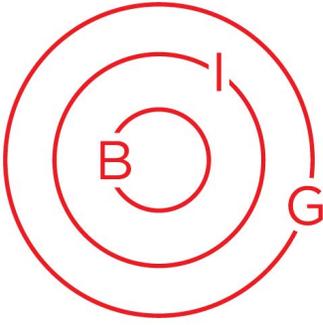




BORDERS IN GLOBALIZATION





Borders in Globalization Research Project 24

**The Northern Plains and Prairies: From
Frontier to Borderland**

**Randy William Widdis
University of Regina**

Introduction: The Case for an Historical Approach in Policy-Making

My argument supporting the historical approach in policy-making is based on the assertion that policy makers need to develop a sense of relativism which in turn will lead to critical questioning of technocratic planning paradigms that are insensitive to place and time. Accounts of historical evolution deepen “understanding of current issues by placing current problems in their broader temporal context” and provide “a basis for comparison with past situations which may enlarge the range of policy options to be considered” (Rennie, 1998: 289-290). Because borders are imagined, contested, constructed, and reconstructed through time, the historical approach is absolutely essential to border-related policy-making. As well, historical insights facilitate cross-border conversations that are knowledgeable of and sensitive towards the positions advanced on both sides on a number of matters including security, trade, governance, labour mobility and environmental concerns. With this argument in mind, I present a brief historical overview of the northern Plains and Prairies borderland.

From Transnational Frontier to International Borderland

At the turn of the 19th century, the vast expanse west of the Great Lakes in both Canada and the United States was virtually empty of Europeans and non-native North Americans, the exception being a relatively small number of fur traders. The Canadian historian W.L. Morton (1992: 42) describes the Canadian prairies during this time as: “... a virgin *tabula rasa* (my italics), a blank sheet with no writing, an unmarked parchment, unscraped, unspoiled, unprepared.” Using his criteria, much the same could be said if one were to describe the northern section of the American Great Plains during the first fifty years of the 19th century (Figure 1).¹ Yet such a view overlooks the presence of native peoples and the dynamic nature of native-white relations taking

place over time. Whites and native groups engaged in various kinds of relations that centered on the fur trade which superimposed itself upon and was incorporated into traditional native trading networks.

Figure 1 here

There existed an “international” system of national polities of indigenous peoples before - and during - the colonial period that had an impact in the settlement and bordering of western North America. Sophisticated trading networks throughout the west existed prior to the arrival of Europeans and North Americans. Those that existed in the Great Plains stretched far and wide, both north-south and east-west, with central hubs (e.g. the Mandan and Hidatsa villages on the upper Missouri) and corridors of transportation that often followed water courses. Such trade resulted in the exchange of cultures and languages as well as material goods. After contact with Europeans, native trading networks remained intact as Europeans realized the geographical advantages of systems that had been in place for centuries. The river systems and tributaries that were the earliest trade corridors for native peoples continued to serve in that capacity for explorers, trappers and traders. The horse certainly accelerated the participation rate of plains tribes in the fur trade. It not only allowed peoples of the Great Plains to become more nomadic in their hunting of the buffalo; it also allowed them to extend their spatial reach in trade.

Despite an increasing presence of whites, indigenous people were the main ‘actors’ in the unfolding events that shaped the contours of the Plains-Prairies for much of the first half of the 19th century. Different kinds of ‘middle grounds’ (White, 1999) reflecting variable historical and geographical circumstances existed throughout what might be described as a gigantic trade zone. The middle ground, as White (1991: x) describes it, is a liminal hybrid space, “the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate world of villages.” In such a

setting, made possible by the fur trade system, economic negotiation and cultural accommodation took place, and native agency played a major role in dictating the evolution of the space-economy even though the system was managed by and catered to the demands of distant metropolises. The fur trade system might also be viewed more critically, i.e., as a system that exploited the environment and undermined the culture of native groups (Wishart, 1979). Certainly the fur trade produced its own kind of violence and the introduction of European goods had an immense impact on all native peoples throughout the western frontier but this didn't necessarily translate into complete dependence and acculturation, at least not until the point when species extinction, demographic catastrophes due to epidemic diseases, and overwhelming white settlement would take its toll.

