This paper argues that social historians must continue studying local history if they wish to understand resistance to the nationalization of the United States’ economy. Scholars who eschew local history necessarily ignore the persistent localism of many Americans. In cities like Chicago, workers and proprietors in trades like construction evinced a provincial mindset and fought corporate elites seeking to centralize commercial power. Skeptics may question the case-study method and trumpet a broad historical synthesis, but only local research can illuminate the contested origins of twentieth century American society.

The case-study method has been popular among American social historians since the 1960s. Highly influential books like Poverty and Progress, Stephan Thernstrom’s 1964 investigation of social mobility in nineteenth-century Newburyport, Massachusetts, inspired an amazing range of semi-quantitative case-studies, many focusing upon the social structure of towns and cities. Spurred by the political struggles of workers, African-Americans, and women, some historians narrowed their geographical subjects, digging deep to uncover the history of people leaving few written records. For scholars who entered graduate school in the sixties and seventies, the case-study approach was the cutting edge of
historical scholarship, a means of rigorously analyzing the hidden history of American life. ¹

These works based their claims to significance upon a number of different premises. A few scholars imagined themselves part of a common project. Quilting together different patches of local history, scholars hoped to create a definitive history of the American people out of the combined monographic evidence. More commonly, scholars contended their case-studies were representative of a larger American story. For example, Sean Wilentz’s landmark book *Chants Democratic* took the immodest subtitle, *New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850.* ²

In recent years, historians have questioned both these assumptions. Though social history remains dedicated to empirical research, most scholars recognize that these monographs together will never constitute an objective synthesis. No book, ¹

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no matter how narrow its focus, rigorous its research, or brilliant its analysis, objectively defines the history of its region. Nor have any scholars yet synthesized these varied works. Finally, few studies have proven to be truly representative. Indeed the regional differences noted by social historians only contradict the notion that any single locale captures the American experience as a whole.

Further, scholars have pointedly challenged the appeal of case studies to a mainstream audience. These critics press for historians to write synthetic histories that unify the experiences of a range of Americans. Of course, these scholars do not seek to remove “the people” from social history, but they encourage their peers to stress the common rather than the particular responses to social transformations.  

But such critiques themselves rest upon problematic assumptions. However satisfying in concept, synthetic history often obscures much of what makes the past so interesting: its detail and contingency. Given our temporal and financial limitations, more breadth usually equals less depth.  

Moreover, a broad focus tends to portray transformation as inevitable by

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placing too much emphasis on the growth of a modern nation and too little on those individuals who defied it.\[^{5}\]

Though some social historians undoubtedly overestimate the significance of their own topics, local research methodology does not necessarily dampen and may even enhance the importance of specific project. The recent success of George Chauncey’s Gay New York suggests the continuing power of the case study where the subject matter itself is fresh, relevant to contemporary life, and distinctively local.\[^{6}\] With this in mind, it behooves us not to condemn local histories per se, but to determine where such histories are interesting, valuable, and justified. In other words, we need to ask what kind of stories either demand a case study, or retain their significance in a local setting.

One such topic is the modernization of the American economy. On no subject have past scholars written more synthetically. Prominent historians like Robert Wiebe, Martin Sklar, and Alfred Chandler have described how a national network of corporations replaced isolated local business communities in


the United States after 1880. But in the process, these historians tend to diminish those remained resolutely local. For example, political historian Martin Sklar argued in 1988 that, the corporate reorganization of American capitalism was a relatively peaceful affair. Unlike the great sociopolitical crisis of the 1850s and 1860s, which was solved by national reconstruction that required a civil war and revolution, the corporate reconstruction required neither civil war nor revolution, but rather political and economic reorganization and reform. 8

Focused upon national politics, Sklar raises the threshold for resistance to extraordinary heights. In Washington, D.C., the struggle to defy corporate capitalism was peaceful and reformist indeed. But should we expect the defenders of a local, proprietary, labor intensive economy to organize and send representatives to the nation’s capital to lobby for Federal protective legislation? I think we might instead find their struggle in local markets, courts, and deliberative bodies.

