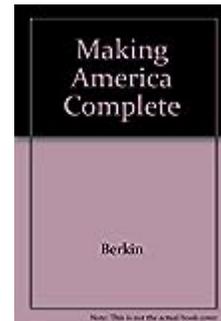


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Carol Berkin Gormly, Christopher L. Miller, Robert W. Cherny, James L. *Making America: A History of the United States*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995. \$91.96 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-395-50251-8.



Reviewed by Bill Cecil-Fronsman (Washburn University)

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Review and Authors' Responses

One logical justification for writing a new survey text (when there are quite a few good texts on the market) is that it enables the authors and publishers to do something different. *Making America* does certain things that make it stand out from other texts. It is extremely well put together with a thematic unity frequently not found in other multi-authored texts. At the same time, however, there are problems with the organization of the material that may well frustrate other potential users.

The book is very well designed as a teaching tool. In certain respects, *Making America* looks like a high school text. This is, incidentally, intended as a complement. Each chapter begins with a section called "ECCO" – an acronym for Expectations, Constraints, Choices, Outcomes. In that opening section the authors lay out the overall themes of the chapter. Individuals have expectations that are affected by constraints. In that context they make choices which produce new outcomes. In other words, by laying out these themes in the front of each chapter, the authors effectively design a framework for getting students to think about the historical process. Each chapter ends with a review of these themes and

shows how the choices made in one chapter lead to problems to be addressed in the next.

Another strength of the book's pedagogical design is the way that it identifies terms and individuals. Here again it looks a little like a high school text in that terms like "martial law" or people like "Susan B. Anthony" appear first in bold letters. Then at the bottom of the page a definition or brief biographical description appears. Although these might turn off students at some of the more selective schools, my students at an open-admission school would probably find them quite helpful.

Although I have not read the entire book, the sections that I have read are clearly written and well-explained. One advantage of having so many definitions set aside if plain sight is that it enables the authors to use more sophisticated concepts and language without making themselves unduly obscure. Although some may object to a feature that makes the book appear a little like a high school text, I would say that this feature enables the authors to go beyond what is found in high school texts without losing their audience. For example, the introduction of the term "commodity market" in the section

on gilded age agriculture enables the authors to develop an analysis of agricultural practices that goes considerably beyond what is in standard texts.

The book is printed in an Instructor's Annotated Edition which offers a wide variety of help, particularly to the neophyte instructor. The annotations show precisely where the material is covered in the test bank. They provide suggestions for discussions as well. For example, in the discussion of the cult of domesticity the annotation reads:

Analysis: You may want to stress that the choice to live the domestic ideal was not open to most women, just as what most modern Americans think of as the "traditional" family organization was not open to most families. Students should recognize that although both were byproducts of industrialization, they existed only among groups with the economic wherewithal to support domestic wives and idle children. A good discussion topic is how prevalent these circumstance are today and whether the concept of the "traditional" family is valid even now.

The annotations include other tidbits, anecdotes, additional background, and ways of connecting the points to the themes laid out in the ECCO section.

One feature of the book which is like those of many of its competitors is that each chapter sets aside a certain amount of space for a brief discussion of an individual who had to make a choice. For example, the chapter on World War I looks at Alvin York and discusses how he reconciled his pacifism and fighting in the war. The chapter on the 1960s discusses how Alice Walker chose to become a civil rights activist and author. The decision to focus on some representative individual is not unique to this text, but the emphasis on individual choices fits well within the framework laid out in the beginning of the book.

For the most part, the book is well organized. After a chapter which sets up American Indian life and culture and begins the story of the coming of Europeans, the book spends its second chapter on the emergence of the British settlements. In contrast to many texts which break up the 17th century, *Making America* covers the entire period in one chapter. Thus for the instructor who wants to spend a single day on the development of Virginia from indentured servitude through the rise of slavery after Bacon's Rebellion, the text is well organized.

The material on Gilded Age America is similarly well designed. The second volume opens with Reconstruction

(as do virtually all texts). But instead of a chapter on the west, *Making America* goes directly into a chapter on industrialization and its economic consequences. From my vantage point, this is a good strategy. Since the growth of industry is the big story of this part of the course, it makes sense to emphasize it. From there, the text examines the West, Urban America, Politics, and Foreign Relations. The material is well-done and incorporates recent scholarship. The authors do a good job of finding places for a variety of themes. For example, the chapter on politics includes a discussion of women's suffrage. The chapter on urban life includes a section on redefining women's roles. There is also a section on the emergence of a gay and lesbian subculture, making it the first text that I have seen to incorporate the findings of *Gay New York*, and one of the first texts to deal with gays and lesbians before the gay rights movement of recent times.