Even after the 49th parallel was designated in 1818 as the border from the Lake of the Woods to the Rockies, the northern part of the international Great Plains continued to operate primarily as a fur trade frontier. Those geographically advantaged native groups, situated in productive fur-bearing regions, distant enough from Euro-American and Euro-Canadian settlements to avoid too much contact with epidemic diseases and yet close enough to develop networks of trade that would produce economic, technological and material benefits, rose to a position of prominence and even engaged in conflict and alliances with other societies to further their advantage. But over time, the position of these groups declined in the face of an eroding middle ground.

The border came into play only in terms of competition between rival companies and when indigenous groups could take advantage of differing national policies. By the middle of the 19th century, the earlier middle ground that was based on a more or less balanced relationship between whites and native peoples, despite the horrendous demographic and social ills wrought by disease, was well on its way to collapsing as the fur-bearing animals were rapidly reaching

the point of near extinction and the demand for furs decreased. The imperial powers of Britain and the United States competed for the same territory but operated from different perspectives. Eventually the transnational frontier yielded to an international borderland, where the border served as a reference point, even though it did not exclude cross-border intercourse.² During this transition, which took place at mid-century in the United States and a little bit later in Canada, middle grounds gave way to a “space of dispossession” and a “geography of exclusion” as native peoples were forced onto isolated reservations and reserves. Their role as contributors to and engineers of the evolution of the cross-border region became increasingly marginalized. The evolution of the borderland became even more complex and geographically nuanced as the North American west entered the next period of accelerated change.

The Evolution of the International Borderland

At Confederation, the Canadian Prairies were still isolated from points east and west and continued to function primarily as a declining fur trade frontier awaiting settlement. On the other hand, demographic processes pushing people westward combined with the rapid growth of the railroad network and the manifest proclivities of the government to advance settlement to the eastern margins of the Great Plains. In 1870 the Dakotas and, to a much lesser extent, Montana, were about to become less peripheral and more connected to the expanding American empire. River corridors, oriented primarily north-south, were superseded by railroad corridors (Figure 2)³ that ran primarily east-west. The same would also occur in the Prairies but not until the turn of the 20th century.

Figure 2 here

Space constraints make it impossible to tell the story of the evolution of the northern Plains/Prairies borderland from 1870 to present-day. Therefore, I will be selective and briefly cover

just a few of the many themes that illustrate similarities and differences between the Prairies and the northern Plains.

a) **Similarities**

i) **The Impact of the Railroad** - The railroad quickly emerged as one of the most important triggers to the reconfiguration of the Plains and Prairies borderland during the latter part of the 19th century. Railroads, along with steamboats and telegraphy, reorganized space and developed economies in this part of North America. The location of rail lines led to the creation of new towns and ensured their success while places that were by-passed were sentenced to decline and even extinction. The men who controlled the railroads controlled space and as a result wielded tremendous political power within the borderland and elsewhere.

ii) **The Fate of Native Peoples** - In the face of such enormous political and economic power, native peoples found themselves in a hopeless position. The social ties, cultural mixing and more evenly balanced political power that marked the fur trade era had disappeared. Settlement and capitalist expansion, first on the Plains and then on the Prairies, erased aboriginal communities and the major resource that sustained them – the bison. With the exception of the two Riel rebellions, the brutal battles that took place in the 1860s and 1870s between the Sioux and federal troops were not repeated north of the border. Yet to some degree, the Canadians followed the American example of following a strategy of attrition. In the Dakotas and Montana, the U.S. army purposefully destroyed food supplies and slaughtered horses as well as supporting the mass killing of buffalo. In Canada, the Conservative government of John A. Macdonald decided to withhold rations that were promised to the Cree, Assiniboine and other groups under the conditions of Treaty Six (Daschuk, 2013). As a result of such actions, First Nations and Plains Indians were removed from their land and geographically marginalized on reserves and reservations before the end of the 19th century. For

