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Recommended Citation

Lacy, Tim () "The Transnational Turn and Trickle Down Disturbances," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 70 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol70/iss1/2

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The Transnational Turn and Trickle Down Disturbances

Review of *America on the World Stage: A Global Approach to U.S. History*, eds. Gary W. Reichard and Ted Dickson (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008)

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Contributors to *America on the World Stage* generally agree that the year 1996 is a special signpost in the development of the transnational turn in the history profession. From that year until 2000, there existed a particular collaboration between scholars, affiliated with the Organization of American Historians and New York University's International Center for Advanced Studies, whose goal was "to rethink the basic narrative of U.S. history in a way that would...[place] U.S. history into its world context" (p. xv). The group sought to create a new, more globalized American history. Because of they met in the summer at an NYU center in Florence, Italy called Villa La Pietra, the results of their meetings were published as the *La Pietra Report* (2000).¹

The *Report* was commissioned by OAH, and Thomas Bender served as the report's editor and primary author. Funding for the project came from the American Council of Learned Societies, Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. This is important because apparently some critics see U.S.-based multinational corporations as promoters of a nefarious variation of transnationalism: globalization.² But it is clear that support for thinking transnationally, at least in terms of history, comes from the most established humanities philanthropies.

¹ See also Marcus Gräser, "World History in a Nation-State: The Transnational Disposition in Historical Writing in the United States," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 4 (March 2009): 1041.

² These fears are clearly seen in a recent CFP for a special issue of the *Tamkang Review* released through H-Net's H-Ideas network on November 28, 2009. The text of the CFP is available here: <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Ideas&month=0811&week=d&msg=ljYcGH6hLGXQbVgiCtLZEQ&user=&pw=>. Accessed March 18, 2009.

The Councilor: The Journal of the Illinois Council for the Social Studies
2009 (1)



Thomas Bender has become a—and perhaps the—central figure in this growing movement in U.S. history. Indeed, Bender has been a proponent of synthesis and integration in U.S. history for almost as long as he has been an active scholar. So while the La Pietra roster contains the names of nearly 80 well established and highly respected historians, including William Chafe, Nancy Cott, Mary Dudziak, Eric Foner, David Hollinger, Robin D.G. Kelley, Linda Kerber, Daniel Rodgers, Roy Rosenzweig, Mary Ryan, and Richard White, it is Bender that has emerged as the primary spokesman for transnationalism.

Another product of the La Pietra meetings included a collection of essays edited by Bender, titled *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (2002). That book spawned a second collection that is the subject of this review: *America on the World Stage*, edited by Gary W. Reichard and Ted Dickson, and published in 2008. Per the latter's cover, each of *America on the World Stage*'s essays were originally printed by the Organization of American Historians in its *Magazine of History*. Bender and Rodgers, as participants in La Pietra conferences and contributors to the *Rethinking* book, form a common thread with the *America on the World Stage* volume. Bender also wrote the introductions for both edited collections. But since most the contributors to *Rethinking* and *America on the World Stage* are different, both stand alone as contributions to the transnational movement.

What is the professional philosophical basis for this movement? The following is asserted early in the *La Pietra Report* (italics mine):

Since the professionalization of the discipline in the nineteenth century, *the nation has been treated as both the principal object and the context for historical inquiry*. Study of the United States offers no exception to this generalization. Its historiography may even offer a particularly strong example of this approach.

At present, however, *intellectual trends in the general culture are pointing in a different direction*. Recent discussions of "globalization," for example, may be uninformed by history, but they have nonetheless promoted important thinking about the historicity of the nation itself. These new understandings of the nation-state invite *more complex understandings* of the American nation's relation to a world that is at once self-consciously global and highly pluralized.

If historians have often treated the nation as self-contained and undifferentiated, it is increasingly clear that this assumption is true in neither the present nor the past. ...

Not all historically significant forms of power are coterminous with nations. Historical



inquiry must be more sensitive to the relevance of historical processes larger than the nation.³

After examining the particulars of *America on the World Stage*, I will return to this broader philosophical foundation to examine its truth and validity.

Reichard and Dickson's collection contains 29 essays: an introduction and 14 pairings of topical and practical essays. The editors refer to them as "essays" and "teaching strategies," respectively. Each are written by university-level experts in a particular U.S. history subfield (e.g. slavery, religion, politics). The practical essays are written by college and high school-level instructors—weighted more toward the former than the latter. The chapters generally proceed chronologically with regard to U.S. history topics.

