

A Place for Regions in the Modern U.S. Survey?

David M. Wrobel

In the fall of 2000, when I began teaching at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, a young Hawaiian woman in my introductory U.S. history survey (1865–present) class asked me if there would be much coverage of Hawaii in the course.¹ Having recently relocated from the East Coast where I had not worked with any Hawaiian students and had not given much thought to the place of the Pacific Rim in the U.S. survey, I was unprepared for the question, but spent time during the semester thinking about Hawaii's place in the course. The experience illuminated a larger set of complications for teaching the introduction to modern U.S. history. As a British expatriate who for nearly two decades has taught this course close to fifty times at two large state universities, one private regional university, and two liberal arts colleges, and in three regions—the East, the Midwest, and the West—I have often struggled with the place of place in our efforts to condense nearly a century and a half of national experience into two and a half hours of face time a week for fifteen weeks.

I understand that our colleagues teaching European and world history face even greater challenges regarding chronological breadth of coverage, as they are rarely slow to remind us. But on one level, Europeanists have an advantage: they are analyzing, especially in the modern period, the interactions of nation-states on a continent. Historians of the United States deal with a geographic area comparable in size to Europe but belonging to a single nation and marked by significant regional differences and conflicts of interest. Yet, as a category for analysis, region is far less evident in modern American history teaching than the nation-state is for modern Europeanists.

Such pedagogical matters bring to mind earlier explorations of the place of regions in the national story. In the wake of World War I the historian Frederick Jackson Turner suggested important parallels between American regions (for which, unfortunately, he used the less positive term *sections*) and European nation-states. He wrote a memoran-

David M. Wrobel is professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

I began teaching my own sections of the U.S. survey as a graduate teaching associate at Ohio University in the late 1980s, then taught the course at the College of Wooster, Ohio (1990–1992), Hartwick College, New York (1992–1994), Widener University, Pennsylvania (1994–2000), and now at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (2000–). I am grateful to the students at those institutions who have made this part of my teaching load one of the best parts of my professional life. My thanks, too, to the teachers of Jefferson County, Colorado, with whom I have had the good fortune of working in Teaching American History institutes since 2002 and whose keen insights have sharpened my thinking about the U.S. survey.

Readers may contact Wrobel at david.wrobel@unlv.edu.

¹ What a pleasure it is to acknowledge the role played by that student, Megan Tavares, in prompting me to think outside the East Coast/Midwest box into which my conceptualization of the modern U.S. survey had been crammed. Megan was 1 of 7 Hawaiian students out of the 50 enrolled in that section.

dum on the matter for President Woodrow Wilson's edification titled "International Political Parties in a Durable League of Nations," which his friend and Harvard University colleague Charles Homer Haskins presented to the American delegation in Paris in December 1918. Turner suggested that a system of European region-wide political parties would mirror the American system of national political parties, which worked across regional lines in a large geographic area and would help ensure lasting peace in war-ravaged Europe. Turner's memorandum had no discernible impact on the peace negotiations; we are not sure whether Wilson (who had known Turner from their days at Johns Hopkins University a generation earlier) even read the document. Nonetheless, Turner's effort to influence contemporary affairs should at least remind us that region has at times been a useful unit of analysis for American historians in the twentieth century and perhaps merits fuller consideration in our survey courses.²

Regions are prominent in the opening chapters of the second volume of U.S. history texts, which begin with the aftermath of sectional conflict and the efforts to reconstruct the South, then move on to explore the New South and the conquest of the Far West. They go on to address the regional divides manifested in the election of 1896, with William Jennings Bryan's fusion ticket winning the South, the Plains, and most of the West, and William McKinley's Republican party controlling the industrial Northeast and Midwest and most of the West Coast (a near mirroring, in reverse, of the "blue" and "red" states in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections). Regionalism reigns in the coverage of the late nineteenth century in those textbooks.

