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Regionalism and the Great Plains: Problems of Concept and Method

FREDERICK C. LUEBKE

American scholars have used the concept of regionalism to organize their thinking about certain aspects of national experience for many decades. Its meaning is imprecise because it has had to serve a broad spectrum of purposes. Inevitably regionalism means different things to different people; its content will vary with the purposes and standards of those using the concept. In literature, for example, a debate has been going on for a century over the merits of regionalism versus other theories of literary creation. Its intensity has waxed and waned with the times, but in our century regionalism in literature has achieved its fullest and best-known exposition in the works of such writers as Robert Penn Warren, John Crow Ransom, Allen Tate, and others, mostly southerners, whose works are strongly flavored with agrarianism and opposition to the industrialization of the South.

In art the term immediately evokes images of that redoubtable trio of midwesterners, John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood, and Thomas Hart Benton. They took a brave and coolly independent stand against their cosmopolitan critics who argued that, because art is a universal language, an emphasis on regionalism is a form of intellectual treason. In architecture the great Frank Lloyd Wright developed his own distinctive brand of regionalism early in the century as he designed houses organically bound to the midwestern prairie. Throughout his life he remained a stalwart foe of the precious intellectualism of the international school of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe.

While regionalists were writing their novels and painting their pictures in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, social scientists made extensive use of the regionalist concept in their research. A check in the card catalog of any major university library will reveal a remarkable array of studies by sociologists and economists based on either rural or metropolitan units in which regionalism is used primarily for planning purposes. Many of these studies were and continue to be sponsored by government agencies,

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beginning especially in the drought and depression years of the 1930s. Not a few lie buried in the publications of university agricultural experiment station bulletins, but others had a noteworthy effect on government planning and policy.

The 1930s were in some respects the heyday of regionalist thinking. In 1931 Walter Prescott Webb produced his influential book, *The Great Plains*, which after half a century remains a vital and stimulating work, often wrong but vigorously argued, a paragon of regionalist thought founded in environmentalist concepts.¹ Seven years later, in 1938, Howard Odum in association with Henry Estill Moore published *American Regionalism*. A remarkably productive sociologist from North Carolina, Odum was dedicated to the revival of the South as an economic region. He and Moore emphasized that effective national planning was contingent upon a recognition of regional variation and that a region, in turn, must be thought of as "a constituent unit in an aggregate whole."²

Most social scientists and historians of this period agreed that regions emerge, first of all, from certain physiographic uniformities. Like Webb, they would begin their studies with analyses of the geology, soils, the climate, and the plant and animal life of the regional environment. Subsequent discussions of economic, social, and cultural relationships would be treated, often historically, within this framework. They would then argue, often convincingly, that economic and social planning and government policy at all levels had to conform to the physical and cultural realities they had presented. A book-length publication entitled *The Future of the Great Plains*, produced by a government committee during the Dust Bowl years and published in December 1936, is an excellent example of this genre and its point of view.³ Although such studies attained a new level in quantity and quality during the 1930s, they were not a new thing. For example, in 1878 John Wesley Powell, the distinguished western explorer and surveyor, insisted in his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* that a series of fundamental changes in the land system of the federal government was necessary in order to bring policy into conformance with environmental realities. He argued that old laws based on experience in the humid East were obsolete and that new laws appropriate for the semiarid West should be enacted.⁴

Analyses of regional environments at that time depended heavily upon the work of physical geographers. These scholars tended to per-

¹ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston, 1931).

² Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (New York, 1938), 16.

³ Great Plains Committee, *The Future of the Great Plains* (Washington, D.C., 1936).

⁴ John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1878).

ceive regional unities on a large scale, but as their science improved they wrote in terms of increasing physiographic detail, dividing huge provinces into regions or sections and these into still smaller subdivisions, each with distinctive characteristics. Thus in 1931 Nevin M. Fenneman, drawing on the scholarship of the preceding decade, devoted the first ninety pages of his *Physiography of Western United States* to a description of the Great Plains province.⁵

Other disciplines used the regional concept in similar ways, but different principles of organization were often substituted for physiography. Economists and agriculturalists, for example, used demographic characteristics, marketing patterns, and cropping practices to delineate regional divisions, although the influence of climate, topography, and soils was often explicitly included in their work.⁶

During those same decades of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, historians also turned out scores of volumes treating regionalist themes, but they seldom defined their terms to the satisfaction of social scientists.⁷ Conferences intended to improve interdisciplinary communication were sponsored by such organizations as the Social Science Research Council and the Rockefeller Foundation. Symposia were held at Sky Top, Pennsylvania; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Madison, Wisconsin, and all gave evidence of both the vitality and diversity of regionalist thought in the study of the United States.⁸ Meanwhile, the American studies movement, always amenable to regionalist thinking, continued to grow. Various universities such as Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Texas introduced American studies departments and developed graduate programs in this new field. Moreover, the preeminent scholarly journal in American studies—*American Quarterly*—was inaugurated in 1949.⁹

⁵ Nevin M. Fenneman, *Physiography of Western United States* (New York, 1931).

⁶ Examples are Donald J. Bogue and Calvin L. Beale, *Economic Areas of the United States* (New York, 1961), and Ladd Haystead and Gilbert C. Fite, *The Agricultural Regions of the United States* (Norman, 1955).

⁷ Perhaps the most stimulating of the books that were produced during this era is the provocative volume by James C. Malin, *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to Its History* (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1967). For a useful assessment of Malin's work see Allan G. Bogue, "The Heirs of James C. Malin: A Grassland Historiography," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 1 (Spring 1981), 105-31.

