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On: 24 October 2013, At: 07:49

Publisher: Routledge

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Regional Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cres20>

Why write books?

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Published online: 23 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Richard Walker (2013) Why write books?, *Regional Studies*, 47:9, 1607-1609, DOI:
[10.1080/00343404.2013.843768](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2013.843768)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2013.843768>

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Book Views

Edited by PÄIVI OINAS

Why write books?

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Books are strange things, practical objects produced by the billions every year, yet often carrying an enormous symbolic value for both writer and reader. This is particularly the case for scholarly books, which are my subject here. Or, to borrow from Karl Marx:

A [book] appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

I wish to look here at various facets of the book using the three categories Marx establishes for the commodity: use value, exchange value and the commodity fetish.

While there have been many predictions about the end of the book in our time, under the assault of the internet and digitization, the numbers of books published every year continues to rise. Yet, in the realms of academe there is a sense that writing books is a dying art, to be mourned only in the dusty corners of humanities departments. Books in the social sciences, where I live and work, are seen by many as of diminishing value, under pressure from three directions: natural sciences, the internet and university administrators. Some of this is occurring for good reasons, but many arguments against books are neither valid nor insurmountable.

Let us begin with the scientific model, where the publishing action has clearly moved toward a more rapid pace and shorter interventions, mostly reports of research findings and tests of current theories (Kuhn's normal science). Natural sciences demand this kind of rapid-fire publication as the forefronts of knowledge advance quickly and where the need to share results and insights immediately is crucial so that others may build on new results (and not waste time on dead ends). Not only does this incremental reporting model promote short articles, it relies more and more on electronic means to reduce turnaround time from research to publication. Articles have a higher use-value than

books in the rarefied world of scientific exchange – which is a kind of productive consumption, in Marx's terms.

The natural sciences also work more often in large teams using expensive tools. This increase in the scale of research militates against artisanal production and toward collective articles, with different authors often taking the lead in reporting on the part of the research where they are the most expert. Moreover, large projects may carry on for years, so that incremental reporting of results is crucial. Trying to write collective books that tackle the whole of such enormous undertakings is a daunting proposition, even if the team might be tempted. In the social sciences, many of the same pressures of masses of new research results, fast-moving fronts of knowledge and large research collaboratives are obtained, with similar consequences.

Yet, natural scientists still publish books. One kind is the survey/textbook, which allows students and colleagues quickly to get a handle on the state of knowledge in the field. Another kind of book is science writing for a broader audience in order to diffuse knowledge among a literate and curious public. Such volumes are increasingly popular, whether written by astronomers or geologists, and have a wider echo in books penned by science journalists. Apparently, books are not altogether an endangered species in the natural sciences.

A second reason for the de-emphasis on scholarly books in the social sciences is time pressure under the influence of digital age information overload. There is so much out there today, so much coming at us, so much to follow to stay abreast of the world (even the narrow worlds of social sciences) that we academics have to take our learning in smaller and quicker doses, that is, articles. And even there it is often in PDF format sent by colleagues rather than in poring over hard-copy journals. I barely glance at paper journals anymore, which have, in any case, proliferated to a

dizzying extent. I am by no means saying that this is a bad thing, even if we could go back to a less stressful pace. I recall an interview with John Lennon in which he talked about getting Yoko Ono to see the virtue in the three-minute song. It is not the only way to do good music, but there is a real brilliance to the best pop songs that cannot be replaced by listening to Mahler's 9th.

On the other hand, even in a fast-paced world of knowledge uptake there is a secure place for books (and symphonies, for that matter). Books are good to read. They are eminently useful in this regard because of the type of intellectual exchange they allow. Books facilitate deep engagement with a subject and sustained reflection on problems of what is known and what is not about a topic. They allow for an extended setting of an intellectual puzzle and whatever may bear on it, with a variety of evidence and argument to carry the reader along toward the author's conclusions. This is particularly important in the social sciences, where the constructions of normal science are less brick by brick and more in the laying out of whole terrains of theory, context and evidence. Social science can be harder than natural science because the objects of our attention are always moving, forever changing their minds and unwilling to submit to controlled experiments. We are forced to build with bigger bricks, one might say.

The third reason for the devaluation of books in the social sciences is the demand by administrators for 'measurables' to prove to themselves, governments and funders that what we academics are doing is productive. Talk about the fetish of the commodity! The consequence of the British Research Excellence Framework (REF) and other similar evaluations that work by counting output numbers has been to create an academic value system in favour of publishing more articles and fewer books. Multi-author articles, now typical in the sciences, are especially useful for racking up points, while books are frequently counted as equal to two or three articles, rather than as a wholly different genre of writing.

I have to hold my nose a bit to make the case for measurables, but there are some positives. For one, writing books is hard work, and it can be too difficult for some scholars, especially young ones (I could not manage it until after I was tenured). Shorter works can be stepping stones in a long research programme (and career) and the best way to work on specific problems. There is no reason for a reverse fetish of books, which can be equally as pointless as racking up article counts. There are, admittedly, many bad academic tomes, puffed up with all kinds of unnecessary stuffing. And there is definitely a need for critical evaluation of scholars for promotion and tenure, which was not always the case in the boom years of university expansion in the 1960s and 1970s.

