

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by Soren Larsen

*Department of Geography
University of Missouri*

Co-Editor John T. Bauer

*Department of Sociology, Geography and Earth Science
University of Nebraska-Kearney*

GO: On the Geographies of Gunnar Olsson. CHRISTIAN ABRAHAMSSON & MARTIN GREN, editors. Surrey / Burlington: Ashgate, 2012. Pp. xiii+398, reprints, diagrams, illustrations, index. \$144.95 hardback. ISBN 978-1-4094-1237-3.

This book masterfully traces Gunnar Olsson's journey as a major geographical thinker from his early years as a "space cadet" of the quantitative revolution to his ontological conversion and contemporary explorations of the semiotic landscape and the abyss of Western cartographic reason. Lovingly cultivated by Christian Abrahamsson and Martin Gren, this homage places the esteemed Swedish geographer mapping "the taboo-ridden territory of the taken-for-granted" and entering "lands not yet discovered," somewhere in between the certainties of modernity and the ambiguity of postmodernity (p. 22). As a doctoral candidate, Olsson was influenced by Esse Lövgren whom he described as a "brilliant man obsessed with the idea of translating the vagaries of human behavior into the precise language of mathematics" (p. 8). However as a practicing geographer, it soon became apparent to Olsson that mathematical models applied to social issues were problematic, particularly as identical spatial forms could be generated through drastically different processes. To Olsson this revealed more about spatial distribution models themselves and less about the intricacies of human behavior and interaction. As a citizen of a modern Nordic welfare state buttressed by the ideology that a better and just society was based on the exact scientific knowledge, he soon began to believe that planning based on spatial interaction models not only created ethical and political dilemmas but was also scientifically questionable as well. Olsson concluded that social engineering approaches were "far more geared towards the growth and maintenance of its own bureaucracy than towards the interest of those sick and disadvantaged which it is supposed to serve" (p. 11) and tended in his view, to conserve rather than diminish existing inequalities—an ironic outcome contrary to the political intentions of the social democratic state. In *Servitude and Inequality in Spatial Planning*, penned for the journal *Antipode* in 1974, Olsson writes:

In retrospect, it appears that the majority of spatial analysts—among whom I certainly include myself—have confined ourselves so thoroughly within our inherited concepts, within our categorical frameworks, within our particular mathematical language, and within our artifacts that we thereby have helped perpetuate the functional inequalities of the past (p. 106).

This recognition presaged and served as a catalyst for Olsson's ontological transformation in which he viewed human "power" as inseparable from language. Influenced by Samuel Beckett's

observation that James Joyce's writing was "not *about* something, but *is* that something itself" (Samuel Beckett, quoted in *GO*, p. 21), Olsson invoked Joyce's "map of the soul's groupography" to guide his conceptual expeditions in the 1970s, '80s and '90s through intangible fields of "invisible geographies" to establish a semiotically influenced cartography of thought (p. 21). Accordingly, Abrahamsson and Gren's text presents Olsson's papers in their original typefaces, font sizes and journal template styles. Their text also charts via companion pieces and pen profiles by Olsson's colleagues and former students of his mental and physical travels from Uppsala to the University of Michigan, and back to Sweden in 1977 where he was appointed chair of economic geography and planning at the Nordic Institute in Urban and Regional Planning in Stockholm. It can be seen that his teaching strongly informed his research perspectives. Olsson's trans-disciplinary and trans-cultural pedagogical experiences informed his vision of lecturing in "neither a scientific laboratory nor a government-sponsored Center for Brainwashing [but] rather an open environment in which the grafting proves to be so successful that everyone can develop one's own personality" (p. 20). In "Chiasm of thought-and-action" (*Environment and Planning D*, volume 11, 1993), Olsson states "I prefer the term 'imagination' to that of 'theory'" and declares "social realism is bad art for the same reasons social engineering is bad ethics, less because knowledge is power, more because power is knowledge" (quoted in Abrahamsson and Gren, p. 190).

