

**Project on Internationalizing the Study of American
History**

Report on Planning Conference I

A Joint Project

Organization of American Historians and New York University

[Report by Thomas Bender]

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This planning meeting was organized under the auspices of the Organization of American Historians and the International Center for Advanced Studies at NYU, with additional financial support from the American Council of Learned Societies. Thomas Bender of NYU's History Department and director of ICAS was responsible for arranging the meeting. Its participants included Americanists from the United States, Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and its agenda was to develop a strategy to advance an international perspective in the study of the history of the United States, thus situating the United States more fully into the larger transnational and global context, with the intention of revealing more clearly the multiple histories that constitute the American experience, each with different relations to the established geographical boundaries and to historical time.

The Distinctive Work of the Conference

Although everyone participating was sympathetic to and had been a beneficiary at one time or another of various efforts to establish networks, exchanges, and discussions

among U.S. and foreign scholars of the United States, this meeting did not have that kind of organizational mission. Its work was in the realm of ideas. Specifically, its work was to give articulate form to an idea vaguely on the horizon that promises an important expansion of contemporary historical practice. Given a growing consciousness of living in a global age marked by the extreme international mobility of people, ideas, and money, the aim of the meeting was to define a history that would better explain the making and the experience of that world.

The task at hand was easy to state, but difficult to realize:

How does one think about nations and write their histories in the so-called age of globalism? More specifically, how does one write the national history of the United States, assuming such histories still have value, in the age of globalism?

Responses to this question at the planning conference produced strikingly rich and somewhat unexpected explorations (even debates) about the theory and meaning of the historical enterprise. It also opened up a very fresh discussion of the relation of history to other social science and humanities disciplines. These developments are both exceptional and significant because they reveal how close these issues are to the core of contemporary historical practice. Since the project is about historical practice itself, the discussion opened out beyond the benefits of cosmopolitanism and outside perspectives, valuable though both of these developments are.

The excitement of the meeting derived from the way an international group of scholars probed the implications of internationalism, transnationalism, and globalism for the writing and teaching of American history--and for history in general. The discussion demonstrated the fundamental character of these issues. To open them up is to ask the hardest and most self-reflexive of questions about the purpose, method, and representation of historical knowledge, both within the profession and in the larger culture.

There is a larger context for such questions: the current international discussion of the future of area studies. American historians have not played a role in these discussions, a misfortune for those discussions as well as for the study of American history. Any reasonably close examination of the various conversations of the "crisis in area studies," or the "rethinking of area studies" that have been fostered in the United States by the ACLS, the SSRC, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation as well as several universities reveals a singular and glaring fact: the United States is rarely included in that discussion. The U.S. is "here," the international is "over there." That division must be overcome, both to enhance our understanding of American history, but also to enable new American perceptions of the larger world, visions with a greater degree of verisimilitude and thus better able to explain (in causal as well as descriptive terms) contemporary history. Indeed, one of the most persistent domains of political contestation in American history has turned on precisely the question of what is "outside" (whether racially, spatially, culturally, economically, chronologically) and what is "inside." To achieve a clear view of these issues, it may be necessary to significantly weaken the distinction between the view from the inside and that from the outside.

Our discussions greatly advanced understanding of these issues. But our objective was larger than that: it was not only to give more precise meaning to the rubric organizing the meeting but also to find ways of communicating the importance of the internationalizing of our historical consciousness to fellow historians, inside and outside of the academy, at all levels and in all forms of teaching about history.

The participants and the titles of their papers are indicated in an appendix to this report, but the more general thematic concerns of the papers can be outlined briefly here. The invitations to paper writers asked for one of three kinds of papers:

1. How would an international perspective affect research and teaching in your own special field and what general implications do these changes have, if any?
2. How does the study of American history from the outside differ from its study from within?

3. What gains and losses might one expect from an internationalizing of American history, or, put differently, what gains and losses might be expected from decentering the study of American history and historicizing its position in the world?

Although the papers fit into these categories, other, more specific and precise divisions organized the agenda for the meeting, which began with an opening statement by Thomas Bender, the chair of the meeting, suggesting the particular moment of opportunity and challenge for the writing of a national history. That charge to the meeting was followed by a provocative paper by David Thelen historicizing the historian's relation to the state, emphasizing the cost of that connection. With those introductory considerations as touchstones for further discussion, papers by William Chafe, P.L. Bonner, Linda Kerber, and Arnita Jones explored in various ways the present achievements and possible future impacts of comparative and international perspectives on their own special fields of interest. Then a series of papers by foreign scholars (Mauricio Tenorio, Ferdinando Fasce, John Rowett, Christiane Harzig, Fumiko Fujita, Ron Robin, and Josefina Zoraida Vasquez) offered views from the outside, views that were often highly critical of the insularity of American historiography and of the misrepresentation insularity has produced in American historical writing.

