New Lessons in Regionalism

Today's regionalism is economic, organic, social and strategic

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The level of interest in regionalism has increased exponentially in the 1990s. Simultaneously, the power of and trust in governments, especially national government, has eroded. Tracing why that might be, consider what former Middlebury College President Olin Robinson said about how political events make centuries unequal in length. The 18th century was short, running from peace treaties in 1712 or so to the French Revolution in 1789. The 19th century was long, running from 1789 all the way to 1914 and the start of World War I. And the 20th century was short. It started in 1914 and it ended on Nov. 9, 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the totalitarian regimes of our time.

By this analysis, the 21st century is already nine years old. And already, it has shattered the geopolitical model of recent centuries—most recently represented by the Cold War—in which coalitions of sovereign nation-states struggle to maintain a military balance of power. Across the world, nation-states today are less omnipotent; many are crumbling. From the hierarchical, governmental, industrial, military models of the 20th century, we are hurtling toward a world of globalized, interactive markets and a totally networked model represented by rapid telecommunications and the Internet.

This new order is tailor-made for *regions*, whether metropolitan or rural or multistate like New England. But it also demands more of regions than anyone imagined. Regions are challenged to think and act strategically, very much on their own, in a world of weakened central governments, evaporating tariffs and $2 trillion-plus a day in world currency exchange. They have been freed to compete and cooperate with counterpart regions, across nation-state lines, across continents, indeed with counterpart regions anywhere on the globe. Yet conversely, if regions ignore the challenges, they will slip and decline.

As recently as 20 years ago, regionalism was narrowly conceived, narrowly discussed and minimally influential. It related almost exclusively to governments—how the various municipal and county units of a single region could bet-

Priority Issues

Following are the 10 key issues to watch in state legislatures across the United States in 1998, according to *Governing* magazine:

1. Tax Relief
2. School Reform
3. The Internet
4. Managed Care
5. Animal Waste
6. Electricity Deregulation
7. Child Development
8. Stadium Deals
9. Ethics/Campaigning
10. Affirmative Action

ter coordinate their efforts or, in rare cases, actually merge.

Today, both the concept and practice of regionalism have escaped those narrow bonds. Government is just one aspect. Today's regionalism is economic, organic, social and strategic.

Consider the economic aspect. One can argue that today's meaningful jurisdictions are not the nation-states on which so many statistical tables and discussions rest, but rather the multiple local regions that operate as the basic, functional economic units of our time. National averages miss huge regional differences. Federal policy is still a factor, but less so than we used to think. Indeed, if we can break away from the prevailing nationalist economic paradigm, we can see what economic regions really look like—freestanding, contiguous, some crossing state or international boundaries, some based on single industrial clusters, others on varied bases, many ready to strike agreements among themselves.

The Europeans understand this; indeed they freely describe their continent as a collection of increasingly powerful city-states, ranging from Milan to Hamburg, Manchester to Stuttgart, Lyon to Marseilles—all metropolitan regions making deals, establishing direct economic and cultural ties to one another with minimal regard for the nation-states in which they happen to be located.

New England's story

Even the most avid exponent of New England has to admit there's a touch of artificiality to this particular region. Glance at the map and you wonder why Maine, at least its northern reaches, doesn't belong to Canada. I spend my summers in New Hampshire, and if it shares much more than the Connecticut River with its geographic twin Vermont, it has escaped me. Connecticut largely ignores the regional hub, Boston, relating more intensely to the great urban agglomeration around New York City.

When I was preparing my book on *The New England States* a quarter-century ago, Elliot Richardson counseled me to focus on the sharp interior divisions in New England. Another expert, George Wilson Pierson, noted that "on the map, it looks as if New England ought to be a region. Whereas, in sober reality, geographically New England is not so much a region as an optical illusion."

Yet everyone knows there is a New England reality, spirit, tradition and future hope. Ambiguities and all, it's as clearly defined a region as you'll find anywhere in America. In terms of the intellectual sparks flowing from its academic halls and laboratories, New England has few peers on earth.

Still, intellectuals seem to take the region for granted. I was shocked recently when a scholar from Newfoundland contacted me to ask if I'd collaborate on a book about cross-border regionalism by writing a chapter on the politics, cultures and institutions of each of the New England states.

