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D. W. MEINIG: *THE SHAPING OF AMERICA: A GEOGRAPHICAL
PERSPECTIVE ON 500 YEARS OF HISTORY.*

VOLUME 2: CONTINENTAL AMERICA, 1800—1867.

Yale University Press, 1993. 636 pp.

Eric Foner, reviewing Howard Zinn's important 1980 book, *A People's History of the United States*, said that it involved "a reversal of perspective, a reshuffling of heroes and villains. The book bears the same relation to traditional texts as a photographic negative does to a print: the areas of darkness and light have been reversed." Meinig's work, while it basically should not be compared to Zinn's in any other way, is like it in the sense that it grabs you, shakes you, makes you think. Both the first volume, *Atlantic America* (1492—1800), published in 1986, and this volume, *Continental America*, did that for me—indeed, made me re-think major portions of the very American history that I am not only familiar with but have been teaching for a quarter of a century. Such books are too rare.

Meinig is Maxwell Research Professor of Geography at Syracuse University (New York). Like many authors of such multi-volume works, he underestimated the number of pages he would need for his task; he now projects two additional volumes: *Transcontinental America, 1850—1915*, which he assures us is now "in preparation," and *Global America, 1915—1992*.

Just what does a geographical perspective on history entail? To begin, it should be noted that it entails an interdisciplinary approach (history/geography) which should have a great deal of appeal for people in American Studies. It is historical geography. It is not history. It is not geography. It is both. And more.

To flesh this out a bit, what does Meinig say about his approach? Not enough, unfortunately, as he made a decision not to repeat, from his first volume, his "succinct statement of ... views on the nature of geography and history, relationships between these fields, and a few basic geographic principles that inform this entire project." In that volume, he had written: "Geography is not just a physical stage for the historical drama, nor just a set of facts about areas of the earth; it is a special way of looking at the world." Clearly, Meinig is not a crude geographical determinist; he emphasized that "by *geographic* character, structure, and system," he meant not "the determination of history by the fundament of nature" but rather "the human creation of places and of networks of relationships among them."

If Meinig's approach still seems a bit vague, it should help to describe the book itself. *Continental America* consists of four parts: "Extension: The Creation of a Continental Empire," "Expansion: The Growth of a Continental Nation," "Tension: The Sundering of a Federation," and "Context: The United States in North America circa 1867." The four parts are very uneven in length: "Extension" and "Expansion" cover the mass of the book with just over 200 pages each; "Tension" is only about half that; and "Context," really just a conclusion, is only about 25 pages. Each part begins with a "Prologue," briefly but brilliantly introducing what is to come. Meinig includes an extensive bibliography. And, as might be expected in such a work, illustrations play a major role; there are 86 of them, of which some will be mentioned later.

As an example of Meinig's prologues, here is the one for the first part, "Expansion," in its entirety:

The United States began in a spacious frame—the world's largest republic, obviously rich in potential if as yet modest in

development. And just twenty years after its formal independence, it was, at a single stroke [the Louisiana Purchase], *doubled* in area. During the next fifty years an even greater expanse of territory was added [primarily the Mexican Cession at the end of the Mexican War] so that by midcentury the United States was more than *three* times its original size.

The creation of the outer framework of the Republic is a geographical topic worthy of close analysis and speculative reflection. However “natural” and matter-of-fact this broad, compact, almost symmetrical transcontinental belt of territory must seem after all these years, no one ever envisioned exactly that extent and shape for the nation during this era of expansion; no far-sighted statesman ever sketched that geographical design on the map as the objective of national policy.

