

A NATION AMONG NATIONS

INTRODUCTION



Bender, Thomas. *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

This book proposes to mark the end of American history as we have known it. "End" can mean both "purpose" and "termination," and both of those meanings are necessary to introduce my themes. First I mean to draw attention to the *end* to which national histories, including American history, have been put. Histories are taught in schools and brought into public discourse to forge and sustain national identities, and they present the self-contained nation as the natural carrier of history. I believe this way of writing and teaching history has exhausted itself. We need a history that understands national history as itself being made in and by histories that are both larger and smaller than the nation's. The nation is not freestanding and self-contained; like other forms of human solidarity, it is connected with and partially shaped by what is beyond it. It is time to stop ignoring this obvious dimension of a national history. Nineteenth-century nationalist ideology became embedded in the development of history as a discipline, but it obscures the actual experience of national societies and produces a narrow parochialism at a time when we need a wider cosmopolitanism.

National histories, like nation-states, are modern developments. The first national history of the United States, David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*, was published in 1789. In fact, Ramsay held off publishing it until the Constitution was ratified.¹ History—and especially history in the schools—contributed mightily to the acceptance of the nation as the dominant form of human solidarity during the next two

centuries. It became the core of civic education in schools and other institutions devoted to making peasants, immigrants, and provincial peoples into national citizens. A common history, which involved both common memories and a tacit agreement to forget certain differences, was intended to provide a basis for a shared national identity.

This conception of the citizen was absolute; it was supposed to trump all other sources of identity. Regional, linguistic, ethnic, class, religious, and other forms of solidarity or connection that were either smaller or larger than the nation were to be radically subordinated to national identity. Moreover, national territory was to be firmly bounded. To sustain the idea of a national citizen or subject, the national space and population were presumed to be homogeneous. In return, the modern nation-state promised to protect its citizens at home and abroad. One artifact that marks both the importance of borders and the promise of protection is the passport—a nineteenth-century innovation.

The leaders of the new nation-states naturalized the nation as the most basic, obvious form of human solidarity, and they were helped by historians. Although this elevation of the nation is still quite new, everyone has become so comfortable with the notion as to refer routinely to events that occurred a thousand years ago within the present borders of France as "medieval French history." In this age of talk about globalization, multiculturalism, and diasporas, clearly our experience does not match up to such nationalist assumptions. Life is simply more complex. Historians know this as well as everyone else.

It is often said that the persistence of the demonstrably false nineteenth-century ideological framing of history can be explained by the absence of an alternative. My aim in this book is to offer another way of understanding the central events and themes of American history in a context larger than the nation. Unlike notions of American "exceptionalism," this framing insists that the nation cannot be its own historical context. In fact, it presses context to its ultimate terrestrial limit: the globe itself. Here the major themes and events of American history, including such distinctively American events as the Revolution and the Civil War, are examined in a global context. To go beyond the nation is not necessarily to abandon it but to historicize and clarify its meaning. "To stand outside of the filiation of history and the nation-state," the historian Joyce Appleby has written, "is not to disparage it but, rather, to

get some purchase on the powerful presuppositions that have shaped our thinking."²

In the past few years some of the most innovative and exciting scholarship in American history has been framed in ways that do not necessarily tie it to the nation-state—work on gender, migrations, diasporas, class, race, ethnicity, and other areas of social history. If this scholarship has not succumbed to the nationalist framing, neither has it altered or displaced it. It has grown up beside the older default narrative that we all carry around in our heads. It has brought forth new knowledge about previously unstudied or insufficiently recognized groups and themes in American history, but it has not changed the dominant narrative structure. The unitary logic of national history seems to have kept at bay new scholarship that could be transformative. Too often this new scholarship is bracketed (literally so in textbooks) rather than integrated. Much is added, but the basic narrative stays the same. That is why textbooks get longer and longer, more and more ungainly, and less and less readable, with the old nineteenth-century narrative buried under the mass. This narrative must be challenged more directly.

About a decade ago I began to think more seriously and quite differently about the way American history has been written, to say nothing about the way I was teaching it. What concerned me was not the then-much-contested question of the politics of history, at least not in the narrow sense of supporting or opposing this or that side in the so-called culture wars.³ Nor was it about favoring liberal or conservative interpretations, for on the issue that concerned me there was no difference. The problem for me was more fundamental and methodological: it seemed to me that the default narrative I carried around in my head limited my capacity to understand the central themes of American history. What were the true boundaries of America's national experience? What history did the United States share with other nations? How would the use of a wider context change the core American narrative? I began to rethink two aspects of that core narrative: its unexamined assumption that the nation was the natural container and carrier of history, and its neglect of the truth that space, no less than time, is fundamental to historical explanation, that history plays out over space as well as over time.

