

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

Local History as Total History

A Symposium held at the Munk Centre for
International Studies, University of Toronto,
25 February 2002

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Can local history constitute total history? Or was the title of this symposium a provocation to historians to define the larger meanings that underpin local and regional studies? Historians from both sides of the Atlantic convened at the Munk Center for International Studies, University of Toronto, on 25 February 2002, to address this question. Convened by James Retallack (Toronto), symposium participants included Roger Chickering (Georgetown), Helmut Walser Smith (Vanderbilt), Jean Quataert (SUNY Binghamton), Abigail Green (Oxford), Jan Palmowski (London), Timothy Brook (Toronto) and Annette Timm (Toronto). The symposium was sponsored by the DAAD/University of Toronto Joint Initiative in German and European Studies and the Departments of History and German.

In his opening remarks, Retallack focused participants' attention on two issues. He emphasized, first, the importance of exploring the complex, shifting interrelationships among nation, region and locality. He drew on James Sheehan's observation that the centre can reflect, yet also obscure, a nation's political life. Political activity at the national level is by nature simplified, so that alignments and issues are often reduced to a set of binary choices. It is at the local level, by contrast, where political choices are revealed as the product of fluid boundaries, shifting alliances and changing partnerships. Retallack emphasized that when nations or regions 'happen', this is not exclusively a top-down process, for political life is also profoundly shaped by the negotiation of meaning at the local level. An emphasis on history as a two-way street,

where the centre and the periphery interact with each other in a non-hierarchical framework, allows us to restore local and regional actors as important historical agents in their own right. However, in his second point, Retallack drew on the work of Karl Lamprecht and his biographer (Chickering) to caution against moving from the particular to the general by positing the identity of the two. The boldness of local history, Retallack suggested, rather than its conclusiveness, will continue to confound global or universal generalizations. By conveying the specificities of history writ small, local history may be the perfect complement of total history; but at the same time it reveals the porousness and untenability of any totalizing vision.

Participants in the morning sessions took seriously this idea by emphasizing the usefulness of 'fixing' the history of a city in times of upheaval. In his paper entitled 'Bitterfeld, Moving through the Twentieth Century', Helmut Walser Smith suggested 'freezing the frame' in order to take a snapshot of the city under two separate dictatorships. As a traditional working-class city, Bitterfeld has often been viewed through the lens of class and class politics. While emphasizing the importance of analytical categories, Smith advocated the uncovering of complexities by moving beyond these fixed categories. The residents of Bitterfeld were not just members of a particular political party or movement; they were individuals shaped by intersecting identities of gender, ethnicity, cohort and confession. By uncovering these broader identities, noted Smith, we can better understand not just those who resisted dictatorship, but also those who left, and those who remained silent.

Timothy Brook's paper, 'Nanking under Occupation, 1937–1945: Chinese, German and Japanese Mappings', also focused on a crisis-ridden city. Brook demonstrated that Nanking can function as a site of total history if we map out a relatively short time-frame and examine developments from multiple perspectives. The history of everyday life in Nanking has been obscured by the events of extreme violence that characterized the occupation, and by an over-emphasis on state administration. How did ordinary men and women cope with deprivation, loss and hardship? What is the rôle of violence in determining the way we tell the history of a city? Noting that we often 'overdo the State', Brook stressed the importance of looking beyond the structures of public administration and particular sets of policy directives to recapture the impact these policies had on the teeming life of a city under siege. His concept of multiple mappings challenged participants to reassess the divisions between private and public space within an urban setting. As Brook argued, when an army of occupation invades, private spaces disappear unless they can be negotiated separately.

These provocative papers laid the groundwork for a lively discussion concerning sources and methodologies. At what point does reducing the importance of analytical categories inhibit our ability to say something broader about the rôle of individuals and groups at the national level? When asked to expand on how to tell a history without class in the 1930s, Smith

argued for the problematizing of identity at the local level. Using the tools of the Bologna School of micro-history, Smith advocated a closer reading of archival sources such as city directories, police records and the records of *Fremdarbeiter*. These files, while not ignoring class affiliation, provide richer and fuller details of individual lives, rather than telling a more traditional history of the working class. This is particularly important during the Third Reich, when the traditional workers' milieu was challenged and working-class politics disrupted. Perhaps, discussants agreed, it is in periods of dramatic change, when old community ties and associations tend to break down, that traditional analytical categories cannot capture the breadth of experience at the local level. Finding multiple voices is aided by the increased availability of wide-ranging sources and perspectives, such as military reports and occupation diaries, written by both the oppressors and the oppressed (Brook).

