
American History through a Midwestern Lens

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Günther Chaloupek and I share two important things in common. We both have published in the field of Austrian economic history and we both have important ties to the American Midwest. In the 1970-71 academic year, Günther earned an M.A. in Economics at the University of Kansas. I was born and raised in a small town in Illinois and moved to Minnesota in 1990.

In between I spent almost 30 years on the east coast pursuing schooling, my career, and raising a family. In 2003, after thirteen years of living in Minnesota, I suddenly felt myself to be a “born-again” Midwesterner and began pursuing my current passion—studying the history of the region I call home. Whether by nature or because of his student days in Kansas, Günther embodies a number of Midwestern traits I admire. He is a high achieving scholar and a strong leader of those who strive to make the world a better place, yet he remains thoroughly humble and without pretention. I am delighted to be among those contributing to this *Festschrift* in honor of him and his extraordinary accomplishments.

For some time the Midwest has been off the radar of most foreigners and even many Americans who regard it as “flyover” territory compared to what lies along the coasts—the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Gulf. The same holds true for most American historians. The Midwest is a common site for their research projects, but unlike the South, the West, and colonial New England, it has little standing within the historical profession as a distinct field of study with its own intellectual coherence, historiography, course offerings, professional society, and scholarly journal. Like a growing number of scholars, I believe that the Midwest’s history as a region deserves wider attention. Though difficult to define and with an identity that is only 100 years old, the territory of today’s Midwest played a central role in the history of North America long before and after European contact, and still does today. What do we learn by viewing the story of America’s past through a Midwestern lens? In what sense is much of American history really the story of its Midwestern heartland? For the purposes of my paper, I have adopted a “big tent” approach in defining the Midwest as constituting all or parts of the following states moving west to east: North Dakota,

South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio.¹

Mississippian Culture and Civilization, 1000-1400 CE

The story of human history before European contact in what is now the United States differs sharply from the popular notion that only scattered populations of hunters and gatherers lived there. Moreover, even knowledgeable observers ignore the central role of the region we now call the American Midwest in dispelling that myth.

To be sure, humans arrived in the heart of North America very recently (around 13,000 BCE) compared to their origins in Africa millions of years ago and their spread throughout most of the Eurasian landmass by 500,000 BCE. Similarly, civilizations flourished in the “New World” long after they arose in Eurasia and North Africa—the Near East (3500 BCE), Egypt (3100 BCE), India (2500 BCE), China (1500 BCE). The earliest were in Mesoamerica, mainly in the territory of present-day Mexico—the Olmec (1500 BCE) followed by the Maya (1000 BCE) and the Zapotec (500 BCE)—with the Aztec around Mexico City and the Inca of South America flourishing much later, around 1200 CE. Although not on the scale and complexity of contemporaries in Mesoamerica, the Ancient Pueblos of the American Southwest were also pursuing agriculture and building sizable villages with notable architectural structures in the cliffs of canyon walls, and crafting impressive pottery and baskets (Stuart, 2000).

Virtually unknown, however, even to Americans who are familiar with the Ancient Pueblos, are the achievements of the people of the Mississippian Culture that flourished in the watersheds of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, especially from 1000 CE to 1400 CE (Pauketat, 2009). The Mississippians lived in sizable urban concentrations situated around large burial mounds, participated in long distance trade, and excelled in pottery and basket making. The largest of these concentrations, Cahokia, was located across the Mississippi River from present-day St. Louis in an unusually fertile region called the “American Bottom.” The location provided a perfect setting for highly productive agriculture, an expanding population, and water transportation links for a flourishing trade network that stretched well west of the Mississippi River, north to the Great Lakes, south to the Gulf Coast, and east to the Appalachians. With a population around 1,000 in 1050 that grew rapidly to as many as 20,000 by 1350 CE, Cahokia was by far the largest city north of Mesoamerica until Philadelphia reached this level in the 1780s. Cahokia’s Monks Mound, the largest by far of mound-building structures, rivaled the largest structures built by the Mayans in Mesoamerica.

