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Localités/Localities

a special issue inaugurating a web-based center for local history, with contributions by **Newton E. Key, Terry A. Barnhart, Nora Pat Small, Debra Ann Reid, Daniel A. McMillan, Ben Fallaw, Christopher Waldrep, and Mark Voss-Hubbard**

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Localités and Early Modern Britain

Newton E. Key

> Localism is a theory of *mentalité*.... It defines the mental horizons that supposedly bounded the social and political world of most inhabitants of Tudor and early Stuart England. According to ...the leading spokesman for the school, each town and county was a 'self-conscious and coherent community with a distinct life of its own ...in which politics played merely an intermittent part.'[1]

In early modern England local identity often was more important than national identity, and "country" as often meant one's native shire as one's nation state. In 1710, a young German gentleman visited London and kept a diary in which he noted unique British customs. He wrote at length about a cockfight he witnessed. He learned that "cocks from the same neighbourhood or county do not willingly attack each other."[2] English cocks had a county identity or *mentalité*. While the sociobiological truth of this animal behavior might be doubted, the English believed it to be true. Cockfights took place mainly between the prize cocks of country squires from neighboring shires. A 1685 advertisement gave advance notice of "a great Match of Cocking, between Leicestershire and Oxfordshire Gentlemen..., in Leicester."[3] In 1710, Surrey and Hampshire gentlemen fought a cock match after May horse races, while, after a Peterborough horse race in July,

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[1]David Harris Sacks, "The Corporate Town and the English State: Bristol's 'Little Businesses' 1625-1641," in Jonathan Barry, ed., *The Tudor and Stuart Town* (London, 1990), 299.

[2]The cock match was not exclusively a gentry affair, and, instead, mixed and confused the strict social hierarchy. At cock matches, the young German noted, "the people, gentle and simple..., sit with no distinction of place" and that "an hostler ...often wins several guineas from a Lord." *London in 1710: From the Travels of Zacharias Conrad Von Uffenbach*, ed. W.H. Quarrell and Margaret Mare (London, 1934?), 48-9. The famous Parson Woodforde disapproved of cockfights because they brought one into contact with "lowlife sort of people." Quoted in Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, 1998), 219.

[3]*London Gazette*, no. 2094, 10-14 Dec. 1685. For a Stamford cock match between Stamford and Peterborough, see Ibid., no. 4657, 23-25 Feb. 1709/10.

there were to be several days of cock-fighting pitting "the Gentlemen of the Counties of Northampton and Lincolnshire against the Gentlemen of the County of Huntington, and Isle of Ely and Cambridge."[4] Cocking and horse racing were part of a gentry "theatre of honour" and of provincial reciprocity and exchange networks.[5] And cocking, at least, reinforced *county* not national identity.

In 1662, a Dutch visitor to England saw "the procession of the Oxfordshire countrymen in Cornhill," in London. After a service at St. Michaels' church, "they all marched two by two" to Grocer's Hall "to have their celebrations together." He added, "[t]his is in London usual with most...," before leaving a blank section in the diary.[6] The Dutch visitor had witnessed part of a county or natives feast, of the type which became "usual" during the late 1650s, died out in the early 1660s, only to reappear in the late 1670s, proliferate in the 1680s and 1690s and, from available evidence, decline again in the early eighteenth century.[7] A character in a play, *The Huntington Divertisement*, performed (or at least intended to be performed) at a county feast in London in 1676, describes the feasts this way:

> they have set up a Monthly Club, which is kept the first Wednesday-night in every Month; when in a glasse of Sack or Claret they remember You here in the Country, and especially their great Patrons; And once a Year they

[4]*London Gazette*, no. 4687, 4-6 May 1710 (for Whitsun Week); no. 4708, 22-24 June 1710 (for 11-13 July).

[5]Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Stanford, 1994), 309-10.

[6]*The Journals of William Schellinks' Travels in England, 1661-1663*, trans. and ed. Maurice Exwood and H.L. Lehmann (Camden 5th sers., vol. 1, 1993), 172. Fuller details on the feast are provided in Andrew Clark, ed., *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, antiquary, of Oxford, 1632-1695, described by Himself* (Oxford Historical Society, XIX, 1891), 1:462-3, though Wood records the feast occurring on 20 Nov., while Schellinks notes it as 29 Nov.

