

Bicoastal America

When Paul Steinberg's "The View from 9th Avenue" appeared on the cover of The New Yorker in 1975, it captured a feeling of many Americans that their country was all coasts

and no interior. This reflected in part a demographic that had seen coastal populations grow by 30% in thirty years. They came at first as vacationers, but many had stayed as retirees or as residents of the huge metropolitan areas that now crowded the shores, east, west, and

south. Everywhere, coasts were acquiring a distinct identity, separating themselves from the inland regions to which they had previously belonged. What was known as The Coast had separated itself from the rest of California; Maine had its Lobster Coast; and in New Jersey there was The Shore and the rest.

Coasts seemed to have more in common with one another than they did with hinterland America. By the 1990s a new species, the bicoastal, was discovered. It was more

stereotype than a reality, but caught the public imagination. Bicoastality was clearly a product of cheap air travel, making it possible to live in two places at once; and bicoastals were defined more by their routes, than their roots, one of the things that

made them suspect to those who called themselves Middle Americans. Coastal cities in particular came to be identified with cosmopolitanism, metro sexuality, and bohemianism. The notion of the Left Coast caught on and it was found that coastal states were generally blue, and even bluer at their edges.

As John Tierney has observed America seemed to be divided between those "who lived on the water and those who do not."

I

But what was treated as something new turns out to be an old story. This was not the first time that Europeanized North America had been bicoastal. It had been born coastal, being all shores and very little interior for its first three hundred years. Columbus had island-hopped his way west, hoping for passage to Asia. The existence of a landmass blocking the way to the Pacific proved a great disappointment, but, because North America's interior remained *terra incognita*, it was easily imagined as a vast archipelago offering many way through. Virginia, Massachusetts, and California were all initially conceived of as islands with western shores bordering on the Pacific. The continental character of what was to become the United States was finally accepted at end of the eighteenth century,

dictated not new geographical discoveries

but by the political will of rebels calling themselves the Continental Congress to separate from the archipelagic British empire.

North America was settled from the sea and was initially sustained by trading and fishing possibilities. As Samuel Eliot Morison put it: "God performed no miracles on the New England soil. He gave the sea." The Puritans who settled the interior always distrusted the fisher folk

and merchants who made their living alongshore. This was a religious but also a geographical divide. Coastal people were, like the prey and occupations they pursued, always on the move. And so too were the coasts themselves. "Always the edge of the sea

remains an elusive and indefinable boundary," noted Rachel Carson. Before Down East was a place, it was a nautical direction. Even after the new United States established its borders, the flux continued. The loyalties of coastal peoples remained uncertain well into the early nineteenth century..

Until the mid-nineteenth century, America was tied together by sea rather than land, its economic and political strength was more maritime than territorial. Like its eastern counterpart, the west coast was explored and settled by water. Initially, Oregon and California

were prized not for their land but their access to the Pacific. It has been said that “the Pacific slope is both the most Western and, after the East itself, the most Eastern part of America.” Their populations were concentrated in seaports, consisting mainly of eastern transplants who arrived by ship as mariners, traders, and missionaries. West coast culture was also distinctly eastern, with ports like Monterey thought of as little Boston. For a very long time, west coasters saw themselves more as sojourners than settlers, and were regarded as aliens by their agrarian inland neighbors.

Coasts had always been frontiers facing both landward and seaward. Initially open and permeable, they were invitations to enter, though not necessarily to settle. It was not until the nineteenth century that Americans turned to their interiors, away from the sea. In the era of the railroad, it was land, not water, that now connected them, but with the effect of separating the coasts, east, west, and south. Once *terra incognita* was fully explored and filled in, it was the turn of coasts to lose identity. Regional sentiments that developed in the nineteenth century largely left out the coasts. The ties that bound bicoastal America together dissolved and ports like Boston that had acted like little sea states, lost power to larger territorial units. They became mere transit points for the agricultural commodities and industrial goods produced in the interiors. Coasts, which had been semi-autonomous zones, became edges, something to live “on,” but not, like the continent, to live “in.” In the later nineteenth century, coasts and

coastal islands tended to empty out. They took on a new meaning as vacation and recreation areas, but they lost their connection with the sea, becoming more and more the extension of their hinterlands.

II

In the past half century, however, the coasts have come back into focus. Global trade has revived cities located on water, not so much as ports or places of production but as locations of high end consumption. The old port cities had largely severed their relationship to the ocean, sending fishing and container ships elsewhere. Their populations have grown enormously, but so too have the previously abandoned places along the shore. For the first time these have become places of residence, not just for retired people but for many who commute to New York, Washington, and Los Angeles from their coastal suburbs.

The shore had always been a point of arrival, but always before from the sea rather than land. The new coast is no longer open or permeable by sea. It has become a border of the nation state, a hard edge heavily protected by a navy that has turned away from blue water duties to take up littoral ones. America is again coastal, indeed bicoastal, but not in the same way that it was in when sea rather than air was its prime mode of transportation. We come down to the shore more to look than to do. Very few any longer make their livings from or on the

sea. A working waterfront is a rarity. Of the 5300 miles of Maine's coastline only about 20 constitute a functioning nexus between land and sea. Coasts are now approached almost exclusively by land, and treated not much differently from territories in the interior. Down East is now a place rather than a sailing direction.

III

The coast is now a line that many approach but few know how to cross. It belongs to the continent, which insists on pushing its territorial claims ever farther out to sea. Pristine shore scarcely exist and the old natural environments are under enormous pressure from overpopulation, pollution, and misguided coastal management. Even though more of us than ever before live *on* the ocean, fewer and fewer of us know how to live *with* its waters. Our encroachments on coasts, our armoring of shores, have only made them more vulnerable. Like so many of the species that once sustained life there, *homo littoralis* is now on the endangered species list. Today, when our bicoastalism is sustained by air rather than water, most of those with coastal addresses are as landlubberly as the rest of America. Real estate agents, magazine editors, and interior decorators talk coastal living, but it is a matter of style, a mode of consumption that has no productive relationship to the sea itself. Sadly, those who now live *on* coasts have little experience living *with* them. As the toll of manmade disasters mount, it seems time to step back and ask what it means to be bicoastal.

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