⁸ For the results of these symposia see Social Science Research Council, *Critiques of Research in the Social Sciences: III. An Appraisal of Walter Prescott Webb's The Great Plains: A Study in Institutions and Environment* [Bulletin 46] (New York, N.Y., 1940), and Merrill Jensen, ed., *Regionalism in America* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1951). The Lincoln conference did not result in a book, but see "Transcript of the Discussion, [Rockefeller Foundation] Conference on the Northern Plains, June 25-27, 1942," Archives of the University of Nebraska, Love Memorial Library, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁹ For an especially useful review of the intellectual ferment in the American studies movement see Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Critical and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly*, XXXI (No. 3, 1979), 293-337.

In the 1950s, however, the climate of opinion had shifted to one that was less favorably disposed to regionalism and its diversity. It was the era of the Cold War, the Korean conflict, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Historians in particular were attracted by themes of consensus and continuity, not conflict and diversity. To illustrate the point from the historiography of the American West: Earl Pomeroy insisted in 1955 that this vast area is best understood as having had a colonial status in relation to the industrial and financial heartland in the East. He charged that western historians had often ignored facts testifying to the continuity of western culture with that of the East. Striking at the environmentalism of Frederick Jackson Turner that informed much of western historiography, he declared that westerners have been imitators, not innovators; conformists, not radicals. Instead of dwelling on the pageantry of adventurous trappers, prospectors, and cowboys, historians of the West should tackle questions of investment capital and management. In Pomeroy's view, new orientations in social and cultural history would reveal striking continuities between settled East and frontier West in religion, education, and social structure.¹⁰

Other scholars attacked the usefulness of regionalism as a conceptual tool to organize data and to solve social and economic problems. Among sociologists, the regionalism that had been popular in the 1930s virtually disappeared in the 1950s.¹¹ Louis Wirth, a distinguished Chicago sociologist, was willing enough in 1951 to characterize regionalism as a counteragent against the leveling influences of standardization and centralization. Yet he, like many other critics, feared the use of regionalism as "a desperate and futile protest" against needed change. Wirth admitted the utility of regionalism as one of many possible ways of viewing social life in areal terms, but he charged that apparent correlations between habitat and culture were often spurious and at best superficial. Causal relationships, he charged, were too often assumed rather than proved to be true.¹²

Such criticism was entirely consonant with the arguments of the cultural geographers, who were eager to discredit any ascription of deterministic power to environmental variables. The specious correlation of physiographic characteristics with the culture of a given region is as old as the Greeks. During the nineteenth century this notion was inadvertently

¹⁰ Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLI (March 1955), 579-600; Frederick C. Luebke, "Introduction," Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke, eds., *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture* (Lincoln, 1979), xvii.

¹¹ John S. Reed, "Sociology and Regional Studies in the United States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 3 (January 1980), 40-51.

¹² Louis Wirth, "The Limitations of Regionalism," Jensen, ed., *Regionalism in America*, 381-93.

nourished by Darwinism, which stressed the power of natural forces in shaping life forms. Early in the twentieth century environmental determinism had pervaded the writings of such prominent American geographers as Ellen Churchill Semple and Ellsworth Huntington. It was similarly inherent in the enormously influential frontier thesis of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner.¹³ But this began to change in the 1920s, when the eminent California geographer, Carl Sauer, introduced culture as the active agent on landscape studies.¹⁴ While cultural geographers did not generally object to the concept of regionalism per se, they were determined to replace physiography with culture as the foundation for regional studies.

By 1964 the attack on environmental determinism had developed to the point where it became the organizing principle for a widely used introductory textbook in geography. Throughout his *Man and the Land*, George F. Carter fervently declares his wholehearted disagreement with such thinking by repeatedly discounting the likelihood of the physical environment being a causative agent in determining how people live in different parts of the world.¹⁵ Carter has organized his book in terms of arid lands, wet tropical regions, Mediterranean climates, mid-latitude forest lands, grasslands, and mountains and seeks to show that within each geographic category different societies have developed, each using the natural resources in different ways and for different purposes, all depending upon differences in cultures.

Meanwhile, physical geographers became less certain of their large categories, less magisterial in their regional delineations. The effect of their work, after all, was to emphasize variations within physiographic provinces more than regional uniformity. The Great Plains, described so

¹³ See Ellen Churchill Semple, *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* (Boston, 1903). Among Ellsworth Huntington's many books, one of the earliest to synthesize his environmental determinism is *Civilization and Climate* (New Haven, 1914); for his interpretation of the American West see Ellsworth Huntington, *The Climatic Factor as Illustrated in Arid America* (Washington, D.C., 1914). See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 1-38, and Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York, 1932). For a cogent analysis of Turner's sectionalist thought see Michael C. Steiner, "The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis," *Western Historical Quarterly*, X (October 1979), 437-66. For a sharp criticism of Turnerian regionalism see Richard Jensen, "On Modernizing Frederick Jackson Turner: The Historiography of Regionalism," *Western Historical Quarterly*, XI (July 1980), 307-22.

¹⁴ See especially Carl Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," *University of California Publications in Geography*, 2 (1925), 19-54. This stimulating essay is included in the collection of Sauer's most influential articles, John Leighly, ed., *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer* (Berkeley, 1963), 315-50. For an especially succinct statement of his concept applied to the American West see the essay "Historical Geography and the Western Frontier," *ibid.*, 45-52.

¹⁵ George F. Carter, *Man and the Land: A Cultural Geography* (New York, 1975).

confidently by Fenneman in 1931, literally disappeared from some textbooks of a later generation.¹⁶

The shift from physiographic or environmental characteristics to culture as the foundation for regional studies coincided to some extent with a new emphasis on pluralism in American society.¹⁷ Beginning in the 1960s with the surging movement of blacks toward equality, the concepts of diversity, nonconformity, and dissent gradually acquired an unprecedented respectability. By the end of the decade sociologists, historians, cultural geographers, and other academicians were discovering heretofore unsuspected ethnocultural influences in many aspects of American life. Regionalism, too, acquired a fresh currency in these times as the newly founded National Endowment for the Humanities revealed its interest in funding regional, state, and local studies.

