Allan Megill

The needed centrality of regional history

Abstract

This paper suggests that in addition to the categories of national history and world history, we also need to think of regional history – of which there are two types, one that lies between local and national history and another that lies between national and world history. The period since the French Revolution has been pre-eminently the age of the nation-state, and the ideology of the nation-state emphasizes a singular national narrative, a homogeneous population, and clearly marked borders. But are these achievable in an age of global interconnection? The paper examines regional history, which emphasizes none of these things, by means of an analysis of the Chattanooga Regional History Museum, in Tennessee, USA. The paper suggests that historians should resist the temptation to convert regional history into national history; for whose central-subject narrative is to have priority, who will decide, and how? We should also remember that the idea of the ethnically homogeneous nation-state is a recent invention. These considerations invite us to rethink the contingent bases of the nation-state.

***

> Does the good historian not, at bottom, constantly *contradict*? (from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*)

Recent social, political, and economic developments have undermined a historiographical framework – a «grand» or at least a «master» narrative – that was once dominant among historians. This narrative told of a global conflict between two markedly divergent forms of political and social organization, one capitalist, the other communist, that (it was assumed) provided

the central theme for all modern history, and whose ultimate outcome was presumed to be some form of human liberation.[1] When I began my teaching career as an historian of modern Europe in the 1970s, the French Revolution was held to be the major defining event of modern world history and all subsequent political and social developments were seen as related to that revolution.[2] Moreover, the model of «the French Revolution and its consequences» was seen as fitting firmly within the framework of *national* history, dominant in the historical discipline from its beginnings in the time of Leopold von Ranke.

In the early 1990s, some suggested that the collapse of the Soviet system heralded the imminent triumph of liberal democracy over communism. This position was famously articulated by Francis Fukuyama (1989; 1992), who suggested that the world was witnessing «the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government». But «history» refused to follow the narrative that Fukuyama proposed. On the contrary, the receding of the «big» conflict between communism and liberal democracy was accompanied by an outbreak of «little» conflicts in various regions of the world, and these «little» conflicts have apparently now morphed into something larger. It is surely wrong to think that this larger conflict is the global «clash of civilizations» that Samuel Huntington (1993; 1996) has proposed. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the conflict is of more than merely local significance. A paradigm case was the first set of Yugoslavian Wars, of 1991-1995. The Bosnian War now seems the herald of a kind of ethnic and religious conflict that few would have predicted thirty or forty years ago. But even the Bosnian War is not quite the kind of phenomenon that appeared in the early years of the present century. The Bosnian War could be regarded as a civil war. But a civil war is a war fought within the territory of a nation-state. What we now see is a form of conflict that goes well beyond national boundaries.

1 Lyotard (1984) articulated this conception in lapidary form. See also Megill (2007: 188-208).

2 Note that by «world history» I mean any attempt to write the history of the human world as a whole. In some countries the term means, instead, the histories of all other countries. That is not the meaning intended here.

It is hardly novel to suggest that, in view of such developments as the retreat of the Cold War, the advance of economic globalization, the improvement of communication technologies, and the emergence of forms of conflict that leap across the boundaries of nation-states, there is a need to rethink some of the organizing categories of historical research. It is no accident that such terms as «world history,» «global history,» and «transnational history» have come into increasing circulation among historians. It is also less than surprising, although interestingly characteristic, that, as Chris Bayly (2006: 1442) observes, the differences between world, global, and transnational history «have never adequately been explained». There has also been a rise in the visibility of comparative history (see, e.g. Umbach 2005 and Penningroth 2007). Here one must add, though, that there is a sense in which all good history is comparative history. This is because the categories that historians deploy are – or at least ought to be – informed by their knowledge of other spatio-temporal-cultural realities than the particular reality or realities that is the object of attention in any particular work.

Nonetheless, in the present paper the focus of attention will be on another category – that of regional history. Regional history has been less discussed than the other genres mentioned. All these genres can be seen as responses to recent historical developments. Regional history, as a category of historical scholarship, is particularly interesting because of the capacity it has to work in a productive way against the categories of «national» and «world» history, both of which are closely related to the notion that there is ultimately a single, dominant process of human development at work in the world. Let me add, finally, that regional history has affinities with some other historical genres that can only be mentioned here, not discussed in detail, such as environmental history and ethnic history.

Defining regional history

What is regional history? Obviously, we need to come to an agreement as to what will be meant, here, by «regional history». The obvious way into a definition is via the term *region*. However, as one historian, Susan Armitage (2001: 32),

has noted, «*region* turns out to be one of those words whose meaning everyone knows until they actually have to define it». «Regional history» shares the same uncertainty. Intelligent discussion of the subject requires that we lessen the uncertainty, while also preserving some of the richness and suggestiveness of current usage. One way of defining regional history is differentially, in terms of the things that distinguish it from other genres of history. Another way of defining it is substantively, in the light of the characteristics of regions (whatever a «region» might be). In addition to the distinction between differential and substantive modes of definition, there is also a distinction to be made between defining a term by means of conceptual analysis and defining it by examining actual usage. All four (intertwined) ways of proceeding have something to offer us.

Looking at regional history differentially means viewing it in the light of the various other genres of history that are not regional history.[3] Regional history has a differential relation to three other genres: world (or «global») history, national history, and (perhaps not so clearly) local history. These genres can be put into a matrix in which local, nation-state, and world history offer, by way of contrast, a definition of regional history. This way of thinking about the definitions of locality, region, nation-state, and world actually makes sense etymologically, since to *define* something is to set its limits, its boundaries (Latin *finis* means «limit» or «boundary»). But regional history is also to be defined in terms of its own specific content, which, on the most obvious and superficial level, is established by the fact that regional history focuses on a «region».

