Forum: Nation: J. Martschukat: The Role of the Nation in American History and Historiography
by Jürgen Martschukat

"To love this particular nation is to love the world." 1

In this essay, I discuss the latest controversy over the role of the nation in the history and historiography of the United States. This controversy has gained new momentum since the recent publication of two books by historian Jill Lepore. It revolves around the central question, if—given the recent power of ethno-nationalist politics—historians should follow Lepore’s call for „a new Americanism, as tough-minded and openhearted as the nation at its best,” and if refocusing on what Lepore sees as a better history of the nation is an apt response.2 However, before I delve into the discussion and in order to prepare my argument, a couple of preliminary remarks on some wider trajectories in American historiography since the late 20th century are necessary, navigating the troubled waters between various kinds of American, national, and global history.

Preliminary Remarks: A Peaceful Coexistence

In general, and I am sharing this observation made by Jill Lepore, most American historians write histories playing out within the American nation, without necessarily writing the history of the American nation. American historians have written books on diverse topics, such as—to cite examples more or less at random—reform movements in the early American city, personal responses to the death of Abraham Lincoln, the power of whiteness in the Jim Crow South, the history of lynching in America, the significance of gender in the Civil Rights Movement, the struggle against the use of pesticides in American agriculture, the history of sex change in the 20th century, or the greed of food processing entrepreneurs in late 20th century North Carolina.3 Even though all these studies deal with American history, thus with what happened in the United States, none of them strives for „a framing interpretation” for the nation and its people; a sweeping, nationally defined history of the United States is not their aim. Furthermore, none of those authors would dispute the claim that a historical perspective beyond the borders of the United States is necessary to understand the histories of democracy and democratic participation, of warfare, of race, racism and violence, of Civil Rights and sexual liberation, of environmental pollution and protection, of food production and consumption, or of neoliberal capitalism. In fact, all of the American historians behind the studies mentioned have in one way or another participated in the globalizing of American history, either by conducting their research and sharing their knowledge in global contexts, by participating in or coordinating global exchange programs, or by writing other books or articles contributing to American history from a transnational or global angle.4

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3For transnational or global histories written or edited by the same authors see Martha Hodes, The Sea Captain’s Wife. A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the
I have deliberately referenced a diverse set of works by American historians who have gone global in various ways, but cannot be characterized as dedicating their careers to the purpose of globalizing American history and historiography. In fact, except for Martha Hodes from New York University, none of them participated at the famous La Pietra Meetings. Initiated in the late 20th century by the Organization of American Historians and New York University’s International Center for Advanced Studies in the Florentine Villa La Pietra, these meetings were convened to internationalize the study and writing of American history in a global age. Over the years, the La Pietra Meetings have become a mythical fountainhead of the globalizing of American history, leading either directly or indirectly to a body of scholarship intended to rethink and reframe the American nation in a wider context. Projects by scholars from Tom Bender to Sven Beckert and Maria Montoya have done this in different ways and to different degrees, and they all have sought to shape a new field of history and historiography.

This cursory background sketch is meant to show that, first, since the La Pietra meetings, a globalization American historiography has produced a body of scholarship that explicitly seeks to overcome the nationalist tendencies and consequences of nation-centric history. This development has been underscored by an increase in job openings with qualifying descriptors such as „Global America“ or „America in the World,“ even though the job market in general has been extremely tight. Second, many American historians are also contributing, as mentioned above, to a globalizing of American historiography without necessarily defining themselves as either a global or a national historians. This reading of the field is confirmed when flipping through the pages of its leading publication, the Journal of American History (JAH). Among the hundreds of articles published by the JAH since the La Pietra Report came out in 2000, by far most of them present histories not of the American nation but playing in America. Some, but not very many articles deal with global or transnational histories, but only few of them make a strong case for globalizing American history. Up to the present day, the JAH has barely seen a serious controversy between advocates of an American and a global or transnational history (for the purposes of the argument I am making here, there is no need to discuss the differences between global and transnational approaches in greater detail).