But as the coverage unfolds, there is much to support Patricia Limerick's lament over the absence of the West in U.S. texts after the close of the nineteenth century. The chronological implications of Turner's 1893 "frontier thesis," with its emphasis on the closing of the frontier and attendant passing of American western distinctiveness, still seems to shape textbooks' coverage of the West. But the second half of Turner's career, devoted to the significance of regions, has been largely forgotten. The frontier is settled, the West has been incorporated into the nation, and, thus, its significance as a region has dissipated. Woodrow Wilson expressed just this sentiment in his 1897 essay "The Making of the Nation," emphasizing the forces of healthy uniformity that marked national development. "[A]s the country grows it will inevitably become more homogenous," Wilson wrote, adding that the day was in sight when the nation would be without an East and a West. He also envisioned an end to North-South sectional divisions as the West lost its distinctiveness. The presence of the western territories had been instrumental to the coming of the Civil War, Wilson explained; thus the absence of a western frontier would facilitate the national healing process.³

But who was closer to the mark—Wilson, who looked forward to the day when regions would hold no significance, or Turner, who tried to convince the president of the

² See Allan G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down* (Norman, 1998), 339. This effort marked the second half of Frederick Jackson Turner's career and includes such largely forgotten classics of the historical essay genre as "Sections and Nation" (1922) and "The Significance of the Section in American History" (1925), both of which are included in the posthumously published collection of his essays, Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York, 1932).

³ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Case of the Premature Departure: The Trans-Mississippi West and American History Textbooks," *Journal of American History*, 78 (March 1992), 1380–94. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, 1894), 199–227. Woodrow Wilson, "The Making of the Nation," *Atlantic Monthly*, 80 (July 1897), 1–14.

significance of American regional relations as a blueprint for a decimated Europe? Have the homogenizing forces of modernization rendered the notion of region moribund as a category of analysis for twentieth-century American history, as Wilson and more recent members of the “death of region” approach, such as William Leach, would have us believe? Or was Turner right about the important lessons that could be learned from studying how historical processes played out differently in the nation’s varied regions? With the close of the nineteenth century, textbooks essentially wave goodbye to the South and the West, and say hello to the “American Century.”⁴

I am not suggesting that regions never slip back into the picture in textbooks or in our U.S. history survey coverage of the twentieth century. Who among us does not place special emphasis on the particularly virulent racism that characterized late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century southern Progressivism, or the South’s response both to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and to the surge of civil rights activity in the region that followed?⁵ But is the danger with this approach that we end up making outliers of regions, rendering them strange anomalies? Thus the South is presented as particularly racially regressive, in contrast to a more racially enlightened national norm.

But consider how recent works by Robert O. Self, Matthew Countryman, and others take the modern civil rights movement out of the South and demonstrate both the depth of resistance and the significance of systematic reform efforts in northern and western cities. This scholarship illuminates the advantages of a renewed emphasis on a regionalist framework, albeit one not beholden to traditional boundaries of textbook coverage (that is, the South as *the* regional site of the African American civil rights movement).⁶ Similarly, coverage of the varied racial underpinnings of Progressive Era reform that played out in different regions—from the virulent white racism that marked southern Progressivism and was manifested in the systematic segregation and disenfranchisement of African Americans, to WASP lobbying efforts in the Northeast to restrict the new immigration, to white western support for the anti-Asian land laws passed on the West Coast, such as California’s Alien Land Act of 1913—provides a rich backdrop for consideration of the admittedly already complex layers of reform motivations. A more comprehensive regionalist approach takes us beyond traditional models that render the South a convenient regional dumping ground for the nation’s shortcomings regarding race.

With these matters in mind, I began the fall 2007 semester with a challenge: How could I keep regionalism in the U.S. survey, in some meaningful way, even after the textbooks have made their premature departure from place-centered analysis at the end of the nineteenth century? But I also needed to determine whether *region* as a concept holds any real meaning or significance for the students in my modern U.S. history survey (a class of fifty-two mostly nonmajors). If region did not matter to them, there would be less incentive for me to labor to keep it at the center of the survey as we moved through the twen-

⁴ William Leach, *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life* (New York, 1999). For textbooks that usher in the “American Century” after the close of the nineteenth century, see, for example, Steven M. Gillon and Cathy D. Matson, *The American Experiment: A History of the United States*, vol. II: *Since 1865* (Boston, 2006); and George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History* (2 vols., New York, 2007), II. While both of these texts occasionally mention developments in the West, the South, and other regions in the twentieth century, regions do not appear in any subsequent chapter titles. The same is true for virtually all U.S. texts.

⁵ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

⁶ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, 2003); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2007); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York, 2003).

tieth century. If the students cared about region, then my efforts to elevate its significance would likely find a receptive audience.