In common usage, the word «region» has two apparently rather different meanings. On the one hand, «regional history» takes as its object a territory *within* a nation-state (we can call this form of regional history «regional history type 1»). For example, there are many books dealing with various regions of the United States, and there is a book series on «The Regional History of England». A similar situating of regional history

3 For purposes of the present discussion, I intend «genre» to be taken as a matter of (a) the type of *historical object*, (b) the particular *scale of attention*, and (c) the *historiographical approach* chosen by the historian, and not only to (d) the work's mode of literary presentation (although content and form are indeed interrelated).

within national history is to be found in the historiographies of many other countries. On the other hand, regional history also sometimes takes as its object a territory that goes *beyond* the territory of a single sovereign entity. Let us hold in abeyance, for the moment, the «larger» meaning of regional history (which in cases of ambiguity we can call «regional history type 2»), and look instead at the «smaller» meaning.

As suggested above, one way of looking at regional history is in differential terms. In its «smaller» meaning, regional history is situated between local history and national history. Viewed differentially, it is *not* national history and *not* local history. But notice how marginal and temporally restricted this definition is, for «national history» as we usually understand it goes back only to the period in which the nation-state in its modern form emerged – namely, to the period subsequent to the French Revolution, when national history emerged as the dominant genre of professional historical research (see especially Berger, Donovan, and Passmore 1999; Berger 2007; and European Science Foundation 2007). In other words, the upper boundary of what is currently the main conception of regional history – namely, a genre of history that deals with areas within a nation-state – did not fully exist before the early nineteenth century. This does not mean that regional history became possible only after the advent of national history – quite the contrary, as we shall see. It does mean that regional history so defined is situated within the framework of the post-French Revolution nation-state.

Political nationalism and the nation-state that political nationalists called for (and in part achieved) after 1789 were «modernist» in at least two ways that are relevant to the issue of the role and significance of regional history. First, the nation-state – perhaps it is better called the *nationalist* state – is «modernist» in the sense that it makes a claim, albeit an oddly paradoxical claim, to unity and universality. It does so by asserting, in spite of any internal divisions and in the face of an insistence that humanity as a whole is divided into different national groups, that the nation itself is a unified entity. Consequently, nationalist ideology proclaimed that all who wished to be considered part of the nation must give their greatest allegiance to it. Second, the nation-state, so considered, is modernist in the sense that it was not «always already» *there*, but needed to

be constructed. To be sure, the ideology of the nationalist state claimed that the nation has had a millennial existence, but we know from the «nationalization of the masses» (see, e.g. Mosse 1975) that occurred in Europe during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that the nation so understood was far more a construction than the natural product of a long history. On this theme there are classic works by Benedict Anderson (1991) and by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983).

A phenomenologist might say that the region (in the sense of a region *within* a nation-state) is more «immediate» or more «natural» than is the nation, for a region in this sense often has a geographical homogeneity that gives a common range of sensory life-experiences to its inhabitants – whether it be a matter of living by the sea, or in the mountains, or on a cold northern plain, or in other environments constituting a common matrix of experience and endurance. Nations are often too large to have this sort of commonality. Instead, nations tend to be tied together less by the experience of living within a geographical region of a particular type than by shared modes of communication and conceptualization. This insight underpinned Benedict Anderson's somewhat contested emphasis on the role played in the emergence of nationalism by printed books and by the technical development of printing, which made large-circulation newspapers possible. The region (in the type 1 sense) tends to be a matter of *place*. The nation, because it is usually of greater extension, tends rather to relate to a more abstract category, that of *space*. For example, Nazi ideologists, intent on expanding the German *Volk's* area of dominance, could appeal to the notion of *Lebensraum* (living space), which they saw as empty territory ready to be transformed by the Reich.

Anderson's emphasis on the role of long-distance communication in facilitating the construction of the nation points to the priority of (abstract) space over (specific) place in matters of nationality. However, it needs to be added that it is not simply a matter of regional place versus national space, but a question of primacy or priority. For the question needs to be asked, what makes an abstract space into something ready-to-be-national? The answer is that the nation is taken as having an abstract *spiritual* essence, which can become variously attached to an ambiguously bounded region, to a precisely

bounded territory, *and* to an abstract and unbounded space. The spirit of the nation has primacy over geography in all its incarnations, whereas the region in its «smaller» sense is first of all a matter of place (for an illuminating discussion of place, space and territory, see Maier 2007).

Regional history (type 1) is usually closer to its other defining limit, local history, than it is to national history. Indeed, local history and regional history are often grouped together under the common rubric «local and regional history». Note in addition that overlap between regional history and national history is also possible, as the well-known conceptualization of Germany in the period 1871-1914 as «a nation of *Heimats*» indicates (the German word *Heimat,* which is not easily translated, is perhaps best rendered as «home region») (see Confino 1997). But when it is a matter of clarifying our concepts, it is better to distinguish local history from regional history than to blur them together. An American historian, Joseph Amato (2002: 91), has suggested in *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History*, that «all history is local. Every place is a universe unto itself … the microcosm in which we learn and know all we will ever learn and know of fellow humans and the world at large». My proposal here, however, is that if there is to be any paradigmatic form of history at all, it ought to be not local history, nor national, world, or global history, but regional history.

«Local history» has been defined in ways that are sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, there is the conception of local history as involving a concern with the locality «for its own sake». This is the kind of local history pursued in tens of thousands of town, city, and county historical societies throughout the world, wherein much attention is paid to the particular virtues and uniqueness of the locality in question. In the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche identified this genre with «antiquarian» history, seeing it as being primarily concerned with «preserving» and «revering» the past (see Nietzsche 1983). While it can be argued that nationalism, too, has an antiquarian dimension, Nietzsche – quite rightly, I believe – regarded the homely, the circumscribed, and the local as the true root of the antiquarian impulse. On the other hand, there is a separate type of «local history» that uses social scientific methods in an attempt to understand broader social forces and that does

not value individual localities in the way that Nietzsche's antiquarian historian does; in American historiography, examples include Kenneth Lockridge's *A New England Town* (1970) and Robert Gross's *The Minutemen and their World* (1976). The first type of local history is particularizing and celebratory with respect to its object, whereas the second type tends to be generalizing and neutral. To be sure, such conceptual distinctions as this rarely fit individual cases perfectly, and so they must be used cautiously.

