

Reflections on the transnational turn in United States history: theory and practice

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Abstract

This article situates the idea of ‘transnational history’ within the recent historiography of the United States, as both a reaction against and accommodation to the nation-state focus of that historiography. It explains transnational history’s specific American development as a broad project of research to contextualize US history and decentre the nation; it explores the conditions of American historical practice that influenced the genesis and growth of this version of transnational history; and it compares the concept with competitor terms such as international history, comparative history, global history, histoire croisée, and trans-border. In the United States, transnational history came to be considered complementary to these concepts in its commitment to render American historiography less parochial, yet, because of its origins, the concept has remained limited in application by period and spatial scope. While the concept retains utility because of its specific research programme to denaturalize the nation, transnational history understood as an exploration of ‘transnational spaces’ opens possibilities for an approach of more general historiographical relevance.

Transnational history is a buzzword in the historical profession, and transnational studies are being applied to many areas of historiography. Simultaneously, historians are questioning the value of the term ‘transnational’. Its use to cover a wide variety of approaches leaves open the question of its precise meaning. Other terms such as ‘global history’, ‘world history’, ‘connected history’, and ‘entangled’ histories¹ are commonly discussed as competitors.

1 ‘AHR forum: entangled empires in the Atlantic World’, *American Historical Review*, 112, 3, 2007, ‘Introduction’, pp. 710–11; Eliga H. Gould, ‘Entangled histories, entangled worlds: the English-speaking Atlantic as a Spanish periphery’, *American Historical Review*, 112, 3, 2007, pp. 764–86; ‘AHR conversation: on transnational history’, with C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, *American Historical Review*, 111, 5, 2006, pp. 1440–64; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Beyond comparison: *histoire croisée* and the challenge of reflexivity’, *History and Theory*, 45, 1, 2006, pp. 30–50; Deborah Cohen and Maura O’Connor, ‘Comparative history, cross-national history, transnational history: definitions’, in Deborah Cohen and Maura O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and history*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. ix–xxiv; Kiran Klaus Patel, ‘“Transnations” among “transnations”? The debate on transnational history in the United States and Germany’, *Center for European Studies Working Paper Series*, 159, 2008, http://www.ces.fas.harvard.edu/publications/docs/pdfs/CES_159.pdf (consulted 25 June 2009).

This article addresses this contemporary debate by putting the discussion in terms of transnational history's adoption as a concept within US historiography from the early 1990s.

Transnational history is by no means a purely American development. For example, a substantial and impressive literature already exists on diasporic identities such as those exhibited in Chinese transnationalism. Over the last few years, the expansion of the European Union has stimulated interest in transnational relations in communications, technology, environmental change, and migration, and the development of the concept of global history in a number of countries has added a further impetus.² Reflecting diverse national and methodological origins, transnational history refers to a broad range of phenomena cutting across national boundaries; it is both less than global history and yet more, in the sense that not all history across national boundaries is global or the product of globalization, but all – at least for modern history – is transnational. That last caveat raises an obvious limitation of the concept for historians. 'The transnational' cannot refer to border crossing where the nation-state does not exist. For the pre-modern period of history, before the emergence of nation-states, the term is misleading, unless interpreted very loosely. Where used for the colonial history of nations subsequently formed, the term betrays, unless carefully defined and limited, a Whiggish approach, in which the rise of the nation is foreordained. This is quite the opposite of what transnational theorists intended at the beginning of their intellectual enterprise.

Though transnational history is clearly not the property of any one historiography, and has parallel roots in non-American scholarship, work using the explicit term 'transnational history' and involving a concrete research programme had early prominence in the United States. The history of that development sheds light on both the importance of the concept and its limitations. The term's first use can be traced to the 1970s, though 'transnational' analysis was done before this time in a variety of countries and a variety of disciplines, as Pierre-Yves Saunier has pointed out.³ In the American case from the 1980s onwards, much of the debate over transnational history implicitly concerned American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States' history diverged sharply from that of other nations.⁴ But, in addition, this debate merged with another registered in the 1980s. The term 'transnational history' became institutionalized through the growing historiographical concern about a perceived parochialism of and specialization within American history. Outlining

2 See, for example, Frank N. Pieke, Pál Nyíri, Mette Thunø, and Antonella Ceddagno, *Transnational Chinese: Fujianese migrants in Europe*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004; Sucheng Chan, ed., *The flow of people, resources, and ideas between China and America during the exclusion era*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006; Gregor Benton and E. T. Gomez, *Chinese in Britain, 1800–2000: economy, transnationalism, identity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Adam McKeown, *Chinese migrant networks and cultural change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900–1936*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001; Erik van der Vleuten, 'Toward a transnational history of technology: meanings, promises, pitfalls', *Technology and Culture*, 49, 4, 2008, pp. 974–94; For a general view of diasporas studies, see Carol R. Ember, Melvin Ember, and Ian A. Skoggard, eds., *Encyclopedia of diasporas: immigrant and refugee cultures around the world*, New York and Boston, MA: Springer, 2004.

3 Pierre-Yves Saunier, 'Learning by doing: notes about the making of the *Palgrave dictionary of transnational history*', *Journal of Modern European History*, 6, 2, 2008, pp. 159–80.

4 Ian Tyrrell, 'American exceptionalism in an age of international history', *American Historical Review*, 96, 4, 1991, pp. 1031–55; Michael McGerr, 'The price of the "new transnational history"', *American Historical Review*, 96, 4, 1991, pp. 1056–67; Ian Tyrrell, 'Ian Tyrrell responds', *American Historical Review*, 96, 4, 1991, pp. 1068–72.

the different ways in which this term has been applied shows how transnational history can move beyond a theme to render US historiography less parochial, and become an approach of more general historical relevance for modern history.

The idea of transnational history had a wider intellectual and political context. It grew, for one thing, in the context of changes in the larger historiography, notably the marked growth in the United States of world history programmes and publishing in the 1980s, which raised the question of the relationship between US and world history. A second factor was the speeding up of what theorists have sometimes called 'new globalization', and awareness that traditional boundaries centred on the Cold War were dissolving as communism itself disintegrated. That was the intellectual and political context, but the practical context of the reception of the idea has been crucially important to its survival and growth.

The search for a new, less parochial approach among historians of US history took root because it gained the support of important institutional networks. Analysis of the practice of history – the study of the institutional, intellectual, and political developments that converge to produce particular discourses of history – must be applied to the topic.⁵ The *Journal of American History* editor from 1985 to 1999, David Thelen, had been deeply engaged in an attempt to reinvigorate American scholarship and to loosen the boundaries of the multiplying lists of history's subfields. Thelen utilized his role as a key facilitator in creating conversations about the profession and the intellectual content of American history. In a 1992 special issue devoted to 'internationalizing' American history, he arranged for non-American practitioners of American history to contribute by discussing issues of theory and practice from the perspective of their own national historiographies and experience. The aim was to 'widen discussions of how all historians can engage audiences' and challenge 'narrow and overspecialized' perspectives.⁶ At the urging of Thelen and others, the peak body for US history, the Organization of American Historians (OAH), inaugurated an 'internationalization of American history'. By 1992, the *Journal of American History* began to list international historical work in its 'Recent scholarship' section and appointed international contributory editors.⁷ The OAH announced foreign-language prizes for the best article in a foreign language and the best foreign-language book.⁸ Thelen also organized a special seminar on transnational approaches at the Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, in 1998, and published the participants' work as another special issue of the *Journal of American History*, in 1999.⁹

In 1997, the OAH also backed a further key initiative to internationalize American history, allied to the work of Thomas Bender of New York University. Bender had been a member of the editorial board of the *American Historical Review* that had considered the 1991 Forum on 'American exceptionalism in an age of international history' that first identified an explicit transnational history as a research project, and he was well aware of

5 For US history, see Ian Tyrrell, *Historians in public: the practice of American history, 1890–1970*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

6 David Thelen, 'Of audiences, borderlands, and comparisons: toward the internationalization of American history', *Journal of American History*, 79, 2, 1992, p. 433.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 451.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 453.

