Imperial San Francisco: 
Urban Power, Earthly Ruin

Gray Brechin
Berkeley: University of California Press

Reviewed by
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This scholarly contribution by a geographer to the long list of books about the City of San Francisco combines an impressive record of original research with a forcefully argued rhetorical framework. In the end, it proves to be an unhappy marriage, as the author’s logical sequence of topics is not a good vehicle for conveying his abundant, insightful observations. However, most purchasers will find reasons to judge the book adequately satisfying, either because Brechin writes beautifully as he tells (or retells) compelling stories, because the publishers have allowed ample (nearly five score) fascinating illustrations from inaccessible sources, or because the final 70 pages of notes, bibliography, and index are a treasure trove about one of our country’s most important places.

The author’s ambitious purposes are stated outright before the first of the seven substantive chapters. San Francisco is classified as an example of an imperial city, one that grew prosperous and great by exploiting its links to a surrounding region. Brechin proposes to examine “the radical environmental impact that one city has had on California and the Pacific Basin” (p. xxii) and asks, “Was it worth it?” (p. xvii). His 330-page response is suffused with the conclusion that the main beneficiaries of imperial urbanism have been a small coterie of powerful urban elites and their families. The few prospered and the many have been ground down and have had their lives diminished by environmental destruction and pollution.

Part One, titled “foundations of dominion,” discusses mining and water supply as two key relationships between the city and its contado, the Italian word Brechin prefers for the city’s tributary area. The first chapter examines San Francisco’s early links to the economy
of gold, mercury, silver, and other mines. Building upon some ideas of Lewis Mumford, bold intellectual claims are staked in the assertion that mining has been the motor of urban history, with even the first large cities supported by "the pyramid of mining." The second chapter discusses the city’s water supply. Environmental impacts of these twin foundations of dominion are presented mostly through the research of others. Strong story lines are provided by the deforestation of the Sierra’s eastern slopes, the hydraulic debris in the Central Valley, and the filling of a Yosemite National Park valley with Hetch Hetchy Reservoir water. The role of wealthy investors and manipulators in these projects is the heart of Brechin’s original research contribution from his work with rare or ephemeral source materials.

Part Two, titled “the thought shapers,” devotes a chapter each to the Hearsts of mine and publication fame; the de Youngs, with similar roots; and the Scott brothers, whose core enterprises were metalworking and ship building. These three powerful families are presented as exemplars of their class. All benefited directly and indirectly from the growing city and all knew well that political imperialism was an essential underpinning of economic expansion. The Spanish-American War and related imperialist intrusions throughout the Pacific and Latin America receive emphasis. Brechin’s research contribution here is often the archival digging that reveals craven motivations and ruthless methods by the families and their associates in mining, lumbering, agriculture, and other resource-extraction enterprises.

The concluding Part Three is given the arcane title “remote control” as an application of another of Mumford’s late-in-life conceptualization of the destructive workings of contemporary society. A chapter on “toward limitless energy” that might well have been put in the book’s first section reviews the rise of petroleum fortunes, dams, and hydroelectric dynasties of the west. Here again the author’s familiarity with memoirs, personal papers, and corporate records reveals illuminating details concerning the methods of the corporate and family enterprises that tapped the resources of the golden state for the benefit of the state’s urban elite. The final chapter reviews the rise of the Berkeley campus of the University of
California as a power in the engineering and science fields that proved to be especially useful to those with imperial aims. We learn of the many direct and indirect threads that link the Bay Area’s mining investment heritage with the academic culture that supported research in nuclear physics and the development of nuclear bombs and nuclear power. The goals and rhetorical structure of Brechin’s book are well represented by his final, six-page section on “the costs of the race come home.” Great human suffering resulted from the long-term health effects of our nation’s five-trillion-dollar nuclear arms race, and the author asks his readers to conclude that it was clearly not worth it.

A visual highlight of the book is the scattering of 42 cartoons and illustrations reprinted from Bay Area newspapers, literary and critical journals, and technical periodicals. They support Brechin’s thesis by showing that contemporaries of the rapacious elite were occasionally aware (and sometimes stinging critical) of the city’s imperialistic ambitions and methods. An intellectual lowlight of the work is its lack of supporting evidence to undergird the frequent assertion that increasing urban land values were important as one of the main payoffs for the elites’ many projects of economic outreach.

