

BUILDING BIOGRAPHIES: TO KNOW CITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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Doing fieldwork has long been associated with a career in geography. But that tradition of working in the field is threatened by a number of armchair alternatives, including obsessions with the information explosion and social theory. The danger in theory and computer-data mining, as in many other sedentary approaches, is their saturation with packaged interpretations that miss the random and often contradictory encounters that define a complicated and messy world. After all, the information explosion is really a “stuff” explosion, and considerable effort is required to convert such stuff into valuable information. There is a temptation to give credence to existing data sets and information sources, even in the absence of personal field observations and experiences.

This temptation, of course, has been around for as long as libraries, data sets, and computers have. But as the World Wide Web has made immense quantities of “stuff” available instantaneously, the problem has grown. I tend to agree with the geographer John Borchert that we are being buried by a kind of information overload and that “a temporary but probably protracted ignorance explosion has accompanied the information explosion” (1991, 230).

Heavy reliance on theory, absent the rich contradictions of place-based research, can also generate prepackaged interpretations. As temptations increase to critique the world through the lens of a particular theory, we run the risk of being ever more distanced from actual people and places. If we use an abstract conceptual framework to examine place characteristics that are themselves abstractions (inner city, class divisions, urban sprawl) we pile up sophisticated analyses that are far too internally consistent to capture the chaotic real world. For example, the planner-geographer Ed Soja’s assertion (à la Frederick Jameson) that Los Angeles’s Bonaventure Hotel is a “heterotopia,” an “evocative countersite in which all other real sites within the synchronous culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1995, 20), with its best Bauhaus-evoking bluster, channels observations by zealous theoreticians into a kind of intellectual Los Angeles River: all concrete, with no chance for deviating meanders. Fieldwork can and should be carried out, encouraging varied perceptions of reality. Theory can then be used productively, and with a grain of salt. Without fieldwork, everything is boilerplate.

Having stated philosophical reasons for valuing fieldwork, I feel obliged to point out that these play only a partial role in my enthusiasm for spending a lot of time in the field—or, more accurately, on the street. We all have different reasons for wanting to do fieldwork, and many of them have as much to do with idiosyncrasies as with

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