

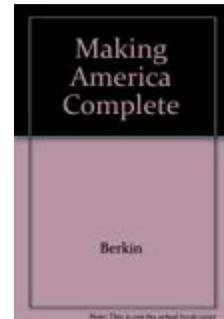
# H-Net Reviews

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 Elizabeth Dale (University of Chicago)  
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Like all good text books, *Making America* is not just a book, it is an approach to teaching the survey. In addition to the text itself (which comes either as a single volume hardback or as a two volume paperback set which breaks at 1877), *Making America* comes with an *Instructor's Resource Manual with Video Guide* prepared by Kathy Woestman; a two-volume study guide prepared by Eli Faber; a test bank of multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions prepared by Orson Cook; and a booklet of Rand McNally maps. The study guide and the test bank both come in hard copy and computerized versions. There is also a set of transparencies and the instructor's volume comes with annotations in the form of discussion questions, additional areas for inquiry, and anecdotes which complement the text.

Several themes and organizing principles tie the parts of *Making America* together. In general, the book attempts to consider political development in light of social, cultural and economic forces. The authors argue that practical impact of this approach is that the book simultaneously introduces the students to major political events and figures, and can consider the significance of immigration, the role of race, and questions of gender and class. In addition, the book tries to ground the United States in the larger world, examining the relation the United States had to other places over the course of its history. (For a more elaborate statement of these themes, see *Making America* pp. xxvii-xxviii.)

Two organizing principles tie those themes together. One is explicit, and is referred to as the ECCO model. ECCO stands for Expectations, Constraints, Choices, and Outcomes. The authors have organized the various chapters along this model (the introduction and conclusion

of each chapter summarizes the chapter in terms of each component of ECCO), and refer to it at times in the course of the text itself.

The other theme is a cross between a pedagogical assumption and a statement of professional philosophy. It is the idea that history is "a dynamic, uncertain process" which is all too often simplified so that the people of the past "live out their roles as actors in a drama written for them by destiny." (p. xxvii) Rather than offer the American past as "a world with too many simple answers and too many clear solutions" the authors of *Making America* have tried to organize their history to tell a more dynamic story and to encourage the students to think critically about what happened.

## 2. Organization:

The book is arranged as follows: In the two volume set, the first volume breaks at the end of Reconstruction and the second ends at 1994. The first volume is arranged so that the first six chapters deal with the period up to 1800, the second six deal with the period up to 1850 and the Civil War, and the last three chapters of the volume deal with sectional conflict, the War and Reconstruction.

Volume two begins with last chapter from volume one, on Reconstruction. The next two chapters then re-examine the period 1865 to 1900, considering the significance of economic and industrial change and western expansion. The next three chapters deal with the period from 1900 to the end of World War I, looking both events within the United States and in the world. Those chapters are followed by three chapters which consider the inter-war period, examining the 1920s, the depression and the New Deal. After a single chapter on World War II, the

remaining six chapters deal with the United States from the Truman to the Clinton presidencies.

Within each volume, the chapters are arranged so that each begins with a colored map, which sets out the significant regions for the discussion which follows. Beneath the map is a time line, designed to place the materials covered in the chapter in a larger historical context. A set of study questions follows to help the students analyze the materials in the chapter. These questions are then followed by an introduction, which summarizes the focus of the chapter in a few paragraphs and sets it out in the context of the ECCO model. This is followed by the text itself, which is amplified by further maps and illustrations which are identified in some detail and are intended to provide focus for class discussion. There are also boxes on most pages which contain definitions of highlighted terms used in the text.

In addition, each chapter contains an “Individual Choices” section. This section introduces a specific historical figure whose life and choices set out some of the problems described in the text itself. Some chapters also contain sections called “Voices” which are excerpts from documents relating to one of the subjects in the chapter, and provide several points of view on that subject. Both the “Individual Choices” sections and the “Voices” sections are designed to encourage critical analysis, and provide a focus for class discussion.

The chapters end with a summary which recapitulates the main points in the text, and again is framed in terms of the ECCO model. In addition, the end of the chapter has some suggested readings, which are complimented by an extensive bibliography at the end of the book.

Each volume is roughly 15 chapters long, and each chapter is between 30 to 40 pages long. The text is arranged in the traditional two column text book style, and the chapters are divided into parts by subheadings. Some of the sections in the chapter are prefaced by study questions, designed to help the students think about what they read as they do so. These questions are complimented by the questions in the study guide, and relate to questions in the test bank.

