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1996

# All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions

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## Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L., Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf. *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996.

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Rethinking  
American  
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*Stephen Nissenbaum*

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The Johns Hopkins University Press  
*Baltimore and London*

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# Introduction

*Edward L. Ayers  
and Peter S. Onuf*

Where do American ideas about regions and regional identity come from? This is a question we rarely ask ourselves, because the answer seems so obvious. Regions with distinctive climates, geographies, cultures, and histories are simply "there"; they provide the framework for understanding who we are, what has happened to us, and what we can look forward to. Patriotic rhetoric and song invoke distinctive landscapes "from sea to shining sea," embracing and transcending regional diversity. Maps of the United States, cartographic icons of nationhood, draw our attention outward, across the continent, away from the centers of population and power and toward the different places we all come from. Thinking ourselves across space, we think ourselves backward in time, imaginatively returning to particular places in an idealized past. American geography thus recapitulates American history; history is immanent in the distinctive character and culture of the nation's diverse regions. This dialectic of space and time, mobility and nostalgia, has shaped our understanding of the role of regions in American history.

Historians and cultural geographers have a vested interest in exaggerating popular ignorance, and their own importance. In their efforts to reconstruct the past or to illuminate the past's continuing presence in our culture, these scholars take their stand against the homogenizing, ultimately obliterating impact of modernity on his-

## 2 • Introduction

torical memory. But modern Americans do not lack a sense of history, historic places, or distinctive regions. What we lack is a sense of how regional identity shaped, and has been shaped by, national identity—of how we have spatialized time and historicized space.

This book explores the evolution of ideas about region in the United States from the country's founding to the present day. The individual chapters are essays, not comprehensive surveys of regional characteristics. The first chapter explores the political framework that virtually guaranteed that regions would come to play a key role in the political history of the federal republic, that regions would be pitted against one another in ways that would jeopardize the survival of the union. The other three essays are written with two sets of questions in mind: the concerns of particular parts of the country and the broader problems of understanding regions in general. Students of the American South tend to focus on topics different from those of interest to students of New England or the American West, but we believe that everyone can benefit from thinking about the language and assumptions we use to think about region in the first place.

There long has been in the United States a cyclical process of forgetfulness and rediscovery of the idea of region. In the twentieth century, for example, "regionalism" was vibrant in the 1930s but passé in the 1950s and 1960s. Since the 1970s there has been a spate of new studies of region, in many disciplines, regarding many different places. The resurgence of interest in and loyalty to region is reflected in the impassioned localism of environmentalism and historic preservation; the new regionalism appears, too, in the form of regional magazines and festivals, in the packaging of local particularities by tourist boards and chambers of commerce. In academic circles, the new regionalism has been manifested in a fascination with local history and in the proliferation of state humanities councils and regional studies centers. Regionalism grows, too, by default, as many seem to have lost faith in national innocence and the national state, have grown dubious of a transcendent national character and American exceptionalism. In an age of disillusionment with big structures and transhistorical dreams, many Americans have apparently decided that places closer to home deserve more of their loyalty.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the renaissance of regionalism and the ever-growing sophistication with which we can study and measure regional characteristics, many discussions of region, popular and academic, seem to revolve around an extraordinarily persistent set of assumptions. One assumption is that regional identity is at heart an inheritance from the past, a moral and intellectual "heritage" that, if it is to endure, must be preserved from the ravages of modern life. To many people, it appears that there was a time in the past when each region was most fully itself: the Old South, the Old West, pristine New England. Since then, we are told, there has been a relentless adulteration and watering down of these places by the forces of modern life.

Another assumption is that the North, South, and West naturally developed out of variations in the American landscape. Regional differences in people appear to be reflections of regional differences in land and climate. Americans tend to think in nature metaphors—cold, rocky New England creating cold, rocky New Englanders; hot and humid Dixie creating hot-tempered men and dewy women; the big skies and wide-open spaces of the West creating independent men and self-sufficient women. When people warn of the demise of regions they usually couch their warning in images of landscapes lost, of battlefields desecrated, of paradise paved. To lose distinctive features of the land is to lose the depth and salience of region, or so most of us assume.

