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The Geographer, Flying High

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REVIEW ESSAY

The Geographer, Flying High

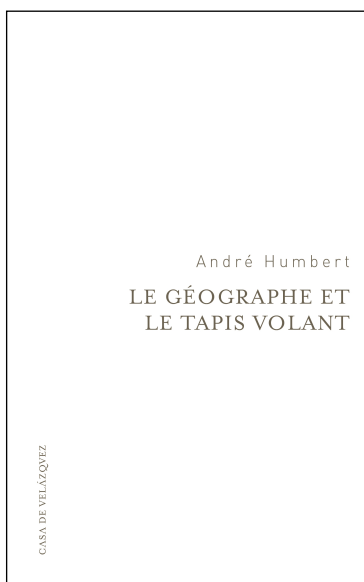
Le Géographe et le Tapis Volant [The Geographer and the Flying Carpet], André Humbert. Essais de la Casa de Velázquez, No. 5. Madrid, Spain: Casa de Velázquez, 2012. 189 pp., foreword, maps, figures, photographs, color plates, notes, acknowledgments. €22, paper (ISBN 978-84-96820-86-9).

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Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts.

—Oliver Sacks (2015)

Small and graceful books sometimes turn into adventure stories, resonant with erudition, pleasure, and the timbre of a life of observation and action. *Le Géographe et le Tapis Volant*, by the French geographer André Humbert, a professor emeritus at the now-consolidated University of Lorraine, admirably fits that bill. It's all but impossible, in reading this slender but far-reaching volume published by the Casa de Velázquez—an institution dear to researchers in Madrid that since the early 1900s has sponsored work by French scholars interested in Iberian studies—not to smile at Humbert's devotion to the landscapes of Spain, France, and the Mediterranean Basin. An affection for the aerial view is everywhere. There are some geographers irremediably linked to a given



technique—geographic information systems, palynology, the weather station or stream gauge, soil pits or solipism, Marxism or numeration—each of those comfortably supportive. Not so the edginess of flight—and Humbert is a master of small plane aviation, using the light private aircraft as a research tool. The limits and possibilities are for him clear enough:

The study of the face of the earth using a conceptual and systematic tool can give a clear identity to geography. Such a technique does not dismiss human company, but its primary purpose is not the study of society itself. Geography needs the social sciences—and many another fields—to understand how people create and develop spaces. The geographer must examine all current and former players who edify, transform, and destroy, to understand the constant remodeling of the surface of the earth. (p. 179)

Such a melding of pilot and professor is nothing entirely startling. After all, the adept student of physiography Erwin Raisz, a cartographer and for twenty years a lecturer in geography at Harvard, explained in more than one essay that he did much of his preliminary landform sketching in the 1930s and 1940s while flying—exactly as Humbert began doing twenty years after Raisz's (1957) *Landform Map of the United States* emerged in its legendary 6th edition. Willis T. Lee wrote *The Face of the Earth as Seen from the Air* in a hortatory 1922 American Geographical Society publication. Peirce Lewis has always insisted that geographers take the window seat, and unfurl Raisz's map to track paths across the North American continent. J. B. Jackson's magazine, *Landscape*, during its

first five years of publication from 1951 to 1955, carried an open invitation on its title page: “*Landscape* is interested in original articles dealing with aspects of human geography, particularly those suited to illustration by aerial photographs”; little wonder that many of the early covers were aerial views. In that spirit, Humbert quotes Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1984), author of *The Little Prince* but the writer of even better nonfiction (Bunkse 1990), in his foreword: “The plane is a machine, no doubt, but what an instrument of analysis! This instrument lets us discover the true face of the earth” (p. xii).

Humbert is convinced that there is special knowledge, laden with insights, that awaits the aeronaut, especially when the plane is your own. For almost forty years he has traveled Spain, France, the Mediterranean, and throughout North Africa. He’s done it from an airplane, camera in hand, dodging the various complications that can arise when a foreign national energetically documents the countryside (and urban firmament) of a land not his own. Or maybe it is his, after all. As Jackson (1951) contended, from the air most international boundaries recede into something indistinct; more a curiosity than a firm border, although considerably more recent books by the likes of Dear (2013), Goin (1987), and Turner et al. (2003), and the elegantly geographical writing of Dan Arreola do remind us of difference and similarity on the ground; NASA’s EOS “Images of the Day” provides satellite images with often learned explanations of earthly phenomena, and the desk-bound can thank Denis Cosgrove for putting larger themes of earth perception into context in his later work (Cosgrove 2001; Cosgrove and della Dora 2005).

