In an era of unprecedented internationalization in historiography, the legacies of nationalism and exceptionalism still haunt the study of American history. History conceived as the origins and growth of the nation-state on the German model took root in many countries, yet nowhere has a nation-centered historical tradition been more resilient than in the United States. There, modern historicism, with its emphasis on the uniqueness of all national traditions, was grafted onto an existing tradition of exceptionalism. The pre-historicist idea of the United States as a special case “outside” the normal patterns and laws of history runs deep in American experience. Its origins, Dorothy Ross shows, lay in the merger of the republican and millennial traditions that formed an ideology of exceptionalism prominent in American historical writing. In this liberal world view, the United States avoided the class conflicts, revolutionary upheaval, and authoritarian governments of “Europe” and presented to the world an example of liberty for others to emulate. This exceptionalist ideology persisted into the twentieth century, influenced such luminaries as Frederick Jackson Turner, and surfaced again in “consensus” historiography in the 1950s.

The rise of historical specialization has shattered these confident assumptions.

An earlier paper on this theme was delivered at the Convention of the Organization of American Historians, St. Louis, April 7, 1989. I wish to thank James Gilbert, Dorothy Ross, and John Higham for comments made at that session. I also thank Max Harcourt, Mark Berger, Michael Pearson, and other members of the School of History who commented on another version given to the School postgraduate seminar, April 22, 1989; and the anonymous critics for the AHR.

1 Dorothy Ross, “Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” AHR, 89 (October 1984): 909-28. See also David Noble, Historians against History (Minneapolis, 1965).

2 A useful recent summary of exceptionalism is in John Agnew, The United States in the World-Economy: A Regional Geography (New York, 1987), 8-15. The most prominent examples are found in the work of Turner and his followers. See, for example, Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York, 1920). Post–World War II historiography recapitulated important elements of the exceptionalist viewpoint. See Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America (New York, 1955); David Potter, People of Plenty (Chicago, 1954); Daniel Boorstin, The Genius of American Politics (Chicago, 1953). Hartz may be seen as a different case from some of the other key post-progressive historians. In The Founding of New Societies (New York, 1964), Hartz and his collaborators extended the interpretation of the liberal tradition as a national “fragment” of “European” political thought in a comparative dimension, illustrating national variations in the process. But it is not this book that exerts influence on American history. Rather it is the Liberal Tradition, which studies the United States not as a variation on a theme of the European fragment but as a single, unique case to be compared with “Europe.” This is derivative of Turner, Alexis de Tocqueville, and the exceptionalist tradition.
but put nothing convincing in their place. Even though many American historians today eschew exceptionalism, in the absence of an alternative organizing framework the vast bulk of U.S. history is still written in terms that accept the primacy of the national focus. More important, the exceptionalism of the liberal tradition has undergone a modest revival. In popular culture, exceptionalism remains strong, and in intellectual discourse, the debate over Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) shows how deeply ingrained are traditions of America as radically unique. In new work by Daniel Bell and Seymour Martin Lipset, the principles of exceptionalism are "reaffirmed." Postmodernist European observer Jean Braudrillard has followed in the tracks of earlier foreign critics to wonder at American uniqueness. In the fields of labor history, women's history, socialism, and foreign policy, important books have returned to the classic theme of Alexis de Tocqueville to emphasize once more American difference from Europe. Other historians avoid the language of exceptionalism assiduously but posit national difference as so central to American historiography that notions of exceptionalism are bound to be encouraged. All this despite the new social history, with its emphasis on the themes of gender, class, race, and ethnicity, themes that appear to cut across the central tenets of the faith in the United States of America as an exception.