Colonialism in New France, 1673-1783

The story of colonialism in American history is also far more complex than the popular narrative of oppressive British imperial rule and the growing inevitability of colonial revolt. Missing from the narrative is the tragic fate of the American Indians under British colonial rule. Moreover, other colonial powers claimed territory: Spain in what is now the American Southwest, the Dutch Republic in New York and the Hudson Valley; and Russia along the coast of present-day Alaska. Directly relevant to understanding the American Revolution, however, is the story of colonialism in New France, a territory that covered a good portion of the present-day Midwest.

Looking at the American Revolution through the lens of New France yields important insights because British and French colonial policies differed in the lands each claimed. France's primary purpose was not settlement and the acquisition of land, but resource extraction—pursuing the fur trade around the Great Lakes region to satisfy the insatiable demand for beaver hats in Europe. French officials organized the fur trade in Montreal; the French Voyageurs carried furs out and manufactured goods in by canoe via the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River, while Indians provided expertise as trappers and local agents. Success in the fur trade required cooperation across Indian and French cultural lines. In this “middle ground,” French and Indians regularly intermarried within extensive kinship systems in which French, Indians, and *Metis* (mixed blood) all played major roles (White, 1991).

The British also pursued the fur trade in North America, although in the French era the trade flowed overwhelmingly in and out of Hudson Bay, well north of British America. In British America, the main non-religious motivation for colonization was not resource extraction, but permanent settlement. Settlement implied appropriating and developing the land according to the principles of English private property law. Conflict with the Indians was inevitable because their cultural practice was to develop a symbiotic relationship in using the land they inhabited, not owning it and treating it as a commodity (Cronon, 2003).

Had the French not been defeated in the Seven Year's War (1754-1763) in Europe (Britain and Prussia against France and Austria) and the French and Indian War in America (mainly France and the Indians against Britain), the very different patterns of European/Indian interactions in British America and New France might have persisted. In the wake of its defeat, however, France gave up its claims to all North American territory east of the Mississippi. This gave Britain free reign to tighten its hold on its American colonies and use them to help recoup the military costs incurred during the mid-eighteenth century wars. As a result, a full-scale revolt of the colonists in America became more likely (Skaggs and Nelson, 2001).

Forging the American Empire in the Great West, 1783-1861

Frederick Jackson Turner was the earliest and most prominent supporter of the view that what later became the Midwest fundamentally shaped American history in the 19th century. Born and raised in Wisconsin and Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Turner presented his thesis at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago in 1893 in a paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (Turner, 1920):

"This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast, it is the Great West."

The Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 laid out the fundamental policies that governed the Great West's settlement. The Ordinance of 1785 called for surveying the land into one square mile sections and selling it in subsections. The Ordinance of 1787 created the Northwest Territory, including the Great Lakes and all the land above the Ohio River east of the Mississippi River. It spelled out how new states would be formed and how the territory was to be governed until then. In addition, it laid out the natural rights of its citizens, prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude, and stated that the lands inhabited by the American Indians "shall never be taken from them without their consent."

Taken together, the two Ordinances, the Declaration of Independence (1776), and the U.S. Constitution (1787) provided the legal framework for fostering the growth of commercial capitalism and bourgeois culture throughout the western lands above the Ohio River (Cayton and Onuf, 1990). The transportation revolution of the early nineteenth century—first canals and then railroads—provided the technological impetus by encouraging urban settlements beyond the existing sites on the Great Lakes and navigable rivers. For most of the pre-Civil War era, though, river cities prevailed. Locked in competition and fueled by the "booster" mentality of bourgeois elites throughout the Great West, Cincinnati on the Ohio River remained the largest city, Saint Louis on the Mississippi River was just behind, with Chicago on Lake Michigan a distant third (Teaford, 1993).

Migrants from the upper Atlantic coast and immigrants mainly from the British Isles and German-speaking Europe fueled the westward expansion. God-fearing, Protestant, individualistic, self-improving male elites, especially from New England, fashioned the emerging bourgeois culture. They later saw their history as "one of rapid and inexorable progress: the arrival of hearty pioneers, the conquest of noble savages, the taming of the wilderness, the transformation of the landscape from forest to farms, the

growth of civilization in churches, schooling, and cities" (Cayton and Gray, 2001, p. 11).

