

Bender, Thomas: *A Nation Among Nations. America's Place in World History*. New York: Hill and Wang 2006. ISBN: 0-8090-9527-0; 368 S.

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Thomas Bender's book takes the American debate on transnational history to a new level: the quest for synthesis in a transnational perspective. The basic idea of *A Nation among Nations* is to reframe U.S. history and especially to reject „the territorial space of the nation as the sufficient context for a national history“ (p. ix). Instead of such a parochial view on the past, Bender widens the canvas of historical inquiry. He emphasizes that every attempt to explain American history by American history alone must remain incomplete. American history, or more precisely U.S. history as the main focus of this book, should rather be understood and incorporated into global contexts. While this may just read like the main idea of most books on transnational history, Bender's book stands out for many reasons, as this review will try to show. Therefore, it would replicate the parochialism of an earlier age if it were only to be read by historians of American history.

This volume forms – in an almost Hegelian sense – a synthesis of Bender's oeuvre. Since the mid-1980s, Bender has criticized an important characteristic of U.S. historiography: the fragmentation of narratives and the loss of synthesis. Especially since the 1960s, historical topics and takes have exploded. As well as bringing about an „age of reinterpretation,“<sup>1</sup> this development has also led to a high degree of specialization of academic historical inquiry. This tendency has not been counterbalanced by overarching syntheses with a broad appeal beyond the level of textbooks. There is, for example, no interpretation of U.S. history that would compare in length and quality to the works of, say, Thomas Nipperdey, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, or Heinrich August Winkler

for modern German history. While some scholars praise this situation as perfectly appropriate for a pluralistic, multi-cultural, or post-modern society, others such as Bender have bemoaned the loss of coherence.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1990s, Bender has engaged himself in a second debate which might seem like the antithesis of the quest for a national synthesis: the attempt to transnationalize historical inquiry. He authored the La Pietra Report – itself the result of a whole series of conferences on the issue (1997–2000). Apart from this widely received plea to broaden the scope of American history, Bender has edited a stimulating and influential volume on how to rethink American history empirically in a global age.<sup>3</sup> With this new book, Bender has raised both strands of his research to a higher level by suggesting how a transnational synthesis of U.S. history might look.

*A Nation among Nations* is admirable for its elegant language, its analytical depth, its empirical breadth, and its provocative argument. Bender focuses on five issues in U.S. history that he finds most deserving of such a reinterpretation in a global perspective. All of them mark key moments and problems, and Bender's analysis is written less for a scholarly audience than for the general reader. His first chapter offers a bold and breathtaking ride around the globe around the year 1500, when oceanic seafaring triggered off the process we now call globalization. Rather than reiterating the conventional story of the expansion of Europe into the New World, Bender emphasizes that the discovery of the oceans shaped the history of every continent. The „oceanic revolution“ (p. 17) led to a reconfiguration of the centers of power, art, and wealth. Bender rejects the conventional narrative of European cultural, economic, and technological superiority that simply proved itself in an „age of discovery.“ Instead, it was a relative sense of weakness and marginality in comparison to the Islamic and Asian worlds that explains Europe's westward expansion. From

<sup>2</sup> Bender, Thomas, *Wholes and Parts. The Need for Synthesis in American History*, in: *Journal of American History* 73(1986), pp. 120-136.

<sup>3</sup> Bender, Thomas (ed.), *The La Pietra Report. A Report to the Profession*, Bloomington 2000; Bender, Thomas (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*. Berkeley 2002.

<sup>1</sup> Van Woodward, Comer, *The Age of Reinterpretation*, in: *American Historical Review* 66(1960), pp. 1-19.

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there, Bender moves to an equally sweeping analysis of the global impact of this „oceanic revolution“ – including the reshuffling of power among Europe’s states, the relative decline of Asian and African powers, and the rise of new forms of slavery.

