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## Review of *Comparative Frontiers: A Proposal for Studying the American West* By Jerome O. Steffen

Leonard T. Guelke  
*University of Waterloo*

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# BOOK REVIEWS

*Comparative Frontiers: A Proposal for Studying the American West.* By Jerome O. Steffen. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. Notes, bibliography, index. 139 pp. \$10.95.

In this short, readable book Jerome Steffen puts forward a framework for the comparative study of frontier societies of the American West. The foundation of Steffen's proposal is the idea that frontier activity can be construed as a contest between the demands of the environment and the principles and practices that settlers brought with them to the frontier. The outcome of this contest, Steffen argues, will largely determine whether changes in the character of frontier societies should be classified as modal or fundamental. In Steffen's words, "Modal change usually represented an altered overt manifestation of a practice or belief whose conceptual foundation remained essentially the same. Fundamental change involved the replacement or significant alteration of the very assumption upon which given practices were based" (p. xi). The extent to which an environment by itself was capable of creating fundamental change is seen as being a function of regional isolation. Frontier environments, demanding new technologies of resource exploitation having few or weak interacting links with the outside world, are, in Steffen's view, more likely to produce fundamental change than those where strong ties with the outside world ("civilization") are maintained, even should the environment be demanding of basic technological change.

On this basis, Steffen draws a distinction between the ideological transformation of American society occurring up to the nineteenth century (as a result of isolated frontier experiences) and the adaptations made in resource exploitation strategies in the settlement

of the trans-Mississippi West. In looking at Great Plains agricultural settlement within this framework, Steffen concludes that it "offered little that is fundamentally new," and adds that "this settlement may not even fall within the parameters of frontier studies" (p. xvi).

The main body of this book is concerned with fleshing out the ideas set out above. In separate chapters, Steffen treats cis-Mississippi agricultural settlement, the American fur trading frontier, the ranching frontier, and the mining frontier. These chapters are intended to illustrate the importance of looking at frontier settlement within a larger social and economic context.

There is always a danger that regional history may become parochial history, in which regional uniqueness is emphasized to a point where form becomes more important than essence. Steffen has clearly recognized this danger, particularly as it applies to the Great Plains with its unique environmental conditions. This book provides a useful corrective to the idea that the American West can be understood in isolation from American history as a whole. If the work has a weakness, it lies in the sharp distinction that Steffen draws between modal and fundamental change. It seems likely that the empirical reality of historical change on the frontier will defy the kind of straightforward classification proposed in Steffen's book.

LEONARD T. GUELKE  
Department of Geography  
University of Waterloo