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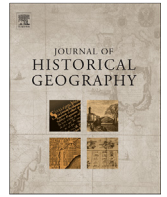

Feature: Historical Geographies of Moral Regulation

‘Where the little life unfolds’: women’s citizenship, moral regulation and the production of scale in early twentieth-century Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Abstract

This article examines the contingent connections between moral regulation and the production of scale in the Canadian city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. In the early twentieth century, a group called the Halifax Local Council of Women (HCW) unveiled an important program of moral regulation. Targeting the lives of the city’s children, this program aimed to inculcate moral norms primarily through the reorganization of space. In the interest of morality, the HCW campaigned against various unwholesome spaces in the city and sought to introduce new, more wholesome spaces for the city’s children. At first glance, the HCW’s program of moral regulation would seem to involve a transfer of women’s activities and capacities from the scale of the ‘home’ to the ‘local’ scale; rather than caring for children in the home, the HCW would now be caring for them wherever the ‘little life unfolds.’ A closer examination, however, shows that the local scale was not so much occupied as it was produced by the HCW and its morality program. In tracking the co-production of moral regulation and geographical scale, this paper aims to reveal the spatial conditions through which one group of people seeks to manage the lives of others.
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At the turn of the twentieth century, the contours of political life were about to be challenged and redrawn in the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. At the centre of this challenge was a newly formed organization called the Halifax Local Council of Women (HCW). Halifax was then a city of 40,000 people on Canada’s east coast, and the HCW was among a handful of local organizations that would seek to guide the city through the tumult of turn-of-the-century population growth, capitalist expansion, and social conflict.[1] Emerging in this context, the HCW brought together the city’s elite (white and middle class) women in the interest of addressing particular social problems and creating a more significant role for women in public affairs.[2] In the short term, the HCW would simply occupy a series of informal roles in the city. Longer-term, it hoped to gain access to the formal public roles that were generally reserved for men, including such citizenship rights as serving on the public school board and voting in municipal, provincial, and national elections. For the HCW, the take-up of informal roles was a pathway to formal citizenship, a way to perform and demonstrate women’s ‘fitness’ for citizenship rights through ‘the diligent discharge of its duties and responsibilities.’[3]

For strategic reasons, the HCW generally sought out ‘public’ roles for women that mirrored the roles that they were expected to play in the ‘private’ realm of the home. In the early years of the organization’s existence, it devoted the greatest part of its attention to overseeing and regulating the moral lives of the city’s children: a traditional, private role of women transported into the public realm. The ostensibly private role of moral instruction could, in the HCW’s

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[1] On turn of the century Halifax, see T. Acheson, The national policy and the industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880–1910, *Acadiensis* 1 (1972) 3–28; H. Roper, The Halifax Board of Control: the failure of municipal reform, 1906–1919, *Acadiensis* 14 (1985) 46–65; E. Forbes and D. Muise (Eds), *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, Toronto, 1993. On the same period in other Canadian cities, see P. Rutherford, Tomorrow’s metropolis: the urban reform movement in Canada, *Canadian Historical Review* 6, no. 1 (1971) 203–224; J. Weaver, Tomorrow’s metropolis revisited: a critical assessment of urban reform in Canada, 1890–1920, in: G. Stelter, A. Artibise (Eds), *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History*, Toronto, 1977.

[2] On the early years of the HCW, see E. Forbes, Battles in another war: Edith Archibald and the Halifax feminist movement, in: *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the Twentieth-Century Maritimes*, Fredericton, NB, 1989. For a broader view of the organization, see J. Guildford, *The Magnificent Services of Women: The Halifax Local Council of Women, 1894–2002*, Halifax, 2002; J. Fingard, Women’s organizations: the heart and soul of women’s activism, in: J. Fingard, J. Guildford (Eds), *Mothers of the Municipality: Women, Work, and Social Policy in Post-1945 Halifax*, Toronto, 2005.