The reader might wonder what historical events, institutions, or topics are presented as transnational, in *America on the World Stage*, that haven't been analyzed as such before? The short answer is none. But this book is not intended to be novel in its topics. The topical essays are scholarly and grounded in recent work, but generally based on secondary sources—usually by the author of the essay. They are powerful, digested versions of academic articles published elsewhere. At the very least *America on the World Stage* serves as a gathering place for issues discussed in many professional journals. The topical essays willingly sacrifice some details of the internal logistics of historical events, or processes, in favor of putting old pictures into new frames.

The framing of the Civil War, for instance, moves from battles, logistics, and great figures to an emphasis on international context. The thesis of Edward Ayers' contribution is as follows:

The American Civil War, played out on the brightly lit stage of a new country, would be a drama of world history. How that experiment fared in its great crisis—regardless of what happened—would eventually matter to people everywhere (p. 127).

Ayers goes on to note that “it fell to the United States...to show that large democracies could survive internal struggles and play a role in world affairs alongside monarchies and aristocracies (p. 128). The article then covers how the North and South “imported ideas from abroad,” how British cartoonists “ridiculed Abraham Lincoln,” and how “Reconstruction came to be seen around the world...as a mistake, a story of the dangers of unrealistic expectations and failed social engineering” (p. 129-31). Ayers reminds the reader that the South's model of segregation

³ Thomas Bender, ed., *La Pietra Report* (Organization of American Historians, 2000). Available at: <http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/index.html>. Accessed March 18, 2009.



became a template for the British in South Africa (p. 131-32). The article ends with a nod toward imperialism—both restrained and later active. The world was "surprised," in Ayers' words, that the U.S. refrained from using "its enormous armies after the Civil War" to invade Mexico, Canada, or Cuba (p. 132). But by focusing on the commerce that would result in the Gilded Age, the U.S. set itself up through investment interests to think about the territorial acquisitions that would inflame imperial ambition. All of Ayers' narrative derives from scholarship published since the mid-1980s, but his essay neatly summarizes the transnational implications of the Civil War.

The pieces by Rodgers (on reform), Mark A. Noll (on religion), Suzanne M. Sinke (on migration), Penny M. Von Eschen (on popular culture), and Melvyn P. Leffler (on the Cold War) replicated the useful brevity and high quality of Ayers' Civil War essay. Although I found little fault with the rest of the topical essays, I do wish that more non-U.S. scholars had been utilized for them. Only Patrick Wolfe stands substantially outside the American higher education framework. But my wish demands too much. I am optimistic that more and more non-U.S. scholars will contribute to transnational scholarship in the future.

The bibliographical pieces that accompanied each topical essay are fantastic. They alone, almost, make this book invaluable as a primer for those hoping to understand and make progress in the field of transnational history. With the essays, those bibliographies make *America on the World Stage* a candidate for one week's reading in a graduate level historiography course. If historiography courses are meant to help keep students on top of trends in the field, this book should be on reading lists. Otherwise, college-level instructors of survey courses can cherry pick essays from *America on the World Stage* to nuance their textbook of choice.

What makes *America on the World Stage* unique with regard to the "transnational turn" is its attempt to effect changes in classroom practice. Unfortunately, this is also the most problematic aspect of the book. The teaching essays are inadequate with regard to their audience (teachers), the current state of textbooks on transnationalism, and classroom time and content issues.

This book wants to address itself to all types of instructors and all forms of U.S. history survey courses. I believe it will be especially useful, however, for AP history teachers and ambitious college-level instructors looking to enrich their survey texts. Otherwise, many of the topics discussed herein have been at least partially covered in good college-level textbooks (e.g. *Out of Many, Nation of Nations*) for years. I suspect the same can be said of many high school AP U.S. history texts.