The next session sharpened the group's thinking about the relation of comparative (George Fredrickson and Colleen Dunlavy) and international (Robin D.G. Kelley) approaches to American history. While efforts at internationalizing American history will depend upon the body of work already developed by comparative historians, it was clear that there was an important distinction between the two approaches. More participants than not felt that comparative history and international history were potentially complementary, but all agreed that the two modes of historical analysis had very different relations to the nation and nation state as organizing principles. International history was more likely to be exploring overlapping dimensions of time and space, while comparative history was generally more tightly focused and analytical. International history worked in "real" time, but comparative history, being more heuristic in intention, may or may not depending upon the question being asked.

The final group of papers opened up a wide terrain for various translocal histories, extending and contracting spatial and temporal axes for analysis. Papers by Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Ian Tyrrell, Michael Geyer, and Walter Johnson at once relocated the United States in the world (as fact and symbol) and revealed the levels of internal complexity that an international or translocal perspective unveils.

Focal Issues

Having roughly summarized the sequential logic of the conference agenda, it seems best to turn now to a different mode of presentation to get at the central issues that drove the discussion in the various sessions. They did not emerge in a sequential fashion and none is identified with the discussion in any particular session. Rather, in a rather striking way that helped focus everyone's thinking the conversation kept circling back to this cluster of issues. What follows, then, is an outline of the framing issues, ideas, concepts that seem to give form, if not a strictly linear form, to the ambition of rethinking American history within an international or transnational perspective. I have here organized these issues roughly into two parts (though they cannot really be separated): theoretical issues and social/political issues, meaning the relation of the historian to the society and polity.

The Politics of History

*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. History as a professional discipline is thus part of its own major substantive narrative. We historians do not examine this fact as much as we should. Our association with the nation's ambition has not necessarily meant that the profession has been the official apologist for the state. The centrality of the archive in the ideology of the profession is related to the opportunity it provides for the historian to speak the truth to power (think of Beard's book on the Constitution), but whether apologetic or critical the intellectual legacy of the marriage of the

profession to the state and the nation is a kind of enclosure that now binds.

*If not attached to the state, what is an alternative attachment of the historian? From what place, both literary and figuratively, does the historian speak? Is there an alternative to ethnocentric national histories? Is a cosmopolitan historiography of the United States possible? How would one redefine the historian's relation to his/her audience?

*It is important to keep in mind how central to historical practice is the assumption of the nation as the fundamental unit of historical narration. There were efforts before and after the second world war within the AHA to move in a more international direction, but they failed. We may want to understand that failure as we try again.

*What have been the consequences of the unexamined assumption of the nation as the only unit of historiography? Has it produced distortions with social consequences (e.g., character and significance of the Mexican War, or the story of immigration, the Spanish-American War). Have alternative narratives been suppressed by professional historiography because of its commitment to the nation? Does release from that commitment invite the development of such narratives?

*Is there a danger in a global orientation to the history of the United States? Does it invite a teleological history not unlike "modernization theory"? Might historians thus become unwitting historiographical collaborators in a kind of triumphalism?

*Do other modes of making and communicating history (e.g., public history venues such as documentary films, museums, historical sites; commercial culture such as Disney, movies generally, tourism) do a better job than academic historians of interpreting the American experience to the nation and abroad? How does the national focus of professional history relate to popular historical memory (in various subgroups of the population)? Would a transnational history bring us closer or farther away from those memories? What should we think about our relation to such memories or, more properly, attitudes (since the reference is to popular understandings, not the memories of

participants or witnesses), whether they seem to confirm or disconfirm a transnational historiography?

Theoretical Issues

*The foreign participants especially noticed the extraordinary tight sense of "we-ness" in discussions of American history. Students always use the "we" in a very firmly bounded way, but professional narratives are also strikingly self-enclosed, and this makes it difficult for American history to "travel," something that is increasingly important.

*What are the alternatives to the nation? In seeking escape from that enclosure, it is important that we do not imprison ourselves in another box. Rather than going from the nation to some other social/territorial unit, we should imagine a spectrum of social/territorial units, thinking of them as a continuum, each of some significance to any given historical life. But we must also think about their interaction. There is a continuum of socio/territorial scales, but the elements are not inert, for there is dialectical play between and among the units. This interaction or interrelation must be captured in so far as it affects and explains historical experience.

