

MOVEABLE FEASTS: AN INTRODUCTION

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In many circles, dispute resolution is still frequently referred to as a movement. Elsewhere, it is increasingly thought of as a business, or a set of professional practices in legal, government, and nonprofit organizations. There are also signs that dispute resolution is beginning to be seen as an integrated academic discipline. But in all of these overlapping senses of the field, there is an implicit assumption that it is appropriate to think of dispute resolution on a national, or even transnational, basis. But how true is that imagery? We know that “all politics is local.” Is it possible that this field, too, is so affected by local cultures that to speak of it in sweeping terms embodies a conceptual error, or even sets us up for a chain of misapprehensions and consequent mistakes in policy?

The Broad Field project, briefly described in the following pages, was organized to try to analyze and strengthen commonalities across widely disparate parts of the conflict resolution field. Commonalities, however, cannot be strengthened without an assessment of whether they exist, and of what role difference, diversity, and context play. As suggested above, one of the ways the field demonstrates its diversity is geographic. We are very pleased to be able to present here the first three in a series of articles designed specifically to broach questions of “local culture” and its impact on how dispute resolution actually works and feels, to its practitioners and its clients, in different places. Thus, San Diego stands as an example of a local dispute resolution culture largely formed by (if in some ways, in reaction to) a single, creative and highly energetic organization. Washington, D.C.’s dispute resolution culture, by contrast, may look from outside the Beltway like it is dominated by a monolithic federal government, but not when closer examination fractures the government (let alone the other players in Washington) into a mosaic of competing entities. And New York, meanwhile, demonstrates an awe-inspiring diversity of local micro-cultures — based not only on the standard ethnic, pro-

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fessional, and religious divergences, but on an array of other divisions and distinctions not so easily noticed at a distance.

We hope to extend this series in the future, but just in the three cities that serve as the initial basis for this discussion, Carrie Menkel-Meadow, Ellen Waldman, Lela Love, and I believe that the field serves up quite distinctive local flavors.