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Jeanne Haffner. *The View from Above: The Science of Social Space.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013. xiv + 203 pp. $32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-262-01879-1.

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Views of the earth from above have increasingly become the subject of critical interrogation. Jeanne Haffner's fascinating book *The View from Above: The Science of Social Space* charts a history of this perspective by exploring the birth of aerial photography and its deployment within twentieth-century France. Valued as a symbol of modernity and for promoting an objective or "scientific" way of seeing, the view from above played a crucial role in shaping French cultural history, opening the spatial configurations of French society to analysis, intervention, and critique. Haffner reveals how, from the 1920s onwards, aerial photography came to signify and carry a number of modernist assumptions over the particular representational "truth" offered by aerial photography and the ability of this technology to provide complete access to "reality." By providing a cultural historical reading of this perspective, Haffner foregrounds how different ways of seeing mediate and constitute the very reality claimed as "accessible." In chapters devoted to military photography, ethnography, and urban space, Haffner demonstrates how aerial perspectives triggered new kinds of urban intervention, understandings of colonial space, conceptions of national and regional identity, and reflections upon the very practice of planning.

Perhaps the most important consequence of these aerial perspectives, however, was the emergence of a particular intellectual category or object of analysis: *l'espace sociale*, or "social space." This term has formed something of a background concept familiar to researchers interested in urban space, everyday life, and histories of spatial thought. This book provides something of a genealogy of this "usefully ambiguous" concept (p. xiii). In particular, Haffner contends that the term is perhaps too quickly associated with the writings and sensibilities of the Marxist spatial critic Henri Lefebvre. Haffner expands the intellectual history of this term by revealing how the notion of "social space" emerged as a consequence of the perceptions and perspectives opened up through views from above, and by demonstrating how it intersected with a number of different fields and

contexts, from military reconnaissance to ethnographic documentation. Crucially, the view from above did not just constitute new intellectual categories or objects of analysis, it also shaped the ways in which spatial problems, such as the housing crisis in postwar France, might be framed and addressed. In this context, Haffner analyzes the French modernizing experiments of the ***grandes ensembles***, particularly in Paris, as spatial solutions to particular social crises, diagnosed and framed by the ***vue d'ensemble*** afforded by views from above.

However, one of the most significant arguments proposed by Haffner is that the view from above should be recognized as something more than an abstracting and objectifying perspective always in the service of the state. To make this claim is to trouble some of the positions promoted in Lefebvre's writings which critique and reject the view from above as an ideological tool of state control or surveillance. In Haffner's eyes, to consider the view from above in terms of an ***a priori*** process of abstraction and distanced observation represents a simplification that ignores the multiple histories, meanings, and practices associated with this visuality. As with other cultural and historical excavations of perspectives of the earth from above, such as Denis Cosgrove's cartographic genealogy of the earth (2001) or the interdisciplinary reflections on visuality in ***New Geographies 4: The Scales of the Earth*** (2011), Haffner questions the easy association between the visual and the exercise of "alienating" modes of representation.[1] This uncoupling of the aerial view from a certain one-dimensional conception of visual power framed by the logics of the state begins in the opening three chapters of Haffner's book, which demonstrate the extraordinary range of uses and meanings assigned to aerial perspectives.

In charting the history of aerial photography as a visual practice, Haffner reveals that the view from above was subject to a range of different disciplinary perspectives that were enrolled alongside specific state projects. For example, the development and implementation of aerial photography for urban planning was a distinctively interdisciplinary affair. Government ministries were tasked with recruiting diverse figures from different disciplines in order to address particular urban problems: photographers, sociologists, human geographers, economists, and architects. Faithful to its subject, Haffner's book reflects this interdsiciplinarity, providing reflections that will be of interest to students and scholars in fields such as the history of science and technology, human geography, visual theory, cartographic thought, and political history.

Clearly, aerial photography did become enrolled in all manner of state and colonial projects. Indeed, Haffner explores the ambitions of government departments to use aerial photography in these contexts, noting how individuals were carefully trained so as to develop "expertise" in reading and viewing aerial photography. One of the goals of this kind of training was to penetrate the surface of the image in order to access the cultural ways of life, and "mentalities" of those social groups depicted beneath the gaze (p. 17). This is particularly evident in Haffner's reflections on the use of aerial photography in colonial contexts, such as the Dogon of northern Cameroon. These techniques of observation were also required to guarantee that "scientific," "quantifiable," or usable information could be extracted from the photographs.

