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U.S. History and Beyond

Thomas "Tim" Borstelmann

Nearly all readers who have persisted to this point in our roundtable discussion understand the depth of commitment required to write serious book-length history and recognize that most of us are nonetheless likely to reach very small audiences. Such disjuncture between effort and result suggests something about historians—doggedness, perhaps, or other less positive qualities that many of those with whom we live might offer up in an honest moment (mulishness, obsessiveness, irrelevance). Indeed, we seem to be almost the last scholarly discipline that writes mostly books. But this disjuncture also helps explain the scale of my gratitude for receiving such careful readings and critiques of my book from four serious scholars whose work I admire. I thank them each for their time, their generosity, and their insights.

The reviewers use phrases such as "does an extraordinary service" (Christopher Jespersen), "does offer a broad, and quite satisfying, interpretive framework" (Rebecca de Schweinitz), "has made a significant contribution" using "an enormous number of sources" (Scott Kaufman), and offers "an ambitious project . . . that he substantially achieves" (Daniel Sargent). I am tempted to fold my cards, collect my earnings, tip my hat, and head for home. No such luck, reader: the reviewers, as expected, also offer criticisms and suggestions, and these deserve to be engaged. So let me sharpen up my knives and see if I can carve into this particular feast of history and ideas in a useful manner.

Writing a book encompassing both the history of the United States and the history of the world across a decade practically guarantees that attentive readers will find information missing or interpretations shaded in ways they dislike. The canvas is simply too large for unanimity. Editor Andy Johns deserves credit for assembling a roundtable of historians with such a diversity of research interests. Christopher Jespersen and Rebecca de Schweinitz seem primarily concerned about issues on the domestic side of

the story, while Scott Kaufman and Daniel Sargent lean more to issues on the international and global side. It is tempting to invoke the old adage that if one is making people unhappy on every side of an issue, one must be doing something right. This is not quite the case here, but the range and diversity of the reviewers' concerns do highlight some of the challenges of trying to write history on this scale.

Jespersen likes "the scope and ambition of the project" but wants more analysis of the Tenerife air disaster in the Azores, more discussion of professional basketball, and more emphasis on Gerald Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon. De Schweinitz wishes for more childhood history and more social history of race reformers. Kaufman hopes for more popular culture, including American television, and more British history, including more Monty Python, but less "Americentrism." Sargent contemplates more Russian and Indian history. The difficulty of writing this kind of history persuasively for all readers should be crystal clear by now. One is tempted, almost, to dive back into one's own small scholarly foxhole and settle back down into the safer confines of knowing too much about too little. Instead, I am taking careful notes for any future editions of *The 1970s*.

But I cannot resist a few brief annotations. First, Tenerife. I mention the accident in one sentence in a long paragraph of diverse examples of globalization's unfinished business. I might have used other examples of limits of the spread of English as a global language, I suppose (perhaps the sign in the Paris hotel elevator reading "Please leave your values at the front desk"), rather than relying on David Crystal's Cambridge University Press book for this point. Still, Tenerife hardly seems to qualify as a central target of critique, particularly since clarity and standardization of English language use were indeed one of the recommended measures for air traffic controllers worldwide that resulted specifically from the accident.

Second, professional basketball. It pains me to note that it just was not that popular yet in the 1970s, nor that important as an industry. For what it's worth, I grew up practically in the shadow of Duke University's Cameron Indoor Stadium, nearly obsessed with playing, watching, and analyzing basketball. I went to ABA games in Raleigh's Dorton Arena with my father and talked courtside, starry-eyed, with his former student, all-star guard Bob Verga. Anyone who knew me in that decade could attest that the relative lack of emphasis on basketball in *The 1970s* demonstrates serious restraint in the face of temptation. I will, however, be among the first to order a good book on 1970s basketball when it comes out.

Third, Ford's pardon of Nixon: clearly important but unwittingly omitted—point taken for the next edition.¹ Fourth, previous literature? I admire Bruce Schulman's work on this decade, but I am no fan of David Frum's intemperate and tendentious book. As for the social history of race reformers, my graduate school mentors—all distinguished social historians of movements for racial justice—would surely be cringing at the idea that I did not provide enough on that topic, though my students would not likely wish for a still-longer book to read. Those same students, however, surely would have enjoyed still more American television content, although *All In The Family*, I must note, does actually make two appearances (115, 145). More Monty Python: who could disagree? The next edition will provide. But Americentrism, Russia, and India . . . now, I believe, we are getting to the central challenge.

In simplest form, the goal of *The 1970s* was to explain the development of American political culture during that decade, particularly as expressed in popular ideas and public policies, and place that development within a larger global context. The values and ideas that shaped American politics and culture were changing in crucial ways in this decade, and similar changes were visible far beyond U.S.

borders. To say that the book “suffers from Americentrism” (Kaufman), then, is really to say that it does what it set out to do. Guilty as charged. But Daniel Sargent will not let me off so easily, and anyone reading his review will have no trouble seeing why the Berkeley History Department swept him up swiftly a few years back. He notes that “*The 1970s* bills itself as a ‘new global history,’ but the book in fact operates at multiple levels” and that “American history is the unambiguous priority among the national histories that *The 1970s* engages.”