He asked good questions. Which socioeconomic and political forces will either inhibit or make it easier for New England's states to work together on common problems? Are there common regional values and interests that can be mobilized? Is New England a myth created by outsiders that is perpetuated to lure tourists? Have there been attempts to promote common values? Is there much trade among these states? Are they more competitive than cooperative?

But I wondered: why couldn't this scholar find *within* New England a small army of qualified, up-to-date experts ready to tackle those issues?

There is a lingering mystery about the six-state region. Why, without benefit of salubrious climate or great agricultural soils or geographic centrality in America, has this region proven so resourceful, so successful over time? The early farmers deserted New England's rocky hillsides as the Erie Canal opened the way to the grand farmlands of the Midwest. New England grew into a great maritime power, only to be eclipsed by New York and later Baltimore. America's insurance and banking industries were born in Boston and Hartford only to be carried off elsewhere in significant measure. The momentous New England textile boom featuring the first power looms was eventually lost to places with cheaper power and cheaper labor.

No News

The much-talked-about devolution of government responsibilities from Washington, D.C., to the states should make the nation's statehouses political centers of gravity, but America's newspapers are missing the story—on purpose.

The number of newspaper reporters who cover state government full-time has declined in 27 states since the early 1990s—roughly the beginning of devolution, according to a recent study by the University of Maryland-affiliated Project on the State of the American Newspaper. Reason: Market-driven editors and publishers figure government news is too dull to sell papers.

Writing in the *American Journalism Review*, the study's authors contend that just 513 newspaper reporters and 113 wire service reporters cover state government full time. The authors note that more than 3,000 media credentials were issued for the last Super Bowl.

To some extent, New England newspapers are bucking the trend. The number of statehouse correspondents has declined in Connecticut and remained level in Maine, but risen in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

Yet after each reversal, New England, like a Phoenix rising from the ashes, has staged a comeback. Its remarkable story of renewal offers lessons to all regions as they plunge into an era of globalization in which the protective envelopes of time and space have been exploded, in which intellectual power will be the coin of all realms, in which no industry, no process, no technology can long retain monopolistic advantage against competition springing up across the globe.

How did New England reinvent itself back then? How is it learning to survive and grow now? What's missing in its formula for the century about to dawn? New England studies ought to be a growth industry, not a backwater.

What is a region?

To be sure, regionalism is a squishy, evasive subject. I learned the hard way by trying to pin down multistate regional lines across the continent in a series of books I wrote on the USA in the 1960s and '70s. In recent years, I have been wrestling with another brand of regionalism—centered on our great metropolitan regions.

Yet if any kind of regionalism teaches you quickly that political boundaries are pretty irrelevant, it's that metropolitan cut. Think of any metro area you know and tell me precisely at what border line you think it starts and ends, and you know why. In 1993, Curtis Johnson, now chair of the Metropolitan Council for the Twin Cities, and I wrote a book about this phenomenon, called *Citistates*.

We devised a modern-day definition we'd like to convince Random House or Webster's to accept. It reads:

> **Citistate**—*n.*—A region consisting of a historic central city, surrounded by cities and towns which have a shared identification, function as a single zone for trade, commerce and communication, and are characterized by social, economic and environmental interdependence.

That definition leaves out *boundaries*. That's because a citistate isn't a political entity. A citistate is organic. It's a labor market, the reach of leading newspapers and TV stations, a medical marketplace, a "commuteshed." The citistate *is* what the economy *does*.

Freestanding Think Tanks

The Boston-Cambridge axis is home to an unparalleled concentration of nationally oriented university-based policy think tanks, led by the high-profile centers and institutes of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. But for state-oriented policy work, two freestanding Boston policy institutes unaffiliated with any college or university continue to make the big splashes.

In the spring, the Boston-based Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth managed to provide common ground for a working group of former cabinet members from the administrations of former Bay State governors William F. Weld and Michael S. Dukakis, commonly thought to be polar opposites. The five former officials even reached agreement on the divisive issue of how to reduce the state's personal income tax rate to 5 percent, down from 5.95 percent, contingent on the condition of the economy. The think tank then disseminated the findings at a downtown Boston breakfast conference, featuring the two former governors themselves, the cabinet officials and Harvard professor Michael Porter.

