



Introduction

In *River Towns in the Great West*, I told the story of the rise and fall of a regional urban system across the upper Mississippi river valley during the middle of the nineteenth century.¹ American settlers and entrepreneurs, in search of land and economic opportunity, transferred the forces of capitalism across the West, reordering economic arrangements and stimulating urban development. St. Louis emerged as the entrepôt of a dynamic system of interconnected river towns and villages that served as the exchange points for a burgeoning regional market economy stretching across Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, and north into Wisconsin and Minnesota. This system was structured by the interaction between settlers and entrepreneurs, the technology of the steamboat, regional topography, and the environment. Within three decades, however, the extent and carrying capacity of the steamboat, which was the driving force of urban development across the region, reached a point of diminishing returns. In the mid-1850s, the railroads responded by penetrating the system from the east to the west and north of Chicago, where the impact of transportation inefficiencies bore heaviest on local economic development. Within a few years, the railroads triggered external and scale economies that caused the rapid centralization of regional market and industrial activity at Chicago and, to a lesser extent, and somewhat later, at St. Louis. By 1860, the rise of these metropolises, together with continued westward migration and development, undermined and restructured the discursive regional urban system of the Great West.

As important as the story I sought to tell was the complex manner in which I told it. Integrating the histories of systems, groups, towns, and individuals, unfolding across the long, middle, and short term, I provided the broadest possible historical explanation of the process of the development and decline of a regional urban system. From this perspective, the history of any community, town, group, or individual is shaped by the nature and timing of its interaction with the system. Likewise, the structure and dynamics of the system were shaped by the integration of many

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64092-3 - Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West

Timothy R. Mahoney

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Provincial lives*

local or individual events into regional processes. Therefore, national, regional, and local history are intertwined together to create a complex understanding of economic and social change. This structuralist approach to history provides not only a “truly local history” which explores both what is specific and unique, as well as general, typical, or universal about the history of any town, place, or group at any time,² but also an integrated history of many and diverse systems which aspires to a “total” history.

River Towns in the Great West focused on explaining the economic–geographic dynamics which created and transformed a regional urban system across the antebellum Middle West. This study examines the development of urban society across the same system during the same time period. My purpose is twofold. On the one hand, I present a framework for the integration of local, regional, and national history. On the other hand, this study, like its predecessor, explores the definition and nature of regional history, and its interaction with broader national narratives and processes as they moved from the East, through the Middle West, and into the West. The framework for such a integrated analysis is to examine the dynamics of economic development from a social perspective. In this study I focus on the same individuals as social, rather than economic beings, operating alone or within families or groups within broader local and regional social systems, while pursuing opportunity, mobility, order, reproduction, satisfaction, or happiness.³ From this perspective, individuals and groups act within and, therefore, both shape and are shaped by, the dynamics of both local and regional social development. The history of any region, community, social group, family, or individual is structured by the timing and nature of its interaction with the broader dynamics of the larger social system in which it exists. Local or regional society, therefore, is built up or layered by the arrival of different groups, each with their own cultures and agendas, affecting the nature or structure of that society. At any moment, however, regional or local social development was constantly being contoured and altered by the response of locals, whether through resistance, acceptance, or accommodation, to waves of newcomers. Such interactions could change individual action and behavior, define new groups, alter social alignments and coalitions, and restructure local society. Thus, living and acting both locally and regionally, townspeople mediated between parochial and more generalized values and connected themselves to the dynamics of a process of regional social development which they both affected and were affected by. Individual stories or biographies, local and community histories, and the dynamics of regional development thus continually interact with and explain each other, providing the historian the opportunity both to explain change and transformation on any level and to place or fuse any story or stories together into a regional social history.

