Of Wholes and Parts: Local History and the American Experience

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Recommended Citation
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The relationships between the wholes and parts of American history are vital to our understanding of ourselves as a nation and a people. Many of the central paradoxes and ambiguities of our national existence cannot be adequately understood without exploring the interplay between localism and nationalism that runs like a leitmotiv throughout American history. The influence of the westward movement in our nation’s past, the give and take of federal-state relations, the internecine sectionalism of the nineteenth century, and the more benign regionalism of the twentieth century raise important questions about the relationship between local history and national heritage, and why they sometimes seem antithetical. As one historian has ably put it, "Essentially American history is the account of local communities strung together to form a composite nation.... The course of history, local or national, has never advanced within a vacuum or without the adhesive element of continuity. So many times past decisions, national and international, resulted from grass roots pressures and demands. In fact the broad spectrum of sectionalism in national history has ever reflected this cause and effect. So many times local historians' books deal with microcosms which are but parts of the broader national scene." It has even been asserted that pivotal events in American history are best understood when studied as a series of local responses to issues and problems that cut across state boundaries, yet were significantly influenced by local conditions.


2A good example of the micro approach to the national past is The States and the Nation series, administered by the American Association for State and Local History under the general editorship of James Morton Smith. These state histories were among the more useful productions of the American bicentennial in 1976—an incredible boon to the writing of American local history. On the impact of the bicentennial and the rebirth of American local history see Michael Kammen, “The American Revolution Bicentennial and the Writing of Local History,” History News 30 (Aug. 1975): 179-90.

Indeed, the nature of the American experience (if one may speak in the singular) cautions against the artificial segregation of local and national issues. As a student of Illinois’ early political history once observed, “[t]he character of the Federal Constitution, and the large place occupied by national policies in the lives of people, make it impossible to divorce local and national issues.” What is true of the national experience politically is also true socially and culturally. The market revolution occasioned by canals and railroads in the early and mid-nineteenth century, the advent of industrial capitalism and its economies of scale and national patterns of consumption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the rise of a truly national culture via the communication and transportation revolutions of the last half century have had a homogenizing influence on the patterns of our lives. Yet local historians should avoid assumptions of national homogeneity as diligently as those of local exceptionalism, for one may find concurrent examples of both. Local, regional, inter-regional, national, and global influences connect the parts to the whole in individual lives and their local communities. It is the job of the local historian to reconstruct the symbiotic relationship between the national and local settings of our social and cultural selves.

There are many reciprocal relationships between local and national history, yet recognition of this fact should not obscure the very real differences and intellectual distance that often separate those who identify themselves as “local” and “professional” historians. The rift has a history behind it. It stems from differences in the training, interests, and approaches of professional and amateur historians, to say nothing of the underlying assumptions which motivates them to investigate the local past in the first instance. Amateur and professional historians departed at wide angles when the historical profession emerged as a self-conscious and credentialed academic discipline in the 1880s. Gone was the great commons of history, where avocational historians of various backgrounds and attainments

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wrote local and national histories for a general readership. The concerns of academically trained historians centered around the history of national political issues, parties, and presidential administrations, while local history remained a stepchild to the profession—a pursuit open to amateurs but largely anathema to the history professional at large. There have been many efforts to mitigate that estrangement, but the burden of the past continues to loom large.

One may be appreciative of local history without being uncritical, for there are many problems associated with its practice. It is undeniably true that the province of local history is too often reduced to an enumeration of “firsts,” anniversary celebrations, pageants, and re-creations that rarely rise above the level of chamber-of-commerce-boosterism and expressions of local pride. There has been an inordinate preoccupation with pioneers and first families—what might best be described as the “what-the-pioneers-hath-wrought” school of historiography, where the community-building enterprises of the first Euro-American settlers in a locality are described in Promethean terms, and further embellished with filiopiety. To recognize the problems inherent in this genre of historical writing should not, however, minimize the contributions of the more diligent and talented among the early chroniclers of the local past. Indeed, notwithstanding the great historiographical and culture distance that separates the historical profession from its antiquarian origins, our intellectual debt to the amateur historians of the nineteenth century is large. There is much of value in their original contributions to historical documentation, which continue to be information sources for analytical scholars who revisit the copious materials they compiled. The literary efforts of the antiquarians and the historical societies they helped established is a legacy upon which professionally trained historians have often built. All those who labor in the vineyard of local history remain conspicuously in their debt.²


arrived, although certain definitional and analytical problems persist.

