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The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij

The 2013 Western Social Science Association Presidential address

Agency, complexity, memory: A scholarship for western places

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Agency, complexity, and memory are core values for the scholarship, especially the historical scholarship, of western places in the 21st Century. The doctrine of agency derives from action theory in philosophy and individualism in sociology. Chaos theory and its companion, complexity, defy determinisms and lead scholars toward narrative explanations capable of dealing with organized complexity. Collective memory situates scholars in a western landscape and society where they are responsible for the stories they tell.

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Something strange—no, something common, it only seems strange in the individual instance, as it marks a change in behavior—something common happens to people when they reach a certain age. Having accomplished the major aims of their lives, or, failing that, having resigned themselves; having raised their children and made passage through the period of open intergenerational warfare, perhaps even fetched up on that peaceful shore where grandchildren affirm the presence of a God in Heaven; and then, by hard work or blind luck, having reached a level of material comfort; people of late middle age begin to think about leaving a legacy. They experience the developmental phenomenon of generativity, which is characterized by distinctive actions. They involve themselves in organizations committed to the perpetuation of cherished value systems and cultural traits; they take up new forms of self-expression, often of the reflective or reminiscent sort, in order to set down their values and culture; they attempt to bridge generations and pass along what they know, or think they know (Kelley, 2010).

What I know about the phenomenon of generativity I have learned from my darling Suzanne, who is much more knowledgeable about the psychology of human development than I, and who regards me as a case study.¹ I hold a titled chair at a land-grant, research university, with grant money and a long leash; my children sometimes ask my

advice, and my grandchildren think I am wise, if peculiar; I have what I need materially and am not worried about my retirement. Around me I have a bunch of students who are quicker than I, but not as wily. There is motive, and there is opportunity.

What values and culture, then, do I choose to regenerate? They coalesce at the intersection of two cords of identity. I am, first, a scholar. After more than four decades in the academy, including foolish episodes in management, I know all the weaknesses and delusions of university life. I know where the bodies are buried—heck, I buried some of them myself. And yet, fundamentally, I believe in the academy as a force for good and an agent of enlightenment, else I would have left it long ago. More specifically, I believe in the land-grant university as America's greatest innovation, and innovator, of higher education (Isern, 2013). I am a scholar in a good place.

I am, too, a westerner, and more specifically, a plainsman. Born and raised on a farm in western Kansas, I have lived all my life, with the exception of interludes abroad, on the Great Plains of North America. When I travel overseas, I go to grassy places like Central Otago or South Australia. My core academic interests are the history of agriculture and the history of the Great Plains. I write scholarly books and articles about my home country, and every week I go on the radio to talk with plains folk about life on the prairies.² There is no segregation of my personal history

¹ My consciousness of the phase of human development known as generativity was raised through the household experience of my wife's dissertation (Kelley, 2010), which work contains a sound exposition of the human development concept as applied to historical memory studies.

² My weekly feature on history, folklore, and life on the Great Plains of North American, *Plains Folk*, is heard statewide in North Dakota on Prairie Public Radio.

and my scholarly endeavors. I have a farm in Kansas, and Thomas Wolfe to the contrary, I can go home again.

At a certain age, then, I contemplate an academic legacy on the Great Plains of North America, a scholarship for western places. What precipitates this contemplation is that horrific ritual known as comprehensive examinations. Really, scholars of other countries regard the comprehensive examinations forced upon American graduate students as pointless and barbaric. But we have them as curricular relics, and so I try to make something of them—make them not merely an ordeal of reading until the eyeballs bleed, but also an incubator by which, as a sort of a seminar, we might, in corporate, come to an understanding of where we are in the scholarship of the Great Plains and even how we might advance it in exciting and constructive ways, how we might, in the full sense of the term, do good history.

And what might such history look like? At this juncture of generativity, here are the three values I resolve to inculcate in my students and seed into the field. The scholarship of western places is a scholarship of agency, complexity, and memory.