The *Instructor’s Resource Manual* provides, among other things, recommendations for cooperative learning (or group) projects, individual projects, work which could be done with the various maps, and paper topic ideas.

### 3. Analysis:

Much about this text and its aims is commendable. In general, as a legal historian who worries about the way students who take legal history courses lack a background in general political history, I was pleased that the authors of this text used political events as the backbone of the work. And as a legal historian who thinks that law (and politics) happen within societies and involve all sorts of people, I was even more pleased by the way the authors tried to put politics into a wider social and cultural context.

By and large, I was impressed with how complete the text was. Even if one ignored the supplemental books and questions, the textbook itself has lots of maps, graphs, pictures, questions, and supplemental materials. I also liked the idea of having definitions of new or difficult words provided on each page, since I have long been impressed with the inability of students to look up words in a glossary at the back of a book or in a dictionary.

Here, the words and their definitions fit into the page and the pages are organized so that the illustrations and the definitions do not distract attention and were not too hard to find. (That said, I did, occasionally, object to the definitions offered. For example, contrary to the definition offered in the text, p. 25, indulgences were not “pardons issued by the pope absolving the purchaser of a particular sin.” They were a form of penance which remitted the need for temporal punishment for sin, they were distinct from absolution from guilt or the need for eternal punishment.)

I was also reasonably impressed with the way the text was written. Most of the time, the book was easy to read. This was partly a reflection of the book’s style, which usually managed to be mildly informal without being too chatty and cute. It also reflected its organization; frequent subheadings made the sections coherent wholes and helped identify areas of focus. My only complaint in this area was that I found some of the paragraphs long and hard to read. This is obviously a function of the double column style, which makes a normal sized paragraph seem long. The problem was, I kept losing my place in the paragraph.

This is not to say I had no problems with the text. I did, and some of them were fairly significant ones.

My greatest complaint was in the first volume and its treatment of the Early American period. I am, in addition to being a legal historian, an Early Americanist. And one

debate in Early American history at the moment is what the focus of Early American history should be.

In a nutshell, that debate turns on how much Early American history should focus on the Anglo American world, or whether that history should expand to consider the indigenous people, and the non-Anglo colonizers. (For people who are interested, various sides in this debate were set out in the William and Mary Quarterly, first in an article by James Hijiya in the April 1994 volume, and then in a symposium responding to his article in the October 1994 volume).

This is not the time, or the place to get into that debate in detail since it raises a collection of complicated issues. But one aspect of that debate seems pertinent to *Making America*, and to this review as well. To put it in the terms raised by this text itself, and its title, the question is what is a history of the making of America?

I assumed, both from the title of this text and its emphasis on critical thinking and the complexity of history, that making America would be problematized in this text. I also assumed that meant that in the context of pre-Revolutionary America, the book would consider Anglo-American colonies outside of the continental United States; would spend more time in considering the western half of what is now the continental United States; would examine not only white interactions with indigenous people, but also the interactions of various groups of indigenous people; and would try to set these different relations and interactions into a greater discussion of how the United States as we know them arose.

That is not what happened. Concededly, the first chapter of the book deals with the indigenous people before 1588. But after that, it quickly becomes business as usual. Chapters two and three are concerned with "British Entry into the New World" and "English Colonies in the Eighteenth Century." And while there is some mention of the presence of other European people in various colonies, and occasional discussion of colonial relations (and wars) with the indigenous people, those references are subordinated to the discussion of the creation of the Anglo-American world.

Equally troubling, all too quickly the indigenous people who were initially described as having a variety of different cultures and approaches to life (e.g., pp. 8-14), became a fairly homogenous mass ("the American Indians") who lived in a single way and had a uniform culture. (e.g., pp. 21-22, describing the reactions of the Indians to the Europeans in terms of a generic cosmology).

I should, I suppose, offer a disclaimer at this point. I am not opposed to Anglo-American history. My dissertation is on Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s and from one perspective at least is about as Anglo-American as one can get. My objection is to the sense of inevitability that the organization and emphasis on English colonial work brings to this book, an emphasis which I think is inconsistent with the text's goal of trying to complicate the history it tells. It is not my understanding of Early American history that it was inevitable that the United States would be an English-speaking country with the borders that it has. I think the quick shift this book makes to consider the United States from the perspective of the Anglo-American world (and a fairly narrow Anglo-American world at that) does suggest that where we are now was inevitable.