9 David Thelen, 'The nation and beyond: transnational perspectives on United States history', *Journal of American History*, 86, 3, 1999, pp. 965–75 (introduction to a special issue of the same name).

the importance of the concept of transnationalism from his studies of American intellectual history and the history of New York. Indeed, it was the use of the term 'transnational America' in 1916 by the radical New York intellectual Randolph Bourne that first inspired interest in 'the transnational' in the United States.¹⁰ Together with the OAH, Bender organized a series of four conferences held at Villa La Pietra in Florence, Italy, which led to the publication of *Rethinking American history in a global age* (2002), with contributions by key La Pietra participants. This book became the standard introduction to the new approach.¹¹

From the planning meeting of 1997 to the full conferences of 1998–2000, the participants at the La Pietra conferences debated transnational history as a suitable framework for American history. Initially, the discussion centred on the competing place of comparative history. Advocates of transnational history argued first that comparison in itself was not faulty but that connections between cases being compared needed to be explored too. Within American history, comparisons repeatedly explored themes that tested issues tied to American exceptionalism, such as classlessness, the frontier, social or geographical mobility, and racial slavery, against particular examples elsewhere. Critics charged that, when these questions were researched, the research design proceeded from a US base and the comparisons usually enhanced an understanding of how the United States was radically different from some perceived norm for the modern world.

Second, critics of comparison noted that the research procedures of historians generally reinforced emphasis upon American national boundaries in the historiography because they took units that had to be held constant for purposes of analysis. As La Pietra participants argued, national comparison did not necessarily exist in 'real' time, and was less historicist than social scientific in its methodological assumptions. In contrast, Bender argued in summarizing the discussion that transnational history 'maps, follows, and tries to understand the relations of power in affecting and as being affected by these channels'.¹² At the first meeting devoted to planning the scope of the conferences, the leading comparativist George Fredrickson reacted against the criticism that comparisons reified national history. As he had done in a 1995 article, Fredrickson argued that national comparison was valid 'as a basic unit of analysis in comparative historical studies' and was even important where sub-national phenomena were considered. While comparative history often used national comparisons, Fredrickson argued, scholars had found both differences and similarities when the United States was compared to elsewhere. Because of their success in documenting similarities as well as differences through open-ended inquiry, comparativists were not tarred with the brush of American exceptionalism.¹³ Though the debate revealed open

10 Thomas Bender, *New York intellect: a history of intellectual life in New York City, from 1750 to the beginnings of our own time*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988; Randolph Bourne, 'Trans-national America', *Atlantic Monthly*, 118, July 1916, pp. 86–97.

11 Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American history in a global age*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

12 'Internationalizing the study of American history: a joint project of the Organization of American Historians and New York University: report on planning conference, Villa La Pietra, New York University in Florence, Italy July 6–9, 1997', <http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/report1.html> (consulted 25 June 2009); Tyrrell, 'American exceptionalism', pp. 1031–55; Raymond Grew, 'The comparative weakness of American history', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 16, 1, 1985, pp. 87–101.

13 George M. Fredrickson, 'From exceptionalism to variability: recent developments in cross-national comparative history', *Journal of American History*, 82, 2, 1995, p. 590.

conflict over the role of transnational versus comparative history, discussion dissipated quickly into truce. By the time of the third conference in 1999, Thomas Bender could report: 'At earlier conferences there had been debates and worries about the relation of comparative and transnational approaches to American history, but at this conference they were rather easily accepted as different but complementary.'¹⁴ This compromise reflected the effort to build a broad church of historians who wished to reorient American history towards a focus on external connections rather than to create a new historiographical sect around the idea of 'transnational history'.

Despite this ecumenicalism, it is certainly true that an inevitable and continuing tension could not be repressed in subsequent discussion. The original judgment of the La Pietra group on comparative history has continued to be influential in discussions of the method. Some would even go so far as to say that a national exceptionalism inherent in the practice of the comparative history agenda requires us to 'call a moratorium' on comparative international studies. In a 2005 review of comparative history, Micol Seigel pointed out that scholars who did comparisons of United States and Brazilian race relations were not 'above' history, able to deal with comparative units as equivalents of laboratory specimens, but 'active agents in the construction of race and of notions of national character'.¹⁵ As Jürgen Kocka has recently noted, important analytical differences persist between transnational or 'entangled' history on the one hand and comparative history on the other precisely because the latter does emphasize discrete units or variables.¹⁶

In theoretical and methodological formulations, analytical differences persist in these ways, but comparative method is implicit in most, if not all, historical study, and clear cases of a transnational perspective without the intervention of national units of analysis are rare. For example, a study of the global reach of a reform organization such as the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union must recognize not only the duplication of its organizational forms in many countries from the 1880s to the 1920s and the circulation of personnel and ideas in such a non-governmental organization but also adaptations to political institutions and cultures grounded in local jurisdictions. The balance of the local and national against transnational aspects depends upon the frame of reference, and the specific questions asked. To take another example, study of transnational environmental connections did not preclude the study of the different ways that environmental regulation of these transnational problems occurred through nation-state or colonial structures of power.¹⁷ But whether the focus is global or national, the reach of organizations and social movements beyond nations needed to be confronted, and any use of comparative method

14 'Internationalizing the study of American history: a joint project of the Organization of American Historians and New York University. report on conference III, Villa La Pietra, New York University in Florence, Italy, July 5–8, 1999', <http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/report3.html> (consulted 25 June 2009).

15 Micol Seigel, 'Beyond compare: comparative method after the transnational turn', *Radical History Review*, 91, Winter 2005, pp. 63, 78 (first quote).

16 Jürgen Kocka, 'Comparison and beyond', *History and Theory*, 42, 1, 2003, pp. 39–44.

17 Ian Tyrrell, *Woman's world/woman's empire: the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in international perspective, 1880–1930*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991; Ian Tyrrell, *True gardens of the gods: Californian–Australian environmental reform, 1860–1930*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.

needed to be combined with transnational perspectives. This is exactly what Marc Bloch urged in his famous injunction on the nature of comparative history. He held this method to be best when it involved 'a parallel study of societies that are at once neighbouring and contemporary, exercising a constant mutual influence, exposed throughout their development to the action of the same broad causes just because they are close and contemporaneous, and owing their existence in part at least to a common origin'.¹⁸

Comparative history was not the deepest problem to be confronted by the new advocates of transnational history, however. The fact that *national* comparisons were being criticised showed how it was the national unit of analysis that stood at the centre of concerns over transnational history. Partly because of US comparative historians' insistence on the importance of their study within American history, and partly because of persistent criticisms that the newer approaches denigrated the role of the nation, the advocates of transnational approaches gave considerable attention to the problem of 'nation'. At the 1998 La Pietra meeting and at subsequent meetings, those who favoured the transnational approach conceded that 'the transnational' did not mean that American history sought to obliterate 'the nation'. Not all criticism of the 'transnational' came from defenders of the American nation-state's political record; some came from those who argued that the nation-state had long oppressed minorities, but that oppressed groups, such as African Americans and women, had in the twentieth century been invested with new rights within constitutions and state structures. The struggle to achieve those rights was key to important aspects of American history. As one critic later observed, the transnational could underrate 'the battles to win respect for ethnic, racial, and religious pluralism in a nation that has always been full of newcomers'.¹⁹ Because of such deeply binding conditions of national identity and nationhood, the role of the nation remained a vital debate within the La Pietra group: historians must put national developments in context, and explain the nation in terms of cross-national influences, but must be equally aware that what constitutes the spaces, institutions, and traditions of nations has changed over time. The nation should be decentred, though the exact meaning of this approach could only be worked out in detailed historical practice.

