

## Introduction

*W. George Lovell*

Columbus cannot be discharged of guilt in perverting an existing code of human rights. Whatever others might have done, his was the authority in these first critical years, his the example, and his therefore the major responsibility. He left an evil legacy that was to vex Spanish colonies for many years.

Carl O. Sauer, "*Terra Firma: Orbis Novus*," 1962

The works featured here under the rubric of historical geography span the second half of Sauer's long and fruitful life. All seven selections reflect him at the height of his abilities as, in turn, (1) a trenchant analyst of population trends and prospects; (2) the innovative leader of a team of educators charged with preparing an elementary school textbook that was light years ahead of its time in terms of pedagogic content, ideological bent, and thematic thrust; (3) a geographer able to discern how a distinctive world region, Middle America, came to be; (4) a dogged researcher prepared to grapple with tricky sources in order to illuminate the circumstances under which the name "America" first appeared in print and thereafter anchored itself in the cartographic imagination; and (5) a scholar whose intellectual curiosity and desire to share knowledge saw him maintain, in late retirement, a momentum that resulted in the posthumous appearance of an ambitious synthesis.

Of the seven selections, "The Prospect for Redistribution of Population" (1937d, ch. 27 herein) is perhaps the most intriguing, for while it deals with established and enduring interests of Sauer's, the piece resonates with a palpable political edge, a trait not commonly associated with Sauer. In this case, however, the matter is of considerable portent, for Sauer is writing two years before the outbreak of World War II for the Council of Foreign Relations. He was commissioned to do so, especially pertaining to Europe, by fellow geographer Isaiah Bowman—Canadian-born but by then well-entrenched in

U.S. public life. Sauer does not mention Adolph Hitler by name but alludes to Nazi notions of *Lebensraum* when he observes: "Political concern about population outlets appears from time to time, but perhaps has never been so urgent as at present." Who can fail to conjure up the specter of an invaded Poland and an occupied France in what Sauer says next. "Whenever there is a population problem," he notes with characteristic economy of expression, "there is insufficient room for an expanding body, which seeks release in directions of low resistance and sufficient attraction" (7).

Despite his evident preoccupation with contemporary events in Europe, Sauer looks back and reckons, "We may very well have come to the end of what we have been pleased to call modern history, the expansion of western peoples and civilization over the thinly peopled or weakly peopled spaces of the earth" (8). For Sauer, the period between 1492 and 1918 "saw the greatest migrations of man since Neolithic time and was marked by his most rapid increase" (8). Population movement is linked inexorably to resource exploitation, from silver in Mexico and Peru in the sixteenth century to the oil strikes of the early twentieth century in other parts of the world. Exploitation of resources, however, carries with it enormous destructive costs, be it the "decimation of native populations . . . not only of the New World proper but of Australia and of Australasia" (18) or, closer to home, in Dust Bowl America, where "as yet uncalculated areas of land that have been under use at most for a few generations have been gutted or damaged in such a fashion that they can no longer maintain their economy or take care of their present population" (16–17). It all comes down, in Sauer's eyes, to "a process of skimming the cream from the earth" (16).

He ends this prescient rumination on the past, composed in free-flowing prose without recourse to one single footnote or reference, by returning to the troubled condition of Europe, for which he foresees a future as a peaceful and united entity half a century before it actually transpired:

In a reasonable world, is not the average European likely to benefit most by elaboration of his skill in his own land? The inhabitant of Europe has at his immediate disposal not only the apparatus and stimulation of an advanced civilization, but he enjoys a unique advantage over the rest of the world. It is that he lives at the center of the world; he has the shortest distance to the ends of the earth and their way stations. This advantage is as permanent as the design of the continents and oceans. If the European can deal freely and amicably with the rest of the world, he is in the best position to do so in his own land.