But even before that propitious development, a new generation of scholars in various fields emerged who were willing to cross disciplinary lines and to theorize on a grand scale. To cite one of many possible examples, the historian Robert Berkhofer, drawing heavily on anthropological thought, pointed out in 1964 that, like any region, the American West had to be analyzed in terms of the prevailing cultural system of the time because culture, understood as a normative system that functions as a blueprint for behavior, conditions the ways in which human beings perceive and respond to environmental forces. Earlier students of American regionalism, such as Turner, Semple, and Webb, lacked such an understanding of culture and hence naturally tended to overestimate the effect climate, topography, and vegetation could have in human affairs.¹⁸

So long as the physical environment was thought to have been the principal determinant of human behavior in a given area, little attention had to be paid to the cultural backgrounds of persons who settled there. Theoretically, all would be forced to respond in a similar manner, regardless of origin. Turner put it succinctly in his famous essay of 1893 when he spoke of the crucible of the frontier in which immigrants were

¹⁶For example, the Great Plains region is ignored in the text of Charles B. Hunt's *Physiography of the United States* (San Francisco, 1967), even though it retains its traditional place on large-scale maps. The 1974 revision of this book, entitled *Natural Regions of the United States and Canada*, is unchanged in this respect. This de-emphasis was by no means characteristic of all textbooks in regional geography. The traditional approach is generally retained in such a representative text as J. H. Paterson, *North America: A Geography of Canada and the United States* (New York, 1975), 253-73.

¹⁷I do not mean to suggest that scholars abandoned studying the influence of environmental forces on the course of history. For an anthology of recent examples see Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *Climate and History* (Lawrenceville, New Jersey, 1982). This book makes a fascinating contrast to Ellsworth Huntington.

¹⁸Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "Space, Time, Culture and the New Frontier," *Agricultural History*, XXXVIII (January 1964), 25.

fused into Americans—"a mixed race," he called them.¹⁹ But if cultural characteristics determine the variation in human behavior, it becomes necessary to know where the people came from, what the contents of their cultural baggage were, when and why they came, and what route they followed to get there.

Such study of the migration of cultural traits in the United States is certainly not a new phenomenon.²⁰ What is new is the way in which the discoveries of the past half century or more by scholars in many fields have been integrated or synthesized in the study of regionalism on a national scale. The work of three scholars—Daniel Elazar, Wilbur Zelinsky, and Raymond Gastil—is especially important in this regard.

The migration of cultural forms is an essential element in the work of Daniel Elazar, a political scientist. Although Elazar is deeply involved in urban studies, he is also well known for his broadly interpretive book, *American Federalism: A View from the States* (1966), in which he outlines spatial variations in American political culture.²¹ Elazar focuses on sub-regional differences in attitudes toward government and what people expect of it, the kinds of persons who are expected to assume leadership roles in politics, and the assumptions people have about the ways government should be conducted—that is, whether government should be practiced in accordance with moral principles in the pursuit of a unified and harmonious society, or whether public policy emerges from the bargaining that takes place among diverse groups in a heterogeneous society. Elazar defines three major sets of attitudes—moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic. Each set is rooted historically in eastern, older parts of the country, has spread westward along the usual paths of cultural diffusion, and continues to dominate the political culture of the various sections of the country.

Elazar is not an advocate of regionalist thinking in the manner of Howard Odum and the social planners. In Elazar's definition, regionalism is nothing more than "a transient phenomenon that brings adjacent states together because of immediate and specific common interests."²² Only "spheres"—the Northeast, the South, and the West—or large sections (of which he identifies eight that correspond closely to Odum's regions) are substantial because, in his view, they encompass interest and arrange-

¹⁹Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," 23. See my comments regarding Turnerian historiography in Frederick C. Luebke, "Ethnic Minority Groups in the American West," Michael P. Malone, ed., *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln, 1983), 388-93.

²⁰See Semple, *American History*; Lois Kimball Mathews, *The Expansion of New England: The Spread of New England Settlement and Institutions to the Mississippi River, 1620-1865* (Boston, 1909). For a later expression of this point of view see Louis B. Wright, *Culture on the Moving Frontier* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1955).

²¹Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States* (New York, 1966).

²²*Ibid.*, 112.

ments capable of surviving conflicts that occur from time to time among internal component groups. Although Elazar is broad in his interests and incorporates a wide range of evidence drawn from many fields, his interpretation is really limited to political considerations. He makes no serious effort to transcend his own discipline and to interpret American culture on a broader scale.

Wilbur Zelinsky, a cultural geographer, has examined the origins, identity, process, and structure of regionalism in his *Cultural Geography of the United States* (1973).²³ He makes effective use of historical evidence to delineate five major cultural regions: New England, the Midland (chiefly New York and Pennsylvania), the South, the Middle West, and the West. These regions are defined entirely upon the basis of cultural traits such as religious beliefs, ethnicity, foods, housing, and linguistic usages; three orders of cultural boundaries are identified within the several regions. Zelinsky places special emphasis on what he calls "The Doctrine of First Effective Settlement"—that is, the first culture group that effectively settles an area will imprint it more strongly with its culture than later, possibly more numerous, groups, because it provides the essential form, structure, or morphology of the region's culture, which later groups can only modify.

Similar in concept but rather more broadly based is Raymond D. Gastil's *Cultural Regions of the United States* (1975).²⁴ Like Zelinsky, Gastil describes regional culture as the legacy of the first effective settlers, supplemented and modified by those who came later. Whereas Zelinsky pointedly observes that "the interaction between settler and various phases of the physical habitat almost certainly engendered cultural change," Gastil prefers to ignore variations in the physical and cultural environment and simply asserts that "the fundamental lesson of history is that different people make different uses of the same environment."²⁵ In his definition, a region is simply a place where a large measure of cultural homogeneity exists. He places special emphasis on the culture of the "dominant elites" in business, education, religion, and politics, on the grounds that the origins of the elite are often more decisive than those of the masses.

