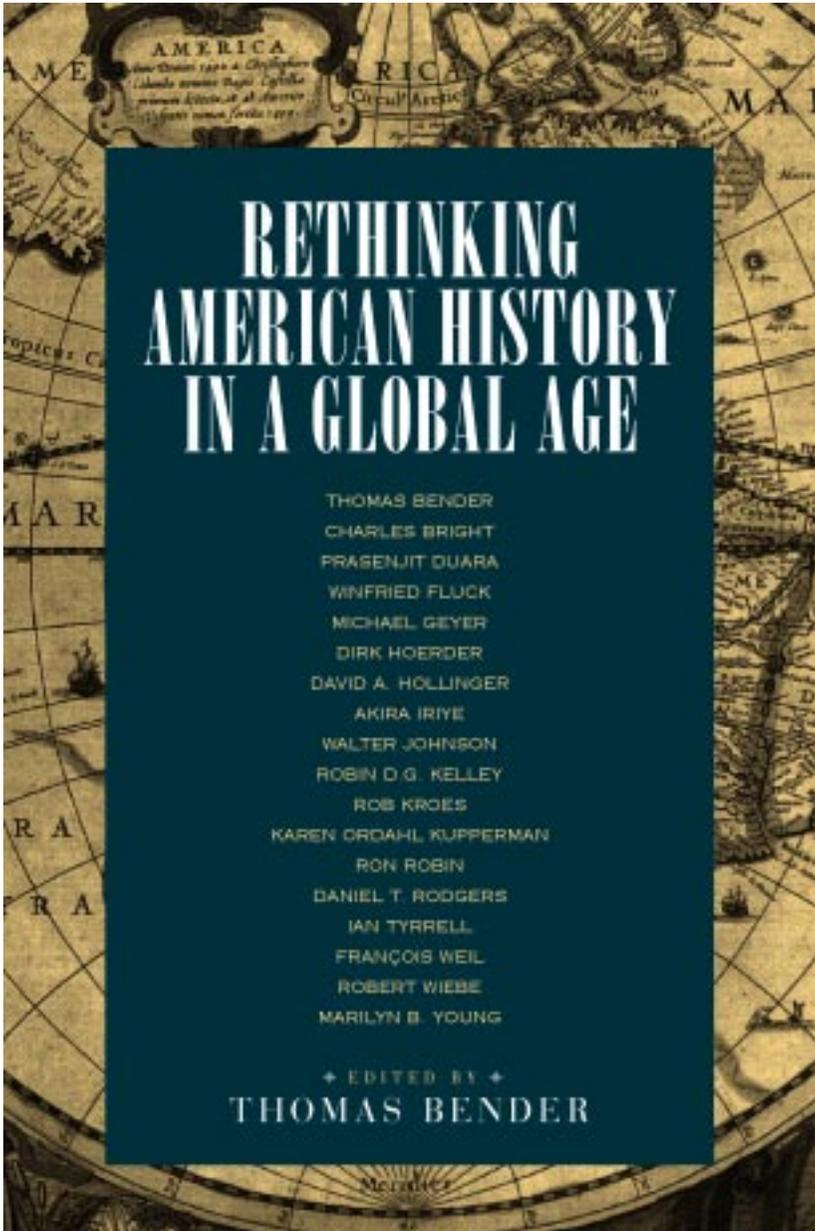


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RETHINKING AMERICAN HISTORY IN A GLOBAL AGE

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INTRODUCTION

Historians, the Nation, and the Plenitude of Narratives

Thomas Bender

Lived history is embedded in a plenitude of narratives. Those narratives come in all sizes, shapes, and degrees of social and political consequence. Historiography necessarily reduces them, emphasizing those that seem more important, those that speak to us, while ignoring or marginalizing—and rightly so—the greater number of them. Of course, over time, different themes or concepts, different narratives, will be deemed significant and emphasized. These privileged narratives, at least on the scale that concerns me here, are in a vital way the product of a quite serious conversation between the historical experience of the present and the histories available in the past. The making of nations and national histories exemplifies this process.

The nation (like a national history) represents a particular narrative of social connection that celebrates a sense of having something in common. A history in common is fundamental to sustaining the affiliation that constitutes national subjects. The achievement of such a history, as Ernest Renan observed more than a century ago, in his classic essay on the nation, depends upon the capacity for disregarding. “Forgetting,” he wrote in 1882, “is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical study often constitutes a danger for nationality.” Understanding the nation as a “historical result,” Renan expected that it would have an end point as well as a beginning, but he did not imagine that its historical career would soon come to an end, and neither, a century later, do I.¹ Nor is it the purpose of this work to subvert the nation. But it does aim to rethink its nature and its relations to alternative solidarities and social connections. It seems important at this moment in our own history, when there is a heightened awareness of both transnational connections and particularistic solidarities, to explore those stories of our past, those experiences at scales

other than the nation, that have been forgotten, that have been obscured by the emphasis upon the centrality of the nation in daily life and in historiography.

A brief look at the context of the earliest American national histories helps to locate this exploration. The first histories of the people who settled British North America were not national histories, and neither were the first postrevolutionary histories. The social entities chronicled in the published histories of the colonial era were the town, the colony, or, in some instances, Protestant Christianity. The language of nation was not yet available. Even after the Revolution of 1776 and the Treaty of Paris that ended it in 1783, American histories were local and state histories, not national histories. The first national history was published in 1789, the year of the inauguration of the new and distinctly nationalist Constitution. It was the work of David Ramsay, a Charleston physician who had earlier, in 1785, written *The History of the Revolution of South Carolina*. That the American national state was created in the same year Ramsay published the first national history, *The History of the American Revolution* (1789), followed by Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* in 1805 in Boston, is not merely coincidental. Nations are, among other things, a collective agreement, partly coerced, to affirm a common history as the basis for a shared future. The near assimilation of history to national history over the course of the two centuries following the invention of the modern nation-state is one of the major themes of this volume.