indigenous peoples, the northern Plains and Prairies were transformed from a borderland of middle ground to a borderland of dispossession.⁴

iii) **Agricultural Settlement** - Governments and railroad companies developed a symbiotic relationship. In both Canada and the United States, settlement was promoted by federal governments directly through homestead acts and indirectly through millions of acres of land grants to railroads that were sold to settlers which these companies used to repay loans.⁵ Policies were designed to get settlers, native-born and immigrant, preferably white, on the land as quickly and efficiently as possible and railroads were the primary means by which this was accomplished.

iv) **The Challenge of Distance and Dependency** – For much of history, the distance from eastern centres of population and the resultant impacts of greater transportation costs restricted economic opportunities in the transnational region. Likewise, small regional markets, limited opportunities for economies of scale, and the economic struggles facing staple industries dependent on the vagaries of national and global economies discouraged attempts made by the constituent political units to diversify their economies. Together, government and the railroad industry served as the architects of a new capitalist space within North America, where provinces and states in the borderland region served as a resource-producing hinterland whose raw materials, mainly agricultural, were shipped by train in a raw or semi-processed state to major industrial, manufacturing, and processing centres located further east (Figure 3).⁶

Figure 3 here

b) **Differences**

i) **Different Urban Systems** - Urban development reached a greater level of intensity on the Canadian side of the 49th parallel. Winnipeg emerged as the regional metropolis with the rest of Manitoba and the North West Territories as its hinterland. Parallel urban development in Alberta

was ensured somewhat by the great distance separating this part of the prairies from Winnipeg but the latter would continue to have considerable hold over Saskatchewan well after the province was established in 1905. Geographically, Winnipeg was ideally situated as to assume the role as the gateway city for the Canadian West (Burghardt, 1971). Indeed, citizens of that city viewed the prairies as their hinterland. Even though a dependency relationship developed between the prairies and central Canada, whereby prairie centers were dependent to a significant degree on the fortunes of eastern metropolises to which they were subordinate, a regional urban system based on the railway evolved, but no comparable system would develop on the American side. There, urban centers such as Fargo, Grand Forks and Billings functioned primarily as commercial outposts for Minneapolis-St. Paul and other large cities such as Denver and St. Louis encircling the region. As a result, Prairie cities play a much more important role in the regional economy and identity than their northern Plains counterparts do. In addition, while other Canadian borderlands served to some extent as hinterlands for cities in corresponding American borderlands, the same was not the case in the Great Plains-Prairies region.

ii) **Differences in Governance** – Paul Sharp (1952: 63) draws our attention to a number of differences in the political systems north and south of the border:

The rush of settlement into the Canadian West never outran organized government as it so frequently did in the American West. ... Constitutional differences places far greater powers in the hands of the central government under the Canadian confederation than in the American system. Litigation over water rights in the semiarid West was avoided in Canada by the denial of riparian rights, the rejection

of the doctrine of appropriation, and the acceptance of the legal principle that water was the property of the Crown.

Towards the end of the 20th century amidst the strengthening of neo-liberalism associated with globalization, business elites and conservative politicians led the charge towards a deeper integration within the borderland region and throughout the North American West. After the implementation of the free trade agreements, this deepening integration would manifest itself with stronger trading connections between the Prairie Provinces and the United States. However, economic networks and cultural connections for the most part link the Prairie provinces with states and businesses outside the northern Plains. Also important is the fact that despite a greater porosity resulting from the free trade agreements, the border effect is still evident in the form of the limited number of ports of entry capable of handling increases in freight, the obstruction in movement of products (e.g. oil shipped by pipeline) across the border because of different regulatory systems, and government implementation of legal requirements and other protective measures during tough economic times when cross-border competition heats up (Rhodes, 2002: 224, 227).