[3] E. Murray, 19 June 1912, What Women are Doing in Nova Scotia, *Halifax Local Council of Women Scrapbook, 1908–1917* [hereafter HCW Scrapbook], Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, MG 20, no. 204, MFM #14723.

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view, be transported into the public domain through a subtle reworking of the assumed scale of childhood. The lives of children, the group pointed out, stretched well beyond the 'four walls of the house,' and ensuring the proper behaviour of children therefore required women to assert their authority in any site, public or private, where 'the little life unfolds.'[4] From the HCW's founding in 1894 until a disappointing political defeat in 1912, the regulation of children's morality was the organization's foremost collective activity and the primary route through which it sought to obtain greater citizenship rights for women. It was the centrepiece of a campaign that envisioned new public roles for women that were observably consistent with their existing private roles and that would tend to upset, as little as possible, the public purview of elite men.

In taking responsibility for the moral lives of local children, the HCW was part of a much broader movement among elite women's organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As an extensive literature has made clear, the regulation of civic morality was a major preoccupation for many women's organizations of this period.[5] On their own, or in collaboration with other reformers, these organizations sought to address a range of moral concerns: 'pernicious' reading material, prostitution, unsupervised recreation (among youth), and many other 'corrupting' activities. Like the HCW, many of these organizations saw moral regulation as a pathway to broader citizenship rights. Reinterpreting the prevailing ideology of 'separate spheres,' women would argue that traditional 'private' concerns like the inculcation of morals actually required them to exert an influence outside the home (in the ostensible 'public' sphere).[6] This strategy often aided in opening up new public roles for women. However, it could also put the elite membership of early women's organizations into conflict with less privileged women, whose children were very often the targets of elite morality campaigns.[7] The ostensibly universal norms of moral behaviour enlisted by women's organizations were in fact middle class, 'white' norms, and the regulation of morality would tend to operate therefore as a program of intervention in the lives of working-class, poor, and racialized households.[8] If elite women succeeded in gaining entry to public roles in this way, it was often an entrance achieved at the expense of less privileged women and their families.

Less recognized than the enlistment of class-specific moral norms, the regulation of morality could also involve a complex engagement with prevailing understandings of geographical scale. The concept of 'scale,' for human geographers, refers to the size or spread of particular processes, spaces, or institutions.[9] Frequently discussed scales include the 'local,' 'national,' and the 'global,' as well as more intimate scales like the 'body' and the 'home.' While the precise ontology and significance of scale has been subject to wide ranging debate in recent years, the most compelling theorizations suggest that scales are variable, socially constructed phenomena, with a range of real-world effects.[10] The task of critical scholars, from this perspective, is to examine how particular configurations of scale are produced and negotiated in practice, and how these configurations come to affect a range of relevant social, political, or cultural processes.[11] Taking up this approach, recent scholarship has examined the scalar effects of surveys, reports, and other forms of knowledge that help to render (ostensibly) scale-specific processes intelligible[12]; the practices of collaboration and negotiation that allow certain actors to work together and influence processes at a particular scale[13]; and the power-laded practices of

[4] Murray, What Women are Doing in Nova Scotia (note 3).

[5] For seminal contributions on moral regulation among early North American women's organizations, see C. Bacchi, Race regeneration and social purity: a study of the attitudes of Canada's English-speaking suffragists, *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 11 (1978) 460–474; M. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925*, Toronto, 1991; A. Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation*, Cambridge, 1999; A. Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*, Urbana, 1991; L. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, New Haven, 1991; C. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1995; D. Spain, *How Women Saved the City*, Minneapolis, 2000.

