

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

REPORT ON CONFERENCE III

A Joint Project

Organization of American Historians and New York University

[Report by Thomas Bender]

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What follows is a report on the third meeting of the Project on Internationalizing the Study of American History. The meeting was organized under the joint auspices of the Organization of American Historians and the International Center for Advanced Studies at New York University. The twenty-seven participants included historians from the United States, Europe, Australia, and Asia. Three scholars who accepted invitations had to withdraw for various reasons, but it was too late for substitutes. The group also included two graduate students from New York University. (See the program and the list of participants in Appendix I.)

The quality of papers was quite high, and the level of discussion matched that standard. The format of the conference made an important contribution as well. All papers (except the two keynotes) were read in advance, and they were introduced not by the authors but by the brief comments of assigned interlocutors whose task was to bring the material forward for discussion. The three days of conversation were erudite, serious, and consistently illuminating. There was a clear sense among the participants that the discussions had a cumulative quality; one palpably felt the motion of the conversations.

Background

The conference agenda was the product of earlier conferences in

the summers of 1997 and 1998. The first of these meetings was explicitly a planning meeting for the whole project, and out of it emerged the sequence of conferences being followed. The 1998 conference addressed the conceptual and "political" issues, including the relation of the historian to the public, involved in any serious rethinking of the narrative and purposes of American national history. The 1999 conference was designed to provide exemplary narratives, taking common themes and periodizations and rethinking them in the broader context of the project.

The aim of the project as a whole is to imagine American historical narratives that situate the United States more fully into its larger transnational and intercultural global context, with the intention of revealing more clearly the multiple narratives, time scales, and geographies, both larger and smaller than formal national boundaries, that constitute the American past.

This initiative seeks to define a new relation for historians to nations in general and their own in particular. It seeks to escape the nation--not as a subject but as a limiting ideological construct. Put more succinctly, the project aims to de-provincialize American history, or, alternately, to provincialize American history. Oddly, in the American case, these opposite terms have the same implication. Both suggest that the United States must be located in the world, not outside of it. By de-provincializing American history, one affirms its continuing relations with the larger world, relations often obscured or explicitly suppressed in American historical narratives. Alternately, provincializing American history

undermines the universalist claims so often made in the name of American history. American history acquires a context, and its claims to global power, markets, and the status of universal model (or exceptional nation) become matters for historical explanation.

Still, embedded in such historicism there is a danger of a Whiggish narrative. Marilyn Young made this point well and powerfully in her paper: When the United States commands unprecedented global power, as it does at the present moment, the historian who would de-provincialize (or provincialize) American history risks a certain complicity in legitimating a new form of empire. Can one narrate global power and dominance without justifying it? A global perspective, in other words, might inadvertently "naturalize" this position or, even worse, provide a triumphalist narrative that justifies not only the position but the unilateral exertion of power. Emphasizing historical contingency is one response, and it can and ought to be coupled with attending to the receiving end of American power.

It became clear that a center-periphery model is almost as problematic as the nation-centered framing of U.S. history. To de-center American history and to enable a relational understanding of the flows of people, money, ideas, and objects, one needs to develop narrative strategies that achieve a multiple focus. The issue is a more expansive and complex shaping metaphor for U.S. history. The task is not simply additive, to make the narrative of American history more cumbersome and the textbooks fatter and yet more unreadable. More precisely the task is one of framing, a framing that might give enough thematic unity to make American history at once richer and more coherent.

Much writing of American history has collapsed figure and field, picture and frame. The field must have a presence. Historical narrative must attend to and enlarge and heighten the field against which the American figure can be elaborated.

The question of meta-themes for the envisioned narratives was raised in the opening remarks of Thomas Bender. He offered the theme of modernity as a possible frame for the situated American history we have been seeking to define. While there was some support for such a meta-theme, there were also important reservations expressed. First, the term is not without ambiguity, a difficulty compounded by the recent rhetoric of postmodernism. Second, is there a danger that modernity might in practice be reduced to modernization, which has long been subject to quite legitimate criticism. It is, however, possible, whether or not advisable, to reduce the salience of the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the concept's use, stressing not the emancipatory story of modernity, but rather emphasizing self-awareness about the constructedness of political and social institutions and cultural meaning. Such constructivism is a quality of modernity, not postmodernity, which has recently appropriated it, for use against modernism. This understanding of modernism avoids the progressivist and, perhaps, exceptionalist dangers of the theme.