Bender’s second chapter offers a reinterpretation of the American Revolution that sees it as part of an age of great wars and revolutions. To the European reader, the background of the Franco-British struggle for hegemony might not be so surprising, and thanks to the impact of postcolonial studies, the history of the Haitian revolution might also be known. But Bender’s canvas is even wider. He convincingly situates these events in a global history of eighteenth-century revolts against the centers of power that stretched from Peru to Cairo and from Brazil to Bengal. And Bender does more than merely describe similarly-structured conflicts and constellations; he goes on to give an impression of the way they influenced one another. For example, he argues that the revolution in Haiti was the most radical one in the New World because it made the strongest claim for universal human rights, including racial justice. Euro-Americans in what was becoming the United States adhered to a less universal version of liberty and citizenship, and when events in Haiti turned violent, this development was used as a warning of the consequences of racial „conflation.“ In the end, all these societies found different answers and it was very often the perception or impact of parallel developments elsewhere that shaped the trajectory of events.

The focus of the third chapter is the age of the Civil War. Bender contextualizes this phase of American history with parallel developments in modern nation-making around the globe. Chapter four brings him to the turn of the century, primarily to what is normally called the Spanish-American War of 1898. Bender uses this as a hook on which to hang his interpretation of the United States as an empire. His views on the continuity between westward expansion and steps beyond the continent are thought-provoking. For example, the debate on the policies of the German Kaiserreich might profit from it. Equally compelling is his analysis of the immense divergence bet-

ween the American self-perception as benefactor and the quite different outlook of the colonized. Americans showed little sensitivity in intercultural contacts and universalized their specific views. This often led to unproductive misunderstandings, to violence, expulsion, and subjugation. Seen in this light, the course of interactions with, for example, the Cherokee after the 1820s does indeed share many similarities with American actions in Mexico, Korea, Cuba, and the Philippines a few decades later. At the same time, it is obvious that Bender had the present U.S. foreign policy in mind when he wrote the passages on how Americans so often failed to understand why others hated them.

A fifth and last chapter sees the Progressive Era as a local variant of a global history of intellectual and political answers to industrial capitalism and urbanization. Building upon the work of James Kloppenburg, Daniel Rodgers, and others, Bender focuses on the Progressive movement itself and its global exchange. He correctly emphasizes the extent to which processes of mutual perception and exchange have shaped the course of all societies into modernity, bringing the parts of the globe even closer together.

All in all, *A Nation among Nations* makes a convincing plea to place U.S. history in a global setting. Bender contextualizes America in a double sense: he demonstrates that the main issues of U.S. history are problems that spanned the globe. As well as these parallels of comparable challenges and varying results, Bender offers us insights into how global interactions impacted on America and other societies. Thus, he draws together the two main strands of the debate on transnational or global history. Also, it is inspiring to see how easily he brings together political, social, economic, and cultural history. The book builds upon a stupendous historical knowledge of American and world history. And while some of his findings might not be completely new for the expert of the specific field and others provocative or even doubtful, it is hard to imagine a reader to whom this book does not offer surprising and inspiring insights. At the same time, the book is an important contribution to the public debate on American empire and the trajectory and problems of U.S.

foreign policy. Some chapters read as one of the most subtle criticisms of George W. Bush's policy.

However, some might even accuse Bender of being too nation-centered. If the book is about a „new framing of U.S. history“ (p. ix), one must wonder why it includes long passages about centuries before the American Revolution. It is probably true that the time around 1500 marked the beginning of global history (or in my eyes rather the history of globalization). But it was certainly not the time of the „beginnings of American history“ (p. 15), let alone of U.S. history. Bender has chosen to adopt the conventional interpretive framework in order to make his point clearer, but there is a price for this decision, and some might wish he had broken more radically with conventional wisdom. Ultimately though, Bender's book deserves simply to be read rather than subjected to that kind of intellectual haggling.

Finally, *A Nation among Nations* succeeds in demonstrating how much a synthesis of national history gains when put in a global context. Books like Bender's are the best proof that transnational history is not simply an appendix or a passing fashion that will be discarded after the next theoretical turn or two. I do not want to claim that the design of his book offers a royal road to the transnational, but I would argue that this form of synthesis and aggregation represents a new frontier in the international debate on these issues.

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