Partly because the origins of the 'transnational' lay in these issues surrounding the role of comparative history and the nation, advocates of the term did not think of their work as a contribution to the study of 'globalization'. This term was generally rejected at La Pietra because of its perceived links with modernization theory, its occasional focus on unidirectional activity, and its implicit historical trajectory towards a more homogeneous world. Such an approach would not do for a historiography whose aim was to contextualize the nation. But it was recognised that study of the multifarious processes of globalization over time in all their complexity and unevenness must be part of transnational history. Transnational history was conceived to encompass global history 'defined as zones of interaction between diverse societies'.²⁰ The United States itself was very clearly from the early

18 Marc Bloch, 'A contribution towards a comparative history of European societies', in *Land and work in mediaeval Europe: selected papers by Marc Bloch*, trans. J. E. Anderson, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967, p. 47.

19 Michael Kazin, 'The vogue of transnational history', *Raritan*, 26, 3, 2007, p. 167.

20 William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Peer Vries, 'Editorial', *Journal of Global History*, 1, 1, 2006, p. 2.

national period connected globally, with its traders visiting all major areas of the world, and missionaries aspiring to global conversion of the world to Christianity. As Thomas Bender put it in the *La Pietra report*,

While this approach seeks to contextualize [the] United States on a global scale insofar as such a scale is pertinent to the questions at hand, it does not propose to subsume United States history under the umbrella of world or global history. We would not have United States history thus erased; rather the aim is to deepen its contextualization and to extend the transnational relations of American history.²¹

'International history' was another competitor term, and one that long predated the present theoretical discussions. From one of this field's most prominent practitioners, Akira Iriye (then president of the American Historical Association), came an influential call in 1989 for a 'transnational cultural history' that provided inspiration for the subsequent debates over the OAH's 'internationalization' project of the 1990s.²² But, in American historical practice, earlier work termed 'international history' tended to focus on inter-state relations, and advocates of transnational history mostly wanted to avoid this limitation. Subsequently, international historians responded to the transnational 'turn' by investing much energy in a culturally focussed history of US foreign relations, particularly on race and gender, in which the journal *Diplomatic History* played an important part.²³ Transnationally oriented historians did not quarrel with such work because international history and transnational history are closely connected. In many historical situations both concepts may be applied, as Erez Manela explicitly does in his path-breaking study of the colonial reception of Wilsonian ideas of national self-determination.²⁴ But the subsequent convergence of styles does not gainsay the theoretical and methodological importance of the original choice of terminology.

Trans-cultural or intercultural relations, terms that approach the more recent interest in 'entangled' histories (roughly translated from the French *histoire croisée*), were other possible competitors discussed by practitioners at La Pietra, but these were considered too broad to analyse the making and remaking of the American nation. The subsequent development, first in France, of *histoire croisée* does come closer to what transnational history was intended to do. Among other things, *histoire croisée*'s supporters abandon the reified synchronic concepts of comparative history, encourage attention to the constant interweaving of influences, and advocate a reflexive approach to the construction of topics. All this is similar to the claims made at La Pietra for transnational history, but the latter is more limited in application. *Histoire croisée* can be applied to all history, not just history where national boundaries are crossed. As Eliga Gould has pointed out, *histoire croisée* allows

21 Thomas Bender, *The La Pietra report: a report to the profession*, <http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/index.html> (consulted 12 July 2008). For a parallel criticism of globalization, see Frederick Cooper, 'What is the concept of globalization good for? An African historian's perspective', *African Affairs*, 100, 2001, pp. 189–213.

22 Akira Iriye, 'The internationalization of history', *American Historical Review*, 94, 1, 1989, pp. 1–10.

23 For example, see Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' imperium: the global production of American domesticity, 1865–1920*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

24 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 222–5.

attention to ‘an interconnected yet porous and open-ended whole’ and is particularly suitable for the many areas of history where nation-states do not extensively intrude. All history is the subject of entanglements, a distinction that makes the term both more useful as a methodological device and less useful as a specific research programme or set of hypotheses. A question remaining with *histoire croisée* is how the selection of phenomena to be connected is to be made. *Histoire croisée* stresses ‘pragmatic induction’, but an operational pragmatism is something shared with the practice and debates of transnational history, if not its theoretical elaboration.²⁵

Similarly ‘trans-border’ or trans-boundary concepts seemed inappropriate, and still do. ‘Transnational’ is less encompassing than the multitude of crossings covered by the terminology of ‘trans-border’, which might refer to borders or boundaries within nation-states, including municipalities; deal with different kinds of ‘borders’, such as the invisible barriers between cultures or ecosystems; or focus on the specific content of frontiers and borderlands.²⁶ ‘Borderlands’ as zones of contact and shared cultures across national borders were certainly a part of the agenda proposed under transnational history, but not its sole preoccupation. The purpose of the transnational label was in fact in one sense more precise than a spray of different labels. Its purpose was to focus on the relationship between nation and factors both beyond and below the level of the nation that shaped the nation and, equally important, that the nation’s institutions shaped.

Though Konrad Jarausch has noted that ‘The vagueness of much transnational rhetoric, often containing quite different elements, requires first of all a clearer definition of its actual meaning,’²⁷ recent debates over ‘borders’ and ‘trans-boundary’ history illustrate the sterility of excessive definition and hair-splitting over categories, and the penchant of historiography for deconstruction, rather than for the production of empirical/historical knowledge. Thomas Bender was alive to this pitfall in 1998, and noted, ‘Perhaps naming should be avoided, in so far as naming it might make merely another specialization or, worse, the latest fashion. In fact, the agenda at hand is not the instigation of a movement, but rather encouragement and some guidance for deepening and expanding the contemporary historical imagination.’ Nevertheless ‘the transnational’ remained the chief term subsequently employed because it allowed American historiography to deal with these problems centred on a powerful organized conception of a national history, and yet to address the perceived need to open American historiography to the possibilities of ‘the contemporary historical imagination’.²⁸

At the same time, as with any of the other concepts proposed, the formulation illuminated some things and not others. In particular, the ‘transnational history’ formulation

25 Gould, ‘Entangled histories’, p. 786; Werner and Zimmermann, ‘Beyond comparison’, pp. 30–50; ‘AHR forum: entangled empires’.

26 For borderland studies, see Samuel Truett and E. Young, eds., *Continental crossroads: remapping U.S.–Mexico borderlands history*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. For a critique of transnational history and the promotion of a ‘trans-border’ alternative, see Joseph E. Taylor III, ‘Boundary terminology’, *Environmental History*, 13, 3, 2008, pp. 454–81.

27 Konrad H. Jarausch, ‘Reflections on transnational history’, 2006, in http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/Trans/forum_trans_index.htm (consulted 4 June 2008).