*What is the relation of international (or transnational) historiography to the already established field of comparative history? Clearly it builds upon comparative history, but it can be distinguished. Comparison is valued most for its heuristic value; it is a kind of laboratory method. Change this variable and what happens. Comparison, in a rough way, allows for that. Comparison can be between contemporary societies, or it can compare with societies of different eras (e.g., the old south and Greek slavery). It can acknowledge and examine the connection between them in "real time" or not, depending upon the current historiographical purpose. Transnational history is always in "real time," following connections that transcend national (and other) boundaries. It maps, follows, and tries to understand the relations of power in affecting and as being affected by these channels. Different kinds of historical questions will determine choices among the two different methods and orientations, and it is possible to do a study that is at once transnational and comparative.

For example, one would see this in studies that invoke a common international context to illuminate specific cross-national comparisons.

*In advocating an international or translocal history it is not necessary to insist upon a global history. One need not reach immediately for the global. While the mapping should be attentive to the full extension of historical processes being studied, work is most likely, especially in early stages, to have a focus on borderlands, regions, or specific transnational systems (e.g., migrations and diasporas). It seems important for students of the United States to think much more than they do about the Americas, especially the North Americas as a starting point. The point is to widen the lens, as far as is feasible in any given study, taking into account those transnational structures, movements, knowledges, and the like that are a part of the story. The guiding assumption here is that contemporary historical practice has been missing important dimensions of the story by having too tight a national focus.

*The prospect of transnational histories invites a far more serious reflection on the meaning of space and time in historical analysis. Put differently, when we open up the question of the spatial configuration of history, we simultaneously raise questions of temporality. Are all spaces (and all people in the same space) in fact oriented to the same scales of historical time? Each place has many possible historical times; historians have assumed, too uncritically, a uniform historical time for each space. We need to pry apart this space/time relationship. Indeed, when the postmodern impulse is to compress the space/time continuum, the contribution of history at the present moment in social theory may be to decompress the two, historicizing both space and time.

*There are areas where considerable internationalization of historical explanations has taken place already: diasporas and migrations, economic history, slavery and race relations, feminism, and environmental history. Other areas seem to invite more internationalization than is so far evident: intellectual history, foreign relations, urban history. The big challenge is major institutions, both state and civil, which have been little affected by the new sensitivity to transnational processes and scales.

*The work of writing translocal history is of course dependent upon empirical data, and in some cases the data will point clearly to the transnational extension of history in unexpected directions (for instance the repeated appearance of articles about Irish nationalism in Harlem newspapers opens up a new transnational perspective on Garveyism). But often a greater confidence in theory, used flexibly, may provide the orientation and bridges needed to develop a transnational historiography.

*A focus on metropolis/region may be a good starting point for rethinking the units of history and the extension of history over different spatial terrains and temporal sequences. One might begin by simply following three flows--people, money, knowledges. Such flows typically originate or terminate or pass through metropolises, and such a focus may be more manageable, but in fact one can begin with any scale--from the biography to the city to the region to the nation to the world region to the globe. It is important to keep in mind, however, that at this stage the main thing is to demonstrate the value of a wider lens. One need not move immediately to a global history of anything. How does this wider perspective affect conventional interpretations and the larger existing narrative of American history, both professional and popular.

*The United States from the perspective here being developed is a partially-bounded area that is deeply implicated in a variety of channels that connect to every part of the world, and it has always been thus, though over the centuries it has moved from the periphery to the center. Moreover, America, or L'amerique, as it was sometimes phrased in the conference, has an extra-territorial existence that must be understood as part of any transnational study of the United States.

*What might be the central theme of a transnational history of the United States? Five come to mind, none unknown to American history textbooks, but liable to a far richer and more complex narrative in a transnational history. The first concerns degrees of freedom and non-freedom, and the tensions between freedom and equality. How does consideration of temporal and spatial as well as social location affect our interpretation oft discussed rubrics. The second is the theme of modernity, which has been an aspect of the meaning of America, at home and abroad, from the first settlement of the Northern Hemisphere, even

though intentions and even experiences were in some instances quite traditional, even regressive. The third theme is that of migrations, contacts, and accommodations, a set of events and processes central to an international understanding of American history. The fourth is identities, their making, transformation, and implications on scales of the national, the subnational, and the transnational. The fifth concerns the many faces and locations of power, and its transformation.

Future Activities

The point of the project is to give a nudge to an emerging perspective. It is not exclusivist, nor does it propose to devalue other approaches to American history. The aim is simply to encourage a wider lens and a less ethnocentric historiography. By extending the horizon of America, it provides a new terrain for historiography and offers to renew the sense of wonder about the past by radically reframing historical problems. The aim is not to abolish the nation, but to relocate it--mapping it in relation to other territorial units and structures of power.

Four planning tasks were before the group gathered at La Pietra. First, the planning of at least two future conferences. Second, the development of a vehicle for bringing this idea before our colleagues. Third, a means of discussing and bringing to our colleagues suggestions on the organization of the profession and the history curriculum at all levels. Fourth, the development of possible follow-up activities that will further advance the internationalization of the study of American history.