American history was taught to me and to you as if it were self-contained. Recent changes in the school history curriculum highlight the

problem rather than solve it. In the interest of better preparing our youth for citizenship in a multicultural nation in a globalized world, most states now require schools to offer world history courses. That appears to be an effective curricular change, but in practice the new curriculum subverts the good intentions that prompted it. Most world history courses do not include American history. Somehow the world is everything but us. America's interconnections and interdependencies beyond its borders are rarely captured in these courses, and the revised curriculum reinforces the very split between America and the world that contemporary citizenship must overcome.

If Americans tend to think of something "international" as being "out there," somehow not connected with them, we historians of the United States bear some responsibility for this misperception. The way we teach history, with our disciplinary commitment to the nation as the self-contained carrier of history, reinforces this parochialism. We assume this nationalism, but we do not argue it. If historians want to educate students and the public as true citizens, they must think more profoundly about the way they frame national histories, which we must keep, but in ways that reveal commonalities and interconnections.

Strangely enough, many scholars who study foreign nations and regions—area studies specialists—have shared and reinforced the binary approach that puts the United States and the rest of the world in two different boxes. American studies and area studies programs developed at the same time in American universities, but until very recently they did not acknowledge that each was an interacting part of the same global history. Thus we have limited our understanding of other parts of the world, and missed the ways other histories have been part of our own. Americans need to be more conscious of being a "part of abroad," as the New York *Journal of Commerce* observed in the auspicious year of 1898.

This book elaborates two nested arguments. The first is that global history commenced when American history began, in the decades before and after 1500. The second follows directly from the first: American history cannot be adequately understood unless it is incorporated into that global context. It then becomes a different kind of history with more explanatory power. It reconnects history with geography. It incorporates causal influences that work across space as well as those that unfold over time. It enriches our understanding of the historical making and remak-

ing of the United States. It is, moreover, the only way to map and appraise the changing position and interdependencies that connect the United States today to the other provinces of the planet.

At the end of the nineteenth century Max Weber famously defined the nation-state as the possessor of a legitimate monopoly of violence. Evidence surely supports this definition, which is necessary but not sufficient. The nation also depends on the population's embrace of a national identity. Nationalism and national identity are founded largely on a sense of shared memories. Making and teaching such shared memories and identities were the work of historians and of national history curricula, generously supported to promote the formation of national identities and national citizens. But we need to recover the historicity of the prior and coexistent forms and scales of human solidarity that compete with, interact with, and even constitute the nation. A national history is a contingent outcome, the work of historical actors, not an ideal form or a fact of nature. It is the outcome of interplay and interrelations among historical social formations, processes, and structures both larger and smaller than the nation. Recently social historians have greatly illuminated those "smaller" histories within the nation; now the larger ones are emerging, too.

Thinking of the global dimensions of a national history, historians must step outside the national box—and return with new and richer explanations for national development. They can better recognize the permeability of the nation at boundaries, the zones of contact and exchange among people, money, knowledge, and things—the raw materials of history that rarely stop at borders. The nation cannot be its own context. No less than the neutron or the cell, it must be studied in a framework larger than itself.

This book examines the United States as one of the many provinces that collectively constitute humanity. The story I tell begins around 1500, when oceanic seafaring for the first time connected all the continents and created a common history of all peoples. The beginning of American history was part of the event that made global history. I end with the twentieth century, when the United States loomed larger in global events than could ever have been imagined at the beginning of the story.

The American nation-building project has been unusually successful. But the history of that success cannot and ought not be used to sustain a claim of historical uniqueness or of categorical difference. Whatever the distinctive position of the United States today, it remains nonetheless only one global province interconnected with and interdependent with every other one. The history of the United States is but one history among histories.

The clamor of debate about multiculturalism and globalization has encouraged talk of the decline of the nation-state and the possibility of a post-national history. But I do not believe the nation is likely to soon disappear. True, nation-states have done terrible damage to the human community, but they are also the only enforcer available to protect human and citizen rights. The nation must remain a central object of historical inquiry so long as we understand history to include both the analysis of power in society and the clarification of ethical responsibility within the human community. My purpose here is not to dismiss national history but to propose a different mode for it, one that better respects the empirical record and better serves us as citizens of the nation and the world.

A considerable scholarly literature has recently been produced that in various ways challenges the old way of teaching national histories. There have even been manifestos that call for alternative approaches, including two for which I am responsible.⁴ They were both directed exclusively to my disciplinary peers, academic readers and professional historians, and they both called for something different without actually doing it. This book is addressed to a wider audience, and it actually does what the manifestos propose.