At the center of this structuralist history of the development of urban society across the upper Mississippi river valley during the antebellum period lies the complex story of the emergence of a distinctive regional middle class. Waves of immigrants arriving in the West between 1800 and the 1850s from different regional social systems and cultures, as well as residents already living in their own social

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64092-3 - Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West

Timothy R. Mahoney

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

frameworks and cultures in the West, contributed to this social history. Over time, three groups, in particular, played key roles in constructing and defining the regional middle class. Early pioneers and settlers who considered themselves members of “good society” laid the foundation. Some of these people, as well as subsequent settlers – especially entrepreneurs, merchants, and professionals – driven by self-interest and a desire for social mobility, intertwined good society with collective booster activity in towns in the 1830s and 1840s – even if this meant participating in vigilante violence and the predominant male subcultures – and framed the structure. Finally, these groups, along with still later newcomers arriving directly from towns and cities in the East, employed a regional version of the cultural system of gentility to demarcate and define class lines, and provided the finishing touches. At each stage, these groups grafted their predominant values to this social and cultural work-in-progress. Members of “good society” provided the moral imperatives of evangelical Christianity. The boosters fused individual self-interest to collective action and helped construct community. Those who cultivated the male subcultures in the 1840s stifled social instability and a tendency to violence with the glue of fraternity and solidarity. Finally, gentility provided a coherent style and code of behavior which clarified group identity.

Each of these contributions were made in the course of social experiences within specific social contexts. Initially, during the nascent period of urban development across the upper Mississippi river valley, pioneer villages and towns were but distant outposts of American society in the East. The early settlers from “good society” there, isolated from their home cultures and societies, shared a common frontier culture – fragmented, disorderly, and highly mobile in character – with the indigenous peoples and the French, French-Canadian, and mixed-blood residents of the region. Through accommodations and compromises, they were able, at least for a while, to coexist amid an ever-shifting geopolitical context across Illinois and Iowa. The increasing immigration of Americans after 1815, however, quickly shifted the forces of accommodation in their favor. Demographic power combined with more aggressive governmental policy to remove the Indians, to provide the framework in which settlers sought to recreate the society and cultures from which they had come across the region. In doing so, they developed strategies and established social outposts which would provide a template for both subsequent American and Native-American interactions and frontier social development in the trans-Mississippi West.

Initially, in the late 1810s and early 1820s, broad spaces and insufficient transportation isolated the mix of adventurers, entrepreneurs, and settlers at frontier outposts across the region from the main currents of American life. As individuals, groups, and then waves of settlers swept across whole counties claiming land and filling up towns in a few years, they quickly transmitted the mores, values, and behavioral traits of various regional cultures in the East into the valley. In some towns, this cultural transference took place through the collective logic of extensive family networks, operating as migration systems. Some of these families had connections with the French families from St. Louis, but most of them came from the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64092-3 - Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West

Timothy R. Mahoney

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Provincial lives*

East, with the intent of transferring their predominantly rural or village values of “good” society and culture to the West.

As the broad migration streams building across the region encountered a developing regional marketplace operating through the dynamics of a nascent urban system, however, more individuals broke free from rural, family-based migration chains, and migrated within more diverse mixed streams of people directly to and among towns and cities across the region. Within this interurban “entrepreneurial” migration system, men, seeking short-term opportunities or making a tour of the country, were a significant majority.⁴ At mining camps, steamboat ports, wood stations, and small villages along the river in the 1820s and 1830s, a predominantly male “proletariat” clustered to compete for local trade or resources, and to gain enough wealth to move on. Though usually ignored in the urban history of the West, these young men from diverse origins pushed the indigenous peoples aside and, amid danger and social disorder, laid the foundations of regional urban society. Common economic goals structured rudimentary cooperative networks. The need for common defense, whether against Native Americans or, a decade later, gangs, desperadoes, or Mormons, provided a further sense of commonality. Yet given the mixed society, in terms of both socioeconomic status and regional origins, in which individuals and groups with different values and attitudes routinely clashed, a fragile social order was forged mostly by cultivating male subcultures. Within these male subcultures, individuals eased competitive pressures and the tendency toward violence through collective modes of behavior and practices which employed sarcasm, dissimulation, and indirection to cultivate solidarity within town. They also engaged in aggressive border management strategies which involved vigilante action against outsiders. In doing so, they established the rudimentary framework of the booster ethos and town society. This distinctive urban subculture which developed across the upper Mississippi urban frontier would serve as a social and cultural framework in which those migrating further west “learned” how to construct urban society. Hence, the practices and behaviors within the urban male subcultures on the urban frontier were transferred into the even more discursive, predominantly male process of urban development which extended across the trans-Mississippi and Mountain West in the 1850s through 1870s and beyond.