One could argue that such constructiveness dates at least from the first European contact with the peoples of Africa and the western hemisphere, for among Europeans and probably Africans and Americans, it forced a rethinking of the human, a point made for the European side by Anthony Pagden in The Fall of Natural Man. Moreover, part of the significance of the Lockean tradition and its "implementation" in the era of the Revolution and Constitution is the self-consciously constructed character of a political community, which, among other things, contributed to the construction of the nation as the unit of history.

On the whole, this meeting was more concrete and less theoretical in its focus than were Conferences I and II. No doubt this is partly because of its substance. The papers built upon established research agendas and substantial empirical bases, while earlier conferences invited advocacy and polemical papers. The format of the conference further

nudged discussion in the same direction. The earlier conferences were organized as panels to encourage a fairly free and wide-ranging discussion, while this conference was more formal, with fewer but more substantial individually-discussed papers and formal commentators. As before, all papers were distributed and read in advance. But this time each paper was introduced by a commentator rather than by the author. This sharpened and enlivened the discussion, but it also limited it in certain ways. These procedures invited discussion of craft issues and prompted close analytical critique. In comparison with Conferences I and II, there were in Conference III fewer strong ideological and methodological conflicts among participants. While there were surely disputes and differences in Conference III, the room never felt divided. Compared to the earlier conferences there was less encouragement for radical challenges to the framing of topics, or for exploration of theoretical issues, or for experimental address of questions of narrative. This shift in the intellectual style was, of course, quite appropriate to the shift in subject matter, and it was intended that this discussion be distinctly different from the first two, the aim being a closer editorial-like focus on individual papers.

Equally important, there was, it seems, greater consensus concerning the value and basic approaches to widening the lens for the study of American history, a development that may well reflect the gradual acceptance within the profession of the premises that animate the project. Recognizing the necessity of opening up American history, participants tended not to argue that point, but rather to explore the practical questions of doing it.

Much that had invited debate in earlier conferences were not issues here. The nation, for example, was not an entity to be either dismissed or preserved; tracking transnational structures and processes (people, money, things, knowledges) seemed startlingly obvious to participants--not really debatable. That the nation was a historical construction was a premise rather than a point of discussion. The relation of history to the public, a lively and important subject of discussion earlier, was not at all a focal point, and certainly not divisive. The notion of

the American Empire, a subject of much discussion in earlier meetings, was assimilated as a premise almost without comment at Conference III.

If at the earlier conferences there had been debates and worries about the relation of comparative and international approaches to American history, at Conference III they were rather easily accepted as different but complementary. There was a comfortable acceptance of the idea that there are multiple levels or scales of every history: global and local, with historically specific intermediate units. Within these frameworks, comparison is more constrained--to "real time" comparisons--but perhaps more illuminating.

As in other conferences, the value of a stronger international community of scholars investigating and teaching American history was strongly affirmed, but in Conference III one could not but be struck by the especial ease of the intellectual (and social) relations among historians from the United States and those from abroad.

A more striking contrast between the first two and the third conference derived from the very different feelings of participants to professionalism. Even though Conferences I and II included several past and future presidents of the OAH and the editor of the Journal of American History, these conferences had a distinctly "anti-professionalism" animus. Participants in Conference III, by contrast, were comfortable with and within the guild of professional historians. They were aware of the partially defining association of the profession and the nation-state in Europe and the United States, but they had a more ironic than combative relation to that history. There was little worry that professionalism might be at odds with the changes in historiography that were the subject of the conference, though both keynote speakers, neither an Americanist, alluded in different ways to professional agendas in more worrisome ways.

There is another contrast between 1998 and 1999 conferences. After the Report on Conference II was distributed, several historians commented that it had something of a postmodern or culture studies flavor to it. There is some truth to that observation, though the proceedings of the meeting and the Report of it were less postmodern than some thought them to be. One might fairly say, however, that Conference III had less of that sensibility. But caution is in order with any such general statement, for Conference III was treated to some papers that were openly and quite brilliantly drawing upon a variety of poststructuralist theories and were clearly indebted to cultural studies. There were no parallel papers in Conference II. Institutional power was discussed in Conference II, and linguistic and representational issues were examined in Conference III. It would be a mistake, probably, to try to label either conference with either of these labels.