A fascinating academic history must lie behind this book. It is the same work (over 95 percent exact overlap in text) that is available through UMI Dissertation Services as the author’s Ph.D. dissertation in Geography at the University of California at Berkeley. UC Press editors liked that version so much that they changed few things besides the dissertation’s more aptly descriptive subtitle, “The Environmental Impact of Urban Elites Upon the Pacific Basin.” Some of Brechin’s core themes are those articulated powerfully in the work of the Berkeley urban geographer, James E. Vance, Jr., who is not cited even though he devoted much energy to arguing, with Brechin, the insight that “the countryside grows out of the city” rather more than the reverse. Notable also is the absence of bibliographic links to the work of other geographers (and even other Berkeley urban geographers) who wrote well about the local and non-local landscape impacts of the economic dynamo that was San Francisco.
How It Came To Be:  
Carl O. Sauer, Franz Boas and the Meanings of Anthropogeography

William W. Speth  
Ellensburg, Washington: Ephemera Press

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The title of this book is presumably derived from a statement made by Carl O. Sauer (in a 1934 letter to Wellington D. Jones): “I do think that our scientific end is in understanding how things came to be.” In this apparently self-published (in 1999) anthology, William W. Speth has brought together 12 of his own essays (10 previously published and 2 unpublished, dated between 1972 and 1993) that deal with one aspect of the intellectual heritage of American geography and anthropology, viz. the influence of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German historicism, especially as perpetuated by the geographer Carl Sauer (1889–1975) and the anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942). The theme is highly specific and explicitly philosophical, and the coverage is quite detailed and esoteric. Beginning with his 1972 dissertation at the University of Oregon, Speth has seemingly directed much of his research energies at demonstrating the powerful penetration of the German historical tradition into the thoughts, methods, and teachings of these two prominent twentieth-century scholars and their students. A convincing case for that supposition is meticulously argued in these essays.

The first six papers in this volume, grouped under “Part One: The Historicist Organon,” deal directly with Carl Sauer and the emergence of American cultural geography. In the first essay, we see Sauer in the context of the conflict between historicism and positivism which resulted from attempts by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European scholars to interpret environment-culture interactions. The high degree to which Sauer was influenced
by the historicist philosophy is evident, according to Speth, by Sauer’s science (retrospective, inductive, genetic, and empirical) and worldview (cultural relativism, traditionalism, appreciation of cultural diversity, and an anti-urban romantic view of rural life). The second essay documents how Sauer’s historical orientation extended into his methodological arguments about what geography should and should not be. Sauer rejected the naturalistic models of W. M. Davis, the rationalist models of Semple and Huntington, the pragmatic approaches of applied geography and political-economic action, and the spatial-theoretical geography of the “quantitative revolution.” In his mind these trends deviated from the “traditional position” of the discipline’s founding fathers, which was a primary concern for areal knowledge, landscape expression, and changes over time. One of Sauer’s persistent research themes, the “destructive exploitation” of the earth by humans, is analyzed in the third essay. Speth scrutinizes the epistemological meaning of this theme in Sauer’s writings: the way Sauer used “environment” and “resource” as relativist terms defined by the resident culture; the way he qualified the concept of destructive exploitation to refer only to the permanent damage caused by the economies of the civilized modern world; and the way he imposed moral judgment into his evaluations.

The next three papers shift the focus to the Berkeley School that Sauer, as the master teacher, founded and led. Essay four is a history of the first decade (1923–33) of the Berkeley geography department under his leadership. Speth records, in great detail, the curriculum, the personnel, the research conducted, Sauer’s evolving views of geography as revealed in his methodological writings of that time, and the ways in which all of these elements helped to establish the basic personality of Berkeley geography that was to continue for another 3 decades. In the fifth essay, Speth relies on questionnaire responses from various members of the Berkeley group to depict the distinctive social and conceptual phenomenon that was the Sauer school. Although there emerged a common feeling of cohesiveness, the opinions varied greatly as to the identity of the cognitive signposts. Essay six is a lengthy, previously unpublished paper from 1989 that presents “A Sociological View of the Sauer School, 1923–44”—an exceptionally thorough reporting on
how this school of thought was formed, specifically on how the master-apprentice bond resulted in “socialization into a department culture” (p. 90). Speth finds that the attributes of a “school of thought” were clearly evident at Berkeley: the magnetism of a strong founder-leader, the multi-generational time span of its disciplinary impact, the strong support and patronage of the university, and the cohesiveness and continuity of spirit, purpose, and effort that came from the faculty and students.