iv) **Agricultural Restructuring** - The restructuring of agriculture that took place at an accelerated rate after the end of World War II led to the weakening of the historically interdependent relationship between farmers and their communities which in turn resulted in significant out-migration of people from rural centres that were the settings for the most intense cross-border interactions. Borderland residents earlier in the 20th century were closely linked at the local scale, but over time, such connections weakened in the face of communication and transportation technologies that facilitated stronger connections with places both within and beyond the respective states and provinces of the international region. Depopulation on both sides of the border

undermined cross-border cultural connections; fewer people meant fewer crossings and a decrease in what Oscar Martinez (1994) terms “core borderlanders”.

v) **The Importance of the Border** - Over the last few decades Prairie music, art and literature has moved towards idioms and narratives that are more Canadian- and Prairie-specific and as such, have done much to articulate and develop a cultural identity indigenous to this region. As always, this cultural explosion is framed by the great “other” – the United States. For many Canadians, the 49th parallel has come to serve as a boundary marking territorial sovereignty and as a social construct symbolizing differentiation. This “powerful cultural trope” has become an important defining symbol in the regional and national imaginary of Canadians (New, 1998: 11) while for Americans in the northern Plains, the 49th parallel came to be viewed as a political artifact.

Conclusion

Relative similarities in physical landscape, geographical position, resource exploitation and historical experience have created a transnational formal culture region. And yet at the same time, a relative lack of economic integration and cross-border organizational connections have impeded the development of a transnational functional culture region.⁷ It is also important to recognize that the Prairies and the northern Plains states are regionally diverse entities made up of different wests. For example, while it can be argued that the states and provinces of the borderland share a composite political culture that is a mixture of populism, conservatism, and progressivism, it is the variable combination of these ingredients at the local and regional levels that ensure diversity within the transnational region. Border policy-makers should be sensitive towards such differences. The first step in gaining such insight is to develop an understanding of the history of this transnational region.

Endnotes

¹ University of Washington Libraries Digital Collection, *North America drawn from the latest and best authorities* (1787). (original source Harrison's Atlas, London: John Harrison, 1787). The most northwestern parts of the map are left blank with the caption "These parts are unknown."

<http://content.lib.washington.edu/u/?/maps,43>. Public Domain (accessed February 11, 2013).

² For discussion of cross-border connections occurring at this time see: Randy Widdis, "'Borderland Interaction in the International Region of the Great Plains: An Historic-Geographical Perspective,'" *Great Plains Research* 7, no. 1 (1997): 103-37.

³ Brian Altonen, *1851 – 1917, Cattle Drives and Texas Fever*, Public Health, Medicine and History website, <http://brianaltonenmph.com/gis/historical-disease-maps/zoonoses/1866-1885-the-texas-cattle-drives-and-texas-fever/>, WordPress.com. Public Domain, accessed February 12, 2013.

⁴ The story of the Métis, a liminal people with their own liminal borderland, is addressed by Michel Hogue in his book *Métis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2015).

⁵ A notable exception was James Hill's Great Northern which purchased land from the federal government.

⁶ The Begbie Canadian History Contest: 1994 to 2013 website.

<http://www.begbiecontestsociety.org/1st20.htm>. Public Domain, accessed May 27, 2015.

⁷ A formal culture region is an area relatively homogeneous with regard to one or more cultural traits such as language, religion, or system of livelihood. A functional culture region is defined by a system of interactions. It is an area that has been organized to function politically, socially, or economically as one unit.

