FEATURE REVIEW

Globalizing American History: The View from La Pietra


When a benefactor recently gave New York University a Tuscan villa called La Pietra, NYU historian Thomas Bender thought creatively. Launching a “Project on Internationalizing the Study of American History,” Bender proposed a series of summer conferences at La Pietra at which historians would consider the state of American historiography in a “self-consciously global age” (p. vii). Accordingly, from 1997 to 2000, a total of nearly eighty scholars gathered at the villa to contemplate this theme. Some fifty came from U.S. universities (including thirteen from NYU), and the others from various Western European nations, Britain, Cuba, Argentina, Mexico, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Israel. (Interestingly, no scholars from Canada, Eastern Europe, or the Islamic world participated.) Of the papers presented, sixteen appear in the hefty volume reviewed here, together with Thomas Bender’s introduction.

The La Pietra project was endorsed by the Organization of American Historians, for which the goal of globalizing U.S. history has loomed large in recent years, as evidenced by the two issues of the *Journal of American History* that former editor David Thelen devoted to the topic in 1999.¹

In his introduction, Bender sets forth the problem as he sees it and proposes a new, more capacious approach. While national history “celebrates a sense of having something in common” (p. 1), he argues, it can divert attention from subgroups within the nation, obscure historical processes that transcend national boundaries, and blur our awareness that recent developments have “weakened the role of the nation and of national histories in the making of iden-

tities and in the management of socioeconomic activities” (p. 7). What to do? We must “deprovincialize” American history and historicize, contextualize, and “de-center” the nation, rather than simply taking it as a given for purposes of our historical scholarship. We must also avoid the error of past historians whose work, intentionally or unintentionally, too often justified the nation’s oppression of groups within its boundaries and its pursuit of narrowly nationalistic goals abroad. While fairly general, Bender’s introduction does offer a few examples of how a less-bounded worldview can broaden our historical understanding, such as the fact that the Harlem press around World War I frequently discussed the Irish independence movement.

Despite the editor’s efforts to impose coherence on the volume, the essays range widely and defy easy summary. Most, however, do offer helpful—and sometimes deeply skeptical—perspectives on the “transnational” project. The three essays in part 1, “Historicizing the Nation,” examine from different viewpoints the national paradigm in twentieth-century historiography. Prasenjit Duara, a historian of modern China, examines the political uses of national histories, the social construction of “boundedness,” and the way the periodization and national perspective of public-school history curricula shape students’ worldview. Using Liang Shanding’s 1942 novel about Manchuria, Lüsedè Gu (Green Valley), as an example, Duara explores the ways in which fiction can be manipulated by nation-builders, and also how it can validate the borderland experience and create a sense of identity for peoples “suppressed and marginalized” (p. 38) by official histories.

Akira Iriye finds the study of U.S. foreign relations still bounded by the national paradigm—a problem intensified by the recent attention to domestic cultural and gender factors influencing America’s actions abroad. Transnational factors merit closer study, he argues, especially the role of groups united by supranational commonalities such as a shared reformist interest in the environment, human rights, and so on. The Cold War paradigm that dominates post-1945 U.S. diplomatic history, Iriye contends, has obscured another key development: the proliferation of international bodies, especially nongovernmental organizations, such as Amnesty International, the World Wildlife Fund, and many others.

A long essay by Charles Bright and Michael Geyer challenges the globalizing project: “[W]e cannot escape the nation or dissolve it into the ebb and flow of transnational processes or the timeless interplay of cultures and peoples” (p. 66). Nor, they insist, does globalization inevitably produce homogenization or a “global consciousness” in those caught up in it. They conclude with a relentlessly materialist, monocausal interpretation of U.S. history in a global context. After a period of territorial expansion, capitalist America rejected European-style colonialism in favor of an economic order consisting of a “corporate core”

and “territories of production, buttressed by offshore extensions and protected by domestic pacification” (p. 85)—a profit-generating construct Bright and Geyer call “transnational America.” To preserve this system, however, the United States submitted to “global forms of organization and cooperation that bind and limit its options” (p. 92). For historians, the result is paradoxical: the global economy makes “the production of autonomous histories increasingly impossible,” yet this same global economy remains incomprehensible without close attention to “the histories of discrete regions and power centers” (p. 70).

