

**David Mauk and John Oakland 2005: *American Civilization. An Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. London and New York: Routledge. 375 + v-xii pp. ISBN 0-415-35831-0**

**Martin Gilbert 2006: *The Routledge Atlas on American History*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. London and New York: Routledge. 156 pages. ISBN: 0-415-35903-1**

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When designing the syllabus for the upcoming year's civilization subjects, the teacher is inevitably faced year after year with a yet unsolvable dilemma: which text(s) to propose as compulsory reading and/or textbook for the survey courses on history and culture of the English-speaking countries. Obviously, the market is saturated with literally dozens of useful books on British and American history but these texts fail to meet the requirements of students pursuing a degree in English in a non-English-speaking country. The majority of these invariably scholarly and well-designed textbooks tend to overload the student with statistics, dates and names that end up confusing the non-native reader. American students have received instruction in history at high school and are already familiar with the key events (such as the causes of the American Revolution), leading historical figures (such as Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln) and understand the symbolism conjured up at the mention of the Boston Tea Party, the frontier, the Old South and similar cultural references. History books such as Hugh Brogan's *The Penguin History of the United States of America* (2001) or George B. Tindall and David E. Shi's *America: A Narrative History* (2000), while providing an extremely comprehensive picture of the future United States from its so-called discovery by Europeans, cover far too much material for a course that students will have at most only an academic year to digest. Likewise, the somewhat misleadingly entitled *The Brief American Pageant* (2004) or *A People and a Nation. A History of the United States*, Brief 6<sup>th</sup> edition, (2003) fail to cater for the more modest needs of foreign language university students as they are both mammoth volumes containing an extraordinary amount of historical information. Naturally, there is a danger of leaning too far in the opposite direction. Textbooks especially intended for non-native speakers of English do provide concise outlines of American history by highlighting just the major events, but at the expense of sacrificing intellectual depth. This kind of book fails to stimulate the adult student as the more restricted content seems to go hand-in-hand with a superficial analysis of major historical changes. The first book under review, *American Civilization. An Introduction*, falls to a certain extent into this latter category since, despite covering a wide range of topics and providing very up-to-date information about the United States, it is rather too simplistic to engage the university student.

Mauk and Oakland's revised edition of their 1995 introduction to American civilization contains fourteen chapters covering a wide range of areas. The authors claim in their preface that "Methodologically, the book combines descriptive and

analytical approaches within a historical context” and that it “is intended to allow students to organize their own responses to American society and to encourage discussion” (xvii). In chapter three of *American Civilization. An Introduction*, ‘The People. Settlement and Immigration’, the authors describe the four major waves of immigration, starting with the founders through to the post-1965 migrants from Latin America and the Far East. Curiously enough, this detailed survey of the ethnic mix of the United States is followed by chapter four, entitled ‘The People. Women and Minorities’, and opens with this intriguing statement, “Discrimination has given women and some minorities a special status in American society” (72). It seems somewhat strange that a textbook revised in 2005 should perpetuate the traditional discrimination between *history*, that is mainstream or male-centred history, and *women’s history* or *Native American history* or perhaps even more troubling *African American history*. If Mauk and Oakland intended their book to stimulate debate, the very organization of the material for the chapters themselves certainly raises several questions. In comparison, a book like Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble’s *The Free and the Unfree* (1988) is an example of a revisionist history of the United States which, as its very title suggests, seeks to redress this balance.

*American Civilization* is meant to be an introduction and as such it fulfills its purpose adequately. The book is easy to follow, the style is straightforward and precise and an enormous amount of information is compressed into its 375 pages. Such a feat of synthesis must necessarily sacrifice depth of analysis. Although the authors take great pains to avoid oversimplifications, their description of *the West* leaves a great many circumstances unaccounted for: “‘The West’ is a myth, a popular set of values and a region of the country. It represents possibility, freedom, self-reliance, the future.” (41). Just what myths are associated with the west and why these particular values are conjured up and for what historical reasons are left to the reader’s own imagination, whereas a study of American civilization surely should attempt to deconstruct such a well-known national trope. A much more exhaustive analysis of the west can be found in books like Patricia Nelson Limerick’s, *The Legacy of Conquest. The Unknown Past of the American West* (1987) or Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (2001), which, surprisingly, the authors omit in their further reading section.