[7]These feasts have been studied at length in Newton E. Key, "The Localism of the County Feast in Late-Stuart Political Culture," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58, 2 (1996): 211-37; and idem, "The Political Culture and Political Rhetoric of County Feasts and Feast Sermons, 1654-1714," *Journal of British Studies* 33, 3 (1994): 223-56.

> have setled a Feast for the honour of our Country, where all the Lords, Knights, and Gentlemen are nobly entertained at a good dinner, and the Charitable Benevolence bestowed to put out poor Children of our own Country to be Apprentices.[8]

And the natives feasts could be just as totemic as cocks fighting for their county. The Kentish feast deployed a Kentish strongman in their parade. "The Strong man who has made so much noise in Town, and who performed several things before the King with extraordinary strength, showed many feats on Saturday at Dorset Garden, but there is another Sampson come out of Darbyshire, who pretends to outdo the Kentish."[9]

While the county community was not bounded as rigidly by gentry status or by geography, it was overwhelmingly self-conscious. Although earlier historians' narrative certainty of the polar division between parties during the late-Stuart and Hanoverian periods has dissolved under the scrutiny of revisionist historians, country ideology and county identity remain valid constructs. As one eighteenth-century feast preacher noted, "[n]or do I find, that even the Party Heat and Feuds, which have greatly tended to divide the Nation in general, have been able to disconcert ...or to destroy that *native Affection*."[10] "Country" was, of course, an ideology, a polemic. And, the localist myth, that the rural individual "moves in his proper sphere" and does not meddle with affairs of State (as opposed to the troubling town-dweller or Londoner–of indeterminate social status and who read the latest partisan newspaper at a coffeehouse), was itself a political polemic.[11] In

[8]W. M., *Huntington Divertisement, or, an Enterlude For the Generall Entertainment at the County-Feast, Held at Merchant-Taylors Hall, June 29. 1678* (London, 1678), 19.

[9]*Post Man*, no. 681, 25-28 Nov. 1699.

[10]Thomas Bullock, *A Sermon Preach'd before the Herefordshire Society at St. Michaels' Cornhill, London, on Wednesday, February 2. 1725* (London, 1726), 22-3.

[11]Quote from James Wright, *The Humours and Conversations of the Town (1693)*, ed. Brice Harris (Gainesville, Flor., 1961), 103. "Gentleman-tradesman" from Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1721).

the early seventeenth century, a country ideology developed that was anti-Court in polemic, though, in practice, it was used to cloak all manner of programs and interests. In the 1690s, "country" politicians opposed those in power with a rhetoric which drew upon a number of themes: "provincialism, patriotism, the defence of liberty, and resistance to the expansion of state power."[12] If country polemic was only in part a localism, *qua* provincialism, it was that, nevertheless. The study of local identities may be termed, *localités*. *Localités* signifies those *mentalités* or world-views that privilege the local or regional over the national or international.

Modern historical study of early modern *localités* began with the realization that, at least before 1700, most of the English lived out their lives within the confines of their county. Although, for those of yeoman status and below, the appropriate arena might better be the parish, throughout the social scale rural life was largely bounded by the shire: "Parliament met infrequently; the Court was socially exclusive; the focal point of gentry life remained the county community."[13] But, ultimately, county identity is as much a feature of urban self-perception or self-fashioning as it was a geographical or country fact. Oxford and Cambridge colleges as well as London victualing inns and alehouses had clear county associations from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries.[14] Cornish men could easily be

[12]David Hayton, "Moral Reform and Country Politics in the Late Seventeenth-Century House of Commons," *Past & Present* 128 (1990): 48.

[13]Nicholas Rogers, "Money, land and lineage: the big bourgeoisie of Hanoverian London," *Social History* 4, 3 (1979): 437-54. See also Alan Everitt, "The County Community," in *The English Revolution, 1600-1660*, ed. E.W. Ives (New York, 1968), 48-63, esp. 49.