One reason for this peaceful coexistence of American and global perspectives might be that until very recently even dyed-in-the-wool American historians could not but agree that many core topics of American history are at the same time transnational or global. Consider, for instance, histories of immigration and the borderlands, of slavery and race relations, of labor and capitalism, of food and consumption, of the environment, and many more. Even the American Revolution, the founding of the nation and the shaping of Democracy, which seem at the heart of the American national project, have been increasingly examined from a transnational, Atlantic, or comparative perspective; I will get back to this specific point later. It’s not either national or global, but both. The history of the American nation is a history of global interconnectedness and diversity. The
United States is globalism from within.8

Writing American History in a Conflict-Ridden Political Landscape

Against this backdrop, I will get back to the central question of my essay. In recent years, this question of the nature of the American nation, and of the role of the nation for American history and historiography and how it relates to the genuine globality and diversity of America, has moved to the center of a new historiographical and political controversy. The controversy shows most clearly that history and politics cannot be kept apart. Also, at times, contributions to this controversy are hard to assign to clear-cut political positions or camps, and the situation is rather fuzzy. Yet in spite of all this fuzziness it seems still clear that, seen from a historiographical perspective, the controversy has gained momentum through the two aforementioned recent books by historian Jill Lepore. The first one, These Truths from 2018, presents a history of the United States from Christopher Columbus to Donald Trump in a single tome of roughly 1,000 pages. I have not counted the reviews and comments about the book, but it seems fair to say that in recent years no other history book has gotten as much public attention as These Truths. Lepore’s second book under consideration here, entitled This America, is an addendum to her magnum opus: Published a year later (2019), it is much shorter, reads like an essay, and does not leave any room for doubt that she is making a forceful Case for the


Party appeared on the political scene in 2009, a wave of reactionary populist politics—predominantly white, male and straight—had been building by fits and starts against the diversification of power and participation in American society since the 1970s and before. Over half a century, this reactionary movement has become shirrill, more nativist and increasingly isolationist in tone. In an effort to achieve what they see as re-empowerment of America, they have conceptualized the nation, the United States and democracy as inherently white, as if whiteness were America’s natural and pre-political state. According to its own narrative, the Tea Party needed to strike back against the „takeover“ of America by the increasingly radical sons and daughters of the civil rights and freedom movements of the 1960s and their politics of equality, participation, and diversification.11

Consequently, the presidency of Donald Trump marked not the beginning of this politics of white reactionary protest, but its culmination. Even the slogan „Make America Great Again“ had already been used in Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign in 1980; Donald Trump reprinted it. This ethno-nationalist discourse and politics, swelling in tone and power for about half a century, escalated on 6 January 2021, when an „army of angry white men“ stormed the Capitol with intent to uphold the reign of their „first white President,“ as writer Ta-Nehisi Coates had called Trump back in 2017. Quite obviously, Trump was not the first American president whose skin was considered white, but he was the first whose whiteness was publicly acknowledged as the most powerful defining force of his program and politics. Trump was the first white president elected after Barack Obama, the first black president, and he had built his political fortunes by sewing doubt about Obama’s American citizenship and legitimacy as an elected President. In Ta-Nehisi Coates’ words, Trump’s „entire political existence hinges on the fact of a black president. “ Trump’s political vision was a recreation of an imagined white national greatness, which he conjured in stark antagonism to a diverse, globalized America, embodied first and foremost by an African American president with a Kenyan father and a mother from Kansas, with an Arabic first name, born in Hawaii and raised in Indonesia from age six to ten.12

With Trump’s victory in the 2016 presidential elections, the question of what kind of nation the U.S. was and who it belonged to, gained center stage in politics, the news media and intellectual circles, with historians playing a leading role in the ensuing debate. As mentioned earlier, the configuration of the conflict was and still is complicated, with a division into clear-cut oppositions between left and right, liberal and conservative, diverse and nationalist being more obscuring than enlightening. A main argument made in this conflict claimed that Democrats and „left“ liberals had lost the election because they had lost the nation. This criticism came primarily—and most forcefully—from within the ranks of liberals themselves, who were licking their wounds after the unexpected loss. Their major scapegoat became a liberal „obsession with diversity,“ as historian Mark Lilla put it in the New York Times shortly after the 2016 election. As Lilla claimed in a soon-to-be published book length manifesto on The Once and Future Liberal, Americans should leave identity politics, „this pseudo-politics of self-regard,“ behind and unite as one „nation of citizens“ behind

