LOCAL HISTORY AND SOCIETAL HISTORY

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Editors' Note – The text of this article is that of a lecture delivered to an LPSS day conference held at Madingley Hall, Cambridge, and we are grateful to Professor Phythian-Adams for giving us permission to reproduce it in the pages of LPS. The text, which is reproduced as delivered, introduces a number of interesting issues concerning the study of local history, and these in turn have important implications for the examination of local populations. It is our intention to comment on some of the ideas raised in this article in the next issue of LPS.

Insofar as the two approaches are even separable, both English Local History and the historical study of local populations have long shared a pre-occupation with 'place': place as a given entity, an observable starting point; place as a manageable unit of analysis; place as a concentrated source of desirable evidence; place as site for a measurable population or a 'community' of people, and therefore as a perceptible social reality, the investigation of which requires no further justification; and, above all, place as inevitably something central: a point from which a social area may be measured and distance decay lovingly calculated; or, in the case of urban place, a hub around which an economic hinterland may revolve, or towards which migrants are drawn centripetally. More than that, a good deal of the literature, whether locally, regionally or nationally inspired, still seems implicitly to adopt a view of society as essentially an aggregation of inhabited places in which, for analytical purposes, like-places may be categorized and grouped economically, or the unlike ranked hierarchically upwards from the humble farmstead through all sorts and conditions of rural and urban settlement to the capital itself. Ultimately such a portrait is effectively the England of Christaller: England as layer upon layer of ever-widening hexagons; England as a geometrical model. Beautiful it may be, but such an England bears little relation to the people who constitute a society or to the culture which informs it.

Nevertheless, if it has to be admitted that most of us working in local historical fields have in some sense contributed to such tacit assumptions (simply because – perhaps subconsciously – we have often allowed our basic units of analysis to determine also our constructions of wider conceptual frameworks), it has also to be said that those who claim to write the social history of this country or a region of it are equally distortive in their approach. In their case, the central organizing principle tends to be what they call 'social structure', a term which is usually restricted to describe degrees of social stratification as these may be variously defined according to rank, class, status, wealth, power, tenure and so on. From there it is but a short step to such related matters as inheritance or social mobility on the one hand, or, on the other, social control, order and
disorder, social deviance and the social customs and problems of both privileged and under-privileged. In this concentration on society as essentially a structure of social self-discipline glued together by relations of superiority and inferiority, and with, as a consequence, its own in-built system of rewards and penalties, such concerns of the local historian and the local demographer as ‘the family’ or ‘the community’ – whether rural, urban or even ‘gentle’ at the level of the county – may be, and are, fitted easily enough. Yet, of course, and as with ‘class’, these matters too are mostly assimilated only at theoretical levels which are generalized up to that of the nation as a whole. In much social history, reference may be made both to settlement on the ground and to the variety of experience accorded to distinct pays; even a sense of localism may be emphasized en passant; but the conceptual leap that then is usually made from the evidence for individual people variously living and inter-relating on terra firma to a national level of collective abstraction, is sufficiently breath-taking as to demand notice.

Such formulations of English society, indeed, are reminiscent of the attempts made earlier this century to reconstruct ‘the medieval manor’ or ‘the village community’ by integrating individual fragments of evidence, from all over the country and from more than one century, in order to contrive a single imaginative construct of theoretically nationwide applicability. Modern historians of English society at different periods similarly tend to disregard the importance of regional variation – largely because we local and regional historians have not furnished sufficiently numerous case studies – but in doing so, implicitly rather than explicitly, the social historians themselves impose a homogeneous view of society as a total entity which is demonstrably spurious. Indeed it is arguable that many current social historians do not analyse society as such at all, but rather a body of broadly shared social conventions (both formal and informal), social expectations, and even societal images. Those precise concerns, however, I would urge, are more accurately to be associated with the ever-evolving general principles of social organization. It is on these that those actually living on the ground in different areas of the country variously draw and then interpret in their own localized manner. There may not therefore be one national ‘society’, but there surely can be a nation composed of many identifiable but interlinked societies. In other words, there may exist regionalized social systems that, over significant stretches of time in pre-modern periods at least, involve personal interactions more within broadly recognizable territories than between such territories.