So I distributed a survey that asked them six basic, open-ended questions, hoping to elicit thoughtful and spontaneous responses. The survey was administered along with a student information sheet that I have handed out since 2000, when the inquiry of that Hawaiian student prompted me to learn more about my students' backgrounds.⁷ The items on the regionalism survey are as follows:

1. Name the region you were born in and/or the region you now reside in.
2. Name as many U.S. regions as you can.
3. What is a region? How big or small can a region be?
4. Are states bigger than regions or are regions bigger than states?
5. Why do regions matter?
6. What is your favorite region and why?

To be clear, I was not trying to test the students' knowledge of the significance of regionalism in modern American history; rather, I wanted to know whether the concept of regionalism held any significance for them.⁸

As one might imagine, the responses were varied, though they did not come close to matching the national, regional, and racial/ethnic diversity of the class. The students included a number of native and resident Las Vegans (twenty-three), many of them recent transplants from all over the nation and the world (including Costa Rica, El Salvador, England, Serbia, and Thailand). There were a good number of Californians (ten), a handful of New Yorkers (four), along with current and/or former residents of Ethiopia, Germany, Guam, Hawaii, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. There were others from the American West (Alaska, Arizona, Montana, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming), the mid-Atlantic (New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.), the Midwest (Illinois and Ohio), the South (Florida and Georgia), and New England (Maine), and a single northern Nevadan. As a group they were probably a little older than students in introductory survey courses at most institutions.⁹ And, as a group, they seemed to care deeply about regions.

The students' responses demonstrated a surprisingly good general knowledge of American regions (question 2), from the broadest delineations of North, South, East, and West, to more geographically specific regional units, such as the Southwest, Pacific Northwest, New England, Great Plains, or Great Basin. While a good number expressed some apprehension about committing to paper an actual definition of a region (question 3) (it was the first day of class and their trepidation is understandable), most proceeded to provide very cogent definitions of the kind that scholars of regionalism would do well to consider. One noted that a region is "an area of land that is related geographically, culturally and

⁷ The student information sheet provides me with data on students' rank, major, minor, home town, parents' place of birth, number of credits enrolled in, and number of hours worked at a paying job. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, is a largely commuter campus where it is not uncommon for nontraditional-aged students (25 and older) to work 40 hours a week and take 15 or more credit hours of coursework. For more information from the surveys, see <http://www.indiana.edu/~jah/textbooks/2008/wrobel/>.

⁸ I am indebted to my teaching assistant Kelli Brockschmidt, a proud Michigander, who helped tabulate and organize the results of the survey.

⁹ Seven of the students in the class identified as 25 or older. The rest checked the 18–24 box, aside from two 17-year-olds. The average age of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, undergraduate population in 2006 was 23.9, and 26.5% of the students are 25 years old or older. "F. Student Life," *University of Nevada, Las Vegas Common Data Set 2006*, <http://ir.unlv.edu/reports/cds/pdf2006/f.pdf>.

economically . . . as small as one state and as large as 4–6.” Another student remarked that a region is “an imaginary boundary line wherein its inhabitants define themselves.” Yet another wrote, “A region is an area of [a] country that usually consists of a group of states with the . . . same time zone and climate.” One respondent simply noted that “a region is an area of the country that shares similar traits” and added that “a region can be as big and small as the specific traits spread.” Many others emphasized similarities in culture, climate, geography, economic infrastructure, and political ideology. Most concluded, in response to question 4, that while regions are generally bigger than states, states can be larger than some regions and states often include distinct regions. One explained that “a region could be as big as a country or as small as a city or town,” and another added that “a region has no rules on size.”

Regions really do seem to matter for many of these students, and a sizeable majority of the class articulated why with striking clarity (question 5). Since regions include “different cultures and ways of living” we need to be aware of them, one wrote. Another noted that regions help us identify “characteristics of business, government, and population.” Some students emphasized that all regions are important because they are distinct and that distinctiveness stems from factors of “history, economy, climate, and geography.” Others underscored the political significance of regions—elections can hinge on the regional appeal of candidates; some underscored their utility for categorizing a vast nation in ways more instantly recognizable than the boundaries of the fifty states. One student stated that “people in various regions tend to feel more connected to each other over citizens in other parts of the country,” and others emphasized the role of regions in connecting adjacent states culturally, religiously, economically, and politically. Another student joked that regions matter because their existence “makes it easier for people to discriminate against other people in other regions for entertainment value,” and there may be more than a kernel of truth in that ostensibly flippant remark.