[14]Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Stanford, 1994), 269; Charles Phythian-Adams, *Re-thinking English Local History* (Leicester, 1987), 47; J.A. Chartres, "The Capital's Provincial Eyes: London's Inns in the Early Eighteenth Century," *London Journal* 3, 1 (1977): 24-39, esp. 24, 29-30, 38; J.H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675-1725* (London, 1967), 33; Peter Clark, "Migrants in the city: the process of social adaptation in English towns 1500-1800," in *Migration and Society in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Clark and David Souden (London, 1987), 273-4.

found at Exeter College; Devonshire men congregated for news from their shire in inns on the Strand. Indeed, the link between county, college, and metropolis was the very life-cycle of the young gentleman. One preacher praised the Herefordshire natives' "[p]laces of our Birth and Education..., *viz.* Hereford and Oxford."[15] Thus, when in July 1680, an advertisement in a London newspaper asked interested gentlemen to meet at the Fountain-Tavern, Newgate, every Wednesday to help plan a new Leicestershire feast, it sought, of course, London residents who had a Leicestershire identity, *not* rural gentlemen imbedded only in provincial networks.[16]

The county community, as a *localité*, is a central component to the world view of the early modern English. It grew, paradoxically, in the metropolis, in London. London as the cultural, governmental, and economic center of the British Isles, of northern Europe, and of the Anglophone Atlantic basin is the "chief feature of the period 1500-1750."[17] As centralized political power grew, the sense of the importance of the county grew as well. As one local historian notes:

> the eighteenth century especially stands out as the temporal apotheosis of the county–the period *par excellence* of the county town, of county regiments, of nascent county cricket involving different levels of society, and of county clubs or societies in the metropolis.[18]

Of course, earlier periods have also been seen as periods of county awareness: the sixteenth century, the 1650s when the local gentry "held aloof from the central authority," and 1660-

[15]Thomas Watts, *Social Friendship and Charity demonstrated as the most proper Remedies of Humane Evils. In a Sermon Before the Honourable Society of the Natives of the County of Hereford. At Their first Solemn Assembly upon their Annual Feast, December 4, 1723. in the Church of St. Michael in Cornhill, London* ([Hereford], 1724), 21.

[16]*London Gazette*, no. 1525.

[17]Jonathan Barry, "Provincial Town Culture, 1640-80: Urbane or Civic?," in *Interpretation and Cultural History*, ed. Joan H. Pittock and Andrew Wear (New York, 1991), 202.

[18]Phythian-Adams, *Re-thinking English Local History*, 47.

1720 which has been characterized as "the triumph of the county community."[19] Critics have objected to the county community thesis for two reasons. First, there are overpowering cultural and administrative forces emanating out of a common education experience (Oxford, Cambridge, and the Inns of Court in London) and politics and the law centered in Westminster which shaped the gentry as a "national class": "Local sentiment was strong, but, lacking any formal institutional focus, it was subordinated to the national ideology of a centralized polity and a common law."[20] Second, "other forums–villages, hundreds, towns, religious associations– ...acted as a focus for loyalties."[21] But the first criticism simply reaffirms that the county community was an idea, a *localité*, not a geographic entity. And, as for other forums, *localités* studies how loyalties from the parish to the *pays* interacted and shaped national and supra-national developments. Urban historians have noted how provincial towns drew upon "the London model" from 1700.[22] During the Hanoverian period, London increasingly become "a cultural innovator and exemplar" and enhanced "local awareness of the outside world."[23] Part of London's cultural innovation, however, was a commitment to the county *localité*.

The county feast, while it continued into the twentieth century, did not recover its importance and centrality, neither to local identity nor to the social calendar of London. Irish Protestants in London began meeting from 1689. The Society of Ancient Britons (Welsh) began in London under the Hanoverians; the Gwyneddigion Society of London (men of

[19]Heal and Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales*, 226; and Peter Clark, quoted in Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth-century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1980), 254.

[20]Holmes, *Seventeenth-century Lincolnshire*, 262-3.

