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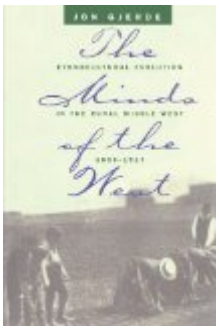

Jon Gjerde. *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xiii + 426 pp. $27.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-4807-4.

Reviewed by Susan Sessions Rugh

Published on H-Rural (January, 1998)

By 1880 one-third to one-half of all farmers in the upper Midwest were foreign-born. ***The Minds of the West*** is the story of the making of ethnic cultures by European immigrants in the Upper Midwest (most prominently, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa, but also the Dakotas, Kansas, and Illinois) from settlement to eve of World War I. The vast expanses of Midwestern lands paradoxically allowed immigrants to geographically seclude themselves in ethnic enclaves where they transplanted cultural patterns brought from Europe to the American milieu. Gjerde labels these cultural signatures the "minds" of the West; by this he means not cultural baggage, but the culture as transformed in its American setting.

The core of the book is a history of the mingling of American and European minds as revealed through the discourse of each group and their critiques of each other. A blend of social, political, and cultural history, Gjerde not only synthesizes the secondary literature on the Midwest, but also draws upon a wide range of primary sources: regional literature, clerical writings, the foreign-language press, and standard social history sources such letters, diaries, and vital records. In the book's four parts, he argues that the "foreign minds" profoundly informed the development of American society in four contexts: region, community, family, and society.

The linchpin of his argument, set out in Part One, is that foreign immigrants possessed what he calls a "complementary identity that pledged allegiance to both American citizenship and ethnic adherence" (p. 8). In America, European immigrants could become republican citizens precisely because they were not required to discard their cultural heritage. However, this multilayered identity was fraught with tension because American liberal individualism imperiled European corporatism which prized the family and community at the expense of individual equality. For their part, Americans feared that the freedom to establish segmented communities meant that Europeans would fail to assimilate into American society, and indeed, would threaten the republic by clinging to their authoritarian traditions. The prospect of these alternative possibilities, which were in some measure realized, is a tightrope

from which the development of the argument is suspended.

Part Two establishes the importance of community formation to ethnocultural evolution. Gjerde explains how chain migration patterns for both Americans and Europeans created "a human matrix throughout the Middle West that linked people with common pasts and ultimately offered them social and economic benefits" (p. 100). For both groups, subsequent migrations led to social conflicts within communities, commonly played out in church-centered confrontations. In one of the book's many ironies, the complementary identity which allowed the retention of religious culture also let people choose their church, and thus supplied immigrants with the democratic tool of majority rule which they wielded against clerical authority.

Part Three takes us within the community to the farm family, where a "family morality" justified the subordination of individuals in the household for the collective good. Building on the work of Sonya Salamon, Gjerde compares customs of household power, patriarchal (lineal) for the Europeans and conjugal (lateral), for the "Yankees," and explains how those conceptions of domestic authority dictated work roles and the life-chances of farm children.[1] While readers who know the literature on farm families will find much that is familiar here, Gjerde carries out innovative research which explains how market capitalism posed a threat to the family morality, and why Europeans found it so important to maintain the primacy of the family over individual needs. Gjerde squarely addresses the literature on gender inequality, including a detailed consideration of the custom of immigrant women working in the fields.

Part Four is a bracing discussion of the cultural debates between the two groups which culminated at century's end in political battles over public schools, temperance, and women's suffrage. In a complicated analysis which cannot be done justice in a brief review, Gjerde argues that disagreements on these issues were rooted in fundamental ideological differences regarding the relative roles of family, community, and state in American society. The immigrants responded to a resurgent nativism by forming ethnic groups which gave them a collective voice in politics and enabled them to form coalitions with other like-minded groups. The exigencies of the political process tempered their goals and muted their rhetoric, and by the end of World War I, they had largely succumbed to the dominant American paradigm of liberal individualism.