The second set of six essays comprise “Part Two: Anthropogeography Revisited.” These papers look at the history and meanings of the two conflicting approaches to the study of the human-nature relationship that found expression in both anthropology and geography. The first paper in this group, essay seven, tries to get at the root of the differences between the historicist brand of anthropogeography (with its idealist interpretation of culture as a creative force), and the positivist brand of anthropogeography (with its rationalist belief in the causal force of the biophysical world, i.e., environmental determinism).

The next four papers look at cultural anthropologists who had strong interests in human-environment relationships. Franz Boas of Columbia University, the physicist-turned-geographer-turned-founding-father-of-American-anthropology and the central figure of Speth’s dissertation, is the subject of two substantial pieces. In essays eight—essentially from Speth’s dissertation—and nine, we find lengthy expositions of Franz Boas’ anthropogeographical thinking: his firm support of the historicist paradigm, his vehement repudiation of “geographical determinism” (a term he coined in the 1920s), his acceptance of a limited role for environment as a force acting upon culture, and his superficial agreements with and more substantial disagreements with the French Possibilist school. Speth includes, as essays 10 and 11, brief pieces on two of Boas’ students who challenged the master’s teachings: a biographical sketch of Clark Wissler, who interpreted cultures as biological organisms that adapt to surrounding nature; and an obituary of Julian H. Steward, who espoused a positivist type of anthropogeography called “cultural ecology.”
The last paper, essay 12 (previously unpublished and written in 1972), returns to Carl Sauer and the way in which he reformulated anthropogeography as a field of study. Speth directs our attention to Sauer’s close philosophical connections with Boas, the progress of his evolving historicism and anti-environmentalism, his synthesis of the Boasian concept of culture and the German concepts of chorology and culture history, his differences with Possibilism, and the emerging of his distinctive style of cultural/historical geography.

*How It Came to Be* can be recommended to the serious Sauer and “Berkeley School” devotee who will appreciate the convenience of having many of Speth’s works collected together in one place. The downside of this kind of collection is that, since each of the articles was written to stand alone, as Speth warns, “there is some [actually considerable] overlapping and duplication.” While this may, as Speth suggests, facilitate the learning process for some, in this reader’s case it only facilitated annoyance.

The reader also has to be warned that, although the thoroughness of Speth’s scholarship cannot be faulted, his prose is exhaustive and exhausting. It is exhaustive in the sense that most of Sauer’s, and many of Boas’, methodological writings are so meticulously scrutinized for meanings, semantic nuances, and derivative lines of influences and connections that maybe we are given more than we ever wanted to know. It is exhausting in the sense that the writing style is pretentiously inflated, overly wordy, unnecessarily obtuse, too frequently punctuated with numerous philosophical “isms,” and, consequently, often quite difficult to decipher. The casual dabbler beware—the reading experience is not easy, pleasant, or painless.

I think it is safe to say that there has been no American geographer who has been as thoroughly dissected and analyzed as Carl Sauer. This book would seem to confirm that William Speth, as a confirmed methodologist in search of “the Berkeley paradigm,” has been one of the more active contributors to that effort. The paradox of such investigations is that methodological sense is sought from the works of a group of very non-methodologically oriented scholars, who probably were never aware of the epistemological categories to which they supposedly belonged. I somehow do not believe that
Sauer would be very pleased with an epitaph that described him as an historicist, populist, expressionist, pluralist, traditionalist, relativist, idealist, empiricist, and irrationalist. Although I concede that a certain amount of understanding derives from such labels, at the same time they strike me as somewhat contrived. This view is confirmed by comments that appear in letters written to Speth by Sauer and some of his students, which Speth reproduces in an appendix. I must commend Speth for including these “sources” for they cast an important light on the Berkeley group. It is emphasized that they never spoke of “method” at Berkeley, and that Sauer would never have liked the term “paradigm.” John Leighly’s opinion was that “An independent and vigorous mind such as Sauer’s cannot be pinned down and labeled like an insect in an entomological collection. I doubt, moreover, that it has much pertinence to the more active former students of Sauer’s....” (p. 205). I suggest that if we must have descriptive labels for the “Sauerian method,” they should be the following: endless curiosity, originality of perspective, independence of thought, open-mindedness, constant questioning, highly-informed critical scholarship, observation and synthesis, and (to use James Parson’s words) “wandering and wondering”—these should form the essence of Sauer’s epitaph.
It was a “Movable feast” to be able to read Hilgard O’Reilly Sternberg’s *A Agua e o Homem na Várzea do Careiro* in Portuguese while at the same time traveling through the Amazon Basin. The publication of Sternberg’s 1956 thesis some 40 years later and in his native tongue is a major accomplishment wrought by the Museu Emilio Goeldi in Belém, Brazil. While reading, sometimes within view of the Ilha do Careiro itself, I was caught up in the nostalgia of my own thesis on Brazil, directed by Hilgard O’Reilly Sternberg himself. I first heard of him and his work from graduate students who had taken the “Brazil Course” while Sternberg was at UCLA. I had my opportunity to take the course when he came to Berkeley in 1964. Such phrases in Portuguese about the geography of Brazil as “Terra preta tem careta” (“Black earth has little faces”) and “O rio está apertando” (“The river is pinching”) caught me in the Amazon web.

