

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

## ***REPORT ON CONFERENCE II***

A Joint Project of the

Organization of American Historians and New York University

[Report by Thomas Bender]

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We are in the second meeting of a complex project, more complex than I had imagined when I began. First of all, it is complex in its sponsorship--NYU and the OAH. It has been complex, but it has been quite a pleasure to work with the OAH on this, particularly Arnita Jones and her staff in Bloomington and especially with Linda Kerber, who as president encouraged me to do this, and her successors (who had been designated at the time we began) George Fredrickson and Bill Chafe.

Because of its complex sponsorship we did something highly unusual. We combined the commissioning of papers (my department) with a plan to open participation to members of the OAH from the U.S. and abroad. It made planning the agenda, knowing what topics would be covered in a timely way, more difficult than I had anticipated. A committee consisting of myself, Linda Kerber, and Mike Hogan, chair of the OAH International Committee, selected the OAH participants, and the combined community of scholars that has resulted has produced--as the papers testify--an ideal group and one that achieves a certain pattern of coherence. I very much look forward to the discussions of the next few days.

There are other partners--foundations and organizations responded, and I want to thank them. NYU and the American Council of Learned Societies provided funding for the first planning meeting last summer. For the three-year project's full funding we have had to turn to several foundations that recognized the importance of the project. The first foundation to respond was the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, and Patricia LaBalme, a trustee of that foundation and herself a scholar, is to be thanked for her early support. With the lead support of the Delmas Foundation, I was able to secure the remaining funding required for the sequence of conferences from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation. To all my thanks. They have shown their confidence in me, in the partnership between NYU and the OAH, and in all of you. I feel the burden of having to produce a final product that will repay this confidence.

Let me say at the outset that I anticipate two kinds of products. One is a publication containing scholarly essays, a highly focused sample of the many essays that will have been presented over the course of the series of conferences. I hope they will address theoretical or conceptual issues, explore issues of the sociology and politics of historical knowledge, and, finally, provide exemplary works, actually re-interpreting important themes, periods, or events in American history.

In addition to such a scholarly product, I hope to offer a report to the OAH, and through the Organization of American Historians, to the History Departments of the United States and abroad. This report would make the case for widening the lens of American history, developing the need and possibilities, but also--as several papers here do--pointing out the pitfalls. It would also make recommendations concerning the training of students, the shape of curricula, and our relations to scholars and scholarly institutions abroad.

Although the final meeting will address institutional issues, the focus here is in the realm of ideas. There is

an idea out there waiting for articulation. Each of us has a part of that idea, but we have yet to plumb the full implications, both positive and negative of the idea. Our purpose is to articulate that idea to ourselves and then to our colleagues. I do hope that we will affect the way history is written. But I do not propose the kind of arrogance that has plagued so many "new" histories in my time: the claim of perfect knowledge, the claim that all other approaches are to be abandoned, the claim that the final history is now ready for use.

No, I want only to nudge along something that is dawning already--and more than nudge it, I want it to be very seriously considered and thought through before we raise the banner of yet another new history.

In broad terms, the idea is easy enough to state: 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--and I do assume this--in the age of globalism?

Note that I am not proposing a global history. Nor an international history. Nor the end of national histories. We are talking about a reframing. Conceptually this is difficult; practically even more so. And I am anxious not to create new approaches to history that will have even less resonance with a larger public than the histories we presently write and teach.

As we proceed, I think we should keep developments in other fields in mind. Within history, other fields than American history have been thinking about these matters more than we have. We can learn from them. I have distributed a recent essay by Natalie Davis that is pertinent. More directly, we are fortunate to have Prasjenit Duara, a specialist in East Asian history who has been a leader in rethinking the role of the nation in historical writing. The footnotes in

several papers refer to other scholars, working in fields other than American history, who have been asking the kinds of questions we are asking.