In Chicago, I’ve found such local conflict. Two business communities battled to control the city’s economy in the 20th century. The first was a wealthy national elite, composed of steel manufacturers, meat packers, wholesale merchants, and bankers. This elite envisioned an economy composed of large corporations, selling goods to a national market. Their

businesses rationalized production by mechanizing and de-skilling work. They favored a hierarchical form of industrial organization with workers at the bottom, managers in the middle, and stockholders at the top. Their hierarchies placed control over commerce firmly in the hands of a national class of stockholders and corporate directors.

This elite confronted the workers and proprietors of what I call the craft economy. The craft economy included trades operated by city dwellers and for city dwellers, such as construction, trucking, retail, and service. Between 1890 and 1904, the city gained over eight hundred and thirty thousand new residents, as well as thousands of new businesses. These newcomers needed food, shelter, services, transportation, and infrastructure. Neighborhood stores, restaurants, bars, and barber shops defined their public culture. If steel and oil were the sinews of the America’s national economy, coal delivery, garbage disposal, and building construction underpinned Chicago’s commercial life. 9

9 Hugo S. Grosser, Chicago: A Review of its Governmental History from 1837 to 1906, (Chicago: Municipal Information Bureau, 1906), 74; Richard Hofstadter was one of the few historians to note the effects of urbanization on small scale enterprise in the city's service sector. He wrote: It would be misleading to imply the development of the corporation eliminated profitable direct small-scale investments. Quite the contrary, for the urbanization of the country brought a growing need for the work of service industries that are usually organized in small units, and such lines of enterprise continued to offer much opportunity for small
The craft economy was also demographically significant. Thousands of Chicagoans built the city’s homes, cut its hair, and delivered its coal. In 1900, over 55,000 men, or one in ten working males over ten years of age, found their occupation in just eleven construction trades. Another 35 thousand men or 6.3 percent of male workers (34,864) and 46 thousand women or 30.5 percent female workers (45,747) engaged in selected service fields including barbering, laundering, and building maintenance. Finally, local transportation workers such as teamsters accounted for over 23 thousand men or one in twenty-four male workers (23,203).  

The self-made men and skilled workers of this craft economy favored a distinctly local alternative to corporate capitalism. Let’s start by looking at the material conditions in the craft economy. At the turn of the century, the forces of industrialism had touched but not radically remade the day-to-day operations of construction and other trades. Machines were uncommon and capital requirements were low. Powerfully built teamsters drove investors who were satisfied to operate profitably on a small scale in marginal lines of business.


horse-drawn wagons over the city’s uneven streets. In the
building trades, manufacturers had begun producing materials in
factories, but skilled journeymen still did most work by hand,
and laborers carried stones, bricks, and lumber with sledges and
barrows.

Craft enterprise also remained small in scale. However
prominent corporations had become in manufacturing, they were
fairly uncommon in the craft economy. Of the 284 teaming
concerns in Chicago in 1902, 241 were individual proprietors, 3
were partnerships, and 12 were family firms, while only 28 were
large enough to call themselves “companies.”

The craft economy retained the public quality
characteristic of nineteenth century commerce. Few barriers
separated Chicago’s population from craft enterprise. Teamsters
carried goods upon public streets, building tradesmen worked on
lots visible to passers-by, and retail stores, barber shops and
saloons were familiar local commercial institutions which engaged
in commerce directly with customers. By contrast, walls hid
manufacturing from the outside world, turning factories into
black boxes of production, mysterious physical manifestations of
an increasingly abstract corporate economy.