[6] On 'separate spheres' ideology and women's engagements with it, see L. Kealey, Introduction, in: *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s–1920s*, Toronto, 1979; L. Kerber, Separate spheres, female worlds, woman's place: the rhetoric of women's history, *The Journal of American History* 75 (1988) 9–39; P. Ethington, Recasting urban political history: gender, the public, the household, and political participation in Boston and San Francisco during the Progressive Era, *Social Science History* 16 (1992) 301–333; A. Kinahan, Cultivating the taste of the nation: the National Council of Women of Canada and the campaign against 'pernicious' literature at the turn of the Twentieth Century, *Canadian Journal of Communication* 32 (2007) 161–179; C. Comacchio, *The Infinite Bonds of Family: Domesticity in Canada, 1850–1940*, Toronto, 1999, 50; V. Johnson, Protection, virtue, and the 'power to detain': the moral citizenship of Jewish women in New York City, 1890–1920, *Journal of Urban History* 31 (2005) 657.

[7] On the class and race privileges of prominent North American women's organizations, see V. Strong-Boag, *The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893–1929*, Ottawa, 1976, 6; C. Andrew, Women and the welfare state, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 17 (1984) 667–684. On the role of class and race privileges in defining these organization's moral sensibilities, see Valverde, *The Age of Light* (note 5), 60–61; C. Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930*, Toronto, 1995, 125; C. Strange and T. Loo, *Making Good: Law and Moral Regulation in Canada, 1867–1939*, Toronto, 1997, 84; A. Glasbeek, *Feminized Justice: The Toronto Women's Court, 1913–1934*, Vancouver, 2009, 67; K. Dehli, They rule by sympathy: the feminization of pedagogy, *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 19 (1994) 195–216. Although working-class and racialized women were generally excluded from prominent women's organizations, they sometimes found other ways to participate in civic activities and sometimes formed (smaller and less influential) civic organizations. See L. Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890–1920*, Toronto, 1998; W. Roberts, Rocking the cradle for the world: the new woman and maternal feminism, Toronto 1877–1917, in: L. Kealey (Ed), *A Not Unreasonable Claim* (note 6).

[8] See F. Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830*, London, 1987; S. Wilson, 'Our common enemy': censorship campaigns of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the National Council of Women of Canada, 1890–1914, *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 10 (1998) 138–479.

[9] The literature on scale is vast and varied. For reviews, see A. Herod and M. Wright, Placing scale: an introduction, in: A. Herod, M. Wright (Eds), *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale*, Oxford, 2002; R. Howitt, Scale, in: J. Agnew, K. Mitchell, G. O'Tuathail (Eds), *A Companion to Political Geography*, Oxford, 2003; E. Sheppard and R. McMaster, Introduction: scale and geographic inquiry, in: E. Sheppard, R. McMaster (Eds), *Scale and Geographic Inquiry*, Oxford, 2004.

[10] A well-theorized examination of 'scale effects' appears in S. Legg, Of scales, networks, and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34 (2009) 234–253. A compatible 'performative' or nominalist approach to scale is developed in C. Collinge, Flat ontology and the deconstruction of scale: a response to Marston, Jones, and Woodward, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (2006) 244–251; R. Kaiser and E. Nikiforova, The performativity of scale: the social construction of scale effects in Narva, Estonia, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008) 537–562; A. Moore, Rethinking scale as a geographical category: from analysis to practice, *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (2008) 203–225.

[11] See Moore, Rethinking scale (note 10), 214.

[12] D. Demeritt, The social construction of global warming and the politics of science, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91 (2001) 307–337; K. Jones, Scale as epistemology, *Political Geography* 17 (1998) 25–28; T. Rutland and A. Aylett, The work of policy: actor-networks, governmentality, and local action on climate change in Portland, Oregon, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008) 627–646.

[13] T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, Berkeley, 2002, 2–14; C. McFarlane, Transnational development networks: bringing development and postcolonial approaches into dialogue, *The Geographical Journal* 172 (2007) 35–49; R. Inkpen, P. Collier, and M. Riley, Topographic relations: developing a heuristic device for conceptualizing networked relations, *Area* 39 (2007) 536–543; A. Lester, Imperial circuits and networks: geographies of the British Empire, *History Compass* 4 (2006) 124–141.

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