The colonial implementation of aerial photography also plays a central role in another of Haffner's arguments: that the view from above enabled new kinds of critique that politicized the spatialities produced by capital. In short, aerial photography made those socioeconomic inequalities striating French space visible, both within urban spaces, and between rural and urban areas. Drawing upon Le Corbusier's reflections on aerial photography, Haffner explores how a new diagno-

sis became possible, that of the health or sickness of urban space. Through comparative juxtaposition with the harmonious, "natural," social spaces of colonial space, capitalist space appeared chaotic, disordered, and unhealthy (p. 46). In highlighting how aerial perspectives could be used to diagnose French urban spaces as "sick" in comparison with healthy, organic, and harmonious (colonial) spatialities, Haffner presents the reader with a striking paradox. Here is a technology that is laden with all manner of modernist signification: a symbol of historical progress and tool of the Enlightenment. And yet, Haffner reveals how it was deployed in a Rousseauist romance of the traditional, "primitive" society and the valorization of harmonious relations between social groups and environmental orders.

This relation between society and environment, and the different senses of cultural or national identity that emerge from this relation, becomes part of the cultural history of twentieth-century France explored by Haffner. Aerial views promoted reflections on particular conceptions of French national identity, which became reconfigured or reworked through reflections on the relations between society and the land. However, in the analysis of the ways that discussions of socio-spatial form engaged in explicit and naturalistic arguments about the relations between environment and social order (or disorder), perhaps more could have been made of the fascist dimensions of these discourses. In what ways, for example, where these kinds of images bound up with rhetorical articulations of the relations between nation, labor, soil, ground, cultural homogeneity, and so on? Haffner hints, for example, that the attempts to conceive of cultural-spatial formations through biological and environmental languages of soil or ground were problematic, but does not make explicit precisely how these metaphors were dangerous, for example, by situating them within a broader history of environmental determinist thought (see pp. 23-31).

The ethnographic "potential" of aerial views also found expression in efforts such as the "Archives of the Planet" project that attempted to create an encyclopaedic "photographic atlas of the entire world" (p. 25). Jean Brunhes, a pupil of Paul Vidal de la Blache, worked with the banker and philanthropist Albert Kahn on this project. "Archives of the Planet" had the intention of revealing and documenting differences in how societies relate to their environments, and to thereby communicate knowledge about the "unity and diversity" of humankind. This assumption of views from above as bearers or signifiers of particular humanist sensibilities could perhaps be placed within a legacy running up to the recent activities of figures like Yann Arthus-Bertrand. Other examples of particular visual practices or devices, such as the "maquettoscope" (p. 88) and its street-level view of planned urban form (as a situating perspective to complement the view from above), also open up reflections on other contemporary visual practices, such as those surrounding Google Earth.

The "maquettoscope" is an example that speaks again to Haffner's attempt to question the one-dimensional narrative of the view from above as essentially the viewpoint of abstract state planning. Across Haffner's study, consideration of social relations, ways of life, and the ethnographic dimensions of spatial configurations--in short, "social space"--are understood to emerge ***from*** the view from above, rather than being modes of human experience somehow erased by aerial perception. However, the notion "social space" is only fully interrogated in the final two chapters of the book, which address the work of Paul-Henry Chombart and Henri Lefebvre, respectively. Challenging some of the orthodoxies of radical spatial thought, Haffner argues that views from above cannot be reducible to that "oblivion and misunderstanding of practices" that Michel de Certeau diagnoses in the urbanist's abstract gaze from above.[2] Rather, Haffner argues that these perspectives in fact precipitated reflections

on everyday life in line with a broader sociological ambition of addressing the complexities of socio-spatial experience. Views from above thus become important elements in the history of critical attention on social practices as spatially expressed. In tracing the heritage of the term "social space" to the aerial photography of Chombart, Haffner presents a narrative path from the ethnographic, humanist, and sociological ambitions of Chombart's aerial photography, to those radical writings on social space developed by Marxist thinkers such as Guy Debord and Henri Lefebvre. In the latter part of the book, this history culminates in the French New Left and Lefebvre's interrogation of the spatialities of capital and modernity. In charting this history, Haffner seeks to expose a contradiction within writings, such as Lefebvre's, that equate urban planning with an abstract, optical view from above, and which see in this perspective an obliteration of social space or an awareness of socio-spatial practices. Lefebvre's rejection of this "technique" or perspective, Haffner implies, can be seen as a kind of false consciousness, or at least poor historicism (p. 119).