There are some features of the book that are troubling, however. A key problem with the first volume is its extremely unconventional organization. The organization would (for me, anyway) make the first volume extremely difficult to use.

The opening chapters of the book cover ground in a relatively familiar way. The first chapter deals with pre-Columbian America, the Spanish and early European conquests. The second deals with the establishment of British colonies, and so on. But starting with chapter seven (which begins a section written by a different author than the previous chapters), the organization of the material drastically changes. The period of time covered by each chapter becomes incredibly short:

Chapter 7: 1796-1804 Chapter 8: 1805-1814 Chapter 9: 1815-1819 Chapter 10: 1820-1827 Chapter 11: 1828-1840 Chapter 12: 1841-1849 Chapter 13: 1850-1860

This is in sharp contrast to the way that other texts organize the material on antebellum America. The typical text has a chapter on the old South, perhaps a chapter on economic growth after the War of 1812, often a chapter that deals with Jeffersonian America, one that deals with reform and other social movements – in other words, topical chapters. *Making America* uses topical chapters in the other sections. The second chapter looks at the growth of British America to 1752, the third chapter looks at the social and economic growth of the colonies from 1700 to 1763. The Gilded Age material is put in chapters on industrialization, the west, urbanization, politics, and foreign affairs. The events leading up to World War II are treated in a separate chapter from the discussion of the New Deal. But only in the second half of the first volume

does chronology so rigidly determine the organization of the material.

This kind of organization leads to some serious problems. The obvious one is the problem of topics that do not neatly fit into one of these chronological categories. For example, the Old South is put in the chapter allegedly covering the years 1815-1819. The rationale for doing so is that one associates the emergence of the cotton economy with the land boom occurring after the War of 1812. But much of the discussion of the Old South deals with issues occurring after 1819. The chapter has an “Individual Choices” section devoted to Frederick Douglass, who was barely alive during this period.

Similarly, the discussion of northern manufacturing occurs in the chapter dealing with the years 1820-1827. It is not entirely clear what the rationale for putting this material into that chapter is. As the chapter makes clear, Francis C. Lowell started his weaving factory in 1813 – Eli Whitney introduced his interchangeable parts in 1798. Why this chapter? This same chapter has a discussion of the rise of abolitionism including Garrison’s founding of *The Liberator* in 1831.

Were I to be teaching a survey class using this book, I would be hard pressed to know how to handle this material. My pattern is to have a unit that covers the early republic up through the second party system, give an exam, and then start a new unit that takes us to the Civil War, beginning with a discussion of the Old South. Were I using this text, I would have to chop this section (and several other sections) out of context.

As stated above, I have not read the entire 1024 pages of text – but have skimmed much of it and read some of it closely. As I suspect most historians do when encountering a new survey text, I first looked at the areas where I have specialized knowledge. In my case that would be the antebellum South and the political crisis of the 1850s – or more specifically, lower-class whites and “Bleeding Kansas.”

The material on “Plain Folk in the South” is weak and does not reflect recent scholarship. The list of suggested readings refers students to Frank Owsley’s *Plain Folk of the Old South* and describes it as a “truly phenomenal study by a scholar whose methods and outlook were forty years ahead of their time.” This is an astonishing statement as virtually every recent study of the southern yeomanry rejects Owsley’s basic assumptions. Furthermore Owsley’s methods were blasted in a review of his students’ findings three years *before* the book’s pub-

lication date. Ironically, the text mentions the “troubled relationship” between planters and common whites, an interpretation that is a serious departure from the outlook of Owsley. The text devotes two short and two long paragraphs to the subject (who comprised roughly half of the southern white and black population) – about half as much space as the planters (whom made up less than 3% of the total southern population), and about as much space as free blacks, who comprised an even smaller share of the total population. This weak treatment is in contrast to a variety of other texts. *Out of Many*, for example, devotes several pages to the subject. *A People and a Nation* has a several page discussion as well.

Although this one aspect of the antebellum South is weakly treated, the discussion of slavery is strong and does reflect recent scholarship. The chapter examines the impact of post-War of 1812 expansion on the slave system. It examines the economics of slavery to some extent, though it focus on slave culture. Its emphasis is on the issues of survival – families, religious life, and the various forms of resistance. This language is clear and the treatment of the subject seems consistent with the broad direction scholars have taken.

The other area where I have specialized knowledge is the “Bleeding Kansas” issue. The discussion is a fairly standard narrative that focuses on the ultimate triumph of the antislavery faction. Like every other treatment of the issue, very little attention is paid to what the proslavery faction was all about. The chapter is a good overview of the 1850s that shows the breakdown of the political system and why neither side could find an acceptable compromise.