Participation in the planning conference was by necessity based upon invitation only. The future conferences will combine invitation and competitive application. Approximately one half of the participants will be selected by application, and one half of these will be from abroad. Within this group we expect to select at least one K-12 teacher and one community college teacher.

Each conference will include some participation from the previous conference, to ensure continuity of discussion. Moreover, papers and reports from each conference will be distributed to participants in the previous conference(s).

The aim here is both to obtain their responses and to nourish a continuing core of scholars who are exploring this set of issues.

It is anticipated that funding will be sufficient to hold conferences of up to 32 persons at La Pietra for the next two summers and a slightly smaller group either in La Pietra or New York in the third summer. The distribution of participants will follow the following guidelines:

4 participants from the planning conference (2 from the U.S.; 2 foreign)

2 from the OAH

2 from NYU

8 commissioned papers

16 competitive (at least one K-12; one community college, 8 foreign)

Every effort will be made to ensure that foreign participants collectively represent all continents.

The conference will normally be in the first week of July.

Applicants will be expected to participate fully in the conference. Part of the application will be a brief paper on one of the conference subthemes. These papers will be distributed in advance of the meeting and they will be discussed there. Some successful applicants may be asked to expand these papers into full length papers for either the conference or the planned book(s).

For each participant, all expenses in Florence will be paid--hotels and meals and local transportation. It is hoped that most participants will be able to secure their air travel funds from their academic institutions. For those who cannot, the Project will provide cover those costs.

Themes for Conferences II, III, IV

Conference II, Summer, 1998, will be devoted to developing an argument for the internationalization of American history and sketching out the historiographical issues embedded in such work; Conference III, Summer, 1999, will be devoted to the reconfiguration and re-periodization of American history, offering exemplary accounts of selected periods or themes; Conference IV, Summer, 2000, will develop a report on the curricular and professional issues raised by the work of the project. It is expected that each of these three aspects of the project will be published in book form.

Conference II will be more theoretical in orientation, while conference III will offer exemplary studies. Conference IV will offer policy suggestions for the OAH and the profession.

Schematic descriptions of conferences II and III follow. The rubrics offered will organize the conference and book. Each rubric describes a domain of interest, not a topic itself. There will be one or more specific papers/chapters under each of these rubrics. Applicants as well as commissioned participants are to address their essays to these rubrics. Under each of the broader rubrics there are more specific subtitles, but they too are themes, not titles. In many ways the overarching theme for both conferences is a simple question, or the inversion of a simple question: Can you think of an important issue in American history that is without an international aspect?

Conference II

WHERE IS AMERICA?

I. Locating the Nation

What is *L'amerique*? [the international symbolic extension of the U.S.]

Where is America?

What Time is America?

II. The Politics of Historical Knowledge

Historians and the Making of the Modern Nation

What Does the Nation Hide?

What is the Public Responsibility of a Cosmopolitan Historian?

What is History For?

Historical Space in Popular History, Commercial Culture, and Professional History

How People Think Themselves into History

The "Americanization" of Knowledge and the Future of History

III. Concepts

Comparative and Translocal Histories

Space-Time Decompression

Spaces of Power and Horizons of Experience

Multi-nodal narrative

Conference III

INTERNATIONALIZATION AND RETHINKING AMERICAN HISTORY

I. Themes

Freedom and Unfreedom: America and an international conversation on freedom, including the tension between freedom and equality

America and the international conversation on modernity

Migrations, Contacts, and Accommodations

Identities: National, sub-national, and transnational

The Spaces, Extensions, and Forms of Power

II. Reconfigurations and Re-periodization

European Settlement--and how rethinking it changes the national narrative

The United States and the Age of Revolution

The Incorporation of Social Politics and the Making of a Modern Nation

After the Cold War: The United States and the World

Each of these essays would cover a grid of seven domains:

- spaces of experience
- the mobility of knowledges
- migration systems and diasporas
- capital and labor
- environmental issues
- spaces of power, including both civil and state institutions
- extra-territorial America

Conference IV

This conference will build upon the findings of the previous conferences, and it will make curricular recommendations and suggest professional issues that must be addressed in light of the work of this project.

The agenda of the Conference IV also invites discussion of future activities, at various levels, ranging from the OAH to the individual institution and scholar. One might, for example, develop a series of NEH summer institutes to introduce high school, community college, and four-year college teachers to the ideas and approaches being developed by this project. There were also possibilities for new international networks of scholarship that might be developed as a result of this project. In fact, it is hoped that many new teaching and research projects will be stimulated by the work of this project.