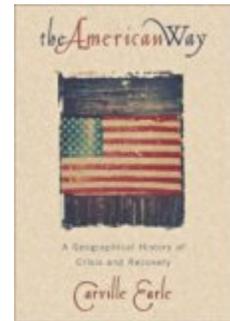


Carville Earle. *The American Way: A Geographical History of Crisis and Recovery*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. xviii + 449 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8712-1.

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What Comes Around Goes Around: A Dialectical Approach to American Historical Geography

There are 129 figures and 49 tables in *The American Way*, a far-reaching synthesis of American historical geography published shortly before its author passed away in October 2003. For historians, the most important of these illustrations is the first, figure 1.1 (p. 19), titled “The periodic structure of the American past.” Readers’ responses to this chart will likely presage their reactions to the remainder of this complicated work. For historians of a humanistic or anti-structural bent, the chart and the dialectical theory of history it represents will probably set off many alarms.[1] For those who find comfort in the chart’s “reassuringly generic” (p. 27) historical cycles, however, *The American Way* will surely appear to be a wondrous fusion of geography, politics, and economic history.

The chart in figure 1.1 offers the key to the book’s historical approach. Time appears as a horizontal dotted line extending from circa 1600 to the present. Snaking above and below this axis is a regular sinusoidal curve whose peaks and troughs signify, respectively, “Good Times” or “Bad Times.” Atop each plateau are the names of eight “Policy Regimes,” beginning with “Mercantilism” (1640-1680) and ending with “Reagan’s America” (1980-present). As indicated in figure 1.2 (p. 20), each rise and fall of the curve represents a cycle of six phases: “Crisis, Creativity, Conflict, Diffusion, Dissent, and Decline” (p. 19). Each period or policy regime begins with an economic crisis at the low-point of “Bad Times” and ends with a long decline as the curve plateaus in “Good Times” and turns back toward another economic and ideological crisis.

Earle contends that these policy regimes alternated in a regular pattern of forty-five to sixty years over the entire course of American history. In the foundational colonial period, two “republican” regimes (“Mercantilism” and the “Age of Empire”) flanked a single “liberal” regime (“Salutary Neglect”). Since the 1780s, each successive U.S. regime has been alternately a “republic” or a “democracy” and has combined characteristics of the purely republican and liberal regimes of the colonial period. Each of these paired policy regimes also formed a distinctive type of American state that lasted about a century. The first, the “Sectional State,” extended from 1780 to 1880; the second, the “National State,” lasted from 1880 to 1980; and the last, the unfinished “Transnational State,” began in 1980 and continues to the present. Brief periods of cataclysmic “Dissent” and war—the English Civil War, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the “Second Civil War” (i.e., the 1960s)—signaled the origins and end-points of each of these century-long forms of state.

Earle’s approach to historical geography extends from this cyclical view of history. Agents of each policy regime, Earle argues, pursued specific types of policies that affected the ways Americans arrayed themselves in space. These policies regarding property and trade differed according to the regime’s reigning ideology. The two colonial republican regimes (1630s-1680 and 1740-1780) implemented “nationalist” foreign policies and “egalitarian” domestic policies that fostered specific geographical effects, namely “spatial expansion, demographic concentration, and regional volatility and diversification.” By contrast, the policies of the single

liberal regime (1680-1740) encouraged “spatial consolidation, demographic dispersion, and regional stability and specialization” (p. 60). During the U.S. period, “republics” and “democracies” drew from and combined these republican and liberal spatial strategies. Republics “fused a republican protectionist geography of spatial expansion and demographic concentration with a liberal elitist geography of regional stability and regional specialization.” Their counterparts, the democracies, “fused a liberal free-trade geography of spatial consolidation and demographic dispersion with a republican egalitarian geography of regional volatility and regional diversification” (p. 67).

The first four chapters in part 1 help to elucidate the meanings of these different periodizations, ideological dispositions, and geographical strategies, although readers trained in history may struggle with Earle’s terminology and concepts. His transhistorical and categorical use of “liberalism” and “republicanism” will likely find few fans among intellectual historians, for example. The lack of specific definitions for his geographical dialectics of “spatial expansion/consolidation, demographic concentration/dispersion, regional specialization/diversification, and regional stability/volatility” may prove maddening until the reader reaches chapter 4, where Earle describes them in detail for the first time, despite referring to them repeatedly in preceding chapters. Even then, the reader may have trouble sorting out how republicanism could simultaneously encourage “spatial expansion and demographic concentration” or how exactly this differed from liberalism’s “spatial consolidation and demographic dispersion.”

Chapters 5 and 6 round out part 1. Chapter 5 describes another series of cycles in American history, namely the three consumer revolutions and three producer revolutions that Earle identifies in alternating egalitarian and elitist policy regimes since the mid 1700s. Chapter 6, which is nearly as long as all the previous chapters put together, offers yet another view of long-term trends in American history. With more historical narrative than the previous chapters, the sixth chapter focuses on the three sequential forms of the American state: the Sectional State, the National State, and the Transnational State. The chapter offers multiple parallel narratives of the “spatial enlargements in American power” that occurred in the aftermath of revolutionary sectional conflicts over civil rights (i.e., the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the 1960s). Most interesting is Earle’s ironic account of the way that expansions of civil rights have enabled subsequent regimes to expand the reach of

the U.S. government into new jurisdictional spaces.