28 ‘Internationalizing the study of American history: a joint project of the Organization of American Historians and New York University: report on conference II’, <http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/report2.html> (consulted 1 September 2008).

limited the utility of the concept beyond the field of modern history. Its growing prominence led theorists and methodologists to want to apply it elsewhere, but the concept necessarily could not encompass large swathes of the human past. It could help only for history after the period of the legal emergence of nation-states, for which it was explicitly designed. This demarcation line created difficulties when applied to the early European settlement of places such as Canada, Australia, and the United States, where the colonial histories of those modern nations were often seen as transnational experiences, even though no nation existed. Though work on, for example, colonial America could arguably be included in a transnational history of colonization, technically it could only be so as part of an inter-imperial history of Spanish, English, and French colonists, and as part of relations with sovereign Native American peoples. For these interactions, the broader term of intercultural history, or 'connected' or 'entangled' history, was more appropriate.²⁹ In writing pre-national histories of this type, a conscious effort needed to be made to consider experiences that did not contribute to the subsequent nation. Paths that were not taken in the birth of the American nation, for instance, needed to be considered as part of the project to make the history of the American nation contingent and constantly changing. On a global level, the editors of the *Palgrave dictionary of transnational history* chose 1850 as the departure point for study of 'the transnational', but, for American history, historical consensus is more likely to settle around the nation's development in the second half of the eighteenth century, principally from the Declaration of Independence (1776) and/or its Federal Constitution (1789), as an appropriate beginning.

As some subsequent writers have noted, the concept was never intended to be anything other than a heuristic one, whose limits must be recognized. The term's use could not, Jarausch argues, 'presume to be a universal wrench that manages to fix all historical problems' and practitioners had also to recognize that their work was not entirely new; it relied on the many approaches accumulated since the beginning of professional historiography, where strains of thinking anticipated the interest in locating nations within regional, imperial, or global themes.³⁰ Nevertheless, for the writing of American history it is clear that the transnational formulation has been the most important way of expanding the horizons of US historians.

Since 1990, considerable effort has gone into writing transnational histories, and the same explicit agenda has developed in other countries, with major work being done in Europe. Jarausch writes of younger German historians responding 'to a growing sense of interconnectedness, stemming from the dynamics of the globalization process'. These historians have used the concept as 'a rallying cry ... for venturing into horizons beyond their own nation'.³¹ However, the growth of *transnationale Geschichte*³² within German historiography underlines, at least in part, the concept's importance as a reaction to a dominant

29 Gould, 'Entangled histories'; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories: notes toward a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3, 1997, pp. 735–62.

30 Jarausch, 'Reflections'; Ian Tyrrell, 'Making nations/making states: American historians in the context of empire', *Journal of American History*, 86, 3, 1999, pp. 1015–44.

31 Jarausch, 'Reflections'.

32 Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz, *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006.

tradition of national exceptionalism – the *Sonderweg* or ‘special path’ in the German case. The comparison with US historiography confirms this function in the trajectory of transnational history’s development.³³

In addition to demarcating transnational history from other competing or complementary concepts, there was and still is a need to delineate the different ways in which the term might be deployed in the practice of history. Application of the term can be highly diverse. Using cases mainly from American history, I shall specify four different ways in which transnational history has been developing in US history: as framing contexts; as patterns of exchange; as centripetal clusters of power; and as transnational circulations and networks. These types overlap to some extent and elements of each can be found in specific concrete histories.

Many topics in US history would simply benefit from providing a wider context than the nation by acknowledging that similar events or experiences occurred elsewhere. This approach is ultimately derived from Lawrence Veysey’s claim in 1979 to see American history as the product of global forces, such as shared experiences of urbanization, modernization, and industrialization.³⁴ Veysey thereby challenged the ‘autonomy’ of American history. To frame problems in this way would not be to deny national and regional differences but to balance inward-looking accounts with broader perspectives. The range of specific research topics that could be considered in this vein is large because Veysey had a point. When he wrote in the late 1970s, US history was indeed often considered in isolation. This point is reinforced by the way in which Veysey’s call for putting US history in context met strong challenges from prominent historians who, in the case of Carl Degler, complained that such an approach was ‘ahistorical’ and would homogenize US history, stripping from its study the search for national distinctiveness.³⁵

Since the 1980s, it has become more common to acknowledge that events in the United States are part of broader patterns. One of the most recent attempts to put American history in such a context is Edward Davies’ *The United States in World History* (2006).³⁶ In moves reminiscent of Veysey’s trans-cultural approach, Davies stresses themes common to US and modern world history such as shared migration, the global trade in commodities, and processes such as corporate development and industrialization, albeit with national variations in ideology, power, and the diffusion of technology. Davies comes at the problem of American history from a global history perspective. As is appropriate for a brief synthesis, he writes in broad-brush strokes of trends stemming from systemic global forces, rather than concentrating on specific transnational connections. A similar point could be made about other, more specialized accounts that have emphasized transnational parallels. The cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *Three New Deals* focuses on the similarities that emerge from the common social situation of Germany, the United States, and Italy in the face of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The existence of political systems vastly different from the

33 Patel, ““Transnations” among “transnations”?”, *passim*.

34 Lawrence Veysey, ‘The autonomy of American history reconsidered’, *American Quarterly*, 31, 4, 1979, pp. 455–77.

35 Carl N. Degler, ‘Remaking American history’, *Journal of American History*, 67, 1, 1980, p. 16.

36 Edward J. Davies II, *The United States in world history*, New York: Routledge, 2006.

American does not preclude analysis of striking parallels in social, economic, and political responses, because all three countries were facing a global economic catastrophe and shared problems of modernity.³⁷

Corrective studies that put US history in a global (or regional) framework are most satisfying as transnational history where they are able to show not simply parallels or global contexts but also material or intellectual connections. In the New Deal case, the back-to-the-land movement in conservation policies in 1930s America discussed by Schivelbusch was not only a widely shared response to the Depression. German nature protection and concepts of regionalism, for example, were studied by prominent Americans and reported back in the United States.³⁸ Yet relatively little work has been done to draw out such connections and assess their significance for a wide variety of American history topics, even though they are integral to the agenda of US history 'in context', to which American transnational history was initially addressed.

What might be termed a 'framing contexts' approach draws most heavily upon the debates over American transnational history when discussion centres on the simultaneous operation of different geographical scales of history. The 'causes' of a particular event might be not purely local but instead operate simultaneously on different geographical and temporal scales, namely the local, regional, national, transnational, and global.³⁹ In a reflection on his earlier work on American industrial workers, *Class and community: the industrial revolution in Lynn* (1976), Alan Dawley noted in 2000 that the history of Lynn, Massachusetts would need, in the light of modern historiographical concerns, to be reconsidered not only as a history of class struggle within the context of the national political culture of Jacksonian America, the Civil War, and the Gilded Age, but also as a story of processes that had their tentacles in distant regions. He argued that contemporary historiographical awareness of global and transnational approaches made this wider frame of reference necessary. The importation of strike-breakers from China in 1870 to Massachusetts was one such example of transnational processes that impinged upon the town in ways that previous generations of US historians had neglected.⁴⁰

Little monographic work of this type has yet been done, though highly skilled historians are investigating local events through different geographical scales. Moon-Hu Jung has sensitively documented how the transnational phenomenon of Chinese indentured labour imports influenced American sugar-plantation society in Louisiana after the Civil War. Planters first obtained supplies of 'coolie' labour from Cuba and later, in 1870, from San Francisco, when Cuba's anti-Spanish revolution began to disorganize the economy and labour trade there. Such importations raised many hackles nationally and locally, and contributed to movements to advance white supremacy in the aftermath of Reconstruction's

37 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.

38 Paul Sutter, *Driven wild: how the fight against automobiles launched the modern wilderness movement*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002, pp. 96, 318.