It is the reconstruction, measurement and understanding of such systems and their inter-connectedness in terms of actual people living on the ground in the past – as opposed to nationally generalized sets of conventions – that I would describe as ‘societal’ history in deliberate contrast to the more thematic concerns of ‘social’ history. In what now follows then it will be necessary to ignore the very interesting conceptual problems that are posed by the constant interaction between change in real societies and the normative absorption of such to the national level of what I am calling ‘the social organization’. All that there is space for, is to summarize, as opposed to argue, a possible new framework of understanding with which some of us at the University of Leicester Department of English Local History have been concerned over the last decade or so, more
details of which are available at greater length in a collective volume of essays entitled, *Societies, cultures and kinship 1580-1850: cultural provinces and English Local History*, published by the Leicester University Press. In this approach we are concerned with the interaction of a complex of variables: time – both short-term and very long-term; cultural contexts; social territories; and kinship (and other) interconnections as these find expression in residential patterns. At its most elementary, the goal is to identify the ways in which and why, at different spatial levels, certain relatively proximate communities usually tend to be more closely linked to others within a determinable grouping than to communities in other groupings not all that far away. The results of this work are very suggestive indeed. At the very least I am hoping, then, that given the shortage of helpers at Leicester – not least because of the ever widening concerns of the department – we may be able to convince others similarly to seek out and to investigate such problems for themselves in their own home-territories and, having done so, to be so kind as to communicate their results to us. What is needed above all, are strategically located case-studies from every region of the country for different periods.

First, however, it is necessary to outline – and in the space available, all too simplistically – how one might possibly identify what are now beginning to look to us like the most relevant levels of cultural and societal reality in the past.

If, for example, national space is reasonably to be characterized not by a crude aggregation of places but by a broadly stable and definable territory, by a shared culture, and by a body of people who regard themselves as natives, then similarly determinable qualities should also influence the ways in which local historians might seek to delimit their spatial sub-divisions of England. It is clearly the case, for example, that at no time will a regional population ever be evenly distributed across a territory, nor equally will that population be disposed without some degree of differentiation from its neighbours. In all regions of England the denser concentrations of people are separated from each other by landscapes of sparser settlement, and the wider you draw your map of this the clearer it becomes that, in terms of both nucleated rural settlements and towns, the most heavily populated areas are invariably the major river valleys. At the inland perimeters of entire drainage systems the watershed zones tend to be pastoral pays of woodland, wold or fell, and to be late and sparsely settled or, in mountainous areas, not inhabited at all. At the outermost limits there is the barrier of the sea. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the areas of most major drainage systems once seem to have been broadly reflected also in the extents of early territories – either large territories or groups of smaller territories – with zones of intercommoning between each such neighbouring territory along the watershed divisions; though in other cases, the more aggressive entities pushed over their watershed limits and drew their frontiers along the next river on the other side. Subsequently, as a result of deliberate but separate administrative reorganizations at identifiably different dates, such territories in much of the country north of the Thames were themselves broadly replaced in turn by groups of component counties which, consequently, may still be seen to fit quite neatly into their physical matrices. True there is rarely ever an absolutely precise coincidence of geography with administrative
convenience, but such differences are never very serious. The areas of overlap indeed – and especially when occasionally, they are extensive – are, as we shall see, themselves of absorbing interest, because of what they reveal of the crucial cultural mechanisms inter-connecting populations in either side of watershed divisions. Overall, the result is, however, that such a group of counties, like Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire for example, clearly has much more in common internally than it does with Essex, Hertfordshire and others in the Thames valley on the one hand, or even with the bulk of East Anglia on the other.

