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Corinne Lathrop Gilb. *Toward Holistic History*

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Corinne Lathrop Gilb sets herself a difficult, if not impossible, task. She wants to show, in the development of her own historical writing, the evolution and broadening of historical perspective, a perspective that is still evolving, hence the title of the book. But she is aware that one’s historical perspectives do not evolve neatly and coherently. In her case, her life involved years of migrating from her California home to teaching at Wayne State University, the city university of Detroit. In the 1970’s and 80’s she was a professor of history at Wayne State and then director of Detroit’s city planning department, while she continued a lifetime of participation in academic conferences throughout the world. The pragmatic and theoretical interacted with each other, so a chronological presentation would have been confusing and incoherent.

She chose instead a topical presentation of papers and articles written over a span of several decades. This gives order and coherence, but it cannot present evolution; it can’t show the development of perspective, it can’t go toward anything. She provides context by introducing the circumstances in which each article or paper was written or presented. In so doing, however, she could not update the article. So a paper she presented in 1968 (Chapter 9), looking at (as we then spelled it) Peking “now” in comparison to Rome and Paris, loses a great deal when read at the beginning of the 21st century.

Finally, Gilb’s task was rendered more difficult by the scope of her knowledge and interests. Not every American city planner has Umma or Benaras in mind when coping with urban redevelopment. This is one reason at least two reviewers were needed for this article.

The scope of the book is neatly summarized in a paragraph appearing on the book’s cover. “In writing about the world, the historian asks what are the links between selfhood, values, human ecology, social, economic and political structure, community and physical environment? What is the role of culture in the linkages? What are the connections between space/time constructs and all the rest? What connects the person to the universe?”

While it might not be considered fair to hold an author responsible for this modest summary, in this case the author is the publisher. And, indeed, all of these connections are probably made. The difficulty for a reader of ordinary capacities may be in trying to relate these connections.
Along the way, Gilb raises some interesting questions for her own research agenda or that of others. She asks, for instance, what are the salient changes in North African and Near Eastern cities under the Byzantine, Arab and Ottoman empires? And how different are they under the mandates and as part of small, independent states? Did the cities cohere over the regions to which they belonged, or was their range of coherence independent of these political arrangements? What was the relation of cities to expanding boundaries? When was the expansion political, when economic? And how do water boundaries, rivers, lakes, and oceans change from obstacles to unifiers (Ch. 13)?

Individual papers and articles are full of interesting insights. City parks and house lawns provide connection for the city dweller with his or her rural roots of previous generations (Chapter 8). There seems to have been a movement in time from sacred places to holy people as concepts of God widened, yet economic motives are discernible beneath the sacred from the time of David and Solomon to the time of Begin and Peres (Chapter 12).

Or, she invites reconsideration of the assumption, going back to Ibn Khaldun, of the recurrent conquest of sedentary peoples by nomads. The Mongols, she argues, became sinicized by the urban north Chinese before conquering south China. The nomadic Arabs were connected from the inception of their conquests with the economy and industry of Mecca (Chapter 13).

Gilb does not make it easier for the reader in that she shows commendable academic caution, stating her hypotheses very carefully and rarely generalizing beyond the limits of her data. For instance, for a long paper (typically) entitled “City Form, Governmental Structure, and the Space of Power,” she offers two propositions. The first “That socio-economic-political structure, treated holistically, is characterized by a number of interesting interdependent special-temporal patterns, both behavioral and imagistic in nature. The second proposition is that the artifacts of human environment (most intensely, the form of great world cities) are symbolic notations, crystallizing, focusing and channeling the special-temporal patterns of particular total systems.”

It seemed necessary to return to these propositions every couple of pages, asking, how did they go again? The academic caution seems related to her question raising. When she looks at a problem, she sees, and perhaps is sometimes daunted by, its complexity. Thus when she considers theories of spatial distribution among cities, she notes that these are undercut by the contexts of their functions as trade, govern-
mental or market centers or some specialized economic function around some geographic advantage, such as a waterfall that might provide power or serve as a tourist attraction.

Thus the awareness of complexity may lead her to widen her range of consideration, making the original problem ever more difficult. Thus it may be that she has been best at raising questions and elaborating problems, and therefore she may not be uncomfortable with the—what would you call it?—postmodern organization of Holistic History.

Finally, Gilb is immensely knowledgeable. One 12-page paper on sacred cities is followed by thirty pages of references. In some respects she reminds one of Vytautas Kavolis, who sometimes did not appear to realize that what seemed perfectly evident to him might be a little over the heads of some of his readers or listeners.

A lot of knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Gilb’s reference to the function of symbolic crystallizing, focusing and channeling is reminiscent of her contrasting how well these functions are performed in Paris as compared to the centrifugal tendencies of American cities. Perhaps this book is an American’s centrifugal clearing the way for a forthcoming series of books on cities in history that will be crystallized, channeled and focused.

Gilb is to be complimented for her care, not for the few, but for the many, her wish to make historical understanding, psychological insight, urban and special studies, among many other things, serve the needs of our ever-changing world. A sense of her own dignity leads her to an intuitive sense of the dignity of others, no matter how much they may seem to diverge from her own ways. She is to be applauded and admired for her steadfast resistance to provincialism, a resistance which has naturally led her to seek global and civilizational perspectives. Ethics and the social, historical, and psychological sciences guide her.

The same generosity of spirit makes her suspicious of an attachment to only one scientific or historical way of seeing things. So the reader of this collection of her collected essays and addresses might wonder how they all add up. They add up, we think, to being a record of the personal voyages of one scholar who was not afraid to wander into new territories, knowing that her own heart would provide the thread that an obsession with system could not.

—Matthew Melko and Edmund Leites

Editor’s Note: We regret that the author of the work under review, Corinne Gilb, passed away in January of this year. We will remember her long service to this organization with respect.

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