

BOOKS & ARTS

There's no place like home?

A bold attempt to synthesize the effects of geography on the world's population through maps highlights some interesting paradoxes, explains **Yi-Fu Tuan**.

The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape

by Harm de Blij

Oxford University Press: 2008. 304 pp.
\$27.95, £14.99

For those who want to be on top of world events, yet feel overwhelmed by the amount of information that floods into their homes and offices through the media, *The Power of Place* is an excellent start. In his new book, professor, writer and broadcaster Harm de Blij uses the geographer's favourite tool, the map, to help us feel somewhat in control of this mass of information — the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, the levelling of the playing field for the well educated, the roughening of the landscape for the illiterate and poor, the threats of climate change and of nuclear and biological terrorism.

He depicts global population distribution, groupings of language families, dominant belief systems, recent earthquake centres, places of recurrent conflict, and other phenomena, at world, regional and local scales. De Blij also puts us at ease by subsuming the materials under a few overarching themes.

A prominent theme is the uneven distribution of wealth: the difference between rich and poor, north and south, core and periphery. These terms are seldom defined by those who use them. North and south are particularly vague, and de Blij doesn't give a definition either. But he does draw a clear line between core and periphery: the core of wealth extends sinuously from Europe and North America to coastal China and the Yakota triangle of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, and then dips south to Australia and New Zealand. His map also shows places where fences, walls and other devices have been set up to prevent or limit members of the periphery from entering the core.

With the map's help, de Blij articulates a major problem of our time: the core needs a labour force and the periphery needs jobs and income. This relationship would seem to call for arrangements of mutual benefit, yet it is rich in paradox and irony. It collides with the core's desire to defend its 'high' culture — its ideals of democracy, equal rights, individualism, a secularist world view and future orientation — against dilution by large inflows of the poor



Sub-Saharan Africa is harsh for inhabitants but has a richer cultural diversity than Europe.

from the periphery, with their attachment to place, kinsfolk and religion. There was a time when newcomers gradually and willingly merged into the mainstream: the outstanding example in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the United States. But in the past 30 years, immigrants have been less willing to merge because they see their language and culture as their identity, and as a source of pride not to be given up. Rather than adapt to the core, newcomers believe that the core should adapt to them; for example, that core inhabitants in the United States should learn Spanish and respect male domination in the household. Ironically, the liberal cosmopolitan core has encouraged this trend by promoting the acceptance of ethnic and cultural diversity. With this pluralism comes the idea that one culture is as good as another, only different. If this is true, it begs the question of why we should make the effort to change and move up the cultural ladder. Furthermore, what do we mean by 'up'?

Another major theme is that of the book's title — the power of place. De Blij does not define what he means by power, choosing to let the reader deduce its meanings from the contexts in which he uses it. This is not

helpful. Power could mean empowerment, or the opposite — deprivation of autonomy through confinement and control. Place obviously empowers by providing resources for its inhabitants to survive. It does not dictate how far the inhabitants will progress by using the resources. Some inhabitants go far and, over time, produce the high living standard of the core. But resource, as the late geographer Carl Sauer said, is a term of cultural appraisal. Culture determines what we consider a resource and how to make the best use of it. For people to prosper, both place and culture have to empower. Of the two, culture is by far the more important enabler.

De Blij gives many examples of disablement by natural forces such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, droughts, tropical storms and endemic diseases. People are at a disadvantage when they live in places prone to natural disaster. They are also at a disadvantage when their geographical location is unfavourable — land locked, for example, or remote from the lanes of commercial and cultural exchange. People of the periphery suffer from these disabling powers of place. But they suffer even more from the peculiar forms of culture they developed in that place. Culture can become a

handicap, discouraging people from enriching themselves and developing further. Many people in the periphery bear the burden of culture even more than the burdens of nature and natural habitat. Culture may be a home for them, but easily turns into a cosy prison.

As de Blij and others have pointed out, the world's poor are concentrated in the tropical latitudes. Here we have another paradox. The warm tropical latitudes are exceptionally rich in flora and fauna; by comparison, the deserts and middle latitudes are poor in plant and animal life. The same paradox seems to apply to culture. Take language and religion, for example; New Guinea has some 900 languages and sub-Saharan Africa has around 2,000; Europe, by contrast, is home to only about 200 languages.

The same disproportion is true of religion. Peoples in the tropics have many polytheistic belief systems in which they worship countless spirits and deities, and assign divine powers even to animals, plants and rocks. Peoples of the deserts and steppes, on the other hand, tend to be monotheistic, their belief systems simple and austere.