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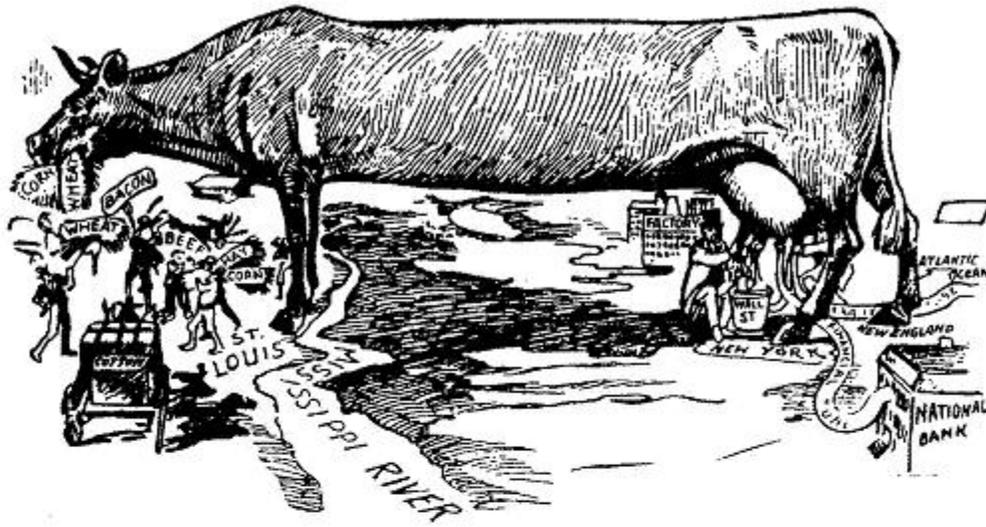
Figure 1

1787 Map of North America

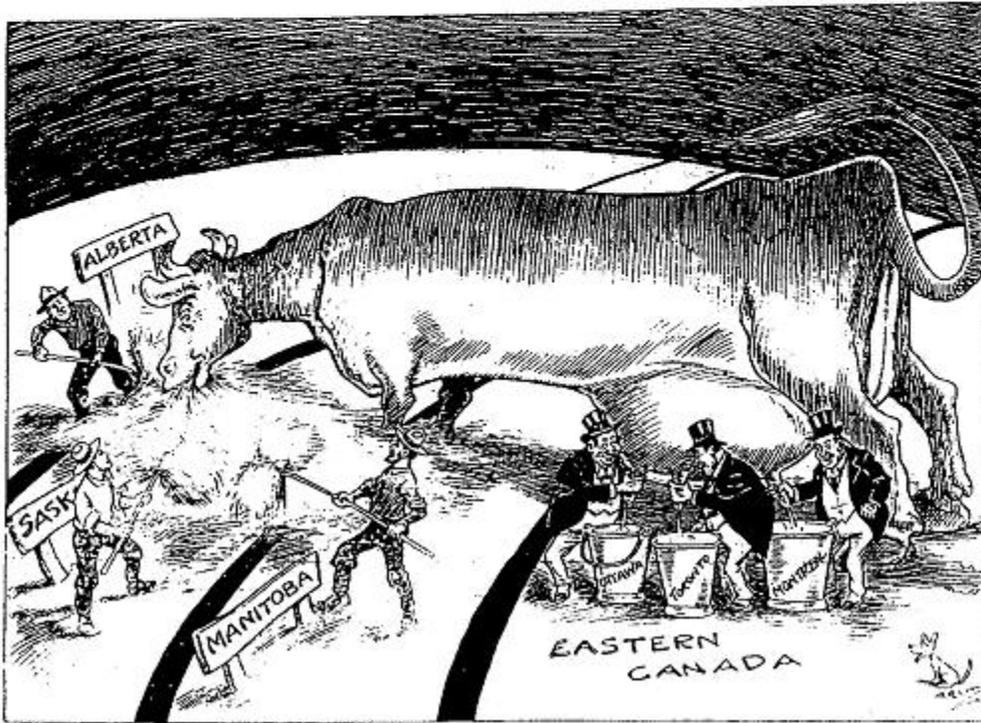


Figure 2

The U.S. Railroad System in 1870



New York World, 1 March 1896



The Grain Grower's Guide, Winnipeg, 4 Aug. 1915

Figure 3

The Milking of the North American West