

Book Review

Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997, 344 pp. ISBN: 9780520207431 (paperback).

Reviewed by: Xing Fang*, *Department of History, the University of Macau.*

*The author is a graduate student at the Department of History, the University of Macau. He is also a lecturer at Macau Institute for Tourism Studies, Macau SAR, China.

The construct of continents has been a widely accepted global spatial structure in academic and popular discourse as well as a common framework of global geography and history in school education today. However, Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen contend that this over-simplified meta-geography is grounded mainly on ethnocentrism and environmental determinism and ignores the complex reality and diversity of human communities around the globe. In contrast, they adopt a moderate post-modern approach, which accentuates fluidity and multiplicity, to challenge the conceptions such as continents, West and East, nation-states and isolated civilizations that co-construct a static order of the world. In order to rectify the flaws of meta-geography, they propose a revised scheme of the world regions that emerged in the North American academia, and they believe that this scheme could liberate geographical and historical studies from the misconceptions, reflect more accurately the socio-cultural reality of a highly interconnected world, and promote further debate regarding meta-geography.

The organized style of composition is a notable strength of the book. In Chapter 1, the authors present a review of the historical development of the scheme of continents and introduce the fallacy of environmental determinism underlying the scheme as well as the little utility of the scheme in geology. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 deconstruct West and East as spatial and cultural notions, reveal the arbitrary nature of the West-East division driven by Euro-centrism, and evidence that the imagined boundary between the West and the East has been shifting in response to the practice of

the West to construct a central Western image and tradition composed of rationality, democracy and economic progress. In Chapter 4, the authors mainly discuss and criticize Euro-centrism and Afro-centrism, which are both forms of ethnocentrism. They also point out the inappropriate use of race as a geographical concept because race is merely a social construct and the distribution of the “racial” characteristics does not correspond with the continents. Chapter 5 reviews Arnold Toynbee’s scheme of isolated civilizations for carving up the world and elucidates a paradigm shift to a refined world-system theory, which considers both civilized and uncivilized areas of the world and emphasizes the cultural interconnectivity among civilizations and world regions. In Chapter 6, the authors present their revised “world region” scheme by elaborating on the challenges of treating Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Latin America as a single region. They finally conclude the book with ten principles for meta-geographical reforms and emphasize the importance of historical and cultural connections in the division of regions. They also suggest directions for further research such as non-Western people’s view of the globe, the impacts of European geography on non-European intellectual framework, sea communities as well as international flows of capital, commodities, and labor.

Behind the clear structure of the book are the authors’ tremendous efforts to reveal the arbitrary biases and logical flaws hidden in the language and conventions of meta-geography and their rigorous attempts to demonstrate the fact that regions of the world are not isolated but have long-



standing historical and cultural linkages. For this reason, they remind that the order and division of the increasingly multi-centered world should remain dynamic, which means that the maps of the world need to be constantly tailored and improved and people should avoid using the same regionalization scheme for all time and all purposes.

Another prominent strength of the book is the authors' extensive use of sources, which range in time from 1681 to the 1990s. The authors have not only consulted tremendous collections of world atlases, Oxford English dictionary and Webster's Geographical Dictionary for the definition of key terms, but also the Encyclopedia of Britannica as well as a broad range of references in relation to history, geography, linguistics, religion, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, which discuss diverse themes including identity, nation-state, imagined community, ethnocentrism, foreign policy, race, colonialism, and cultural comparison.

The content of the book could have been further buttressed if its shortcomings had been more prudently managed. First, the book could benefit from further in-depth discussion when it comes to assigning comparable units (of similar size) to the same rank, such as France and Guangdong province of China. France as a sovereign state might not be truly comparable to a Chinese province in terms of social and cultural formation. A case study of such comparison could have rendered a clearer illustration of this claim. Second, the book seems not to expound why different world regions absorb certain portions of the oceans where cultural differences of humanity are less identifiable as they are on land. In addition, readers should also heed several limitations of the book that are mentioned in its preface and introduction. For instance, the book mainly concentrates on Euro-American views of world geography and eventually crafts a world-region scheme grounded on North American

academic traditions. The authors also admit their lack of elaboration and discussion on the myth of the nation-state, the political-economic distinction between the developed and the developing regions of the world, as well as "the ways in which meta-geographical ideas play out in the realm of international power politics" (p. xiv). Furthermore, the treatment of the revised world-region scheme predominantly as a pedagogical instrument (p. 205), coupled with insufficient discussion of geopolitics, seems to lend little support to the authors' claim that when the misconceptions of meta-geography are "used by those who wield political power, the consequences can be truly tragic" (p. 1).

Overall, this book, despite its limitations, criticizes the common myths lying beneath meta-geography, discusses in detail and consistency the problems caused by ethnocentrism and environmental determinism, and proposes some critical principles for capturing and researching the fundamental construct of space in geography in terms of its fluidity and connectivity especially in the age of globalization. Undoubtedly, this book would continue to inspire studies in geography and related disciplines, particularly history, anthropology and political science. It will also remain a valuable mind-opener for readers in general and encourage them to ponder the complexity of the world and the ideologies shaping it.

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