

IS IT TIME TO GIVE UP ON REGIONAL HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES?

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I should say right upfront that my title is considerably more ambitious than the actual contents of the paper. I also need to admit that I do not have a clear answer to my query. Yet in raising such a strange question, I hope at least to provoke a small bit of critical reflection on a very big issue. I fully realize that my perspective is not likely to be terribly popular at this conference—it has not been terribly popular in many circles in my homeland! After all, at a time of the seeming disintegration of the nation-state, it seems somewhat perverse to deny the power of region. But let me try.

The recent revival of regional history in the United States has been quite dramatic. Perhaps nothing symbolizes this better than the fact that in the U.S.—where there has traditionally been such an extremely strong wall separating state and culture—the federal government has begun to officially sanction regional history. In one of its most important initiatives of the past few years, the National Endowment of the Humanities has begun to pour millions of dollars into ten regional history centers. As NEH chairman William Ferris, himself a prominent southern regionalist, says, they will ‘tap the energy and enthusiasm of people through what Eudora Welty calls «a sense of place.» By exploring regions that have shaped us, we discover American culture.’ (Ferris, 1999; see also www.neh.gov/news/archive/19991202b.html)

Now I do not necessarily think that these regional centers will prove harmful. Indeed,

insofar as they help bring academic history closer to the public—and public concerns closer to scholars—they can only help enrich our study of the past. But I do think that such a strong emphasis on region is perhaps more trendy, and politically savvy, than intellectually wise and challenging. I hope to show this through a case study of the region whose history has become most visible both within universities and the wider culture in the last twenty years—the American West.

For it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that there has been a revolution in the American West. Until recently, few American historians took notice of western U.S. history. When they did, it was to proclaim the field's death. In 1984 James Henretta commented that 'the subject of western expansion . . . no longer engages the attention of many, perhaps most, historians of the United States.' Noting a 'steady decline in courses,' Henretta wrote that 'few of the leading members of our profession have achieved their scholarly reputations in this field' (Quoted in Limerick 1987: 20).

All this has changed. With the rise of the 'New Western History' the field has become an important site of intellectual vitality. Books in western U.S. history have won major prizes, and university presses often no longer regard western titles as a liability. And the leading New Western historians--William Cronon, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and Donald Worster (see especially Limerick 1987, Worster 1985, Cronon 1991, White 1991a)--are among the outstanding American historians of our time.

Three contributions of the New Western History stand out. First, to a greater extent than before, it has revealed the diversity, particularly in terms of race, of the people of the American West. Second, through exploring the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world, western environmental historians have decisively broadened our understanding of the scope of history itself. Finally, New Western historians have shown American historians the potential for de-easternizing U.S. history. There is enormous value in taking seriously a region continuously scorned.

The revolution's achievements, however, have not come without serious analytical costs--costs that have gone largely unaccounted while the New Western historians have been busy defending themselves, often against a right wing and an older generation (Nash 1993). Yet a serious examination of the way in which the most prominent New Western historians have re-created 'The West' reveals that a renewed 'western history' may be increasingly unviable.

For as the work of Limerick, Worster, Cronon, and White illustrates, the development of the New Western History has depended upon the formulation of a 'West' that has consistent, often ahistorical, and indeed exceptional characteristics. The specific focus of this essay is on the way that the New Western historians have insisted that 'The West' has been almost exclusively liberal. Here, I mean liberal largely in the sense of classical political economy: market-oriented, property-obsessed, avarice-driven, radically individualist, and monolithically capitalist (see also Robbins 1994). 'Western history' has, then, become primarily a way of elaborating upon this special privileged quality, along with several others such as unique racial diversity and environmental destruction.

In creating a 'West' with such essentialist characteristics, however, the New Western historians have helped to freeze out of western history far too large a portion of human experience. Most critically, the New Western historians have contributed substantially to the field's evasion of the messy realm of the political. As Richard L. McCormick notes, 'political action is open-ended and unpredictable. Consequences are often unexpected, outcomes surprising.' (McCormick 1986: 355). As I will show, if the New Western historians actually wrestled fully with 'the autonomy and indeterminacy of politics,' abstract and timeless analyses such as the liberal West would be destabilized, and the 'agency and contingency' of the political would wreak havoc on neat and tidy conceptions of western history (Wahrman 1995: 10, 9).