We are concerned with the various geographical designs that were put forth during each episode and stage of that history, with what the territorial issues were, what alternatives were considered, and why the United States did come to have the particular outline it eventually obtained. We are also concerned not simply with the setting of exact boundaries but with the creation of broad borderlands. While a sequence of gigantic extensions shifted the western limits of the United States from the Great River to the crest of the Great Mountains to the shores of the Great Ocean, we will be dealing not simply with the Westward Movement, so famous in our national history and mythology, but more accurately, with a powerful Outward Movement that ramified deeply into every neighboring society. And while we will not, in this part, focus closely on the actual expansion of the “American” people, we will pay attention to those other peoples who got caught in the path of that expansion through these successive extensions of American jurisdiction. Having established the outer bounds of the United States, we will then be ready to look more closely at the

momentous geographical changes taking place within this expanding structure during these years.

Meinig proceeds to cover in that part such familiar topics as the Louisiana Purchase, Indian removal, Oregon, and Texas and the Mexican War, but always with a fresh perspective.

On the War of 1812, for example, he chooses to emphasize the Canadian viewpoint. How many Americans are aware that the famous British invasion of Washington, D. C., was in direct retaliation for the American looting and burning of York a short time before? And if the Americans were able to rationalize a victory in that war, certainly the Canadians could more readily proclaim victory: "They could also breathe a great sigh of relief that they had not been conquered and forcibly incorporated into the body of their aggressive, volatile, republican neighbor."

Indian removal, says Meinig, involved a "decision to establish an Indian America and a White America;" it was "a kind of geographical social engineering."

Meinig quotes traditional historian of American expansion Frederick Merk about the Oregon settlement at the Forty-ninth parallel as "the boundary that the finger of nature and the finger of history pointed out," then continues skeptically: "As for the first, it is difficult for a geographer to discern 'the finger of nature' ... in a geometric line drawn straight across great mountains and rivers and across the human systems adapted to those gross lineaments of nature. As for 'the finger of history,' it is true that the United States kept its 'finger' pointed firmly along the Forty-ninth parallel, but it must also be concluded that it thereby achieved a geopolitical victory that its historical geographical position could hardly justify. ..." "Manifest Destiny," it would seem, the phrase used by Americans of that generation to justify their expansion, was neither "manifest" nor "destined"!

Meinig is perhaps at his best in discussing Texas and the Mexican War; two of his earlier books were *Southwest: Three Peoples in Geographical Change, 1600—1970* and *Imperial Texas: An Interpretive Essay in Cultural Geography*. Here he writes:

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo [which ended the war with Mexico] involved a variety of issues between the two parties (land claims, indemnifications, and so on), but geography was the crux of the matter. This war began over disputed territories, the main objectives—of both sides—had always been defined in terms of specific territories, and at each stage of the war as their armies ranged across much of the Mexican nation and their warships blockaded its harbors, American leaders pored over maps to consider how big a bite to take out of their victim. It is difficult to appreciate the immense geographical scope and portent of those discussions. We have lived so long with the results and, as with the Oregon dispute, the outcome has been so commonly represented as the logical, more or less inevitable—even equitable (on the grounds that corrupt, chaotic Mexico did not deserve to rule those lands)—result of American development that it is useful to consider the geography of this great alteration with care.

Sometimes Meinig will write a sentence that will surely make many American readers squirm, as: “The Americans were of course acting with that luxury of choice given to a powerful aggressor that has beaten a weak neighbor into submission.”

Indeed, Meinig’s analysis of American imperialism in general, a central theme of his work, will prove discomforting to many Americans. As he notes, “rarely did anyone speak of the United States as an empire in the old generic sense of a geopolitical structure exhibiting the coercive dominance of one people over other, captive, peoples.” And he notes correctly that this tendency to call it “imperialism” when another country does it but something else, like “Manifest Destiny,” when America does it, is “still part of the national mythology.” But how any intelligent reader could read Meinig’s pages on “Empire: The Geopolitical Management of Captive Peoples” and deny that the United States of America was an imperial power

is beyond this reviewer. (Some, however, might want to take issue with his contention that it was an “unusually severe” one.)

We cannot continue to look at subsequent parts of *Continental America* at such length. Suffice it to say that in part two, “Expansion,” Meinig turns his focus inward to look at such topics as the filling in of the continent through westward expansion, the development of a transportation network, and the development of cities and industries.