The need for total history to mine innovative sources and methodologies remained a key theme in the following sessions, as did the emphasis on local studies in a time of crisis and upheaval. Roger Chickering's paper, 'Freiburg in the Age of Total War 1914–1918', argued that war is the most effective structuring agent in the writing of total history. War regimented the material, cultural and social worlds of the citizens of Freiburg, observed Chickering, and therefore war also provides an ideal navigational map to historians around which all phases and elements pivot: centre and periphery, town and countryside, men and women. Chickering emphasized that everywhere the war was experienced locally. Thus, by focusing on the political, social and cultural worlds of a smaller centre like Freiburg through such sources as death notices, graffiti and cooking recipes, we can perhaps capture a greater sense of the sights, sounds and smells of a city undergoing the wrenching pressures of mobilization for total war. This approach may bring us closer to a total history precisely because it enables us to see how meaning was created and negotiated at the local level.

Adding to our understanding of the impact of total war on local history, Jean Quataert emphasized the continuing importance of the state well into the First World War. Quataert's paper, 'Baden and the Practice of Philanthropy 1914–1918', used philanthropic and associational life as a window onto the shifting ground experienced by city- and state-builders in Baden during the war. For example, the Baden royal family had traditionally provided space and meaning by solidifying the abstractions of national identity for its citizens. This enabled a response to the war rooted in the strong local traditions of activism, associational life and a 'gendered patriotic public'. Only after 1916 did these strong regional ties begin to break down as the need for absolute discipline, streamlined resources and the subordination of all of life to the war effort prevailed over local administrations and local identities.

In responding to these two papers discussants were intrigued by the suggestion that total war *requires* total history. Some participants, notably Jan Palmowski and James Retallack, sought to tease out the differences between

local and total history. Would the story of Freiburg be different from, or in fact mirror, the experiences of other German towns during the First World War? Chickering answered that the era of war does lend itself to this specific methodology, and that the analytical template would look the same even if one undertook the total history of another city. Indeed, the commonality of responses to the war points to the importance of cities and regions as not just influenced by, but also constitutive of, Germany's response to war.

How should the historian incorporate gender into a total history? Perhaps the methodologies of gender history could be utilized throughout a study, Annette Timm noted, and not be limited to one section or chapter. In many ways, Chickering replied, gender may in fact have constituted the primary orientation for personal and public responses to war. Rôle division was a key element in the regimentation of daily lives, and a total history must incorporate men's and women's differing tasks and responses to the demands of the state. Quataert then raised the issue of the importance of the family and inter-generational relationships, leading discussants to consider the extent to which gender also intersected with other identities such as age, confession, class and ethnicity. All agreed that integrating these complicated multiplicities confronts the total historian with a daunting challenge.

Shifting gears while maintaining a focus on the local, conference papers presented by Jan Palmowski and Abigail Green in the first afternoon session emphasized the continuing importance of the state and state-building from the early nineteenth century into the twentieth. These papers shared a common understanding that regions should be studied as historical sites in their own right, not merely as potential examples of German 'peculiarity'. Indeed, Palmowski noted that regions may have served as the primary source of self-identity for most Germans as late as 1916, when 65 per cent of the population still lived in towns of fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

Abigail Green's paper, entitled 'Smaller Fatherlands? State-Building and Nationhood', emphasized that many states were important in their own right as 'small fatherlands' before 1871, and that this powerful attachment to locality and *Stamm* did not immediately fade away with unification. Her examination of medium-sized states such as Saxony and Hanover demonstrated that their rulers adopted the tools of modern state-building to maintain influence and command the loyalty of their citizens. These tools included the celebration of state heroes in public monuments, the emphasis on the state's importance in school textbooks and the writing of state-friendly editorials in widely read newspapers. Far from being a throwback to an older, particularistic tradition, and far from being restricted to the more liberal states of southwestern Germany, élites in these medium-sized states envisioned a unified Germany as a modern, composite nation of regions, where the promotion of the local did not come at the expense of national identity. Following Green's lead, Jan Palmowski's paper, entitled 'Localism, Nationalism, and Constitutional Practice', brought the discussion of constitutions and regionalism identities into

the post-1871 period. He argued that regional constitutional discourse can help us trace shifting concepts of citizenship over time, emphasizing continuities over ruptures in the development of regional and national identities. State constitutions provided space for public debate, codified citizens' rights and responsibilities and reflected the changing ideas and mores that defined the local political community. Only in the Weimar Republic did this defining localism shift, suggested Palmowski, when the new constitution emphasized federalism over the older idea of the distinctiveness of individual states.