My concern here is not to impose a single definition on a term, «local history,» that has been employed with different resonances by different historians. I am concerned, rather, with how we can manage to think more clearly about regional history, and for this purpose it is illuminating to draw a contrast between regional history and the first, particularizing type of local history. This type of local history is often yoked together with regional history, as noted above: a Google search for «local and regional history» in August 2007 yielded 41,200 hits. Some universities advertise masters programs in local and regional history (for example, Cambridge, Essex, Lancaster, and Sussex), and there are lists of archival collections and other resources under the «local and regional history» heading. It is clear that local and regional history is a thriving category of academic or semi-academic historical work, generally aimed at people interested in the history of a particular local area, such as Cumbria or Lancashire.

When the historian is concerned with writing, say, a history of Cumbria, there is surely no harm in running together local and regional history. But at the level of historical theory, when it is a matter of being clear about concepts, doing so obscures rather than reveals reality. I propose here that, to the extent that local history means something different from regional history, its difference lies in the focusing of local history not just on an individual village, town, city, or county, but on something else – namely, on the *particularity* of that entity. The emphasis that local history (in the first of the two senses noted above) places on the particular has both normative and conceptual preconditions. Normatively, such a focus requires that the historian value that particular as worthy of attention in its own right. As for the conceptual precondition, it lies in the fact that there can be no such thing as «the particular» without that concept's opposing

term, the general or the universal. Thus, properly speaking there can be no local history without its generalizing counterpart.

«The particular,» taken as one of the poles of historical writing, emerged among historians and historical theorists in the nineteenth century in the wake of and in conjunction with the emergence of a focus on national history. I concede that there was an extensive, even massive, production of what could be called local history prior to the French Revolution. But to be conceptualized as concerned with «the particular,» such work needs to be juxtaposed to an historiography that purported to concern itself with what is «general» or even «universal». Among historians, it was primarily Ranke who conceptualized this distinction; indeed, Ranke envisaged a continuum leading from local history, to national history, to an as-yet-unwritten universal history. As Ranke saw it, «The investigation of the particular is always related to a larger context. Local history is related to that of a country,» and this «national or general history» must then be related to «the great whole [*Ganzen*] which we call universal history» (Ranke 1973: 57-9). In a similar vein, the historical theorist and Prussian national historian J. G. Droysen explicitly noted that «even the narrow, the very narrowest of human relations, strivings, activities, etc … , have a process, a history, and are for the persons involved, historical. So family histories, local histories, special histories. But over all these and such histories is *History*» (Droysen 1893: 44). The particularizing type of local history was vividly encapsulated by Nietzsche in his description of the antiquarian historian, who:

> looks back to whence he has come, to where he came into being, with love and loyalty … By tending with care that which has existed from of old, he wants to preserve for those who shall come into existence after him the conditions under which he himself came into existence. (Nietzsche 1983: 72-3)

For his part, Amato (2002: 17) gives essentially the same account in *Rethinking Home*, suggesting that «Local historians are often historians of home. The meaning of home shapes their works. It is the source of first feelings and impressions, of primary encounters; it is the subject of first memories, deep senses, and enduring passions».

Amato's *Rethinking Home* is essentially a *défense et illustration* of local history. Significantly, he does not clearly distinguish between local history and regional history. He tells us that he has chaired his university's program on «local and regional history»; he frequently refers to «region» and to «regions» in the course of making his case for local history; and he expends some effort in trying to identify and to define the borders of the region with which he is primarily concerned in his historical work. Yet Amato is right to subtitle his book *A Case for Writing* Local *History* (rather than *A Case for Writing Local and Regional History*), for that is where the weight of his interest lies. It seems reasonable to suggest that «region» makes its appearance in *Rethinking Home* mainly because the locality in which Amato lives and in which he is primarily interested, southwest Minnesota, has been deeply affected by economic and social forces that go far beyond the locality itself. However, as his claim that «all history is local» suggests, at the end of the day he remains a local historian.

My proposal here is that there are good reasons for not blurring together the concepts of regional and of local history. Consider again Amato's (2002: 191) suggestion that «every place is a universe unto itself ... the microcosm in which we learn and know all we will ever learn and know of fellow humans and the world at large». In an experiential sense this is no doubt true, as long as the experience in question is limited to that place and as long as that place has the characteristics of a micro-cosmos. But there are reasons for finding such a view inadequate when it is a matter of trying to understand, not only the wider world beyond the locality, but also the locality itself to the degree that it is not really a «universe unto itself» but is already fissured and even disrupted by outside forces.

Obviously, in historiographical practice local history and regional history are often closely connected to each other.[4] But while recognizing this connection, we also need to ask what can distinguish the two. Here I must proceed normatively, with the aim of setting aside the assumption, often tacit in historical scholarship, of a microcosm/macrocosm relation between

4 Of course here, by *local history* I continue to mean the particularizing type, and by *regional history* I primarily mean «regional history type 1,» that is, regional history that takes as its object a region *within* a state.

different levels of historical attention. Clearly, we do need the concept of a local history, in the sense proposed by Amato and already implied by Nietzsche. Local history of this type focuses on a single particularity (which, to be sure, the historian may well see as being at the mercy of regional, national, and global forces). But I propose that we also need a regional history that stands as distinctively different from local history so understood – a regional history that takes division or conflict as its object, with the division or conflict being expressed in primarily geographical terms.

In the context of the view that I propose, the difference between local and regional history is not mainly a difference of scale or scope. To be sure, regional history tends to «cover» a physical territory larger than the physical territory covered by local history. But we ought not to see this as the essential difference between the two. Rather, I contend that it is more illuminating (and also more critical) to see local history as focusing on a single unit (which we are invited to love, or at least to revere), and regional history as focusing on geographically-expressed conflict (which we are invited to reflect upon, and perhaps to attempt to overcome). Geographically-expressed conflict can manifest itself in various ways, but – especially within a situation of developed capitalist commerce – the most likely geographical conflict will be between center and periphery, between metropolis and hinterland.