Parts 2 and 3 offer examples of “transnational” historiography in practice. Karen Ordahl Kupperman reminds us that the American nation emerged from the rivalries of European powers, and also that the Indians of Colonial America comprised complex groupings that, by the standards of the day, functioned as nations in their dealings with each other and with the newcomers. Robin Kelley’s essay on the African diaspora portrays this vast, involuntary human migration, as well as the transition from slavery to freedom, as phenomena of the Atlantic world, not of any single national history. Walter Johnson reflects on the differing conceptions of time one finds in accounts of the Middle Passage, the slave experience, and slave rebellions. Sensitivity to “the lost temporalities of the past,” he suggests (p. 161), can enrich our grasp, not only of African-American history, but of the interactions of peoples of differing cultural backgrounds more generally. Shifting our focus yet again, Ian Tyrell of the University of New South Wales argues that a more comprehensive view of “settler societies” (Australia and early California, for example) can illuminate such familiar American themes as environmentalism, perceptions of the wilderness, and relations with indigenous peoples.

In a lengthy essay supplemented by twelve pages of notes, Dirk Hoerder of the University of Bremen previews his forthcoming history of migration as a world phenomenon. Such a global and multicausal approach, he argues, not only complicates traditional U.S. immigration history but also provides the basis of an integrated “people’s history of North America” to replace “the segmented institutional, political, or elite cultural” histories of the past (p. 222). The late Robert Wiebe, in a tantalizingly brief essay, reflects on the origins and interweaving of three great ideologies—nationalism, socialism, and democracy—in an Atlantic perspective. Daniel T. Rodgers reprises his *Atlantic Crossings* (1998), which persuasively argued that the early twentieth-century social-justice movement must be understood in an international context, with attention to developments in Great Britain, Germany, and other nations, not just as a preoccupation of reformers in the United States.

The essays by U.S. diplomatic historian Marilyn Young and Dutch cultural historian Rob Kroes stand in fascinating counterpoint. Twentieth-century

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America, Young argues, has generally viewed the world as “isomorphic with its own needs and ambitions” (p. 277) and has failed to confront the crushing effects of the application of U.S. power abroad, from the suppression of the Philippines insurgency to the post–World War II interventions in Guatemala, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Young criticizes John Lewis Gaddis, who, in her view, while hardly uncritical of postwar U.S. foreign policy, too readily accepts Washington’s self-proclaimed objectives and too cavalierly downplays the human cost. Those who would “internationalize America’s history . . .,” she cautions, “need to keep in mind the reality of American hegemony and its dominant, self-absorbed culture. . . . [T]he United States is not exceptional, only exceptionally powerful” (p. 291). Similarly, Kroes urges more attention to the impact of American cultural exports. Reflecting on the way in which U.S. advertisers manipulate the idea of freedom, he examines how Europeans—especially the young—reconfigure these ads “in expressive settings entirely of their own making” (p. 300). As “American culture washes over the globe,” he suggests, the equation of “America” and “freedom” has become “an international iconographic language” (p. 304), largely untethered from historical reality or from any conscious propagandistic aim by its creators. From their differing vantage points, Young and Kroes caution against easy generalizations, positive or negative, about the world impact of American power and American ideas.

The essays in Part 4, “The Constraints of Practice,” raise further cautionary flags. François Weil of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, asking “Do American Historical Narratives Travel?”, concludes that, apart from certain topics such as slavery and feminism, they do not. With their insularity and overspecialization, U.S. history monographs are rarely translated, and U.S. historians remain marginal to the larger world of historical scholarship, despite their fondness for the international lecture circuit. And this, he implies, is not likely to change anytime soon.

Winfried Fluck of Berlin’s Freie Universität, discussing “The Modernity of America and the Practice of Scholarship,” finds U.S. humanities scholars’ transnational influence less in their specific works than in the “expressive individualism” of their academic culture: the competitiveness, obsession with novelty, impatience with the ongoing process of collaborative inquiry, and ceaseless quest for the latest theory. As with Kroes’ view of U.S. advertising, Fluck sees this “Americanization of knowledge” spreading effortlessly, not from an insidious cultural imperialism, but simply from the fact that the United States is on the cutting edge of a broader modernizing process. While the history profession may be somewhat less affected by “expressive individualism” than the literature departments Fluck knows best, his analysis is on target. Professor Morris Zapp, in David Lodge’s 1975 academic novel Changing Places, might be taken as a fictional embodiment of Fluck’s argument.

Ron Robin of Haifa University cautions the internationalizers against “simplistic caricatures of the nation and an ahistorical understanding of nationalism and nation-making” (p. 369). In flogging the dead horse of “American exceptionalism,” he warns, they risk losing sight of the continuing centrality of the nation in U.S. history, and thus of its importance for U.S. historians. Far from being frozen and unchanging, Robin contends, the American nation is a fluid, evolving entity “that incorporates, reacts to, and acknowledges communal loyalties and multiple identities” (p. 374). As for the La Pietra project, Robin sees it as very much a U.S. initiative. “[F]oreign scholars,” he concludes wryly, “engage the attention of Americans only if they adhere to an American-generated agenda” (p. 377).