Their aim has clearly been to provide the reader with as much information as possible in the minimum amount of space, which they have indeed fulfilled. Both authors are senior lecturers in Norwegian universities and despite the fact they do not explicitly say so, their book is clearly intended for use in colleges of higher education and universities. Each chapter contains a list of specialized terms, proper names or abbreviations such as *Manifest Destiny* and *McCarthyism* (chapter 7, ‘Foreign Policy’) *Medicare* and *TANF* (chapter 10 ‘Social Services’), *muck-raking* and *William Randolph Hearst* (chapter 12 ‘The Media’) or *Great Awakenings* and *creationism* (chapter 13 ‘Religion’), which effectively force students to check they can identify or define them correctly. They also include a selection of essay topics, such as *Why is law such an important part of American life?* (chapter 8 ‘The legal system’). However, I would think that a topic of this nature can only be tackled superficially using the material provided by the text book, yet the authors fail to recommend sources where the interested

student could delve more deeply into these issues. Much of the further reading provided in chapter 8 is unlikely to be consulted by students of humanities owing to the excessive specialization (e.g. *The Politics of State Courts*). More accessible, but at the same time thought-provoking, material related to this extremely relevant topic could be *Law in America: A Brief History* (2002) by Lawrence M. Friedman or even Gerda Lerner's *Why History Matters* (1997) as both texts encourage the student to question facts.

Chapter 1, 'The American Context', summarizes the main areas that the book will cover and suggests that "a significant historical dilemma for the USA has been how to balance the need for national unity with the existence of ethnic diversity and, thus, how to avoid the dangers of fragmentation" (8), following which a brief discussion of the salad bowl vs. melting pot models is presented. Chapter 2, 'The Country', presents the geographical variety of the United States, emphasizing the cultural diversity of its regions, and briefly discusses environmental concerns. Chapter 3, 'The People. Settlement and Immigration', begins with the somewhat hackneyed phrase that "[immigrants] strengthened the nation's commitment to 'the dream' and to its ideal of being a refuge for the poor and oppressed, a nation of nations" (48). The chapter goes on to describe the first clashes with Native Americans, the various waves of immigrants and the introduction of restrictions in the late nineteenth century. Chapter 4, 'The People. Women and Minorities', focuses on the evolution of women's political, social and economic rights, the gradual removal of Native American tribes, the struggle for African American civil rights and the growth of the Asian American and Latino groups. Chapter 5, 'Political Institutions', explains how the US Constitution was drafted, discusses the differences between the two main political parties, the function of Congress and the role of the President. Presidential elections are dealt with at some length but the idea behind the electoral college, frequently misunderstood outside the US, is rather sketchily outlined. The chapter ends with a brief description of the judicial branch. Chapter 6, 'Political Institutions. State and Local Government', sets out to explain the concept of federalism as understood in the United States, in which the individual states are recognized as "the building blocks of the American system" (140). The workings of local government, the different levels of government (federal, state and local) and the gradual shift in power from the states to the national government are given in some detail. Chapter 7, 'Foreign Policy', provides a historical survey of American attitudes towards the rest of the world. In accordance with the book's emphasis on contemporary issues, half of the chapter is devoted to the post World War II period including 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. All of the chapters in the book end with suggestions for further reading and recommended websites. Unfortunately, the latter are far too general and the interested student will no doubt find a more appropriate website on his or her own. The inclusion of the website for the Washington Post and CNN, recommended at the end of several chapters, or for *wikipedia* hardly seems appropriate and even necessary. Chapter 8, 'The Legal System', sets out to cover the workings of the courts at both local, state and federal level, and crime and punishments including the death penalty and debates over gun control. Chapter 9, 'The Economy', discusses American economic liberalism, taxation and the budget, industry,