Internally, such broad provincial settings have to be regarded as of profound cultural significance. Both the ethnic histories of their inhabitants and the general developments of their dialects tend to vary one from another. For each one of them shares an ‘aspect’ that is unique to itself; each is uniquely vulnerable to particularized external influences or settlement from the outside. Inland, either they will look ‘inwards’ towards and then along the line of a major navigable river like the Trent, the Severn or the Thames; or at the national margins, like East Anglia or the north-east for example, they will look ‘outwards’ eventually via parallel river lines from a shared coastline towards one or more of the neighbouring foreign cultures (whether British or Continental) with which they have alternately frequent maritime links and intermittent hostile international relations. Given in addition that towns – or certainly the more important of them – hug the river valleys, the identification of regional urban hierarchies and networks with such settings tends to be highly specific, so it is equally apparent that for centuries the commerce in both goods and ideas was to a large degree similarly focused within such contexts. Until the conquest of the watersheds (in some instances through substantial urban colonization or rural squatting settlement at different periods of demographic expansion, or by new modes of communication), it is arguable that the fourteen several groupings of counties here defined, may be seen to have comprised what will now be termed the basic ‘cultural provinces’ of England. It is because of this cultural dimension, indeed, that the outer boundaries encircling each have been taken to be those of the pre-1974 counties rather than the physical lines of the watersheds (see Figures 1-4).

It is within such cultural sub-divisions of the country then that we might locate the largely separate local social systems which are here being called ‘societies’. With the possible exception of the Solway Plain region (the old county of Cumberland plus what was northern Westmorland), a cultural province is never co-terminous with the territory of a single society insofar as the latter may be delimited with any pretence to precision. Once again, however, since the major drainage basins themselves subdivide into the areas described by each of their component tributary systems, and since in so many cases one or occasionally two such systems tend to equate generally with the areal extent of each immediately encompassing shire, it does become possible in most regions, I believe, to talk broadly of ‘shire societies’. That, however, should never stop us recognizing that, in some instances, a very early form of shire like Hallamshire may continue to interrupt a later county area, and in doing so retain its own sense of independence.
Figure 1  River-drainage patterns and groupings of counties: the 'cultural provinces' of England

CULTURAL PROVINCES
1  Solway
2  'Irish' Sea
3  Severn/Avon
4  Severn estuary
5  South 'British' Sea
6  'French' Channel
7  Thames
8  Thames estuary
9  'Dutch' Sea
10 Wash/Ouse
11 Trent
12 Witham
13 Yorkshire Ouse
14 North ('Scandinavian') Sea

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Watersheds of major drainage systems</th>
<th>Pre-1974 county boundaries</th>
<th>Overlap zones between</th>
<th>Boundaries of cultural provinces (by county groups)</th>
<th>Major navigable rivers</th>
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0  miles  0  --  100  kilometres  140
Figure 2  Northern 'cultural provinces'

- Watersheds of major drainage systems
- Pre-1974 county boundaries
- Overlap zones between and
- Boundaries of cultural provinces (by county groups)
- Major navigable rivers
In most counties, nevertheless, there will be a readily identifiable heartland area (sometimes even two such areas) of above-average population density distributed across a spectrum of rural settlements and focusing eventually on one or even two successful county towns. 'Downstream' along the axis of the major river, towards the core of the enviroring province, as it were, or along the major road lines communicating with other nearby 'provinces' or with the capital, such localized allegiances are likely to merge with wider concerns. 'Upstream', local mores will more probably exert themselves (the sturdy cultural independence of the pastoral areas being often quoted in such connections). Whatever the case, it now seems to be widely accepted that, to judge from the surname evidence, certain regionally identifiable family stocks perdured and proliferated over the generations within the broad confines of most shires, or not far beyond, simply because, as many studies of pre-modern England show, the great majority of people moved only short distances when they migrated, while some of those others who moved further away, say to the capital, may well have returned to their county of origin at some later stage of the life-cycle. One does not have to believe that every shire society was demarcated abruptly by a line coincidental with the continuous boundary of the county to accept, moreover, that the county was also either, firstly, the named area with which most people were associated in the past; or secondly, as territory that its male inhabitants were expected to defend or to represent militarily; or thirdly, an area of jurisdiction, taxation and administration in many more locally constraining ways than is the case today; or, finally, a tract of England which to a significant degree could boast its own customs, history, maps, politics, newspaper circulation, and hence a proven identity of its own.