Let me pose a hypothetical example. Imagine a history of a relatively although not monstrously large city, such as Toronto. I am not thinking, here, of any *actual* history of Toronto, because an actual history would surely cross genre boundaries – although it might still be best characterized as one genre rather than another. [5] A good *local* history of Toronto would attend to political, social, economic, cultural, and ethnic conflicts within that metropolis over the time that the history

5 Readers might wish to reflect on actual large-scale city studies that they know – such works as William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991) and Mike Davis's *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (2006). Cronon's book is certainly in the regional history genre. As for Davis's book, it is perhaps not so easily classified according to a local history/regional history grid: on the one hand it lacks love of the local, since it is nothing if not critical of what it discusses, while on the other the divisions that Davis focuses on are more about class than about geography.

covers, but its essential focus would still be on «Toronto». In the context of the view that I am proposing, a *regional* history in which Toronto would figure might have as its central theme a tension between Toronto and its various hinterlands. Alternatively, one could imagine a regional history that would be only a history of *Toronto* (and not of Toronto and some other geographical entity standing in tension with it). However, in order to be a regional history, such a work would need to find a geographical tension *within* Toronto. Or, to offer a slightly more likely example, one could imagine a history of Ontario that could be either a local history or a regional history. A *local* history of Ontario would treat Ontario as a unitary entity – no doubt full of conflicts over time, but not marked by an unresolved geographically-expressible tension. A *regional* history of Ontario, on the other hand, would focus on one or more such geographical tensions – such as between Ontario's cities and its rural areas, or between Ontario considered as a unit in its own right and the nation-state within which it is located, Canada. In this last case, then, the history would be written as the history of a particular region of Canada in its relation to the larger sovereignty of which it is a part.[6]

What can we learn from an actual case?: The Chattanooga Regional History Museum

Let us now look at a concrete instead of a hypothetical case. In August 2007 I visited the Chattanooga Regional History Museum (CRHM), in Chattanooga, Tennessee, which at the

6 This idea might be extended by noting that a *regional* history of Ontario would have to soft-pedal the fact that Ontario is a clearly-bounded political unit, and would instead emphasize the *geographical* aspects of the territory that *politically* is the province of Ontario. A primarily *political* history of Ontario could not be a regional history as I conceptualize it here. One of the features of regional history is uncertainty about precise boundaries, and this requires an absence, or at least soft-pedaling, of a clearly-bounded and well-accepted political sovereignty. An important feature of regional history is that its territorial object exists *within* or *between* sovereignties. In other words, in regional history the geographical trumps the political. When focus on the political increases, what *was* regional history turns into political history – which is likely to mean that it turns into some variant of national history. In situations of political uncertainty, this development threatens to worsen, or even to create, conflict – over territories and borders in particular.

time occupied two floors in a modest downtown building. Shortly thereafter the CRHM was closed, with a view to moving to a purpose-built facility. At the time of the final revision of this paper (June 2009), the museum's name is the Chattanooga History Center and it has a new Website, http://chattanoogahistory.com, but it does not yet have a new building. Accordingly, everything that I say about the CRHM applies to a museum that no longer exists. But while it is no more, it still serves to concretize some of the distinctive features of regional history.

The metropolitan population of Chattanooga is about 660,000. The city, which lies between the Great Smoky Mountains to the east and the Cumberland Mountains to the west, is situated in southeastern Tennessee, on the banks of the Tennessee River. It is close to the Georgia state line; in fact, a prominent landmark visible from downtown Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain, lies mostly outside the boundaries of Tennessee. However, the Chattanooga Regional History Museum was explicitly not a museum focused on local history; it could have been a «Museum of the City of Chattanooga,» but it was not. To be sure, the ordinary use of language can be maddeningly imprecise. One advantage of the conceptual distinction between local and regional history that I posited in the previous section is that it can help to clarify issues that would otherwise be unclear. But I do not mean to suggest that what we observe on the ground is hopelessly unclear. Often, when hard-won money is being spent, some measure of collective intelligence is applied to the product. Much thought on the part of founders, donors, curators, and directors is likely to have gone into the construction of even a small museum. Moreover, people who are aficionados of the history of a locality or region are likely to have devoted some serious thinking to the thing they love. This is especially the case when people have to collaborate with each other if anything is to be accomplished. Finally, although few people are philosophers, anyone who is good at her job is likely to have gained insight into the object of that job. And so we can find illumination of a theoretical sort from instances that are not theoretical. In particular, the CRHM can tell us something about the differences between regional history and the genres that primarily limit it, local history and national history.

After paying a small entrance fee, I was invited to view a twenty-minute video, entitled «Marks on the Land: Historical Film of Chattanooga, Land and People,» that serves as a general introduction to the museum. One then proceeds to the museum's exhibits. A feature that was striking in the video, in the museum's summary characterizations (by means of placards) of its exhibits, and in the exhibits themselves was the extent to which it did not tell the story of «Chattanooga Country» as a «central-subject» narrative – that is, as a narrative organized around the actions and sufferings of a single subject (see M.White [1965] on «central subject» narrative; the notion has since been picked up by many other writers).[7] Rather, the story is told as a story of *place* (but a place, it turns out, that lacks precisely defined boundaries). The priority of place was explicitly emphasized by those who designed the museum. «Land» twice preceded «people» in the title of the video. The same priority was evident in a prominent caption above the doorway leading to the exhibits: «Chattanooga Country: Its Land, Rivers and People». Under the caption and to the left and right of the doorway was a mural showing various people and modes of transportation, including a Cherokee notable, a Civil War soldier, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a riverboat, a buggy, a nineteenth-century locomotive, and a 1950s-era streamlined diesel locomotive (see Figure 1). Similarly, under the heading «CHATTANOOGA COUNTRY,» a wall placard announced that:

> The history of the Chattanooga Country has been shaped by its geography and people. This exhibit illustrates events in five historical periods and shows how these forces shaped the lives of the region's people from prehistory to the present. (see Figure 2)

Again, a crucial point imposes itself: *geography* has priority over *people*. The assertion that «these forces shaped the lives of the region's people from prehistory to the present» is ambiguous, since it is unclear what «these forces» were. Although it was not explicitly stated, the forces seemed to be geographical forces, forces emanating from «place». But one thing was evident: «the region's people» do not occupy the subject-position.