Perhaps we should ask whether the two conferences somehow represented different parts of the profession--a question important in its own right and also for the light it might shed on what seemed to some a different intellectual sensibility in them. Were there significant differences in the demographic description or special fields of participants in the two conferences? That is doubtful; it was a quite diverse group in age, special fields, methodologies, theoretical interests, and institutional bases. It is the case, however, that in the earlier conferences there were more people of colors other than white, from the United States and abroad. There were also more specialists in fields substantially inflected by the incorporation of poststructuralist theories and cultural studies, particularly race and gender studies. Two of the three who could not attend might have slightly altered this balance. Some influence of this sort might have been evident, but any difference some might have detected in either the conference or the report of it more likely derives from the difference in substance: exemplary papers with strong empirical bases as opposed to papers of advocacy and theoretical argument about the nature of history.

Participants

Because of the Project's complex sponsorship, the selection of participants combined invitation and competition. The invited participants were Tiziano Bonazzi (Italy), Nicholas Canny (Ireland), Eric Foner (US), Ferdinando Fasce (Italy), Jun Furuya (Japan), Lori Ginzberg (US), Dirk Hoerder (Germany), Rob Kroes (Netherlands), Lester Langley (US), Donna Merwick (Australia), Daniel Rodgers (US), Nayan Shah (US), Robert Wiebe (US), FranHois Weil (France).

Participants from New York University's Department of History were, besides Thomas Bender, Karen Kupperman and Marilyn Young. (Tricia Rose, who would have been the fourth NYU faculty participant, had to withdraw.) In addition, two NYU advanced graduate students participated: Michael LaCombe and Molly McGarry.

The competition sponsored by the OAH produced a substantial pool of applicants, and from that pool eight were selected, all from the U.S., but two of whom fit into the growing category of transnational intellectuals. The group represents a diverse group of institutions and positions within the profession: Nancy Cott (Yale), Alan Dawley (College of New Jersey), Dana Frank (UC, Santa Cruz), Kristin Hoganson (Harvard), Yukiki Koshiro (Notre Dame), Carl Nightingale (Massachusetts at Amherst), Thomas Osborne (Santa Ana College), and Mari Yoshihara (Hawaii at Manoa).

Keynotes

There were two keynote speakers. As in Conference II, the keynote speakers were not Americanists. It was thought in

both cases that distinguished scholars working in other than American history might effectively highlight the issues we must address by framing them in contexts other than the American nation. Both of our keynote speakers served our purposes marvelously well. The first was Jacques Revel, historian and President of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Social in Paris; the second was Greg Denning, recently retired from the University of Melbourne, where with a small group of colleagues he pioneered an anthropological history. In their distinguished careers, both have raised questions about what historians do, about the boundaries of the discipline, and about how we "do" history, for whom we do it, and for what reasons. Both have commented upon and experimented with alternative analytical and narrative strategies.

Revel has re-thought the nation and the state. Along with several collaborators, he has produced a novel multi-volume history of France, Histoire de la France, which reorganizes the topics, beginning with the space of France, moving from there to "Conflicts" and the "State." He has also been a proponent of microhistories. He took responsibility for the volume on Space in Histoire de la France, and he begins it with a question very pertinent to our inquiry: "When does the history of France begin?" This question is inherently spatial as well as temporal. Implicit is the concern that too fixed a notion of national space and time obscures the both microhistories and macrohistories that must find some relation to the history of the nation.

Denning has undertaken a series of historical studies of parts of the world that are not organized by states, though neither are they completely isolated from state power and national ideologies. In all of his work, including Mr. Bligh's Bad Language and Islands and Beaches: Discourses on a Silent Land: Marquesas, 1774-1880, he reveals the importance of re-imagining the bounds of a given historical narrative. As historians extend the boundaries of United States history they will confront an issue (raised in Conference II) about which Denning has reflected with a clarifying humaneness, the relations between people with a history and those supposed to be without one, or with a different temporal location on the global stage.