It was out of and upon this roughly formed urban society, pieced together from persisters from two or three frontier subcultures, that subsequent settlers in the 1840s and 1850s would construct a more stratified, hierarchical, and institutional society more directly integrated with society in the East. Entrepreneurs, merchants, and professionals, whether immigrants or residents who rose up through local society, increasingly conflated their self-interest with that of the town. With the capital they acquired through surviving intense economic competition, successful merchants and entrepreneurs became boosters. To stabilize their social status, and also to avert violence and disorder, they even more aggressively directed the values of middle-class culture toward self-discipline and social control. In addition to transferring west the values and modes of behavior associated with evangelical Christianity, republican law and order, and market capitalism which they shared

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64092-3 - Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West

Timothy R. Mahoney

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

with other boosters and members of “good society,” they began to employ, amid the relatively classless and disorderly western society, the cultural system of “gentility.” They did this to secure their social position and social order in general through material display, mannered behavior, and moral admonition. Whether manifested by the establishment of genteel churches, institutions, associations, and clubs, or by delimiting and demarcating genteel sets, circles, or groups through material consumption and display, scripted behavior and etiquette, and intensified gender roles, gentility structured local society, reframed local politics, and firmly affixed public life to the booster ethos. In doing so, genteel people laid claim to elite status in local societies across the region. Securing their local social standing through persistence, economic achievement, and social differentiation, they began in the late 1840s and early 1850s to associate with others like them within the larger network of relations, or “trans-local communities” in regional society, and created a regional social group or class whose attitudes and actions transcended local concerns. The deepening of these interurban patterns or webs of social interaction set the framework for the development of a more integrated regional social process which, just before and after the Civil War, dramatically rearranged social power and altered the intraregional relationship among town societies.⁵

The members of these emerging urban middle-class enclaves played a central role in building a regional society across the upper Mississippi river valley and the Middle West. This made them, in the absence of a wealthy industrial or aristocratic elite, the brokers of regional society in the 1850s, and the conduits through which that system would be transferred further west in the 1860s and 1870s. In the towns of the Great West the middle class transferred a cultural and social system which middle-class people had only just formulated in the older towns across New York and Ohio and tested its ability to shape social order in the West (which they saw as western extensions of the “North”) and in the whole of the United States. Small enclaves of “middle-class” people, using the towns of early Middle West as testing grounds for a cultural system, thus made those towns, as one historian argues, the embodiment of republican ideology in the 1850s.⁶ If they could replace parochial localized versions of this social system with a more accessible generalized model, middle-class gentility could be transferred and reproduced endlessly from town to town no matter the local context. If this could be done, a new scale of social diffusion occurring at the national level would give the middle class broader hegemonic power and enable it to control and shape the mainstream of American society.

But no sooner had the middle-class elites of many towns and cities across the Middle West achieved social control, than new economic forces began to rearrange the structure of the regional system and undermine the power of those away from the center of regional economic–urban development.⁷ The economic geography of railroads reshaped the structure and dynamics of the regional economy. By generating external and scale economies, larger firms, centrally located, gained control of markets, triggering intensive centralization and metropolitan development. Across the hinterland new towns on railroad lines rearranged the urban network, while settlement shifted toward the interior and away from the rivers. Unilateral and depen-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64092-3 - Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West

Timothy R. Mahoney

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Provincial lives*

dent city–hinterland interactions replaced egalitarian ones. The rise of the metropolis thus reordered and integrated social power across the system and elevated metropolitan society into the arbitrator of regional life and local societies across the system.