The conceptual and practical limitations of the notion of bounded unity claimed by the nation-state and revealed in histories framed by the national subject is a second theme. If part of the argument that follows insists that professional history assimilated the ideology of the nation into its basic working premises, it is especially important to recognize earlier insights into these limitations and to build upon them to construct a more generous framing of American history. And this brings us to the historical reflections of Frederick Jackson Turner.

Turner's speculations about alternative ways of narrating American history, including his penetrating critique of the nation as the self-contained unit of historical narration, have been overshadowed by his brilliant and poetic evocation of the frontier as the defining narrative of American history. Turner is pertinent in another way as well: he reveals the importance of openly bringing the present into conversation with the past in the work of establishing interpretive strategies that will speak to the historian's present. As is widely recognized, he wrote his famous essay as the present was being transformed by the closing of the frontier and the development of industrial capitalism. Later, he suggested that the urbanization increasingly

evident in the 1920s, the decade when the majority of Americans for the first time lived in cities and towns, invited an urban interpretation of American history. But before the famous frontier essay, his awareness of developments that we now call globalization prompted him to insist that the history of any nation be contextualized on an international, even global scale.

A century after Turner, we find ourselves in a strikingly similar situation. We are aware, too, of what seems to be a fundamental shift in the geography of our national life. We are intensely aware today of the extraterritorial aspects of contemporary national life. The inherited framing of American national history does not seem to fit or connect us to these transnational and global developments. Inevitably, contemporary historiography is being inflected by a new awareness of subnational, transnational, and global political, economic, social, and cultural processes. These circumstances invite, even demand, a reconsideration of the American past from a perspective less tightly bound to perceptions of the nation as the container of American history. One can no longer believe in the nation as hermetically sealed, territorially self-contained, or internally undifferentiated. Nor can we take the nation so unproblematically to be the natural or exclusive unit of historical analysis or, for that matter, as the principle of organization for history departments and graduate training.

Having invoked Turner, I want to explore his historical reflections in more detail. Perhaps surprisingly, he provides an important starting point for the reframing of American history that this book proposes. His was a richly complex and playful historical intelligence. If in his famous address of 1893, he moved the profession in the direction of nationalist insularity and contributed to the twentieth-century development of the notion of American exceptionalism, in other places, less attended to by later historians, he had quite different historiographical suggestions, including one that points quite directly to the agenda of this volume.

Turner's address "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," picking up on long-standing popular American myth, reframed the narrative of American history in a new and compelling way.² The first generation of professional historians of the United States, including Turner's mentor at Johns Hopkins, Herbert Baxter Adams, had located the narrative of American history in the Atlantic world, partly and notably outside of the boundaries of the American nation. Adams and his colleagues offered what was essentially a genetic history, one that drew upon another ethnocentric American myth. The seeds of American democracy, they presumed, had first germinated in the communal life of the primitive forests of Germany,

then sprouted in the medieval villages of Anglo-Saxon England, and finally produced town-meeting democracy when planted in the rocky but somehow fruitful soil of New England.

Turner directly challenged this historiography. He moved the focal point of historiography away from the Atlantic world to the interior. "The true point of view in the history of this nation," he wrote, "is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West."³ Commentary on Turner has focused on the theory of democratic evolution he associated with the frontier experience and on his contribution to the notion of American exceptionalism. The implication is that he understood American history to be self-contained; perhaps his famous address was an example of midwestern isolationism.

In fact, Turner, whom I would readily compare with Marc Bloch, was never as trapped in his rhetoric as many of his epigoni were. He broke the Eurocentric genetic chain, but he did not thereby intend to isolate American history, a point recently made by Ian Tyrrell.⁴ Two years earlier, in an essay with an even more portentous title, "The Significance of History," he outlined a vision of history that Bloch would echo a generation later. "In history," Turner observed, "there are only artificial divisions," whether one is speaking temporally or geographically, for

not only is it true that no country can be understood without taking account of all the past; it is also true that we cannot select a stretch of land and say we will limit our study to this land; for local history can only be understood in the light of the history of the world. . . . To know the history of contemporary Italy we must know the history of contemporary France, of contemporary Germany. Each acts on each. Ideas, commodities even, refuse the bounds of a nation. All are inextricably connected, so that each is needed to explain the others. This is true especially in the modern world with its complex commerce and means of intellectual connection.⁵

Charles Beard and W. E. B. Du Bois, the other great American historians working at the turn of the century, can be quoted in much the same way. Not only were American intellectuals aware of the closing of the frontier, they were beginning to grasp the global dimensions of modern life and thus of history. The literary scholar Thomas Peyser argues, in fact, that "global thinking permeated the literature of the realist period to an extent that has not been appreciated, and, for the most part, not even noticed."⁶

In our own present, when we have such an immediate sense of global transformation, I want to propose a rethinking of the narrative of American history, to move from Turner's more famous essay to the less famous one from which I have just quoted. Our moment is not unlike his moment; it is at least as protean as the one a century ago when Turner pondered on American circumstances and sought to describe a past that could more effectively engage the present.

For all of his prescience in understanding the interconnections and relations at the heart of any history, there is a telling omission in Turner's prescription for writing Italian history. The United States (and the Americas more generally) are not mentioned. But the Americas provide an essential component of Italian history. The creation of the Atlantic economy in the centuries following discovery of the New World by a Genoese navigator seeking the very old civilizations of the East displaced the Italian city-states—Venice was no longer the hinge of Europe, and Florence lost its position as the financial center of Europe.