Yet if Americans speak of region only to speak of loss, regions do not seem to be disappearing. Accents are not being scrubbed away by mass media. Historical memory has never been so lovingly cherished and burnished. Stereotypes, negative and positive, have not diminished. People carry in their heads quite powerful and uniform mental maps of the United States. Americans refuse to let regional identity die, because it offers something that appears to be hard to find in a mass society: a form of identity that promises to transcend ethnic boundaries, to unite people across generations. Yet the worry persists that mere desire might not be enough to keep regions alive, that our very level of self-consciousness is an indication of the death of real, natural regions.

This book is an exploration of these notions. We critically examine the language with which Americans talk about regions not be-

cause we want to destroy attachment to those places but because we want to be more honest with ourselves about the meanings we invest in them. Regions may be in danger not only from malls and cable television but also from attempts to freeze places in time or to define some particular component of a region as its essence, leading regionalists to despair when that essence seems to be disappearing. It is better, we think, to recognize that regions have *always* been complex and unstable constructions, generated by constantly evolving systems of government, economy, migration, event, and culture. Once we see that regions were never bounded and complete entities, we can see how it is that regions may survive far longer than people imagine.

∟ We are skeptical of those who want to lay claim to some kind of ownership of regional identity, to identify *their* "heritage" as the genuine one. We think it is important to see regions more expansively, to include more people as genuine participants in the creation of regional life. While regional identity can and often does involve an explicit or implicit critique of people elsewhere within the nation, especially those who live in the metropole, regional identity is usually more about belonging than it is about exclusion. People seem able to "become" Southerners or Westerners in a way they cannot become black or white, Italian or Puerto Rican. Cowboy hats and blue jeans are worn by both Mexican-Americans and Anglos; hunting and fishing appeal to both black and white Southerners; professional sports enable white-collar and working-class people across New England to identify with one another and with their region.

It may be useful to measure regional identity according to a set of distinctive attributes or attitudes—in vocabulary, say, or food preferences, or ideas about abortion or guns. Such studies in sociology and cultural geography have gone a long way toward showing the continuing vitality of regional differences. But they sometimes imply that history is a nonrenewable resource, a reservoir steadily drained of its content. Regional differences often appear as artifacts, holdovers, cultural lags waiting for the homogenizing effects of mass media and transportation to erase them. The authors of this book resist such assumptions; to us, it seems that history holds many more meanings than can be accounted for by any measur-

able characteristics of current residents of the region. History creates all sorts of latent meanings in a place, meanings that may not be visible at any given moment but that can quickly come to the surface as events change. Rather than a reservoir, stagnant and bounded, history is more like a complex system of underground rivers and springs, creating its own subterranean pressures.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, we would encourage readers to rethink the role of *business, commerce, and industry in regional histories*. Since at least the Civil War the market seems to have been the most corrosive and homogenizing force in America. People tend to think that the only places where difference survives are the places where the market has not performed its full work—on isolated islands, in mountain valleys, or on distant farmsteads. But just as markets played a key role in creating regions in the first place, production and exchange giving land and climate their first regional meanings, so they continue to make regions salient today. The economic limitations and possibilities of one era can be and often are quickly reversed in the next, a useless mountain becoming a mine, a useless mining town later becoming a ski resort. Some archaic institutions of the market have become widespread symbols of American regions. The old fishing village, the sign-covered general store, and the windblown gas station are among the most common symbols of New England, the South, and the West, respectively, testimony to the power of the market in earlier versions of those regions. Coal mines, ghost towns, and bed-and-breakfast inns have not always been around, but they have become icons of particular American places. Stock-car tracks, gambling casinos, and Italian pizzerias, all market-driven products of the twentieth century, are becoming regional artifacts today even though they seem to violate the “traditional” canons of esthetics and authenticity so cherished by regionalists.

The authors of this book do not see regions as areas filled with a certain kind of cultural ether, but rather as places where discrete, though related, structures intersect and interact in particular patterns. The region *is* climate and land; it *is* a particular set of relations between various ethnic groups; it *is* a relation to the federal government and economy; it *is* a set of shared cultural styles. But each of these elements, even the influence of land and climate,

## 6 • Introduction

is constantly changing. Accordingly, their relationships with one another also are constantly changing. The result of these changing relationships is regional history. Present-day Southerners, Westerners, and New Englanders, we believe, can best connect with their pasts not so much through some unbroken and unsullied heritage but rather by, as it were, comparing notes, experiences, with those who came before, with those who lived on the same land when it was something different.