A few months earlier, MassINC won kudos for its report entitled "Closing the Gap: Raising Skills to Raise Wages," which recommended that Massachusetts invest $160 million a year to provide the range of adult basic education, vocational training, worker training and community college programs needed to prepare adults for the knowledge economy.

The "market-oriented" Pioneer Institute, meanwhile, continues to play a leading role in the development of Massachusetts charter schools, recently helping convince state lawmakers to raise the maximum number of charter schools from 25 to 50, and setting up a new leadership academy to train charter school managers. Pioneer also reopened debate on privatization in Massachusetts with a study claiming private bus service on some routes in Greater Boston would save taxpayers money.

Similarly, the unaffiliated Maine Center for Economic Policy has provided compelling studies on tourism and other economic development issues in Maine, while the conservative Josiah Bartlett Center in New Hampshire and Ethan Allen Institute in Vermont have become established voices in their states.

So what does this urban metro theory of regions have to do with multistate regions like New England? A lot. Dan Kemmis, former mayor of Missoula, Mont., author of books about cities and community and now head of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West in Missoula, observes that we're past the old paradigm—the mechanistic model of Newtownian physics, the intellectual faith of the men who wrote our Constitution, a group forever writing about things like billiard balls, because they were so fascinated with strict cause-and-effect relationships. That was a world of rational checks and balances and predictable effects—the progenitor of the Machine Age.

But it's time for a change, Kemmis insists. He invites us to look at complexity theory and how closely it ties in with a conception of modern world regions as organic. In this model, each level is defined not by borders and rules but by natural organic development in successive stages from neighborhood to citistate to bioregion to continent to the entire globe.

Regionalism, writes Kemmis, is an utterly organic phenomenon. It is never possible to tell a place that it is a region; either it is a region inherently or it's not a region at all. As a result, regionalism stands in stark contrast to the command-and-control structures we have placed on the landscape—structures like state and county boundaries by which we attempt to

State of the States

Earlier this year, the national Council of State Governments analyzed the state-of-the-state addresses of 45 governors and tallied the top priorities in its monthly *State Government News*. Issues marked with an "X" were considered priorities. Note the "higher education" column:

	K-12	Safety	Children	Environment	Tax Cut	Economic Development	Higher Education	Transportation
Conn.	X		X	X	X			X
Maine		X			X	X		
Mass.	X				X			
N.H.	X	X	X					
R.I.	X		X	X	X			
Vt.		X	X	X	X	X		X

tell places what they are and are not part of.

Instead, Kemmis proposes that we think about fractals—patterns within patterns within patterns. Look, for example, at the surface of a sand dune: you will see small sand dunes making up that surface and even tinier dunes on the surface of the small dunes. In this organic sense, these forms play back and forth on one another. And while this description is physical, we can extend the analogy to all sorts of analyses and insights, political, economic and environmental.

Bill Dodge, head of the National Association of Regional Councils, suggests we are moving from the old paradigm of governance—federal, state and local—to a new paradigm that is radically different: global, regional and neighborhood.

Why?

Global because critical impacts are worldwide—global warming, for example, but also worldwide economic restructuring and the dawning of the Information Age.

Regional because citistates are the true cities of our time—the real environmental basins, the real labor markets, the functioning economic communities.

Neighborhood because the local community is the arena in which social problems must ultimately, on a person-to-person, neighbor-to-neighbor basis, be dealt with—and all the more so as our national safety nets for the poor disintegrate. And because in our strikingly interdependent regions, neighborhoods do dramatically better if they're connected to the larger region, its growing economy and its diverse educational and developmental resources.

Kemmis sees it this way. Globalism is here to stay, because the whole earth is so utterly organic and interconnected. Continentalism too is a fact of life. Bioregionalism is with us. So is city- or citistate regionalism, and finally the most elemental form, the "miniregion" of organic relationships we call the neighborhood.

In that construct, New England emerges distinct out of history. In one sense, it's the New England inside us: Puritan sometimes in severity but transcendentalist in new opportunities of the mind, a region that symbolizes as no others do values of character, of capacity, a place that through history's vicissitudes stays afloat, keeps progressing. And by those qualities, a place that owes itself and its people no less than preparation for a challenging century ahead.

Some people will always see New England as a political entity. Clout, they'll say, is the name of the game. One needs to get one's act together—to lobby with the powers that be in Washington for special grants and privileges. And certainly, at least some reasonable level of federal research and development support is vital for any academically based region.