In the 1890s, even as Turner wrote, agricultural developments in California impelled Italians into the Atlantic migration system, and had it not been for the explosive growth of the economy of Buenos Aires between 1890 and World War I, even more migrants from various parts of Italy would have arrived in New York, San Francisco, and other North American cities. To further elaborate on this point: massive international investment in Argentine railroads and other industries, mostly from Britain, but also from the United States, created extraordinarily rapid development and infrastructure construction, which produced a voracious market for unskilled labor. Without this movement of global capital, there would have been much less demand for labor in Buenos Aires, and the pattern of Italian immigration to the United States and elsewhere would have been different. It is important for our understanding of U.S. and Italian history to know that not all Italian immigrants came to the United States, or even to the Americas. In the 1890s, more Italians emigrated to France and Germany than to the United States.⁷ And it is important to Italian as well as to American history that in going abroad Italy's peasants added to older village and regional identities the new one of Italian. On that basis, they became Italian Americans and simultaneously reinforced the developing Italian nationalism in the still new Italian republic. The experience of the peasants who migrated to France was different; they soon became French, just like contemporary French peasants who were being transformed by the cultural and bureaucratic policies of a centralizing state.⁸ From this brief account, I trust that one can readily see that American history rather quickly gets bigger, more complicated, and more entangled in other histories.

My intention in stressing this disconnect on the part of Turner is to make an important point about American self-perceptions. In both academic and popular thought and in policy there is a tendency to remove the United States from the domain of the international. America is "here," and the international is "over there." If there is a practical aim in this enterprise of rethinking and deprovincializing the narrative of American history, it is to integrate the stories of American history with other, larger stories from

which, with a kind of continental self-sufficiency, the United States has isolated itself.

My argument and that of this book is not for increasing the study of American foreign relations, although that is important. The point is that we must understand every dimension of American life as entangled in other histories. Other histories are implicated in American history, and the United States is implicated in other histories. This is not only true of this present age of globalization; it has been since the fifteenth century, when the world for the first time became self-consciously singular.

This means that American historians should be deeply involved in the current discussions about rethinking area studies. Such engagement is required to overcome the unhappy assumption that unites Americanists and area studies specialists. Both agree that “international” is everything that is not the United States. Without undoing this bifurcation that separates United States and the world, one has only the most distorted notion of the national history of the United States and very little historical foundation for understanding the contemporary relationship of the United States to transnational and global developments. We have yet to catch up with the writer in New York’s *Journal of Commerce* who noted in 1898, an apt year for the comment, that “we are part of abroad.”

For reasons of history, the history of our own profession, it is difficult for historians to make the move this volume advocates. The nation-state was from the start adopted by modern historiography as the natural unit of analysis, and the work of the historical profession was institutionalized as the study of past politics, a charter inscribed on the wall of Herbert Baxter Adams’s famous Seminar Room at Johns Hopkins.

Well before Leopold von Ranke established the parameters of professional history, the nation had captured history. As early as the sixteenth century, with the emergence of secular history, the nation became the measure of development. Even Voltaire, who approached history as civilizational, could not help resorting to the French state of Louis XIV as “the implicit point of reference for his universal history.”⁹

But it was in the nineteenth century that history, as a professional discipline, and the nation, as the new and dominant form of political subjectivity and power, established a tight connection that amounted to collaboration. With the founding of research universities in Europe and, in a more complicated way, in the United States, historians and humanities scholars produced national histories and certified national literatures and cultures, which in turn helped to sustain the project of making the modern nation-state.¹⁰ Modern historiography, as Prasenjit Duara has observed, collaborated in enabling “the nation-state to define the framework of its self-understanding.”¹¹

Earlier uses of the nation in history had given it a broad significance as a

carrier of something larger than itself: the collective progress of mankind. Ranke retained some allegiance to the notion of a universal history of progress, but his influence was otherwise. National histories became far more specific; the nation became the locus of differentiation and antagonism in a system of nations. When in this context the nation became the unit of politics and history, time within the international system became singular, and internal differences within the national territory were masked.¹² To the degree that European and American historians (and the public) were committed to evolutionary theories (and the commitment was considerable), place in time distinguished historical from nonhistorical societies. One could even say that this temporal difference was spatialized. Those peoples not organized in nations—referring mainly to colonies of European powers—were not only outside of the system of nations, they were outside of its understanding of “normal” time, or put differently, they were “backward,” even though they were contemporary and entangled with the imperial powers.¹³

With these developments, the world was divided between history and anthropology: history taking those peoples organized into nations, with literatures and archives, leaving for anthropology all differently organized peoples, reduced to historical nonentities. The reframing of history being proposed here reflects in part the dissolution of that division between history and ethnology, both as method and as domain of study.

Professional history in the United States (and in Europe and Latin America) was institutionalized as a cultural investment in the work of modern nation-building. That work made resources available and gave the profession standing. As William McNeill has emphasized, history “got into the classroom. . . to make nations out of peasants, out of localities, out of human raw material that existed in the countries of Europe and in the not so very United States as well.”¹⁴

The professional practice of history writing and teaching flourished as the handmaiden of nation-making; the nation provided both support and an appreciative audience. There was a problem in this arrangement, however. Only recently and because of the uncertain status of the nation-state has it been recognized that history as a professional discipline is part of its own substantive narrative and not at all sufficiently self-conscious about the implications of that circularity. Recent political and cultural changes have weakened the role of the nation and of national histories in the making of identities and in the management of socioeconomic activities, and this enables (and demands) more self-reflection than historians have heretofore given it.

In saying this, I do not mean to propose that historians became apologists for the modern state. In some sense, they were apologists for the nation as the proper instrument for the formation of historical subjectivity, but they were not thereby apologists for *their* particular nation, although,

of course, we can all think of some historians who could be so charged. In fact, historians were often critics of the nation—hence the importance of the archive in the professional ideology of history. Empowered by the archive, historians could speak the truth to official power, as Beard did when he turned to treasury records to make his critique of the Supreme Court’s sacralization of the Constitution in the Progressive Era. But now, after more than a century’s duration, the marriage of the profession to the nation increasingly has the feel of a tie that binds.

