



GOING TO THE CITY : A STUDY OF GEOGRAPHIC PAROCHIALISM

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Introduction

When I moved to Northern California two decades ago, I was struck by the tendency of local residents to refer to San Francisco as The City, as though there were no other city in the area. The Lake meant Lake Tahoe, even though there are several other large lakes nearby. A local beauty queen described herself during a news interview as "an Army brat who has lived in several communities, but wants to stay in Sacramento which is close to the Lake and close to the Bay."¹ This type of usage is not unique to California, of course. Even though New York City has five boroughs, the statement by a resident of Brooklyn or Queens, "I'm going to the City," refers to an impending journey to Manhattan. Since there has been little direct investigation of parochial usage of place names, the phenomenon seemed worthy of study. The only attempt that I could locate to assess the parochialism issue directly was the 1973 study by Saarinen² who supplied students with a blank sheet of paper and asked them to sketch "the University area." Although it would have been possible to specify more clearly the area to be encompassed in the mapping, the investigator was particularly interested in how the term would be interpreted. Leaving the instructions vague gave the mapping procedure some of the elements of a projective technique.

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Parochialism is an aspect of vernacular geographic thinking, "the product of the spatial perceptions of average people, the shared spontaneous images of territorial reality hovering in the minds of the untutored."³ Bollnow⁴ believes that each person has a "natural place" to which he or she belongs, and this place "can properly be called the zero point of his or her reference system." Shared knowledge of these "natural places" within a community leads to parochial place-naming. Such shorthand descriptions become part of the taken-for-granted spatial context.⁵ Tuan⁶ includes parochial names in the category of booster images or nicknames, likening the City to such appellations as The Big Apple (New York) or Auto City (Detroit). However, nicknames tend to emphasize particular attributes or products, and thus describe the general in terms of the specific, for example, a city in terms of its major product or landmark,⁷ while parochial naming goes in the opposite direction of describing the specific by means of the general. Parochial place names are deliberately abstract and non-imageable. For a newspaper columnist to describe San Francisco as Baghdad by the Bay or Queen City evokes images of opulence, sybaritic living, perhaps decadence. To refer to it as The City carries little sensory content but only the abstract criteria for designating an influential urban area.

Miller,⁸ in an attempt to define the boundary line between Southern and Northern California, employed a variety of indicators, including the drainage divide, the break line for truck and telephone rates, air and bus fares, the distribution areas of newspapers and a major regional periodical, and the service area of branches of the state automobile club. An important omission in his analysis is information about the views and perceptions of the state's residents. The fact that outside government entities, in setting rates and service areas, classify a town in one district rather than another does not mean that the local inhabitants share this view. There is some indication that the residents of cities such as

San Luis Obispo see themselves as belonging to a distinct region called Central California. There are also those who believe that the true division of the state is between the cosmopolitan coastal zone and the agricultural interior.⁹ An examination of geographic parochialism may provide further information on the issues raised by Miller.

Method

The respondents were students at six universities representing various regions of California. Two universities were located in Northern California (Arcata and Davis), two in Central California (San Luis Obispo and Bakersfield), and two in Southern California (Long Beach and La Jolla). In each case, a psychology instructor, known personally by the writer or contacted by letter, administered the questionnaire to his or her students. Since the technique was brief (requiring five to ten minutes of class time) and pleasant, there was no problem in obtaining cooperation.

A list of eleven commonplace descriptors was used: lake, river, city, downtown, mountains, beach, island, valley, forest, peninsula, and border. The instructions asked each student in the class to take out a sheet of paper and write numbers from one to eleven, one beneath the other. Then the instructor read the following instructions:

I am going to read you a list of statements about places. If you have a reasonably good idea of the answer, please guess, but if you have no idea, just write "don't know." If you are already in the place described in the question, please write "already there" as your answer.

This was followed by eleven statements, each one involving a separate place descriptor.

1. If I said I was going to the lake, what would be the name of the lake to which I was going?

2. If I said I was going to the river, what would be the name of the river to which I was going?

3. If I said I was going downtown, what would be the

name of the city in which the downtown was located? And so forth.

The task of the students was in each case to identify the place referred to in the generic description. Responses were collected during 1982 in regular class sessions by the instructors, sent to the writer for scoring, and then a summary of the results was mailed back to the instructors to provide feedback.

Most of the responses were scored easily with the exception of those relating to forests and mountains which were relatively unbounded and had multiple place names. Among the terms used to describe forests were the names of specific parks (Prairie Creek Redwoods Park), sections of parks or groves (Avenue of the Giants), or generic terms such as redwoods or national forest. Nothing had been said to the respondents regarding the specificity of their answers, since it was feared that this might create bias. Scoring of responses to *forest* and *mountains* proved so difficult that it seemed best to delete these terms from the analysis.