Not the least of the problems associated with local history has been to adequately define its nature, scope, and purpose. Much of this discussion has centered on the need for integrating state and local history into larger frames of meaning, as an antidote to the provincialism that has been endemic to the field. Historians have long valued the study of localities as a means of testing the validity of more general and theoretical studies of regions or the nation at large. Such case studies attempt to determine the extent to which a community is representative of others in its region and to what degree local experiences have paralleled national trends. Thus one of the many benefits of regional and local history is the capacity for validating, modifying, or refuting many of the grand themes of our national history. Local historians, Clifford L. Lord once respectfully observed, possess an ingrained suspicion or “healthy skepticism about the glib generalization” and an abiding appreciation for the diversity of the American scene.

That localized view of the American experience does not preclude synthesis and generalization; it only circumscribes it within proper boundaries. “Although the diversity of American life in its many separate communities may preclude generalization about social organization throughout America, the historical development of any single community bears a coherence that readily lends itself to a holistic interpretation.” Localized history is an invaluable means of interpreting the complex inner workings of the national experience, for many of the continuities, countervailing trends, and crosscurrents of that past stand in bold relief when examined in a local context.

The case-study model of local history is not, however, without its critics. As historians use local history to test hypotheses about the American experience at large something important and distinctive about state and local history is lost along the way. Localism and regionalism under this paradigm is neither presented in the round nor on its own terms, but is made to serve other purposes. As John Alexander Williams has noted, the academic or case-study model of local history is incomplete because it makes the local past serve national history as defined by the academy. This has created a “partial” or a “fragmentary” view of the local past that is inadequate for those use seek a broadly-based cultural history. A distinguishing feature of this history is that it also includes the physical dimensions of the local 8


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past—the things of history. It is hard to imagine, in fact, how state and local history could retain its sense of immediacy and intrinsic appeal with the material past left out. Public audiences in particular often prefer the particular, the personal, and the real over the theoretical paradigms of the scholar, and have their interests most fully engaged by the physical realities of local history. Their attention more readily turns to the commercial, high-style, and vernacular architecture found in American towns and cities. They delight in traveling along the historic and scenic routes that radiate off our interstate highways, where they seek out the last vestiges of prehistoric Indian mounds, roadside gas stations and groceries, and the town squares, courthouses, and places of worship that have mercifully escaped the leveling hand of “improvement.” These are the physical realities of the local past that define a sense of place wherever people have gathered themselves into community. These are the vistas of history in situ—the social and material environments that rivet our attention as local historians.

Yet broader vistas are also required of local historians. The comparative study of states and regions offer them yet another angle from which to view the interplay between national and subnational events, trends, and long-term processes. As James H. Madison observes in Heartland: Comparative Histories of Midwestern States (1988), the comparative approach to state history “with its nested, three-layered approach of state, region, and nation, mitigates the provincialism of much state history.” It further allows us to recognize, he argues, the importance of understanding the local and regional diversity that still exists within the United States.

Assumptions of homogeneity are omnipresent in twentieth-century America, particularly in the popular culture of music, dress, and food and in the national sweep of television news and entertainment. The common assumption of foreigners that Americans are all alike is not surprising. Many Americans themselves only think in national and international contexts and to avoid strong attachments to place as they strive for career and geographical mobility.

Local historians, therefore, should neither seek distinctiveness nor sameness as ends unto themselves, but inquire into the presence of both. Yet unquestionably they manifest a preference for the particular to the general, and seek to know the nuances of localities and the shared sense of community.