History in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic cultures has always been linear, always beginning with a beginning. Both this linearity and the emphasis on origins has a cost. “All narrative history,” François Furet argued, “is a succession of origin events.”¹⁵ Such histories are almost inevitably teleological, with a beginning and an ending (the present, or, sometimes, an envisioned future). The work of aligning the beginning and ending tends to screen much out, to narrow the history, to reduce the plenitude of stories. Deprovincializing the narrative of American history may require displacing the focus on origins and allowing a greater spatialization of historical narrative. We might attend to Herman Melville’s description of the history he will tell in his resoundingly and probably intentionally unsuccessful novel, *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities* (1852): “This history goes forward and goes backward, as occasion calls. Nimble center, circumference elastic you must have.”¹⁶

A history liberated from origins would, I think, historicize the axis of time itself, emphasizing structure, transformation, and relations (temporal and spatial). Attention to the relational aspects of historical phenomena is the key, and it differentiates this approach from most comparative history, which not only tends to reaffirm the nation as a natural category but, more important, seldom explores causal links between the two national experiences being compared.¹⁷ One must explore interactions between social units of varying scales.

In seeking a respatialization of historical narrative in a way that will liberate us from the enclosure of the nation, it is important that we avoid imprisoning ourselves in another limiting conceptual box. Rather than shifting our focus from the nation to some other social/territorial unit, we would do better to imagine a spectrum of social scales, both larger and smaller than the nation and not excluding the nation. We must think of them not as inert points on a scalar axis, but as social worlds interacting with one another and thus providing multiple contexts for lives, institutions, and ideas.

In all of this, moreover, it is important to remember that one of the most persistent points of political contestation in American history has

turned on precisely the question of what is “outside” and what is “inside,” whether one is speaking of global traders, new media and popular culture, diasporic populations, peoples of particular class standing, or groups marked by distinctive cultural practices and heritages or by supposed racial phenotypes.

Our discipline is defined by time; perhaps, as a result, we do not question the historicity of time itself. In historicizing space, one inevitably historicizes time. To deprovincialize American history, we must learn to juggle the variables of time and space, to genuinely historicize both temporal and spatial relations.¹⁸

As the geographical terrain of history expands, time is pluralized. Indeed, if one looks closely, one discovers that there are different temporal rhythms both within the conventional boundary of the nation and beyond it. Our uncritical—and ahistorical—acceptance of the nation as a historical unit, the only historical unit, blinds us to these differences and relationships. We must take seriously the observation of Ernst Bloch: “Not all people exist in the same now. They do so externally, through the fact that they can be seen today. But they are thereby not yet living at the same time with each other.”¹⁹

History thus becomes a complex weaving together of all coexisting histories.²⁰ For instance, with the creation of the Euro-Afro-American Atlantic world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a variety of histories—all with different narratives and temporal signifiers and significances—came into contact. It looked then—and does today to most historians—like a single system, but it was in fact a series of histories sharing space, relating to one another, often with causal consequences, but not assimilating one to the other.²¹

One sees this process and pattern in the first published narrative of an African enslaved in the newly constructed Atlantic world. Olaudah Equiano experienced not only loss of freedom but spatial and temporal change as he moved through the Atlantic world. He was taken forcibly from a particular place with a particular history, with its own scales of time and historical narratives; enslaved by Europeans whose lives were elaborations of other narratives with different temporal expectations; and he labored for ship captains and colonial planters. In all of these different locations, the temporal structure of life was distinct.²² Or look at it from the European perspective: for them, time was European, or metropolitan, or Christian; Africans, at least in European eyes, were outside of those narratives and structures of time. The recent global millennium celebration, marked as it was by striking unities and diversities of timescales, provides a graphic example of the point I wish to make here.

Preparing ourselves for such a history demands that we explore more than we have the relations of time and space, and our relation to them, not only in the narratives we construct but also in our professional lives. If we historicize the nation, make it an object of inquiry instead of our professional platform, we may have to think more than we have about our audience, about who will pay the bill. (Historicizing our national platform is not unlike sawing off the branch upon which we are sitting.) We cannot be complacent. The extreme form of market values justified by the ideology of globalization frees individuals and governments not only from the obligation of addressing the consequences of unregulated capitalism but also from responsibility for sustaining culture and scholarship. We have, therefore, very practical reasons for trying to understand the dynamic of contemporary history.

While the aim here is to move beyond the uncritical acceptance of the nation as both the “natural” unit for historical study and the “natural audience” for historical work, this is not a plea for a postnational history. This volume is not intended as the obituary of national history; it argues instead for the value of “thickening” the history of the United States, making it both more complex and truer to lived experience and the historical record.

The result, I think, will be a richer understanding of the nation, with some sense of its importance in relation to other forms of social unity. To use an image that does not come naturally to me, it will clarify significance by sorting factors as in a multiple regression analysis. Or to provide a historical example, it opens up important questions too rarely pondered: Did foreign missionaries from the United States in the nineteenth century identify themselves (to themselves and to others) as Americans, as Anglo-American Christians, as Protestants, as heirs of the Puritans, or as the advance guard of civilization and modernity? A tight national narrative does not invite this sort of question, but once the frame is opened it is an obvious—and obviously important—question.

Can we imagine an American historical narrative that situates the United States more fully in its larger transnational and intercultural global context? Can such a narrative reveal more clearly than the histories we have at present the plenitude of stories, timescales, and geographies that constitute the American past? Can we historicize the nation itself in such a way that its historical career and its making and unmaking of identities, national and otherwise, can be better understood outside of itself, as part of a larger history than that of the bounded nation?