Historians of every period of American history have concerned themselves with region, though in widely varying ways. For historians of the twentieth century, region is often a matter of government policy, of voting patterns, of shifting economic fortunes. For historians of the nineteenth century, questions about region tend to be questions about national identity, about the relationships between slavery, frontiers, and industry. For historians of the eighteenth century, the Revolution and nation-building tend to be pre-occupying problems. For historians of the seventeenth century, questions of origins, of the migration and evolution of culture, are the major concern. While the essays in this book cut across all these eras, it might be useful to take our bearings in the earliest periods first.

Divergent approaches to early American history, one focusing on colonial beginnings, the other offering fresh perspectives on nation-building and national identity, have brought the problem of region to the historiographical fore. Colonial historians have given the new nation multiple pasts, grounded in the cultures and experiences of diverse settlement areas; meanwhile, Revolutionary historians have sought to show how colonists with such a wide array of local interests and loyalties could come to discover a common, national identity as "Americans." Thanks to these scholars, we have a much better understanding of the genealogy of regions and regional identities as well as of the Revolutionary origins of nationhood and national identity. But we have yet to bring these literatures together in a completely satisfying fashion, notwithstanding a recent flurry of ambitious and impressive efforts at synthesis.<sup>3</sup> Looking forward, the Revolutionary generation confronted the problem of integrating localities and regions in effective union;



modern scholars look backward and seek to balance the claims of the little communities that constituted colonial America and of the new national community the Americans invented.

Colonial historians emphasize the social and cultural adaptations of European settlers to New World conditions. Working in a transatlantic, early modern European historiographical framework, they have shifted attention away from independence and nation-making and toward the founding of colonial societies. By providing authoritative expositions of the spread of settlement and culture patterns from diverse regional "hearths," these writers have both Europeanized and regionalized the story of American beginnings.<sup>4</sup> In their work, "Europe" itself has dissolved into a patchwork of local regions, still only loosely organized around and subject to emerging central governments or metropolitan economies. The colonialists' emphasis on distinctive colonial origins and adaptations legitimates and reinvigorates the classic dichotomies—setting Massachusetts Bay against Virginia, New England against the Chesapeake, North against South—that have structured popular as well as scholarly understanding of national history. The irresistible conclusion is that regional identities antedate the new nation's founding and therefore were as much a given for the founders as they are for us today.

Revolutionary historians, focusing on political ideology and popular mobilization, give us a radically different account of the new nation's beginnings.<sup>5</sup> Seeking to explain how so many Americans could bring themselves to declare their independence, these historians invoked a much more malleable and manipulable notion of "culture" (as discourse or ideology) than have their colonialist colleagues, who were more impressed with deep structures and durable patterns. The ideological historians have devoted much of their energy to criticizing one another for exaggerating the classical republican or liberal sources and character of Revolutionary political thought. While this great historiographical controversy has complicated, confused, and conflated the original positions of its protagonists, its net effect has been to widen the gap between colonial and national history. Thus, where colonial historiography gave an authoritative pedigree to regional difference and the persistence of local identities, Revolutionary historians underscored the novelty

of American republicanism (whatever its ideological sources) and the inventiveness of the founders in conceiving and constructing a new national politics.

In the traditional narrative of American history, independence was the logical outcome of colonial history, the culmination of an extended apprenticeship in self-government. In the wake of the new historiography of colonial and Revolutionary America, the story no longer seems so straightforward. Where did American nationhood come from, if its seeds were not planted with the first settlements? And what does the history of nation-making have to do with the lives of particular people whose interests and identities were so closely tied to the histories of distinctive local communities?

The Revolution had a profound impact on local and regional identities in the British American colonies. A new nationality was not simply superimposed on older, enduring communal loyalties. To the contrary, independence brought questions of loyalty and allegiance to new levels of consciousness and contentiousness, encouraging Americans to redefine their rights and interests as citizens of local communities, states, and the union as a whole. Traditional ways of acting and thinking could provide only limited guidance as Revolutionaries constructed new collective identities and projected them into new and unfamiliar contexts. Interstate conflict precipitated new concepts of statehood. In similar fashion, the development of regional consciousness was predicated on awareness of *other* regions in a competitive political context.