A further antidote to provincialism in local history is the concept of regionalism. In fact, much of what is generally called state and local history is actually regional and even inter-regional in its scope and content. When historians speak of regionalism, they usually mean something more than the common political origins of contiguous states, and something less than absolute uniformity in characteristics. A region need not be unique in all its characteristics, say in its demographic profile, in order to have an historically and culturally defined character and shared identity. Differences within a region and similarities between regions of the United States are often the rule and not the exception. But rather regionalism makes the people, institutions, politics, literature, and culture of an historically defined region the categories of historical analysis. New England, the South, the Midwest, the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, the Southwest, California and the Northwest Coast are relatively homogeneous. They do have distinct historical patterns of development and distinguishing characteristics, including distinct regional identities. As Louis Worth has noted, regionalism also embraces the province of perceptual geography—place as a “state of mind”

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15Philip D. Jordon, The Nature and Practice of State and Local History (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, Service Center for Teacher of History, 1958), 12-3. Jordon well stated the interrelationships between the wholes and parts of American history. As the nation integrated itself politically, economically, and culturally the parts fit more securely into the whole, but the parts still remained as distinct and self-conscious entities.
and “a sense of common belonging.” Research in this field is well advanced.16

State historical societies have long valued the kind of broad-based cultural history that is customarily known as regionalism, although it is usually pursued under the familiar label of state and local history. Regional themes are implicit in their founding missions, institutional histories, and specialized collections. Historical societies keep faith with founding missions and established practices dating back to the local history movement of the nineteenth century. It was then that local history in the United States emerged as a distinct intellectual tradition and genre of historical writing, and that historical societies became the first purveyors of public history. Through the maintenance of archives, libraries, museums, and historic sites, state historical societies (and several urban ones too) have gathered systematic collections of manuscripts, documents, rare books, and artifacts that have greatly enriched our understanding of the American past. Preservation activities at these agencies save


produced the most detailed and deeply textured accounts of American localities. It claims to attention are considerable.

Community studies as a type of local history has been a particularly fruitful ground. Historical studies of this mold have great affinity with the kind of “thick description” of local life and attention to detail that was a hallmark of the cultural history written by Clifford Geertz. This broad-based cultural history is sometimes referred to as the “community-social interaction model.” This model falls well outside the familiar narrative mode of history. It is less concerned with tracing the local course of national events and more with getting at the kinds of formal and informal networks that define individuals, groups, and entire communities on their own terms. It examines the processes of community building that have historically defined a given locality, such as social mobility, immigration, urbanization, industrialization, and interactions between these various long-term processes. History as process gives context to the daily rhythms of work, leisure, and family that punctuate individual lives. Events, both local and distant, impact individual lives too, but social and cultural historians look primarily at the deep structure of communities. They seek to identify hierarchical relationships within a community, as manifested in the distribution of power and goods and in the educational, religious, ethnic, demographic, and political identification of its residents. Within this conception of locality, research can still examine the unique or not so unique ways that specific communities have responded to outside forces at work in American society at large.

These, then, are some of the key ideas, fundamental themes, and interdisciplinary approaches involved in the study of localities. Localized historical studies are informed by the tools and concepts of historians, historical geographers, and anthropologists, and embrace not only documentary evidence but also the material past. Whether one conceives local history as localized case studies of national history, regional studies, or community studies, it is a broad and rich field of historical inquiry with many practitioners inside and outside the academy. These developments might lead to what Kathleen Neils Conzen has called “the basis for a true local history of the United States—a local history resting on coherent interpretation of the changing nature of life at the local level and the changing role of the local community in American development.” Such remains a desideratum, but the concepts, methods, and materials for such histories are clearly at hand. It is hoped that this discussion has brought the field of local history into clear view, along with it needs and opportunities.

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21Mark Friedberger and Janice H. Webster, “Social Structure and State and Local History,” Western Historical Quarterly 9 (July 1978): 297-8. The authors argue that the “social structure” model should form the basis of studying state and local history.