One important step in this direction is greater curiosity about the nation itself. A nation is grounded in an agreement, partly coerced, partly voluntary, to find significant unity in diverse personal memories and public historical narratives. Both as the foundation and as the product of that agreement, the nation is a field of social practices, all imbued with power of

varying magnitudes and types, that are brought into some continuing relation, practically and imaginatively. Although it is true, as Renan pointed out, that the nation is a “daily plebiscite,” once created, the nation has great powers for reproducing itself, for it has the power, partially, not completely, to shape future social practices and identities in the space it claims and seeks to delimit.²³

The capacity of the nation to frame time and space is not inherent; it is a historical variable. Nor can the nation contain all the narratives that shape the subjectivities of those within its formal bounds, although in historically specific instances, it may well fairly claim to contain the more important ones. The task of historians is to look for the ties that bind a multiplicity of historical narratives to one another under the canopy of American history, even as they explore ways these histories connect the United States to histories outside of its bounds—sensitive in both instances of seams and fissures in the surface unity. The nation thus becomes a partially bounded historical entity imbricated in structures and processes that connect to every part of the world. Too fixed a notion of the nation will obscure all of these vital aspects of history and of historical understanding.

The historian needs to be a cosmopolitan. For that to happen, both historiography and the historian have to restore some sense of strangeness, of unfamiliarity, to American historical experience. American historiography has become too familiar, too technical and predictable. One aim of destabilizing the nation must be to defamiliarize the stories that make up American history, thus inviting a fresh curiosity that is not prompted by the ever more refined and increasingly technical analyses of long-established themes and questions.

The true cosmopolitan must cultivate a doubleness that allows both commitment and distance, an awareness at once of the possible distance of the self and of the possibility of dialogical knowledge of the other. Put differently, it is an error to think of the cosmopolitan as one who is comfortable in the world at large; rather, the cosmopolitan is always aware of the world’s unfamiliarity, always slightly uncomfortable, even at home. The nation, its parts, and its surroundings thus become objects of inquiry, objects of a richer curiosity. In this spirit, Tzvetan Todorov has observed: “The man who holds his country sweet is only a raw beginner; the man for whom each country is as his own is already strong; but only the man for whom the whole world is a foreign country is perfect.”²⁴

The orientation to American history being proposed here has some obvious connections to a number of theoretical positions associated with the harder social sciences on the one side and cultural studies on the other, and it is important for us to both learn from those theories and seek to historicize the discussion of them. But this project, while informed by those theoretical positions, is not driven by them. The argument and method for

this history converge in a commitment to be empirical. Historians, we are arguing, will be doing better history by being diligently empirical, accepting no artificial boundaries as they carefully follow the movement of people, capital, things, and knowledges across national and other boundaries. The aim is verisimilitude, no more, no less.

The task before such a new history is to notice the evidence of transnationalisms previously overlooked or filtered out by historians. For example, close examination of the Harlem press in the era of World War I reveals frequent discussion of and intense interest in Irish nationalism and the Easter Rebellion. An assumption that African-American intellectual life is bounded by Harlem, by the black community, or by the national borders of the United States is all too likely to define such discussions as extraneous, making for the all too common tendency to pass over such accounts. To do that is to shrink the territory occupied by black intellectuals, and it also misses a clue to a more complex history of the relationship between African Americans and the Irish in America.

If globalization powerfully shapes our own time and our sense of contemporary history, it is important to capture the imaginative space it offers for historical reflection. But it is important to remember, too, that the danger of recapture is real. It will do historiography no good to work free of the nation and its ideology only to embrace the ideology and process of globalization. Such a move promises new blindnesses, and there is, besides, the danger of complicity, conscious or not, in a triumphalism that justifies the current phase of capitalism.

Finally, in case there is any misunderstanding, this volume is not in any way a brief for writing global histories. The point is not to displace the monograph, only to thicken the layers of context it incorporates. Nor does this volume propose a dismissal of the nation as a concern, even a central concern, for historical analysis. The aim is to contextualize the nation.

This book originated in a series of four conferences, and the table of contents roughly reflects the sequence of issues that organized them. It begins with the question of the nation, moving to theoretical issues raised by questioning the nation as the sole and complete container of a national history, then providing examples of reinterpretations of major issues and themes in American history, and concluding with an examination (undertaken mainly by foreign historians of the United States) of the sociology of the professional practice of historians, identifying constraints on innovation, both unavoidable and voluntary.

Part 1, "Historicizing the Nation," begins with Prasenjit Duara's essay on the limits and distortions that can arise from framing histories too tightly as national narratives. Duara, whose historical work has been on modern

China, is concerned, to borrow a phrase from the title of one of his books, "to rescue history from the nation." History and the nation, he argues, historically mutually constituted each other, and the historian must stand outside of this process in order to obtain some perspective on the ways in which history makes national subjects and the ways in which the nation structures (he would say captures) historical thinking. The ideology of the nation-state threatens to enclose historiography in a way that in fact dehistoricizes the nation. By looking at the regional literature of the "borderlands" of the United States and of World War II Manchuria, Duara shows how complex the relationship between culture, place, politics, and nation is.

In the following essay, Akira Iriye begins on the terrain of the international and what he calls international history in order to insist that, paradoxically as it may seem, it is necessary to internationalize the study of international relations. He makes the important and increasingly influential point that while some social relations beyond a given nation are state-centered, many are not. Restricting the study of international relations to the relations of sovereign states misses a great deal of national, transnational, and international political, economic, and cultural history.

