

# EISENBERG INSTITUTE

F O R H I S T O R I C A L S T U D I E S

EIHS Theme (2011-2013)

## TAKING PLACE: HISTORY AND SPATIAL IMAGINATIONS

The dimensions of historical inquiry are as much spatial as temporal. The subjects of history inhabit space and move across it; they shape space, and are shaped by it. It is hard to imagine historical work that does not in some way contend with the dialectic of space and place—interrelated yet distinct concepts—whether in the territorial claims of nations, the making of cityscapes, the crossing of boundaries, the limits and possibilities imposed by mountains and oceans. Whether “chosen peoples” have the primary right to settle and rule in a given place and others are fated to migrate and live as exiles, refugees, or diasporas, both the settled and the mobile contend with their relationship to space. And yet, while disciplines from geography to anthropology long ago turned to thinking about space as both analytic and metaphor, historians’ contributions to this theoretical literature have thus far been muted.

*Taking Place: History and Spatial Imaginations* seeks to focus inquiry on space and place in both history and historiography. Our theme seeks to bring temporality and context to questions of space and movement. We aim to do this by focusing on two analytical axes: mobility and scale. Mobility has been central to historical narratives, in the stories of travelers, traders, slaves, and diasporas, for example. And if mobility is in some ways about thinking laterally, scale allows us to think vertically: from the individual body to the global. Both scale and mobility challenge spatial concepts; they disrupt and support the immobile structures of history, society, and culture, forcing reconsiderations of the traditional places of historiography.

*Taking Place* therefore pushes us to articulate the centrality of space to the writing of history with more clarity. Indeed, one goal is to show how the discursive spaces of historical narrative—the spatial imaginations of history itself—can be opened up to critical examination. The “spatial turn” surely started a vital conversation. But space—particularly in its relationship to mobility and scale—must be addressed with renewed vigor. We at the Eisenberg Institute hope to provide the space, as it were, for that conversation to take place.