7 For the standard history of «Chattanooga Country,» see Govan and Livingood (1977).



Figure 1. Entrance to the Chattanooga Regional History Museum

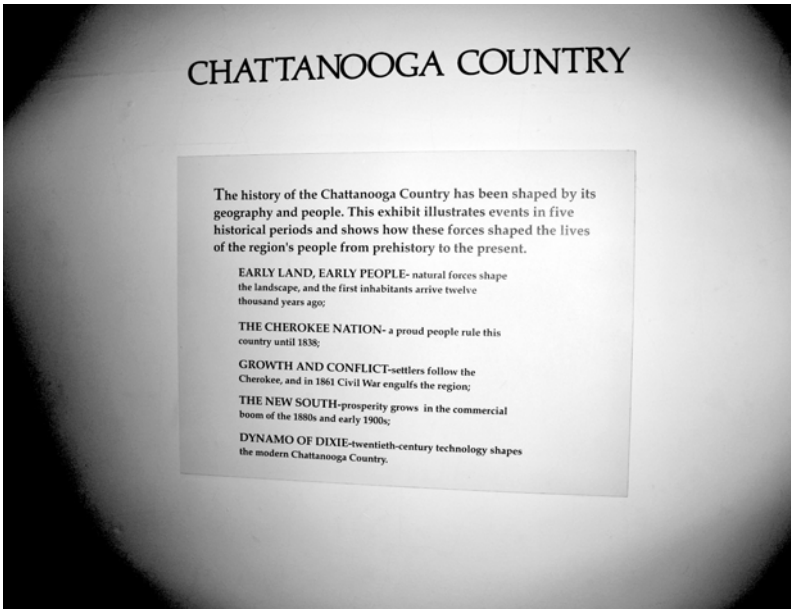


Figure 2. Chattanooga Country: Five Historical Periods

It is essential here to draw a contrast between regional history and national history, for this will help us understand the deeper logic behind the giving of a non-dominant position to «the people» in the Chattanooga Regional History Museum.There were *people* in the CRHM, but not «*the* people». Consider, in contrast, Ernest Renan's 1882 «What is a Nation?,» in which Renan argued that the nation is not a race, and not an ethnic group bound together by common characteristics (such as language). Rather, he contended, a nation is constituted by a people's desire to live together. This desire presupposes that all individuals within the nation have forgotten many things that would otherwise divide them, such as, in the case of the French, the St Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 and the massacre of the Albigensians in the thirteenth century. More positively, Renan also held that «a nation is … a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future» (Renan 1990: 19). In short, Renan's claim is that nationhood requires a central-subject narrative. It is an insightful claim, for the most striking feature of national history has indeed been, first, that it takes a narrative form, and, second, that a particular central subject – namely, the nation – is the agent of this narrative.

In writing «What is a Nation?,» Renan was drawing attention to the fact that nationhood is a difficult accomplishment. In the conflict-laden region that eventually became the French nation-state, nationhood required the sidelining of particularistic loyalties. The same was true for the «founding» of the German, British, and American nationalities. It took a long time before the American former colonists stopped thinking of themselves as citizens of individual states, a long time before «these United States» became «*the* United States». Indeed, a major war was fought before that issue was decided. Realities on the ground are of course more complicated than anything written up in «national» histories. But the key element in national history is its taking of the nation as a now-unquestioned reality, a reality that the historian makes the focus for his work. Thus the nation's origins and development, trials and tribulations, and accomplishments and failures become available for recounting. A unity assumed in the present or future is seen as existing already in the past, to the degree that one can

proleptically speak of «the nation,» even when it did not yet actually exist.

Temporality and unity play a fundamental role in national history. National history assumes a *temporal process* by which the *unity* that is the nation develops over *time*. This process involves the subordination of lesser forms of allegiance to national allegiance. Different national ideologies all presuppose an essence of the nation that needs to be achieved. To be sure, different national ideologies have different emphases. Some see the nation differently than Renan did – as racial, or as involving commitment to a particular language and culture, or as embracing a particular mission to be carried out, such as the mission to spread civilization or, more recently, democracy. But the essential point here is that there is a temporal process that involves the subordination of lesser allegiances to the single allegiance that is the nation.

In contrast, regional history does not manifest itself in a central-subject narrative (otherwise, it would not be regional history but instead an exercise in actual or aspiring national history). A central-subject narrative is absent from the Chattanooga Regional History Museum because there is no (single) central subject. The politics of the region are also strikingly absent (it is most often in political activity that «the people» come to know themselves as «the people» and acquire a national character). A placard (Figure 2) identifies the «five historical periods» that the museum covers as (1) Early Land, Early People, (2) The Cherokee Nation; (3) Growth and Conflict; (4) The New South; and (5) Dynamo of Dixie. There is little if any continuity between periods (1), (2), and (3), and while there is something resembling a central subject in periods (4) and (5) it is not clear, especially with respect to period (4), that the central subject can be identified with «Chattanooga Country»; rather, the central subject of «the New South» and of «Dixie» seems to be Southerners generally. The «early people» of «Chattanooga Country» disappeared sometime after the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto passed through the region in 1540 (it is not accidental that «land» precedes «people» in the naming of this first period). «The Cherokee Nation,» which came into being in 1827, formed a remarkably coherent group: unlike most other native American peoples the Cherokee entered into settled agricultural life on their own

terms. But in the 1830s the United States government forced the Cherokee to resettle in the West. Even aside from their removal to the West, the Cherokee can in no way be identified with «Chattanooga Country».[8]