Jacques Revel's keynote began the conference, and using French history as an example, raised just the right question. He asked whether a national history of France is any longer possible? Partly it is not possible because the changed position of France in the world undermines the "arrogance" of its traditional historical narrative. But he also raised a question seemingly more likely to be raised in the United States: the dissolution of shared national traditions in the era of memory and identity, both of which are particularistic in implication. He argued that the national narrative that had offered a repertoire of shared meanings no longer does. Most radically of all, he openly questioned whether in France the past is any longer expected to inform the future. Past and present no longer seem to be continuous. History is no longer the grand tradition, the reign of Louis XIV but rather 20 million Frenchmen in the era of Louis XIV. History now addresses our every current interest. The focus is on many particularities that are parts of the French past, but no overall history of France.

It is said that France must now respond to immigrants. But in fact there are no more immigrants today than in the past. The issue seems larger because there is a refusal of assimilation to the French tradition, a refusal by both nativists and immigrants. Nationalism no longer coheres, whether in current policy and identity issues or in historiography.

Revel did not frame this as a story of the disuniting of France (to play on Schlesinger's book on U.S. history using that phrase). Rather, he speculated, there may be here an opportunity here for a non-nationalist history of the nation, and he cited a powerful example in Braudel's L'identitij de la France, and he pointed out that the title of his own project, Histoire de la France, by adding the article la distances historian and history, making the constructed character of the nation clearer.

He summed up his point by drawing attention to Italy, where we were meeting. It has neither a strong sense of nation nor a national historiography. It has historical moments of great importance, but it does not have a continuous and unifying history. The example suggests the need to escape the notion of "necessity" in national narratives. That which we call a nation might contain and be part of many possible narratives.

Greg Dening began by extending the era of globalization, referring to Sir Francis Drake's sixteenth century phrase "the world encompassed." In rethinking the shape of history, especially in the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, it is essential to recognize how large and important a place the sea was. Indeed, the world was the sea with islands. It was a particular kind of place as described by Dening, an ambiguous space, marked by motion and hybridity, a point powerfully made for historians of British North America by Ira Berlin in his recent book on the first two-centuries of slavery, Many Thousands Gone (1998).

Dening's focus, however, was on encounters, the "place" where the local and global meet. He emphasizes the way in which language of encounters misleads. In fact, there is not a place or moment of encounter, no before and no after. The encounter is a continuous and transformative process, changing all parties to the process. In Dening's phrasing the French notion of la longue durJe was adapted to the story of the movement of people, things, and knowledges. In fact, Dening's observations were quite in the same key as those of Revel; both are examples of the historical deconstruction of assumed boundaries.

Discussion of Papers

Eleven full-length papers were distributed and formally discussed with assigned commentators who introduced them. (See Appendix for authors, titles, and commentators.) In addition, eight shorter papers were distributed, though not formally discussed. All of the papers sought, in varying degrees, to do one of two things (sometimes both): either reframe the theme or period in terms of historical narratives larger than the United States, or to enrich particular topics by comparative methods or by widening the context. Both of these approaches are fully within the project's agenda, but it seems particularly important (and particularly difficult) to achieve the enlarged framing.

Several papers directly took up this challenge: the appeal of nationalism, for example, was explained by broad Atlantic world historical processes, thus locating the relative experiences of nationalism of the United States and other nations within the same story. More specifically, another paper tracked Atlantic and Pacific migration systems, thus locating United States history within different narratives of migration. A third paper looked at the American role in the world in a global context, from the multiple points of contact with other nations and peoples, rather than simply relying upon the view from a comfortable chair at home.

One could cite other papers in this list, but with this said, it is striking that the discussion tended to quickly skip over these aspects of the papers (often with a compliment, however), and the conversation turned to particulars. In the first case listed above, the framing was hardly discussed, but the definition of nationalism used was discussed at great length. Even though there seemed to be a reasonably strong consensus on the importance of widening the context of larger narratives, it is clear that the professional skills of historians are trained for other, more traditional kinds of debate. There is not yet enough experience with debating larger and metanarratives for American history.

