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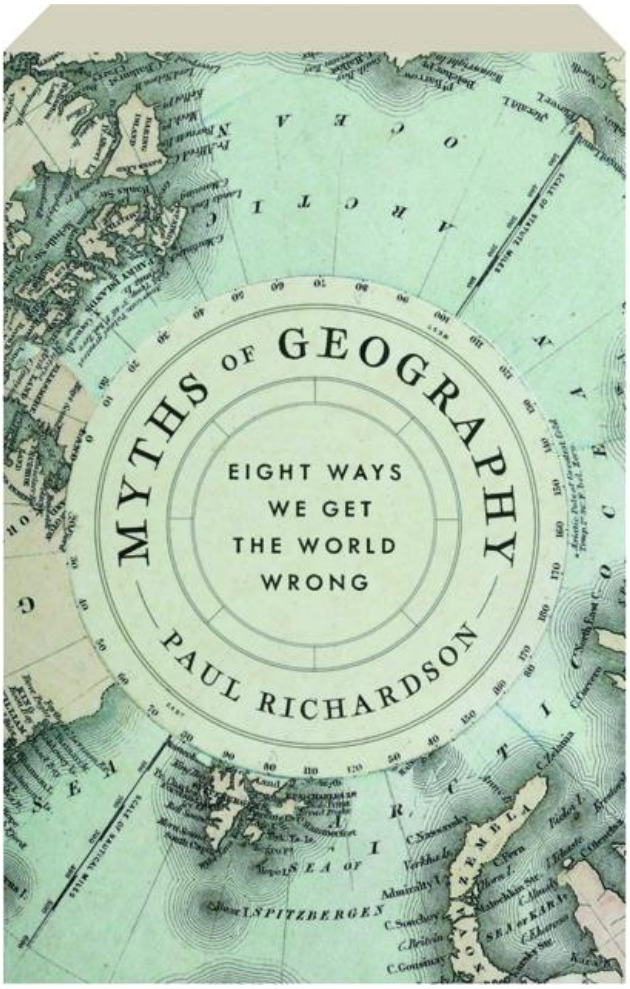
Book review: Myths of Geography: Eight Ways We Get the World Wrong

reviewed by Susan M. Moore



Richardson, Paul. *Myths of Geography: Eight Ways We Get the World Wrong*. Toronto: Hanover Square Press, 2024. 303 p. $19.99. ISBN; 978-1-335-14686-1.

Dr. Paul Richardson is an associate professor of Human Geography at the University of Birmingham in the UK, with a regional focus on Russia and Eurasia. In this reprint

of a book originally published in 2024 by Bridge Street Press, Dr. Richardson explores eight underlying assumptions about how the world is arranged and the motives behind some international relations that he believes are myths.

The first myth he analyzes is the myth concerning the number of continents on the planet. He starts with the perceptions of the ancient Greeks and Romans that there were three continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa) though there were discrepancies among the various philosophers on where the continents began and ended. He points out that there is no physical feature that serves as a division between Europe and Asia. Searching for “maps of the continents” give you results that show a range of seven to nine continents, so the discrepancies concerning the number of continents continues to this day. As Richardson points out, given the fact that plate tectonics continues to move the land masses and the results will eventually be a new Pangea, does dividing the world into continents even make sense?

The border is the second myth to be analyzed. Richardson begins the examination at the United States-Mexican border, specifically at the town of Ambos Nogales, which is formed by the conjoining of the cities of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. The community existed before the establishment of the border and was divided into two when the border was established. Using the border wall built during Donald Trump’s first term as a starting point, Richardson discusses other walls that were meant to serve as dividers and points out their inability to serve that function. Instead, many of the walls built became a place of interaction between the groups. He investigates the history of Hadrian’s Wall as well as the Great Wall of China, pointing out that several walls in these respective areas were built as the empires expanded and contracted. He points out that borders are a fairly recent phenomenon and that increasing the militarized enforcement of borders leads to increasing violence along them.

The third myth analyzed is the myth of nations. Again, for a lot of human history, nations weren’t at the top of mind for most people. What was important was your family, your lands, your village, and your liege lord. Many nations create an illusionary history in attempt to show that they are timeless and natural. Dr. Richardson explores the relationships between architecture, ceremony, and the nation as an attempt to tie the new buildings to the past. He gives the redevelopment of the government offices in Hungary and Donald Trump’s executive order promoting classical design as examples of this. The investiture of then Prince Charles as the Prince of Wales seemed to be steeped in tradition but was the second time that the investiture took place at Caernarfon Castle. Richardson also

spends some time discussing the fact that many European nations as they currently exist were formed more recently than they present. Traditions such as standardized language, culture, education, and holidays were often a side effect of industrialization.

The myth of sovereignty is the fourth one analyzed. Richardson begins this analysis with an exploration of the region of Bir Tawil, a section of desert between Egypt and Sudan but not claimed as territory by either country, thus a land without a ruler. In contract, the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes, and of Malta has the symbols of a nation but holds no territory. Antarctica is given as a example of a challenge to the thought that a territory must be overseen by a single sovereignty. The fact that nations are dependent on one another is demonstrated by Richardson's examination of the impact of Brexit on the British economy.

The fifth myth is the myth of measuring growth. Richardson looks at how growth is defined by various measures and has varying definitions. There has been a focus on the need for continued expansion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) while areas noted for a high average life expectancy tend to have a lower GDP. The question then becomes what growth it is important to measure. Richardson explores how the way GDP is calculated and what variables left out that may be important.

The last three myths focus on specific areas: Russian expansionism, China's new Silk Road, and the perception that Africa is doomed to fail. Just as with the first five myths, Richardson gives an overview of the myths, delving into the history of each of them. For each myth, alternatives to the myths are explored.

This book is well-written and offers alternatives to geographic thoughts that we "know" are true. Some of the illustrations would benefit from having additional context provided and there were a few typographical errors. I would recommend this book for both academic and public libraries.

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