The last question (What is your favorite region and why?) elicited the most revealing responses. Students expressed very strong attachment to place, particularly to the places of their childhood. Relatively few respondents claimed a favorite region other than the one in which they were born and raised. Those hailing from the East Coast expressed a strong affinity for that region over the West. One Alaska resident wrote that that he was born “rather closer to the Arctic circle than most people” and now “reside[s] in a region known as hell, located in the Great Basin of the western United States.” He concluded that his preference was for his home region, “where it rains more than twice a year.” Another westerner explained that she preferred her region “because people aren’t as uptight or religious over here (generally).”

But most expressions of sense of place were more positive. The vast majority of Las Vegans self-described as being residents of the Southwest and demonstrated as deep a “topophilia,” or attachment to place, for their home region as those from other regions did.¹⁰ They emphasized the value of the diversity of cultures in the Southwest and the sunny weather. A handful of Las Vegans expressed a preference for the Northeast and/or New England, because of the cultural richness of those regions, the Midwest because of

¹⁰ It was interesting to see the ease with which the Las Vegas residents identified their home region—the Southwest. The Las Vegas Valley lies at the fringes of two deserts, the Mojave and Sonora, and, arguably, three regions, the Great Basin, the Southwest, and the expanding Inland Empire of southern California, but all residents of the Valley described their region similarly. The term *topophilia* was coined in Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, 1974).

its small-town atmosphere, or the Northwest because of its climate, scenery, and laid-back life-style. The Californians almost invariably emphasized the scenic beauty and temperate weather of their state; one pointed to “the weather and women” as the Golden State’s greatest attractions. Another Californian, whose family roots are in New Orleans, chose the South as her favorite region because most of her family still lives there. One student of Mexican origin underscored the absence of the international borderline that ostensibly divides the southwestern part of North America, noting that he was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico, North America, and now lives in Henderson, Nevada, North America. He added that “the northern region” was his favorite “because my home town is located there” (it was unclear which of his two home towns he meant; perhaps both). A number of rather self-confident students from all over the United States noted that the respective regions in which they were born or now resided were the most important ones largely because of their own literal emergence or current presence there. A New Yorker of Italian extraction proclaimed his preference for the “East Coast, where . . . [there are] more real Italians.”

It is difficult to draw any clear conclusions from this body of data, other than the obvious one: regions and regional identity are important to this particular group of students. My study is tiny compared to Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano’s survey of two thousand eleventh- and twelfth-graders and two thousand adults over the age of forty-five. Toward the end of the semester I administered the Wineburg/Monte-Sano survey to my students, whose judgment may have been clouded, or illuminated, by the course coverage. The results differed from those culled from Wineburg and Monte-Sano’s larger survey samples. In response to the first question, asking for the five most famous Americans (excluding presidents and their wives), the top three choices were Martin Luther King Jr. (chosen by 32 students), Bill Gates (17 students), and Benjamin Franklin (16 students), with Thomas Edison (8 students) and Elvis Presley (7 students) rounding out the top five. In response to the second question, asking for the five most famous women in American history (excluding the wives of presidents), Rosa Parks was a strong first (34 students), with Oprah Winfrey second (21 students), Martha Stewart third (18 students), and Marilyn Monroe fourth (17 students), well ahead of Sacagawea and Susan B. Anthony (each with 11 votes).¹¹

The “changing pantheon of American heroes” that Wineburg and Monte-Sano’s study illuminates may speak volumes about the consistency in the K-12 curriculum across the nation’s regions and about the ways that a national heritage is formed and re-formed over time. But their survey findings may also reflect the enduring significance of region as well as race in American culture. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman (from Maryland, a border slave state), and Oprah Winfrey, numbers 1, 2, 3, and 7, respectively, in the heroic pantheon revealed in Wineburg and Monte-Sano’s survey of students, are all African Americans, but also southerners.¹² One suspects that if respondents had been allowed to include presidents in their lists, Bill Clinton (also a southerner) and George W. Bush (who despite his eastern background and education has worked hard to assume

¹¹ Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano, “Famous Americans’: The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes,” *Journal of American History*, 94 (March 2008), 1186–1202. Fifty-two class members took the regionalism survey on the first day of the semester. One student withdrew from the course during the semester. Of the fifty-one remaining students, forty-one completed the survey; a few were absent on the day it was administered, and a few arrived too late to take it under the same conditions as the rest of the class.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1191.

a down-home Texas ranch culture southern identity) would also have made the top ten. There may be some evidence here of the southernization of American culture.