In general I have found that texts today fall within one of two broadly defined categories. The more traditional texts emphasize political history – most of the newer texts emphasize social history. *Making America* falls more into the second category than (say) George Tindall’s *America*, or the older texts such as Bailey and Kennedy or Current, Williams, Friedel, and Brinkley. But political developments are much closer to center stage than Faragher et al., *Making America* or this text’s fellow Houghton Mifflin product, *A People and a Nation*.

Instructors who are looking for a book that brings in social history but covers the political narrative more thoroughly than *A People and a Nation* should take a good close look at *Making America*. The book is pedagogically sound, well-written, and brings in a variety of attractive features. My chief reservation, as stated above, is with the organization of the second half of the first volume.

But many instructors will not find that to be a problem. This book is a welcome addition to the literature.

H-NET BOOK REVIEW RESPONSE Published by H-Survey@msu.edu (May 1995)

Responses by Berkin et al. to Reviews of *Making America: A History of the United States*, for H-Survey.

In deciding what to include and what to emphasize in the chapters on the 17th and 18th century colonial world, we were guided by our commitment to use chronology and political development as the framework for *Making America*. One of our central themes was the development of the US as a polity, and the history of the Anglo-American colonies was clearly critical to that theme. As the historian responsible for these chapters, I made a serious effort to stress the multicultural and multiracial composition of these colonies and to explore the interplay and conflict among the many groups who shaped their colonial world. In addition, I reserved space (always, as readers know, in short supply in a text that covers 4 full centuries and reaches back thousands of years to recapture the Native American past!) to incorporate parallel developments in the French and Spanish American colonies. I chose as well to internationalize the developments of the 17th and 18th century English colonies by stressing both the imperial diplomacy and imperial warfare of the era.

The colonial chapters do, however, maintain a focus on the fundamental information a student needs to understand the choice many colonists made for revolution and the political structures they created in their new, independent nation. Such a focus, of course, has its costs. For example, although regional differences were illustrated, the great political, social, religious, and demographic variety scholars have documented between neighboring colonies (and for that matter communities within a single colony) could not be given their full due because of length constraints. The same was true of variations among Native American tribes who interacted with these English colonies. And, similarly, I was unable to explore in depth the cultural variations among enslaved Africans. As scholars, we know that any generalization diminishes the complexity and richness of the narrative, and that is why the authors of *Making America* tried to keep such generalizations to a minimum. But, just like the women and men whose lives we reconstructed in our text, we, as authors, faced our own set of constraints and as a result made some hard choices about what topics to cover and how to handle them.

In the end, it was our collective judgment that: 1) a focus on the English colonies and their role in creating the early US polity was required; 2) a fuller elaboration of any aspect of 17th and 18th century history would rob us of the opportunity for coverage and depth of regions other than the East coast in later chapters of *Making America*. We believe that *Making America's* coverage of the West and the South (and of the multiple ethnic and racial groups that comprise their societies) is excellent—and that this is possible in part because of our economy in narrating the earlier history of what became the United States.

In response to the criticism that the chapters on the early 19th century were too narrowly defined in terms of chronology, Christopher Miller drafted this explanation:

As already explained, we had a chronological approach foremost in our minds from the outset. It was our experience that many of our students had little grasp of the basic sequences of events in United States history and even less grasp of how events in seemingly isolated realms of national life were, in fact, deeply interrelated. It seemed to us that this problem was particularly acute among students taking the first half of the survey in that a higher proportion of them are entering students with little or no college-level preparation. In fact, our dedication to keeping at least the first volume of *Making America* as chronological as possible created one of the thorniest and most time-consuming problems we faced. As Professor Cecil-Fronsman notes, approaching the period between 1820 and 1850 chronologically has become virtually unknown in textbooks, making it necessary for us to carve out an organization that would not only present the material as it occurred but also present recent scholarship that emphasizes specific topics during that era. What we came up with may, unfortunately, create some need to reorganize lectures and to rethink how this era may be presented in the classroom, but we are convinced that students will be better able to see complicated interconnections among events in the nation's various geographical sections and among the political, economic, diplomatic, and social realms of historical behavior than they could by treating this period topically.

Christopher Miller also drafted this response to criticism regarding some of the critical thinking questions:

Professor Dale's points about critical thinking are all excellent, but where she sees a weakness in the complexity implicit in many of the questions posed, we see a strength. Her example, the question directing students to think about how Europeans and Native Americans responded to each other, provides an excellent

case in point. The complexities she raised in her review are among those we hoped students would come to see through the process of reading and engaging in directed discussion. Introducing documents, as she suggests, is an excellent way to encourage such discussion. We might also recommend using the Study Guide that was prepared for *Making America* as a way of helping students to identify and pull together coherent interpretations. One way to sketch this complicated set of scenes would be to use the ECCO Chart method introduced in the Study Guide—perhaps to have different individuals or groups of students prepare an ECCO Chart for each of a selected group of relations—what did Spaniards, Englishmen, Frenchmen, and other groups expect and what did Algonkian, Iroquois, and Muskogean Indians expect; what constraints did they face; what choices did they make; and what were the various outcomes—and then to compare these during a class discussion.