If he sees the advantages to himself of the greatest possible natural relaxation of barriers, Europe is perhaps of all parts of the world best suited to support a larger population. (23–24)

From demography and geopolitics we move, in a short piece entitled "About Nature and Indians" (1939:8–9, ch. 28 herein) to a glimpse of Sauer very few know about. In the prime of his forties, over a six-year period when professional demands were heavy upon him from every constituency of academic life, Sauer responded to another overture from Isaiah Bowman. Writing to him in early 1934 as director of the American Geographical Society, Bowman approached Sauer to solicit his leadership in coordinating the production of "A First Book in Geography," which would be geared to the instruction of grade-four school children. The result of the endeavor is *Man in Nature: America before the Days of the White Men* (1939), a forgotten classic that engages its subject matter with pedagogic flair, conceptual clarity, and the organizational skills of a seasoned communicator. The book's focus is hardly what most elementary school teachers (certainly in the 1930s, but most likely even today) would expect an introductory text in geography to constitute. Sauer pulls no punches and refuses to spare his young audience the moral indignation he feels when telling them about the Native American past:

Our people, in settling America, have . . . changed nature a great deal. We have let . . . soil wash away on hills that we have farmed. In many places we have made rivers muddy that once were clear. We have cut down forests and plowed up grasslands. We have killed off many animals, like the buffalo. We have built towns and roads and have done many things to change the country. Some of these changes are good. Some of them may be bad for us. . . . Before the white men came all the land belonged to the Indians. This book is about Indian days. The Red Man . . . was much more part of nature than we are. By learning how and where the Indians lived, we shall learn what kind of country the white man found. We shall then know better what he has done with it. (8)

Though the collaboration was not without its problems and setbacks (see Lovell, 2003, for fuller discussion), Sauer saw the project through to completion, leading by example. "We have gone on a new trail in this book," he wrote late in 1939 to C. F. Board of Charles Scribner's and Sons, the publishers of *Man in Nature*. "It is a trail that readers of all ages, not just nine-year olds, will find a rewarding one to follow."



The bold evocations of "Middle America as Cultural Historical Location" (1959a, ch. 29 herein) feature Sauer at his synthesizing best, delineating the emergence of Mexico, Central America, and the Island Caribbean as a hearth of human growth and development. It all began, Sauer speculates, in ways that recent radiocarbon dating now confirm, much earlier than we thought. A "first peopling of the New World before the beginning of the last (Fourth or Wisconsin) glaciation is no longer a fantastic notion" (196). In terms of settlement flow and direction, Sauer envisions Mexico as "the cone of the funnel, and Central America as the narrowing tube through which poured all but the later migrants that peopled South America." He favors "Yucatán as point of departure" for initial occupation of the Antilles, arguing that "Western Cuba lies northeast of Yucatán, that is, in a favorable position for men at sea to drift across at an easy angle" (195, 197, 198). Geography shaped the destiny of the region as "corridor and crossroads," even though "the peoples living about the Caribbean were more separated than connected by the Carib Sea" (199, 200). Commonly held "elements of culture" in the Antilles and the Central American littoral "came almost wholly from the northern mainland of South America" (199). Sauer asserts, in a memorable turn of phrase, that the Antilles by the time of European penetration "were quite simply colonial South America" (199). He urges that we view Middle America, indeed the New World as a whole, as a dynamic *Gestalt*:

The cultural content of an area is an accretion and synthesis by different and non-recurrent historical events and processes of people, skills, and institutions that are changing assemblages in accommodation and interdependence. Few human groups have lived in isolation, excluding persons and ideas from outside; the more they have done so the less they have progressed. Isolation after a while stifles innovation; this is perhaps the major lesson of the history of mankind and also of natural history. An advancing culture accepts new culture elements without being overwhelmed by them; it adapts as it adopts and thus change leads to invention. (200)

We stay in Middle America for the fine-grained discussions of "*Terra Firma: Orbis Novus*" (1962e, ch. 30 herein), a precursor to arguments that Sauer would propound at length four years later in *The Early Spanish Main* (1966a). The imaginary geography of Columbus—"he was strangely untouched by the attitude of inquiry that invigorated his time"—receives much of Sauer's attention, and his critique of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea is categorical. His trust was not in observation but in old authority, Sauer writes, pointing out

Columbus's fixation on the reports of Marco Polo. "His was the medieval mind seeking confirmation in writings of the past" (258). Sauer's conclusion is unequivocal: "Did ever any one discover so much and see so little? The original bold and genial venture became the *idée fixe*, bringing confusion to his mind and suppression for others, ignoring the facts of newly known land and life, and ultimately helping to destroy him. He became unable to observe or to think rationally, to the point of being disordered as to mind, temper, and conduct. After the original voyage of discovery he never again rose to greatness or to face realities and make sensible use of them" (263). The power of conviction proved too much for the discipline of observation.

