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Reviews

Digital places: living with geographic information technologies by M R Curry; Routledge, London, 1998, 191 pages, £55.00 cloth, £17.99 paper (US $90.00, $29.99), ISBN 0 415 13014 X, 0 415 13015 8

Let's not beat around the bush. Geography, like many disciplines is caught on the edge of a pervasive conflict about the nature of science. To some like Michael Curry, the emergence of geographic information systems (GIS) provided the clearest outpost of science inside the discipline. Prominent GIS figures such as Michael Goodchild (1992) were after all claiming the mantle of 'GI Science', and many of these same figures were schooled on the quantitative frontiers back when they were being sold as the vanguard of scientism.

But wars require opposing forces, and it is not so easy to dismiss *Digital Places* as one of the artillery shells lobbed back and forth over the devastation of any kind of middle ground. While Michael Curry certainly articulates his analysis inside the critical stance of the post-modern era, he is just as likely to draw his argument from Aristotle or Kant and everyone in between.

This book of nine chapters collects and somewhat reedits eight essays published between 1994 and 1998. Curry's writing process was punctuated by a tour of a substantial number of geography departments. His preface recounts an experience during this process with someone who might have been me. This person (who Curry only identifies as a 'user' of GIS) makes a long rambling attack on Curry's talk, yet Curry feels he misses the point totally. The preface is a defense against the argument that an 'outsider' cannot understand GIS well enough to criticise it. I must admit that some of the GIS insiders do hold this opinion. They lump Curry into an opposing force; some, indeed, are stocking up their ammunition for a return salvo of some kind, though most probably think that the GIS enterprise is on such high ground that their defenses will survive by simply ignoring any criticism.

But, Curry actually has insider experience, though from a number of decades ago. As he reveals in the later part of the preface, he was involved in one of the original GIS projects at the Minnesota Land Management Information Center and in the commercial sector (doing the geocoding and geodemographics he now worries so much about). This fragment of his professional experience complicates the easy oppositions of the science wars. It also provides a key to understanding Curry's main argument.

Like his previous book [*The Work in the World* (Curry, 1996)], the key argument of *Digital Places* deals with authorship. Curry makes the rather strong claim that ethical use of GIS is not possible—inherently the technology is flawed because it conflicts with the very goals of science. In this argument he relies on Merton's (1973) four norms of scientific practice. All of this seems rather odd for someone who is damned as a postmodernist relying solely on Foucault and Derrida. No, Curry seems to share much with the GIS insiders at least when it comes to setting science on a pedestal. Yet, he has come to opposite conclusions about the relation of GIS to science. He tries to show how the commercial entanglements and details of actual practice force it to deviate from the scientific norms.

Such a criticism falls into what Bruno Latour would term the "first denunciation" (1993, page 53): the discovery that a certain portion of science falls far short of idealist goals. It is actually fraught with the contingency of real organizations, real people (with their flaws), and actual historical context. Yet, somehow, Curry does not ally himself with the sociologists of science [the so-called 'Strong Program', such as Barnes (1974) and Bloor (1976)] who have made their careers out of finding the feet of clay—the 'interests' that hide behind the practices of science. Though Curry cites Latour in one of these chapters [drawing on a single article "Drawing things together" (Latour, 1990)]. Curry certainly does not accept any of the symmetrical anthropology required for Latour's 'amodern' stance (Latour, 1993). No, Curry sticks to Merton, a sociologist who studied

scientists up to the door of their laboratory, but not inside. He sticks to a set of norms for science which no science could possibly attain.

And why does Curry need to hang on to Merton? I believe it is because his underlying interest is in authorship. He shares with Habermas a belief in a fundamental division between narrative (communicative reason) and the logic of science (though Habermas does not appear in the index or the references cited, probably because Curry makes eight citations to Wittgenstein about language and reason). As a geographer, he takes this division into geographic representation by drawing a strong distinction between space (bad) and place (good). He argues that GIS is fundamentally incapable of representing the spirit and values of places, just as scientific logic cannot deal with narrative. In this distinction, I must register some disquiet. I share with Massey (1999) the feeling that geographers have made too much of this division, and failed to understand how space and place are coproduced (and tied to views of history). Oh, yes, long ago I too tried to link GIS data structures to the intellectual history of concepts of space (Chrisman, 1978), but the problem is that Curry and I came to opposite conclusions. I linked raster data (the incremental decomposition) to Leibniz, and the continuous view of vector to Newton. Curry makes the exact opposite argument. My conclusion is not that one is right or wrong, but that recourse to the classics is less helpful than understanding everyday practices and the contradictions between tools and uses. Both Curry and I were perhaps implicated with what Massey terms ‘physics envy’, the strategy of citing the authority of a ‘harder’ science.