There was thus a break between period 1 and period 2, and between period 2 and period 3. As for the subsequent periods, these were dominated by the whites who settled in increasing numbers in Chattanooga Country. But it is hard to see these inhabitants of Chattanooga Country as continuing historical agents, given that Chattanooga Country had no government of its own and hence no institutional locus within which agency could be articulated. Moreover, over much of its history after 1838 Chattanooga Country was at the mercy of outsiders. The (American) Civil War (1861-5) had a devastating impact on the region, which remained desperately poor and was hard hit by the depression that began in 1929. Even before assuming office in March 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited the region in order to discuss ways of relieving its grinding poverty. Roosevelt and his advisors decided to create the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), parts of which had been proposed under previous administrations. Established by Congressional charter in May 1933, the TVA built dams and thus brought flood control and electricity to the Tennessee Valley – although for a long time the area remained almost as poor as it had been before (see Gray and Johnson 2005; Govan and Livingood 1977; and a period propaganda piece, Duffus 1944).

When I visited the CRHM, there was a temporary exhibit dealing with the involvement of the region in the Second World War – another great event from outside impinging on a region that remained a byword for backwardness. For many years after the war the region and the city remained, by the standards of the United States generally, economically challenged and culturally and socially backward. Insofar as Chattanooga itself is concerned, one piece of widely repeated information was the fact that in 1969 a federal government report identified Chattanooga as «the dirtiest city in America» because of the high level of air pollution (Motavalli 1998). Also widely noted was the fact that, although the 1941 hit song,

8 On the removal of the Cherokee, see Perdue and Green (2007). Conley (2005) offers a general history.

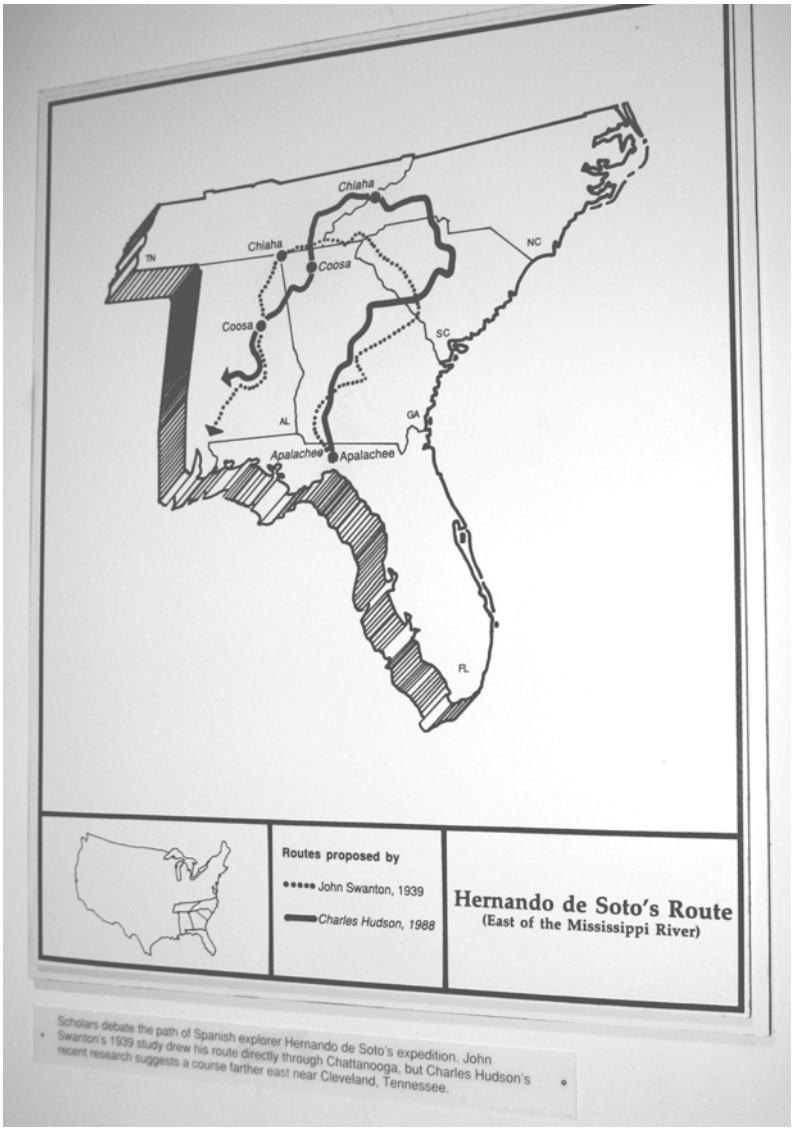


Figure 3. Hernando de Soto's Route

«Chattanooga Choo Choo,» made Chattanooga's status as a Southern rail center famous, in 1971 passenger rail service to the city ended. But by 2007, after a quarter-century of civic improvement, Chattanooga had turned around. The air was no longer polluted. There was a magnificent aquarium on the

river bank. A footbridge across the Tennessee River, once a no-go area, had been turned into a tourist attraction. The river had been cleaned up, and although there were signs forbidding swimming, two lap swimmers were seen in the river; and electric buses plied the central part of the city.

These more positive developments would have been legitimate objects to be presented in a museum focused on local pride, but they were all but absent from the CRHM when I visited it. Any conversion of the museum into a monument to local pride would involve a radical transformation in its genre. The CRHM as I saw it in 2007 was faithful to what I have been depicting as the genre of regional history. It clearly showed the difficulty of identifying a single central subject that would be the agent of the history that it told. With the arrival after 1830 of large numbers of white settlers (as well as of African-Americans), there was a continuing population group in the region, but even for this later period it remains difficult to identify a central subject – which no doubt helps account for the museum's fidelity to the «regional history» genre. To be sure, there is *always* agency in history: the assumption of agency is a condition of possibility of writing any history at all (Megill 2007: 94-5). But regional history *qua* regional history postulates an agency that is divided, existing mainly outside the frame of the history, or otherwise impaired. In this respect the non-congruence of «region» with «state» is crucial. A region is precisely *not* a territory within which a single political authority exercises its «monopoly of legitimate violence,» as famously phrased by Max Weber.