Craft producers weren’t certain what transpired in those
black boxes, but they knew very well that factories augured the
wholesale transformation of their enterprise. In the past, many

historians have seen craft workers and small businessmen as practical, narrow, and even retrograde. But craft workers and proprietors seem regressive only if we passively accept corporate whiggery. Tradespeople had ideals; they simply contradicted elite visions of the city’s development. As such, we need to take their beliefs as seriously as we’ve taken the ideology of, for example, ante-bellum southern planters.\textsuperscript{12}

The craft world-view proposed a local market governed by unions, associations, and agreements. Craft workers were militant organizers. The first Chicagoans to unionize were construction workers, but employees in transportation, retail,

and service followed closely behind, obtaining charters from the American Federation of Labor. Though commentators today sometimes contend that retail and service workers are unorganizable, history suggests otherwise. By 1904, the Retail Clerk’s Protective Association had seventeen local unions in Chicago. Transportation workers were even more successful. Between 1902 and 1905, teamsters formed forty-eight new locals with over twenty thousand members, rising in only a few years from non-existence to the dizzy heights of power. Until manufacturing workers unionized during the Great Depression, such craft workers formed the backbone of the Chicago Federation of Labor. As late as 1929, seventy-two percent of the city’s unionists worked in construction, teaming, service, trade, government, and amusements.13

Small businessmen also fervently associated, filling the craft economy with local business organizations. In 1897, the Lakeside Directory of Chicago listed groups of plumbers, bottle dealers, carpenters, cooks, drapers, jewelers, liquor dealers, masons, plumbers, tailors, retail druggists, theatrical

mechanics, and undertakers. In the coming years, more emerged, including the Chicago Grocers and Butchers Association, the Chicago Master Steam Fitters, the Master Horseshoers Protective Association, and the West Chicago Liverymen and Undertakers Association, among many, many others.¹⁴

Craft producers strengthened these organizations with trade agreements. Though some scholars have argued that collective bargaining began in industries like garment manufacture, trade agreements actually trace their origins to the craft economy. Chicago’s master masons signed the city’s first union contracts in 1880. By 1910, craft employers generally accepted unions and collaborated with them to set wages, hours, and methods of production. By contrast, even twenty years later, very, very few corporate manufacturers deigned to recognize organizations of workers

Trade agreements relied upon friendly relations between labor and capital. Though masters and journeymen quarreled at the end of every contract, they did not see their interests as contradictory or even necessarily antagonistic. John Mangan, the President of the Steam Fitters’ Protective Association of Chicago, described conditions in his trade thusly:

I feel that the harmonious feeling... can be attributed largely to the fairness of our contractors, and I may further say that while we were making steady and reliable progress, and proud of it, we were

equally proud of the advancement of the Master Steam Fitters. I... hope that the present pleasant relations may long continue.¹⁵

Such mutuality reflected the muddled class identities of tradespeople at this time. Unions, such as the Carpenters, the Barbers, the Musicians, and the Teamsters, allowed small proprietors to join. Most craft workers were a small step from independence, and some chose to take it. Union officers were especially prone to start their own businesses. In 1900, for example, George Gubbins was the fiery President of the local bricklayers union, but, less than a decade later, he was a mason contractor.¹⁶

Correspondingly, most employers lived, worked, and played in the same neighborhoods, yards, and saloons as their employees. The Secretary of the Chicago masons and Builders, F.B. Robinson called his members “ordinary common laboring men,” and he wasn’t far from the mark. Most contractors had been journeymen earlier in their lives. Though so-called upward mobility was a reality for these men, they often perceived their interests as closer to their workers than to the capitalists running the steel mills.¹⁷

¹⁵John Mangan, History of the Steam Fitters’ Protective Association of Chicago, (Chicago: Steam Fitters’ Protective Association), 38.
¹⁶Industrial Commission, Reports, v.8, 1901, 233; Lakeside Directory, 1912, 564.
¹⁷Robinson’s comments came in response to the cross examination of Jacob Newman, a lawyer representing a brick manufacturer purportedly blacklisted by the Masons and Builders Association. Newman asked if the master masons were "college bred men," and Robinson answered "No, they are not." Testimony before Master of
Employers were not wealthy; indeed most were financially contingent. Low barriers to entry made competition a brutal fact of life. In 1910, a journal for teaming contractors commented: “There is no future... a man can’t figure on a thing; it’s cut, cut, cut, the competition is so keen in the teaming business that there is not one cent in it...”\(^{18}\) Perhaps they overstated their weakness, but most were small local entrepreneurs in an unstable, competitive environment rather than prosperous capitalists.