This essay explores these problems of liberalism, regionalism, and the evasion of politics primarily through an analysis of the work of the most prominent regional historian in America, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and in particular her book *Legacy of Conquest*. For those interested in my larger analysis of this issue, and the attention that I give to Donald Worster, William Cronon and

Richard White, see Johnston 1998.

If western history was by the mid-1980s a ghettoized subfield, it is principally the quality of the scholarship of Limerick, Worster, Cronon, and White that has revived it. Just as crucial, however, have been the daring ways these scholars have articulated their professionalizing project through the invocation of the grand entity, 'The West.' Limited academic claims about Portland, Oregon or Riverside, California could only go so far in claiming a significant audience. Instead, the only possible way to bring 'western history' into prominence was either to refute or to rework the previous grand narrative of western history, the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner (Turner 1994).

As Philip Deloria has pointed out, though, 'The problem was (and is) that the mythic-historical Turnerian narrative is so strong that it can only be displaced by a story line of equal power' (Deloria 1996: 364). In a sense, then, the demands of anti-Turnerian myth required the birth of a New West--in this case, a West of rampant liberalism that allowed for plenty of opportunity to moralize while creating a grand new narrative. Subject matter--'The West'--thus in crucial ways came to determine the content of the field--'western history.' Only with great difficulty could western historians step outside of the default settings imposed by 'The West.' Otherwise, the project of 'western history' would dissolve, and ghetto status might return.

This paper argues that if the New Western History continues to follow this trajectory, the field is likely again to go into intellectual decline. For no other field survives for long by letting its subject matter dictate content. When we do women's history, we do not already know that women are uniformly victims, or that they have a special culture, and then have 'women's history' revolve around those themes. At best, those are issues to investigate in a flexible manner. Similarly, 'labor history' does not (or at least no longer) revolve around the search for a class-conscious proletariat, nor 'urban history' around pre-conceived notions of cities, nor 'economic history' around a list of the five most distinctive things about capitalism. Yet the New Western history has fallen into just such a trap.

How to get out? The conclusion to this essay outlines a 'new reorientation' of western

history, one with less emphasis on distinctive characteristics and exceptionalism; more flexible geographical categories; and greater attention to contingency, change over time, alternative social movements, and--most substantively--politics. In what form--indeed whether--'western history' then survives the inclusion of the political could be one of the most intriguing questions within the historical discipline during the early twenty-first century.

PATRICIA LIMERICK'S PALEO-LIBERALISM: THE PECULIARITIES OF THE WESTERNERS

A discussion of western history today must undoubtedly start with Patricia Nelson Limerick. More than any other writer, Limerick has given shape to the field in both academic and popular forums. She is the most outspoken advocate of, and tireless proselytizer for, a self-conscious movement known as 'the New Western History.' In graceful and accessible prose, she has consistently trumpeted the superior virtues of this 'new' history as compared to the baneful influences of the 'old.'

Limerick has been tremendously energetic in bringing new, particularly non-white, voices to bear on the story of what is now the West. Her focus on irony and paradox--and beyond that, on conquest, oppression, and environmental despoliation--has encouraged Americans to break out of a tendency to celebrate the westward movement. Limerick's plan for liberating the field from the supposed hegemony of the Turner thesis has, however, locked her into a regionalism that is far too self-limiting and, in fact, ultimately dangerous to 'western history' itself.