Humbert argues there is much to be discovered in seeing what the Swiss journalist Georg Gerster (1986) once described as below from above. If consciously artistic work by Gerster and many another aerial photographers splashes color and amazement before our eyes, using aerial views for scholarly inquiry is another affair, as Humbert’s career makes clear: flying to make sense of the existence and history of patterns on the land. Images gathered from kites or balloons or space stations or, for that matter, drones do contribute. All the photography included in the book is from the air, all in oblique photographs, and handheld, from the pilot’s perspective (Dyce 2013). Aerial surveys themselves go well back in time, but to make such matters a professional passion is less usual.

The book’s four main chapters are followed by a gallery of color photographs and a conclusion: “A Day of the Flying Geographer,” “Dreamlike Flight and Contemplation of the World,” “The Unsettling Nature of Flight,”

and “Of Scenes Admired and Landscapes Explained: The Macroscopic of the Geographer.” Humbert’s last massive chapter is 120 pages long, but reviews a great deal of his published work. He ends with “Conclusion: A Privileged View of the Planet.” His research using flight photography began in 1978, when Humbert agreed to help geographers and archeologists with an aerial survey of Spain; a last major trip in 2011, before the book’s publication, was an expedition quartering southern Morocco (p. 40). Across a long career, Humbert’s books, chapters, and essays—often published by the Casa de Velázquez—are the embodiment of what, in a subtitle to an earlier book, he calls “Prospections aériennes,” or aerial surveys—although that term could almost and more precisely be translated as “prospecting.” But just as flight gave Saint-Exupéry (1984) freedom to explore, Humbert revels in a joining of flight and geography. One chapter subhead in the memoir is “An Old Dream Becomes Real”; another is “The Great Aesthetic Pleasure.” In earlier writing by Humbert, the insights and views, so carefully discussed with nearby photographs almost always printed in color, were for me a reminder of the value of perspective. In four decades of teaching at Berkeley, James J. Parsons would start off a field class with travel to a suitable high vantage point, often as easy as a trip to the Lawrence Hall of Science, with its San Francisco Bay Area panorama at 1,107 feet (338 m). When I returned to southern Spain to start a research trip after being away for nearly twenty years, Jim’s advice before I left was to ride a public bus to any nearby airfield, loiter artfully, and ask if anyone there was interested in a few hours of flying time. Someone would be willing, if I volunteered to pay for the fuel: Sure enough, the high-wing Cessna is ideal. Pilots like to fly, and it is probably safer for someone else to handle the mechanics of flight while as a passenger you duct tape or lock the window open, wrestle with a map, and photograph away—so much easier now with digital cameras than it was changing Kodachrome cassettes in a Leica rangefinder camera. I remind my own students about the value of an aerial overview; not many make it into a plane to follow up on that suggestion, but a few do, and they never forget.

Among the themes Humbert raises are problems unique to the “voyager on a flying carpet”—his reflections on the risks of field work. Changeable weather, skeptical local authorities, securing safe fuel, and traversing suspect terrain are unsurprising issues. An essential—and haunting—problem of the private pilot is knowing where you are, and being certain just how welcome you are in that airspace (p. 41). Locating yourself, Humbert notes, has at least grown easier with Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment (pp. 45–55). It could be argued that many of

the same problems exist for field workers on the ground, but the ordnance and legal apparatus that can be brought to bear against an errant plane makes the risk of blundering into unfriendly space a more serious matter—and in the air there might be less of an opportunity to talk your way out of trouble. Joys and apprehension can go hand in glove in the frisson of field work:

It was not the first time I felt this feeling of bliss, as over thirty years—and even a little more—there have been hard times in flights around the western Mediterranean. Clouds that trap and suddenly enclose the plane in mediocre weather; a mountain with its peaks and gorges that leaves a pilot no possible recourse should the engine stop; the sea, over which we must venture to go from France and Sardinia, or to move from Alméria to eastern Morocco—hardly welcoming to a pilot potentially in trouble. (p. 3)