I had some other substantive concerns with the book, though mostly those are in areas that I feel less qualified to comment on. To offer just one example, I was struck by the way the chapter on Reconstruction focused almost exclusively on the Southern states. I understand, of course, that Reconstruction involved federal laws and intervention in Southern states. But while Reconstruction the event happened in and to the South, there were related activities in northern states as well. In Illinois, for example, there were questions of integrated education in this period, and efforts to organize both blacks and whites to help the freed people. There was also some backlash and opposition to the aims of Reconstruction and the Reconstruction era amendments. While it may be that states like Illinois were not the most significant sites of Reconstruction era reform, they were places where Reconstruction and race relations were debated. And by ignoring that, *Making America* seems to me to give a slightly distorted view of how this country dealt with the many questions of race and rights which arose in the period immediately after the Civil War.

My other major concern with the book was in the efforts it made to encourage critical thinking. Once again, a disclaimer is in order. I too think that critical thinking is an important aspect of the teaching and studying of history. But while I believe that, I also believe that there is critical thinking, and critical thinking.

Where the questions raised are too complicated for the available evidence, critical thinking all too easily becomes speculation or cynicism. Sometimes, the questions posed in *Making America* seemed to me to be too difficult for the text they accompanied.

Thus, in the first chapter the questions on the rela-

tion between American Indians and Europeans, which focused on how those groups chose to respond to each other, struck me as being too difficult given the amount of material on that interaction. Responses changed over time (de Vaca's account suggests that even individual responses changed over time), depended significantly on who was involved, and depended on the intentions behind the interaction (be they economic, religious, colonial, or a combination of the two).

Given that, I am not sure that asking the students to speculate about those responses without providing them with more material to show them the complexities involved in that sort of analysis is helpful. That is to say, I do not know if I think it encourages critical thinking, so much as it encourages a sort of glib and presentist explanation.

One way around that, and it is one offered by the text, is to use primary materials (be they texts or illustrations) as the basis for questions designed to help the students think critically about the issues raised in the text. Often, the people described in the "Individual Choices" sections, or the issues described in the "Voices" sections are just the sort of spring board for that kind of critical discussion.

Once again, however, the material provided does not really support a careful analysis. While I think Anne Hutchinson's case, to use one example, raises many interesting questions about ideology and life in Massachusetts Bay, I did not think the fairly simple description of her beliefs provided in the text could support much more than a simple analysis. Likewise, while the dropping of the atom bomb is a moment which raises a host of important questions or history and morality (and the relation between the two), the snippets about the bomb in the text did not strike me as being a sufficient basis for sustained discussion.

There are two obvious, but somewhat inconsistent, responses to those objections. The first is that a survey course which has to deal with many different things, has

to make some choices and cannot, therefore, provide detailed discussion about anything. That is certainly one understanding of a survey course, and is one which in large part I share. But it seems to me that a sense that the survey course must provide breadth is inconsistent with the idea that a survey course can teach critical thinking, and since *Making America* begins with the statement that it wants to teach critical thinking, it cannot easily avoid the implications of choosing to cast its net broadly.

The second response is that one way to provide detail and analysis is to have the professor provide the details the book leaves out and to supplement the text with primary materials which might permit more careful analysis. Once again, that is a fair response, and, indeed, were I to use this book (and I might well, for all my criticism I thought it was as use-able as any other text I had seen) that is precisely what I would do. I would, I think, organize my class schedule so that each week involved two days devoted to a chapter in the text and a third day considered an event or a person in detail using primary materials as the basis of the consideration.

I might, for example, use some or all of the transcription of Anne Hutchinson's trial and have the students consider what they think the issues of the trial were and what other information they think they would need to come to grips with the trial. Or I might use Taney's opinion in the Dred Scott case as the basis of a discussion of his use of history to support his argument, contrasting his sense of history with the description of early American history provided in the text. In either case, I would emphasize critical thinking about historical events and about historical evidence.

I think both types of critical thinking are important, and I think they both have a role in a survey course. In this, I believe the authors of *Making America* and I agree. I believe we disagree on the issue of whether their text and its supporting materials provide a sufficient basis for that sort of critical thinking. I do not think the text is sufficient, and so were I to use it, I would supplement it with other materials.

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