Turner's view in 1893 that the Great West and not the Atlantic Coast held the key to understanding the first century of American history rings true. Yet it is incomplete because he wrote long before the emergence of "history from below" in the 1970s, which takes account of American Indians, slaves, white southerners, and women, all of whom now belong to the American national narrative (Bender, 2002). This body of revisionist work, too, demonstrates the Midwest's centrality in American history.

The Northwest Territory that captured the imagination of white settlers became the initial battleground for the bloody conquest of native peoples by the U.S. Government. The promise in the 1787 ordinance that the land occupied by the Indians would not be taken without their consent was an empty one. The purpose of the 1785 ordinance was to specify the mode of disposing of the western lands by dividing them into one square mile parcels that could be subdivided, bought, and sold under the laws of private property. By doing so, it openly challenged prevailing notions of land tenure on the French and Indian middle ground.

Not surprisingly, the Indian tribes put up fierce resistance as white settlers began moving into the future states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois (Skaggs and Nelson, 2001). A broad alliance of tribes soundly defeated U.S. forces in 1790 and humiliated them in 1791 in one of the worst defeats ever suffered by the U.S. military against native peoples. The U.S. military turned the tide in 1794 with a series of victories that pushed the Indians ever closer to the Mississippi River. The de facto ceding of land in post-war treaties became formalized with the passing of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 that was vigorously supported by President Andrew Jackson. Two years later, U.S. troops effectively removed any Indian threat to the lands above the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River by ending the Blackhawk War with the massacre of hundreds of unarmed Sauk and the removal of remaining survivors west across the Mississippi.

Although the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 banned slavery and indentured servitude in the Northwest Territory and the constitutions of the individual states eventually ratified the ban, forced labor persisted in the Old Northwest until the end of the Civil War. Many white southerners who had migrated from the Upland South into the Old Northwest bitterly opposed the ban, especially in Illinois where the resistance was particularly violent and the ratification vote was quite close (Simeone, 2000). Some southern migrants were able to institute indentured servitude contracts with African Americans as a way of sidestepping the state level bans on slavery once they were passed. Even in the Upper Mississippi states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, slavery persisted as federal officials, military officers, and vacationing southerners routinely brought slaves with them (Lehman,

2011). Missouri was not part of the Northwest Territory and entered the union in 1821 as a slave state according to the Missouri Compromise.

Women, too, began to step beyond their traditional roles in the domestic sphere to spearhead social movements promoting such causes as temperance and the abolition of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, moved with her parents from Connecticut to Cincinnati and eventually wrote her famous anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*, after visiting a plantation across the Ohio River in Kentucky.

American Capitalism and Social Reform in the Great West after 1865

By the 1820s, industrialization in New England (textiles) and the Mid-Atlantic region (diversified light manufacturing) was underway. Protected from competition by high transportation costs and fueled by highly productive agriculture in the Great West, some cities especially Cincinnati and Saint Louis, began industrializing by the 1840s (Meyer, 2003).

After the Civil War, industrialization in the Great West accelerated. Consistent with their respective resource endowments, the eastern regions of the Great West tended to specialize in heavy industry—iron, steel, chemicals—and light manufacturing, while the western regions of the Great West specialized in food processing (Page and Walker, 1991). Chicago became a gigantic rail hub that linked the two industrial regions together and a major producer of both types of goods in its own right (Cronon, 1991). Minneapolis, the self-proclaimed “flour milling capital of the world,” anchored agro-industrialization in the west, while Cleveland, the largest city in the heart of steel country, anchored heavy industry in the east.