39 Richard White, 'The nationalization of nature', *Journal of American History*, 86, 3, 1999, pp. 1015–44.

40 Alan Dawley, 'Preface', *Class and community: the industrial revolution in Lynn*, 25th anniversary edition, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. xxv; see also Andrew Gyory, *Closing the gate: race, politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

demise.⁴¹ Another compelling example is Thomas Andrews' *Killing for coal*. He takes the case of the Ludlow, Colorado miners' strike and massacre of 1914 as an episode that can be enriched in the context of the environmental history of coal mining, and the transformation of modern society by fossil fuels. National boundaries are repeatedly breached in Andrews' study. Coal mining becomes part of a transnational story: the miners come from Poland, Mexico, Britain, and other places; it is not the nation that moulds them into a strike-prone workforce, with its own conception of rights, but the 'workface': the intersection of workplace, company-town living arrangements, and the actual experience of environmental hazards. The analytical frame of reference ranges across time to consider the transformation of coal into energy as a pattern reproduced in modern third-world and newly developing societies. Ludlow is a site through which flows the history of energy, the economics of the coal industry, transnational migration patterns, and the history of labour conflict. Andrews' aim is not to write a treatise on transnational history but to bring labour and environmental history together, and to understand what he calls 'interconnections' across the globe that are responsible for transformations of both the human and the non-human worlds.⁴²

A second transnational perspective in US history concerns connected flows between geographical areas; these transnational 'exchanges', as they are sometimes called, are studied within fixed (national) sites of transmission. Here the 'transnational' is not a framing context for local or national studies, or one of several overlying spatial dimensions, but is central to substantive issues shared within and without a national unit. The transmission of ideas and personnel across national boundaries for Progressivism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a key example. Daniel Rodgers' much noted *Atlantic crossings: social politics in a progressive age* indicates that research centred on social movements, reformers, and intellectual history has made important uses of the transnational theme of exchange. Others, in fields such as environmental history, have pursued a similar vein but have emphasized the multilateral nature and pointed to the varied regional geography of such exchanges. Though much of this work has had an Atlantic history base, as reflected in Rodgers' study, ideas, personnel, and institutions have circulated across a variety of nations in all regions, including the Pacific as much as the Atlantic.⁴³

'Exchange' history, as the term implies, requires a simultaneous commitment to reciprocal processes across boundaries, not just influences from outside upon the inside. At the same time, the flow of information and the transnational exchanges that occurred were often unequal, even though they were multilateral and reciprocal.⁴⁴ For this reason, even

41 Moon-Hu Jung, *Coolies and cane: race, labor, and sugar in the age of emancipation*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

42 Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for coal: America's deadliest labor war*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 291.

43 Peter J. Coleman, *Progressivism and the world of reform: New Zealand and the origins of the American welfare state*, Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1987; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic crossings: social politics in a progressive age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998; Ian Tyrrell, 'Transatlantic progressivism in women's temperance and suffrage', in David Gutzke, ed., *Britain and transnational progressivism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 134–48.

44 Gutzke, *Britain and transnational progressivism*; Coleman, *Progressivism*; Ian Tyrrell, 'Looking eastward: Pacific and global perspectives on American history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', *Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 18, 2007, pp. 41–57. For environmental history, the seminal text in regard to reciprocity is Alfred W. Crosby Jr, *The Columbian exchange: biological and cultural consequences of 1492*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972.

where historians of transnational exchange incorporate these variations, empirical studies need to be sensitive to unequal power relationships.

Exchange may be asymmetrical to the extent that the outward or inward transnational impact becomes the overwhelming focus. For American history, this genre already looms large, because of the considerable power and global presence of the United States since the early twentieth century. The study of Americanization, for instance in Europe, is a highly developed subject within transnational approaches to history.⁴⁵ Within this genre, earlier studies focussed on the transfer of cultures or transplanting of institutions.⁴⁶ Numerous works have dealt with aspects of the 'outward thrust' of US imperialism and documented the expansion of the United States as a dynamic process in which the nation inevitably engages transnationally with a variety of nations and peoples.⁴⁷

So powerful may this one-way influence be that it may undermine in some circumstances the very idea of transnational transfer. For periods where the United States' economic or political influence has been a dominant one, American experience may subsume global experience. Late twentieth-century Americans who travel abroad may not circulate transnationally but occupy an 'American space' created by the export of American culture when they inhabit Starbucks or stay at American-style hotels.⁴⁸ Much work needs to be done on working out what 'American space' might have constituted in the past, through studies of expatriate communities. Excellent beginnings have been made by such works as Eileen P. Scully's study of the operation of extra-territorial law in treaty port China from 1844 to 1942.⁴⁹

Economic history offers much scope for the study of American power abroad and its transnational connections. Studies of tariff policy and trade, and of multinational business corporations and expatriate businessmen offer obvious potential. However, in the form of business history and histories of foreign investment and international trade, such work is not new. In US history, the pioneering research of Mira Wilkins on what were known as multinational corporations was especially notable.⁵⁰ But such studies were not self-consciously conceived

45 Examples include Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible empire: America's advance through twentieth-century Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005; R. Laurence Moore and Maurizio Vaudagna, eds., *The American century in Europe*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003; Philip Bell and Roger Bell, eds., *Americanization and Australia*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998; Rob Kroes and Robert Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

46 Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of duty: American missionary wives in nineteenth-century Hawaii*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989; Mary Brown Bullock, *An American transplant: the Rockefeller Foundation and Peking Union Medical College*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982.

47 On 'Williams School' foreign policy studies of this type, see Paul M. Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams: the tragedy of empire*, New York: Routledge, 1995; William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a way of life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. See also Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American dream: American economic and cultural expansion, 1890-1945*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

48 Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational nation: United States history in global perspective since 1789*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, ch. 14.

49 Eileen P. Scully, *Bargaining with the state from afar: American citizenship in treaty port China, 1844-1942*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001; for American expatriates, there is no satisfactory single study, but see Maureen Montgomery, *'Gilded prostitution': money, migration and marriage, 1870-1914*, London: Routledge, 1989.

50 Mira Wilkins, *The emergence of multinational enterprise: American business abroad from the colonial era to 1914*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.

as transnational history, and the work of the new transnational history has stressed social and cultural topics, neglecting economic history in the process. That said, recent research relating key themes of US history such as slavery and the Civil War to global economic changes suggests a revival of interest in economic transnational connections.⁵¹

One area in which historians have begun to treat the extension of American space and power as a transnational topic is at the intersection of economic and environmental history. The US metropole was transformed by the spread of an American resource-based empire catering to consumerism's growth – commonly dated from the 1920s, though elements can be found further back. This mass consumerism was intrinsically connected to the flows of raw materials from an expanding informal American empire. The appetite for Cuban sugar, Colombia coffee, and the United Fruit Company's products coming from 'banana' republics sustained important aspects of American consumerism and had transformative environmental impacts on other nations.⁵² Those who sought metals and fuel did likewise. The Phelps-Dodge Copper Mining Co. (now part of Freeport McKean) remade the cultural and natural landscapes of northern Sonora in the late nineteenth century, as Samuel Truett shows. He treats this 'growing transnational empire in copper' and its accompanying landscape changes using ideas derived from borderland and environmental studies.⁵³

Some historians especially impressed by the extent and persuasiveness of American power (whether in favour of that power or not) find transnational approaches insufficiently attuned to such 'realities' of history. Although the distinguished American diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber does not use the phraseology explicitly in his essay 'The United States and Europe in an age of American unilateralism', asymmetrical power is the burden of his argument. He argues that proponents of transnational history underestimate twentieth-century US power. Transnational history he regards as defective because the United States has been able to 'shape that transnational context' concerning 'how Americans used power to formulate and extend ... their influence across cultures'.⁵⁴

Yet LaFeber's comment is at odds with an important postcolonial dimension in transnational history – showing how the powerless and powerful engage and influence one another. Influenced by the insights from outside US history by Ann Stoler, Frederic Cooper, and others that metropole and colony had to be studied within the same 'analytic field',⁵⁵

51 Sven Beckert, 'Emancipation and empire: reconstructing the worldwide web of cotton production in the age of the American Civil War', *American Historical Review*, 109, 5, 2004, pp. 1405–38. See also Peter A. Coclanis, 'Distant thunder: the creation of a world market in rice and the transformations it wrought', *American Historical Review*, 98, 4, 1993, pp. 1050–78.