The few significant spatial exceptions to the broad equivalence of shire and society — Wiltshire, Warwickshire, Westmorland, Suffolk, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire (though in the last two cases their historic subdivisions broadly equate with shires elsewhere) — in fact tend to support the general rule, since what partitions all of those named is the exceptional local configuration of their historic boundaries in defiance of the underlying watershed pattern. East Anglian counties stretch towards the Fens for obvious agrarian reasons; Wiltshire (Wessex) and Gloucestershire (the Hwicce) reach towards the Thames; while the Scandinavian partition of Mercia accounts for the artificial structure of Warwickshire. In the great majority of shires, however, there are clearly-identifiable, well-populated heartlands which, on most sides, fade as it were demographically at their margins, to varying degrees of coincidence with the broad lines of their county boundaries.

It must be emphasized here that it is not being suggested that there were never links across such boundaries. Current work, indeed, suggests that, in particular, when for long stretches county boundaries follow the lines of significant rivers — especially those, like the Tees, the Welland and the Suffolk Stour, which divide specific cultural provinces one from another — the inhabitants of both sides of each immediate valley in question will conjoin, to comprise an introverted form of frontier society to some degree independent, whether administratively, economically or culturally, of the two parent shire societies concerned in each case, and will focus in, per contra, on their own mini-capitals — one or more solid market towns. At the level of national peripheries, of
course, the societal significance of such valley arrangements will be that much more extreme: one need only recall for earlier centuries in particular the special circumstances of the Tweed or the Lyddel towards Scotland on the one hand, or the valley of the Wye below Monmouth on the other.

Exceptional as these considerations may be, however, they do serve to highlight the crucial role of towns and the manner in which these focus both society and culture. Yet what is becoming increasingly clear is that, while urban centrality in local social systems and thus also in the heartlands of shire societies is the one element of the Christaller view that seems to work, the town, *per se*, can no longer usefully be regarded simply in terms of the inhabitants of a bounded place. As will be explained further below, the spatial components of local societies, like their parent ‘provincial cultures’ as sub-divisions of the national territory, somewhat resemble the plates of earth tectonics; that is, areas superficially linked but, below the surface, essentially divided. At the level of local societies, it seems to be becoming apparent that there are basically two quite differently structured elements, the one urban and centralized, the other rural and dispersed. In the case of urban society, however, we need first to disentangle the economic from the societal. The centrality in question has nothing to do with the extent of a rural hinterland – as a marketing area or as an undifferentiated field from which migrants may be drawn. It has to do quite specifically with the distribution of those people who most commonly interact with one another on a regular basis and largely within the terms of the local urban conventions in question. In other words, the central urban place will be linked – according to its importance – to a range of proximate *rural* places (usually biased towards ‘urban’ economic activities) in its immediate shadow and ‘from which’, as I put it in 1986, it will draw ‘most heavily in terms of marriage partners, kinship connections, and its regular labour force’.

That means, also, that certain nearby rural places – perhaps largely those away from the major routes of communication to the town – will therefore *not* be so connected.

Thus defined, the historical existence of urban societies that transcend the technical limits of ‘the town’ can hardly be gainsaid. The earliest documentation for them is at least as old as Domesday book from which Professor Christopher Dyer has so ingeniously disentangled settlements of rurally adjacent dependent cottagers in urban contexts. Much of the traceable medieval history of suburbanization, moreover, represents, as later, the urban absorption of already partially urbanized rural settlements in the town’s immediate vicinity.

If such settlements tended originally to be no more than hamlets, in later urbanizing periods, of course, entire villages and rural parishes would be engulfed. One could say, indeed, that in times of urban expansion, today’s urban society will become eventually tomorrow’s central town.

A view of urban society as comprising a constellation of personally interdependent rural and urban sub-communities liberates us at once not only from the conventional and often sterile preoccupation with ‘the’ town, but also from such simplistic views which hold, or at least imply, both that ‘place’ is exactly co-terminous with ‘community’, and that society is constituted by undifferentiated aggregations of such places/communities.