This process of regional integration lacked the power, however, to integrate and align all reality in its path according to its dynamics and directives. Divergent local and regional events and processes, and regressive or counteracting trends, evolved apace with or flowed out of the systemic forces of integration and development. In the interstices of the system, contrary tendencies manifested in failure, displacement, disintegration, enervation, decline, or stagnation are as much a part of the story of regional social systemic development as centralization and social development. For example, while migration chains drew diverse people into a common process, such chains also served to reinforce diversity and loyalty to kin, ethnic, local, or “tribal” identities. Nor could economic integration of diverse people into a regional market economy and the rise of an urban middle-class culture control the countervailing forces of individualism, capital mobility, economic specialization and differentiation, and social atomization. Likewise, a diminution accompanied by a resurgence of localism inevitably followed periods of regional integration. While centralization and systemic integration establish social control and homogenization, they also engender resentment and feelings of rejection that can lead to parochial or provincial retrenchment, antipathy, apathy, and exhaustion.

Just as systemic development drew everyone into larger networks, so too it shattered the cohesive worlds of local life in the mid-nineteenth century. Increasingly, life in a world of systems was lived not in overlapping and reinforcing local communities and social groups, but in a segmented web of different groups, defined locally, regionally, and nationally. Cultivating a sense of place became a matter of what aspect of one’s life one chose to emphasize: One lived no longer entirely in any one place, but in several places at once, each defined by different criteria. Local society, nested in regional and national societies which it interacted with in countless ways, and localism, based on common experiences, on the belief of local autonomy, and on the belief that local society mirrored the structure of the larger society, eroded, leaving in its wake scores of fractured communities seeking, in the shadow of the metropolis, to reformulate their self-images and find new ways to interact with the new systems that ran their lives. Thus no sooner does one find order and a coherent process of social structuration, than it begins to unravel and disintegrate into several divergent processes which divide, separate, and rearrange various subgroups and individuals with varying interests, loyalties, and agendas.

Though ultimately metropolitan society and the social forces of centralization, integration, and control did prevail and two different regional societies were able to evolve and develop, the contrary forces unleashed by the application of each cultural and social system or implementation of mercantile and then industrial capitalism undermined the strength and cohesiveness of that development. The result was that the first “Great West” in the antebellum Middle West was a multicentered, loosely

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64092-3 - Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West

Timothy R. Mahoney

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

defined social network, undermined by diversity, racked by internal tensions, and pulled apart by centrifugal tendencies. What might have been a distinctive social and cultural region was, as a result, weakened, leaving it vulnerable to new forces of systemic organization and development which swept across the region and the nation in the years just before, during, and after the Civil War.

The general story of the transformation of one regional social system which is supplanted by another is, therefore, but one line of narrative emphasis following one theme or story line among the many stories in which each entity or process exists and operates. Alternating selectively between the aggregate of development, transformation, and superimposition, and individual, group, and local stories of action, experience, and adjustment, each of which run according to their own dynamics and follow their own concerns and narrative plots, highlights the complexity of the development of a system. This account will, therefore, selectively focus on different parts of different case studies in which the data in each case study provides the deepest insight into social developments that many individuals and groups in many towns or cities in the system, at roughly the same time, were experiencing. Following apparent shifts in focus among the historical actors from regional to local concerns and back in response to the forces pulsing through the region, this history will also shift its focus periodically, from regional to local to individual analysis. Intensive experiential histories of particularly representative families or individuals, for whom extensive records and evidence have survived, will tie together local and regional, individual and group, in roughly a chronological framework, through the antebellum period. Through the perspective of selected individuals, based on contemporary letters or journals, memoirs or autobiographies, records, and genealogies, the shifting patterns of social change and the complex interplay between individual experience, social change, and community structure, and how each shaped or were shaped by the other, will be explored. Like weaving a tapestry, many individual narratives are taken up for a time, then set aside, only to be picked up at a later point. Each intertwines with broader aggregate analysis and generalization, to tell the story of the development of a distinctive and influential culture in American life at mid-century: that of provincial small-town elites in the Middle West between 1800 and 1860. It was a culture which would later send its children into the highest echelons of national power in the East and the heights of corporate hierarchy and culture in the metropolis, as well as across the trans-Mississippi West, to invade, settle, organize, and integrate a new region into the national system which their parents had played a large part in constructing.