[21]Holmes summarized in Anthony Fletcher, *Reform in the Provinces: The Government of Stuart England* (New Haven, 1986), 265-6.

[22]Peter Clark, "Antiquarians and the English City before 1800," in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, ed. Derek Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe (London, 1983), 105-24.

[23]Peter Borsay, "The London Connection: Cultural Diffusion and the Eighteenth-Century Provincial Town," *London Journal* 19, 1 (1994): 25.

north Wales) began in 1751.[24] As a new identity, the Briton, developed in the eighteenth century, Celtic links were likewise forged.[25] A nineteenth-century list of the charities of London, lists only six county-based societies. Two of these societies were county schools, not apprentice, charity feasts, and only one, the Herefordshire society (established 1710), had been formed before the nineteenth century.[26] Several natives feasts meeting in London struggled into the twentieth century. But the heyday of the natives feast and of county identity in the metropolis had passed.[27] Whether the county was replaced by English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish identities in the formation of a new British nationalism is a subject for future study.

Social and cultural historians have found the study of *mentalités* quite useful, and have drawn upon the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's call for "thick description" study to reveal "local knowledge."[28] The problem of such "local frames of awareness," which have found their equivalent in the microhistories of Robert Darnton and Carlo Ginzburg, is that they open the researcher to charges of triviality when viewed from the

[24]Irish Protestants in London advertising their feast and sermon in anniversary of deliverance from the massacre in 1641, in *Daily Courant*, no. 3137, 1 Nov. 1711; no. 4052, 29 Oct. 1714; no. 4066, 4 Nov. 1714; advertisements regarding the Welsh Society of Ancient Britons, in *London Gazette*, no. 5408, 14-18 Feb. 1715/16; no. 5513, 16-19 Feb. 1716/17; Philip Philipp(s), *Loyalty and Love. Recommended in a sermon preached [to the Society of Ancient Britons] 1 March 1715* (1716); William Davies Leathart, *The Origin and Progress of the Gwyneddigion Society of London* (London, 1831).

[25]See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992).

[26]Sampson Low, Jr., *The Charities of London in 1861* (London, 1862), 110, 238-9. See also, John Lane, ed., *Herbert Fry's Royal Guide to the London Charities* (London, 1914), 126, 258, 290, 292; Gloucester R.O., D763, correspondence and papers of Gloucestershire Society in London, 1835-47.

[27]See Hereford R.O. M90/157, "Extract from Rules and Regulations of the Herefordshire Society" (n.d., post-1903); *Wiltshiremen in London. Book of Rules and List of Members of Wiltshiremen in London, 1907* (n.p., n.d.); Shropshire Records Centre, Shrewsbury, 3594/1, "The One Hundred and Eighty-Sixth Anniversary of A Shropshire Society in London" (1936).

[28]Aletta Biersack, "Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), 72-96, esp. 74.

lofty prospect of world-system theory or other overarching holistic theory.[29] Likewise, the local historian has often been charged with mere antiquarianism. And rightly so. The town on the nineteenth-century Illinois frontier (see the materials on Charleston in Coles County, below) created itself outside the patterns of world trade and national expansion no more than did the English workers of the mid-eighteenth century create themselves as a class outside English market and capital relations. But frontier settlers or the working class were present at their own creation and there is no useful history which ignores the actors. Likewise, provincial culture helped shape national culture. This point recently has been taken up by one historian who argues, "there was a profound cultural-political divide in British society in the eighteenth century, and in particular within its elites, between an emerging wide-ranging 'national society' and an alternative polymorphous communal-provincial culture."[30] This struggle, between nativism and cosmopolitanism, is certainly important throughout the early modern period. And it has a history which is not the simplistic tale of an ever-widening cosmopolitanism and an ever-shrinking native culture. To help understand this struggle and its part in shaping a multi-cultural Britishness, the study of *localités* is in part dedicated.

[29]Biersack, "Local Knowledge, Local History," 79, 82.

[30]Dror Wahrman, "National society, communal culture: an argument about the recent historiography of eighteenth-century Britain," *Social History* 17 (1992): 43.

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