When we, members of the core, think of plants and animals, we always consider diversity to be a good thing and do our best to preserve it. This preference is sometimes carried over to human languages and cultures. Thus, like many other linguists of the core, de Blij laments the decline in the number of languages in tropical latitudes, forgetting that in New Guinea and Nigeria, the multiplicity of tongues

is a barrier to the broad exchange of goods and ideas that is necessary for progress.

The Power of Place is full of fascinating facts, such as this one that I chose at random: global migration, large as it is, makes up less than 3% of the world's population. Despite de Blij's attempts, the mind still finds it hard to make sense of so much disparate information. He should have offered fewer facts, made a greater effort to subsume them under three or four linked concepts, and drawn simpler and stronger conclusions. ■

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A toolbox for policy planners

The Handbook of Technology Foresight

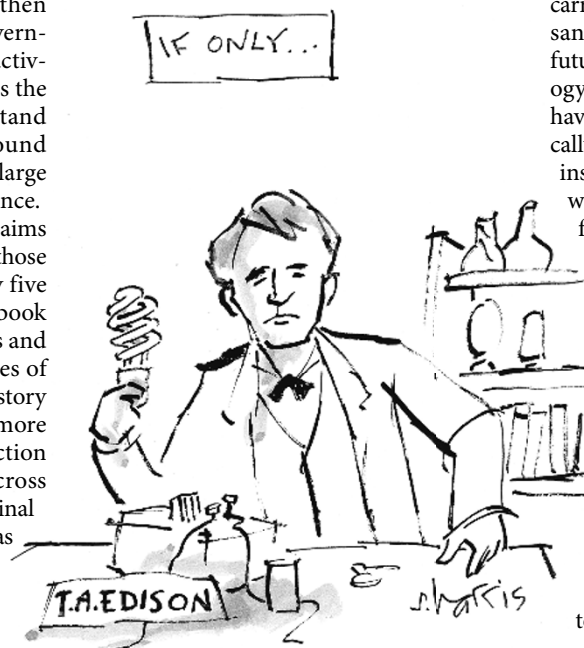
Edited by Luke Georghiou, Jennifer Cassingena Harper, Michael Keenan, Ian Miles and Rafael Popper
Edward Elgar: 2008. 456 pp. £115, \$220

During the past decade, many national governments have sponsored formal planning processes called technology foresight. Such exercises involve a wide range of stakeholders in anticipating long-term social, economic and technological developments, and then using the resulting vision to inform government policies. The growth of foresight activity, most prominently in Europe, reflects the desire of these governments to understand and influence today's rapid and profound social and economic changes, driven in large part by advances in technology and science.

The Handbook of Technology Foresight aims to shape this emerging field and to assist those planning foresight activities. Edited by five scholars active in foresight practice, the book opens with a critical review that defines and distinguishes foresight from other types of futures studies, alongside an excellent history of the field and a detailed summary of more than 30 methodologies. The second section surveys national foresight activities across Europe, Asia and the Americas, and the final section addresses common themes such as evaluation and policy transfer.

Initially a means of informing government investment priorities for research and development, the process of national technology foresight has expanded to address a full range of societal issues

that affect and are affected by science and technology. The authors quote approvingly the definition of foresight given by the European Commission's FOREN project, which describes it as "a systematic, participatory, future-intelligence gathering and medium-to-long-term vision-building process aimed at present-day decisions and mobilizing joint actions". They name three characteristics that distinguish technology foresight from other approaches to futures studies. It looks to the future; it uses information about the future to inform near-term



Foresight in hindsight. (From *101 Funny Things About Global Warming* by Sidney Harris and Colleagues; Bloomsbury, 2008.)

decisions; and it includes a broad range of individuals in group exercises to develop forecasts and explore their policy implications.

The book's survey of national programmes demonstrates that foresight activities are shaped by the particular needs, culture and politics of a country. The United Kingdom's foresight programme was established in 1993 and has become an institutionalized policy instrument for many agencies and departments. It uses a wide variety of methods such as scenarios, simulations and gaming, workshops and the Delphi interactive expert-based survey for forecasting. By contrast, the Japanese government's technology foresight programme, which has been running since 1969, carries out a nationwide Delphi survey of thousands of experts every five years to map out future developments in science and technology. Central and Eastern European countries have used technology foresight only sporadically, often hindered by political mindsets and institutional structures that are more at ease with single rather than multiple views of the future, and with wholly separate government research endeavours rather than integrated national innovation systems.

Those considering a foresight exercise will find this book a valuable compendium that offers lessons to be learnt, and help in choosing goals, selecting methods and identifying successes and failures. Scholars will find a rich survey of current practice, methodological approaches and tensions in the field. But the book does not address the fundamental question of when national technology foresight can provide an appropriate means to achieve a society's goals.

Technology foresight aims to create a 'national public good'. At a time of fast-paced radical change, it seeks to offer a