As the “Second Industrial Revolution” unfolded in the Great West, its typically small-scale, family-owned capitalist enterprises gave way to large-scale enterprises that adopted the corporate legal form. The increased scale and scope of these firms, and the complexity of their operations led to a “managerial revolution” with layers of top and middle management increasingly standing between the owners (shareholders) of firms, and the skilled and unskilled workers on the production lines and shop floors (Chandler, 1977). Also, many nimble, small scale specialty firms in the Midwest also introduced new technologies and played crucial roles in bolstering American economic power, for example, in the furniture and machine tool industries. (Scranton, 1997).

The growth of corporate capitalism in industry, and waves of immigration significantly altered social class, ethnic, and gender relations after the Civil War (Cayton and Gray, 2001). Early on in the Great West, capitalists and high-level managers tended to be overwhelmingly white, Protestant, and

descended from English colonists. Workers and lower level managers tended to be white, Catholic, and descended from Irish, Scottish, and German immigrants and from those who migrated from the Upland South. Successive waves of new European immigrants from northern, southern, and eastern Europe swelled the ranks of the industrial working class. Women, too, entered the labor force in large numbers to fill low-paying, white-collar clerical, sales, and office jobs in large-scale manufacturing and retail firms.

The social and political reactions to these trends in late 19th century capitalism were strong on many fronts, especially in the Great West (Nye, 1959). The reactions coalesced into the Progressive Movement that enabled what is now the Midwest to lead the nation "in defining a new relationship between civic identity and state responsibility" (Cayton and Gray, 2001, p. 19). In the 1870s and 1880s, farmers fostered the Granger Movement and protested the fall in agricultural prices, rising farm foreclosures, and high interest rates. The trade union movement challenged large industrial firms on low wages, the deskilling of jobs, and poor working conditions. Eugene Debs, a labor leader born in Indiana, led the violent Pullman Strike of 1894 outside of Chicago; later founded the Socialist Party of America, which was unusually strong in the Midwest; and ran four times as its candidate for President of the United States, (Teaford, 1994).

Others in the Great West joined the political fray on several fronts. In Kansas, Carrie Nation became the best known and most radical activist in the temperance movement while Frances Willard led its national organization, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, from its national headquarters in suburban Chicago. Jane Addams led the settlement house movement for women with the creation of Hull House in Chicago in 1889. Willard and Addams were also active in the movement to give women the right to vote, which was especially strong in the more democratic Great West than in the east. Intellectuals, many of whom had spent considerable time in Europe studying the social reform movement there, played a central role as advocates of social reform in municipal and state government (Rodgers, 1998).

The Meteoric Rise of the Midwest, 1890-1915

Not long after the Superintendent of the U.S. Census Office officially announced "the closing of the frontier" in 1890 and no later than the entry of the United States into World War I in 1916, the territory of the Great West was often referred to as the Midwest or Middle West in the popular press. Surprisingly, the Middle West had appeared in print as a regional designation already in the 1830s. At that time, it was a north-south geographical construct referring to the states of Tennessee and Kentucky that

lay in the “middle” of the Great West between Ohio and Indiana in the old Northwest Territory and Alabama and Mississippi in the plantation South. (Shortridge, 1989).

With the westward movement of population, the cultural, social, political, and economic differences between the industrializing, capitalist North and the agricultural slave South hardened. The 1830s notion of a Middle West between these two very distinct regions fell away. By the 1890s the term Middle West had surfaced again in the popular press as a north-south construct. It referred then to the central plains states of Kansas and Nebraska, which lay below the Dakotas and above the Oklahoma Territory, as the home of rural values—self-reliance and independence; pragmatism and industriousness; idealism and humility (Shortridge, 1989).

By the early twentieth century, steady migration into the Great West that now stretched beyond the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, had left behind people with much in common. They shared similar values rooted largely in common European origins. They cultivated prosperous small family farms, and promoted thriving industry in small towns and large cities on land taken from the American Indians. They had limited experience with slave labor and fought the Civil War against the slaveholding South. They were well connected by an expansive railroad network centered on Chicago, which, by 1900, was by far the region’s largest city with a population of almost 1.7 million. It was arguably the most dynamic city in America as the site of the 1893 Columbian Exposition (World’s Fair) and the main locus of innovation in modern architecture and the use of public space (Teaford, 1991). Not surprisingly many viewed Chicago as the unofficial capital of the western lands in the “middle” of America, the Middle West, excluding, of course, the South. As a geographic term, the Middle West was now an east-west rather than a north-south construct (Shortridge, 1989).