We convene today in Denver, the Queen City of the Plains. The Great Plains of North America constitute a self-conscious region with a body of scholarship devoted to it.³ The experience of humankind here is deep, certainly more than 12,000 years, turbulent, and marked by critical human decisions shaping the course of events, from the time when lithic peoples laid the torch to the land and formed the grasslands to the moment when petroleum engineers implemented horizontal drilling and opened the Bakken. The interactions of people, prairie, technology, and the cosmos are a dance marathon of emergences and resets punctuated with contingencies. Plains folk catalog these experiences and tell them in a literature, formal and informal, of remembrance, by which they, we, adjudge actions and achieve identity. We have a history.

I say, “we tell,” “we have a history,” because as already noted, I am of a certain age, and have lived this history, not just told it. My generation on the plains experienced the era of consolidation, as people and capital deserted the land, farms were merged in the vain search for economies of scale, the social cost of space ate up the efficiencies, and communities teetered in near-collapse. We tightened our belts, defined hardiness and restraint as virtues, and cultivated a fatalistic asceticism. Our historians failed us, for they reckoned the facts of life on the prairies by the experience of their own generation, rather than the *longue durée*.⁴ Despite this, there remained possibilities of choice and initiative, so that my family farm navigated passage into its fifth generation, and a scion of the farm family

achieved a PhD in Western History from a land-grant university of the plains.

Wherein I was intellectually imprinted with that literature of memory of which I spoke, a historiography rooted in grassland ecology, greenhoused in prairie universities, and patterned by positivistic habits of scholarly explanation. The root from which springs this prairie historiography is *The Great Plains*, by Walter P. Webb, published in 1931 and never out of print (Webb, 1931; Tobin, 1976; Dorman, 1993). The great irony of Webb’s masterwork is that in his regionalist attempt to define the Great Plains and give his home country an identity by which it could resist the corruptions of American homogeneity, Webb embraced determinism, environmental determinism of a blinkered and somewhat racist cast. We have been a long time digging out of this hole, so that while we do not forget Webb’s insights about life in the level, treeless, semiarid environment, we rise free of his determinisms and embrace the possibilities of life and scholarship in a western place.

I ain’t got a lot, but what I got is mine
I ain’t rich, but Lord I’m free⁵

George Strait got this before the scholars did. I refer not to his existential two-step, “All My Exes Live in Texas,” but rather to his lyric treasure, “Amarillo by Morning,” the title of which reeks with ironies, but the final refrain of which soars as a manifesto of liberal democracy and human agency: I ain’t got a lot, but what I got is mine, I ain’t rich, but Lord I’m free.

In recent years scholars of the Great Plains—Elliott West is a good example—have embraced human agency as an underpinning for a new scholarship of western places (West, 1998). They do this parcel to general trends in the profession, as scholars have backed off narratives of victimization and have foregrounded considerations of contingency, choice, and consequences. What we historians have not done is to inquire, self-consciously, about the origins and implications of this thing we call *agency*.

I am talking about the capacity of people and peoples to dream dreams, to make decisions, to act autonomously, and to live with the consequences as they navigate the passages of history. The scholar of agency rejects determinisms, environmental or any other kind. Such a scholar does not deny that categorical forces such as environment, economics, technology, inertia, or gravity exist or that they are important. He merely observes that these forces are not history. Rather, history is constituted by the actions of people and peoples as they navigate, confront, or otherwise interact with such forces and with one another over time, making choices all along the way (Aya, 2001).

Few historians know it, but when they speak of agency, they are building on the thoughts and works of scholars in two other disciplines, the first being the mother of them all, philosophy. Although philosophers draw a distinction between agency and free will that is more refined than historians care to contemplate, they nevertheless provide grounding for agency in what is known as action theory

³ Dorman (1993) analyzes the origins of Great Plains regionalism in the 1920s and 1930s; Wishart (2004) is a handy compendium of regional scholarship generated through the 20th Century.

⁴ Beginning in 1993, and on multiple public occasions since then, I have delivered a public lecture entitled “The Promise of Life on the North American Plains.” This lecture takes to task regional scholars, chief among them Elwyn Robinson of the University of North Dakota (Robinson, 1966), who have embedded dependency into a declensionist narrative of the northern plains at the expense of agency.

⁵ Terry Stafford and Paul Fraser, “Amarillo by Morning,” as sung by George Strait, *Strait from the Heart* (MCA, 1982).

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