But internal capacity and performance are more important for these times. The federal grant chase is a detail, not an end in itself. The political clout game is part of the adversarial, win-lose politics we brought to a fine and frustrating art in the 20th century. It's part of the traditional adversarial governance model that produced so much gridlock and left so many governments paralyzed attempting to cope with deeply ingrained societal problems. At least in some measure, it will be replaced in the 21st century by a politics of collaboration. Just take a look at corporate culture today. Of course all sorts of power games are still played. But few question that the most viable, sustainable corporations will be those that honor and consult their employees and encourage teamwork, rather than a hierarchical, power-clash model. And so too in the public sector.

John Gardner, the former cabinet secretary and writer on organization and community, noted: "Behind all the buzz about collaboration is a discipline. And with all due respect to the ancient arts of governing and diplomacy, the more recent art of collaboration does represent something new—maybe Copernican. If it contained a silicon chip, we'd all be excited."

Optimizing a region's prospects in the age of globalization requires that we reinvent government, sharpen economic development planning and face up to shared social and environmental problems. And that we systematically tap the region's resources, ranging from corporations to universities to aspiring ethnic groups, just as any intelligent business uses its assets to progress and prosper.

California has a network of regional organizations—people who despair of their overly politicized state government—who see their local governments too deeply engaged in a fight for revenues to be at all creative. But what has emerged, region by region, is a network of "civic entrepreneurs," individuals who instinctively grasp that regional success and civic agendas, ranging from education to better land-use planning, are closely allied, indeed dependent upon one another. They have names like the Sacramento Regional Cluster Project, the Institute of the North Coast and San Diego Dialogue. They're working on ways to bridge political jurisdictions, build public-private relationships, rethink complex issues and get results. They see state and federal governments as potential partners—but by no means saviors—in helping regions prosper.

Many of these civic entrepreneurs met in Santa Barbara, Calif., last fall for a regional summit put on by the Irvine Foundation. In effect, they presented a regional declaration of independence from an overbearing, overburdened state government that appears so beholden to special interests. They declared that regions are the right focus for action—large enough to assemble sufficient resources and leadership to act, but small enough to ensure effective interaction among interested parties. They affirmed their belief in the interdependence of economy and community. They announced their commitment to involving underprivileged communities—to making the table bigger and rounder. They concluded that having small groups of leaders speak for them was yesterday's way. Now, they would operate not as hierarchies, but as networks based on trusting relationships and seeking measurable results.

A good model for other regions is *Joint Venture: Silicon Valley*, which began in the recession of the early 1990s. With top high-tech industry leaders at its helm, Joint Venture is building substantive benchmarks into its vision, rather than relying on squishy good intentions. It's now addressing such Silicon Valley migraines as road congestion and sky-high housing costs. Recently, it has dispatched teams of business professionals to work intensively and over time with selected groups of schools, helping them devise specific classroom changes and set hard goals for better student achievement. This is a whole generation ahead of simplistic corporate adopt- a-school programs.

A New England Policy Collaborative

The New England Board of Higher Education was awarded $139,451 by AT&T and the AT&T Foundation to support its New England Public Policy Collaborative, an initiative designed to coordinate the region's policy expertise, enhance public access to timely policy research and focus attention on regional issues.

NEBHE kicked off the collaborative in February by bringing together policy researchers and opinion leaders for a conference on "The New England Agenda." Since then, NEBHE has linked about 200 public policy centers and institutes on the World Wide Web at www.nebhe.org., and launched a major survey on New England policy issues.

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For a region like New England, which has to rely on its brains, the idea of a 21st century labor force any less than superbly prepared, equipped with critical analytic tools, should be intolerable. But regions have to do it for themselves.

Consider the New Standards in Education project, sponsored by Theodore Hershberg's Center for Greater Philadelphia at the University of Pennsylvania. Hershberg argues convincingly that low education standards aren't just an inner-city problem, but that suburban districts are often far behind the international competitive curve too. Hershberg's project is persuading a growing number of Philadelphia-area school districts to introduce rigorous standards-based school reforms. The effort ingeniously walks around the political arguments of whether there should be federal- or state-imposed standards by building consensus for standards from the bottom up, enlisting local chambers of commerce and others in the effort to get sometimes-lethargic school districts on board.