There were also a few respondents who did not understand the instructions or who gave non-serious replies. These were usually obvious since they involved consecutive non-serious replies by the same individual, for example, river—Amazon, forest—Sherwood, mountains—Everest. In the case of obvious non-cooperation or misunderstanding, the entire response sheet was removed from the analysis. The concurrence of a second researcher was obtained before removing any respondent from the sample.

Results

The degree of consensus regarding parochial naming is indicated by the percentage of responses in each sample interpreting a generic name in the same manner. If every respondent in a region interpreted The Lake as the same place, this would represent complete consensus. On the

other hand, if no one in the region could identify The Lake or each person came up with a separate answer, there would be zero consensus. Between the extremes of total and zero agreement, are varying degrees of consensus. These can result either from different perceptions regarding the importance of a place or from competing pressures among different places that fit the description.

All those locations mentioned by at least 15 percent of any sample are included in Table 1, and the size of the typeface indicates the degree of consensus:

small type = 15-29 percent consensus

medium type = 30-49 percent consensus

large type = > 49 percent consensus

The Lake. In all samples there was at least one lake that was consensual, although the tendency was stronger in some locations than others. Lake Tahoe comes closest to being a "state lake" since it was mentioned by some respondents in all samples, although the frequencies ranged from 29 percent in Davis to 4 percent in Bakersfield.

The River. This had specific meanings within all of the regions. The replies illustrate the major north-south division of the state. For the two northern samples, the dominant replies in Arcata were the Trinity and the Mad Rivers and in Davis the Sacramento and the American Rivers. Farther south, the Colorado and Kern Rivers were dominant. The Colorado was mentioned within all samples midstate or below, but by none of the students in the northern samples.

The City. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students in each sample identifying The City as San Francisco, Los Angeles, or San Diego. In Northern California, The City is San Francisco; but in Central California, there is a split. Although San Luis Obispo and Bakersfield lie in approximately the same latitude, for San Luis Obispo residents, The City is San Francisco; for the Bakersfield group, Los Angeles is The City. Los Angeles is also The City in Long Beach; but when one proceeds south to La Jolla, San Diego

CITY IN WHICH SURVEY WAS UNDERTAKEN*

	Arcata n = 19	Davis n = 53	San Luis Obispo n = 60	Bakersfield n = 77	Long Beach n = 29	La Jolla n = 48
	Trinity Ruth	Berryessa Tahoe	Lopez Laguna	Ming Buena Vista Isabella	Elsinore	Tahoe
	Mad Trinity Eel	Sacramento American	Colorado	Kern	Colorado	Colorado
	San Francisco	San Francisco	San Francisco Los Angeles	Los Angeles Bakersfield	Los Angeles	San Diego Los Angeles
	Eureka Arcata	Davis Sacramento	San Luis Obispo	Bakersfield	Long Beach Los Angeles	San Diego
	Clam Trinidad	Santa Cruz	Avilla	Pismo	Huntington	La Jolla Shores
	Hawaii	Hawaii	Hawaii Catalina	Hawaii	Catalina	Catalina Hawaii
	Central	Central Napa/Sonoma	Central San Fernando	Central San Fernando	San Fernando Death	San Fernando
	Samoa San Francisco	San Francisco	San Francisco Monterey	-----	Palos Verdes Balboa	-----
	US/Mexico CA/OR	US/Mexico	US/Mexico	US/Mexico	US/Mexico	US/Mexico

Table 1. Specific locations mentioned in response to generic place names.

*Includes locations mentioned by at least 15 percent of any sample.