In general, each of these contemporary scholars considers culture to be of preeminent importance in the analysis of spatial variations in human behavior. Although their vocabularies vary, each agrees that for a particular area to qualify as a region it must have some measure of cultural homogeneity. To express the concept more fully, a region is a large area

²³ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973).

²⁴ Raymond D. Gastil, *Cultural Regions of the United States* (Seattle, 1975).

²⁵ Zelinsky, *Cultural Geography*, 6; Gastil, *Cultural Regions*, 26.

where, for whatever combination of reasons, certain identifiable cultural characteristics have achieved a significant measure of uniformity or commonality. Each scholar also places great importance on the diffusion of cultural traits across the country in the settlement period of American history and how they came to dominate new areas farther west. Physiographic characteristics are generally accorded little or no significance; variables such as climate, topography, soils, and mineral resources are ignored. While Elazar, Zelinski, and Gastil do not reject the definitions or categories developed by economists and other social scientists as false or meaningless, they argue that economic or environmental characteristics have little utility in explaining the incidence and distribution of the social and cultural traits they seek to understand or explain. In these ways, then, they differ drastically from most earlier students of American regionalism, who typically rooted their analyses in physiographic differentiation and discussed economic, social, or cultural development within that frame of reference.

It is readily apparent that when we apply regionalist thinking, as I have described it, to the Great Plains, we are confronted with a problem of considerable proportions. A half century ago, physiographers saw a regional unity in topography, climate, soils, flora, and fauna that contemporary scholars tend to reject. Similarly, modern students of culture, such as Zelinsky and Gastil, argue even more convincingly that the Great Plains lacks cultural unity. Clearly, the culture of North Dakota more closely resembles that of Minnesota and Wisconsin than that of the Texas Panhandle; the culture of the southern plains obviously derives from what we customarily call the South and, speaking comparatively, has little in common with the northern plains.

Nevertheless, the Great Plains exists in the minds of persons even minimally knowledgeable about the United States.²⁶ Where or what the Great Plains is may be unclear, but the term unquestionably evokes an image of a huge area in the west-central part of the United States, oriented generally on a north-south axis, that is relatively flat, semiarid, and naturally treeless; it is commonly perceived as an agricultural or pastoral region of vast distances and few people. If, on a clear day, a tourist stands on the summit of Mount Evans in the Front Range of Colorado and gazes eastward, he knows that the physiographic area he sees in the distance is dramatically different from the mountains; if a person travels westward across Kansas or Nebraska, he knows, as the migrants on the Oregon Trail knew more than a century ago, that he is passing almost imperceptibly from one physiographic region to another. He understands that Minot,

²⁶ Perceptions and images of the Great Plains are treated in Brian W. Blouet and Merlin P. Lawson, eds., *Images of the Plains: The Role of Human Nature in Settlement* (Lincoln, 1975).

North Dakota; Scottsbluff, Nebraska; and Lubbock, Texas, are cities within the Great Plains; while he may be uncertain about Omaha, Kansas City, and Dallas, he knows that Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Houston are not on the plains.

How firmly rooted in popular usage the term *Great Plains* is remains debatable. The first person known to have used the term was Alexander Henry the Elder, who applied it in 1776 to the wheat grass prairies of southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. In the early nineteenth century, cartographers usually labeled the region as the Great American Desert or Great Western Prairie. Before the end of the century, however, *Great Plains* had come into frequent usage. John Wesley Powell, writing in 1896, deplored its currency because in his view the region was better understood as a vast plateau or series of plateaus.²⁷ By 1907 the term was sufficiently common for the popular writer Randall Parrish to use it as the title of a history of the region.²⁸ When Walter Prescott Webb and Nevin Fenneman published their books in 1931, they confirmed in scholarly work a usage that had become standard and had even penetrated elementary textbooks.²⁹

Popular usage of the term has increased noticeably in the last decade and may be observed in the names of motels, factories, distributing agencies, brokerage firms, museums, agricultural councils, and Girl Scout Councils.³⁰ At the same time, centers for regional studies have been established in several universities in both the United States and Canada;

²⁷ G. Malcolm Lewis, "The Cognition and Communication of Former Ideas about the Great Plains," Blouet and Luebke, eds., *Great Plains*, 33-38; "Regional Ideas and Reality in the Cis-Rocky Mountain West," *Transactions and Papers* [Institute of British Geographers, Publication No. 38] (London, 1966), 135-50.

²⁸ Randall Parrish, *The Great Plains: The Romance of Western American Exploration, Warfare, and Settlement, 1527-1870* (Chicago, 1907).

²⁹ The cultural geographer E. Cotton Mather makes the exaggerated claim that the term *Great Plains* won acceptance as a consequence of Webb's and Fenneman's books published in 1931. See E. Cotton Mather, "The American Great Plains," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 62 (June 1972), 239. At least one scholar denies that the Great Plains exists as a significant popular perception, arguing that people in the area tend to think in terms of smaller areas, such as the Texas Panhandle, Arkansas River Valley, or the Sandhills. See Ruth Hale, "Map of Vernacular Regions in America" (doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1971). See Mather, "American Great Plains," 238, for a map of the plains on this subject by Ruth Hale. Raymond Gastil sharply criticizes Hale's methodology. Moreover, he insists that regional consciousness is not a critical consideration in the study of culture. See Gastil, *Cultural Regions*, 34-35. In any case, however, the common use of the term is relatively recent and, no doubt, is less firmly fixed than popular images of the South, New England, or the Midwest.