The secondary audience for *America on the World Stage* appears to be high school teachers who



have not been exposed to transnational scholarship, but the book misses the mark there. The topical essays will be helpful to them, but the teaching essays will be paradoxically less so. Why? Of the 29 contributors 23 are college professors or professional historians involved in university administration. Only 6 of the 29, however, currently teach or have taught at the high school level. Of those 6, 4 are either PhD holders or PhD candidates, and 3 are associated with AP programs. The demographics of the authors results in their being, as a group, aloof from practical classroom problems. I will elaborate how below. Of course there are exceptions. The essays by Ted Dickson, Betty Dessants, Kathleen Dalton, Luisa Bond Moffitt, Lawrence Charap, and Frederick W. Jordan are first-rate evaluations of how to implement their relative topics of concern. In fact, the excellence of the teaching essay generally determined the quality of the pairings in the book. I found the coupled essays on the Civil War, reform, migration, popular culture, and the Cold War to be the book's best.

A secondary goal of the *America on the World Stage* essays seems to be pointing out textbook problems in relation to transnationalism. But are textbooks precisely the problem? The book's message is mixed. The teaching essay by Omar Valerio-Jimenez explicitly notes a few current textbooks that do focus, for instance, on Indian societies in the West before westward expansion (p. 100, 104n1). He praised Faragher, et al's *Out of Many* (2000), Jones et al's *Created Equal* (2006), and Deloria et al's *This Land* (2003). But if several prominent textbooks are doing the job well on one subject, then what's generally wrong? No clear or precise answer is given. Stuart Blumin negatively and vaguely mentions "the textbook version" of the story of the American industrial revolution, but doesn't specify any textbooks (p. 114, 118n7). Kathleen Dalton contradicts Valerio-Jimenez somewhat by stating that "despite a few admirable gestures toward the token inclusion of a comparative or global perspective, U.S. history texts remain annoying nation-centered" (p. 160). Professor Dalton credits only two Carl Guarneri textbooks as adequate: *America in the World* and *America Compared* (166n7). But aside from these three AWA contributors, the rest of the essays either ignore or fail to make persuasive arguments about which current textbooks are a problem.

For instance, I have recently used the fourth edition of *Out of Many* and found it to be reasonably satisfying on transnational topics, where applicable. It would have been helpful to *America on the World Stage* readers, therefore, if at least one author had empirically specified problem areas in recent textbooks on relevant topics. I understand that there is some professional risk involved in this endeavor, but the benefits outweigh the concerns if one's audience is teachers. The author of my proposed additional essay could point out problem passages and sections of textbooks without castigating an entire work as wholly faulty. If transnationalism is a truly imperative, then risks must be taken.



The issue of teaching time is only addressed in a few spots in this book.⁴ Even the best teaching essays in *America on the World Stage* discuss time limitations in a vague fashion. On what should an instructor spend less time? Or, what are instructors spending too much time on to the detriment of transnational topics? For the most part, *America on the World Stage* authors avoid making suggestions about what should be subtracted. This leaves one with the impression that transnationalism is additive or easily integrated. But transnationalism can not be simply integrated if any degree of comparison is introduced.

Betty A. Dessants' teaching essay on American industrialization exhibits some of the ambivalence I feel about implementing a transnational approach. Because her students are required to take world history surveys as freshmen, she has the luxury of teaching students of with a broad knowledge base. Dessants therefore is able to use local history in a way that enlightens the national narrative. For example, because she teaches in a Pennsylvania institution, Shippensburg University, that draws many in-state students, she makes required reading of Thomas Bell's novel, *Out of This Furnace* (1976). That book deals with "three generations of Slovak immigrants who lived in Braddock [PA] and worked in the steel mills near Pittsburgh between 1880 and the 1930s" (p. 121). Dessants' essay reflects the idea that local history does not strictly denote a parochial story. So what is local history's role in the realm of the transnational? Based on the material in *America on the World Stage*, it can only be used if there is an explicit comparative connection abroad. In Dessants' case, however, problems of time and context mean that, after explaining a seemingly adequate connection between local history and other nations, she was left discussing how she might do more by way of comparison and contrast on the subject of industrialization. Where will she find the time to add the material necessary to draw those comparisons?

And comparative history, furthermore, is something the transnational project is trying to supersede. Comparative historiography has a long and somewhat checkered history. Here is an excerpt from *La Pietra*:

[Transnationalism] builds upon comparative history, a method of historical inquiry that has been developed by Americanists in the past generation. Yet what we propose here is a different project. Rather than comparing two national experiences, [transnationalism] relates national experiences to larger processes and local resolutions.