In the final essay, David Hollinger echoes Robin’s insistence on the continuing importance of the nation in American historiography. Even if recent developments call for a supranational analysis, he notes, the centrality of the nation in earlier periods remains unchanged. And even today, a sufficiently capacious definition of “the nation” (which Hollinger helpfully provides) can easily accommodate attention to its many subgroups, including oppressed and exploited ones, as well as to supranational movements and processes. Like Young, Hollinger reminds us that, for good or ill, the nation-state centered in Washington, D.C., remains a global superpower whose actions shape the destinies of its own citizens and of far-distant peoples.

Hollinger explicitly criticizes a 1998 essay by Thelen (see note 1 for citation) that seemed to dismiss national narratives produced by trained historians as inevitably celebratory or complicit in exploitation and suppression and as less authentic than grassroots beliefs about the past embodied in family lore and a kind of free-floating collective memory. In refutation, Hollinger cites David Kennedy’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Freedom from Fear*, an unabashedly scholarly and nation-based history of America from 1929 to 1945 that nevertheless movingly evokes the experience of ordinary folk and is far from celebratory in its treatment of racism, the exclusion of Jewish refugees, the wartime incarceration of Japanese-Americans, and the obliteration of entire cities as the war turned increasingly savage in 1945.

A few brief concluding reflections. First, I was struck by the book’s lack of attention to religion, presumably a matter of interest to anyone promoting a transnational perspective on U.S. history. Judaism, with its rich multinational history and its intense interest in Israel; Islam, a global faith with millions of U.S. adherents; the Catholic Church, the world’s oldest international organization; and Protestantism with its transatlantic roots and global missionary reach, hardly make an appearance. For that matter, neither does the apocalyptic belief system, embraced by millions of Americans, which bypasses the national and the global paradigms altogether (except as they provide evidence

of human wickedness and naiveté) to view human history from a cosmic perspective.

Secondly, the means by which the globalizers’ goals might be achieved receive little attention. Interestingly, it is French contributor Weil who urges less theorizing and more down-to-earth discussion. “The internationalization of American history, if it is to succeed,” Weil writes, “cannot remain what it is now—largely a top-down movement driven by a relatively small group of cosmopolitan academics” (p. 333). Weil, Robin, and a few other contributors do suggest some modest steps toward overcoming the parochialism of U.S. historical scholarship: more translations; a larger presence of foreign scholars in our journals and professional meetings; more pressure on the authors and publishers of U.S. history textbooks (a crucial conduit between professional scholarship and the general public) to introduce transnational perspectives; and so forth. Stimulating as the La Pietra gatherings surely were, it is through such practical measures that the transnational approach is most likely to be successfully advanced.

Third, it is a curious experience to read these essays from a post-9/11 perspective. Though only a few years old, they seem to come to us from across a great divide. In ways unimaginable before 9/11, Americans have become aware of how forces beyond the nation’s borders can shape our history. The current presidential administration, the most nationalistic and unilateralist in recent memory, nevertheless endlessly urges us to be on guard against terrorism perpetrated by elusive foreign evildoers. And even this go-it-alone administration found it prudent to seek a UN Security Council resolution before pursuing “regime change” in Iraq, underscoring Iriye’s point about the growing importance of international organizations. In short, the context of any discussion of “American history in a global age” has changed radically since the La Pietra initiative, and it will be fascinating to see how this initiative plays out in the future. Will we see a genuine effort to illuminate the global context of American history (including a more penetrating analysis of the causes of terrorism), or an increased diet of simplistic and artfully misleading generalizations about world realities spoon-fed by our leaders and a fearful retreat into an even deeper parochialism?

Finally, Bender deserves praise for selecting essays that not only argue for and exemplify a transnational reading of American history, but also interrogate that project critically and note the risks in abandoning or even downplaying the nation-state as a category of analysis. We historians need continually to examine the partially hidden assumptions underlying our work, and this rewarding volume contributes to that process. Even the most jaded or skeptical reader cannot fail to recognize merit in the call to think more critically about our use of the national paradigm and to attend more assiduously to the ways our work can be enriched by lifting our gaze from our particular patch of the garden, and even by looking past the boundaries of the nation itself to the larger world beyond.