On the contrary,
and at a much more realistic level, what gives society continuity, stability and its traditions are variously enduring personal linkages or relationships. Indeed, one should go further and emphasize that 'society' and 'community' represent quite different functions of time. Society is essentially a product of inter-generational process and its basic unit is therefore the lineage; whereas 'community' is largely a product of intra-generational process and its basic unit is the family or even no more than a stage in the domestic cycle of its members. Lineage finds spatial expression across many communities and often within a broadly definable region: family exists where it is at the time. Society and community therefore mesh where lineage and place coincide, where certain families – usually a minority – are stable over time and inter-marry with similar stable families in the same place or in the same immediate locality, thus contriving what Marilyn Strathern has described at community level as 'kinship at the core'.\(^6\) 'Around' such families, as it were, roam offspring and other relatives who 'carry' their kinship connections with them, through different communities, over lesser or further geographical distances from their surviving lineage cores.

The degree to which the local towns and cities exerted sufficient attractive powers as to draw such lineage representatives further into the heartlands of either local societies or the cultural province itself, as opposed to losing them altogether to local societies in other provinces, is still a matter of uncertainty. There must be, however, a presumption that those lineages that are 'circulated' over long periods of time through the local urban societies and back again into rural contexts may be seen not only as the local cultural custodians but also as standard-bearers, ever refreshing the evolving nature of the local culture as it is constantly re-interpreted in the towns: those locations most susceptible to 'foreign' ideas and influences.

Now I have deliberately dwelt on society as a matter of both process and space under this urban heading, because in societal terms, towns, or rather urban societies, must be regarded as central in two quite separate senses. The town itself will be the centre of its own urban society at any one time; but, to different degrees according to its ranking, the urban society in its turn will clearly also be a cultural pivot both in a much wider spatial sense and also over time. In other words, the urban element in a local society operates dynamically in terms of both space and time, whereas the rural platelets in this reconstruction of societal tectonics, seem to behave rather differently.

Rural areas may sometimes boast what Dr Mary Carter describes as mini-centres – minor trading nodes situated on communication axes – but their non-agricultural activities tend to be so minor that these cannot be regarded as central in the same sense as a town. Such places surely were frequently leap-frogged whether for shopping purposes, courtship or betterment-migration. In the countryside, therefore, the differentiation between communities does not seem to be so significant. What is apparent, however, both from work done by Dr Anne Mitson on south Nottinghamshire in the late sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries, and by Dr Mary Carter herself on Huntingdonshire in the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth centuries, is that spatially-definable groups of adjacent rural places, often within the same pays, might be internally
linked together – the basic cement again being kinship. Dr Mitson’s careful work – based on the integration of family reconstructions from eleven nearby parishes – in particular, demonstrates how certain families might be common in some numbers within quite small rural neighbourhoods of dynastic families, families that both inter-married and furnished those who typically comprised the parochial office-holding elites of the area.” Patterns of indebtedness in Dr Mitson’s Nottinghamshire and concentrated land-holding patterns in Dr Carter’s pioneering analysis of Huntingdonshire both represent but further dimensions of the same phenomenon.

It is the residentially enduring nature of such family networks, however, that is so pronounced and with it their continuing dominance of neighbouring community cores over the decades. These spatial networks in their turn thus demarcate definable areas that are transcended only by a tiny minority of such geographically ramifying local lineages. Below that superior level, Dr Mitson is able to demonstrate the edges of three neighbourhoods within her small area: two rural units (each of which may have stretched further beyond the limits of her study area) and one partial entity comprising the parishes of Radford and Lenton which clearly represented the westerly rural outskirts of an urban society centred on next-door Nottingham, in much the same way as did the so-called ‘urban villages’ identified by Dr Carter in the immediate vicinity of St. Ives. Not only then is an urban society to be demarcated from a rural one, but even at close quarters, and even in the heartlands of two separate local societies, "rural" too may be distinguished from "rural" despite the absence of insurmountable physical barriers to impede easy social intercourse between adjacent neighbourhoods. In both urban and rural cases, therefore, it seems to be the spatially definable neighbourhood that mediates between ‘community’ and ‘society’.

It follows, therefore, that where one neighbourhood is situated in relation to the local social system as a whole is bound to be a matter of some significance. In particular, away from the main lines of communication (whether road or water) along which societal structures are likely to be at their most changeable, one would reasonably expect there to be consistently marked contrasts between arrangements in heartland locations as opposed to those at the periphery and especially where the latter are characterized by pays of dispersed settlement. If dynastic neighbourhoods have edges of sorts, what about the nature of the limits both of local societies per se and also of those where by definition – at the watershed margins – the edges of both local societies and cultural provinces coincide?