At the heart of this resilience of American exceptionalism is a paradox. To some critics, American historiography seems too narrow in its concentration on American uniqueness, yet in no other national historical tradition has comparative history received more rhetorical support. Alongside the belief in American exceptionalism, there has been in American historiography a marked impulse to relate American history to that of the rest of the world. To take one prominent example, much of Arthur Schlesinger, Sr.'s voluminous writing was concerned with what he called "national traits." In *Paths to the Present* (1949), he addressed the question raised in the eighteenth century by J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, "What

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Raymond Grew contended that American history has been more parochial than other historiographies; Grew, "The Comparative Weakness of American History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 16 (Summer 1985): 87–101. Grew conceded that his observation was partly based on experience as editor of *Comparative Studies in Society and History*—hardly a representative sample of American historical writing on comparative history. From the perspective of non-American historiography, American efforts seem substantial.
Then is the American, This New Man?” Alongside work unmistakably influenced by the exceptionalist tradition, however, Schlesinger wrote essays stressing America’s global relationships. His warning is instructive: “History as conventionally written stresses national differences—even when not genuinely such—to the neglect of national similarities. This emphasis,” Schlesinger noted, glossed “over the fundamental interdependence of peoples.”

Schlesinger’s essay was first published in 1941 under the title “World Currents in American Civilization.” Even then, as a glance at his bibliography shows, a substantial literature on American connections with “world history” existed. The presence of this strand of historical writing suggests that American exceptionalism has not gone unchallenged. A subordinate tradition of international analysis requires recognition in any account of American exceptionalism. This tradition offers instructive themes for the reconceptualization of national historiography in the United States and in other countries as well. American historians have been prominent in the drive to establish comparative history as a genre, for example, and have heralded such efforts as evidence of greater cosmopolitanism in American historical analysis. Technically, they are correct. The critical absence has not been comparative and international perspectives themselves but rather the failure of comparative history to transcend the boundaries of nationalist historiography. As an alternative, the possibilities of a transnational history must be considered. This does not mean that nationalism and the history of the nation-state can be ignored. It does mean that these national perspectives must be historicized and relativized by developing a new historiographical project organized in terms of a simultaneous consideration of differing geographical scales—the local, the national, and the transnational—in American historical thought.

The national focus I am criticizing here may seem merely to reflect a rock-bottom historical “reality.” No one doubts the importance of both nationalism and the nation-state in the modern world. Yet, all too often, the primacy of these concepts is assumed by historians. This penchant for national frameworks reflects not merely the historian’s common-sense observation of the contemporary world but also the way historical knowledge has been produced. History is not a set of data to be deposited into tidy boxes, of which the national box is the most obvious and sensible. History is, much more than most historians are willing to accept, a constructed body of knowledge. The role of the nation-state framework in the production of that history must be acknowledged, if alternative views of American history are to be advanced. Other disciplines have been much more open to transnational analysis than history has been, and even American historians, when they turn to the subject of European history, have made contributions

9 Both the constructed nature of historical knowledge and the widespread unwillingness of historians to abandon their empiricism are clear from Peter Novick’s That Noble Dream: “Objectivity” and the American Historical Profession (New York, 1988). See also Ian Tyrrell, The Absent Marx: Class Analysis and Liberal History in Twentieth-Century America (Westport, Conn., 1986).
to comparative and international history that demonstrate just how artificial the dominance of the national framework in American historiography can be. But these innovative achievements have not been fully appreciated by other national contingents of historians. This suggests that the problem lies less in the facts of American history or American perversity than in the nature of historical training. A focus on national difference is an occupational hazard among all historians, not just those of the United States. American exceptionalism presents a special case of the more general problem of history written from a national point of view.

NONE OF THIS WOULD BE WORTH DISCUSSING if American history were truly exceptional, but exceptionalism has always contained an insuperable logical difficulty. The history of the United States cannot be exceptional unless contrasted with other histories that conform to fixed patterns of historical development. In the twentieth century, American advocates of exceptionalism have, paradoxically, been hostile to the very idea of laws of historical development represented in, for example, Marxism, and have argued that these schematic accounts do not apply to American history. Yet such schemes of history underpin the explanations exceptionalist advocates give for American difference from other countries. The logical difficulty has been compounded by changes in the Marxist tradition itself. Marxists no longer hold to a rigid stages theory of historical development, and the fragmentation of the Marxist tradition has removed the contrast on which modern interpretations of exceptionalism have been constructed. Added to this, the exceptionalist tradition assumed an essentialist dichotomy between "America" and "Europe" that denies the complexity and variation European historians—Marxist and non-Marxist—have found in their own histories.