Methodologically, the intellectual assumptions and concerns of this work continue where *River Towns in the Great West* left off. Empirically based structuralism argues that the nature and meaning of social, economic, political, or cultural behavior, action, order, and organization at any time are real and empirically observable and are imbedded in and shaped by the structures of slow-to-change economic, social, political or cultural systems, and that as these systems change, the nature and meaning of social relationships and order changes as well. This perspective, when

Provincial lives

employed in history, seeks through contextualization based in systems or network analysis to provide the broadest possible explanation of the actions, behavior, and development of any individual, group, town, or society on any level of activity. A structuralist argues, however, that even as these systems change, deeper cognitive and cultural unities persist which tie the experiences of people in different subsequent systems together and provide historical continuity. Whether examining the deep underlying characteristics that manifested themselves in human geographical patterns and shaped all behavior through several economic systems across the region, or exploring various aspects of the rise and fall of a system, and the similar experiences of individual towns, groups, or persons within those systems, analysis is always rooted in “harder empirical reality.”⁸ Though occasional forays which try to discern the social and cultural meaning of a discourse or language may seem sympathetic to the poststructuralist analysis of deconstruction, discourse remains fastened to actions and intentions which are rooted in the precise historical context of real people who lived their lives in an empirically comprehensible past.

My deeper intellectual and methodological purpose lies in asserting the helpful nature of this structuralist empirical approach in enabling social scientists to deal analytically with complex reality. A basic premise of systems analysis is that the distinctive course of events in any one place or unit are explained not by their similarity or representativeness among others like it during the same period, within the same or a similar system, but by the interaction between that place and the system in which it existed. One explains the course of local events not by articulating the stages of local development and showing that they follow an internal linear process of events found in other cases, but by showing how local and regional events intersected at that place and time, as demonstrated, whether directly or circumstantially by the concurrence of the two.⁹ Intellectually, such an approach is externalist and contextual, rather than internalist, a distinction made in debates on the formation of personality, the development of ideas in intellectual history, or historical explanation.¹⁰ From the systemic urban historical approach, each place is defined by an amalgamation of its internal characteristics and processes and outside forces that affect the town by varying degrees depending on the degree of interaction and the power of the outside force. Each place, like each person or case, is, therefore, both similar and typical, but nevertheless unique. Unique not just because the people were different, but because the timing, degree, and intensity of the interaction between that town or group and others, as well as the places it interacted with, are specific to that time and place. The ability to discern what is typical and what is unique about any place in its time and place context is one of the things historians contribute to social science and the central goal of local and regional history.

Such a systemic approach enhances an historian’s ability to move from local to regional or national analysis, or from individual to group to aggregate behavior. Individual cases can be more precisely understood, and their relationship to other cases clarified, by understanding how each was imbedded in its own web of interactions with the system and outside reality. Whether a case is representative or typical of a set of other places need concern historians less and less. By situating local or

Introduction

individual analysis within a densely woven analysis of the systemic context in which it exists, and delineating the way it interacted with other units and individuals within the system, one can explain what about that individual or society was unique and different, and also comparable to other cases. At the same time one can also do what historians are meant to do, explain events in a specific time and place context. Developing such densely woven explanations lies at the heart of the local history and should be the ambition, as well, of the urban history. Perhaps because the general patterns are understood, what makes places similar to each other interests fewer and fewer scholars. Accounts of general social processes or developments generally told quite well by case studies are rooted in the sampling assumptions and concerns for scientific objectivity and representativeness of a generation ago. Historians now seek to touch the reality of life and explore, discover, and explain how people experienced, responded to, and contributed to the forces of change, in all their nuance and complexity. If this is understood, as much as the sources permit, what makes that place representative of others, as well as unique, should be apparent, and any effective case study achieving this goal can serve as an example for historians of other places, towns, or cities.