agriculture, trade unions and banks. As in many of the chapters in the book, the authors quote the results of opinion polls, for instance, “86% agreed with the statement that ‘people have to realize that they can only count on their own skills and abilities if they’re going to win in this world’ ” (227). Chapter 10, ‘Social Services’, introduces the New Deal and describes contemporary welfare programs, including poverty and the homeless. Chapter 11, ‘Education’, analyzes the structure of education in the United States and the private vs public education debate. Chapter 12, ‘The Media’, discusses the evolution of newspapers, radio and television and provides a rather large amount of data and statistics. It touches on significant areas such as the role of the press in the Watergate scandal but provides no follow-up references for the interested student. Chapter 13, ‘Religion’, sets out to explain why religion still plays such an important role in the United States. They state that “Given the prevalence and diversity of denominations in American life, it is perhaps inevitable that religion and its moral concerns should influence public and political debates on issues such as abortion, the death penalty, same-sex marriage and armed conflicts” (316). They describe the history of various religious denominations and the current situation of the major religions in the country today. The final chapter, ‘The Arts, Sports and Leisure’, is one of the sketchiest in what is an extremely general portrait of American society. Chapter 14 covers an immensity of cultural productions ranging from painting, sculpture, pop art, jazz, blues, rock and roll, folk, the film industry and Hollywood, basketball, baseball, football, as well as including statistics on leisure activities. Although they do not provide one, the authors’ conclusion seems to be that such a wide diversity of possibilities proves that America has created “an American-oriented internationalized mass culture” (325). This closing chapter merely skims the surface as most of the themes are dispatched in, at most, two or three paragraphs. Despite the authors’ middle-of-the-road stance, their statistically-oriented, factual account of the United States, their scrupulous honesty in drawing attention to historical grievances, the neutral tone of the book somehow fails to ring true.

At the end of the book the authors have included appendices with the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and the twenty-seven amendments. They might have considered adding some of the best known speeches by leading Americans, such as Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address or Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech as they have become as much a part of American culture as the legal documents cited. A chronology of significant dates in American history is provided and the text is made more reader friendly by the incorporation of tables, figures and pictures, but, surprisingly enough, of only six maps.

The shortage of visual aids to help the student locate places and routes may be compensated for by the use of Martin Gilbert’s *The Routledge Atlas on American History*. This is clearly a reference book, as it contains no actual text, but instead, a collection of 156 maps, which are, according to the blurb, “accompanied by informative captions, facts and figures”. It goes on to say that “The complete history of the United States is unrolled through vivid representations of all the significant landmarks”. The title and the chosen illustration on the front cover (a smug George W. Bush pictured in the 2004 election campaign) lead one to presume that it is an atlas of United States history. Therefore it is an unexpected pleasure to see that the author has included

relevant maps of South America and Europe to indicate the political, economic and cultural expansion of the US. He even includes two maps on outer space: 'Exploring the Solar System 1962-1992' (map 137) and 'Defence Preparedness in Space 1992-1993' (map 138). The maps are extremely clear, even an extremely complex map such as number 2 'The Indian Tribes of North America before 1492', which shows the names of over a hundred Native American ethnic groups. Particularly useful for the student of early American history are maps such as number 10, 'European Settlements 1526-1642', and numbers 23 and 24, 'The North Atlantic 1770' and 'The Triangular Trade', which show the involvement of other European powers apart from Britain in slavery and imperialism. The maps are organized in four sections. Section one 'Early Years' comprises maps 1 to 24, i.e. from 'The origin of settlement in America 50,000-1,000 BC' to 'The Triangular Trade'. Section two, 'Independence', contains twelve maps ranging from 'The War of Independence 1775-1783' to 'The War Against Britain 1812-1815' (maps 25-36). Section three deals with 'Modern Times', a somewhat confusing term as the maps begin with 'Indian Battles and Cessions 1784-1820' (map 37) and end with the afore-mentioned map 138, 'Defence Preparedness in Space 1992-1993'. The author might have considered subdividing this category in order to balance the sections. The final section of the atlas, 'The Twenty-First Century', contains eighteen maps from 'Foreign Born Population of the United States 200' (map 139) to 'American War Dead in Iraq' (map 156).

As a reference book, *The Routledge Atlas on American History* is highly commendable but its use without an accompanying textbook seems unlikely. In turn, *American Civilization. An Introduction* provides current information about the United States by drawing attention to ongoing debates on controversial issues. The weakness of this book is that it fails to engage fully with these debates, as it tends to simplify and overgeneralize in order to cover all areas of American society at the expense of intellectual depth. The increasing publication of a wide range of surveys on US history rather than more specialized studies on a particular period or figure suggests that courses on American studies are still in demand among European university students. However, despite the fact that the two books under review could be useful as supplementary reading for an introductory course on American studies, I would hesitate to recommend them as textbooks, even in those universities where American studies are offered as a single course option. Likewise, in institutions which offer highly specialised modules on different areas within American studies, it seems unlikely that books of this nature would be included on a reading list.

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