We do not question the persistence of regionally specific social and cultural patterns across the Revolutionary period and throughout American history. But the key issue for students of regionalism is to explain why some cultural distinctions come to matter, while so many do not, in the construction of collective identities. Persistent folkways might continue to define the texture of daily life for most Americans, but a consciousness of difference would give them new value and significance. Regional idiosyncrasies would only become conspicuous within a national framework as they rose to the level of self-conscious reflection and manipulation.

Regions defined one another in a nation of regions. This process

of reciprocal definition did not inexorably lead to conflict, disunion, and war. Advocates of regional interests in the new federal republic did not conceive of themselves as secret separatists or conditional unionists. From the Revolutionaries' perspective, local loyalties constituted the threshold of an enlightened patriotism that ultimately embraced all freedom-loving Americans across the continent. American nationalism was not predicated on suppressing and supplanting these multiple, overlapping loyalties, but rather on creating a complex constitutional regime that would secure the equal rights of localities as well as of individuals. Localists and sectionalists could thus portray themselves as patriotic Americans, while impugning the patriotism of politicians from *other* sections who threatened their vital interests and therefore the integrity of the union itself.

Scholars may define the boundaries of regional cultures with some degree of precision. In doing so, they have the advantage over their subjects, whose sense of where they were situated—with respect to other “peoples” in other “regions”—was subject to constant redefinition. The great sectional crisis leading to the Civil War has made “North” and “South” seem like timeless entities, distinctive regions that long antedated the crisis itself. Contemporaries, however, had difficulty figuring out where one section began and the other ended, even after the Confederate states seceded. This indeterminacy of regional identities was, of course, much more pronounced in previous decades, when other, equally ill-defined regions, most notably the trans-Appalachian “West,” jockeyed for relative advantage in the national political arena. In other words, *regionalism*, a sense of common interest and identity across an extended, if indeterminate, space, was a function of unpredictably changing circumstances and bears only a contingent relationship to the *regions* that scholars construct in order to organize and interpret a vast universe of historical data.

To think historically about regionalism, we have to explore this relationship between the “imagined communities” that ideologues conjured into existence and the complex social and cultural conditions they confronted.<sup>6</sup> Nationalists do not work on blank slates: they must reconcile, reorient, or replace preexisting loyalties. It took years of political education and military mobilization for the

American colonists to convince themselves that they constituted an independent "people" and that this new identity was compatible with diverse definitions of fundamental rights and vital interests. Local and regional differences were not submerged in nationhood, but as they were brought forward—into consciousness and into the process of nation-building—they were transformed.

A new history of regionalism in the United States might begin with the creation of the new nation, and only then look backward toward the first colonial settlements. Consciousness of difference, the identification of economic interests or of cultural patterns that could divide Americans along regional lines, depended on a common context that had not existed before the Revolutionary conflict. Nationalism came first and was the necessary precondition for the development of regional consciousness. Regionalism was itself compatible with, and expressive of, Americans' sense of their national identity.<sup>7</sup> As South Carolina novelist William Gilmore Simms wrote, "To be *national* in literature, one must needs be *sectional*."<sup>8</sup> The original federal union did not collapse because Americans lacked a sufficiently developed sense of national identity to resist the seductive charms of sectionalist appeals. To the contrary, it was the precocious development of a collective, national identity during the protracted Revolutionary crisis that constituted the essential precondition for regional consciousness and the ultimate emergence of claims to new nationhood in the fire-eating South.

The history of American regional identities cannot be extricated from the development of American nationalism. Most Americans through most of their history would deny that there is any tension, much less fundamental incompatibility, between these collective identities or that they should be distinguished from one another in the first place. To understand how this could be so, we have to return to the time of the new nation's founding. The intention here is not to call the success of the founders into question (though of course the Civil War does so) but rather to explore the ways in which Americans imagined themselves to be a people and how these ideas were shaped by the vast spaces of the extended republic. The new federal regime yoked regional consciousness to national identity. From its founding, the new nation was a nation of regions.