The value and purpose of such a systemic approach are increasingly appreciated by urban and economic historians, for whom the dynamics of systems, whether of production, transport, communication, and marketing, are central concerns. Among social historians, however, efforts to understand how social systems were structured, operated, and changed, from both internal dynamics of human life and external forces like economic change, remain much less developed. The analysis of social systems continues primarily by intensive local case studies of one society at one town, community, or neighborhood.¹¹ Absorbing the dictums of the new local history, their value lies in the discerning the complexity and nuance of the local world they are able to discern and explain. The models employed reflect social complexity, describing grids, matrices, spheres, and architecture of society, often giving the reader a remarkable experiential sense of being alive at that time and in that place. Yet most microhistorical studies that explore the complexity of society and social change in one place leave it to the reader to connect these accounts to broader systemic or aggregate reality.¹² In such studies one encounters gender, class, social, and cultural systems and assumes somehow that they are “distributed,” “diffused,” “transferred,” “extended,” or “reproduced” from one place to another. It is often assumed that their character, structure, and ideology were internally generated, evolving from natural development or growth over time. External force arguments that view social change as caused by urbanization, industrialization, or immigration are generally stated but left unexamined. It is assumed that the character of the system is universal and the structures of local, regional, or national societies are parallel and analogous.

As a result individual cases are generally studied in isolation from each other. What is rarely addressed is how the development of a social system in one place interacts with the development of another social system in other locations at the same time. We know little how various local societies affect each other, how social

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64092-3 - Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West

Timothy R. Mahoney

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Provincial lives*

systems are transferred over time and across space, and whether such interactions, between different local societies at different phases of development as shaped by their interaction with the system, alters and changes the general social structure across the system as a whole. In short, we never imagine that among all the local stories of social change is a process of regional social development that parallels regional economic and urban system development, because our methods ignore the interactions between. In addition, we ignore those who lived and acted within this realm, outside the confines of local society to which they remain a transient, unconnected, historical blur. We do not even have a vocabulary to describe the myriad of interactions and relationships that make up the dynamics of this regional process of social development. This work explores this regional social realm between local and national society.¹³

Yet all these structuralist ambitions are focused primarily in telling a story involving thousands of people, in numerous towns and cities, across the middle of the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century. Though the construction of models and the analysis of group behavior with an eye toward their contribution to broader dynamics, patterns, or structures may seem to leave the people out, in fact developing a broader contextual understanding of the general patterns and dynamics of social change deepens one's sense of the story line of countless individuals' lives. So too, such dynamics, patterns, and trends remain the aggregate result of thousands of individual actions made in response to general developments. General forces do not have a life of their own and should not be personified with that power. For all the social-scientific analysis, the story remains a plot with a cast of thousands, most of whom have left only traces or clues of their actions and behavior in aggregate records serially compared or tracked, and fewer of whom have left diaries, notebooks, letters, account books, and memoirs.

Structuralist social-scientific methods use the same sources as those writing biographies or linear narratives. The rules of evidence are more strict: Social scientists demand that data correlate, often statistically, rather than merely associate, thus significantly narrowing the range between action and circumstance in providing circumstantial evidence and thus explaining an argument. Social scientists require several layers of evidence to make a case or demonstrate a point. They tend to argue that events are not as linear, further complexifying their reading of evidence. Nor do they allow the use of general evidence to construct composite portraits. For historians, the precise time and place context of events or activities matters. To a structuralist historian, and most social scientists, a steadfast rule is that a diary, letter, or account book must come from the exact place at the exact time being studied, or its value declines proportionally to its distance in time or place from the time and place of the study. Finally, social scientists eschew the imaginative realm of recreating plausible and factional episodes. If the record is silent, we can speculate over the silence, and present plausible circumstantial scenarios, but we cannot write a narrative or story in a way that gives the unaware reader the impression that this account is based on evidence.¹⁴ Yet, we still tell stories. This, then, is an analytic narrative –