

The Andes: A Geographical Portrait

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The Andes: A Geographical Portrait

By Axel Borsdorf and Christoph Stadel.
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2015. xiv + 368 pp. US\$ 139.00.
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Axel Borsdorf and Christoph Stadel note that their “major motivation” for preparing their impressive work titled *The Andes: A Geographical Portrait* “was the realization that since the publication of the *Geography of the Andes* by Pedro Cunill ... some 50 years ago, no comprehensive documentation of the Andes has been undertaken” (p v). The book that they have produced reflects the insights, observations, and passion that come from their many decades of work and travel in the Andes. The result is a text that is comprehensive, engaging, and above all colorful. Even though it is written primarily as a textbook, the book could easily grace any coffee table. *The Andes* is full of color photographs, maps, and diagrams, and in the time that we have been able to enjoy the book, it has regularly enticed us to pick it up, flick through its pages, and have a quick shot of the vibrancy, diversity, and complexities that underlie much of our passion for the region. This book not only conveys a lot of information about the Andes but also elicits a feel for the region.

Given that this book lies somewhere between a reference work and a textbook, we have taken the unusual step of writing this review from the perspective of two types of users: the professor and the undergraduate student. From each of these perspectives, the book has many strengths, together with a handful of limitations, that suggest how it might be used in conjunction with other materials.

The text is organized around 10 chapters. The introductory chapter provides a framework for the remainder of the book, in which landscape, spatial structure, and the natural environment are afforded particular importance for understanding the human and human–environmental geographies of the Andes. Chapter 2 further elaborates on the physical geography of the region, while chapter 3 addresses conservation and protected areas. Chapter 4 gives an overview of pre-colonial and colonial history, and the remaining 6 chapters address dimensions of the human geography of the Andes: ethnicity and demography, rural and urban settlement, regional economies, transport, geopolitical and cultural constructions of space, and development. The glossary of terms and reference list at the end of the book are helpful and comprehensive. However, the absence of an index is frustrating and means that the only way to explore the book is through the headings and subheadings of the contents pages. The translation from the original German (Borsdorf and Stadel 2013) is excellent.

There are many highlights to these chapters. Chapters 4, 5, and 9, for instance, do a fine job of showing how historically rooted ethnic hierarchies continue to shape social and spatial dynamics, as well as highlighting the contemporary and historical roles that indigenous groups play in Andean society and politics. Chapter 9 also introduces interesting discussions of religious spaces and places, a theme that is often absent from geographical texts. The authors strike a good balance between describing contemporary political, social, and economic arrangements and drawing attention to the ways in which they are changing and adapting in relation to modernization and globalization. The chapters convey a nuanced sense of “the Andes” as a region while revealing its remarkable internal diversity.

The book is more encyclopedic than it is analytical, and although implicit theoretical arguments appear in different places, this is not a book that provides a clear framework with which students can interpret and explain Andean geographies. Instead, the authors’ strategy is to convey a great deal of empirical information; suggest the central importance of landscape, the natural environment, and spatial relationships for any effort to organize this data; and then let students work with that information to arrive at their own interpretations of stability and change in the region. There is much to be said for this approach, but it requires considerable time from students, and it runs the risk that they might get lost in the detail and find it hard to step back and identify broader patterns. At the least, it might have been helpful for each chapter to include a short summary outlining its most important implications and lessons. In addition, notwithstanding the volume of information presented, the book assumes at least some knowledge of the broader Latin American geographical, historical, and political context.

For the professor, all this means that while the book is a great teaching aid—in particular because the ample use of photos and images draws the student reader in—the text is not sufficient for a course on the Andes. It would have to be combined with other texts that are more theoretical in tone, as well as material laying out the broader Latin American and global context within which the Andes are embedded. While the authors introduce some of this material, there is not enough to provide the student with an adequate sense of the social and political economic relationships that have helped produce Andean geographies. Conversely, if the text were being used in a class on Andean physical geographies, it would have to be complemented with material that has a more deeply ecological and Earth system science orientation.

While recognizing that there is a great deal of information in the book, a number of themes might have received slightly more attention, given their importance for the region. The challenges of climate change and water resources, which are so pressing in the region, seem relatively underdeveloped. Nor is there much discussion of the relationships among narcotics, rural and urban economies, and political systems. Perhaps because we are writing this review as the Colombian peace process is (hopefully) in its final stages, we would have liked to see more discussion of the relationships among violence, war, and human geographies of the Andes. Conversely, the authors do a fine job of drawing attention to

other deeply significant aspects of everyday life that are often missing in critical geographies of the Andes, themes such as the places and spaces of everyday religiosity or the challenges of traffic, mobility, and road access.

Perhaps the finest feature of this book is how it feels. Reading the text and simply turning the pages, the reader cannot get away from the remarkable and jarring diversities and differences that constitute the everyday geographies of the Andes. The authors have produced a book that conveys a clear and palpable sense of the Andes and will excite students and encourage them to want to know more about the region. It is a fine achievement.

REFERENCE

Borsdorf A, Stadel C. 2013. *Die Anden—Ein Geographisches Porträt*. Berlin, Germany: Springer.

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