In an essay rich in both theory and description, Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, neither of whom is an Americanist and both of whom have written important essays on world and global history, theorize the global context and locate United States history in it. They explain that one must take care not to assimilate national history to the global, which is, in fact, not complete, universal, and totalizing. The task is to find historiographical space that treats the national and the global as separate processes but reveals, better than established narratives do, the manifold interactions between them and the imbrications of the one with the other. To illustrate their point, they focus on three historical configurations of American sovereignty. They elaborate the centrality of the production of a sovereign territory in the nineteenth century, the extension of the territory of production in the industrial era, and the partial deterritorialization of civil society since World War II. Referring consistently but carefully to what they call "off-shore America," which consists of both the imaginary and the practical, they establish the embeddedness of American history in contexts larger than itself and explore some of the implications of that historical condition not only for the United States but for other parts of the world.

The work of historicizing the nation invites closer examination of actual geographies of social practice and raises the issue of a pluralization of temporalities. Not only do historians tend to bound and homogenize space in their embrace of the nation as the container of history, but they also assume that time is singular. These issues are addressed in part 2, "New Historical Geographies and Temporalities."

Karen Kupperman shows that in early American history, the boundaries that we honor with the rubric “American history” were meaningless, and that in the territory now so labeled, there were groups speaking hundreds of languages, in hundreds of polities, mingling and contesting with one another. She reminds us, too, that Europe and Africa could be similarly described at the time. The Atlantic world was not yet organized by nation-state. In fact, she argues, the development of an Atlantic focus hastened national consolidations and national consciousness on both sides of the Atlantic. The nations of the Atlantic world were thus formed by and formed internationalism. Kupperman argues forcefully that one misses the dynamic of early American history if the colonies and settlements are assumed to be self-contained and self-sufficient, tied absolutely to their sponsoring colonial authorities. In showing such a terrain of complex interaction, she undermines the deeply embedded notion that the story of America is that of westering. More important, she would argue, were the many vectors of interaction that made the space that became the United States international from the beginning.

Robin D. G. Kelley recovers a vision of African-American history as an Atlantic story, not merely an American one. He argues that such a reframing of African-American history significantly remaps American history, not merely in the era of slavery but through its whole extent. American history is not only embedded in the world of the African diaspora, but Europe and the notion of the West were defined in part by their relations to Africa. The Atlantic world, Kelley argues, was the product of the historical interactions of the peoples of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and many of the big questions have to do with the implications of that movement and the resulting contests and accommodations. Without overstating the capacity of a diasporic approach to American history generally, he shows how central the theme is to the American experience.

In a theoretically rich essay, Walter Johnson focuses on African-American history in its Atlantic context. But he probes a different implication of the geographical expansion of American history, showing that when one situates slavery in such a transnational, even global perspective, the historian must confront a pluralization of time. There are, by implication, many temporalities, many histories sharing the space of the Atlantic world. Although different participants in that world find themselves in common places, interacting with one another, that does not necessarily mean that they are temporally or narratively in the same place, and national narratives may in fact produce a convergence or even unity that distorts actual experience, in possibly significant ways. National histories generally do not question the structure of time. As a result, they often and silently privilege the temporal structure of modernity, a historical move so thick with political and moral implications that it ought not go unnoticed, as it

tends to be. Johnson exposes this issue. At the same time, his essay opens up the unattended and profoundly important connection between time and space in historiography generally.

Ian Tyrrell suggests that American historiography is more deeply rooted in Europe than actual American experience has been, and that, as a result, most gestures in the direction of comparison, explicit or implicit, or transnational history have looked too exclusively toward Europe. While he recognizes the enrichment of context represented by recent formulations of the Atlantic world that include Africa and the southern part of the Americas, he points out other transnational patterns that point in the other direction, toward the Pacific. Building upon his own recent work in environmental history, which cannot be contained by the nation, he elaborates a model based on settler societies and staple economies for writing U.S. history that is calibrated to several scales, extending to the global.

The essays in parts 2 and 3 criticize traditional national narratives; explore theoretical issues of time, space, and narrativity; and propose directions out of the nation as container. But most obviously they are advocacy statements, urging a reframing and recontextualizing American history. The essays in part 3, "Opening the Frame," do the work being proposed. They are in intention exemplary. They examine large themes, issues, or periods through a wider lens, one fashioned by the advocacy and theoretical propositions of the first two parts. Here we see the rudiments of a new kind of history in operation.

So much immigration history has been written on the assumption that there were only two points on the compass, the point of origin and the port of New York (or some other American port), that we have too little sense of the *system(s)* of migration that in fact encompassed the globe. The capitalist quest for cheap labor (both free and unfree) combined with the pursuit of work (and freedom) by ordinary people sustained two Atlantic systems (one linked to Africa, one to Europe) and a Pacific one. There was also a systemic movement from the south to the north within the Americas. It is impossible to grasp the meaning of the immigrant experience in America outside of the framing provided by those systems and without comparing the reception and possibilities of different groups at their various destinations. These systems work at the global, regional, national, local, neighborhood, and even workplace levels, and all of these interact. It is not at all clear that the nation is the most important of these scales at all times. Often the most relevant factors structuring lives are nonstate and transnational ones, such as family economies and culture. Dirk Hoerder, in an extraordinarily rich and ambitious essay, sketches this larger history, which, without denying the nation reveals a history that could be called a peoples' history or, better, a history of peoples.

For Robert Wiebe, the issues of democracy, nationalism, and socialism

are Atlantic-wide, not strictly national. He examines their careers in the United States comparatively and as part of a larger social history of the Atlantic world. Like Hoerder's study of migration, Wiebe frames an American topic in a context and a process larger than the nation. The result is a fresh interpretation not only of these global themes but of American democracy. In Wiebe's view, democracy, nationalism, and socialism are different ways of organizing a society's solidarities. As mechanisms of solidarity, they were made essential by massive demographic and social transformations (population increase, migrations, urbanization, etc.) first felt in the Atlantic world. Wiebe thus makes it possible to compare different national resolutions (comparative history) within a larger frame of experience that is eventually shared globally.