It has become fashionable to write about Amazônia. This piece of work, however, is like no other before or since. The result of Sternberg’s many field excursions into the central Amazon in the 1950s, *A Agua e o Homem na Várzea do Careiro* exemplifies the kind of geography as human ecology that many of us from the Berkeley tradition cherish. So much more than an elaboration of facts and data, the work demonstrates Sternberg’s broad grasp of this aquatic world: fluvial geomorphology (he was a geomorphologist first), biogeography, and, of course, human adaptation. The work is a sequent occupancy study of a small island near the meeting of the waters that stretches from pre-historic times to 1956.
Based on careful field analysis, this pioneering work has stimulated geographic and scientific work in general on the Amazonian varzea. There had been earlier works on the physical and biological features of the region, but A Agua e o Homem is one of those treatises that have come to epitomize geography as human ecology, the raison d’être of the discipline. From PUC in Rio de Janeiro to the Universidade de Brazil to UC Berkeley, Sternberg has carried his holistic approach to understanding complex human/environment relationships. The book is a highly humanized kind of geographic information system for the central Amazon. At a time when the discipline is suffering an identity crisis, this scholarly work helps us rediscover geography.

Even the introduction is filled with well-executed maps and tables, which create a foundation for the presentation of his thesis. From introduction to conclusion, the author includes many of his own photographs along with those of some of his Brazilian colleagues: all black and white, all descriptive in the best sense of the word. Of particular interest are the classic drawings, desenhos, by Percy Lau, based on Sternberg’s photos.

Section I is a treatise on the geomorphology of the world’s mightiest fluvial environment. The sets of photographs showing high water and low water renditions are again descriptive in a way that words never could be. His notations on annual variations in water level prompted me to wonder about tie-ins to El Niño events, only to find that in the postscript, Sternberg had thought of that too.

Sternberg identifies the importance of early activity in the Amazon Basin, a topic that is red hot right now in archeological circles. Only here would I have wanted a slightly different organization. It seemed to me that pre-historic human activity should have started the section on “O Povoamento” rather than including it with the physical geography. The section of the book dealing with migrations into the central Amazon from the state of Ceará is as methodologically up to date as any current study…and, of course, the phenomenon continues. I have always liked the use by Sternberg of the term Hiléia to describe the climax rain forest community. The section on the evolution of dairy activity on the Ilha portrays humankind at its most creative—floating dairy barns to cope with massive fluctua-
tions in river levels. A quote inserted from a conversation with one of the local small-scale dairy operators tells the story of what might have been were it not for environmental factors: “Sou pequeno criador, a água não me devea ser fazendero” (“I’m only a small herdsman; the water keeps me from being a rancher”).

The collection of maps accompanying the book is a contribution in and of itself. It is too bad that more of us do not read Portuguese. After having read this treatise, I am glad that I do!
Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues

Paul Farmer
University of California Press

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Fortunately, in the United States and Canada medical care is affordable for the insured, and is generally accessible for everyone. Readers of this journal probably can afford to be seriously ill or injured, if their employer provides adequate medical insurance or if they can pay the premiums themselves. Moreover, they probably have sufficient social skills and education to interact successfully with medical personnel and institutions. Still, after a minor accident in any town or city within the territory of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, an ambulance ride to the hospital costs more than the annual per-capita income of Haiti. The subsequent hospital emergency-room visit might cost more than the annual per-capita income of Peru. Notwithstanding many well-known public policy and practical issues, North Americans live well and long and are protected competently by sophisticated modern medicine, sanitation, and public health infrastructures.