Once again, we want to thank H-Teach and H-Survey for organizing this discussion and to thank Professors Cecil-Fronsman and Dale for their thorough and thoughtful reviews. We look forward to responses from list subscribers, and will do our best to respond to them.

Carol Berkin Christopher Miller Robert Cherny
James Gormly

H-NET BOOK REVIEW RESPONSE Published by H-Survey@msu.edu (May, 1995)

Addendum to Elizabeth Dale's Review of *Making America: A History of the United States*, for H-Survey <erd1@midway.chicago.edu>.

This note is in part a brief addendum to my earlier review, which I hope will clear up a few points and respond to a couple of comments that people made in messages they sent to me personally. It is also an effort to raise some broader questions for discussion.

First, I hope that no one concluded that I ignored the second half of *Making America* because I had nothing good to say about it. To borrow an apt phrase from one of my private correspondents, my review reflected the limitations of the reviewer as much (or perhaps more) than they reflected the limitations of the text. In dealing with the 20th Century, I am only a few steps (and a profound sense of my own limitations) ahead of the students in a survey class. As a result, I am truly at the mercy of the authors of a text book to tell me what I need to get across to the students.

Given that, so far as I could tell, the second volume

of *Making America* seemed quite adequate. It discussed the events and people who struck me as being important for that period. I had no quarrel (at least so far as I could come up with one off the top of my head) with the organization of the chapters or the emphasis in them. Indeed, I was pleased that the book managed to mention civil rights activities in quite a few chapters, suggesting to the students that the civil rights movement(s) of the 50s, 60s, 70s, and beyond had antecedents from earlier decades. Were are I to ever teach the second half of a survey, I would amplify the materials on civil rights in the book. But that simply reflects my interests, as a former civil rights attorney it is an article of faith with me that no one teaches the subject enough.

So my silence on the second volume did indeed reflect my limitations. And those are limitations that I have because I am an Early Americanist, but they are also limitations that I have as someone who is not a singularly experienced teacher of the US History Survey.

And that seems to me to raise a question that lurked beneath both the reviews, and the authors' responses, and one which is sufficiently important that it should be addressed more explicitly. We are all of us, whether we be beginners or teachers of long standing, at the mercy of the authors of text books, though our reasons for that dependency differ. Beginners may know a great deal about a period in history –and may, therefore be able to find the compelling documents to provide depth to a text, or may see problems in a text's presentation of that period – but we rarely know as much about other periods. More experienced teachers may feel more comfortable teaching all the parts of a survey, and may have their favorite ways of doing so, but they may be less aware of the recent arguments in particular areas which might call into question the assumptions on which their treatment of a particular period are based.

In the absence of historiographical articles or review essays which annually provide an update on the various subfields of US History, we are all of us dependent on text book writers to instruct us as well as provide a means by which we can instruct our students. To put the situation somewhat dramatically, the answer to the question Bill raised in his review – why write a new text for the survey? – seems to me to be that new surveys are the conscience of the profession. They force us to rethink our courses, both in terms of what we cover, and in terms of how we cover it. And that keeps us honest, at some very fundamental level.

As I said, that may seem to be a dramatic way of

putting it. But unless and until someone can either show me another way for a busy professor to keep up with changes in all areas of US History and different theories of teaching (or can explain to me why a static view of US History is preferable), I think that the drama is justifiable.

So the first question that these reviews have raised is whether survey texts can, and should bear such a weight.

And that raises several related questions: Assuming that a text should be able to bear that weight, how do we judge a text to see if it is doing so? How do we evaluate a text that says, contrary to what we have long taught, that more attention should be given to New Spain in the first half of the survey? How do we, as authors of a text, respond to an argument we left something out, or assumed something that no informed student of the 1960s would ignore? How do we judge a textbook that provides a very different view of a century or a decade about which we

know very little? What do we do about a textbook that assumes a particular sort of learning system is best, and is structured around that system?

These are obviously very general questions, and we have touched on several at other times on this list. But it seems to me that they are raised more specifically in the context of the reviews of this text, and the authors' responses. Those reviews and those responses contained assumptions about a range of professional obligations we all bear, as people who write texts, people who pick texts, and people who review them.

Because those obligations were assumed, I am not sure we dealt with all of those issues very well. Indeed, perhaps we all avoided them, since in some senses, it seemed to me we were all quick to pass those obligations on to the people at the other levels, and I am not sure we can or should legitimately do so.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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