Gaston Gordillo (2014) Rubble: the Afterlife of Destruction. Duke University Press.

Review for Social and Cultural Geography

Rubble: the Afterlife of Destruction is a tantalisingly enigmatic book. It sets out from the outset to counter romanticised, colonial and thoroughly modernist renderings of 'ruins'; in their historical, material and notional form. In brief, Gaston Gordillo argues that ruins are all-too-easily appropriated as sites of fixed meaning, itself dictated by a prevailing power-geometry. Having laid ruin to ruins, Gordillo furnishes the idea of 'rubble', harnessing ethnographic impulses from inter-alia, Anna Tsing. According to Gordillo rubble causes no-end of theoretical and political problems, specifically for 'elites', not least because it constitutes both the "disintegration of recognisable forms" (9) and also spaces for geopolitical contestation. Indeed, throughout the book, Gordillo reiterates an apparent disjuncture between the manner in which ruins are apprehended with awe and wonder by 'elites', and conversely, with a collective indifference by 'locals'.

Gordillo's disquisition on rubble is staged through a wonderfully narrated series of historical traces and ethnographic tales, focussed primarily on his longstanding engagement in the Gran Chaco lowlands of north-western Argentina; sites and spaces that have witnessed wave upon wave of ruination, caused invariably by Spanish conquest and latterly the expansion of soy-based agrarian activity. In Parts 1 and 2 Gordillo does not flinch from recalling the history of conquest in, sometimes, turgid detail. One should concede that the telling of the long durée is necessary in providing a much-needed antidote to the glossy colonial history that focuses wistfully on the ostensible 'lost cities' of South America, and thereby focussing on imperial ruination alone; indeed Gordillo is at pains to also examine the destruction of colonial assemblages themselves.

The enigma of this book lies in its conceptual ambit. In terms of empiricism, Gordillo delivers a well-paced, sometimes ironic and sometimes poetic ethnography, illustrated nicely with the occasional photograph. Refreshingly, Gordillo is unencumbered by sharing awkward fieldwork moments with the reader. Moreover, he also displays a self-deprecation in the scholarly assumptions that he brings to the field but then soon find themselves wanting in their naivety. But back to the conceptual enigma. The text fizzles with flashes of theoretical snapshots from, amongst others, Deleuze, Spinoza, Butler, Adorno, Malabou, Benjamin, Marx, Lefebvre, the list is not exhaustive, but itself belies the book's inchoate ethos. Tellingly, Gordillo does the majority of his theoretical labour in 'Interludes' at the start of each part of the book. On the one hand, Gordillo makes each of his theoretical nodes do the work required,

and convincingly so, yet taken as a whole, there is a palpable uncertainty about the conceptual conviction of this book. One detects, albeit crudely, that Gordillo is pushing a Marxist politics as throughout the book there are several blunt reminders that those who live amongst the rubble are not those who created it; Gordillo also attempts a brief recuperation of dialectics contra Deleuzian affirmation. Elsewhere, many notions are introduced yet not examined to their fullest extent; notable amongst them are the cognate ideas of void and vortex. Alarmingly, so too is 'rubble' sometimes forgotten on its own terms.

Why might this be? One potential response is that in addition to the intellectual forbears that Gordillo pays his conceptual dues to, the book is also haunted by the spectre of object-orientated ontology; indeed Gordillo labels the style of his fieldwork as 'object-oriented analysis'. What this constitutes is not entirely made evident, but it implies a vague concern for the affective draw and autonomy of rubble. Such theoretical energy appears to stretch uncomfortably between object-orientated ontology of Levi Bryant, and the vital materialism of Jane Bennett. In sum, one might argue that it is precisely because of Gordillo's flirtation with object-oriented approaches that the book 'forgets' about rubble. As Gordillo himself recognises, rubble can only be spoken for, and an object-oriented approach in this instance demonstrates its intellectual bankruptcy as a school of thought that is supposedly 'for' the autonomy of objects. This all makes for a deeply humanist account of rubble, itself not a problem but for the way in which Gordillo invokes and uses geography throughout the text.

Criollo geography, *gaucho* geography, *disjointed* geography, *the* geography. Of what is Gordillo speaking? 'Geography' is *Rubble's* foil; shorthand for thinking about space in distinct political units. Once again the book remains enigmatic on this point. On the one hand, the anthropologist Gordillo joins geographers in calling to make more of space beyond that of a container; he draws attention to affective dispositions and matters beyond the tangible. Yet on the other hand geography is treated with remarkable fixity. To be sure, perhaps such a qualm only exercises the passions of certain geographers, yet given Gordillo's readings of David Harvey, Neil Smith, Stuart Elden and Tim Edensor, one might have hoped for a less redundant figuring of geography. On this point, Caitlin DeSilvey's work on ruins and decay is sorely missing here.

In sum, one wonders if this is not more a book about the institutional disciplining and recombinant politics of rubble than it is about rubble itself. Perhaps that was Gordillo's motivation. Certainly such thoughts emanate when the text preoccupies itself with religion and the Catholic-syncretic tradition of using terrestrial ruination to discipline public disposition (an induction of Old-

Testament-God-fearing by no means unique to north-western Argentina). That aside, it is difficult not to be entertained or to be pushed conceptually by this lively and generous read, not least for the theoretical mischief it stokes, and its own very ruination of the tired norms of identity, meaning and representation.

Joe Gerlach
University of Oxford
October 2015