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Connelly Roundtable

Thomas Borstelmann

Let me show my cards. I am partially responsible for this interchange, since I had the pleasure of chairing the program committee for the 2010 OAH annual meeting and organizing the plenary session on “The United States and the World” at which Matt Connelly first delivered this paper. I invited him because I knew he would be insightful and I hoped he would be provocative. The audience and I were not disappointed on either count. I have been an enthusiastic (though not uncritical¹) fan of Matt’s work for a long time.

I am a bit older than Matt and have watched the same changes he describes. I began graduate school in the 1980s at Duke University, when there were still *two* diplomatic historians in that department, Bill Scott (a Europeanist) and Calvin Davis (an Americanist).² After their retirements, neither was replaced. Social history dominated the landscape, with cultural history sweeping up fast behind it. Duke kept its position in military history, at least, thereby blunting some of the decidedly appropriate criticism of declining attention to diplomatic history, in a nation of unusual international influence and repeated military engagements abroad.

Those social historians taught me a great deal, particularly about power and democracy. I did not train as a historian of U.S. foreign relations in a typical way—I had no fellow

graduate students in the field—but Peter Wood, Bill Chafe, Larry Goodwyn, and others gave me an angle of vision onto U.S. international history perhaps different from that more commonly available in other institutions. Their attention to social change and the uses of power on a local level in the United States grounded my own more international research interests. Such a grounding might become still more unusual if our field—whatever we call it—were to position itself primarily, following Matt’s suggestion, as a subsection of international and transnational history.

I am not especially worried about loosening our links to domestic social history, however. Ours is a mighty big pasture, expanding all the time. We can gauge its breadth from the vitality of SHAFR’s annual meetings and the diversity of the articles published in *Diplomatic History*, as Matt notes. I think of us as the hinge between domestic U.S. history and world history: we function like a traditional Western barroom door, swinging both ways, and doing so easily, readily, continuously. Sure, there are a few dust-ups and briefly raised voices on each side of the door, and sometimes it feels more like *Blazing Saddles* (1974) than *Unforgiven* (1992). But connecting the American past to the global past is a crucial business, one that requires a solid foundation on each side of the door.

We do this in an awful lot of different ways. Some SHAFR folks have written brilliantly on the domestic roots of American international power, which was the subject, after all, of much of the thrust of cold war revisionism in its various forms. How Americans think about and understand the world beyond their borders remains a matter intimately connected to domestic developments in the United States—to daily life on farms in California’s central valley, in school classrooms in small-town Minnesota, on streets in south Florida, in churches along Colorado’s Front Range, in fast-food joints in urban Houston, in retail outlets in the suburbs of Philadelphia, in college classrooms from Seattle to southwest Georgia. Productive work in the big SHAFR pasture includes attention to culture, regionalism, economics, ideology, and a myriad of other features of the sometimes peculiar American landscape. Our field, whatever we call it, is not subsumed by U.S. history. We are not limited to U.S. history. But we are deeply embedded in U.S. history. We cannot float free of that very particular past into some larger sphere of international or

transnational history without a very real loss of historical understanding.³ Matt acknowledges the enduring importance of local and national history in his wise warning against internationalist chic.

Our door swings the other way, too. We need more—much more—transnational research and research in archives abroad. International research is hardly new in SHAFR, where area specialists have long led the way with their unusually rich knowledge of the histories and archives of other nations and regions.⁴ But we need more of it. We will also benefit from the perspectives of world history, an integrating and transnational field whose growth in the past twenty years can be tracked in the membership lists of the World History Association and the pages of the *Journal of World History*, established in 1990.⁵ World history not only broadens our view but also tends to lengthen its chronology, saving us from being too focused on the twentieth century. We should certainly shed any remnants of defensiveness about our position in the broad discipline of History or the sub-discipline of U.S. history and exercise genuine leadership in the ongoing and multifaceted project of the repositioning of U.S. history within world history.

One way to imagine how U.S. history fits in the broader sweep of world and transnational history is to think in terms of connections and comparisons. Connections are everywhere; they are the bread and butter of our field, the most obvious “relations” in foreign relations. But comparisons offer another form of relations, one that is particularly helpful in engaging students and readers in a political culture still pervaded by assumptions of American exceptionalism. Just what is and what is not distinctive about the United States, including how it relates to the rest of the world, is a question that can be answered only through careful engagement with the histories of other nations, empires, cultures, and regions. In our increasingly globally conscious era, it will no longer do to analyze the American Revolution, American slavery, the Civil War, or U.S. imperialism as though they were phenomena unique to these shores. They were not.

SHAFR members and leadership will do well, at every opportunity, to combine their expertise on connections between the United States and the rest of the world with the growing work of comparativists, who are placing U.S. history within the broad sweep of a global past.

One central figure in this effort is Tom Bender, whose book *A Nation Among Nations* offers perhaps the best synthesis to date of U.S. history and world history and who served as the chair of the OAH plenary session at which Matt Connelly delivered the original version of this paper.⁶ Whatever its name and the name of its journal, SHAFR should be at the very forefront of both U.S. history and global history, for we are now in an era for which our field is peculiarly well placed to provide leadership. In history departments everywhere, SHAFR members should be the most curious, the most engaged, and the most widely read participants, building links in all directions and shaping the future of the historical profession.

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Notes:

1. For example, Connelly’s remarkable global history, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA, 2008) does not to my mind adequately engage the enormous and probably dire consequences of population growth across the past two centuries. This increase in world population is at the center of John McNeill’s brilliant *Something New Under The Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York, 2000).
2. I did not work closely with either one of them, choosing instead an alternative path to a doctorate, SHAFR membership, a long stint at Cornell, and an eventual position in world history at Nebraska.
3. My own commitment in this direction is evident in the courses I teach, ranging from world history to U.S. history, and in a U.S. history textbook I coauthored, along with Jacqueline Jones, Peter Wood, Elaine Tyler May, and Vicki Ruiz: *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York, 2008).
4. A particularly distinguished and now fairly senior group of area specialists in East Asia comes immediately to mind, including Michael Hunt on China, John Dower on Japan, and Bruce Cumings on Korea.
5. I have a forthcoming historiographical essay on this topic. See “A Worldly Tale: Global Influences on the Historiography of U.S. Foreign Relations,” in Michael J. Hogan and Frank Costigliola, eds., *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941* (New York, 2011).
6. Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York, 2006). See also Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2002). My own next contribution in this direction will be *More Equal, Less Equal: A New History of the 1970s* (Princeton, 2011).