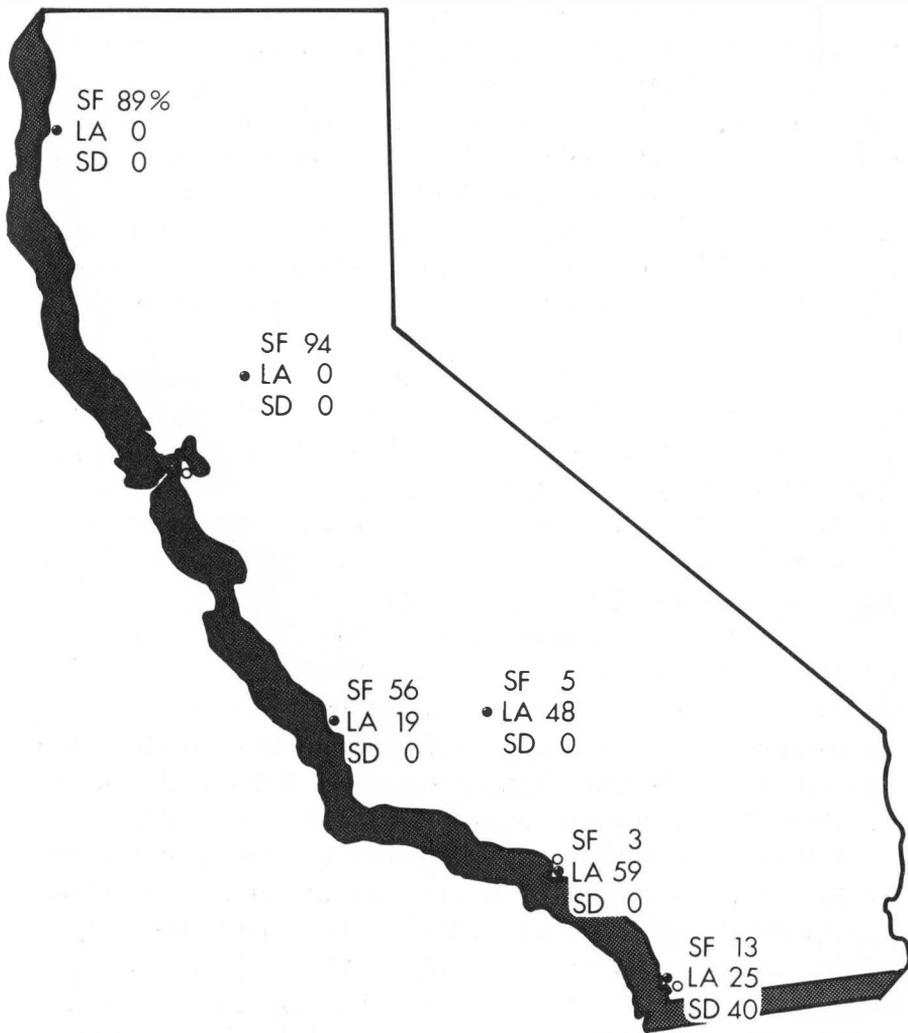


Figure 1. Responses from all samples to "The City."

becomes The City. These results should eliminate the belief that any single urban area is The City for all Californians.

The Downtown. Responses to this item may be a guide to the autonomy and vitality of the central business district. Students at Humboldt State University were slightly more likely to locate The Downtown in Eureka than in Arcata, which is closer but smaller. With this exception, all the other samples indicated that The Downtown was located in the city in which the survey was taken. However, the margin was reduced in Long Beach, where almost as many people felt that The Downtown was in Los Angeles as in Long Beach.

The Beach. California's long coastline virtually ruled out any consensus on a beach. While each sample had its own favored beach, there was no overlap among the samples. Clam Beach was dominant at Arcata, Santa Cruz Beach at Davis, Avila Beach at San Luis Obispo, Pismo Beach at Bakersfield, Huntington Beach or Long Beach at Long Beach, and La Jolla Shores at La Jolla.

The Island. For respondents in Northern and Central California lacking major coastal islands, The Island was Hawaii. For the two Southern samples, it was Catalina. In all samples there were at least a few people who identified Hawaii as The Island, suggesting some perceived connection between the mainland and the Hawaiian Islands.

The Valley. Interchangeable names created minor problems in scoring this item. Responses mentioning Central, Sacramento, and San Joaquin Valleys were combined into a single Central Valley category. Figure 2 shows the dominance of the Central (Sacramento/San Joaquin) Valley in the north and center of the state, and the San Fernando Valley in the south.

The Peninsula. This term did not seem to have as much commonality among the respondents as did the other place descriptions. At Arcata, The Peninsula was interpreted to be the Samoa Peninsula lying across Arcata Bay, at Davis it was