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the shared values of freedom, safety, and prosperity.13

Making the Case for the Nation

Jill Lepore’s books somehow point in a direction similar to Lilla’s. However, the overarching purpose of her writing is not a critique of identity politics, but a criticism and reframing of the role of the nation among “left” liberals in America today, and in American history and historiography in particular. Lepore does not want to leave her readers with any doubt, telling them in the title of her manifesto that she is making The Case for the Nation. In the 1970s, as she explains in her summary of the historiographic development of the recent half century, American historians were appalled by nationalism and as a result „abandoned the study of the nation,” either in favor of narrower research topics—groups—or global ones. With the nation, Lepore argues, „a common history for a people“ got lost, and „when scholars stopped writing national history, other less scrupulous people stepped in“ and promoted a new and aggressive nationalism. Lepore seems to say that American historians went AWOL, and the American nation became disoriented and shipwrecked as a result. In Lepore’s eyes, putting it back on course is the major historiographical and political challenge of historians today.14

While Lepore acknowledges that every nation is different, she sees the American nation as exceptionally different from other nations because of its lack of „people who share a common descent.“ She argues that it is the belief in a set of rights—„these truths,“ enumerated in the 1776 Declaration of Independence—rather than origin that unites Americans from all over the globe into one nation. As Lepore writes, at the heart of the American project is „the very good idea […] that all people are equal and endowed from birth with inalienable rights [of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness] and entitled to equal treatment, guaranteed by a nation of laws.“ In Lepore’s eyes, the American nation is an endless endeavor of a diverse people growing together in a state with laws that guarantee these rights to its citizens: „The United States, in other words, was a state before it became a nation.“ Seen against the backdrop of the work by scholars such as David Armitage, however, these characteristics may make the United States less unique than Lepore would have her readers believe.15

At this point, it must be emphasized that Lepore is not praising a national success story unequivocally. First, she has written histories from the periphery, where America has so often failed to live up to its ideals. The struggles of the marginalized and excluded may even be seen as the driving force of Lepore’s narrative in These Truths. In fact, one can infer from the book that the American nation is so diverse and has so many different peripheries that it does not make sense to speak of peripheries and a center after all, despite any claims or pretense throughout the nation’s history of a white ethno-centrism.16 It is because of all the marginalization and exclusion that Lepore argues American history might be written as history of a nation not living up to its ideals. However, at the same time, the constant battle against discrimination and exclusion and „for a more perfect union“ (as Barack Obama put it in a 2008 speech, invoking the preamble to the U.S. Constitution) is as much at the heart of the American nation as its ideals and the failure to live up to them are. In fact, Lepore claims, „in the United States the nation is that battle.“ In Lepore’s version

15Lepore, This America, pp. 20, 21, 33; Armitage, Declaration of Independence.
of American history, the politics of exclusion, of racism, of the claim to power by the Ku Klux Klan and the like, stand for “illiberal” or “bad nationalism,” while the protest and the battle against them stand for “good nationalism”: fighting for liberty, equality, sisterhood, a dedication for inquiry, justice, and fairness.17

Second, Lepore is aware that many (even most) questions and problems of history transcend the nation-state and are transnational or global in scale. In This America, she points to the history of racism, to different types of colonialism and decolonization processes, to the threats of the nuclear age and of environmental pollution, or to the workings of global capitalism. As I noted earlier, all these issues, as well as others, have driven American historians to expand their approaches and inspired at least some of them to take global perspectives in their research and writing. Furthermore, Lepore acknowledges, the late 20th century has seen a fierce, resurfacing nationalism in many different countries and regions on the planet, culminating in genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. If indeed, as historian Eric Hobsbawm once said, „historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers […] are to heroin addicts,” in the 1990s it seemed to be about time for historians to turn away from national history. Looking from today’s political perspective, Lepore considers the turning away a mistake.18