³⁰ For a systematic study of regional indicators of this kind on a national scale see Wilbur Zelinsky, "North America's Vernacular Regions," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 70 (March 1980), 1-16. On a state level, see Terry G. Jordan, "Perceptual Regions in Texas," *Geographical Review*, 68 (July 1978), 293-307, and James R. Shortridge, "Vernacular Regions in Kansas," *American Studies*, 21 (Spring 1980), 73-94.

academic courses have been introduced in the history, geography, literature, sociology, and biology of the plains. University presses have undertaken extensive publication programs of scholarly work in Great Plains studies.³¹

But where is the Great Plains? What are its boundaries? No one disputes the western limits of the plains, which end generally at the Rocky Mountain cordillera; at the same time, few scholars are concerned with the northern or southern limits. It is the eastern boundary that is elusive, shifting, perpetually imprecise—a transition zone. It is ordinarily described in geographic terms—rainfall, vegetation, topography, soils, or a combination of these and other similar variables.³² Most of these boundaries transect the eastern parts of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, central Oklahoma and include the Texas Panhandle and the Edwards Plateau.

The location of the eastern limits of the Great Plains was central to the thesis developed by Walter Prescott Webb, who built on the foundation laid fifty years earlier by John Wesley Powell. Powell argued that the region was integrated by rainfall of less than twenty inches per year. To this criterion Webb added flatness and absence of trees. Webb taught, somewhat inaccurately, that the frontier of settlement had moved westward in the nineteenth century until it reached the Great Plains, where it faltered for several decades, unable to overcome natural obstacles or to displace the fierce native Indian tribes, whose adjustment to the plains environment had been magnificent. Successful settlement of the plains had to await the evolution of an appropriate technology—the revolver, the railroad, the windmill made of steel, the barbed-wire fence—and of better methods of irrigation and dry farming, as well as suitable land and water laws. In the meantime, Webb taught, agricultural settlement bypassed the Great Plains for outposts on the West Coast and in the mountains. A second attempt to occupy the plains was made after the Civil War. This

³¹ North Dakota State University has maintained its Institute for Regional Studies for many years. More recently centers for Great Plains studies have been established at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and at Emporia State University. Augustana College (Sioux Falls, South Dakota) has its Center for Western Studies. In Canada the influential Canadian Plains Research Center is located at the University of Regina. In addition to works already cited, University of Nebraska Press has recently published W. Raymond Wood and Margot Liberty, eds., *Anthropology on the Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1980); Paul Schach, ed., *Languages in Conflict: Linguistic Acculturation on the Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1980); Virginia Faulkner and Frederick C. Luebke, eds., *Vision and Refuge: Essays in the Literature of the Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1981). The Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, publishes *Great Plains Quarterly*.

³² The distribution of these variables is recorded on a map in James E. Wright and Sarah Z. Rosenberg, eds., *The Great Plains Experience: Readings in the History of a Region* (Lincoln, 1978), 17. See also Carle C. Zimmerman, "The Great Plains as a Region," Carle C. Zimmerman and Seth Russell, eds., *Symposium on the Great Plains of North America* (Fargo, North Dakota, 1967), 3-9.

time it was successful and the Last West—the Great Plains—was rapidly populated, especially in the 1880s.³³

Given to the doctrine of environmental determinism, Webb had misread the historical record and seriously overstated his case. Most of his evidence was drawn from the Texas experience and then inappropriately applied to the entire plains region. In the central area, settlement had halted at the western boundaries of Missouri and Arkansas, not because pioneering techniques had failed in a new and strange environment, but because the land to the west was closed by law to settlement until the Kansas and Nebraska territories were organized in 1854 and treaties with indigenous Indian tribes subsequently negotiated. In the north the agricultural frontier moved steadily north and west across Missouri and Iowa into Nebraska and later into the Dakota territory. Demographic studies have shown that at no time did the westward sweep of settlement falter or hesitate as it approached the 98th meridian on the central or northern plains. At no time had American civilization “toppled over in temporary failure,” as Webb had said.³⁴

Nevertheless, Webb’s environmentalist influence was profound. Even though he had several harsh critics, his interpretation of the Great Plains experience was widely applauded. Scholars in many fields seemed to accept Webb’s determinism—the idea that the Great Plains environment was so powerful and so dominating that human societies were forced to conform to its dictates.³⁵ Webb carried his interpretation into literature as well. If life on the plains was as different as he believed, then that difference should also be present in the literature that emerges from the area. Webb analyzed cowboy ballads, folksongs, and a few of the works of Owen Wister, Andy Adams, Emerson Hough, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, plus others. Among farm novelists he was particularly attracted by Hamlin Garland and Ole Rølvaag.³⁶ Not surprisingly, Webb always found the environmental influence that he was looking for, and, as his critics have pointed out, conveniently ignored all other evidence.

Most other students of regional culture, however, do not build so exclusively on environmental or physiographic foundations. Cultural historians and geographers, folklorists, linguists—especially those interested in the maintenance of immigrant forms—tend to recognize and interpret evidence showing that migrants, either native- or foreign-born, successfully sustained important elements of their culture, despite the corrosive effects of a difficult environment. Patterns of migration are

³³ Luebke, “Introduction,” Blouet and Luebke, eds., *Great Plains*, x-xii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁵ Perhaps the best-known book that adheres closely to Webb’s principles is by Carl F. Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition* (Norman, 1955).

³⁶ Webb, *Great Plains*, 453-84.

central to their research. Since the flow of culture has usually followed east-to-west lines, the Great Plains, with its north-south orientation, has not been a useful unit of study.³⁷ Almost inevitably, these scholars, like Raymond Gastil, have tended to slight the unique physiographic and historical character of the Great Plains in much the same way the environmentalists have tended to ignore the persistence of significant cultural variations in the same region.

It should be obvious, of course, that wide variations in culture may exist within one environment; it is equally obvious that environment imposes certain limits on human activity. In the words of Louis Wirth, "Nature sets the stage, but it is man that is the actor. Nature furnishes the possibilities and sets limits. It is among these possibilities and within these limits that man can choose."³⁸ Thus, fruitful studies of the Great Plains (or any other region) can emerge from analyses that are based on the interaction between environment and culture; regional studies should be founded on the complex interrelationships between the people and the land they live on. As Lewis Mumford pointed out a half century ago, "Geographical conditions are primordial, while social differentiations . . . are emergent: one is foundation, the other pinnacle." Yet the environmental base does not determine the culture of a region because the society that develops in a given place necessarily brings with it cultural elements and historical experience from somewhere else.³⁹ As Elazar, Zelinsky, and Gastil have demonstrated, patterns of migration hold the key to regional culture.