In sharp contrast, Peter Martyr and Américo Vespucci are treated with the respect that Sauer demonstrates they deserve, particularly the latter: "A proper name was needed for the great Southern land as its continental proportions and position became known. Influenced, it is true, by the 'four navigations' ascribed to Vespucci, the authors of the *Cosmographiae Introductio*, composed at St. Dié in 1507, invented the name America. The legendary Atlantic isles of Antilia and Brazil had already been applied to parts of the New World. It could hardly be called after Columbus, who had made every effort to deny its existence. To adapt the assonant name of Américo was an innocent and rather appropriate conceit" (270).

We close with three brief excerpts from *Seventeenth Century North America* (1980), the manuscript that Sauer was working on at the time of his death in 1975. More a draft than a refined and fully referenced final product, this book has much to commend it, not least the autobiographical "Chart of My Course," with which the volume begins. Sauer recalls his six-decade trajectory as a student of land and life, from his doctoral dissertation at Chicago under R. D. Salisbury in 1915, published as *The Geography of the Ozark Highlands of Missouri* (1920b), to his reconstruction of *Sixteenth Century North America* (1971b) during his final Berkeley years. He reminds us of some of his more controversial claims, which include "Vinland as having been in southern New England, the climate as at present," and that "Irish monks settled on shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the tenth century or earlier" (1980:11, ch. 31 herein). Engagement in his last project, he reveals, "has drawn me back to the experiences of my early years, going back to 1910, when I was beginning to learn geographical observation in the Illinois Valley" (11).

Sauer conceived of *Seventeenth Century North America* "as an introduction to the condition of land, nature, and Indian life as seen and influenced by French and Spanish participants" (1980:12, ch. 31 herein). Its last two chap-



ters distill the outcomes of confrontations between natives and newcomers from New Spain in the south to New France in the north. In "Decline of Indian Population," Sauer reviews Indian numbers and demise in Mesoamerica, the Pueblo towns, the East Coast, and the St. Lawrence River Valley. Everywhere Sauer looks he sees unprecedented disaster in the form of "terrible epidemics," "mortality," "great sickness," and "nations destroyed" (1980:248, ch. 32 herein). The vignettes he leaves us with are of entire regions laid to waste, their inhabitants diminished if not extinct, the achievements of the past no guarantee for survival in the future. In the concluding chapter, "The End of the Century," Sauer's final published words, the situations of European New Spain and New France at around 1700 are briefly reviewed. Native peoples survived, but how they lived was a far cry from Verrazzano's image of a "Golden Age," Lahontan's portrayal of Indians as "exemplars of a good society," and Rousseau's depictions of the "Noble Savage" (1980:253, ch. 33 herein). The geographical consequences of empire, as Sauer's lifework on the theme tragically attests, turned out to be markedly different from what the first Europeans to reach and write about the New World could ever have imagined.

## REFERENCES

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## The Prospect for Redistribution of Population (1937)

Carl O. Sauer

### POPULATION CHANGE MUST BE CONSIDERED HISTORICALLY

The population problems of the world can be defined only in so far as we have knowledge of growth or decline of human densities as distributed about the world in time. Population change has been very unevenly expressed spatially. There are areas that maintain, for a long time, a terrific rate of increase; there are others that, neglected for a time, have filled with a rush; there are still others that continue empty or nearly so to the present. In the first place, we need far more accurate descriptions of the distribution and "movement" of population over the world from period to period. Much more significant population maps could be made than any that we now have, and it is from them that the dynamics of population growth are to be read. The science of population, which has scarcely been begun, can answer questions regarding potential populations only by the most careful work in historical geography, in the phenomena of human distributions, and areal exploitations. As yet we lack mostly the evidence for projecting population trends areally. The following remarks, therefore, are inferences based on fragmentary knowledge and should be considered simply as a working thesis.

Political concern about population outlets appears from time to time, but perhaps has never been so urgent as at present. Whenever there is a population "problem" there is insufficient room for an expanding body, which seeks release in directions of low resistance and sufficient attraction. These areas