This means, among other things, that the borders of a region are (*per definitionem*) uncertain. It is thus characteristic of the genre that in the Chattanooga Regional History Museum the borders of «Chattanooga Country» were never specified clearly. On the one hand, the museum included a graphic that indicated the putative route of Hernando de Soto's 1540 expedition through what is now the southeastern United States (see Figure 3). To be more precise, two different putative routes, proposed by two different scholars, were displayed on an outline map of the southeastern United States. Both proposals have de Soto encircling an immense territory, passing through land now located in six different states: Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas.

This was the largest representation of «Chattanooga Country» in the museum. But «Chattanooga Country» can also be interpreted as covering a smaller territory, centered on the city of Chattanooga and on the Tennessee valley upstream and downstream from Chattanooga for some indeterminate distance.

Some wider implications

Unlike the national historian, the regional historian posits a situation where authority is *and remains* deeply divided, if not absent. Where the region exists within the framework of a recognized nation-state, there is an inevitable tension between the claim of the nation-state to sovereignty and the regionality of the region. The national historian sees the nation-state as exercising (or at least as rightly claiming) the legitimate monopoly of violence within a given territory. In contrast, the regional historian, even when the region in question is well integrated into a nation-state, puts off into the background of his account the centralizing pull that the nation or its representatives exercise, or propose to exercise, over the region's territory.

While regional history type 1 exists between the poles of national history and local history, regional history type 2 exists between the poles of national history and world history. One thinks, for example, of regions in which there are, or have recently been, territorial disputes between two or more currently existing nation-states or peoples (for example, in the Balkans and in the Middle East). Regional history type 1 and regional history type 2 are united by their focus on territories where sovereignty is either absent, sidelined, divided, or disputed. Further, both forms of regional history, as long as they *remain* regional history, lack a clear central subject, and thus are ordered in essentially non-narrative ways – taking «narrative» here to mean an account that is temporally ordered (it is possible, to be sure, to use the term *narrative* in other ways [see Megill 2007, 78-103]).[9] Moreover, both types of regional history tend to emphasize the ways that human

9 Perhaps the best-known exemplification of the affinity between regional history and non-narrative form in modern times is Braudel's *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (Braudel 1972).

beings are the objects of historical events, rather than being the makers of those events.[10]

If the region with which the regional historian deals exists *between* or *above* competing sovereignties, the regional historian has to remain undecided among these sovereignties; otherwise, the product of the historian's work will be a history of a nation-state that he or she hopes will come into being. In other words, the regional historian is caught – and has to balance – between various opposing realities: between the national center and the region, between the regional town or city and its hinterland, between one sovereignty and other sovereignties, and between nation and humankind. This is in contrast to the local historian who focuses on the particularities of a compact place, and to the national historian, who sees regions (or *Heimat*, to use the closely equivalent German term) as constituent elements contributing to the greater glory of the nation.

As for the relations between regional history and world history, it is first of all important to note that no historian so far has written a world history that has achieved general acceptance. I believe that this failure is both inevitable and fortunate. We ought to be suspicious of world history, and even more of global history (by which I mean a world history focused on processes of globalization), for the same reason that we ought to be suspicious of national history – namely, that these genres contain potentially dangerous unitary tendencies.[11] The history that is told as a single narrative (of, for example, the advance of freedom and democracy) is all too likely to stand as an unexamined justification for continued movement in the same direction in the future. I contend, on the contrary, that world history is far better conceptualized as a juxtaposition of different but related national and regional histories than as a central-subject narrative. It may well be that national history is also best seen as sets of juxtapositions, abandoning the heroic tale of national self-development. In this case, it would no longer be national history in the sense indicated in this paper, dominated by the story of a central subject's progress.

10 This too is an important theme in Braudel.

11 In Megill (2007: 165-87), I indicate why I think that the failure of world (and global) history is inevitable.

National history remains powerful in the world today. So does the idea that every country ought to have its own unified and triumphal historical story, a story of advance through time. But, as the French historian of Greek antiquity, Paul Veyne (1984: 80-1), has remarked, «there is no proof that the Western way of writing history as a continuous account according to duration is the only conceivable way or the best way». Veyne regrets that Thucydides, in «taking the plot of a war as a pattern for the study of the mechanisms of politics,» unintentionally «gave the impression that history is the account of events happening to a nation». Veyne regrets even more the «mechanical continuation» of Thucydides» account by the «mediocre follower» of Thucydides, Xenophon. In contrast, he praises Herodotus, who «uses the stages of the Persian conquests to tell of the origins of the wars of the Medes in the form of a geographical review of the conquered peoples, recalling the past and present ethnography of each of those peoples». Veyne suggests (1984: 80-1) that had Herodotus rather than Thucydides been followed, «things might have ended in something other than national histories; from Herodotus there could have arisen a *historia* like that of the Arab geographers or like a geographic-sociological review in the manner of the *Prolegomena* of Ibn Khaldun». Veyne likewise suggests, with an air of pessimism, that «once history has become the history of a people it remained that» – so much so that writers who diverged from that pattern were said not to be historians at all (Veyne 1984: 80-1).

To sum up: Amato has suggested that «all history is local history,» and Veyne has suggested that we are trapped in national history. But perhaps it is time for a different claim to be put forward: «all history is regional history». Certainly, the first historian in the Western tradition, Herodotus, was a regional historian *par excellence*. Nor should this be surprising, for in the world in which he lived and in the world about which he wrote, hegemony was disputed between *polis* and *polis*, and between Greek and non-Greek. Where hegemony was so deeply disputed, it is not surprising that the history that came to be written was regional history. As for Thucydides, the Peloponnese was, after all, nothing other than a region, given that it was a territory over which competing political powers disputed (as the title of Paul Cartledge's (2002) *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History* deftly acknowledges). And

in his account of the Peloponnesian war, what was Thucydides doing but describing a situation of disputed sovereignty within a region? In other words, the problem with Thucydides, if Veyne is right in his criticisms, is that the narrative *form* of his history unfortunately lent itself to triumphalist use by others.