A Nation Shaped by Global Entanglements

Lepore’s These Truths has been celebrated as a masterpiece and has received a number of awards, but the book has also been criticized for its focus on the nation, its embrace of the intellectual tradition of American Exceptionalism, and the neglect of America’s global entanglements from 1492 to the present day. In a review roundtable in the American Historical Review, colonial historian Mary Beth Norton pointed out that in These Truths, Lepore seems to underestimate how intensely colonial North America was involved in exchanges of people, animals, and goods across the globe. Paul Ortiz, a specialist in Latinx and African American history, added that Lepore widely ignores the intellectual influence of thinkers from the Global South on the American project as well as the cross-border alliances built by American social and liberation movements in their fight against authoritarianism. Similarly, labor and immigration historian Matt Garcia critiqued These Truths in the roundtable as lacking a nuanced interpretation of Latinx influence on American history and society, given that Latinx people accounted for the largest group of immigrants (25 million in total) to the United States in the second half of 20th century. Garcia describes this as a function of Lepore’s failure to embrace a transnational perspective. He urges Lepore and historians of the American nation in general to „begin to recognize that the nation’s character has been shaped as much by what we have done at and beyond our borders as by what has happened within them.”19

Another most poignant critique has been raised by historian Daniel Immerwahr, published in The Nation. Immerwahr urges historians to acknowledge that the past is not served up neatly in national containers and that American history is a global history with global consequences. He seems to assume that Lepore is fully aware of this, but that „political commitments” have impelled her to preach a national

17Lepore, This America, pp. 42, 46, 52, 86, 110; Barack Obama, A More Perfect Union, Speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, 18 March 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezp-2H1AdO> (23.08.2021); Gary Gerstle, American Crucible. Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century, Princeton 2017, distinguishes between „racial nationalism” and „civic nationalism.”


“liberal gospel” in *These Truths* and make this explicit in *This America*. Thus, a major purpose of her books is to intervene in America’s political conflicts, and she does not want to „cede love of country to the nationalists“ or let their use of America’s past go unchallenged. And Lepore’s logic seems to be that in order to be heard by the American people as widely and as loudly as possible, in order to attract a large readership beyond academia, American history writing needs to focus on the nation.20

Jill Lepore is deeply troubled by the reactionary politics of the present and the (mis)use of history in rightwing circles, from the Tea Party to Donald Trump. The politicization of the past is of course not a new phenomenon, but I share Lepore’s concerns about the recent use of history as a blunt instrument of reactionary politics, and her fears about its effects on American society. The creation of the so-called 1776 Commission in November 2020 by then-President Donald Trump and the publication of its January 2021 report are a case in point. The commission underscores why Lepore’s concerns and fears are more justified than ever before. Formed in opposition to the 1619 Project initiated by the New York Times, which sought to present American history from the perspective of slavery and its effects, the 1776 Commission was given the explicit mandate „to restore understanding of the greatness of the American founding“ and safeguard a „patriotic education“ of American children. The main instrument to achieve that was a one-sided, unidirectional narrative of America’s past, which sought to „protect“ American children from „identity politics“ and from a „progressive“ history focusing on racism in America’s past. The 1776 Commission report was condemned outright by the American Historical Association (AHA), with support from 47 professional organizations, including the Organization of American Historians. The AHA dismissed the report as „a simplistic interpretation that relies on falsehoods, inaccuracies, omissions, and misleading statements.”