In reading and rolling Humbert's elegant French phrasing around my tongue, I found much of interest in larger lessons laid out about how to cipher what is happening in a landscape. There is an education about the role of the geographer, as a trained aerial observer, in that process. No doubt the aerial view (and I won't be the last to express delight in the possibilities offered by Google Earth) adds spice to the sauce:

Indeed, geography is the science of space, places, and territories, which is to say the study of often large objects. There is no doubt that, for a scientist, not being able to take in at once the entirety of an object of study is a major handicap. That, precisely, is what happens to the geographer. For so many disciplines, instead of taking in all the territory within a study area we must be content with partial and quite fragmentary views, a space of tens or hundreds of square kilometers in which the view is constrained and tiny. Granted, someone who knows a landscape surpassingly well can compensate for such inferiority by raw force of intellect, with rational deductions and logical relationship used to piece together pieces otherwise observed separately, one after the other. But doing this can lead to erroneous conclusions, absent sound reasons for surmises. Not all sciences suffer from this drawback. (pp. 57–58)

But in closing, there is truly a special pleasure in reading, studying, and reveling in the work of someone who has shared many of my own experiences in a familiar landscape that we both much enjoy, the dotted woodlands of southwestern Spain and Portugal, known as the *dehesa*, with its mix of evergreen holm oaks and the still more colorful cork oak, with its brilliant red cambium right after the cork is stripped—something that is not evident from the air (Campos et al. 2013). Yet the overall landscape is captured well by Humbert:

There is a military airstrip in Badajoz almost at the Portuguese border where civilian aircraft are allowed. I filed a flight plan to avoid around an enormous disturbance that was sliding slowly eastward. A short time, in flight: it does not take more than an hour to cross this empty space of Iberian forests dotted with light green holm and cork oaks. I always feel solitude flying over this region where villages are rare and the human presence is in the form of *cortijos* [large rural estate houses] scattered through a mass of oak woodlands. Those structures loom large in a *dehesa* [managed oak woodland] that can cover hundreds or thousands of hectares. Inherited large properties here were passed down in landed families since the Reconquest, from the 12th to the 19th centuries, though great estates may also trace back to the sale, during the 19th century, of huge expanses of forest once owned by rural or urban communities where in winter animals hailing from the cold lands of the North would graze: merino sheep of the Mesta, that great confederation of Castilian breeders. These lands of raw rock, where soil is acid and poor, could not nourish a large peasantry; however *dehesa* estates symbolize in the eyes of the agrarian proletariat an unbearable tyranny of the *latifundia*, a yoke they could not shake off, and little wonder it was therefore one of the main issues of the Spanish Civil War of 1936. . . . The landscapes of these solitudes are anything but monotonous, especially in the Sierra Morena [north of Seville] where a contrast of barrens and long montane corridors reveal quite a varied vegetative cover, with hard dark scrub but also well-spaced oaks, whose understory is often cultivated by the ancient practice of long fallow, where a grain harvest may be brought in once every year or two, but sometimes only once every fifteen or twenty years. (pp. 21–22)

There are recognizable costs involved in favoring one main research technique, whether the ethnographic interview, a deep dive into paleography and the archive, the Web-based or mailed survey, data instrument-collected in the field, or idylls derived from the airiest realms of theory. Having read this book and absorbed past lessons from André Humbert that document from the air the long lots of Morocco and southern Spain, the presence of the *noria* (an Islam-derived water-raising technology), an exquisite hydrogeology of all-but-disappeared *qanats* or *foggaras* used for irrigation and urban water, or seen the crumbling walls of now-abandoned North African cities, I recognize the profound value of mixing ground work with an assessment from the air of land history (Humbert 2014). So much to see, so many conversations to have, such policies and perturbations to learn: Who would not relish them all? I feel the broad embrace makes me a better geographer. As the lyrical author put it, “I get off my flying carpet willingly to pose specific questions, but I return to it as often as possible to see again and again the spectacle of the world” (p. 179).

Translations from the French are by Paul F. Starrs.

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