Certainly the new pantheon seems less New England- and Northeast-centric than older canons. In addition to the four southerners, the Wineburg/Monte-Sano top ten also includes a westerner, the Los Angeleno Marilyn Monroe; a midwesterner, Thomas Edison (born in Ohio and raised in Michigan, though he spent most of his career in the New York area); a Kansan, Amelia Earhart (a westerner or midwesterner, depending on which side of the regional demarcation line one places the town of Atchison, where she was born); a Jewish-German immigrant, Albert Einstein; and only two northeasters, the Massachusetts-born Susan B. Anthony and Benjamin Franklin.

Taking into account the results of the Wineburg/Monte-Sano survey and my own more limited survey, I am struck both by the potential for greater integration of regional themes and case studies in the modern U.S. survey and by the biracial model that seems to dominate the national historical consciousness (if there is such a thing). We learn from Wineburg and Monte-Sano that “César Chávez appeared on 13% of California students’ lists, but a scant 2% nationwide.”¹³ This suggests that Chávez is a figure of regional significance, particularly to Hispanic Americans, and to a lesser extent to white Californians. But Chávez has virtually no significance to non-Hispanic people outside of California. Should we then teach to some heroic national pantheon of which Chávez stands virtually outside? Or should we seek to connect with the regional interests of our students, which I can attest are very different in the remarkably diverse classrooms of Las Vegas than they were in the relatively homogenous classrooms of northeastern Ohio, upstate New York, and even southeastern Pennsylvania?

For my students, who gather twice weekly in Las Vegas but hail from just about every American region and from much of the world, one logical piece of connective tissue is the theme of mobility and adjustment. The United States’ populations are more geographically mobile than those of most other countries, and the process of adjusting to place is a constant in the national story (probably even more so in the story of the West), one that many of my students know personally. The first weeks of my modern U.S. history course amount to a regional tour of late nineteenth-century America, from the Reconstruction South, New South, and “Progressive” South; to the migrations into the West from all directions and the racial tensions evident in that region in the making; to the agrarian discontents of the Plains and the consequences of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration in the Northeast and Midwest. The regional focus is maintained in coverage of the Progressive Era, the 1920s, and 1930s—no great feat given the regional character of much Progressive reform, the regional tensions of the 1920s, the regionalist orientation of much of the New Deal, and the broad backdrop of regionalist thought and artistic endeavor between the wars.¹⁴

With the final segment of the course to cover, I am reminded that my students might benefit from special emphasis on the migration (both forced and voluntary) and adjustment experiences of many Americans on the home front during World War II, from war industry workers to Japanese and Japanese American internees. The students may well connect too with a focus on the special status of the West as the center of the Cold

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1194.

¹⁴ On the regionalist movement between the wars, see Robert Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1993).

War military industrial complex, the regional concerns over Mexican immigration in the 1950s, and the various civil rights movements in the West (gay, women's, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Native American). Moreover, I hope that my coverage of the continuing general southwesterly tilt of the center of American population during the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, and the region's role as a prime destination of immigrants from all over the world since the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, will have special meaning for a group of students largely comprised of first- and second-generation migrants to the Las Vegas Valley.

Then, of course, there is the rest of the material that must be covered for the students to have a sense of the sweep of the national story in the last six or so decades. That is the conundrum: as we move through the second half of the U.S. survey, and particularly the post-1945 period, region runs the risk of becoming a victim of time constraints. We know that regional stories are important, but there is a big national story to attend to—the Cold War, the Korean War, McCarthyism, the civil rights movement, the Great Society, the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Reagan revolution, 9/11, the Gulf Wars. Regional emphases, one might conclude, become a luxury rather than a necessity in the frenetic march through time. But there are moments when it is advisable to catch our breath, remember where we are and who is in the room with us, and perhaps even remember, too, Turner's deep hope, expressed in his 1922 essay "Sections and Nation," that "we shall find the strength to build from our past a nobler structure, in which each section [read *region*] will find its place as a fit room in a worthy house."¹⁵ If the vantage point of home is significant to how we view the nation's past and present, then the modern U.S. survey ought to vary from region to region as we work to structure a meaningful and usable past for our students.

¹⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Sections and Nation," *Yale Review*, 12 (Oct. 1922), 21.