As an illustration of how metropolitan regionalism moves into interstate regionalism, consider the Cascadia grouping of citistates and their allied territory stretched along the Portland-Vancouver corridor. This group is looking at rapid rail, trade, academic, other alliances, even a joint application for future Olympic Games.

Regionalism on-line

We must use the Internet to create the virtual region (metropolitan or multistate) that politics denies us—a home for all the reports, analyses, updates, benchmarks, citizen goals, commentaries and debates that a healthy and competitive society should have. Yet New England, known as a high-tech region, presents a pitiful image of itself on this, the high-tech medium of our time.

I recently did an experiment to see what an interested person—a prospective student, business partner, scholar, retiree, convention planner—could learn quickly about New England's status, conditions and future directions via the Internet.

I thought just typing in the words "New England" on one of the Internet's popular search engines would connect me pretty quickly to all sorts of information on, for example, the state of the economy. I thought I'd find data on leading industries and economic clusters of specialization, manufacturing and services output, median wages and so on, by state, on a New England-wide basis and perhaps even by city or town. After all, any region that could give us such economists as Michael Porter and Lester Thurow ought to have that basic economic material available quickly and easily.

I also expected a lot of basic Census data—population totals and trends, demographic breakdowns by sex, race, age, occupation and more. I imagined links to state pages, which, in turn, would lead me to pages on each of those hundreds of wonderfully independent, historic New England towns. And I expected such 1990s tools as governmental efficiency and effectiveness performance measures regionwide, by state and by locality.

Maybe I'd find something on how environmental improvement measures are restoring air and water purity, cleaning up toxics and defending the integrity of the landscape New Englanders boast about so much. Or perhaps a truly advanced model like the Oregon Benchmarks and Minnesota Milestones efforts—showing popularly determined goals on where states want to go over the next five, 10 or 15 years on vital economic and social indicators—and how well they've really done.

Well, my search yielded precious little of that. Instead, I discovered some stale data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Boston Regional Office, a bit on the activity of the New England Council's Political Action Committee and, through the New England Board of Higher Education's site, links

to the New England Governors' Conference and the very interesting site of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

I got a list of Subaru Dealers of New England, Food New England and the Northern New England Real Estate Network House Selection Wizard. Approved AAA repair facilities in Southern New England. New England Yellow Page classifieds. New England Fishing Trips and Charters. But on the whole, I was left at a loss.

A strong Internet presence would give New England the following benefits:

- Citizens, businesses, organizations and potential customers from across the continent would see an aware, customer-oriented, self-critical, mature, adaptive, promising region.
- New England media—newspapers, magazines and TV news—would be able to tune in quickly for updates on where important matters stand and prepare much better coverage as a result. So would college students, high school students and civic organizations. Break down the data and goals—from regionwide to state to city and town—and think how much peoples' capacity to criticize and participate meaningfully in public life could be improved.
- Nor should New England be limited to any single Web site or sites parroting a single party line. Multiple outlets should be on-line, and linked. Healthy debate on proposals and their meaningfulness should be encouraged.

For New England, the Internet, while interesting, is really just a means to communicate something more vital—a region that works, a region seeking to apply the immense intellectual firepower of its unparalleled concentration of universities and policy institutions.

Why not, for example, create a mechanism to introduce into New England a constant flow of "best practices" tracked from across America and acround the globe—best practices in environmental cleanup, in overcoming racial and class barriers, in efficient, one-stop, rapid business permitting, in brownfields clean-ups and recycling, in neighborhood housing and commercial development, in community policing and crime prevention and much more?

It should be considered negligence, maybe not a crime but terrible practice, for any research institution in New England to develop a best practice in some particular policy area and not experiment with its application in a sampling of New England communities.

The ultimate goal, of course, is a successful, sustainable region. Camille Barnett, the chief administrative officer of the District of Columbia, has summed up the imperatives of sound regional development another way. She talks about three obvious "E"s: a strong *economy*, a healthy *environment* and social *equity*. And then she adds a fourth, which is a key to our future: the "E" of full civic *engagement*. Even in an age of experts, we need that engagement. A combination of relevant, organized, mobilized, coordinated expertise on one hand, and engagement of our citizens on the other, are the ingredients of a New England that works.

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