During the plenary discussion, a number of speakers acknowledged that bringing constitutions back into the debate has been important in emphasizing the enduring nature of particularist identities. Comments focused on the activity of political stakeholders who continued to define themselves at the regional level, with questions of local culture drawing special attention from the discussants. Was there a tension between the cultural and political goals pursued by dynastic or constitutional reformers (Chickering)? The strength of the region, Palmowski argued, was rooted in a strong sense of cultural identity based on concepts of *Heimat* and a cultural bedrock. Green added that cultural associations interacted in cooperation with, not in opposition to, the state. Discussants agreed that more work is required on the interrelationship between culture and politics and their mutual impact on state building.

As a crystallization of the key themes of the day, James Retallack and Annette Timm's presentations led participants into a final discussion about the intersections of politics, culture and gender. In a paper entitled 'Identity-, Culture-, and Nation-Building, Writ Small', Retallack noted that *Heimat*-ism, while an intriguing concept, can also be limiting when it is used to suggest that localism is best viewed as a metaphor for, or as the shaper of, nationhood. Retallack demonstrated how liberals' actions and reactions to social, cultural, and political challenges were conditioned by the local contexts in which they operated. Lines of political agency do not proceed from the local to the national (or the other way around) with a predefined trajectory, he argued; rather, as Foucault has noted, power circulates in, around and through social spaces. Hence we should not be too quick to use hierarchical models and linear modes of analysis to explain what one historian has termed the 'dialectical process' of local, regional, national and global identities. Instead, Retallack suggested we might do better to explore a multiplicity of incongruent paths by recognizing the difficulty of moving, both spatially and methodologically, from the familiar towards the unknown.

Annette Timm's wide-ranging comments on 'The Politics of Fertility through Five German Regimes' focused on *Bevölkerungspolitik* in a city—Berlin—that may not have been completely 'representative' but was nonetheless 'iconic'. Timm argued that a look at long-term developments gives a more complete picture of changing laws and attitudes and of the effect of dictatorship and war on public health policy. By focusing on marriage counselling and venereal disease clinics, she demonstrated how the state was present in individual lives

in myriad ways. Timm emphasized the need to bridge the gap between the rhetoric used to defend certain policies at the top of the political and administrative hierarchies and the practical application of policy at the bottom: focusing closely on one city, she argued, also provides a salutary reminder about the interdependence of national policy and local context.

The final discussion that followed these two papers returned to several of the key themes introduced earlier in the day. Helmut Smith sought to clarify the similarities or differences between micro- and local history. Local history, Retallack suggested, is not the same as regional history, but might serve as a case study within a region and within a given time-frame. Perhaps local history lies somewhere between micro-history and regional history? No consensus was reached on these competing definitions, and underpinning all of these discussions was uncertainty about the definition of 'total history' itself. As Chickering noted, all writers of total history have struggled with the challenge of relating the disparate phenomena of intellectual and material life into a single framework. Most studies fall short of their claim to totality, because they are necessarily reduced to a single category within the framework: for Marx, it was the material; for Hegel, the ideal. But their failure encourages scepticism—it seems to point to our vain hope for a centred whole that does not really exist. It may not be possible to capture history in its totality, Chickering continued, but, as the symposium title suggests, methodologies undertaken by local historians may bring us towards a more complete understanding of specific historical events. It is impossible to tell the 'total' history of eighty million people; but as with Chickering's study of Freiburg, it may be possible at least to attempt the history of 70,000 people within well-defined parameters: we can give them names and provide the details of their lives, but we can also fit them into a larger story.

Given that so many papers focused on periods of war, occupation and crisis, a provocative question was raised repeatedly throughout the day: is it possible that 'total war', although itself a shifting and problematic term, can offer a navigational map for 'total history'? Chickering suggested that we can best capture the experience of total war by attempting total history (in his case, through the study of one locality where 'nothing is irrelevant'). Others meanwhile turned the coin over to ask whether total history is perhaps viable only when we study relatively circumscribed periods of intense social and/or military conflict. In these ways, then, participants questioned the extent to which one can write a true total history, under what circumstances, and with what expectation of success. Despite healthy doses of scepticism injected into the proceedings throughout the symposium, the participants demonstrated that studies of conflict and crisis—however broadly and ambitiously conceived—can benefit greatly from approaches pioneered by historians of the local.