

The Saints and the State: The Mormon Troubles in Illinois
By James Simeone

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Reviewed by Brent M. Rogers

The history of the Latter-day Saint experience in Nauvoo, Illinois, still has a great deal to teach us. It is not just the simplistic story of religious persecution and expulsion that is often rehearsed. In seven dense chapters, James Simeone, professor of political science at Illinois Wesleyan University, unveils a complex political milieu to explain the tension that led to the 1846 departure of the Saints from Illinois—and ultimately the United States. Relying on political theory and philosophy and his deep knowledge of politics in frontier Illinois, Simeone unpacks the paradox of a developing democracy, which he defines as the demand that the state produce popular justice for its citizens even while the state lacked the capacity to enforce the law. That inability emboldened groups within the civil society to take up the mantle of the state and impose their own group ideals in the place of a weak government. Simeone uses this lens of state power and its intricacies to understand the breakdown in group dynamics, toleration, and accommodation between the Latter-day Saints and the old settlers in Hancock County, Illinois. The state, meanwhile, did not fairly or actively manage the majority-minority relations. Instead, its inaction widened the gulf between the groups. In the end, in Simeone's telling, the Latter-day Saint difficulties in Illinois provide a useful example of failed governance.

The Saints and the State is an erudite contribution to the state-formation debate and the place of Latter-day Saint history therein. Simeone explains “how the Illinois regime came to be, dissecting its powers, and detailing how its uneven authority shaped and drove the Mormon troubles” (7). He reconstructs the operable ideas, interests, and institutions within the Illinois political regime to map the breakdown of toleration for Latter-day Saints and for law and order in Hancock County. Simeone traces the dynamics of the Latter-day Saint community’s arrival

into and encounter with a developing democracy that had existing patterns, background norms, and ideals. The Saints, a socially marginalized minority group, had their own patterns, background norms, and ideals. Even still, the old settlers provisionally accepted the Saints as independent producers. According to established thought, the independent producer was an individual who was independent in politics and a productive contributor to society and the economy. This, Simeone shows, was the ideal in frontier Illinois.

However, within a couple of years of the Latter-day Saints' migration to Illinois, the old settlers came to view the Saints as violating that ideal. Simeone elucidates how the perception of the local majority shifted. The old settlers no longer considered the Saints as valuable independent producers as their rage grew over the Saints' political and legal choices. The old settlers believed the Saints to be under the sway of a powerful religious leader who dictated voting patterns and abused the law for his own short-term advantage. The old settlers no longer viewed the Saints as free decision makers, particularly in the political arena, and therefore felt they no longer held worth. Simeone deftly analyzes the rules of civic worth demonstrating how the majoritarian conception of worth changes and how those shifts influence not only political action but also social action. As determinations of worth were changing on the ground in Nauvoo and Hancock County, tension between the minority and the majority increased. While this tension increased, the state, as represented by Illinois Governor Thomas Ford, took a neutral stance in law enforcement. Ford's legalistic neutrality, Simeone explains, focused on the humanity all parties had in common but prevented action to deescalate the rising conflict.

At the crux of the problem was the pursuit of popular justice. The Latter-day Saints had found no justice for actions perpetrated on them in Missouri. They came to Illinois and built a political regime dedicated to popular justice from their perspective as a minority and designed for their own protection. Joseph Smith's ability to create a successful city-state, however, had disastrous ramifications. Outsiders initially tolerated the religious difference of Latter-day Saint refugees but came to observe Smith's consolidation of power as a replacement of democracy with divinity. Power politics brought a significant challenge to the status quo and to the old settlers' conception of their own worth as self-governing independent producers. Simone states, "Expulsion came because the Mormons challenged the Illinois way, the old settlers' claim to rule and recognize independent-producer worth on their own terms" (118). In

other words, the minority challenged the majority rules of worth. He demonstrates further that “what from the Mormon perspective looked like Joseph Smith’s effective use of the writ [of habeas corpus], prudent deployment of the militia, and adroit manipulation of the two parties looked to the Hancock settlers like a mockery of the law and a travesty of justice. The old settlers concluded they had lost control over their government and with it their self-determination” (203). To reinforce the established rules, the majority group, the old settlers, now sought their own pursuit of popular justice.

Seeing Smith as an outlaw and his followers as fanatics, non-Mormons in western Illinois banded together to strengthen and advance their worth and contributions, and to end the threat of this minority group. These group dynamics revealed the limits of toleration and accommodation in Illinois. As the groups polarized and became increasingly isolated, Illinois governor Thomas Ford remained focused on legal assessments and neutrally enforcing the law rather than on what actions the state could take to ameliorate the situation. His efforts, or lack thereof, were castigated by both Latter-day Saints and their unified opponents. Ford’s approach inhibited the state from exercising any authority in the escalating conflict. “When state authority is tenuous,” Simeone argues, “and a majoritarian story of peoplehood is under construction, groups matter greatly” (283). Each group—the Latter-day Saints and the old settlers—wanted their vision of civic worth recognized, but Ford’s neutral, idealistic approach was blind to the politics of civic worth. He could not satisfy the demand for popular justice from either the minority or majority perspective. Ford ultimately failed both groups, which led to the extralegal action that killed Joseph and Hyrum Smith and led to the eventual expulsion of the Saints from the state of Illinois.

Understanding the political theories and philosophies driving decisions and actions by actors such as Joseph Smith, Thomas Ford, and Thomas Sharp, *The Saints and the State* offers a more complete, albeit complicated and theoretically heavy, portrait of the Latter-day Saint experience at Nauvoo. While the general contours of this history will not be new to students of the Latter-day Saint past, the explanation of the political forms of the story will provide for most readers a new angle to comprehend it. In that way, the book is a fresh look at events well told. Beyond this contribution, Simeone’s book forces us to ask difficult questions that remain relevant in politics today. How do groups become polarized? How can groups improve toleration? When toleration breaks down, how equipped (and willing) is the state to protect

and aid minority groups? Is the majority willing to accommodate the minority and on what, and whose, terms? How can we see and understand the civic worth of groups that are different from us? How groups become polarized within the context of the state's capacity and power to act to enforce the law is well illustrated by Simeone's analysis of the history of the Saints' difficulties in Nauvoo. The tension over political machinations, government institutions, and law enforcement in Illinois provides a powerful example to see how the state works and how it can be improved. These are just a few reasons why the Latter-day Saint experience in Nauvoo still has much to teach us.

Brent M. Rogers is the managing historian for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. He is the author of *Unpopular Sovereignty: Mormons and the Federal Management of Early Utah Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).