How are we to understand this rather sudden rise of the Midwest? Almost 50 years ago, Leo Marx (1964) wrote about the ongoing psychic tension between Americans’ self-image as a people who live in a garden of purity, yet embrace high productivity, wealth, and industrial power. For the Midwest, the turn of the last century was a unique moment in the history of this psychic tension. Embodying at once the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian America and the Hamiltonian vision of an industrializing America, the Midwest seemed to stand on the middle ground between the heavily urbanized and industrial East and the relatively empty “Wild West” and clearly separate from the American South as a distinct geographic and cultural space. The Midwest soon reached the pinnacle of its importance in the United States as the harmonious embodiment of the pastoral ideal—“a haven between the corruption of urban civilization, and the dangerous, untamed wilderness” (Shortridge, 1989, pp. 27).

The Midwest under Pressure: Image and Reality, 1915-1940

As suddenly as it had risen to prominence after 1900, the image of the Midwest as the preeminent region in the United States began to erode during World War I and the decade of the 1920s. Despite its flagging image, the Midwest played a key role in American history throughout the interwar period, especially in the 1930s, when it served as a main theater for the Great Depression and the New Deal.

The image of the Midwest began to tarnish in the popular mind for several reasons. During World War I, isolationist sentiment prevailed because of the region's insular location well off the coasts and its large immigrant populations from Germany, the main Axis power, and Sweden, a neutral country (Billington, 1945). The end of the hostilities brought a precipitous drop in agricultural prices and farm incomes, and a rash of farm closures. In 1920 Sinclair Lewis published *Main Street*, a biting commentary on life in the small town Midwest (Shortridge, 1989). Having been raised in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, Lewis used the fictional small town of Gopher Prairie to parody the value placed on conformity, the sense of moral superiority, and the lack of enterprise for anything other than making money among those who grew up and lived in small Midwestern towns. The book was an instant success, especially among readers who saw it as a vehicle for reclaiming the east coast's primacy in the hierarchy of American regions. Ignoring Chicago and the other major cities of the industrial Midwest, they took great pleasure in seeing the Midwest as a rural backwater that one must leave to find culture and modernity.

In popular accounts of the 1930s, New York's "Wall Street" typically takes center stage as the prime actor in the story of the Great Depression. In many respects, though, "Main Street," that is, the Midwestern heartland of America, was on center stage. Vast stretches of the Midwest west of the Mississippi, suffered under the severe drought conditions that John Steinbeck memorialized in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. As the Dust Bowl deepened and commodity prices fell, farm incomes in the Midwest plummeted. The Midwest bore the brunt of the Great Depression because of the nature and sheer size of its industrial and agricultural sectors

Like the Great Depression itself, President Roosevelt's New Deal policy response, was, in many respects, decidedly Midwestern in its origins and character. A staggering number of legislative initiatives were introduced in the period 1933-1938: programs of agricultural support, public works projects and other programs for the unemployed, banking and financial market regulations, protection for workers and labor unions, and America's first-ever national-level social welfare and insurance program. Most of these initiatives had deep roots in the largely unrealized agendas of the Progressive Era in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that were pro-

moted by Midwestern reformers and intellectuals (Rodgers, 1998). In addition, many members of Roosevelt's "brain trust" were raised, educated, and/or active professionally in the Midwest when the Great Depression began (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_Trust).

The Midwest, 1940-2000: Caretaker of America's Pastoral Values and Bellwether of its Future

After World War II, the Midwest lost much of its vitality and identity in face of formidable economic, social, and cultural challenges. Yet the region still retained its role as the caretaker of America's pastoral values and may well be serving as the bellwether of America's future as it confronts globalization.