In the two heartlands that have now been studied so microscopically the answers are not unanimous. In the case of the Trent, the provincial axis at this point between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, Dr Mitson’s rural neighbourhoods in Nottinghamshire may have overlapped the county boundary into Derbyshire on the western side of her sample area to some as yet-unknown distance. By contrast, despite the axial line of the Great Ouse, Dr Carter finds a very definite societal barrier between Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire towards the fens. Obviously this is an important and challenging field of enquiry, and given the varying dispositions of kinship
neighbourhoods, it may well be that a zig-zag pattern determining the edges of adjacent localized networks, but cutting backwards and forwards across the formal boundary between two societies, is what we might most realistically expect from future investigation. At the moment we are obviously casting our analytical nets over areas that are as yet far-too-spatially restricted.

Rather different problems attend attempts to characterise the physical limits of what simultaneously may broadly be the edge of both a local society and a cultural province. In this case there are two alternative landscape contexts which need to be distinguished. The more straightforward is that where the outer limit of a group of counties roughly coincides with the watershed zone itself – in other words, usually along relatively higher ground than that occupied by the heartlands of the local societies on either side. Divisions of this kind are marked most commonly by strikingly empty landscapes of fell or wold in which you can almost see societal allegiances visibly petering out towards the dividing boundary-line. Such a context – though rather more subtly – characterizes the boundary between the Trent drainage basin and that of the Severn/Avon where Leicestershire bounds with Warwickshire. It was there that, some years ago, a group of us first identified the remarkable failure of nineteenth-century Leicestershire's people to marry beyond their immediate kinship neighbourhood into the adjacent local society of Warwickshire. An alternative scenario is involved, however, when, as we have seen, the cultural limit of a group of counties or a province overlaps the watershed. In many such cases the gap between the lip of the drainage basin and the line of cultural boundary is dominated by an entire valley or vale or even the upper reaches of a minor drainage system running parallel to the watershed. In their aspects such valleys look towards the heartlands of their parent societies eventually in ways that the river-frontier valleys do not, but for all that they represent some of the most secret inland recesses of England and as such, usually boast their own market-town centres and detectable cultural lives of their own. Examples of such are innumerable and range from the valley of the south Tyne above Alston on the edge of Cumbria, through the valley of the Kennet above Hungerford, to such vales as those of Malmesbury and Taunton Dene. In minor variations of this type, the county boundary may clip across the valley as does the division between Yorkshire and Derbyshire across the upper valley of the Sheaf, or that between Surrey and Kent across the valley of the Eden. In the latter area, indeed, another fascinating study done at Leicester by Dr Evelyn Lord has shown that, in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries, kinship networks seem to have accommodated themselves more to the east/west lines of the North Downs, of the Greensand ridge and of the valley of the Eden, than to the obstacle posed by the watershed rim of the Thames basin and hence contact southward with Sussex. The whole of this vast Wealden area, of course, epitomises the theme of simultaneous division between societies and cultures, and serves to emphasize how only recently is it even appropriate to speak of the 'South-east' as some kind of broadly unified entity. For centuries before, the wide zone of the Weald delimited virtually separate societies respectively to the north, east and south of it. One might add that a similar zone, containing such diagnostic place-names as Upper Weald near Stoney Stratford and a noticeable sparsity of settlement, also once characterised the watershed landscape between the Thames drainage basin and
that of the Ouse, where the cultural limits of the Thames culture as defined by
the northern boundary of Buckinghamshire overlap physically into the inland
territory of the Wash basin.