After wrangling with the categories and cycles in part 1’s two hundred pages, many historians will probably welcome the more conventional narrative in the next two hundred pages of parts 2 and 3. Part 2 is the most fully developed and is probably the section teachers of American history survey courses will find most useful. The four chapters in part 2 correspond to the distinct colonial periods Earle represented back in figure 1.1. Chapter 7 considers the origins of English colonization in the economic crises of the Elizabethan age and discusses the founding of the Chesapeake and New England colonies prior to the English Civil War. Chapter 8 examines the “republican geographies” initiated by Cromwell and carried forward by Charles II during the Restoration. Chapter 9 describes the “Lockean geographies” that began with the Glorious Revolution and ended in the early 1740s. Chapter 10 considers the “imperial geographies” that began with the fall of Robert Walpole’s ministry in 1742 and ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783 (p. 293).

At 74 pages, part 3 seems rushed in comparison to the lengthy exposition of the colonial period in part 2, which is over 120 pages long. In the slender eleven pages of chapter 11 Earle considers the geographical characteristics of the American Constitution and the first decade of the early national period. Finally, in chapter 12 Earle offers an overview of the cycles in spatial variables (i.e., chapter 4’s geographic dialectics) from the 1780s to the present. The cyclical categories and regimes return with a vengeance in this last chapter, but the chapter provides a great deal of description to support Earle’s structural theory.

Throughout *The American Way* Earle marshals a wide range of evidence to support his arguments. The core of his theory relies on economic evidence and most of his analysis focuses on economic themes, but his theory applies to much more than economic trends and events. Earle wants to show that economic crises drove ideological, political, religious, and social change in American society from the colonial period to the present. According to Earle, Americans’ combination of liberal and republican ideologies have allowed them to respond to historical change in a flexible, moderate way—“the American Way” (p. 18). Earle’s model even offers predictions for the future.[2] This ambitious scope is at once *The American Way*’s greatest strength and its greatest weakness. Despite the remarkable achievement this work represents, many historians will likely find Earle’s schematic approach too rigid, programmatic, and difficult for their

tastes.

For this reviewer, whose specialty is in colonial social and cultural history, a theory of history predicated on serial economic crises seems hard to connect with the ways historical actors actually behaved and thought. Earle's attribution of extensive agency to disembodied "policy regimes" seems especially problematic given metropolitan authorities' limited ability to implement and enforce such policies. Although Earle himself has investigated the changing shape of settlement in the colonial era, his evidence connecting these changes to ideological shifts seems weak. Without more evidence of intent, it is hard to believe that administrators consciously devised systematic, coordinated policies so different from the equally systematic policies of the preceding regime, as Earle argues in his discussion of changes in colonial land policies in the mid-1700s (p. 264).

The near total absence of North America's indigenous population from Earle's work is yet more difficult to comprehend. The index reveals that "American Indians" appear on pages 218, 219, and 243 in a text 408 pages long. Despite Earle's emphasis on imperial geographies and trade, the Iroquois appear in just one place in the book, in the corner of figure 10.2A, which is primarily a map of European "churches and ethnic concentrations" (p. 299). The Indian traders, fighters, and refugees who occupied the intermediate zones between English, French, and Spanish colonies in North America are nearly invisible, save for a map that shows "Indian Concentrations" in the backcountry of South Carolina and Georgia (p. 296). For that matter, few non-English Europeans appear in the colonial history of *The American Way*. The Spanish make an early entrance and exit as the victims of English piracy in the late sixteenth century; the Dutch act as punching bags for the protectionist/nationalist republican era of Cromwell and Charles II; and the French are most notable for losing the French and Indian War and helping the British Americans win the Revolutionary War. Despite discussions of revolutionary changes in consump-

tion and production and the mechanization of the household, women do not appear to have a distinct place in this story either.

Smaller problems bedevil Earle's lengthy text, including errors in charts (figures 4.9 and 6.9, pp. 73, 157), and numerous typos, such as references to Charles I as Charles II (pp. 220, 226) and "Anglicans" as "Anglians" (pp. 226-227).

Despite these faults, *The American Way* will surely stand as a challenging and thought-provoking work in the years to come. Even if readers do not accept Earle's dialectical theory, the abundance of historical data and argument he presents can only add to our understanding of American history. It is a fitting monument to his life's work as a historical geographer.

Notes

[1]. Historians seeking a more humanistic approach to historical geography should consult D. W. Meinig's *Shaping America* series (1986, 1993, 1998, and forthcoming), which employs a cultural approach to historical geography. Earle is rather dismissive of the "celebratory particularism" and "Tory politics" in Meinig's work (p. 1), but the two geographers have been waging this battle over the purposes of historical geography for at least twenty-five years. See their exchange in response to Meinig's "The Continuous Shaping of America: A Prospectus for Geographers and Historians," *The American Historical Review* 83 (1978): pp. 1186-1217.

[2]. Figure 1.1's predictive function offers grounds for short-term pessimism and long-term optimism. The bad news is that our current era—the "Third Republic," i.e., "Reagan's America"—is poised to plunge into an era of "Bad Times." Judging from the chart, by 2020 or so the U.S. should hit bottom and experience one of the periodic religious "revitalizations" that have characterized each previous descent. The good news is that America should then move into the age of the "Third Democracy," and "Good Times" should peak again circa 2040.

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