

Marion Hourdequin and David G. Havlick (eds.)

Restoring Layered Landscapes: History, Ecology and Culture

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Restoring Layered Landscapes is an anthology that revolves around issues concerning the restoration of landscapes that have been more or less heavily shaped by human activities. The book contains 14 chapters, selected into 3 sections. The first section (Chapters 1–5) addresses theoretical perspectives, the second (Chapters 6–9) is dedicated to empirical examples and case studies. The last section (Chapters 10–13) builds on an important presupposition of the book, namely that landscapes carry meaning that needs to be interpreted and represented.

Although one could wish for some contributions from biology or ecology in this collection, one may still argue that it represents an attempt to address this pressing issue from a cross-disciplinary point of view. The selected list of contributors have their background in philosophy, history, geography, environmental studies, sociology and agricultural studies. A shared and underlying issue for the authors in this volume is a concern for ways to overcome the man/nature-dichotomy.

A theoretical topic that necessarily comes up when you want to restore something is the relationship between past, present and future. The authors who engage in this question seem to agree that the intention of preserving ‘everything’ is not appropriate. Keulartz gives the reader an idea as to the way in which the book’s core issue may fit into a debate about how we as humans generally relate to historical phenomena. Modernity, he reminds us, has a critical attitude towards the past, which according to Nietzsche, instantiates in an attitude that wants to eradicate and forget the past in order to liberate the future. In line with Nietzsche’s more general ideas on history, Keulartz argues that layered landscapes ‘ask for’ striking a

balance between keeping the past (antiquarian view) and a critical view that wants to start with a *tabula rasa*.

More generally, there seems to be a common agreement among the authors that restoration should go beyond the idea that we should try to ‘return landscapes to their historical predisturbed condition or their natural state’ (p. 1). Similar attempts to find a ‘restoration 2.0’ as it were, are quite common these days (e.g. Cole and Yung, 2010).

Why should we move forward? Hourdequin lists 3 reasons: firstly, we should consider the shift from what Eugene Odum called New Ecology to the ecology of disturbance and patch dynamics, which is a shift away from thinking about ecosystems as stable climax seeking systems to ecosystems that are not ‘drawn toward a single ideal state of balance’ (p. 5).

Secondly, it seems to be a fact that the human impact on the surface of the earth (climate change) has made the pursuit of idea of ‘pristine nature’ vacuous which, thirdly, is not really a ‘problem’ since (we nowadays seem to think that) most of the nature thought to be pristine never really was anyway. All in all, this brings us to the point where we should rethink our ideas about, naturalness, historical fidelity, authenticity etc.

Why do we want to restore something at all then? Allan Holland (Chapter 4) argues that restoration is a process where we recover something that was *lost*. So what makes an agent feel the loss of something? Holland maintains that it is our identification with the nexus of relations we have to other beings that creates *meaning* and therefore makes it meaningful to say that we have lost something. But, life is inevitably full of loss and we cannot ‘restore everything’. Restoration is therefore a process where we restore something while we inescapably also are in a process of ‘coming to terms with loss’ (p. 62). Restoration needs to strike a balance here and therefore make choices. I like the way Holland argues in his article, but I am not sure if he is right. Partly, I think his perspective is too human-centred, and partly I think he could be wrong about what restoration mean in this context. The restoration of, for

example, a building always needs a lot of constructing and building effort. Ecological restoration often just means that you facilitate a process or even just leave what already is going on alone.

The main contentious and underlying issue in this book is of course how areas changed by humans should be restored in a way takes humans and nature into a balanced consideration. A striking example gives the reader an immediate reason to think about this issue is Holly Deary's very interesting chapter on the Scottish Highlands in section 2. The Scottish Highlands is a cultural landscape that requires a lot of maintenance, *but is generally perceived as wilderness*. The maintenance here is partly done by grazing sheep, which means that the landscape obviously expresses a likeable balance between nature and culture (in the public eye), also to the extent that we *see* the human activity in the area as being natural. The author defends this merger, but she makes no principled argument for this support. (One may therefore ask for a principle deciding what kind of human activity that would *not* 'strike the balance').

The editors state 'there is no single prescription for restoration' (p. 4), and in section 2 the reader encounters different *empirical* examples that conceivably supports this claim. A common denominator for all these examples is how most of the authors seems to anticipate that restoring layered landscapes simply means that we should let different perspectives have their say in the process of restoration. The idea of merging plural narratives (Hourdequin) strikes me, however, as a bit unbalanced since non-human nature in the concerned landscape only has one narrative and that this narrative has to 'compete' with conflicting narratives supporting *all* sorts of human interests.

Part 3 does not really depart much from the empirical approach we see in part 2. The emphasis is on *reading* and *interpreting* the landscape, but the empirical approach dominates over what might have been a more theoretical approach where the reader could have been

given some clues as to how to *interpret* layered landscapes more generally. (Does for instance hermeneutics work for the ‘interpretation of landscapes’?). Interestingly, perspectives from the art field are brought in to enlighten the interpretation and representation of landscapes. A common focus for this part seems to be that the landscape should work as a kind of pedagogical tool for the public and for future generations; that one should strive towards *representing* all that ‘is there’ for the benefit of the commons. Mrill Ingram argues that this means that we have to ensure that the ‘landscape is just’. She argues that ‘ahistorical ecological goals’ have worked as a way to not take a stand on ‘just landscapes’ (p. 225). There are for instance different interests connected to invasive species and there are examples where eradication of an invasive species can be seen as unjust.

Reading this book gave me a wide and thorough understanding of the many aspects that belongs to the effort of restoring (layered) landscapes. What I miss in this anthology is *discussions* about restoration goals, though Martin Drenthen’s article is part way to a valuable exception. The book reminds me of a situation that Thomas Kuhn calls a pre-paradigmatic face, where you don’t like the existing theories and have a lot of empirical data supporting something else but you don’t really know what it *is*. It is easy to criticise (framed) ideas about naturalness, the pristine, authenticity and historical fidelity, but it is quite another thing to find guiding principles that are able to reflect consistently the fact that humans are a part of nature.

References

Cole, D.N. and L. Yung, eds. 2010. *Beyond Naturalness: Rethinking Park and Wilderness Stewardship in an Era of Rapid Change*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

SVEIN ANDERS NOER LIE
University of Tromsø