Such cultural and societal limits must be regarded as very real: even today, one
has to be insensitive to a degree not to notice the accumulating visible signs of
a new cultural and physical environment as you move across the boundary
between two such great cultural sub-divisions of England. It is this, then that
also lends particular significance to one last category of town and its urban
society. For around the inland perimeter of every cultural province there are to
be found a select number of usually quite modest market centres - often
originally in quite isolated situations but on one of the major lines of
communication - which often discovered their economic rationale probably
relatively late in the period of medieval urban expansion. Such transitional
places, the cultural portals of the provinces, would include Royston, Saffron
Walden and Daventry on the edge of the Ouse basin, and elsewhere Hitchin,
Haltwhistle, Newcastle-under-Lyne, Lutterworth and Alton. Only a very few,
indeed, as in the cases of Coventry in the first place, and then later, on the
other side of the same watershed, Birmingham, grew to such sizes that they
may be said eventually to have united into one wider economic system the
formerly distinct regional urban networks that had characterised two
neighbouring cultural provinces: in these two cases, those of the Trent on the
one hand and of the Severn/Avon basin, on the other. The point that needs
emphasizing here, however, is not the economic significance of the evolution of
supra-regional economic systems, but the cultural implications. The emergence
of new provincial capitals, influencing, as it were, new super-provinces, creates
new patterns of migratory flows, by and large in addition to the possible
traditional patterns that have been suggested. But if so, do such shifts of focus
change or help, perhaps, to entrench previous societal allegiances and
identities?

It is being argued, then, that within provincially-extensive economic and
cultural contexts there existed localized societies with their own cultural
identities, societal structures, and processes that were focused to a point where
we may reasonably describe them as comprising local social systems. It is not
being denied that such systems interlocked with one another in personal terms
(they would hardly have been but the local parts of a national whole if they
had been that discrete), nor, equally, is it being asserted that province never
merged into province via broadly definable intermediate zones. Finally, it is
certainly not overlooked that England had a capital which drew into its own
special form of urban society the more mobile representatives of the provinces
in a whole range of capacities; and which, conversely, also exerted its own
influences outwards along the major arterial roads of the country or up the
navigable rivers of the provinces, and therefore, perhaps especially, through the
inland river ports situated where these two modes of communication intersected.

In the space available, of course, there has been no room either to build above
the level of what seem to have been widely experienced spatial expressions of
kinship and culture and then towards other elements in the social structure,
when these last, at any period, are seen more properly as to do with the relational structures of inter-personal behaviour according to local conventions, rather than as a national system of hierarchy. What has been sought here, then, has been to establish no more than a basis for an alternative way of analyzing society so that closer respect might now be paid to geographical and cultural variation. Is it not obvious, for example, that societies and cultures facing towards a British-dominated Irish Sea will inevitably differ fundamentally from those looking out towards the Low Countries?

Only once we have re-defined our units of analysis does it become possible to think relationally about societal mechanisms and process, or to identify in such contexts, the functions of certain forms of centre or, for example, of different types of valley society. Above all, only then may we begin to think comparatively and systematically about the manner in which different societies or different cultures precisely behave, and how rapidly, in response to inexorable pressures for change. For while it has been possible here to emphasize the relevance of space, culture and process, what has also had to be left to one side – except by passing implication – is the nature of long-term change at the level of residential form. What has been stressed by contrast, and deliberately, is the necessity for local historians of society to take long views of their subject, to recognize that society is not to be understood simply in terms of typical historical periodization.

Societal history then is not social history as it is currently practised. Unlike the essentially short-term thematic concerns of social history, societal history has a direct and immediate resonance for every citizen who wishes to situate himself or herself in time and space today, because it relates to recognizable workaday contexts that are narrower than the elusive notion of England or Britain as a national whole, but wider than that of a single place. As such, societal history is primarily the proper concern of all those who regard themselves as students either of English Local History or of local demography. It seems to me, indeed, that we are now all on the edge of very exciting analytical possibilities to which both the specialist and the layman should be able to contribute – whether from a humanistic or a scientific point of view. There are societal concepts to be sophisticated, methodologies to be honed, and innumerable measurements to be taken. The ultimate goal is nothing less than a properly-grounded understanding of the rich geographical and cultural diversity of the 'English' as an ever-evolving people. In striving – however imperfectly – towards such an end, however, we shall have finally to relinquish our still-lingering obsession with the uniqueness and centrality of the single place.

NOTES

1. C. Phythian-Adams ed., Societies, cultures and kinship 1580-1850: cultural provinces and English local history, (Leicester, 1993), with contributions by Charles Phythian-Adams, Anne Mitson, Mary Carter and Evelyn Lord. Fuller references to all the matters discussed here will be found in that volume.