BOOK REVIEW: THE MYTH OF CONTINENTS

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Rita Kipp specializes in Southeast Asia and teaches courses in cultural anthropology. She is the co-director, with Leedom Lefferts, Jr., Drew University, of the ASIANetwork Ford Faculty Development Seminar on Southeast Asia, and will travel with the group to Southeast Asia in the summer of 1999, Year II of the seminar.


No one who teaches about Asia should miss this compelling book. Lewis, a geographer, and Wigen, an historian, criticize a number of taken-for-granted, umbrella categories we all use to talk about the world. Perhaps the most pernicious of these is the ubiquitous East-West dichotomy. Even those of us trained as Asianists, knowing well that the “East” lumps a vast array of disparate cultures, sometimes fall into the convenience of describing the particular region or culture we know best in contrast to “the West,” as if that were a uniform, unified tradition, writing off its fractures of class, race, gender, and locality.

Geographic determinism

The myth of continents is one that also bears re-evaluating for those of us lucky enough to have grown up when geography was still part of the primary and secondary curricula. What is “mythical” about the canonical seven continents we learned in school is that their sometimes arbitrary boundaries can derail our generalizations about culture and history. The way “Africa” is used in much Afro-centric scholarship, for example, overlooks the cultural divide marked roughly by the Sahara Desert. Perhaps the most vexing continents, however, are Asia and Europe, the boundary between them being the tinder for many scholarly disputes. Martin and Wigen object, above all, when geographical determinism creeps into our talk of these “continents,” as if the land forms themselves and their analytical separability explain why people live and think differently in these places.

Some may be surprised to learn that the nation-state is also one of the metageographical dragons against which the authors joust. States—with armies to deploy, currencies to mint, diplomats to dispatch—motivate and organize much of what we read in the daily news. What is mythical about that? The authors do not question the state’s centrality in the modern world, nor the indisputable power of nationalism to inspire loyalty and spark conflicts. They argue only that the hyphenated entity, nation-state, is a contingent unit (states may encompass multiple imagined communities, to use Benedict Anderson’s felicitous phrase), and that states are politically constituted realities but not necessarily cultural/historical ones. This geographer and historian especially chafe at instances where state boundaries seem to dictate how scholars organize cultural and historical information. The arbitrary political bifurcation of the island of New Guinea, for example, means that museum displays and college courses about Southeast Asia sometimes include that island’s western half because it is part of the Indonesian state, although its affinities lie clearly with Melanesia.

World regions

The authors propose, in place of these misleading frames, the concept of world regions, “large sociospatial groupings delimited largely on the grounds of shared history and culture” (p. 157). This idea is far from new, they admit, citing the work of the Islamicist Marshall Hodgson and the anthropologist Jack Goody among those who have suggested similar rationales and schemas. In Martin and Wigen’s framework, “Asia” disappears as a self-standing entity, although the term informs five of their fourteen world region names:

- Central Asia (divided into Lamaist and Islamic zones);
- East Asia, Southeast Asia; and South Asia. These world regions, with the troublesome exception of Southeast Asia, perhaps, have “inherent unique personalities” (p. 173). Migrations, diasporas, and the web of information and mass communication that link and shrink the world complicate this cultural-spatial schema, to say the least.

It seems that every myth Martin and Wigen expose leads down a common conceptual detour, one that exaggerates the historical and cultural significance of Europe. Some of the scholarly literature they argue against is decades old, however, and their antagonists thus have a kind of straw man feel at times. I found myself in a defensive mood during much of this book, and sometimes bored with what I thought I already knew about Eurocentrism, Orientalism, and the social construction of all scholarly categories and boundaries. The total effect, however, is finally arresting. They also
tackle some of those spectral topics that have yet to be exorcized fully from Asian Studies, hoary ideas such as oriental despotism and an Asiatic mode of production, as well as the rationality question.

Martin and Wigen's prose is clear and accessible even for students. This would be an excellent beginning for a survey course in Asian Studies or Western Civilization, encouraging students to be critical of the way maps and atlases are organized, and of the meaning of terms such as "civilization" or "the West" that trip so lightly off our tongues. Those of us at Kenyon who teach in Asian Studies read this book and discussed it together, a salutary exercise in a program that presumes to span that entire non-entity called Asia! Whatever the shape of your Asian Studies program, you and your students will also find challenges and food for thought in this book.

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ASIANetwork is a special professional resource and worthy of separate funding for faculty professional development. Colleagues whose college policies permit "only one conference per year" might want to propose an alternative, namely, "unless one of the conferences is ASIANetwork or an equivalent meeting devoted primarily to intellectual community in service to teaching and learning in the liberal arts."

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