It is certainly interesting to find out about Lefebvre's relationship and engagement within government planning projects. However, what is not necessarily explored here is whether this kind of biographical complicity actually puts into question the validity of Lefebvre's critiques of the logic of state urban planning, and those abstractions or erasures of sociality that Lefebvre and others diagnose within certain modes of perception. Further, just what is passed between the figures of Chombart and Lefebvre in their respective uses of "social space," and what theoretical traditions do they draw upon? As is acknowledged by Haffner (pp. 119-120), there is little if any shared public discussion on the notion between the two. Part of the silence here may be explainable in terms of the different theoretical languages and bodies of philosophical work drawn upon by Chombart and Lefebvre respectively. For example, Haffner outlines how Chombart's conception of social space derived from particular anthropological, ethnographic, and psychological theories (pp. 82, 92). Whilst the notion of social space for Lefebvre clearly also refers to comparable horizons of human praxis, it is also not reducible to those theoretical traditions. In particular, the question of the role of "social space" as a rearticulation or reconfiguration of Marxist thought is not addressed in as much depth as one might expect here. It is also worth underlining the strategic use of the notion of "social space" in Lefebvre's writings, such as *The Production of Space* (1991), as a counterpoint to a range of poststructuralist authors such as Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, or Michel Foucault who, for Lefebvre, deployed the notion of "space" or "spatiality" in discursive, idealist, or "mental" registers, and which had the effect of evacuating the notion of space from a real, materialist politics.

If Haffner's study of aerial photography proposes that this technology marked a distinctively new set of visual conventions, it is not clear exactly how these visualities departed from, or reworked, earlier conventions. I was left wondering, for example, how developing practices of aerial photography intersected with, transformed, or altered long-standing state-cartographic practices. In this light, there could have been a more careful situating of aerial photography within broader histories of the "view from above" (p. 16). In particular, this perspective has been examined in contemporary cartographic histories precisely in terms of the articulation of those relations between "the social and the spatial," or culture and environment, that are explored in Haffner's study of aerial photography. Further, whilst Haffner's book does not set out to provide a detailed history of aerial photography as such, it might be productive to consider work on the social histories of perception, such as that of Jonathan Crary, in order to open questions about the technicity of these views from above, and about the kinds of

materialities, skills, and embodied practices required for certain kinds of image creation.

Similarly, in the final chapter there could have been more nuanced reflections on just why there was "skepticism" from philosophers and sociologists towards aerial perspectives. Clearly, the role of views from above in new kinds of aerial bombing during World War II and the Algerian War played an important role. However, Haffner contends that the growth in skepticism towards aerial visions was a question of scale: aerial photography had "scaled up" in the 1960s and was now too distanced and removed from the humanly meaningful scale of the neighborhood and village. Oddly, Haffner posits that this reached a peak in the Apollo "whole earth" photographs of the 1960s, which distanced the earth to a "pale blue dot" (p. 109). This description seems a little anachronistic, as it was famously used by Carl Sagan to describe the image of the earth captured by Voyager I in 1990. However, surely the critique of greater distance, detachment, and ties with colonial-military practice are only part of the story of this skepticism? Perhaps in thinking through those critiques of the totalizing and objectifying modes of perception opened through aerial photography, among other modes of vision, one might need to reflect in more depth on the central place of the critique of Cartesianism within French thought across the twentieth century, as well as the role of phenomenological and existential thought in putting into question technological modes of enframing the world.

Of course, it is always easy to ask books to do more, especially, as is the case with Haffner's study, when they provoke interesting questions and open up further avenues of discussion. Haffner's study provides an important, well-written interrogation of the complex histories surrounding a perspective that continues to inform contemporary conventions of seeing.

Notes

[1]. Denis Cosgrove, ***Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*** (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); E. H. Jazairy, ed., ***New Geographies 4: Scales of the Earth*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[2]. Michel de Certeau, ***The Practice of Everyday Life***, trans. *S.* Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press,1988), 93.

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Lefebvre, H. 1991: ***The Production of Space***. Nicholson-Smith, D. Trans. Blackwell: Oxford.

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