In the discussion of more than half of the papers presented, what might be called the materialist worry emerged. If the culturalist tilt of Conference II had underplayed institutions and material interests, there was a better balance this time. In a different but related series of exchanges, the importance of social history in relation to more elitist histories was raised. This project has no direct interest in such a question, one that has been amply discussed over the past couple of decades. But it does become important to the project if there is any reason to believe that de-centering American history would encourage one kind of history over another, particularly when there are potential political implications, as that carried by the challenge of social history over the past generation.

Class issues entered in another way. Does transnational experience vary by class? Do we tend to overlook the role seemingly marginal people's experience a larger world. For example, the comment was made in discussion that whatever their limitations businessmen and missionaries played a key role--before universities began to address international studies--in bringing knowledge of the world overseas into American culture, even as they projected American capitalism and American Protestant culture abroad. But, it was pointed out, we must not fail to recognize the role of immigrants and sailors in the movement of knowledge on an international scale. In general, the movement of knowledges (whether of "big ideas" or specific knowledges of technique) looms as a major theme of a deprovincialized American history.

Looking at the projection of American culture abroad in the late-twentieth century, the process of selection and appropriation (indicating degree of agency) was at the center of the discussion. The question is whether much that is identified as "American" is equally more plausibly described as "modern" by and for the recipients. Have the French, for example, created "Americanization" by identifying aspects of the current global commodity economy that they do not like as "American"? Whether or not one can institutionally track "American" or "modern" or "free commodity," what meaning does it have to the recipient?

Does it mean some kind of affiliation with specifically American values and ways? Or is it more abstract, less rooted in a place or culture: freedom, pleasure, eros, status? How do cultural forms, ideologies, images, and consumer objects change their meaning when inserted into different contexts? How much variability is possible? Are such questions part of American history?

A paper on social movements that emphasized the religious identity of the participants raised important questions of the relative significance of nation in the nineteenth century. To what extent did these Americans (middle class, mostly of New England origin) frame their identities as Americans simply as American, or as an American version of Christians, or Protestant Christians, or even descendants of the Puritans. There was no resolution of the question, but it nicely opened up multiple narratives larger than the nation that do not completely displace the nation, but modify it--or provide an object that nation modifies.

Two rather different papers--one on the age of encounter and the other on migration and immigration--emphasized that the creation of the Atlantic world is only part of the American story. Scholarly attention recently devoted to the Atlantic world is welcome, but more so in so far as it locates itself as part of a global historical process.

The same two papers revealed in striking ways a pattern of historiographical appropriation. Dutch traders and Italian migrants are typically located in a binary world: Netherlands and New Amsterdam, or Italy (or Sicily) and the United States (or the Lower East Side). These papers refused that binary, and revealed not only that the process is larger, but in our historiographical binarism we have tended to appropriate other peoples' histories as our own. It is in a way a reverse colonization: the larger world of the Dutch empire, which is the context for the founding of New Amsterdam, tended to be pushed to the margins, making American history the context for itself. Again, a collapse of figure and field.

Two papers, relying upon irony, reveal the logic of this collapse of figure and field under the sign of exceptionalism. They suggested that one way of anticipating the self-destruction of American exceptionalism is when American values and goods (freedom, for example) and American power are triumphant and universal.

Papers that framed United History within larger thematic "ages" freed the narrative of American history from both exceptionalism and teleology (or at least moved a long way in this direction), while at the same time opening the way to comparison. Each effectively de-centered American history without undermining it. (One large absence in the series of chronological ages was one for the "Age of National Consolidation," referring roughly to what Eric Hobsbawm has called the "long nineteenth century." It is at this point that nation and historiography become so entangled, and it is crucial to reframe this period in a way that is larger than that particular assimilation has permitted.)

Examining the American Revolution in hemispheric and Atlantic perspective not only escaped the usual teleological narrative, but it located the revolution in British America as the first of three revolutions in the Americas. This reframing makes this revolution a revolution among revolutions, including the Haitian revolution, so frightening to contemporaries and so seldom understood and so easily overlooked by later generations. Haiti curbed the revolutionary spirit in the United States by exposing the contradictions of slavery and freedom and by revealing the explosive potential of the revolutionary age. Widening the lens reveals an interesting comparison with South American revolutions. There, Creole elites mobilized slaves; in the United States that did not happen, at least not in any significant way, though a larger number were recruited by the British. By making the Haitian revolution part of the widened story of the American Revolution, one begins to understand how a nation born in revolution quickly became counter-revolutionary in its political culture and policy. Together the Haitian and American Revolution are a massive

event in the history of the Black Atlantic, bringing freedom to large numbers of Africans in the Americas.