Rather than nibble at the edges of the default narrative, this book examines five major themes in American history and reinterprets them as parts of global history. To do this significantly changes—and in my view enriches—our understanding of those themes. I might have addressed other themes, but the ones I selected are central, and no general history of the United States can omit any of them.

The first chapter explores and redefines the meaning of the “age of discovery.” What precisely is new about the New World? That chapter, which establishes the beginning of global history, sets the stage. The next chapter, taking its cue from a comment made by James Madison at the Constitutional Convention, extends the chronology and geography of the

American Revolution, placing it in the context of the competition among the great eighteenth-century empires and especially the “Great War,” the global conflict between England and France that lasted from 1689 to 1815. Developments outside the territorial United States were decisive in the American victory against Great Britain and in the development of the new nation. Equally important, the revolutionary crisis of British North America was but one of many around the globe, all deriving from the competition among empires and the consequent reform of them.

Next I place the Civil War in the context of the European revolutions of 1848. Lincoln watched and admired the European liberals who were forging a link between nation and freedom and who redefined the meaning of national territory, and they watched him, understanding that the cause of the Union, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation, was central to their larger ambitions for liberal nationalism. These new understandings of nation, freedom, and national territory were played out on every continent, and often violently.

Most Americans hesitate to acknowledge the centrality of empire in their history, let alone to see that the American empire was one among many. But the imperial adventure of 1898 was not, as is often argued, an accidental and unthinking act, and in my fourth chapter I explore the ways in which empire had been on the national agenda for decades. There is a striking continuity in purpose and style from America’s westward expansion to its overseas colonization in 1898. Equally continuous was a policy of extending foreign trade in agricultural and industrial goods and, in the twentieth century, access to raw materials and securing American investments abroad.

My fifth chapter concerns American progressive reform, social liberalism, and the claims of social citizenship in the decades following 1890. With a wide-angle lens, one cannot but recognize that American progressive reform was part of a global response to the extraordinary expansion of industrial capitalism and of large cities at that time. A global menu of reform ideas was available to all. That they were selectively and differently adopted and adapted, nation by nation, shows the importance of national political cultures within the larger, shared global history.

This last point is crucially important. I am not saying there is only one history, or that the American Revolution is like other revolutions of its time. Nor do I say that the Civil War was no different from the eman-

cipation of serfs in the Russian and Habsburg empires or the unification of Germany and Argentina. Nor do I argue that the American empire was indistinguishable from those of England, France, or Germany; or that progressivism in the United States was like progressivism in Japan or Chile. Yet there are family resemblances we have missed, and we have also missed the self-aware communication about common challenges that historical actors on every continent had with one another.

It is not just that all national histories are not the same. More important, the extension of context enables us to see more clearly and deeply exactly what is unique about the national history of the United States. Its major events and themes look different; their causes and consequences get redefined. And then we can better understand the legacy of the past for our present.

The United States has always shared a history with others. To acknowledge that literally makes us more worldly, and it makes our history more accessible to foreign scholars and publics. It makes us more open to interpretations of our history coming from historians and others beyond our borders. It will, I hope, better educate us and our children to the kind of cosmopolitanism that will make us better citizens of both the nation and the world. Surely it will move us closer to the cosmopolitan moral integrity that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has well expressed for us:

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms of human life locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes.¹

This kind of history is not entirely novel. It is a recovery of history as it was envisioned by some of my predecessors a century ago. They were among the many intellectuals and men and women of goodwill who sustained a hopeful internationalism and cosmopolitan values, which resulted in the foundation of various international organizations devoted to peace and uplift. There was a great awareness of global connections, and

global thinking was quite pervasive.² The 1890s were a decade when transnational developments were as striking as they were to us in the 1990s, and the percentage of foreign investment even greater.

Historians of that era also shared in the presumption that national histories were part of a larger universal history. The intellectual foundations for this understanding of history had been laid by the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel in the early nineteenth century, but American historians mostly absorbed it in diluted form through their emulation of German historical scholarship, most notably that of Leopold von Ranke, who clearly understood that his particular histories were part of an implicit universal history. The first generation of professional historians trained in the United States was more worldly than the post-World War II group who emphasized American "exceptionalism," and this earlier generation was typically trained in European as well as American history. With their passing, American history became more self-enclosed, a development accelerated by the Cold War.³

When, in the 1890s, historians presumed that the Atlantic world shared a history, their unifying theme was, unfortunately, racist. They included in the domain of history only those parts of the world that were organized into nation-states, thus leaving out Africa, most of Asia, and what we now call the Middle East. And the transnational history studied and written by Americans then traced the special Anglo-Saxon gift for political life. Herbert Baxter Adams and his students in the famous historical seminar at The Johns Hopkins University studied the development of American democratic institutions from the medieval forests of Germany, through England and English legal institutions, to the rocky but evidently nourishing soil of New England. It was a kind of genetic history, with history tracking the "germ" of democracy.