Legacy of Conquest, still the single most influential statement of the New Western History, is in fundamental ways an argument with Frederick Jackson Turner. Limerick's quarrel with Turner begins with her intriguing subtitle: The *Unbroken* Past of the American West. In that critical word 'unbroken' lies one of Limerick's chief arguments, that western history did not conclude where Turner's thesis ended it, with the closing of the frontier in 1890. For Limerick western history is allegedly not about The Frontier; it is the history of a *region*, what we today

consider the modern West. In arguing against Turner, Limerick defines a set of distinctive western characteristics that hold true throughout the region's history: the West's racial diversity, the impact and influence of conquest, the role of the federal government, the boom-and-bust nature of the economy, and the routine disillusionment for the region's settlers (Limerick 1985: 27-30).

The way Limerick goes about overturning the Turner thesis, however, creates profound analytical problems. First, her insistence that nineteenth-century patterns continue to dominate the twentieth-century West effectively denies any significant transformations or periodization within western history. Second, Limerick overemphasizes the uniqueness of the West and understates its subregional divisions. Third, although Limerick demystifies rugged individuals subduing savage peoples and wild places, her characterization of the West is as one-dimensional as Turner's. *Legacy* refuses to celebrate individualism, but the subject of the story remains the same--only in this case it is individualism run amok (Limerick 1991b: 44-45).

Most problematically, Limerick's focus on the theme of property allocation results in her characterizing the economy and political culture of the western United States as exclusively dominated by liberal capitalism. Her Euro-American westerners generally have only one thing on their mind while performing their acts of conquest--property and its attendant profits. What she later called 'the monomaniacal pursuit of profit' becomes pathological (Limerick 1993: 34). From gold miners to farmers, almost everyone in *Legacy* is obsessed with getting rich quick and is in the grip of speculative frenzy.

Although *Legacy* does contain substantial conflict, with rare exceptions the significant contests in the book are all either between Anglos and non-Anglos, or else mere matters of materialist interest-group politics, particularly involving natural resources. In creating an exceptionalist synthesis, Patricia Limerick has shaken hands with the Louis Hartz of *The Liberal Tradition in America*, creating a world where meaningful conflict between classes or between different economic and moral visions is almost inconceivable (Hartz 1955).

Not only is this view inaccurate, it systematically denies both the potential and the actual

efficacy of social and political movements that challenged the ideas and practices of capitalism. In this sense, then, although *Legacy of Conquest* contains *information* about political struggles, its overall framework represents an evasion of the political.

Overall, Limerick fails to take into account the genuine complexity and ambiguity of white Americans' conceptions of property. Specifically, she fails to acknowledge the many western challenges to economic liberalism even from within the 'conquering' society. Limerick's treatment of the major oppositional movement that arose within white society, agrarian radicalism, also demonstrates *Legacy's* all-encompassing liberal political economy. The Populists' essential motivation is obvious: their belief that they were not getting the economic rewards that they deserved. This was also their basic weakness, since as 'small businessmen, clinging to the status and dignity of those who worked for themselves and not for wages,' they could not be genuine radicals (Limerick 1987, 129). When prosperity returned, the farmers gave up their complaints and were content--at least until the next bust in the economic cycle. Absent from this explanation of Populism's fate is any concern for the massive power of corporate economic institutions, the structure of partisan conflict, and the undemocratic voting rules that played such a major role in the People's Party downfall in the Plains and throughout the West. Also gone is an attempt to understand the complete economic vision of agrarian radicalism, one highly ambivalent about modern corporate capitalism and insistent on the moral use of private property (Argersinger 1995, McMath 1993).

Limerick announces to the naive that the ubiquity of rural land speculation is shocking only 'if you are trying to hold on to the illusion that agriculture and commerce are significantly different ways of life' (Limerick 1987: 68). One does not have to agree with contemporary agrarian philosophers such as Wendell Berry, however, to realize that historically farming has not been solely about the market (Berry 1977). By contrast, John Mack Faragher's *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (1986) powerfully highlights the flaws of Limerick's political economy (see also Taylor 1996: 9-10).