American Progressivism and the American welfare state are often seen as examples of American uniqueness or exceptionalism, and the greater part of the historiography treats their emergence as the result of local circumstances. Yet if one looks, as Daniel Rodgers does, at the agenda-setting general ideas about the crisis of industrial capitalism and unregulated urban development rather than looking at specific policy outcomes that tend to accent national distinctions, one sees an international conversation.²⁵ The United States was a participant in this conversation, offering important examples in the field of public education, mass production, and mass consumption. But the relationship was asymmetrical; the United States received more ideas than it gave to the Atlantic world of reform. In the nineteenth century, the United States had seemed to be at the cutting edge of history, revealing a democratic future for Europe and perhaps the world, as Tocqueville most famously proposed. In the age of social politics, however, the United States was, as Theodore Roosevelt observed, backward. To the confusion of many, the "Tortoise of Europe" had somehow "outdistanced the hare." But, of course, having "foreign experiment stations" was of great benefit to Progressive and, later, New Deal reformers. After 1945, the terms of the transatlantic (and increasingly global) conversation shifted, and the United States again claimed the mantle of modernity (as well as superior firepower).

Social politics in the Atlantic world in the past century has been complex: at once a common conversation and a set of diverse outcomes. Opening the frame, as Rodgers does, revises the usual understanding of the movement and appropriation of ideas ("influence"), a point with significant implications for the writing of intellectual history.

The second half of the twentieth century, when the United States was a global power, possessed of unprecedented power by the last decade of the century, might seem the easiest and most appropriate place to frame American history in global terms. In fact, it is more difficult; one must take care to avoid a simplistic whiggism and to ensure that those who lack American

global power are not erased from history. One of the arguments of this volume is that the history of the United States has always been connected to the whole globe, but that since 1945 it has held a dominant position, a preponderance of power, in these relations. It requires a very subtle and sensitive history, and that is precisely what Marilyn Young provides in her essay, examining not only the American side of these connections but the impacts and responses—resistance, victimization, accommodation—at the receiving end of American power. The global history of the United States that she outlines is thus dynamic, dialogic, and morally focused.

Rob Kroes examines American cultural imperialism from, as he puts it, “the receiving end.” He offers an appraisal of the capacity of the United States to project itself abroad, touching every nation on the globe. He recuperates the notion of American exceptionalism, but he makes it historically specific, examining the international collaboration that has constructed America as a global imaginative entity. The pervasiveness of this imaginative America makes the global position of the United States a “semiotic center,” with all other nations in the position of being at least part-time receivers. Yet his carefully nuanced account makes an important additional point. If American cultural exports have been pervasive and powerful, they have not all been unmodified. Foreign consumers of imaginary and material objects of American origin have appropriated them in locally distinct, often surprising ways. Reception was situated, and the arrival of both the perturbations and opportunities presented by American commercial culture invited playfulness as often as simple consumption or resistance.

Having argued the case for reframing American history and having provided some successful examples, the volume concludes with more ambiguous statements. There are many aspects of historical practice that are worrisome, not simply in relation to reframing the narrative of American history, but in general. Still, there are distinctive questions or problems for those who would write a more transnational, relational, even global history of the United States. Interestingly, these more hesitant essays are all but one by foreign scholars. Their hesitation is not so much about the aspiration; rather, they doubt whether the inward-looking and self-referential aspects of American historiography can easily be overcome. The one American in part 4, David Hollinger, a self-consciously cosmopolitan historian, remains uncertain about just how far one should move from established professional practice and from the nation as the focus of history and contemporary life.

François Weil of France argues that we shall not be reading the obituary of national histories, American or otherwise, anytime soon. Indeed, he believes that to flourish, national and transnational histories need to be in a contrapuntal relation to each other. Still, he notes a strong parochialism

in American historiography. This insularity, he argues, is structural, ideological, and professional, not a general resistance to foreign historical concepts, and he notes that Americanists have been avid borrowers of specific methods from abroad. For him, the distinguishing quality of the American historical profession—and of U.S. Americanists in particular—is its scale, what he calls its “continentalism.” This condition, a fortunate one in many respects, less happily encourages a sense of insular self-sufficiency or self-enclosure. Scale also facilitates a remarkable degree of specialization that cannot be matched or even easily followed by foreign colleagues. Together, self-referentiality and specialization deprive American history of foreign audiences. The unexpected result is that despite their quantity and manifest quality, American historical writings on U.S. history have had surprisingly little influence abroad.

Where Weil emphasizes continentalism and its consequences, Winfried Fluck, writing from Germany, examines the highly competitive character of American professional disciplines. As with Tocqueville’s more general comments on American culture, Fluck notes the way competition and putative equality promote the assertion of small differences to distinguish oneself, to mark one’s own difference. The result for academic culture is a stress upon an originality that stresses its separation from, not argument with, different or adjacent interpretations. The consequent pattern of relentless redescription not only produces fragmentation but reduces context, treating it as a hindrance to originality, which in turn works against synthesis. But context and some level of commitment to the synthetic view are both essential to the historiographical revisionism proposed in this volume. These qualities of American academic culture draw upon and affirm what Fluck calls “expressive individualism.” It is this set of academic values, not substantive narratives of American history, that, according to Fluck, travel to academic cultures abroad, largely because of their modern and seemingly democratic promise of self-realization.

Ironically, then, if Fluck is correct, the increasingly global distribution of American academic culture may undermine the strong sense of contextualization central to the project of internationalizing the study of American history. Yet there is another possibility: by so dramatically changing the terrain of American history and historiography, and by making it so unfamiliar, the project might promote a new and invigorating curiosity, something Fluck sees as having evaporated in the hothouse of American-style academic careerism.