The greatest threat to local craft enterprise was the growth of a national corporate economy. Perhaps the best example is the energy business. At the turn of the century, methane gas lit Chicago’s streets and homes, but coal warmed its residences and businesses. Nevertheless, gas technology was improving, and companies like Marshall Field’s had begun experimenting with gas heat in the summer. The differences between coal and gas were marked. Coal epitomized craft production. Sold by small neighborhood dealers, delivered by teamsters, burned in cast iron stoves by residents, and shoveled into steam furnaces by stationary firemen and engineers, it was diffuse, proprietary, and labor intensive. By contrast, gas was the very definition of “modernity.” The People’s Gas Light and Coke Co. was a corporation, owned by Eastern capitalists. The “Gas Trust”

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burned coal to produce methane in a massive central yard known as "Little Hell," and distributed the gas by underground pipeline. The corporation’s ambition: to eliminate inefficient, labor intensive, dirty, proprietary coal with efficient, capital intensive, clean, corporate gas.¹⁹

National corporations began selling their wares in Chicago, much to the consternation of local businessmen and craft workers. In the nineteenth century, a generous supply of clay and the high cost of transportation gave Chicago’s brick manufacturers a strong hold on the market for building material in the rapidly expanding city. But near the turn of the century, corporations began challenging this local monopoly, producing bricks more cheaply in other states and in better equipped plants. Martin Emerich, a businessman from St. Louis, moved to Chicago and began selling brick made in Ohio. Bernard Weber, quit his position with the powerful, but locally-owned, Illinois Brick Company to start the National Brick Company, using $500,000 borrowed from Eastern investors to build a modern new factory.²⁰

¹⁹ It was not until the 1920s that improvements in metallurgy allowed the piping of large amounts of “natural gas” from the gas fields in the Southwest U.S. to Chicago and its denizens. “Old King Coal,” Chicago Tribune, 5/18/1994, C1-2.
Such threats brought workers and employers closer together in defense of a locally controlled craft economy. The most striking characteristic of craft producers in Chicago was their provincialism, their belief in local self-government. Remarkably, craft producers believed that their organizations had exclusive rights to designate “legitimate” workers, products, and businesses within their jurisdictions. A patchwork of rules and agreements established minimum prices, legislated the quality of goods, dictated the location of storefronts, and set the conditions of work, including wages, tools, and hours.

Craft organizations tightly limited who could make a living in the city. Recent scholars such as David Roediger, Herbert Hill, and Ruth Milkman have noted how some craft unions denied membership to women, people of color, and European immigrants. Yet craft workers did not see their discriminatory policies as we do today. They advocated exclusivity in pursuit of a narrow self-government. John Mangan, the President of the Steam Fitters’ Protective Association of Chicago, rejected the egalitarian principles of the Knights of Labor, commenting,

while the platform of that body is noble and praiseworthy, still the section as above quoted... destroys the validity, tenacity, and family of the trade union, and the unity and discipline therein.\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{22}Mangan, 13.
During this period, the idea of the union as a family was potent. Exclusivity was an aspect of a preoccupation with localism that nearly verged upon patrimony.

Correspondingly, neither whiteness, nor masculinity, nor even union membership necessarily entitled a man to work or sell in the craft economy. When union members came to Chicago from other cities, local craft unions frequently refused to recognize their working cards and demanded exorbitant fees to transfer their membership. In other words, unions tightly drew their circle to keep out any outsiders who challenged their authority.