Negative reactions to comparative history in the past resulted from sweeping civilization comparisons, such as Arnold Toynbee's multi-volume *A Study of History* series published from

⁴ I observed it being addressed on pages 33, 103, 122, 138-9, 296, 298.



the 1930s to the 1960s. Even earlier, in the 1910s and 1920s, Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* volumes elicited criticism from intellectuals for its overly broad generalizations. Some of the Americanists referred to in the passage above from *La Pietra* contributed to a 1968 volume edited by C. Vann Woodward titled *The Comparative Approach to U.S. History*. That essay collection included luminaries such as Ray Allen Billington, Alfred Chandler, David Brion Davis, John Hope Franklin, John Higham, Richard Hofstadter, and Seymour Martin Lipset.⁵

As per the contributors to the more recent *Rethinking* outlined above, enthusiasts for the comparative history project clearly constituted no minor roster of highly respected professional historians. And comparative programs in history still exist. Brandeis University, for instance, offers both M.A. and Ph.D. programs in the subject. Reflecting current circumstances, their program purports to:

Train students to do comparative historical research — not only to study individual countries in depth, but also to explore thematic issues in a broader transnational context. That comparative perspective makes it possible to determine what is common, what is unique and thereby to draw conclusions about general patterns and dynamics.⁶

In this new century, transnational enthusiasts seek to limit their analyses to universal topics such as economics, ethnicity, diaspora, colonialism, gender, popular culture, etc. Indeed, the University of Washington organizes its comparative history graduate studies along similar lines.⁷

But why, if superior to standard nation-state studies, has the original comparative project not grown and overtaken standard doctoral programs? I think the same problems that potentially hamper the development of those programs also constrict the wide implementation of transnational and comparative approaches at the classroom level. In short, these include research funds and time for archival explorations abroad, language barriers, widely available professional training, and common standards for transnational historiography.⁸ All together, combined with the problems of the *America on the World Stage* volume, these disturb what would be a natural

⁵ C. Vann Woodward, ed., *The Comparative Approach to U.S. History* (New York: Basic, 1968). Republished with a new introduction in 1996.

⁶ Although I cited from the M.A. program page, the introduction is identical to that on Brandeis' Ph.D. program page. Available at: <http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/history/grad/ma-comparative.html>. Accessed March 18, 2009.

⁷ History Department website, University of Washington. Available at: <http://depts.washington.edu/history/studying/graduate/divisions/comphist.html>. Accessed March 18, 2009.

⁸ I wrote on these potential problems in a post for the U.S. Intellectual History weblog: "The Promise and Perils of Transnational History---And the Consequences for U.S. Intellectual History," (November 24, 2008). Available here: <http://us-intellectual-history.blogspot.com/2008/11/promise-and-perils-of-transnational.html>.



trickling down of transnationalism.

How then might transnationalism grow and take deeper root in U.S. historiography? This is no place to make suggestions on the infrastructure of history graduate studies, or professional class and status issues, but a revised *America on the World Stage*, or a secondary volume, could help the cause. Perhaps *America on the World Stage* should have been split into a textbook and a teaching guide? If any new format is considered, my first suggestion for improvement is that most of the teaching essays should be solicited from secondary school teachers. Why? If the philosophical concerns driving transnationalism center on undermining American exceptionalism and provincialism, and if those concerns are imperative, then efforts to correct those vices must begin earlier than AP and college-level coursework. In addition, to satisfy the urgency of the cause, everything must be framed so as to not make transnationalism seem additive: it cannot convey the feel of an enrichment program.

I believe the focus should be on middle and high school teachers (grades 6-12). To insinuate transnationalism earlier in the process of teaching and learning history, the teaching essays must display a thorough, ground-level understanding of practical classroom problems in history and social studies courses. The presentation of alternate means and methodologies will be important to giving teachers relevant options. Although the teaching essays in this volume handle classroom discussion well, especially via text-based primary resources, more must be considered, for instance, with regard to multimedia presentations, especially film. Some of the essays do reference useful multimedia (e.g. film in Jordan's essay, music in Charap's), but the possibilities abound. Surely there are some recent PBS *American Experience* documentaries that cover topics from a transnational perspective?

Despite the suggestions and broader philosophical concerns I have outlined above, *America on the World Stage* is nevertheless an excellent introduction to the transnational turn. The book stands as a challenge and an important reminder to all historians. Even having it in your possession, I think, will cause you to attend to the international aspects of American history already present in your survey texts.