Faragher's examination of the conquest of the Kickapoo, the patriarchal nature of agrarian

life, and the hegemonic function of pioneer mythologizing in the Sangamon region of Illinois certainly looks like New Western History. Yet Faragher's depiction of agricultural and communal practices in Sugar Creek simply does not square with Limerick's portrait of property-obsessed westerners. Life on the Illinois frontier was intensely communal, with farmers oriented above all to 'placing the security of their families first' (Faragher 1986: 99) Sugar Creek's rural residents survived their early years in Illinois only by extensive use of self-consciously democratic common lands and a vigorous network of borrowing goods and services. Accounts were kept and debts were reckoned, but interest never charged. Methods of planting 'clashed with the value of accumulation in capitalist culture.' (Faragher 1986: 98) In no way did speculation drive the agrarian economy, and community consistently triumphed over individualism (Faragher 187, 225, 132-135; also Faragher 1992).

The Legacy of Conquest is now a decade old, and Limerick has generously engaged her many critics. She remains firm, however, in her regionalist resolve, ever ready to provide a list of basically the same special western characteristics (Worster et al. 1989: 320-321, Limerick 1991c: 70-71, Limerick, 1996, 88-91). Probably Limerick's greatest stake in historiographical debates now rests on the issue of racial and ethnic diversity. Her principal idea is that the 'pattern of Western race relations has been considerably more complex than the pattern of race relations in the East,' providing the nation with a paradigm that goes well beyond the traditional Black-White model (Limerick 1996b: 93). On one level, this proposition is useful in that it does point toward the complexity of American race relations. Yet, as one non-academic reader quipped in response to this idea, 'Let him come to Brooklyn!' (Reilly 1992: 54).

More substantively, to turn diversity into an exceptional western quality, Limerick has to resort to a call for narrative unity that is untenable:

In the West, for instance, region took the disparate stories of Indian tribes, Hispanic villages, Anglo-American pioneer settlements, and Asian American immigrant communities and pulled them into *one story*, as these various groups interacted in the big process of the invasion and conquest of the region' (Limerick 1996b: 94, emphasis added; but see also Limerick 1997).

What, then, is the relationship between peoples of color and 'the West'? Limerick herself sensitively begins to explore this problem in a recent article on the relation between historians of the West and historians of Asian-Americans. She even starts by asking what western historians should do when so many Asian Americans live east of the Mississippi, and indeed the biggest American Chinatown is in New York. In response, though, Limerick calls only for 'place-centered history' while fully admitting that she must leave unanswered the crucial questions: 'how much do place and region really matter? . . . is region--and this unit, 'the American West'--a necessary category in taking place and setting seriously?' (Limerick 1995, 96, 98) Until she responds more effectively to this issue, Limerick leaves herself open to the charge that in her view of western history, peoples of color have, in the words of Robert Berkhofer, 'their appropriate(d) places according to the underlying model and its Great Story.' (Berkhofer 1995: 190. See also Milner 1996)

Moreover, in a recent forum in which Limerick took part, Edward Ayers has issued a convincing challenge to New Western-style regionalism that speaks quite loudly to any would-be regional historians. Ayers's subject is that most traditional and solid of all American regions, the South. Ayers rejects the common assumption that what is important about his home region is only, in David Potter's words, 'points where conditions of the Southern region differ from those of other regions'. By focusing on a distinctive regional culture, we run the risk of giving that culture an 'essence' that it does not have, exaggerating the difference between that culture and those of others, and 'totalizing' that culture, making 'specific features of a society's thought or practice not only its essence but also its totality.' He scorns the Southerners who, having 'something to sell traffic in difference, eagerly marketing any distinctiveness they can claim' (Ayers 1996: 65-66) Instead, Southerners

should take heart from a vision in which regional identity is continuously being replenished even as other forms, older forms, erode and mutate. *Anything that has happened and is happening* in this corner of the country rightfully belongs to the South's past, whether or not it seems to fit the template of an imagined Southern culture. *There is no essence to be denied, no central theme to violate, no role in*

the national drama to be betrayed (Ayers 1996: 82, emphasis added; Ayers 1994).

In the end, we must base a viable history of the West on Ayers's fluid, spacious—and *non-regional* ideas.

