

Par là, Angers et Fabre éclairent avec beaucoup de finesse une phase historique dans laquelle ces revues ont joué un rôle d'éveil religieux et politique, mais elles n'ont pas pu maintenir cette tension commune au-delà des années 1970.

Jacques Portes  
*Université Paris 8 – Vincennes-Saint-Denis, France*

BANTJES, Rod — *Improved Earth: Prairie Space as Modern Artefact, 1869–1944*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. Pp. 204.

This concise, theoretically sophisticated work sketches the spatial dimensions of Saskatchewan colonization. Rod Bantjes's goal is to depict a world in which there are no physical givens, only projects designed by people to make use of specific places and potential resources. As he explains, "physical things do not have social effects divorced from social projects that give them meaning" (p. 9). The book's particular focus is what Bantjes calls rural space during the age of modernity, a moment that began on the prairies in the late nineteenth century and dissolved in the closing decades of the twentieth century, but which is studied here in terms of a limited number of Saskatchewan examples between roughly the last decade of the nineteenth century and the 1940s. The subjects addressed include the prairie square survey, the wheat export economy, rural municipal government, and the political and economic resistance movements that developed among farm households during these 50 years. The underlying themes are three projects of governance (Foucault's term): class formation, state formation, and the construction of nature. Bantjes sees the projects as existing in parallel and argues that, in their Saskatchewan expression, all are distinctively "modern".

Bantjes starts with the square survey — not the "outcome" of the surveyors' work, which is "an uncompromisingly uniform grid" — but the process, "a set of discursive practices" by which the state "writes up" its empire and makes it visible from a distance. These include the imposition of a European pastoral image, of Canadian property law, and of international capital flows and the market. Bantjes is critical of the resultant settlement system, which he describes as "the unprecedented and 'ugly' modern landscape". He suggests, moreover, that the survey's discursive practices inscribed racial, class, and gender issues into the land and left them to fester (pp. 34–5).

His next subject is the economic culture that developed in this land. Its hallmarks, he argues, included "spatial indifference", "trans-local" economic organization, and intense production practices. Here, Bantjes relies on Anthony Giddens's concept of the "disembedding" of social relations: that is, Saskatchewan farms were disembedded from the local district and from local contexts of interaction and placed, instead, in an international economic system that covered "indefinite spans of time-space" (p. 41). Neither the farm district nor the shopping town really offered a sense of place, and the various versions of "closer community design" that civil servants offered to ameliorate rural conditions were still-born.

The third substantive section considers the rural municipality, a relatively little-studied element in prairie life. His argument is that the constraints within which the Saskatchewan “RM” operated — its small size (there were over 300 in the province), its sparse population, the exclusion of towns and villages (which had their own governments), people’s reliance on railways for transportation (which magnified the importance of a few central meeting places) — meant that these rural governmental units “remained abstract and arbitrary determinations, with no organic links to ‘place’ or ‘community’ ” (p. 79). The municipality’s strength lay not at the local but at the provincial level, where its representative participated in a substitute parliament of and for farmers — a “class agent with some of the universal spatial scope of the provincial state and pretensions to state-like powers at the provincial level” (p. 89). This is an interesting and original angle of thought. Those seeking the origin of Saskatchewan’s pioneering medical care programmes, for example, will have to examine the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities’ gender sensitivities and its refusal to accept the “constraints of bourgeois rationality” (p. 90).

Bantjes’s last subject is “agrarian class formation”. He considers such movements of people’s resistance as co-ops, the Pool, the United Farmers of Canada, and co-op farms. He sees these resistant farm families as “modernists”, willing to adjust to their position in a global economy, idealistic about the possibilities of human invention, and eager to employ both democratic public ownership and decentralized governing structures in this adjustment.