Approaching the theme of internationalization as a “wary beneficiary of the new openness” to foreign scholarship and transnational perspectives, Ron Robin of Israel is uneasy with much of the ideology of what he calls a postnationalist perspective, evident in some versions of internationalization. The postnationalists seem to treat the nation as a thing more fixed

and unified than it in fact is. Nor does this position attend to the temporal implications of the spatial reconfiguration it proposes. But more worrisome yet to Robin is a quality he ascribes to the postnationalist impulse: a refusal of all enclosure, not only the nation, but even the claims of professionalism. Turning from ideology to practice, he takes a quite different, but still skeptical look. He suggests that in fact most internationalism among Americanists is still driven by questions and concerns internal to U.S. history. His critique is not of the idea of internationalism but of elements of present ideology and practice that suggest, at least to him, a revolution manqué. In the end, however, he affirms a wider, more generous, and vibrant “borderless exchange of ideas and concepts.”

In the essay that concludes the volume, David Hollinger urges caution in rethinking the nation and national histories. Endorsing a public role and responsibility for the historian in the politics of the nation, he urges what he calls a modest charter for a more cosmopolitan history. He reaffirms the danger of being used by the nation, but he warns that the ambition to escape the nation and the traditions of professional historiography has its own dangers. Worried about a tendency toward absolute dichotomies in some of the rhetoric surrounding new ways of writing history, Hollinger makes a careful argument for nation-centered histories *and* for strategies for recontextualizing the national focus, providing a variety of examples that historicize nation-making.

American historians of the United States, Hollinger notes, inevitably have an awkward relationship to their subject matter and to their fellow citizens, an awkwardness signaled, perhaps, by the clumsiness of the descriptive phrase that begins this sentence. That awkwardness, I would argue, may in fact be a heretofore unrealized asset. It contributes to the work of making American history strange again; it can be the prompt and object of a fresh curiosity. It makes us, or it can make us, more conscious of our narrative choices, more thoughtful in our definition of contexts, more aware of the continuing importance of the nation, even as we realize the historicity of the nation.

The death of the nation, like Mark Twain’s, has been announced too soon. It is not about to disappear, and as long as the nation is granted the exclusive power to make citizens and protect their rights and to deploy legitimate violence, it must be a matter of continued and intense scrutiny. But it is not bounded by its own self-definition.

The agenda being offered here does not propose a postnational history, but rather an enriched national history, one that draws in and draws together more of the plenitude of narratives available to the historian who would try to make sense of the American past. If history is a disci-

pline whose claims to knowledge consist in locating events, ideas, things, and persons in explanatory contexts, we must be more aggressive than we have been in following the extension of historical contexts spatially and temporally, at least insofar as they carry the promise of interpretive significance.

NOTES

1. Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York, 1990), 11.
2. On the foreground of Turner's essay, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950).
3. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in id., *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1961), 38.
4. Ian Tyrrell, "Making Nations / Making States: American Historians in the Context of Empire," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1015-44.
5. Turner, "The Significance of History," in *Frontier and Section*, 20-21.
6. Thomas Peyser, *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (Durham, N.C., 1998), x. See Charles A. Beard, *Readings in American Government and Politics* (New York, 1909), and, at least for this very early period, the dissertation of W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (New York, 1896), and his "Careers Open to College-Bred Negroes" (Commencement Address, Fisk University, June 1898), in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York, 1996), 827-41.
7. *Economist*, January 8, 2000, p. 83.
8. See Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, Calif., 1976).
9. François Furet, *In the Workshop of History*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Chicago, 1984), 69.
10. On the connection between the humanities and the nation, see Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), esp. 1-53. For some account of the role of the social sciences in this work, see Peter Taylor, "Embedded Statism and the Social Sciences: Opening Up to New Spaces," *Environment and Planning A* 28, 11 (1996):1917-28. See also Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences, *Open the Social Sciences* (Stanford, Calif., 1996).
11. Prasenjit Duara, "Historicizing National Identity, or, Who Images What, and When," in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald G. Suny (New York, 1996), 151.
12. See Tyrrell, "Making Nations / Making States," 1020-21.
13. For a particularly insightful and thoughtful historiographical and philosophical examination of European and colonial relations, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), esp. 3-23.
14. Quoted in Joyce Appleby, "The Power of History," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 10.

15. Furet, *In the Workshop of History*, 55–56.
16. Herman Melville, *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities* (1852; New York, 1964), 79.
17. For two recent comparative histories that are *not* subject to his criticism, see James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York, 1995); and Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860–1930* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999). For an important essay on this issue, see Fred Cooper, “Race, Ideology, and the Perils of Comparative History,” *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 1122–38.
18. This echoes the call of Fernand Braudel in “History and the Social Sciences: The Long Term,” in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (1956; rev. ed., New York, 1973), esp. 405–6.
19. Ernst Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics,” *New German Critique* 11 (1977): 22. I am taking this quotation for its descriptive power, for its recognition that beneath a seeming homogeneous surface, different temporalities may exist. This limited use separates the quotation from the specific argument about German history and capitalism in which it is embedded.
20. In a different context, Braudel made this point. Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences,” 414.
21. See, e.g., Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000).
22. *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York, 1987), 1–182.
23. Renan, “What Is a Nation,” 19.
24. Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l’Amérique: La question de l’autre* (Paris, 1982), trans. Richard Howard as *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York, 1984), 250. The history of this statement reveals something of the making of a cosmopolitan sensibility, which cannot be replicated, but it does suggest some of the continuing value of travel, something that should be much more encouraged for Americanists. Todorov, a Bulgarian living in Paris, took it from Edward Said, a Palestinian long a resident of New York, who took it from Eric Auerbach, a refugee German Jew living in Istanbul.
25. One should note that in a very important study of key progressive and social democratic intellectuals in Europe and America much the same point was made by James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York, 1986).