Thus, in order to understand the people of the Great Plains, they must be thought of as immigrants. None of the culture groups presently inhabiting the plains have been there for very long. This is also true of the various Indian tribes, few of whom had wandered onto the plains before 1500.⁴⁰ Remember, too, that by law there were no permanent white

³⁷ Numerous studies have charted the paths of cultural diffusion in the United States. Among the most influential is Fred Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 55 (December 1965), 549-77; but see also Wilbur Zelinsky, "An Approach to the Religious Geography of the United States: Patterns of Church Membership in 1952," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 51 (June 1961), 139-93. For the Great Plains see John C. Hudson, "Migration to an American Frontier," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66 (June 1976), 242-65, and Robert C. Ostergren, "Prairie Bound: Migration Patterns to a Swedish Settlement on the Dakota Frontier," Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1980), 73-91.

³⁸ Wirth, "Limitations of Regionalism," Jensen, ed., *Regionalism in America*, 386.

³⁹ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938), 311.

⁴⁰ For a convenient summary of Indian movement onto the Great Plains from prehistoric times to the nineteenth century see Elizabeth R. Henning, "Native Americans on the Great Plains: Cultural Diversity and Adaptation," Wright and Rosenberg, eds., *Great Plains Experience*, 35-45.

settlers before the 1850s and that the Great Plains proper had few non-Indian inhabitants before 1880. Huge districts, especially in the northern plains region of Montana and the Dakotas, were settled in the twentieth century. We must discover who these settlers were, where they came from, when and why they emigrated. Knowledge of how they immigrated—singly or in groups, in stages or directly—is essential. We must comprehend the culture they brought with them—group values, attitudes, folkways, religions, and languages. We must understand the physical and social environments from which they came—not only the climate, topography, and soils but the social and occupational structures of the homeland, be that Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Germany, or Sweden.⁴¹ It is important to have some command of their material culture—clothing, tools, and utensils, as well as materials and methods used in the construction of houses, barns, and churches. Similarly, aspects of expressive culture—folksongs, hymns, sermons—help us understand the immigrant experience.

Immigrant culture must then be studied within the context of the new environment to determine what was usable and what was not, what substitutions were possible, and what substitutions were in fact acceptable. We must ask how great the difference was between the old and new environment. For the Volga Germans, the plains of Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado were much like the Russian steppes from which they came. Because they tended to emigrate in large groups directly to the plains, where they settled in comparatively compact colonies, they were able to sustain their culture in ways impossible for the more numerous Germans from Germany, who generally arrived in stages in the classic chain migration pattern and who tended to settle on farms and in towns in a much more scattered fashion.⁴² Compare the German-Russian experience with that of the Norwegians, who were the most numerous single ethnocultural group in North Dakota. Coming from fishing villages and farms nestled in narrow valleys between forest-covered mountains, they settled in a drastically different environment—semiarid, incredibly expansive, virtually treeless, half a continent distant from the nearest sea, in summer hotter and in winter colder than anything they could have imagined, and

⁴¹For outstanding examples of such research see Robert Ostergren, "A Community Transplanted: The Formative Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Community in the Upper Middle West," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 5 (April 1979), 189-212, and Robert C. Ostergren, "The Immigrant Church as a Symbol of Community and Place in the Upper Midwest," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 1 (Fall 1981), 225-38. Another valuable study is Reinhard Doerries, "Church and Faith on the Great Plains Frontier: Acculturation Problems of German-Americans," *Amerikastudien*, 24 (1979), 275-87.

⁴²Frederick C. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900* (Lincoln, 1969), 16-32; Frederick C. Luebke, "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly*, VIII (October 1977), 405-30.

all of this accompanied by winds of startling ferocity. Both the mode of emigration and the drastic differences in physical environment made it more difficult for Norwegians than for German Russians to transfer their culture to the plains.

This emphasis on immigrant culture is basic to an understanding of the Great Plains development, particularly in the central and northern parts, where present-day populations consist primarily of descendants of late-nineteenth-century immigrants from northern and central Europe.⁴³ In the Canadian prairie provinces, the ethnic mosaic is even more varied and intense.⁴⁴ All these ethnocultural groups were ignored by Walter Prescott Webb, who merely pointed out that European immigrants, as well as blacks and Asians, avoided the Great Plains and left the region to old-stock Americans of English and Scottish ancestry.⁴⁵ Webb's assertion has some validity for the southern plains, but even there he ignored the Mexicans and the numerous Germans, Wends, and Poles who settled in his own neighborhood of Texas. This omission should not surprise us—it was a direct consequence of his environmentalist approach.

The question of the density of ethnic population holds special importance for the Great Plains, where small numbers of people are thinly spread over vast spaces. In order for ethnocultural forms to be sustained over time, they must have the support of institutions such as churches, schools, the immigrant-language press, social and cultural associations of all kinds, mutual benefit or insurance societies, and businesses that cater to the ethnic trade. A certain level of concentration in the ethnic population—a “critical mass”—must be attained before the supportive institutions can be generated. If they appear, ethnic language and culture will be maintained for a longer period of time; without their support, immigrants will tend to lose their ethnocultural characteristics and assimilate rapidly. Obviously, such auxiliary institutions cannot easily be created or maintained in areas where the ethnic population is thinly distributed, as on the Great Plains. For the same reason, the religious characteristics of a given ethnic minority are especially important. Churches were commonly the easiest of immigrant institutions to create; often they were the only ones to survive in the sparsely populated plains, where they frequently

⁴³ Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, xxviii-xxxii.