While rural social history has borne the fruit of many fine local studies of immigrant culture, no one has yet attempted to weave together the threads of both immigrant and native-born rural peoples on so large a scale. That Gjerde, the author of an earlier case study of Norwegian immigrants to the upper Midwest, is able to tell the story whole is a summary achievement.[2] To trace the process of ethnocultural evolution, he quotes extensively from the writings of the literati of the day in both the English-speaking and foreign-language press, interpreting each with agility and keen insight. However, the loudest is the immigrant voice.

This tendency to use native-born Americans as a foil accentuates homogeneity, and thus emphasizes the gulf between them and the foreign-born. Gjerde, who skillfully separates the strands of national origin, religion, and political loyalty for immigrants, rarely distinguishes between groups of native-born Americans in the Midwest. Perhaps because of the preponderance of New Englanders in the Upper Midwest, he uses the term Yankee to represent all native-born Americans, regardless of region of origin.[3] This moniker elides the substantial cultural gaps between native-born Midwestern settlers that may not have been apparent to the immigrant observer. This anachronistic inclination to characterize native-born Americans as Yankees signals a lacu-

nae in the rural scholarship that suggests a research agenda for the future. I am also troubled by his heavy dependence upon the diary of Emily Hawley Gillespie in the comparative analysis of native-born and immigrant farm families. While her diary is unusually valuable for its exposition of her feelings, the profound alienation and mental illness in her family are hardly typical of native-born midwestern farm families.

This criticism aside, ***The Minds of the West*** is valuable on three levels: it brings a coherence to the study of rural America by crafting new theoretical models, it supplies evidence based on original research, and it freshens and synthesizes existing literature on the Midwest. Perhaps its most important contribution is the way it links notions about family authority to community, ethnicity, and religion, thus deepening our understanding of an emerging American pluralism. Rural historians should consult it as a primer on the theory of ethnic group formation, and historians of ethnicity will find in it a model of comparative analysis which avoids the pitfalls of filiopietism. Necessarily, gender and race take a back seat to ethnicity, which leaves one curious about how the presence of Native Americans and African-Americans in the Midwest figured in the construction of ethnic identities. (The 1862 Dakota uprising in Minnesota comes to mind.)

Given our concern that rural history be taken more seriously, it is instructive to see how Gjerde's work informs larger historical debates. He convinces us that much of what we label rural culture--the patriarchal family, the tightly-knit community, the village church--is a manifestation of ethnic culture in the countryside. And in a period of peak immigration from Europe to America, this book explains how rural immigrants were drawn into a pluralist politics through a set of ethnic loyalties anchored in their cultural pasts. Thus it should be of interest not only to rural historians, but also to scholars interested in ethnicity and immigration, politics and the expanding state, and the role of religion in identity and community.

The book raises some questions that we might consider in an on-line discussion. How broadly can we use the model of a complementary identity? Does it hold true for immigrants who lived in communities which were a mix of immigrants and the native-born? Might the story be told differently in the lower Midwest, where the "Yankee" element took a back seat to Southerners? We might also discuss the lessons of this history for nativist controversies in today's public policy, such as campaigns to make English the official language. Can we see parallels between the formation of ethnoreligious identities and the identity politics of our own age? Are today's debates over abortion rights, prayer in schools, and working mothers anchored in similar dual conceptions of power and authority in the home? ***The Minds of the West*** suggests that by contemplating our fears of immigrants, and the hopes that immigrants carry, we can unlock deeper understandings of the meanings of American citizenship.

Notes

[1]. Sonya Salamon, ***Prairie Patrimony: Family, Farming, and Community in the Midwest*** (University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

[2]. Jon Gjerde, ***From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West*** (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[3]. For the multiple meanings of Yankee, see Susan E. Gray, ***The Yankee West: Community Life on the Michigan Frontier*** (University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

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Citation: Susan Sessions Rugh. Review of Gjerde, Jon. *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917*. H-Rural, H-Net Reviews. January, 1998.

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