
Andrew C. Holman
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Walter G. Peace

New York:

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This regional middle-class consciousness was both powerful

and fleeting. Regional elites held the economic and profes­

sional reins in local society; like those of southern planters, their

ideals and values were hegemonic locally and overshadowed other subcultures. Economic and professional interests and

common values married regional elites to one another. By the

1840s, a regional booster network was paralleled by a regional
cultural network; river-town elites were bound by common inter­
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This regional class culture eroded, however, as shared eco­

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(of the sort that Blumin describes) prevailed; in those towns

bypassed by the railroad, middle-class culture withered once a

reason for regional consciousness was removed. In the upper

Mississippi valley, the middle-class moment was bright but

short-lived.

Mahoney’s method in treating this subject is well balanced.

Having painted the form of the regional urban structure, he

seeks in this book to understand the social relationships that

held it together. The author’s archival research is impressive. He

presents evidence from personal and family correspondence,
diaries, and an interesting array of ephemera like social-event

invitations and handbills. He uses family reconstitution (one of

the most laborious methods that social historians employ) to ex­
plain the social networks that westward migration entailed and

case studies to elucidate the professional culture of lawyers.

Mahoney’s book is, then, “structuralist,” but not faceless. His
portrait of regional society is rich, detailed, sophisticated, and

above all, credible.

Some weaknesses remain, of course. The book is generally

well written. Mahoney is at his best when telling stories about

families, but this occasionally lapses in sections of dense,

awkward prose (in the introduction and epilogue) that obfuscate
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(Vanmeter or Van Meter? Saukenuk or Saukenauk? Kenney or
Kinney Said? Hudson Bay Company, comradery, and railroad

Mahoney, Timothy R. Provincial Lives: Middle-Class

Experience in the Antebellum Middle West. New York:


maps, tables, bibliography, index. US$54.95 (hardcover).

In the conclusion of his pathbreaking 1989 study of 19th-cen­
tury urban American respectable types, The Emergence of the

Middle Class, Stuart Blumin pointed to an interesting irony. For

all he had demonstrated about middle-class structures in urban

America, his study focused on only a distinct minority—big-city
dwellers—in an era when most of the people lived on farms and

in small villages and towns. What, he asked, were the differenc­
es between urban and rural milieux when considering middle­
class structure and identity? What, in other words, was the

geography of middle-class formation in 19th-century America?

Ten years later, Timothy Mahoney has begun to answer that

question, and rather ably. Provincial Lives examines the de­

velopment of a middle-class consciousness within an urban

system: the river towns in the upper Mississippi valley from

the 1790s to the Civil War. This book dovetails nicely with

Mahoney’s previous work, River Towns in the Great West (1990),

which traces the development of a regional urban system in

small-town Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Wisconsin in the middle

decades of the 19th century. These books divide the labour

of urban history clearly and well; River Towns describes the

anatomy of the antebellum Midwestern urban system, Provincial

Lives describes much of its physiology.

Mahoney’s central argument is both plain and sophisticated: the

Midwest was, in the early 19th century, a testing ground for

middle-class values constructed in eastern cities and trans­

ported westward to growing towns and their hinterlands. Class

identities here were not national or local in scope, but regional.

“In the towns of the Great West the middle class transferred a

cultural and social system which middle-class people had only

just formulated in the older towns across New York and Ohio

and tested its ability to shape social order in the West . . . and

the whole of the United States.” (5) Three successive migrant

groups played key roles in constructing and defining the

regional middle class: early pioneers and transplanted gentry,

whose ideals were paramount in local society, 1790s–1810s;
young, male fortune-seekers, whose fraternal behaviour posed

the threat of local social disorder in the 1820s and 1830s; and

more respectable sorts—merchants and professionals—whose

material display, mannered behaviour, moral admonition, and

boosterism became the dominant means of expressing middle-
class culture by the 1850s.

This regional middle-class consciousness was both powerful

and fleeting. Regional elites held the economic and profes­

sional reins in local society; like those of southern planters, their

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This book is largely about publicly expressed class culture and, like other works on the Victorian middle class, women's roles in middle-class formation are treated only marginally. Moreover, this book says nothing about the ways that movements like moral reform, religious revival, and sport—quintessentially middle-class activities elsewhere—may have helped shape middle-class awareness in the Midwest. Finally, Mahoney does not puzzle over theory. As such, this book is not laden with dull sociological discussions about social structure, but as a result it lacks a clear definition of the "middle class," or even an acknowledgment that it is a problematic category.

Like all good scholarly books, however, this one's weaknesses are minor when compared to its strengths. Mahoney's Provincial Lives sheds a great deal of light on how the middle class grew and declined outside of big-city America—in villages and small towns within an urban regional system. The book is a model for those who write about the history of urban regions in that it demonstrates the importance of social values and cultural ideals to the existence and maintenance of regional economies. And its scope—the region—provides an important corrective to social historians whose subjects have too often been either national or local. Mahoney's work leaves the reader wanting to know more about what the decline of regional middle class left in its wake. What happened to the "insecure, disoriented, untethered" respectables left behind in the small-town Midwest by the railroad and by the middle-class moment? Here is another intriguing story and one that I hope Mahoney will tell in his future scholarship.

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