⁴⁴ Canadian scholars have produced an impressive literature in this field of western history. See the periodical *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, published since 1968. Individual volumes, such as Martin L. Kovacs, ed., *Ethnic Canadians: Culture and Education* (Regina, 1978), and Howard Palmer, ed., *The Settlement of the West* (Calgary, Alberta, 1977), also suggest the extent and quality of this research.

⁴⁵ Webb, *Great Plains*, 509. Terry G. Jordan, “Annals Map Supplement Number Thirteen: Population Origin Groups in Rural Texas,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 60 (June 1970), 404-5.

provided the nucleus of ethnic life and functioned as substitutes for the array of social and cultural societies that were available in urban centers.⁴⁶

The level of density also affects the internal cohesion of an ethnic group, its homogeneity, and its sense of peoplehood. The tiny clusters of German-speaking Hutterites of South Dakota, Montana, and Alberta have these qualities in abundance; so do the Mexicans, but in a rather different way. The degree of clustering required for the maintenance of ethnic language and culture is also related to the social distance perceived by an ethnic group between its own distinctive way of life and what it discerns as the culture of the host or receiving society. The greater the difference perceived between the characteristics of the immigrant group and those of the mainstream society, the greater will be the tendency for clustering. Moreover, such differences increase the potential for ethnocultural clash. In other words, the social environment, like the physical, must be included in our research design.⁴⁷

Consideration of ethnicity, among other variables, prompts us to formulate systematic methods in regional studies. I offer two basic principles. The first is that we should study the interaction between culture and environment over time. The second is that regional studies must include appropriate *comparisons* in time, space, and culture; we must ask how a specific behavior of a certain social grouping within a given region compares (1) to that of other social categories in the same environment, (2) to that of the same group in other environments, and (3) to what the behavior of the group in question became later in time.⁴⁸

This is a big order. Has anyone in Great Plains studies attempted such systematic analysis? Two collections of essays on Great Plains topics have appeared that are partly conceived and organized along the line I have suggested, but certainly no one has attempted such an interpretation on a grand scale in the manner of Webb's *The Great Plains*.⁴⁹ There are studies treating highly circumscribed areas or topics, but few of these works

⁴⁶ Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Historical Approaches to the Study of Rural Ethnic Communities," Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, 1-18. See also Robert P. Swierenga, "The New Rural History: Defining the Parameters," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 1 (Fall 1981), 211-23. Portions of this and several following paragraphs are drawn from Luebke, "Ethnic Minority Groups," 394-95.

⁴⁷ This, of course, is not a new idea. The environmentalism of both Turner and Semple at the turn of the century was broad enough to include social variables. See Ellen Churchill Semple, *Influences of Geographical Environment: On the Basis of Ratzel's System of Anthropogeography* (New York, 1911).

⁴⁸ Turner, Huntington, and other writers in the early twentieth century also urged the study of such interaction, but in their interpretations it was usually a case of discerning powerful environmental forces and ignoring the persistence of cultural forms in uncongenial environments. Moreover, their analyses usually lacked systematic comparison in time and space, as well as to other cultures.

⁴⁹ Blouet and Luebke, eds., *Great Plains*; Wright and Rosenberg, eds., *Great Plains Experience*.

transcend description.⁵⁰ The best of these works have been produced by cultural geographers. For example, Donald Meinig neatly blends spatial analysis with the study of culture in his *Imperial Texas* (1969) to show how Texas society evolved over time from a relatively simple structure to its present complexity.⁵¹ What distinguishes Meinig's approach from that of the environmentalists is his working assumption that race, ethnicity, language, religion, and custom continue to separate Americans in fundamental ways and that the Texas environment, itself highly varied, has not produced homogenized Texans, popular lore to the contrary.

Another highly effective study in Great Plains regional history is Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. Offering an ecological interpretation, Worster analyzes the relationship between the physical environment of the region and the capitalistic, exploitative culture of its inhabitants. This interaction resulted in one of the great ecological disasters of all time—the Dust Bowl, an event that occurred “because the culture was operating in precisely the way it was supposed to.” Worster studies two counties in detail; he also shows that the experiences of the 1930s, difficult and sobering though they were, have not modified the attitudes of plainsmen toward land use. Worster enriches his account with comparisons to other times and places, but they are not systematic.⁵²

How one's work should be organized—temporally, spatially, or culturally—depends upon the question being asked. We should expect historians to think in terms of *temporal* relationships, for history in its simplest sense is the study of change over time. Webb's thesis, for example, was that white settlement of the Great Plains was delayed until a technology equal to the task had evolved; until then the Indians, who had effectively adapted their culture to the flat, dry, and treeless plains environment, could not be successfully challenged. But the principle behind Webb's interpretation is that people with technologically primitive cultures must conform to environmental conditions to a much greater extent than groups with advanced technologies. Thus, Indian tribes that migrated on to the plains tended to develop remarkably similar ways of life,

⁵⁰ For example, see Huber Self, *Environment and Man in Kansas: A Geographical Analysis* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1978). This book provides a wealth of data but fails to interpret effectively the relationships between environmental and cultural variables. See also the series of attractive atlases on Nebraska produced under the direction of Merlin P. Lawson: Richard E. Lonsdale and John E. Magill, eds., *Economic Atlas of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1977); James W. Williams and Doug Murfield, eds., *Agricultural Atlas of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1977); and Merlin P. Lawson, Kenneth F. Dewey, and Ralph E. Neild, *Climatic Atlas of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1977).

⁵¹ D. W. Meinig, *Imperial Texas: An Interpretive Essay in Cultural Geography* (Austin, 1969).