In part, economic forces were responsible for the loss of vitality. During much of the post-World War II period, the Midwest gave way to the "New" South, Western Europe, Japan, and some regions in the Third World as the new drivers of the American economy (Markusen, 1987). Industry languished and declined throughout the "Rust Belt" (Teaford, 1991; High, 2003). The agricultural sector, too, shrank in size and changed in character as the prototypical small Midwestern family farm gave way to larger corporate enterprises (Nelson, 1995). These major changes cut deeply into the traditional image of the Midwest as the breadbasket and industrial heartland of the United States.

The "Great Migration" of African Americans from the South to the North, especially after 1940, significantly challenged the white, European foundations of Midwestern identity (Cayton and Gray, 1991). Pushed out by racism and pulled in by jobs in the urban centers of the industrial heartland, African Americans found their new lives in the Midwest to be a mixed blessing (Berry, 2007). They faced significant racial and class barriers to upward mobility in the form of segregated housing and schools, and persistent discrimination in labor markets. In the wake of the riots in Chicago (1966) and Detroit (1967), the unfulfilled promise of new lives in the Midwest coupled with the New South's economic vibrancy led to the reverse migration of many African-Americans. Also in the 1970s, a new wave of international immigrants further challenged the foundations of Midwestern identity (Radzilowski, 2007). The initial wave came from Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, then from the Middle East and the countries of the former Soviet bloc. More recently, war, famine, and other disasters in sub-Saharan Africa have fueled significant immigration from Nigeria, Ethiopia, and especially Somalia to Midwestern cities, and even small towns and rural areas.

Perhaps the most important and least understood challenge to Midwest-

ern vitality and identity is the role of mass consumer culture. More than any other region, the Midwest has spawned the institutions of mass consumer culture in America and exported them to the rest of the world. It is very likely that the distribution of income and wealth was much more equal in the Midwest than in the East or the South, which would have provided fertile ground for mass production techniques and the institutions of mass consumer culture. Well before World War I, mass production developed in the beer brewing capitals of Milwaukee and St. Louis. The two largest mail order firms in the United States were located in Chicago and served consumers in small towns and rural areas. Mass retailing subsequently developed with the founding of large department stores in Chicago, Minneapolis, Detroit and other large cities.

By the 1920s, major advertising firms were conducting sophisticated marketing surveys on consumer buying habits in the small-town Midwest. Chain stores were competing aggressively against family-owned grocery stores, and discount "five and dime" variety stores were proliferating. After World War II, the first enclosed suburban shopping mall was built in the Midwest and others soon followed. A number of the largest international fast food chains (McDonald's and Dairy Queen) and major "big box" chains (Wal-Mart, Target, and K-Mart), had their start in the Midwest. Combined with the relative decline of agriculture and industry in the Midwest, these institutions of mass consumer culture over the long run seem to have sucked the life out of the rural areas, the small towns, and the small cities that lay at the heart of the Midwest's role as the embodiment of the pastoral ideal in America.

Yet in the first decade of the 21st century, there are indications that the Midwest is reviving. Hitching biotechnology to agriculture may put that sector on firmer footing and an upward trajectory (Longworth, 2008). Although major cities like Milwaukee, Saint Louis, Cleveland have lost traction in the last few decades, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Columbus, Indianapolis, Madison, and Ann Arbor are prospering as homes to major public research universities and the externalities they create. Some medium-size cities like Grand Rapids, Michigan are staking their economic future on medical infrastructure and technology, education, and a vibrant arts community. Many small towns are recovering through aggressive efforts at selling their Midwestern past through tourism.

This revival, still in an early stage, means that the Midwest may well be a bellwether for America's future. Having served as the preeminent region in America over a century ago, it lapsed into relative decline during the last half of the 20th century as other regions caught up. Midwesterners, both long-term and newly arrived residents, are marshaling their considerable strengths in carving out a largely non-industrial future of unknown shape. Globalization presents both major challenges, and vast opportunities for

imagining and fashioning the Midwest into a 21st century version of the pastoral ideal. Perhaps that agenda can anchor and serve as a model for the entire United States in helping it adapt and prosper as it heads into relative decline in face of the current global restructuring of economic and political power.

Note

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