Frederick Jackson Turner rejected this metatheory of Adams, his mentor.⁴ Instead, he famously proposed his still influential frontier hypothesis at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. In powerful and almost poetic language he rejected the Atlantic transit of democracy. Rather, he claimed, American democracy was the product of the frontier experience. "The true point of view in the history of this nation," he declared, "is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West."⁵ While he broke the Eurocentric genetic chain, he did not, as many of his followers did, endorse the idea that national histories, American or otherwise, were self-

contained. A point of view is not the same as a method. Two years earlier, in "The Significance of History," which was based on a talk he had given to teachers, Turner elaborated on the importance of historical and geographical contexts larger than the national one. "In history," he observed, "there are only artificial divisions" of time and space. One must take care not to cut off the fullness of either the axis of time or the axis of space. "No country can be understood without taking account of all the past; it is also true that we cannot select a stretch of land and say we will limit our study to this land; for local history can only be understood in the light of the history of the world." "Each [nation] acts on each . . . Ideas, commodities even, refuse the bounds of a nation." He added, "This is true especially in the modern world with its complex commerce and means of intellectual connection."⁹

Turner was not alone in the 1890s. Henry Adams's great *History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (1889-91) is a powerful example of a history that moves between local, national, and larger transnational contexts. Adams begins the first volume with regional portraits of the social and intellectual condition of the new nation in 1800, and he concludes the final volume with a similar account of the nation in 1815. But in between, he reveals a nation embedded in a larger Atlantic world, and as a historian he shifts his position from place to place to best reveal and explain actors and acts beyond the borders of the United States that are part of its history. The cosmopolitanism that enabled Adams to write such a history was part of his family history and biography. He was, after all, the great-grandson of John Adams, who with Benjamin Franklin negotiated the Treaty of Paris that ended the war of American independence; the grandson of John Quincy Adams, who negotiated the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812; and the son and private secretary of Charles Francis Adams, Lincoln's ambassador to the Court of St. James's. Moreover, he was a distinguished historian of European history. His exquisitely crafted *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1904) remains a classic for its celebration of the architecture, social organization, and spiritual devotion of medieval European culture, and he would later publish three memoirs of his travels in the South Pacific.

In 1895, W.E.B. DuBois completed his Harvard dissertation, published a year later as *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*. This work was a forerunner of Atlantic his-

tory and the concept of the "Black Atlantic." All the continents with Atlantic shores were part of DuBois's history of this fundamental, even central aspect of U.S. history, since they were all connected by the slave trade and the institution of slavery. DuBois's recognition of the global developments of the 1890s, like Turner's, no doubt encouraged the global perspective that marked his scholarship and political activities throughout his long career. In an address to the graduating class of Fisk University in 1898, he sketched out the broad connections that were making human history singular:

On our breakfast table lies each morning the toil of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and the isles of the sea; we sow and spin for unseen millions, and countless myriads weave and plant for us; we have made the earth smaller and life broader by annihilating distance, magnifying the human voice and the stars, binding nation to nation, until to-day, for the first time in history there is one standard of human culture as well in New York as in London, in Cape Town as in Paris, in Bombay as in Berlin.¹⁰

After World War I, this worldly impulse among historians went into decline, though the aspiration was not entirely lost. In fact, in 1933, when most nations, including the United States, were turning more nationalist in the midst of the crisis of the Great Depression, Herbert B. Bolton, a Berkeley historian of Latin America, titled his presidential address to the American Historical Association "The Epic of Greater America" (later published in *The American Historical Review*). He took his colleagues in U.S. history to task for their tendency to study the "thirteen English colonies and the United States in isolation," an approach that, he pointed out, "has obscured many of the larger factors in their development, and helped to raise up a nation of chauvinists." He proposed a much larger framing of history not only to make better citizens, but also "from the standpoint of correct historiography." He insisted—in the spirit of Turner, whose notion of the frontier Bolton had applied to the Spanish frontier in North America—that "each local story will have clearer meaning when studied in the light of the others; and that much of what has been written of each national history is but a thread out of a larger strand."¹¹