Like Massey, I would rather that we find a way to have conversations about our different perspectives across the many divides (qual/quant, human/physical, GIS/critic). For me, as with a few human geographers, the work of science studies provides substantial leverage on this process. Curry’s book does raise fundamental questions about the ethics of GIS, about the interpenetrations of GIS industry with the academy, about privacy and copyright. Such questions should always be a part of our discourse.

However, at the end of reading Curry’s book, I still feel that he missed part of the point. It does seem that he has set out to find fault with a technology that, after all, he helped to found. (In fact, his nostalgia for the days when programs were simpler belies the complexities of even the archaic SYMAP, an involuted Tower of Babel with layers of programming like some lost city.) Curry still wants the author to retain a position of detachment, to adopt the format of narrative, not database. Yet, the database does not have to be the sterile antiethical siren that worries Curry. It can provide the opportunity for informed readers to take responsibility for the manipulations that they must perform to make sense from the inchoate bit-bins. Yes, this does confuse the role of ‘author’ by democratizing it.

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Los Angeles: globalization, urbanization, and social struggles by R Keil; John Wiley, New York, 1998, 296 pages, $89.95 cloth, $34.95 paper (£50.00, £17.99) ISBN 0 471 95778 X, 0 471 98352 7

Roger Keil's new book, *Los Angeles: Globalization, Urbanization, and Social Struggles*, is a welcome contribution to the literature on Los Angeles. At the outset Keil asserts (page ix) that "this work is not explicitly theoretical. It is narrative, essayistic and argumentative; theoretical discussions are implicit reference points". However, one could see the book as an attempt to bring theory to bear on the more empirically oriented work of scholars such as Mike Davis and William Fulton. The book draws quite heavily on theories of regulation, world cities, globalization, and economic restructuring, and to some extent Keil reads the situation in Los Angeles through the lens of these theoretical perspectives. This is the common 'top-down' approach of much political economy whereby local events are understood largely as manifestations of global processes, and empirical analysis emerges deductively from a body of theory. This approach often leads to sweeping conclusions based on scant evidence, and Keil is keen to reject it. He quotes Davis (Keil, page 206), who is unequivocal in saying that

> "the immigrant working class does not simply submit to the city for the purposes of capital, it is not merely the collective victim of 'urban crisis'; it also strives to transform and create the city, its praxis is a material force, however unrecognized or invisible in most accounts of contemporary Los Angeles."

Keil stipulates that world cities are partly constituted by processes at a global scale, but he argues strongly that world cities are also shaped by the particular local politics of a place. More specifically, he contends, the struggles and resistance of poor, immigrant, nonwhite, and working-class residents are a crucial element in structuring the world city.

Taken one step further, Keil's larger argument is that globalization is not inexorable, nor is it solely structural: it is profoundly shaped by the actions, decisions, and projects of agents. Those agents are not only the representatives of multinational capital and nation-state elites, they are also those who are commonly pegged as the victims of globalization—poor and marginalized people who engage in everyday resistance that helps determine how globalization will unfold. So, in order to understand world city formation and the processes of globalization, Keil argues that we must take seriously the details of local politics and the actions of everyday resistance in world cities. His book is an attempt to do just that in Los Angeles.

The structure of the book is built on this issue of the interplay between the local and the global. Part 1, titled "Images and narratives", is an introduction to Los Angeles, its history, politics, and culture. Keil suggests three areas in which Los Angeles is remaking itself: (1) it is developing new forms of regional governance, (2) it is characterized by an increasing number of social movements that stand in opposition to much of the ongoing urban restructuring, and (3) the local political geography is increasingly marked by 'progressive cities'—local governments that are able to enact progressive policies that help shape globalization. My own research suggests that each of these is a relatively weak trend in the city's politics, but perhaps that is the point—these trends are emerging. They may become central, but they may just as well fade entirely from the political landscape.