The Age of Social Politics reveals how integrated into a trans-Atlantic (though distinct) political culture the American experience was in this era. More important, one discovers a reciprocity of influences: ideas flowed both ways across the Atlantic, with different levels of influence in different periods. The notion of reciprocity forces a reconsideration of the autonomy of United States and European histories. American history was to some extent Europeanized, while European history was to a degree Americanized. Or perhaps many ideas and policies became available to all, sufficiently creolized so as to obscure national origin.

Reframing the postwar era in transnational terms as the Age of Globalism reveals the fundamental importance of reframing that history in terms larger than the nation itself--or in terms of those moments and ways in which American respond to challenges or opportunities abroad. American national history in the global age must attend to the impact upon other polities and societies as well as to challenges from them.

The likely result of a reframing of U.S. history is a substantial revision of all histories and vice versa. Histories are intertwined, and historiography must become more relational--within the national borders and beyond them, all the while recognizing the continuity between the "inside" and the "outside." Such a reframing will have institutional implications. The discrete and autonomous definition of major fields in graduate departments will be challenged. It may also be that discipline and department may come nearer to being intellectually and institutionally a commons for historians.

Conference IV

Conference IV will be held in the summer of 2000. Because its work is to be the writing of a report to the profession--addressing professional or institutional, research, and curricular issues raised by our sequence of meetings--the participants will be made up mainly of alumni of the previous three meetings. The most important themes to be addressed are, first, the prospect of an intellectually unified discipline; second, the intellectual challenge of relations between microhistories, middle range histories (national in the old sense), and macrohistories; third, the structure of the curriculum, including the relation of undergraduate and graduate education to K-12 education; fourth, possible changes in professional organization that would be needed to serve a redefined discipline.

If we build it, will they come? Will the public recognize such a history as is being proposed by the Project? Will students coming from traditional schools and colleges be stimulated by a reformulated American history? Will changes in framing the story invite invention in presentation, in teaching? Will graduate students educated in novel ways, with differently defined capacities, find slots in history departments? Is there, to state it more broadly and less crassly, a constituency for an American history that better describes personal and national experience but which defamiliarizes what "we think we know" from the usual repetition of the U.S. Survey in elementary, secondary, and tertiary education. How might a deprovincialized American history relate to the public? In the U.S. and abroad? What happens to the audience for American history? Will readers of history follow? Will a new story encourage and reward literary invention and the development of new modes of historical representation? What happens to the civic role of historians? Big questions remain.

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PARTICIPANTS

Tiziano Bonazzi, University of Bologna

Thomas Bender, New York University

Nicholas Canny, National University of Ireland, Galway

Nancy Cott, Yale University

Alan Dawley, College of New Jersey

Greg Dening, University of Melbourne

Eric Foner, Columbia University

Dana Frank, University of California, Santa Cruz

Ferdinando Fasce, University of Genoa

Jun Furuya, Hokkaido University

Lori Ginzberg, Pennsylvania State University

Dirk Hoerder, University of Bremen

Kristin Hoganson, Harvard University

Yukiki Koshiro, Notre Dame

Rob Kroes, University of Amsterdam

Karen Kupperman, New York University

Michael LaCombe, New York University

Lester D. Langley, University of Georgia

Molly McGarry, New York University

Donna Merwick, University of Melbourne

Carl Nightingale, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Thomas Osborne, College of Santa Ana*

Pablo Pozzi, University of Buenos Aires*

Jacques Revel, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales

Tricia Rose, New York University*

Daniel Rodgers, Princeton University

Nayan Shah, SUNY Binghamton

Robert Wiebe, Northwestern University

FranHois Weil, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales

Mari Yoshihara, University of Hawaii, Manoa

Marilyn Young, New York University

*Unable to attend