He then goes on describes the evolution of his ontological transformations, and the questions provoked, in terms of his own work:

My own imagination has emerged gradually, in stages without breaks. This there are clear affinities between my current concerns and the etchings of *Birds in Egg/Egg in Birds* [1980], the watercolors of *Antipasti* [1990], and the oils of *Lines of Power/Limits of Language* [1991]. How do I know the difference between you and me and how do we share our beliefs in the same? To which extent is it I who speak through language and language speaks through me? How are we made so obedient and so predictable?¹

Such musings and observations contain seeds which would bloom fully in 2007's *Abysmal: A Critique of Cartographic Reason*. In 1994 Olsson noted "any artist worthy of the name tries to render not the visible but the non-visible, not what catches the eye but what hides in the taken-for-granted" (p. 21). It can be argued that Joyce successfully did so in *Ulysses* (1922). In this instance, *Abysmal* is both Joycean and Biblical in its scale and scope, with Olsson apocalyptically stating, "Plato's Sun is setting," and declaring in manifesto:

The current truth is in fact that the fix-points, scales and mappa of cartographic reason have lost much of the power they once had. Immersed in a world which is neither solid nor stable we are beginning to suspect that the excluded of the excluded middle might have escaped from the Renaissance lines of modernism and taken refuge in the Baroque folds of postmodernism.²

Olsson advises to approach *Abysmal* "as a minimalist guide to the landscape of western culture" (p. ix), and draws upon theology, mythology, cartography, aesthetics, philosophy, geometry and semiotics to exegetically braid strands of thought rooted in seminal pieces of literature, art and scripture. Giving voices to Biblical, classical Greek, enlightenment and modern philosophers, modernist artists, linguists and novelists among others, Olsson's critique gives lie to the emperor's new clothes of modern cartographically parsed reason. Abrahamsson and Gren, who open their text with a dialogical "Preamble," have done a great and invaluable service for geographical

scholarship. Acting as conductors they skillfully orchestrate pieces by Reginald G. Golledge, Michael Dear, Michael J. Watts, David Jansson, Jette Hansen-Möller Chris Philo, Gunnael Jensson, Alessandra Bonazzi, Ole Michael Jensen, Marcus Doel, and Franco Farinelli into a coherent overarching multi-perspectival intellectual symphonia, which interspersed with critical tones and colors from Olsson's own *oeuvre* over the past thirty years, provides an Arcades-like impression of one of the most innovative geographical thinkers at work on the planet today.

Charles Travis
Trinity College, Dublin

NOTES

1. Gunnar Olsson, *Abysmal: A Critique of Cartographic Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 247. Gunnar Olsson's question: "How are we made so obedient and so predictable?" struck this reviewer as a perfect description of the human landscape of recent Association of American Geography meetings where conference attendees sit peering obediently into the predictably soft glow of their iPads, laptops, and cell phones—perhaps instigating digital ecosystems and networks, or more ominously braiding their synaptic structures into complacent electronic straightjackets. The reviewer is also guilty of this obedience and predictability.
2. *Ibid.*



Life on a Rocky Farm: Rural Life near New York City in the Late Nineteenth Century. LUCAS C. BARGER, transcribed and with an introduction by Peter A. Rogerson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013. Pp. xxv+163, maps, appendices. \$19.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-4384-4602-8.

Life on a Rocky Farm is a captivating first-hand account of agricultural life in nineteenth and early twentieth century Putnam County, NY. The account, written by Lucas Barger (1866-1939), demonstrates the impacts of industrialization on "traditional" agricultural life through a series of vignettes. A typewritten version of the manuscript was discovered at the Putnam Valley Historical Society by Peter Rogerson, a geographer and relative of Barger's. Rogerson's research also led him to the New York State Library where he discovered a copy of the original handwritten manuscript and a series of letters between Barger and his daughter. Both Barger and his daughter had intended to publish the manuscript but failed to do so before Barger passed away in 1939. The Barger family's efforts are here recognized by Rogerson, who has painstakingly transcribed and edited the manuscript. His preface describes the curious history of the manuscript's discovery and transcription, and his editor's introduction and notes throughout the book situate Barger's account historically using maps, US Census Non-Population Schedules and other documents.

Barger's vignettes provide a unique commentary on farm life, though they do not often name specific characters or family members. The manuscript is divided into several chapters such as "Incomes Directly from Nature" or "Life of the Rocky Farm Women," and subdivided into descriptions of aspects of farm life such as making apple cider, planting, making soap or candles, basketry, raising sheep, and even women smoking. Three appendices at the end of the book list words and their phonetic spelling as pronounced in the regional dialect, and then provide example conversations between named individuals (though it is unclear what their relationship is with Barger, if any).

Barger describes tasks vividly and colorfully in his own unique style, as if he were an older relative recalling fond memories. An air of nostalgic yearning is present in most of the