The final days of the Trump presidency were marked not only by the storming of the Capitol by insurrectionists, but also by the administration’s effort to seize control of how America’s history is told and taught in public, at universities and in schools. Since then a number of Republican state lawmakers have sought to establish pushbacks against critical race theory and to limit how public school teachers can talk about social justice issues in the classroom. Thus, with her two latest books, Lepore had anticipated and sounded alarms about the political conflict over America’s history before it finally boiled over in the way it did. Lepore’s intent has been to counter reactionary political efforts to hijack American history and turn it into a story full of falsehoods and omissions. Instead, she wants politics to build „on a history that tells the truths“ about the rights and wrongs that nations do.21

So far so good. However, I wonder if distinguishing between „good“ and „bad nationalism“ really does the trick, or if „racial nationalism“ can really be exorcized by „civic nationalism,“ to cite a distinction made by historian Gary Gerstle. Some historians have argued convincingly that freedom has been conceptualized as white from the very beginning, and therefore, civic nationalism cannot be


separated from its inherent racism. Furthermore, even if we as historians recognize that national histories can provide adequate responses to some questions, at the same time we know that there is hardly any research problem that does not transcend the national and does not also require local, regional, transnational, or global perspectives. This also applies to the history of the American Democratic project and the threats—past and present—against it. Let me briefly underline this by pointing to three exemplary fields.

First, revolution and efforts to shape a state and society built on liberty, equality, and the brotherhood of mankind were not unique to what would become the United States, but were embedded in an Atlantic revolutionary fervor of the late 18th and early 19th century from France and other European countries, to Haiti, North and Latin America—with philosophers, politicians, soldiers, goods, and ideas going back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. For instance, when conceptualizing their independent state, American revolutionaries very much drew on the thinking by Swiss jurist Elmer de Vattel, to name just one example of countless exchanges across the Atlantic. Second, the recent populist and ethno-nationalist politics threatening the Democratic project is also not unique to America, but rather a global phenomenon. Specific manifestations vary from nation to nation, but for decades democracy has been contested and populist ethno-nationalism has been on the rise in countries such as Brazil, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, Venezuela, India and many more. Third and in conjunction with widespread ethno-nationalism, reactionary crusades to hijack history and establish a one-sided narrative of the past are not unique to America. One fitting example are the efforts by the conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS), which now holds control of the Polish government, to rearrange the exhibition of the recently opened Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk. Whereas the museum’s conception by founding director Paweł Machciewicz followed the trajectories of a multi-directional culture of remembrance, the Kaczyński government replaced this rather global perspective with a Polish nationalist master narrative. Another case in point is the politics of history made by the German ethno-nationalist party Alternative for Germany (AfD). For instance, party leader Alexander Gauland called „Adolf Hitler and national socialism not more than a bird-do in 1000 years of German history,” and Thuringian AfD politician Björn Höcke is constantly pressing for a nationalist politics of history, questioning the importance and legitimacy of the established Holocaust commemoration in Germany. Their idea of a national history is one that emphasizes pride and achievement of the German Volk, with all the racist connotations that the term Volk carries.

Lepore’s indefatigable faith in American values is impressive, and her struggle for an America based on „a devotion to equality and liberty, tolerance and inquiry, justice and fairness” is more than apt and admirable.


On global populism see for instance the introductory book by Jan-Werner Mueller,
that, first, these values are not an exclusive American invention, and second, that they have been under attack for quite a while not only in America, but across the globe. The fight for democracy might benefit from putting the American situation into a global perspective, and particularly if, as Lepore claims, loving the American nation means loving the world, pushing for decidedly national perspectives in the writing of history does not help the cause. Or, as Richard Drayton and David Motadel put it, populist nationalism builds on feelings of lost national grandeur, and “retreating from global history would seem to be the least obvious response.” After all, I wonder if Lepore does not make the same strategic mistake in her fight against a white ethno-nationalist politics and history that she herself blames President Barack Obama and Senator Elizabeth Warren for having made in their conflicts with Donald Trump. When Obama finally gave in to the pressure and showed his birth certificate to prove his constitutional right to the Presidency, and when Warren underwent a DNA test to prove her Cherokee ancestry, they “seemed to acknowledge” Trump’s right to ask for them, Lepore claims in This America.28 By the same token, I wonder if Lepore’s urging historians to focus on the history of the American nation does not at least seem to acknowledge the legitimacy of a nationalist “America first” politics.