52 For a synthesis, see Richard Tucker, *Insatiable appetite: the United States and the ecological degradation of the tropical world*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

53 Samuel Truett, *Fugitive landscapes: the forgotten history of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 56.

54 Walter LaFeber, 'The United States and Europe in an age of American unilateralism', in Moore and Vaudagna, *American Century*, pp. 26, 45 (quote); for an example of the United States as global space, see Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the new global capitalism*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.

55 See the essays in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by empire: geographies of intimacy in North American history*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006; Ann Laura Stoler and Frederic Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony: rethinking a research agenda', in Ann Laura Stoler and Frederic Cooper, eds., *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997, p. 15.

American historians began in the 1990s to take more account of the cultures of empire. Modern studies of US imperialism include complex patterns of collaboration and resistance, and the impact of the colonial experience back upon the United States. Even as power is asymmetrical, influences are exerted multilaterally and in reciprocal fashion. When cultural concepts and artefacts cross boundaries, they are reshaped and reinterpreted in the process, and are often re-exported to the land or lands of origin.⁵⁶

Attention is now being given in US historiography to resolution of this tension between history as ‘exchanges’ and as imperial ‘power’, especially through the concept of transnational activity as networked relationships. Though inspired in part by the work of sociologists studying transnational activism, work on networked relationships is largely empirical in nature; the generalizations that sociologists have produced on transnational networks are derived from description rather than theory.⁵⁷ Historians have a key role to play here. They need to track the movements of personnel – who they knew, who they influenced, where they went, what forms of organization they used. Pioneering studies follow the trail of personal contacts among elites. One exemplary work is that of Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds on the global circulation and production of racial barriers in the Anglo-Saxon ‘settler’ societies of the late nineteenth century.⁵⁸ In *Drawing the global colour line*, they trace transnational networks through the writings and personal ties of the late nineteenth-century Anglo-American elite. Before Lake and Reynolds’ work, US historians had rarely considered the close relationship between immigration restriction and anti-African-American legislation in the United States on the one hand, and racial legislation in the white dominions of the British Empire on the other. The standard study of this topic was completed by Robert Huttenback,⁵⁹ a historian of the British colonial experience, in work bereft of these American connections.

The potential for resolving the exchange/power conflict comes from the fact that networks are not all equal. As Charles Maier observes, the ‘nodal’ points of networks must be mapped. The nation is one of the ‘nodes’ that operates upon transnational networks, distorting them in the process.⁶⁰ But networks themselves are both sites and conduits of power. In the nineteenth century, the wiring of the world through cable, the power of British

56 Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds., *Cultures of U. S. imperialism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993; Amy Kaplan, *The anarchy of empire in the making of U.S. culture*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002; Paul A. Kramer, *The blood of government: race, empire, the United States, and the Philippines*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006; Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: military occupation and the culture of U.S. imperialism, 1915–1940*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001; Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco Scarano, eds., *Colonial crucible: empire in the making of the modern American state*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.

57 Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders: advocacy networks in international politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998; Richard Price, ‘Transnational civil society and advocacy in world politics’, *World Politics*, 55, 4, 2003, pp. 579–606; Sidney Tarrow, *The new transnational activism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Manuel Castells, *The rise of the network society*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996.

58 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the global colour line: white men’s countries and the international challenge of racial equality*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008.

59 Robert A. Huttenback, *Racism and empire: white settlers and colored immigrants in the British self-governing colonies, 1830–1910*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976.

60 Charles Maier, ‘Discussion on transnational history’, 2006, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-german&month=0601&week=d&msg=fz4or79bUjZXO9rM/LT0ZQ&user=&pw> (consulted 30 June 2008).

or other navies and armies, the development of new forms of transportation, and webs of financial power constituted important networks.⁶¹ Just as our modern worldwide web is not equal in access or design, past networks were not random in origin but integral to the contours of imperial power and international commerce. These approaches to networks may reconcile the study of transnational ‘exchanges’ on the one hand, and imperialism and power on the other. Within current studies, ‘exchanges’ do not tend to give enough credit to ‘power’ relations, while the latter remains unconnected to the broader setting of transnational relationships that help to explain the distinctive patterns of American cultural, economic, and political projections across the globe. For the history of the US empire’s formation from the 1880s to the 1920s, a huge web of transnational relations developed from the growing presence abroad of American travellers, businessmen, expatriates, missionaries, reformers, and others. The activities of these groups did not ‘cause’ American imperialism but collectively drew the nation to the edge of empire, formally speaking. That is, commercial, religious, and cultural transnational connections implicated the nation in specific circumstances that ultimately produced formal US imperialism from 1898 onwards.⁶²

The growing interest in networks is linked to a final notion of transnational history developed since the 1990s, one that does not focus upon nation at all but upon what might be termed a ‘transnational space’. It is at this point that transnational analysis, as a strategy for broadening the sometimes parochial field of US history, could contribute to something more general: an approach to creating a new kind of history. This approach deals with transnational phenomena and their material and mental circulation rather than any particular national circumstances. Transnational history may trace the working out of an idea such as human rights or national self-determination,⁶³ the life stories of individuals challenging boundaries of race, class, and nationality,⁶⁴ or the activities of sub-cultures outside the jurisdiction of states (such as eighteenth-century pirates).⁶⁵ It may chart a social movement, or analyse organizations that are explicitly transnational in their operation.⁶⁶ The space referred to as transnational may be a mental rather than a physical one, as with aspects

61 Daniel R. Headrick, *The invisible weapon: telecommunications and international politics, 1851–1945*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Headrick, *The tools of empire: technology and European imperialism in the nineteenth century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

62 Tyrrell, *Transnational nation*, ch. 10; see the important but neglected work, Merle Curti, *American philanthropy abroad*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963; cf. Richard Hofstadter, ‘Cuba, the Philippines, and manifest destiny’, in *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*, New York: Knopf, 1965, pp. 145–87.

63 Manela, *Wilsonian moment*; Paul Gordon Lauren, *The evolution of international human rights: visions seen*, 2nd edition, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Major American work has focused on abolitionism, for which see, for example, David Brion Davis, *Slavery and human progress*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the world: America’s vision for human rights*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, focuses on the export of an American idea.

64 Martha Hodes, *The sea captain’s wife: a true story of love, race, and war in the nineteenth century*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

65 For example, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The many-headed hydra: the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic*, Boston, MA: Beacon, 2000.