⁵² Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979), 4. For strikingly different interpretations see Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque, 1979); and R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago, 1981).

regardless of where they came from—the wooded Great Lakes region, the mountain valleys to the west, or the southern reaches of the Mississippi River basin. Even though important cultural differences remained among the Pawnees, the Comanches, or the Sioux, they all integrated the white man's horse into their cultures, lived off the seemingly limitless herds of bison, and for a short time—no more than two centuries—enjoyed a golden age, a brief flowering of culture, before they were overcome by the technologically advanced and numerically superior Euroamericans.⁵³

Many other scholars, of course, have made temporal comparisons in their analyses of the Great Plains. For example, Terry Jordan, another cultural geographer, has shown how German immigrants in Texas were initially forced by environmental realities to abandon German cropping practices and to adopt approximately the same methods used by other farmers in the area.⁵⁴ After a decade or two, however, these Germans reintroduced crops that were more closely associated with their cultural heritage. They had in the meantime acquired the means, technological or otherwise, to return to traditional modes that had been impossible in the settlement period.

Just as historians conceptualize in terms of time, we should expect geographers to think in terms of *spatial* relationships. It is a curious fact, however, that historians have also effectively analyzed the Great Plains experience in spatial terms. Writing in the mode of Turnerian environmentalism, they have shown how the environment has dictated a low density of population. They have described how the people of the plains have adapted their agricultural practices, governmental arrangements, and institutional relationships as the technology of transportation and communication has annihilated space. Meanwhile, technological advances in agriculture have made possible enormous increases in the average size of farms. Rural population has declined accordingly, thereby causing severe dislocations in local government, education, health care, and highway construction and maintenance. Much of the recent history of the Great Plains may be understood as adjustment, usually inadequate and often ineptly managed, to changing spatial relationships.⁵⁵

⁵³ Waldo R. Wedel, "Holocene Cultural Adaptations in the Republican River Basin," Blouet and Luebke, eds., *Great Plains*, 1-25. Dozens of titles could be cited for Indian adaptations to plains environment and the simultaneous retention of distinctive traits; among them are Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* (Norman, 1952); John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (Norman, 1958); Richard White, "The Cultural Landscape of the Pawnees," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 2 (Winter 1982), 31-40.

⁵⁴ Terry G. Jordan, *German Seed in Texas Soil: Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth-Century Texas* (Austin, 1966).

⁵⁵ For examples, see Gilbert C. Fite, "The Great Plains: Promises, Problems, and Prospects," Blouet and Luebke, eds., *Great Plains*, 187-204; Mary W. M. Hargreaves, "Space: Its

Finally, there are those scholars who integrate their regional studies in terms of *culture*. In an article specifically treating the Great Plains states, Daniel Elazar identifies migration as the key to understanding the political behavior of the region. He sees little, if any, unity in the Great Plains; instead, he describes a kind of shading from north to south. North Dakota, for example, was settled by streams of Anglo-Americans from northern states such as New York, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota and by immigrants from northern Europe, especially Norwegians. They combined New England moralism with Scandinavian pietism and believed that it was possible to achieve a unified society—a commonwealth—on the basis of moral principles. Politically speaking, the good life could be attained through positive measures taken in the public interest. As a result of these prevailing attitudes, North Dakota has tended in times of stress to use the power of the state to intervene in economic affairs on a dramatic scale. It is a state with a history of radical agrarian politics, of farmer cooperatives, unions, and political action organizations. It is the only state in the Union with a state-owned bank and state-owned grain elevators.⁵⁶

Several hundred miles to the south lies Nebraska, a state populated by rather different streams of migration. Highly dependent in its early years on its Missouri River connection with the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, Nebraska received a more heterogeneous population than North Dakota. Its Platte River valley has provided the most important route across the plains—the Oregon Trail, the first transcontinental railroad, and more recently, a heavily traveled interstate highway. Nebraska drew people from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and other states of the lower Midwest; Germans—always highly varied in religion, customs, and dialects—were by far the most numerous of its European immigrants. Characterized by religious diversity, Nebraskans preferred that government should promote the search, not for an idealistic commonwealth, but for individual economic opportunity. It should leave moral questions to the churches. While moralistic components have certainly not been absent from its population, a majority has usually embraced the individualistic point of view.⁵⁷

Nebraska makes an interesting contrast to Kansas, its neighbor to the south. Kansas had been settled first in the 1850s by New Englanders determined to stop the spread of slavery onto the plains. Their Yankee

Institutional Impact in the Development of the Great Plains," *ibid.*, 204-24. See also the work of nonhistorians such as Howard Ottoson, *Land and People in the Northern Plains Transition Area* (Lincoln, 1966), and Leslie Hewes, *The Suitcase Farming Frontier: A Study in the Historical Geography of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1973).

⁵⁶ Daniel J. Elazar, "Political Culture on the Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly*, XI (July 1980), 261-83.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

moralism easily carried over to prohibition and other forms of state regulation of personal behavior that were unacceptable to many European immigrants. Kansas thereby won a reputation for political moralism that attracted Swedish and German pietists but deflected many thousands of other Germans, Czechs, Poles, and Irish to Nebraska, where there was less political interference with pluralistic life-styles. By the end of the century, Nebraska had received proportionately twice as many European immigrants as Kansas.

These studies by Meinig, Worster, Jordan, Elazar, and other scholars demonstrate that the key to effective regional analysis lies in the use of systematic comparisons. They have effectively shown that the old and much-traveled thoroughfare between environment and culture is a two-way street and that it can still bear heavy traffic.

By taking a broad view of the Great Plains studies and of the conceptual schemes and research methods scholars in various disciplines have used, I have identified and outlined two basic approaches to the study of regions. Earlier analyses tended to focus on the ways that physical and social environments of a given region served to unify it and to distinguish it from the country as a whole. Later students of regionalism have founded their inquiries on culture, showing how it filters reality and fosters a wide range of behavior within a single environment. The two views overlap in many ways, and they have not been exclusive of each other. The effect of the older scholarship was to reveal regional uniformities, just as the newer scholarship stresses intraregional variation. Each discerns relationships that are beyond the analytical power of the other. Regions are therefore best conceptualized in terms of the interplay between environment and culture; they are best described and analyzed through appropriate comparisons in time, space, and culture.