Most of these scholars have some affiliation, whether formally or not, with Area Studies. We should look more than we have to Area Studies and the transformation that idea is undergoing. American Studies and Area Studies (at least as institutionalized) are both products of and agents of the Cold War state. Even before 1989, for a variety of reasons, but mostly the recognition of the postcolonial moment, Area Studies has been rethinking two key aspects of its institutionalization: first, the notion that we in the west, in the U.S. more specifically, make knowledge about, even define, the colonial or postcolonial or non-western other. Second, each area has been assumed to be a kind of container. Theoretically interdisciplinary, area studies seldom was. Many people in various disciplines simply got funding from the same area studies center. Most odd of all, was the assumption that these spaces were self-contained, when most of them were implicated in global empires. Neither of these assumptions any longer prevails. The future of area, regional, and international studies (note the change in terminology now used) is not yet clear, but it is more interactive, less isolated. The development of scholarly agendas in the areas being studied and the increasing presence of diasporic intellectuals in a variety of settings has made for the possibility of a much more dialogic approach to American studies. More voices are contributing knowledges. And areas are increasingly focal points for networks of scholars and historical actors, processes, and ideas.

Incidentally, much of the this talk among area studies scholars seems to be responding to political concerns, particularly a fear of "orientalism." There is good reason for that worry, but that is not the whole of the story. There is a purely scholarly issue inherent in the work we must do. Unless we open up the lens, we will not achieve verisimilitude. The justification for the work we are doing is not political (though it does not preclude political considerations), but it is quite simply to achieve a better description of the world, past and present.

It is sounding now a bit like our papers, but no one in area studies thinks of the U.S. as an area, nor do Americanists. We must, and we must join into this wider conversation. International for Americans generally and for academics, whether Americanists or internationalists, means the "other." It is "we," here, and "them," over there. Much of our work is to break down that dichotomy.

We cannot think historically about the United States without engaging, one way or another, many other histories. We cannot confidently--or before empirical inquiry--rule any history as beyond our ken, beyond some level of entanglement. But of course that is the most frightening prospect of all. To internationalize the study of American history is not to write the history of the globe every time we sit down at the computer. We aim only to make our story more ample. If history is a contextualizing discipline, a discipline whose claims to knowledge consist in locating events, ideas, persons in explanatory contexts, our task is to spatially widen the context--a move that, as the papers reveal, also complicates our temporal assumptions. And in doing this we do more than neutral mapping. These more complex relations of space and time are inscribed with relations of power.

Many of the papers cite some of the literature on globalization. We should attend to that literature in the social sciences, but as historians we ought not emulate it. This social scientific work is historically thin, embarrassingly so, and we can contribute to a much richer and persuasive story of the history of global relations by being more precise, more empirical, and more chronological in our mode of analysis. The other disciplinary work that speaks to this issue is cultural studies. There too we can learn, but we ought not emulate. There, too, the historical depth and empirical evidence is more often than not absent. We can address the questions raised there in a much more compelling way.

The question of internationalizing the study of American history is unavoidably connected to the issue of "American Exceptionalism." I would not want to get trapped in that old debate; in fact, I think what we are doing does an end run around that problem and puts a new kind of pressure on it. But we must be careful not to construct a new mega-conceptualism, with the American global city upon a hill the new model for a global culture and economy. There is a danger of a triumphalism that we could fall into, thus becoming the ideological defenders of the latest phase of capitalism.

Our aim is to relativize (or de-center) American history in time and space, without losing that history. We must look for the ties that bind a multiplicity of historical narratives to each other under the canopy of American history, even as we explore the ways in which these histories connect us to yet other histories. (I think there will remain an "us" even as we open the field.) We must come to understand the relative significance of different forms of convergence and non-convergence of histories. Most important of all, we must understand the relations of these histories within contingent and permeable borders to histories (some continuous) beyond those borders.

Writing a new kind of history, whatever its particular innovation, always raises questions about our relations to audiences? Will this move widen or narrow our audience--in the U.S. and abroad? More important, what happens to the civic role of the historian? Professional history in the West has been deeply implicated in state-making. We have not always been apologists for the state, but we have been tethered to it. If we loosen or even cut that tether, where do we locate ourselves and our audiences?