The conclusion expresses this relatively abstract analysis in clearer terms: “My main interest in writing this book has been in understanding the ‘new’ technologies for action at a distance as they were employed in governance” (p. 120). Bantjes has tried to explain how Canada addressed “the spatial problem of governing anonymous, secreted, and dispersed populations” (p. 120) on the vast prairies. He argues that, “to understand the operation of power within the prairie west”, one must consider “a whole series of spatializations — of land use, of community, and of formal institutions within the state and civil society” (p. 122). The farmer socialists, for example, perceived that “the local had meaning as a fulcrum of resistance. Yet from the start it was spatially amorphous, without stable outlines or physical embodiments in features of the landscape or architecture ... their networks of resistance had to be, like the webs of power of the state that they frequently opposed, disembedded and knit together through modern technologies dominating space and time” (p. 124). This formulation permits Bantjes to retain a sense of optimism about human action. As he writes, “What is striking is how persistent the vision of a collective existence was ... in opposition to the private individualism of the grid” (pp. 124–125).

This essay is very brief (125 pages without notes), very dense, and very abstract. It draws on significant contributors to the literature on space and power ranging across the past three centuries, from Jefferson and Bentham to Marx and Kropotkin, and from Anthony Giddens and David Harvey to Michel Foucault. In one sense, its themes are relatively familiar: the rigid square survey, the misleading pastoral image, the legal system of private property, the inescapable international market, the lonely homestead, the financially strapped rural municipality, and the inventive agrarian resistance have all been canvassed before, but not in this way. What is new about this

book is its consistent focus on space, and this is a difficult matter to convey in ordinary language, as Bantjes would be the first to agree. What he has done is to illustrate how one can discuss space and place in such a way as to ensure that, as he writes, “neither nature nor structure is reified as an absolute limit” (p. 126).

Gerald Friesen  
*University of Manitoba*

BRUBAKER, Leslie, and Julia M. H. SMITH (eds.) — *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. 333.

Leslie Brubaker and Julia Smith have produced a volume of assorted approaches to the problem of gender in the pre-modern world. The editors begin by reminding readers of the multiple, flexible meanings of gender and the difficulty of defining it. As in similar volumes, gender ends up meaning whatever is discussed in the included essays, which is to say, the usual topics: political and social discourses restrictive of women, concepts of bodies and sexualities, and definitions of masculinity. Three articles in the collection focus on Byzantium, two on Abbasid society, one on the late empire, and nine on early medieval northern Europe.

Although the book’s topics are predictable, many of the fine articles offer fresh approaches to well-defined historical problems. The authors use case studies to deconstruct the presentation of gender in the primary source material and, at the same time, to destabilize misleading assumptions of modern historiography. Walter Pohl uses barbarian origins myths to probe the overlap of gender roles and ethnic identities, pointing out that most studies of historical ethnicity ignore half the population under study. Mary Harlow also tackles barbarian identities and masculinities by tracking late antique fashions in trousers and togas. Three essays about Byzantium focus less on gender definitions in the past than on how modern historians have burdened the familiar evidence, such as Prokopios’s *Secret History*, with their own gendered baggage. Brubaker shows how Prokopios’s portraits of Justinian and Theodora together formed a complex rhetorical statement about good government. In the most daring essay of the collection, Martha Vinson compares nineteenth-century romantic narratives with stories of Byzantine beauty pageants or “bride shows” from the seventh to ninth centuries. By teasing out subtexts, she is able to identify important shifts in female sanctity and the social position of Byzantine wives.

The two articles on Abbasid society work well together for readers unfamiliar with Islamic history. Even the uninformed will conclude from these essays that the historiography of Muslim women lags behind other areas of women’s or gender history. El Cheikh offers a fairly traditional study of women behind the throne or, in this case, the harem door and their influence on court politics. Julia Bray’s article, on Abbasid readings of gendered behaviour in earlier periods, reads like a summary of a larger analysis; however, it offers plenty of interesting tidbits about businesswomen and thoughtful points about the literary recasting of gender.