TOWARD A NEW RE-ORIENTATION OF THE HISTORY OF THE WEST

Increasingly, much of the best history of what is now the western United States is being written by scholars who are either consciously or consciously *not* regionalists. They do not identify with the field of western history, or if they do, have little if any interest in the frameworks of the New Western History.

With this in mind, I propose a new reorientation of the field of western history that will build upon the New Western History's many accomplishments by loosening-- even shattering--its current analytical boundaries (cf. Pomeroy 1955). As William Deverell points out, many (particularly younger) scholars already share a 'wariness and exasperation over supposed western distinctiveness and exceptionalism, a tendency that invites marginalization on all sorts of political, cultural, and academic fronts' (Deverell 1996: 33).

The first step, then, in a potential reorientation of western history is to devote far less effort to delineating the 'West' or 'the frontier.' This does not mean, however, that western history should abandon geography. One of western history's strengths has always been its taking to heart D.W. Meinig's reminder that 'history takes place' (Meinig 1978: 1205). Too often, however, western historians have made geography an end in itself rather than a supple tool of analysis (see Emmons 1994). Eric Van Young provides a useful perspective on these matters in an article asking 'Are Regions Good to Think?' His commonsense answer is 'Yes, but one needs to think about other things, too' (Van Young 1992: 1, 10) For Van Young regions are highly elusive, but they can be useful heuristic devices for studying *other* more significant issues. For instance, the most important regional quality of the West in the twentieth century has likely been

its *mythic* significance, rather than its status as a coherent section with any substantially distinct culture or social structure.

Much more promising than 'The West' as a category of analysis, therefore, are smaller, analytically contingent geographic spaces. Richard White's own definition of the West in *Misfortune* as a 'much-divided place' (White 1991a: 539) carries an implication, for example, that Dan Flores elaborates in his observation that 'in the case of the American West, no set of generalized definitions, regardless of how inclusive, accurately explains the loose cluster of subregions comprising the huge swath of continental topography and geography that is the Western United States' (Flores 1994: 4). Flores's own call for a 'bioregional history' as the best way to frame studies of the environment is another reminder that how historians conceptualize space should depend on why they want to think about it. Subjects such as ethnicity will require entirely different geographies, especially ones that are transnational.

The second, and probably more fundamental, step in this new reorientation is to create a more political approach to the history of the western United States. Fortunately, there has recently been a small sample of a cascade of works in political history, broadly defined, that have helped to establish a much more flexible, nuanced, and non-cumulative 'history of the West.'

The scholarship on nineteenth-century San Francisco alone yields a lengthy roster of excellent historical analyses that have no use for grand models of 'The West'. Mary Ryan's *Women in Public*, for example, begins with a concern to reenvision women's role in public life in the late nineteenth century (Ryan 1990). While Ryan includes San Francisco as one site of women's public activities, she freely traverses geographical boundaries to also consider New Orleans and New York. Through this approach Ryan develops her important argument that 'women politicians and the politics of gender were midwives to the birth of the welfare state and mass democracy'. Ryan is even more ambitious in her recent interpretation of the rise of contentious urban democracy in the same three cities, and region remains irrelevant to her grander concerns (Ryan 1997).

Ryan's work is just one example of scholarship that demonstrates Virginia Scharff's wise

observations about the need for a 'PostWestern history': 'To claim any object, idea, place, process, or people for the category «West» is to fix things, thoughts, social processes, and lives that are, historically, only contingently, contradictorily, and discontinuously Western' (Scharff 1994: 19; for the idea of the 'postwestern,' see also Etulain 1996, Knobloch 1996: xix, and Klein 1997: 272ff.).

The wide variety of approaches to politics in the work of non-western historians of the West should encourage a final return to the question of *why* we see such an evasion of politics in the New Western History. Perhaps, it is simply because the entire profession has neglected this field. Such a response, however, does not recognize that the last decade has witnessed a significant transformation and broadening of the discipline of political history (Leff 1995) and that plenty of western political history *is* being written. (Brown 1991 and Malone and Peterson 1994).

