The Changing Space of Power (A Summary)

Since ancient times, throughout the history of the world, various components of society have differed in their spatial span. In the age of European empires, for example, churches sent out missionaries far beyond the reach of any one political jurisdiction; long-distance merchants cut across political boundaries.

In the latter part of the 19th century and early 20th century within North American states and provinces, railroads—having a broader reach than many other institutions—exerted power that transcended the political power exerted in individual cities. This was a change from earlier periods of railroad history, when cities along the Atlantic seacoast were hubs for railroads that they substantially controlled. With a surge in immigration between 1870 and World War I, the railroad interests in states like Illinois and California formed political coalitions with the city-dwelling immigrant groups and struck a bargain: city affairs would be left to the cities while railroad interests controlled the state policies affecting railroad interests. This pattern persisted in some states, including Illinois, throughout much of the 20th century.

After the pneumatic tire was adopted in the United States, long-distance trucking took hold during the 1930s. These trucks could go directly to their destinations; their cargoes did not need to be offloaded at an intermediate point as railroad cargoes did. This meant a loss of business for the truckers operating within cities. Since the long-distance truckers were not unionized, it also hurt Teamsters union locals.

On the West Coast, Teamster leader Dave Beck grew his union by organizing bakeries, dairies, and other plants located well beyond city limits, putting a squeeze on the non-union drivers who drove daily between those plants and the cities. This he did both in the state of Washington and in northern California. Out of Detroit, Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa set about organizing the long-haul drivers who drove their trucks into the Midwest from the East and South or vice versa. Soon the union was in a position to demand national labor contracts. For a while, the union's spatial control beyond that of many companies gave it an advantage in contract negotiations. (See note 73 for Chapter 13.)

Then the companies leapfrogged union control by establishing offices and subsidiaries abroad. Some had begun globalizing in the 19th century. By the end of the 20th century, many companies had globalized. Not able to exert much

power beyond the boundaries of the United States, American labor unions sought to pressure the U.S. federal government to enforce economic policies to keep American companies more at home. It was a losing battle.

This kind of interplay of power between organizations with broader spatial reach and those which were more spatially circumscribed had its precedents in many parts of the world and in many periods of history. The more widely-spread forces did not always win out in the end! For example, the Mongols spread their hegemony across Eurasia to the Mediterranean but could not sustain rule over so large an area. And the Vikings, who used coastal raids to try to create a great circle of control around Europe, almost succeeded but had to pull back. They could not consolidate their gains.

Variations in spatial reach within any given society affect and are affected by social stratification; that is, people of means can afford to travel more than those with limited incomes. Wealthy people in a 20th-century Midwestern American town might have traveled regularly to Europe and to Palm Beach in Florida while others could never afford to go out of town, although very poor single males sometimes wander over wide distances. Spatial variations also have a long-range effect on configurations of government. In the United States, for example, in the 19th century, people focused more on state government than on the federal government. This pattern began to be reversed as various elements of society had a more national reach. Social groups seeking redress from state governments were often different from those centered on local or federal governments. Values and social roles both influence and are influenced by differences in spatial orientation. Patterns of spatial reach affect the coherence and survivability of communities.