

## EDITORIAL

### CANONS OF REVIEWING REVISITED

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I must admit that my feathers were quite ruffled by it review of my book on long-wave rhythms in the *Annals* last year. Readers could not possibly have learned what the book was about. Clearly the reviewer did not have the benefit of Wesley Calef's brief essay "Some Canons of Reviewing," which was required reading for successive cohorts of graduate students in the halcyon days of geography at Chicago. Wesley's remarks remain as apposite today as they were then, and so, with his permission, I reproduce a modestly edited version:

The members of a scholarly discipline are not just a number of persons working within the same general field of knowledge; they are also a group of people pursuing shared goals—the advancement and progress of learning within their discipline. The field can be advanced only if the excellences and contributions of their scholarly works are publicly appreciated and understood and if deficiencies and errors are recognized and criticized. The review sections of the learned journals are the most widely used device for achieving this public review. The purpose of a review is to call attention to a new scholarly work, to point out its significance, and to warn against its errors and deficiencies. To achieve this clearly requires expert acquaintance with the state of knowledge within the discipline, careful reading and analysis of the work, and responsible judgment. Unfortunately, these standards are not always maintained.

Many reviews appearing in learned journals are irresponsible and capricious. The reviewer may be unjust to the author by being unfairly critical or by failing to mention the book's strengths. Conversely, many reviewers praise a book vaguely but fulsomely, though the quality of the volume may not be such as to deserve it. Many reviews present a great deal of opinion about the work under consideration, but almost no information about the content. These faults arise from a variety of causes. One is ineptitude; the reviewers simply don't understand the purpose of a book review. Or they may be ignorant. It may be ignorance of the contents of the volume—many reviewers have not actually read the contents of the volume they review. Or it may be ignorance of the subject of the book; few reviewers feel incompetent to review a book merely because they know nothing about its subject. Unhappily, the fault may be simple intellectual dishonesty. Critics excoriate books simply because they don't like the author, or merely to have their essay more widely discussed because of the intemperance

of their attack. Reviewers give undeservedly favorable reviews simply to curry favor with the author, or to do a favor for the author who may be a friend. Nothing can be done in the short range to cure intellectual dishonesty or ignorance, but a brief discussion of how to review books may suggest how to proceed.

A book review should contain three major topics—description, analysis, and appraisal. A reviewer's first duty is to describe the book. The subject matter—the contents—should be described sufficiently so that the reader can obtain a clear idea about the book's subject. The reader also needs to be informed about the tone of the work. Is it an exhaustive and recondite monograph directed to experts in the field, a textbook for beginning professionals, or a chatty, colorful account for the general public? An indication of the character and quantity of the adjuncts to the textual material is appropriate here, also; i.e., maps, photos, diagrams, bibliography, index, or whatever.

With a clear picture of the book established in the reader's mind, the reviewer should turn to analysis. Generally speaking, analysis is the weakest feature of most book reviews. Authors deserve a sympathetic, appreciative analysis of their books, but too few get it. Many reviewers concentrate on the author's mistakes and discuss the book that should have been written.

First, analyze a book on the author's terms. Make clear what the objectives were. Most authors succeed at least partly in attaining their objectives. Point out explicitly what devices the author uses to achieve the ends and note clearly when they are successful. Explain what the book can best be used for. Point out what contribution to knowledge or pedagogy it can make. After the book's utility has been made clear, its deficiencies may be exposed. Never forget, however, that the analysis of deficiencies should be in terms of the author's objectives. If the author's pictures illustrate with clarity what they were designed to illustrate, don't criticize them for being inartistic; at least not without making explicit that they serve the author's primary purpose admirably. When criticizing, be fair. Don't pick out a few ambiguous phrases that actually contradict the general trend of the author's presentation and then suggest that these views are advocated. Don't weasel. Don't write, "Many of the author's examples leave much to be desired." That is a vaguely derogatory remark, against which the author is helpless. If the examples are inapt, cite them, so the reader can judge. If you find three poor examples, don't list two and then add "other examples could be cited." Be fair, be explicit, be honest.

After completing the analysis, appraise the volume. One fair and practical way is to compare it with other books on the same or similar subjects. A few years ago, a geographer wrote a lashing review of a new book by one of this country's leading geographers. I was inclined to agree that most of the criticisms were justified. But I also felt that it was grossly negligent or intellectually dishonest of the reviewer not to point out that the book was by far the best available on its subject. Compare the book factually with its predecessors. What subject does it treat that previous volumes did not? What does it omit? After you have honestly described the differences, you should deliver a judgment about

them; but be judicious; make clear the basis for your opinion. Finally, you should make a more general appraisal of the book's effectiveness by suggesting the book that the author would have been better advised to have written. But again, be explicit and make clear the bases for your judgment.

The foregoing indicates that a book review is not something to be undertaken lightly. It demands thought, analysis, and thorough knowledge. Scholars have an obligation to review new work in the fields in which they are competent. They have an equal obligation not to review works on subjects in which they are incompetent. If you write reviews, do them honestly, responsibly, and properly. Describe the book and its contents thoroughly. Analyze the book on the author's terms, list the functions that it can perform, the uses to which it can be put, and only then warn the reader of its defects and deficiencies. Finally, appraise the book in terms of alternatives, and perhaps in terms of what might have been.

Reviewers for *Urban Geography* take note.