66 Madeleine Herren, ‘Governmental internationalism and the beginning of a new world order in the late nineteenth century’, in Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann, eds., *The mechanics of internationalism: culture, society, and politics from the 1840s to the first world war*, London and Oxford: German Historical Institute and Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 121–44.

of the African-American diaspora,⁶⁷ though the individual or collective entity may move between different geographical spaces as well. Transnational history can in these cases put 'the nation' to the periphery of discussion. Within American history, the case of the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) from 1884 to 1920, and the cluster of international feminist groups that sprang up after 1900 with American leaders such as Carrie Chapman Catt of the International Woman's Suffrage Association, come close to meeting this stricter definition of transnational. Certainly the nation impinged upon temperance and suffrage women's lives at many points, but such transnational actors created counter-national structures, their own collective sense of sisterhood, and their own transnational 'public spaces'.⁶⁸

Sociologists have been exploring the concept of transnational spaces for a decade or more, yet this approach has not made much impact on American history, despite the availability of a large number of historical examples.⁶⁹ Women of the WCTU were sent from 1884 to the 1930s as round-the-world missionaries; they often travelled in pairs and lived substantial parts of their lives outside the United States, without any fixed abode. They travelled as part of a global network of likeminded women, tapping the local WCTU affiliates and missionaries in many countries for funds and places to stay. They explicitly developed the ideology of a global sisterhood and took part in 'World's WCTU conventions'. They served as 'superintendents' of departments of WCTU work responsible for the global implementation of WCTU policy on subjects from prohibition and anti-opium and anti-prostitution campaigns, to woman's suffrage, and international peace. With a membership in more than forty national affiliates and with three-quarters of a million members by the 1920s, they developed, in effect, a 'world' consciousness. Admittedly this organization was conceived by Westerners and based on Protestant Christianity. It relied on networks of Western power to spread its message, and its initiatives required national laws for enforcement. But it promoted practices that won support from a variety of non-Western converts, often attacked Western governments for their policies in the colonial world, and observed no colour bar in international work.

The topic of regular Christian missionaries is similarly one that is in need of reworking using transnational analysis. The historian Ryan Dunch emphasizes that 'missions were uniquely placed' for what he calls 'intercultural communication by virtue of their institutional structures'. They interacted with the host society and with other missionary groups. Through mission boards, they 'remained connected to their home countries and churches, and to missionaries of their own denomination or order working all over the world', through 'correspondence, periodical literature, and conferences'. Influences on them were 'highly diverse and international'.⁷⁰ In the case of peripatetic American missionaries of

67 Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: black public life in Harlem, 1919–1939*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 161–2, 209–13.

68 Tyrrell, *Woman's world*, chs. 4–6; Leila Rupp, *Worlds of women: the making of an international women's movement*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997; on public space, see Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trans. Thomas Burger (1962), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.

69 Thomas Faist, *The volume and dynamics of international migration and transnational social spaces*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

70 Ryan Dunch, 'Beyond cultural imperialism: cultural theory, Christian missions, and global modernity', *History and Theory*, 41, 3, 2002, p. 320.

the 1880s such as Margaret and Mary Leitch, one sees the forging of a public, transnational space through cooperation with reform organizations of a variety of stripes across several countries. Starting with work among the ex-slaves in Virginia in the 1870s, these sisters then spent seven formative years in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) before moving on in 1887 to organize an informal transnational missionary enterprise that raised money in Britain and the United States for missionaries and humanitarian work.⁷¹ In the process, the sisters self-consciously constructed a Christian, transnational space, and rejected the idea of a purely 'national' Christianity. 'In the work for Christ and for immortal souls', they wrote, it was 'shame even to mention the question of nationality'.⁷² They cooperated with English missionaries in Ceylon,⁷³ and scolded the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions for not wishing to contribute to non-denominational missionary causes and for providing more parsimonious funding for their work than came from English and Scottish purses. The Leitch sisters, like the WCTU round-the-world-missionaries, moved *through* the nation-state, negotiating its institutions and making use of them, but mentally they occupied a different space from the nation as much as they regularly moved physically between nations and constructed a shared Christian culture beyond nation. Such a study is not one purely linked to any specific national history.

Other sets of transnational public spaces could be considered. One concerns the vast array of international non-governmental organizations that flourished in the period 1870–1914 – from medical experts and scientists to peace activists; another set concerns those associated with the League of Nations in the 1920s, where a more explicit space for political and social work developed for the first time.⁷⁴ Work in Germany is proceedings on the latter set of topics within European history, and on Europe's links with Asia in voluntary organizational work.⁷⁵ But European links with the American history of NGOs have been almost entirely ignored. Even though the United States was not a member of the League of Nations, its citizens (and some times its governments) participated in the work of international organizations from the 1880s to the 1920s, long before the formation of the United Nations. Cross-national institutions such as the Red Cross provide excellent examples from the 1880s and 1890s, yet work on Clara Barton and the American Red Cross remains skimpy. The whole field of what might be termed American 'humanitarianism' is under-studied.⁷⁶ Merle Curti's *American philanthropy abroad* surveyed relief efforts that flowered in the

71 Mary and Margaret Leitch, *Seven years in Ceylon: stories of mission life*, New York: American Tract Society, 1890.

72 American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, R. 456, Mary and Margaret W. Leitch to 'Mrs Smith' (née Emily Maria Fairbank, of Tillypally, Ceylon), 19 April 1890 (underlining in original).

73 Ibid., Margaret W. Leitch to N. G. Clark, 3 April 1882.

74 Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann, 'Introduction: the mechanics of internationalism', in Geyer and Paulmann, *Mechanics*, pp. 22–3.

75 Ibid.; Herren, 'Governmental internationalism', pp. 121–44; 'A3 The real fiction of unreal equality: networking the international system', University of Heidelberg Research Clusters, 2009, <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/research/areas/a/projects> (consulted 16 April 2009).

76 On 'humanitarianism', see Gil Gott, 'Imperial humanitarianism: history of an arrested dialectic', in Berta Esperanza Hernandez-Truyol, ed., *Moral imperialism: a critical anthology*, New York: New York University Press, 2002, pp. 19–39.

1890s through such drives as the Armenian massacres relief of 1895–96 and the Indian famine relief of 1897–98, but only scratched the surface of this topic. Though providing potential leads, recent work by Adam Hochschild and others only lightly touches upon the American aspects of this ‘humanitarianism’, and its relation to both imperialism and missionary work awaits further research.⁷⁷

A new transnational history of missionaries, cosmopolitan humanitarians and feminists, scientists, social reformers, public health officials, and others like them is not a substitute for colonial and national histories of the non-Western world. The transnational approach would, however, do something novel. It would explore the uncharted spaces between empire and colony, nation and nation, and Western and non-Western worlds, in processes where multiple identities were forged.

This concept of a transnational space suggested here is complementary to that in diasporic studies.⁷⁸ Diasporas operate as a mental and material space that crosses national processes as much as transnational organizations of American origin did. But, just as American transnational spaces have existed within a context of developing national identities and state formations, diasporas are not completely divorced from the national context. In fact, the United States has been a nurturing ground for transnational diaspora, as in the case of Irish or early Italian nationalism.⁷⁹ The broad field of black diasporic, Pan-African, and back-to-Africa causes is attracting increasing attention. From Martin R. Delany in the 1850s to the West Indian-born Marcus Garvey in the 1920s and W. E. B. Du Bois and his eventual migration to Ghana in 1961, American experience generated as well as reflected diasporic sentiment.⁸⁰

Strikingly, studies from *outside* US history are more likely to push the nature of transnational circulatory connections the furthest. Looking at the circulation of ideas about urban planning in *Another global city*, Pierre-Yves Saunier has traced ‘cross national networks of municipal governments as well as intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental programmes in these spheres’.⁸¹ In this project, the contributions vary in spatial context and contents. This newer transnational history goes so far as to question reliance on

77 Curti, *American philanthropy*; Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost: a story of greed, terror, and heroism in colonial Africa*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998; Lauren, *Evolution*, ch. 2.