Here I must plead failure: failure to win a vigorous debate with Princeton University Press, which insisted on the use of “global history” in the title as a way to signal the international scope of the book’s analysis. I preferred other titles, particularly “More Equal, Less Equal: A New History of the 1970s,” which telegraphed more directly, I thought, the thrust of the book’s argument. The staff at the press demurred, citing other titles on their list with similar words and believing that such a title would be more difficult to promote. This is not (really) a complaint on my part: Princeton is an excellent press with which I am quite happy, and its staff is superb. But a publisher is out to sell books, appropriately enough, and in this case the title wound up being reshaped by concerns about marketing. I, however, ultimately signed off on the final title, so if it is misleading that is finally, alas, my responsibility.

The core issue is methodological. What am I trying to examine and explain, and how can I best do so? This is a problem across our diverse field, a problem that is reflected in its proliferating names: U.S. diplomatic history, U.S. foreign relations history, U.S. international history, transnational history, global history, the “U.S. and the world,” and the “U.S. in the world.” The last is the most awkward and seems increasingly the most commonly used. Such awkwardness is not, to my mind, a negative indicator, but rather an illustration of just how large and complicated our field has become. There is not yet a brief, felicitous term for the study of all the ways in which the most powerful modern nation has interacted with the rest of the world.

My own intellectual commitments, from the beginning of my career, have included the intimate connection of U.S. domestic history to U.S. foreign relations—the inward swing of the “U.S. in the world” barroom door—and have increasingly come to include as well the connection between U.S. history and world history—part of the outward swing of that door.² An emphasis on the place of the United States in world history requires that we think comparatively about the American past and how it shares with and differs from the pasts of other nations, regions, and processes. Most contemporary American political dialogue and far too much U.S. historical writing reflexively assume a degree of American exceptionalism or distinctiveness, regardless of the politics of the speaker or writer. Historians in our field, more than anyone else, must avoid that assumption until it is demonstrated evidentially.

Sargent accords *The 1970s* credit for including “a great deal of international history” as well as U.S. and world history. At the same time, he suggests that, subtitle notwithstanding, there is relatively less actual global history in the book, and that developments at a global level, such as economic integration or human rights activism, might be granted somewhat greater causal agency than I have allowed them in explaining events within the United States and other nations in this decade.³ This is a persuasive criticism, as the developing historiography increasingly reveals.⁴

I am less persuaded by Sargent’s questioning of the selection of cases in this decade. Certainly, focusing on the Soviet Union, with some attention to India, would yield different results than focusing on the United States, with some attention to China, but then the very subject would be different: Soviet/Russian history, rather than U.S. history,

in international perspective. He raises the question of whether “a global model is derived from a mainly American experience, which is then held to cohere to the global model,” and suggests that “different cases might have” rendered “the American experience exceptional rather than representative.” The weight of the evidence, particularly in chapter 4, tilts sharply toward representation rather than exceptionalism. Indeed, as Sargent then goes on to suggest in his evenhanded fashion, the United States and the other “advanced economies” might best be seen as a vanguard for economic and political processes that would eventually sweep through most of the rest of the world. The Soviet story in this decade, as *The 1970s* does point out, proved to be far more the temporary exception to the larger pattern of increasing formal equality and shrinking economic equality. But I grant that the amount of attention paid in the book to developments in South Asia, like those in the Soviet Union, is less than ideal—regardless of those students who appreciate a less lengthy book. “Pattern,” for what it’s worth, seems a more useful term in this analysis than “model,” as the historical analysis in *The 1970s* shares little of the social scientific predilection for theoretical postulation.

Sargent raises one final issue: the problem of agency and accountability for this decade’s turn away from public sector expansion and toward “a new, rather harsher, kind of political economy.” Was this momentous shift a result of structural causes, along the lines of global economic integration, or did it stem primarily from the actions of individuals, “Leninists of the right”? As he suggests, how we answer this question as the historiography of this decade develops will reveal our sense of what else might have been, including whether the old order might have been extended “at least a few decades longer.” Chapter 5 does trace the major dissenters, whom I see ultimately as gaining relatively meager political traction. While I have little personal fondness for the results of this new political economy, I do tend to see the structural causes, particularly of technological and financial innovation, as powerfully determinative—thus the slight note of resignation in the book, as Sargent observes. But structures must be manned, and real people devoted their lives to midwifing our new, market-driven order. The ideologues, intellectuals, politicians, media spokespersons, and organizational activists who herded the United States and most of the world into our current condition will face the judgment of future generations for the peculiar combination of wealth creation and maldistribution that they worked so hard to create.

Notes:

1. For unusual insight into this event, see Peter H. Wood, “The Pardoner’s Tale: The Personal Theme of ‘Domestic Tranquility’ in Gerald Ford’s Pardon of Richard Nixon,” *Prospects* 11 (October 1986): 491–539.
2. Thomas Borstelmann, “Connelly Roundtable,” *Passport* 42 (September 2011): 10–11.
3. For a discussion of these terminological distinctions, see my essay, “A Worldly Tale: Global Influences on the Historiography of U.S. Foreign Relations,” in *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941*, ed. Michael J. Hogan and Frank Costigliola, 2nd ed. (New York, forthcoming).
4. On globalization, see Sargent’s *A Superpower Transformed: History, Strategy, and American Foreign Policy in the 1970s* (New York, forthcoming). On human rights, see Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (New York, 2011); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); and Michael Cotey Morgan, “The Seventies and the Rebirth of Human Rights,” in *The Shock of the Global: The International History of the 1970s*, ed. Niall Ferguson, Charles Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel Sargent (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 237–50.