Employers held similar attitudes, and used agreements to stem the entry of national firms into their markets. Exclusive "closed shop" agreements, common in the building trades, placed certain crafts firmly under local control. In 1897, the United Order of American Bricklayers Local #1 agreed to work only for contractors belonging to the Chicago Mason and Builders Association. In return, members of the Masons’ Association agreed to hire only union cardholders. The Mason and Builders’ Association then made deals with the Chicago Brick Manufacturers’ Association agreeing to use only Association brick. In return, members masons received a rebate on the cost of brick.23

23 Industrial Commission, Reports, v. 8, 1901, 220; Bill, 1/12/1903, James Gavin v. Bricklayers and Masons International Union et al.(1903) case file #227562 in the Superior Court of Cook County; Affidavit of Martin Emerich, 7/15/1899, Union Pressed Brick v. Chicago Hydraulic Press Brick et al. (1899), case no. 196935 in the Circuit Court of Cook County; Information
Together these agreements gave these local interests almost total authority over brick construction in the city. After being denied entry into the Brick Manufacturers Association, George Hinchliff, an Indiana manufacturer noted that his brick was absolutely worthless. There wasn't hardly a man in Chicago that would handle them. The workmen all belonged to the union, practically, and the hod carriers would not handle them or the bricklayers wouldn't lay them.24

In 1921, a business agent for the bricklayers remembered the ways of his youth:

If there was a building to be put up, if it was not put up, and the man did not belong to the bosses' association, that building did not go up. If it did go up, it cost the contractor from one to two dollars more a thousand for brick... there was a delegate for the bricklayers' union and the stonecutters and the carpenters and the plumbers and we met at the bosses association. Twenty to fifty dollars apiece was handed out and divided four ways... and we went out to the building and pulled off the labor and if necessary put someone out the second story window into a sand pile. The bosses financed that and organized it with the unions.25

One can imagine the effect this had upon construction in the city. Only local firms and firms obedient to local interests could succeed in Chicago’s well organized building trades.

Likewise, the increasing use of gas for heat by department stores and other downtown businesses prompted swift reaction from the organized coal interests. In 1903, fearing that “The Gas in Nature of Quo Warranto, 7/11/1901, People ex rel Emerich v. Chicago Masons and Builders (1899), Case file #219410 in the Circuit Court of Cook County.

24Purington v. Hinchliff (1905) 219 Ill. 159, 166;
Trust” would eventually put them out of business, the organized representatives of the coal trade-- Teamsters Local #704 and the Chicago Coal Team Owners Association-- demanded that the businesses stop using gas heat during the summer. The teamsters and team owners agreed to stop all coal delivery to these buildings until they complied. The departments stores initially refused, but when gas proved an insufficient source of heat during the frigid Chicago winter, they agreed to remove their new fixtures.26

Through such protests, craft producers expressed a deeply felt localism, a desire for self-government. On one hand, localism was a convenient rallying issue against national corporations like People’s Gas that threatened to transform the coal trade. On the other hand, provincialism was a preexisting ideological trait of craft producers that served to distinguish them from corporate capitalists. Though tradespeople fought to maintain their incomes, they also battled to maintain the principle of home rule, a principle that corporate elites largely rejected.

25Testimony before the Dailey Commission, March 25, 1921 in Montgomery, 189.
A complete picture of the contested rise of the national, corporate, industrial economy requires an understanding of this localism, and this comprehension can only come from the study of local history. Americans struggled, sometimes violently, against the developing social order, but they didn’t fight in Washington, D.C. Indeed, they opposed the power of that city. Synthesis remains a worthy goal, but only if scholars remain cognizant of the provincial producers who defied “modernization,” and the ways in which they predicated their defiance upon the value of local self-government.

This struggle is relevant to those scholars who look beyond national boundaries in their historical work. As today’s transnational corporations break down the differences between the world’s peoples, it is tempting to imagine that local history has lost its significance. But it is the very globalism of capitalism which demands local history, for it is upon such provincial terrain that corporate titans met their most aggressive rivals.