At the heart of the problem is a much larger concern within the humanities and social sciences. As the Brazilian social theorist Roberto Unger argues, in his daringly original trilogy *Politics: A Work in Constructive Social Theory*, scholars of left, right, and center are in thrall to a 'false necessitarianism' (Unger 1987b). Far too many take the institutions of market and state as invariable and monolithic entities. Modernity therefore becomes naturalized; what Unger terms the 'transformative resistance' of ordinary people disappears (Unger 1987a: 11).

By emphasizing the monolithic power of economic individualism within the region, the New Western historians have created a historical world that denies the very choices that they so rightfully emphasize as the purpose of history to explore. If capitalism is as octopus-like in its hold on the West and America as at least Limerick and her comrades argue, if such an arid liberalism indeed has carried all before it, then we end up having no substantive alternatives, no real moral or political choices.

Perhaps this is why the New Western historians have so often fallen into the role of debunkers. They simultaneously live off the cultural capital of, and attempt to destroy, the myths of pioneers, John Wayne, and Ronald Reagan (sometimes even the Sierra Club) while using the voice of irony. Richard White, acknowledging the predominance of this trope in the writings of the New Western historians, realizes that irony 'doesn't stir people's souls' (White 1991b: 34) Patricia Limerick has recognized the 'trivializing' nature of ironic historical discourse, arguing that western history must move on to a full tragic sense (Limerick 1993: 37).

The problem goes far beyond what White and Limerick have identified, however, for the ironic mode itself tends towards an evasion of the political. As Hayden White has written, 'Irony would appear to be transideological. . . . But, as the basis of a world view, Irony tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions. In its apprehension of the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition, it tends to engender belief in the 'madness' of civilization itself' (White 1973: 38). *That* is the ultimate cost of the turn to regional history.

Largely due to the tremendous intellectual achievements of Limerick, Worster, Cronon, and White, never again will anyone state that western history is 'The Worst Scholarship in America' (cited in Bogue 1996: 13). Indeed, if New Western historians can continue to create original and compelling scholarship, *and* if they manage to link up their ideas to the western identities that still do play some role among American publics we should only cheer them on. I believe, though, that regional identities are becoming increasingly attenuated. Much more likely is a 'postwestern' future. As Kerwin Klein speculates:

many historians and their subjects find little value in imagining some western essence in their lives. From bicoastal Asian-American artists to Compton rappers I can imagine an entire sweep of 'westerners' who do not partake of a 'western' regional consciousness.... Postwestern here might suggest the end of western history as a necessary category of inclusion for all those stories told west of the Mississippi (Klein 1996: 213).

To be morally and philosophically viable, a field of history needs a burden. ‘The’ South at least used to have a burden--most fundamentally the legacy of slavery and the Civil War (Woodward 1993). Yet now race relations in the whole of the United States have been ‘southernized,’ and we have witnessed in the last generation ‘The End of the South as an American Problem’ (Egerton 1974, Egerton 1995) Similarly, no matter how distinctive the West may in various ways be, it simply does not have a central burden to keep it at the forefront of public dialogue.¹

Limerick and her colleagues have spoken most eloquently about these issues as ‘western historians.’ To continue most fully to engage us, my sense is that they will do better to speak as Americans. And what most fundamentally unites us is that, even if in so many crucial ways only tenuously so, we still live in a democratic country. Our most pressing responsibility as citizen-historians then becomes continuously opening up the past in order to explore the hope that is embedded in history (Lasch 1991). As Herbert Gutman insisted, ‘The central value of historical understanding is that it transforms historical givens into historical contingencies’ (Gutman 1983: 203). In the end, we will evaluate the legacy of the New Western History—and, by extension, all of regional history in the United States--by how well it contributes to this democratic project.

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¹ In this western history is different from the topical subfields that I think should generally take priority over it, ranging from labor history to urban history, from women's history to environmental history. Each of these subdisciplines has a constituency to which it has an inherent political relation--even if that constituency is the earth, or 'nature.'