Nonetheless, the frenzied pace of modern academia is hard to justify, and the demands on graduate students

and young colleagues to publish or perish are appalling. What this amounts to is not just the accumulation of knowledge, but a kind of mass production of commodities and speed up of the labour process in pursuit of the accumulation of campus funding. This is neoliberal, capitalist logic at its finest, the triumph of exchange over use-value, or real knowledge and the quality of scholarly life. The result is commonly a lot of weak articles: endlessly repeating the same modish concepts, making minor tweaks to established theories, engaging in unnecessary literature reviews, and launching arcane critiques and debates – all with hardly a modicum of good evidence and explanatory power.

And this brings me back to the book. Why write a book in the social sciences? The chief reason is the ability to make a sustained argument for an idea, either through theoretical elaboration, or by carefully setting the stage to isolate causal forces, or by mustering sufficient evidence to support an explanation. Some good books are highly unified narratives that march the reader along a relatively straight path toward the conclusions, while others are more assemblages of different takes on a problem from various angles. Some are more chronological (especially where history matters), some more cross-sectional and in the moment. But it is the sense of the wholeness of the argument and mastery of a subject that makes a scholarly book worthwhile.

Believe me, this achievement is not easy. It takes labour and a degree of learning and maturity that is more often found among senior scholars after years of reflection. I think of my former colleague, Clarence Glacken, whose *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967) is still a foundation stone for scholars thinking about questions of people and nature. Books like that are not just building blocks of general knowledge, but cornerstones. It may seem that such an old-fashioned, artisanal model of working is wholly outdated, because one human mind cannot wrap itself around the expanding universes of knowledge; but the unifying power of a single mind still can work wonders, even though we are engaged in a collective enterprise of scholarship today.

Moreover, there is one indelible argument for the solitary enquiry of the craft model: sheer human creativity. It can happen in teams, of course, and through dialogue and brainstorming; but if there is one thing that writers on technical innovation and artistic endeavour can agree on, it is the anarchic, unexpected and inspirational nature of creative thought, and the way it so often issues from a single mind. This is not a simple working of 'genius' versus the rest of us hewers of wood, though there is a good reason why we so often go back to cite great thinkers; rather, even relatively humble advances in knowledge take a creative act, not just the adding up of more and more information (the bane of the digital age). Books are frequently the best means by which important new ideas see the light of day (cf. HALL *et al.*, 2012).

Moreover, a major reason for writing a book, despite the time and hardship, is the personal satisfaction of having plumbed a subject to the depths and having made a serious contribution to the process of knowledge-making (even if one is ultimately proved wrong). The labour process matters, not merely in the usefulness of the commodity, but in the value we put on it – a value that goes beyond exchange, ‘measurables’ and money. This is true, by the way, for any significant product, whether a beautiful piece of furniture, an elegantly designed iPhone, or simply a good meal cooked at home for friends.

I have to add that the book-as-object matters to the writer, as well. Alienation is not just a negative process of ‘objectification’ of labour; in fact, objectification is part of the point. That beautiful object in hand, when one gets the first copy off the presses, is a reward in itself, a symbol of the achievement. But more than that, the book as object can circulate to colleagues, friends and strangers, carrying the contribution with it. It can create new connections, new opportunities for

the author, as well as for readers, in its travels; and it can outlast the author to keep on being productive for others. What makes this less alienated than factory work is that the author’s name is on a book (though the reality of the publisher’s control can show up in many tawdry ways).

Finally, the book *qua* object is satisfying to readers, as well. This is not just about the ego and fame of the author who, after all, loses control of the text as it circulates. While the ‘object’ may be as minimal as the electronic scribbles on an e-reader, books still get read in huge numbers today, and that practice is not going away even as the digital young have shorter attention spans and lose the habit of reading. How many times do you hear a friend or colleague say that she just loves the ‘feel’ of the book in her hand or the possibility of passing a good book along to someone else? Books are here to stay, even as the world of scholarship, publishing, writing and reading swirls into new constellations. Go read or write a good one, and you will see why.

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Why write textbooks?

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There are likely many effective ways to introduce students to economic geography. Whether it is through a careful explication of location models; a treatment of key actors such as firms or consumers; a discussion of different types of economic spaces (industrial clusters, shopping malls, financial centres, and so on); a consideration of the relations and value chains linking and differentiating spaces (countryside and city, the European Union and its neighbours, the Global North and South, and so on); or perhaps case studies about the local and regional economies with which students are familiar. Probably most instructors of economic geography use a mixture of avenues into the core material. Likewise, there are any number of possibilities for structuring an economic geography course. And there is a wide variation in the thematic emphases of economic geography courses – with globalization serving as one

especially popular key theme over the past two or three decades.

The kinds of decisions instructors make about how best to teach their material are, unsurprisingly, made with attention to the particular characteristics of the students taking the course. Each instructor of economic geography is likely sensitive to the background and context of her or his students. Are they advanced students who have taken a suite of human geography and/or economics courses, or will this be their first encounter with human geography? Are the students majoring in geography, or are they taking economic geography as part of a different curriculum (international studies, business or whatever)? Are the students from the locale in which the institution offering the course is located, or are they drawn from far and wide? Are the students typically well-prepared for a