How, one might understandably wonder, could Meinig possibly have anything fresh to say about Frederick Jackson Turner’s much used, abused, debated, and for many relegated frontier thesis? But his modestly-described “geographic assessment” of Turner’s “notoriously elusive concept” is more than just fresh—it is brilliant. At its heart are two of Meinig’s 86 illustrations: one a two-page diagram of the “Classic Turnerian Pattern” of the six stages from “savagery” to “civilization” (wilderness, trader’s frontier, rancher’s frontier, farmer’s frontier, intensive agriculture, and city and factory); and the other a two-page diagram presenting “An Alternative Pattern: American System of Regional Development” from “North American Traditional System” to “Modern World System” (Indian society, imperial frontier, mercantile frontier, speculative frontier, shakeout and selective growth, and toward consolidation). Describing the illustrations with words does not do them justice—that is why they are illustrations—they need to be read, studied, thought about. Some might not agree with the reviewer for the History Book Club when it offered Meinig’s volume to its readers that Turner’s model was “rendered all but useless for explanatory or even descriptive purposes,” but few will differ that Meinig offers “a sophisticated, coherent alternative.”

While commenting on Meinig’s illustrations, it should be noted that some are maps, which are brilliant, and some are pictures, which do not work as well, in part because some readers will need a magnifying glass to see the features to which Meinig calls our attention.

Meinig is remarkably sensitive and insightful in his historical/geographical perspective on the African American presence. “Just as the severity of the United States as an imperial society is attested by the common plight of the American Indians,” he writes, “so the severe se-

lectivity of the United States as a national society is attested by the chronic plight of American Blacks.”

Many readers will probably feel that Meinig does not contribute as many new insights in part three, “Tension.” Still, it is interesting that from his historical/geographical perspective, slavery is still central in understanding America’s mid-19th century crisis; so, not surprisingly, is geography, though neither “caused” the war, he insists. “The Civil War remains the great watershed in American history,” he writes. “We tend to be so traumatized by that awesome bloodletting that the insistent question is always: Why did the Union fail? But a broader perspective on such geopolitical matters might first pose the question: How could it have held together for so long under such dynamic circumstances? For the rapidity and scale of expansion of the American federation during the first half of the nineteenth century were, and remain, unprecedented in world political history.” Thus the United States had become “a great paradox: a growing, prospering, ever-expanding federation was a turbulent, weakening, and foundering federation.”

Finally, Meinig explains 1867 as his cut-off point for this volume by reference to the Reconstruction Act of 1867 (and, in a totally different context, the purchase of Alaska), and concludes: “To trace the reintegration of the South into the federation and the nation it will be better to enlarge our perspective so as to bring the whole of transcontinental America into the picture—as we shall do in Volume III.”

It may be true, as Meinig insists, that his focus is “more on places than on persons.” But if the traditional layperson’s division of geography into human and physical has any validity, certainly Meinig’s is human. His work is not environmental history, he says; perhaps not, but it is related, and helpful for understanding the complex interrelationships between humans and their natural (and humanly constructed) environment, and it is not surprising that noted environmental historian William Cronon is among those who have praised Meinig’s work. Perhaps historical geographers were somewhat marginalized within their field during the quantitative revolution of the 1960s that affected so many disciplines, but perhaps it can also be argued, as one historical geographer (M. Dear) has done, that by definition

all geography should be historical because “the central object in human geography is to understand the simultaneity of time and space in structuring social process.” In any case, Ralph H. Brown’s classic *Historical Geography of the United States*, published in 1948, was apparently the most recent synthetic treatment of the subject until Meinig began his work; a new effort was long overdue.

D. W. Meinig was born in 1924. Seven years passed between the publication of volume one and volume two of *The Shaping of America*. At that rate, it will be 2007 before the projected fourth and final volume appears. One can only hope that Meinig manages to complete the task, for it is an important contribution indeed.