Nevertheless, North Americans still are vulnerable to and play host to tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and other well-known chronic diseases. The specter of bubonic plague—the infamous villain of the Black Death—is as close as infected chipmunks in the Sierra Nevada. Certainly, nineteenth-century diseases such as malaria, typhus, and cholera await their returns to North America when modern sanitation and public health infrastructures falter. Meanwhile, new, drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis as well as more exotic tropical diseases such as ebola can threaten North America whenever the next infected passenger disembarks from a Boeing 747 from Asia, Africa, or Latin America. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse wait impatiently always.
Infections and Inequalities is a challenging, scholarly protest of the social inequalities reflected in the global realities of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, typhoid, and other infectious diseases. Infections and Inequalities is a physician’s professional biography, and an anthropologist’s critical and self-critical analysis of social, economic, and institutional responses of poor Haitian farmers to medical care for tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. “The book examines the inequalities in the distribution and outcome of infectious diseases. It asks why people...are likely to die of infections such as tuberculosis and AIDS and malaria while others are spared this risk. It explores the creation and maintenance of such disparities, which are biological in their expression but are largely socially determined. This book also explores social responses to infectious diseases, responses ranging from quarantine to accusations of sorcery” (p. 4). Infections and Inequalities provides a theoretical basis for coping with the stark, devastating realities of epidemic diseases and for understanding a global setting where medical knowledge exists but available resources are scarce.

Paul Farmer, a physician, medical anthropologist, and director of Harvard Medical School’s Program in Infectious Disease and Social Change, examines his personal clinical experience and anthropological fieldwork on the Central Plateau of Haiti since 1983, for which he is well known for AIDS research. He evaluates and reports on clinical experiences in the poor suburbs of Lima, Peru, and in the poor districts of New York City and Boston. Paul Farmer the clinician challenges the reader in practical and ethical terms. At the same time, Farmer the medical anthropologist challenges the reader to reach better theoretical understandings of poor Haitian and Peruvian patients, who suffer and die from infectious diseases.

The global HIV/AIDS pandemic, the tuberculosis pandemic, and the threatened pandemic of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDRTB) are quite real. As transnational microbial traffic and international capital and commerce travel together, “we discern the pernicious effects of the two-worlds myth” (p. 34). Beyond the frus-
trations of individual medical care, issues of poverty, inequality, and access to care in the developing world may metamorphose into medical emergencies in the developed world anytime an airplane lands or a ship docks.

Farmer’s medical anthropology shares much with medical geography. Among geographers, only the late Peter Gould is cited for his *The Slow Plague: A Geography of the AIDS Pandemic*. Farmer demonstrates an appreciation of political jurisdictions and boundaries in the spread of biological and social aspects of disease. “The study of borders qua borders means, increasingly, the study of social inequalities. Many political borders serve as semipermeable membranes, often quite open to diseases and yet closed to the free movement of cures. Thus inequalities of access can be created or buttressed at borders, even when pathogens cannot be so contained” (p. 54). Paul Farmer, the medical anthropologist, attempts to create a critical epistemology leading to social interpretations capable of assisting Paul Farmer, the physician, in the creation of a critical epidemiology and a more effective medical program for coping with complex biological and social realities, especially MDRTB.

*Infections and Inequalities* is an important, insightful book. Farmer poses many practical and ethical challenges. Dr. Farmer’s personal clinical experience in Haiti gives insights and authenticity unattainable in Boston. At the same time, his critical medical anthropology of global pandemics warns us that serious infectious diseases know no boundaries. Modern commerce and travel present ample reasons for concern here; we cannot escape or ignore the social inequalities in Haiti, Peru, and elsewhere. *Infections and Inequalities* is recommended to all, especially those geographers who have appreciated the scope and perspectives of Laurie Garrett’s *The Coming Plague* (1993) and Hans Zinsser’s classic *Rats, Lice and History* (1934). *Infections and Inequalities* is an important book for medical geographers, geographers interested in development issues, and geographers who seek to understand global realities generally.