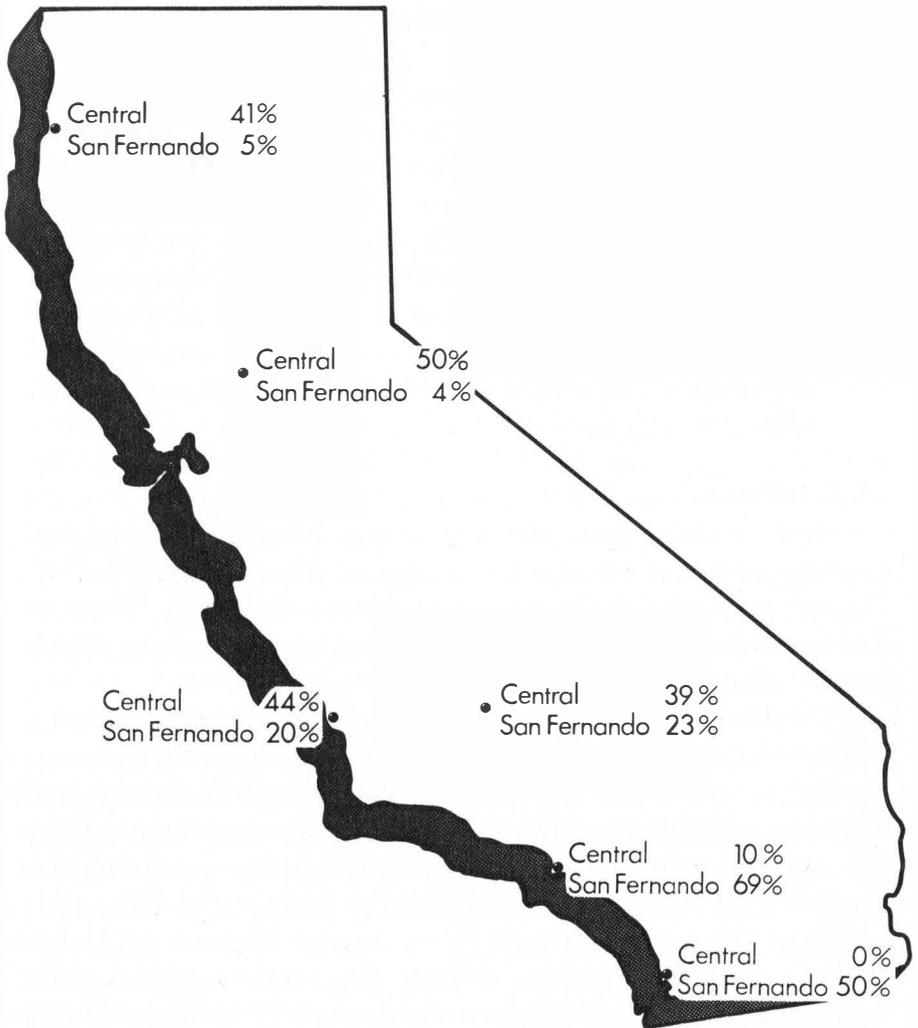


Figure 2. Responses from all samples to "The Valley."

San Francisco or the South Bay Area; in San Luis Obispo there were three competing peninsulas, San Francisco, Monterey, or Palos Verdes; in Bakersfield and in La Jolla, the term had little local reference and was interpreted as

Florida or Baja. At Long Beach, The Peninsula was either Palos Verdes or Balboa.

The Border. Not surprisingly, for students in all portions of California, The Border lies between the United States and Mexico. However, in Humboldt at the far north of the state, there was a secondary border between California and Oregon. It would be interesting to ask this question in locations farther north along the Pacific Coast. My prediction would be that in Oregon, the term would refer to state borders (Washington State to the north or California to the south), and in Washington State it would refer to the Canada-United States border.

Discussion

From a substantive viewpoint, the results reveal the well-recognized north-south division of California qualified by a lesser east-west diagonal cut by the Coast Range. There are three major urban centers in the state, San Francisco in the north, and Los Angeles and San Diego in the south.

These results are largely in accord with the line drawn by Miller¹⁰ dividing Northern from Southern California, except in the case of San Luis Obispo. The present data suggest a closer identification of San Luis Obispo with Northern than Southern California. This issue needs to be researched further. I have no way of explaining the plurality of Sunday *Los Angeles Times* sales over *San Francisco Examiner/Chronicle* sales in San Luis Obispo County reported by Miller.¹¹ Further study is needed of the mental maps of San Luis Obispo residents along with objective indicators of telephone calls as well as telephone rates, and travel destinations as well as transportation rates.

Having established that there is some consensus regarding parochial place names in California, the task remains of identifying those attributes of places that lend themselves to this type of usage. When there is only a single major example of a geographic landmark nearby, such as Mount Shasta

or San Francisco Bay, then parochial usage of terms like "mountain" or "bay" is easy to explain. On the other hand, when there are numerous examples of a geographic landmark nearby, then parochial usage becomes a more interesting geographic phenomenon. What degree of specialness, familiarity, or popularity is required for a lake or river to become The Lake or The River? The criteria used in the transition from the specific to the parochial may shed further light on some basic issues of environmental cognition.

The technique employed in the present study is most useful for discrete geographic entities with well-defined edges and least useful for unbounded settings such as forests or mountain ranges. It also requires frequent reiteration that the questions refer to present usage by the speaker ("I am going to the lake; I am going to the river," and so forth) rather than to places in the respondent's past experience. This tendency to egocentric interpretation of the questions was exacerbated through the use of college students, many of whom identify more closely with their home towns than with the cities in which they are presently situated. A survey of local residents should minimize the possibility of confusion between home town and present abode.

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NOTES

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