As for our own time, the greatest example of a regional history is clearly Braudel's (1972) *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. In sharp contrast to Thucydides in *The Peloponnesian War,* Braudel relegates political events to the dim background of his study. There is no central subject at all, except for the Mediterranean itself, a geographical reality. Unresolved tensions run through the book – most obviously in Braudel's refusal to unite in a single theory the book's competing structural, conjunctural, and event-oriented aspects. The borders of «the Mediterranean» remain unclear, an uncertainty that befits the lack of a human central subject and the presence within that territory of multiple disputed sovereignties. The official borders between states make almost no appearance in Braudel's account.

It is of course an exaggeration to say that «all history is regional history». Perhaps it is better to say, «let regional history be regional history».[12] Surely historians ought to resist the temptation to convert regional history into national history and should instead essay the possibility of making national history less like national history. The nation-state was and still is the dominant political form of the post-French Revolution period. But other forms of the state have also existed, sometimes for long periods of time, in past millennia. One thinks, for example, of various empires – such as the Ottoman Empire – that were sometimes able to grant a high degree of autonomy to the distinct ethnic-religious groups occupying their territories. This kind of arrangement fell prey to the nationalist idea. But we do not need to live the nationalist idea. There are other options that need to be explored, including options related to regions in both the small and the large senses of that term. This

12 One thinks here of the historiography of the medieval state of Koguryo, in northeast Asia. In recent years there has been a dispute as to whether this state is *really* part of Chinese history, or whether it is *really* part of Korean history. See Ahn (2006).

would take us beyond the writing of history to an attempt to rethink the contingent bases of the nation-state itself.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to audiences that heard and reacted to oral versions of this paper delivered at East China Normal University and at the University of Aarhus in November 2007, as well as to Yaakov Kabalek and to several other persons for commenting on written drafts. I am also grateful to Daryl Black, who was curator of the Chattanooga Regional History Museum when I visited it, for answering many questions about the museum, city, and region.

Literature

Ahn, Y. (2006) «Competing Nationalisms: The Mobilisation of History and Archeology in the Korea-China Wars over Koguryo/Gaogouli». *The Asian-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. Available at: http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/1837

Amato, J. (2002) *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Armitage, S. (2001) «From Inside Out: Rewriting Regional History». *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 22 (3): 32-47.

Bayly, C.A., et. al. (2006) «AHR Conversation: On Transnational History». *The American Historical Review* 11 (5): 1441-64.

Berger, S. (2007) «Introduction: Toward a Global History of National Historiographies». In Stefan Berger (ed.) *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-29.

Berger, S., M. Donovan and K. Passmore (1999) «Apologias for the Nation-State in Western Europe Since 1800». In Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore (eds) .*Writing National Histories*. London: Routledge, 3-14.

Braudel, F. (1972) *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 2 vols. Trans. Siân Reynolds. New York: Harper and Row.

Cartledge, P. (2002) *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History, 1300-362 BC*. London: Routledge.

Confino, A. (1997) *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Conley, R.J. (2005) *The Cherokee Nation: A History*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Cronon, W. (1991) *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: Norton.

Davis, M. (2006) *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Verso.

Droysen, J.G. (1893) *Outline of the Principles of History*. Trans. E. Benjamin Andrews. Boston: Ginn and Company.

Duffus, R.L. (1944) *The Valley and its People: A Portrait of the TVA*. New York: Knopf.

European Science Foundation (2007) «Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe». http://www.uni-leipzig.de/zhsesf/documents/cross_team/TopTen_Histories.pdf

Fukuyama, F. (1989) «The End of History?» *The National Interest* 16: 3-35.

Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

Govan, G.E. and J.W. Livingood (1977) *The Chattanooga Country 1540-1976*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Gray, A.J. and D.A. Johnson (2005) *The TVA Regional Planning and Development Program: The Transformation of an Institution and its Mission*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Gross, R.A. (2001) *The Minutemen and their World*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Hobsbawm, E. and T. Ranger (eds) (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Huntington, S. (1993) «The Clash of Civilizations?» *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3): 22-49.

Huntington, S. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Lockridge, K.A. (1970) *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham Massachusetts, 1636-1736*. New York: Norton.

Lyotard, J-F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Maier, C.S. (2007) «Being There: Place, Territory, and Identity». In Seyla Benhabib, Ian Shapiro and Danilo Petranović (eds). *Identities, Affiliations, and Allegiances*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 67-84.

Megill, A. (2007) *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mosse, G. (1975) *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*. New York: H. Fertig.

Motavalli, J. (1998) «Chattanooga on a Roll: From America's Dirtiest City to its Cleanest». *E/The Environmental Magazine*, March/April. Available at: http://www.emagazine.com/view/?426

Nietzsche, F. (1983) *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Penningroth, D.C. (2007) «The Claims of Ex-Slaves to Family and Property: A Transatlantic Comparison». *The American Historical Review* 112 (4): 1039-69.

Perdue, T. and M.D. Green (2007) *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears*. New York: Viking.

Ranke, L. von (1973) *The Theory and Practice of History*. Ed. Georg Iggers and Konrad von Moltke. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Renan, E. (1990) «What is a Nation?» In Homi Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration*. New York: Routledge, 8-22.

Umbach, M. (2005) «A Tale of Second Cities: Autonomy, Culture, and the Law in Hamburg and Barcelona in the Late Nineteenth Century». *The American Historical Review* 110 (3): 659-92.

Veyne, P. (1984) *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*. Trans. Mina Moore-Rinvolucri. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

White, M. (1965) *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*. New York: Harper and Row.