78 For a general view of diaspora studies, see Ember, Ember, and Skoggard, eds., *Encyclopedia of diasporas*.

79 For much earlier studies, see Harold Marraro, ‘Garibaldi in New York’, *New York History*, 27, April 1946, pp. 182–4; Lawrence J. McCaffrey, ed., *Irish nationalism and the American contribution*, New York: Arno Press, 1976. For a recent study, see Michael Doorley, *Irish-American diaspora nationalism: the Friends of Irish Freedom, 1916–1935*, Portland, OR: Four Courts, 2005. Among US historians, Donna Gabaccia has led the way in developing transnational interpretation of Italian diasporas: see, for example, Gabaccia, *Italy's many diasporas*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2000.

80 Corbould, *Becoming African Americans*, pp. 161–2, 209–13. Among numerous other works, see Irma Watkins Owens, *Blood relations: Caribbean immigrants and the Harlem community, 1900–1930*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996; Kevin Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: black expatriates in the civil rights era*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006, pp. 29, 45; Winston James, *Holding aloft the banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean radicalism in early twentieth-century America*, London: Verso, 1998; Judith Stein, *The world of Marcus Garvey: race and class in modern society*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.

81 Pierre-Yves Saunier profile, 2007, <http://www.h-net.org/people/editors/show.cgi?ID=124605> (consulted 24 September 2008); Pierre-Yves Saunier and Shane Ewen, eds., *Another global city: historical explorations into the transnational municipal moment, 1850–2000*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

territorial concepts. Saunier argues that historians must move beyond self-evident geographical categories to analyse how space is produced socially. This approach puts emphasis upon how networks expand and contract, and are distorted or augmented as human activity proceeds.⁸² Similar ideas have been expressed among Americanists, to be sure. Richard White has urged historians to attend to the social production of different scales of space rather than to treat space as a given container into which data is poured.⁸³ Nevertheless, Saunier wishes to move further from the nation-centred origins of the use of ‘transnational’ history. He, among other mostly European theorists, is attempting to forge an entirely new area of study, more precise than other applications of ‘the transnational’.⁸⁴ Yet Saunier himself notes that, in the *Palgrave dictionary of transnational history*, countries ‘are still the units overwhelmingly handled by the contributors. It is on and in countries that flows originate and end, and it is according to national bearings that we label goods, people, ideas, and funds which are on the move.’⁸⁵ If for no other reason, study of transnational flows beyond nation is unlikely entirely to supplant within American historiography the exploration of transnational forces in a national context.

This judgment is underpinned by one of the most striking effects of transnational history within the United States. Despite occasional professions to the contrary, practitioners have generally decentred US history by contextualizing rather than by deconstructing the nation. That choice may reflect national history’s powerful pull in American historical practice. The intensity of debates within the professional community of US historians has made the ‘national’ part of the transnational project particularly important there. Reflecting the roots of the transnational approach in the reaction against specialization and exceptionalism, efforts have centred on searches for new national syntheses. Within college textbooks, authors are adding transnational perspectives in the form of topical insets and essays supplementing the traditional narrative of a nation.⁸⁶ Other, more learned syntheses deliberately integrate American history with the transnational perspective. Thomas Bender’s *A nation among nations* portrays in a series of episodes new narratives stressing the connectivity of American history to its global context. Bender approaches the topic from key moments wherein transnational parallels and forces applied, starting with the great oceanic age of discoveries. The United States was, Bender argues, not ‘continental’ and inward-looking in orientation in its colonial history but part of an oceanic world, globally connected. He goes on to look at the transformative moment of the American Revolution; early nineteenth-century democracy; the nation-state making of the Civil War period; the formal imperialism of the late nineteenth century; and early twentieth-century Progressive reform. Bender’s view stresses similarities between the United States and comparable Western democracies. Though perfectly aware that there are cross-national differences as well as similarities in the

82 Saunier, ‘Learning by doing’, pp. 173–4; see also Maier, ‘Discussion.’

83 White, ‘Nationalization of nature’.

84 Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of transnational history*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Saunier, ‘Learning by doing’, p. 14.

85 Saunier, ‘Learning by doing’, p. 169.

86 See, for example, Mary Beth Norton et al., *A people and a nation*, 7th edition, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2005; Alan W. Brinkley, *American history: a survey*, 11th edition, Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2003.

story he tells, he is true to the transnational project in showing how events thought to be the product of internal conditions were profoundly influenced by external circumstances. Thus westward expansion in the era of the Louisiana Purchase, usually seen as an internal drive, is shaped by the great Atlantic revolutions of the 1790s, particularly by the impact of the Haitian Revolution on Napoleon's geopolitical ambitions.⁸⁷

At the opposite extreme is Eric Rauchway's attempt in *Blessed among nations* to use the transnational context to explain the growth of American peculiarities. Rauchway uses globalization's late nineteenth-century impacts to analyse changes in American national identity, the growing distinctiveness of the American state, and its political culture produced by the reaction to that transnational encounter.⁸⁸ Rauchway openly embraces this distinctiveness as exceptionalism, but tries to supply a missing ingredient in exceptionalist studies; he illustrates how one scholarly outcome of US transnational history has been to specify the conditions of exceptionalism as part of political culture, a position quite the reverse of the intention of transnational history's promoters. The problem with Rauchway's method is that, like the older comparative literature, it treats the United States as a 'box' into which transnational influences can be poured. The strengthening of national boundaries that occurred in the late nineteenth century is analysed, but the interplay between local and transnational features – as in the reflections of Alan Dawley on Lynn, Massachusetts, or the give and take of the exchange approach – is missing. A more balanced method would explore how the transnational context 'produced' the American nation as a continual making and remaking process, in which the United States was changed by wider influences and yet contributed to these influences.

It is often said by critics of transnational history that the nation holds not only sovereignty but also the key to the identities of citizens, and that the transnational is less important in the process of identity formation for the modern world. Yet it is a misconception to measure off these relationships as factors to be weighed. Looking at external versus internal factors in American history is mistaken, especially for the nineteenth century, when the state was relatively weak and trade, capital, and labour flowed freely. The transnational making of the nation through a variety of borders, from immigration controls to health quarantine to state projects of national memorialization, has occurred decisively only in very recent times – in the American case, like so many others, from the 1880s to the 1940s.

Though many of the examples chosen in this essay come from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where much scholarly work has concentrated, even when the nation-state becomes stronger in the twentieth century, the state itself is produced transnationally. Transnational organizations proliferated in the 1920s and again after the Second World War; the cross-national diplomatic and legal interconnections of the American nation-state grew rather than decreased; and, after the hiatus of the 1930s and 1940s, economic ties strengthened, particularly with the quickening pace of globalization after 1970. Regarding the development of the modern American nation-state, the global context of national

87 Thomas Bender, *A nation among nations: America's place in world history*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

88 Eric Rauchway, *Blessed among nations: how the world made America*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2006. For a more balanced view that emphasizes comparisons as well as transnational aspects, see Carl J. Guarneri, *America in the world: United States history in global context*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

security, economic competition, and demographic change means that the boundaries of the nation had to be made. They did not exist in isolation. National identities have been defined in relation to other identities, including the transnational phenomena than impinge upon the nation as it is constructed and reconstructed repeatedly. Transnational history historicizes and denaturalizes the nation, a theme highly applicable to other historiographies than the American. Even if US transnational history achieved only this aim, and no more, it would make a valuable contribution to the complementary and larger corpus of global histories.

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