Part 2 is titled "(Un)making Fordism". It takes the reader through Los Angeles' transition from a Fordist city to a post-Fordist one. Here the discussion relies heavily on regulation theory and Allen Scott's work on flexible specialization. It is mostly 'top-down' in that Keil explains events in Los Angeles through the lens of the general theory of transition from a Fordist – Keynesian mode of regulation to a post-Fordist – neoliberal mode of regulation. While he does stress that the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism was shaped in part by local conditions, the thrust of the discussion is to shine a light only on those aspects of the city that speak to the concerns of the theory. In this context Los Angeles is not so much an interesting subject in itself; rather it is interesting for what it can tell us about global restructuring.

Part 3, "Globalizing the local", continues this trend. It explains how Los Angeles has been transformed by global restructuring, particularly in the areas of production mix, immigration, and land development. Throughout, Keil is careful to show how global processes have been mediated by local conditions, but again the overall thrust of the section gives the idea that the city as a relatively passive stage on which global processes are playing out. However, the last

part (part 4), "Localizing the global", is more self-consciously concerned with showing how politics in local places shape globalization processes. The chapter on redevelopment, for example, shows how the Community Redevelopment Agency, a creature of both state and city governments, plays a determining role in deciding how redevelopment capital will remake the city. That chapter is followed by a less convincing one on how the relatively endogenous politics of local municipalities play a big role in shaping how globalization plays out within their territories.

Chapter 11, the penultimate chapter of the book, finally gets at what I think lies at the heart of Keil's argument—there is a growing awareness that social movements among poor, nonwhite, immigrant, and working-class Angelenos are resisting the terms of globalization, and their resistance is having a significant impact on how globalization is remaking this city. This 'wind from below' argument is also made by scholars like Mike Davis, Laura Pulido, and Ed Soja, all of whom see resistance among marginalized populations as the most important new trend for the future of economic and political restructuring in Los Angeles. While this trend is undeniably taking place in the city, I would suggest that these authors are overstating the case rather too much. Urban politics in Los Angeles are still largely characterized by remarkably familiar themes: centralization versus neighborhood autonomy and growth versus slow-growth. The most influential voices still come from the elite strata of the dual city; they still set the rules and shape the agenda. Issues of social, environmental, and spatial justice, while becoming a more frequent part of the conversation, are still relatively marginal ideas that are in no way central to the agenda of the powerful. As I mention above, this could all be changing. We could indeed be witnessing the emergence of a new and powerful voice in the debates on world cities and globalization. But we are just as likely to see that voice silenced and become in retrospect an ephemeral cry of protest against the steamroller of global restructuring.

I agree strongly with Keil not only that local politics matters but also that it is a central constituent element in the processes of global political and economic restructuring. I applaud his desire to write about how this bottom-up influence is at work in Los Angeles. I think the book is a fine first step in this direction. But I wish the book had done more. The argument that global processes are remaking local places is widely accepted. It is less obvious how (and how much) local politics are (re)shaping global processes. Given the imbalance in the literature, I think the burden of proof is on the bottom-up approach, and so I would have liked the book to offer a more expansive analysis of how this bottom-up process works. More detail is required on how local resistance came to be, whom it is made up of, why it is emerging today, and how it is transforming globalization. I understand Keil's desire to balance top-down with bottom-up (a complete analysis requires both), but I think what is called for at this point is analyses that ignore top-down and concentrate fully on how the local constitutes the global.

The book will appeal both to those interested in Los Angeles and to those interested in the theory surrounding world cities, regulation, and global restructuring. Keil is right that the book is not a systematic theoretical statement, but he does engage theory significantly, and with provocative results. With respect to other work on Los Angeles, the book counters the fiery dystopianism of Mike Davis with the hopeful argument that the marginalized in Los Angeles are rising to challenge their oppression. For the literature on world cities, regulation theory, and global restructuring, the book takes some needed, though incomplete, steps toward the important position that we can never understand globalization well unless we take very seriously the idea that it is fundamentally constituted by the complex politics of local places.

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