Many American historians have accepted these logical difficulties and argue instead either for national uniqueness or national difference. Since all national histories are unique, there is nothing objectionable about this maneuver, at least in principle. Yet "uniqueness" does have overtones of national superiority, and the concept has been used, for example by David Potter, in a sense that clearly implies exceptionalism. In his _People of Plenty_ (1954), Potter reworked the familiar frontier thesis and explained differences between "Europe" and "America" in terms of American abundance. "Europe cannot think of altering the relationship between the various levels of society without assuming a class struggle; but America has altered and can alter these relationships without necessarily treating


one class as the victim or even, in an ultimate sense, the antagonist of another."\textsuperscript{12}
This polarized and ahistorical treatment of two worlds defined by the presence or absence of class conflict echoed the preoccupations of earlier writers like Turner and the nineteenth-century originators of exceptionalism.

Even the historians who have emphasized national difference in more neutral fashion have helped perpetuate the concern with exceptionalism. To understand this, it helps to put individual historical works in the context of inherited historiography and keep in mind that far more history is written about the United States than any other country. If the United States is said to be different, the sum total of that research produces more evidence of specifically American difference. All histories may be distinctive, but American history becomes, through the sheer volume produced, "more distinctive" than others. Further, the focus on American difference cannot be divorced from the context of exceptionalism as an inherited ideology. The historian may deny the notion of exceptionalism, but his or her analysis reinforces the existing, deeply ingrained assumption that the history of the United States has been endowed with special features until the contrary is proven.\textsuperscript{13} For these reasons, exceptionalism is in practice inseparable from the concept of national distinctiveness in American historiography, and the two notions have become linked through comparative history. Although comparative history is by no means an American monopoly, the search to define, explore, and test the uniqueness of the American past has produced an impressive body of comparative history by world standards. For many years, this link was merely implicit. Advocates of exceptionalism such as Turner assumed American uniqueness rather than investigated it.\textsuperscript{14} More recently, the growth of comparative history, in part a product of the consensus historians' preoccupation with American uniqueness, has allowed systematic testing of exceptionalist ideas.\textsuperscript{15} Comparative history is for this reason not necessarily antagonistic to exceptionalism.

These connections are not always made clear by practitioners, and comparative history may sometimes be seen simply as a way of making the discipline in the United States more cosmopolitan.\textsuperscript{16} But even the supporters of comparative history acknowledge that the genre has its defects. The most obvious problem is the tendency to compare whole countries and to take for granted the primacy of the national unit of analysis. Thus slavery in the United States is compared to slavery in Brazil or to serfdom in Russia. Neither regional variations nor transnational influences are necessarily excluded in such accounts. Nevertheless,

\textsuperscript{12} Potter, People of Plenty, 118. The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1427, defines "unique" as "unmatched, unequalled, having no like or equal or parallel." This clearly has connotations of exceptionalism.
\textsuperscript{13} This is the problem with Degler's "In Pursuit," despite the sophistication and the nuances of his arguments about national comparison.
\textsuperscript{14} Turner, Frontier; Frederick Jackson Turner, The Significance of Sections in American History (1932; rpt. edn., Gloucester, Mass., 1950), 339.
the historian is forced to subordinate variations in both time and space to the elaboration and explanation of larger national differences.\textsuperscript{17}

Carried to an extreme, this type of comparative analysis reifies national characteristics. The classic case is the work of Louis Hartz, in \textit{The Liberal Tradition in America} (1955) and \textit{The Founding of New Societies} (1964). Here the liberal "fragment" derived from Europe's more complex social structure determines the nature of political debate. The fragment becomes frozen and loses its dialectical relationship with other fragments to produce a self-perpetuating "tradition." All major political and ideological developments can be explained in terms of such a national pathology.\textsuperscript{18}

It is not necessary to deal with an entire national tradition in order to fall into this error. Some local case studies do likewise. A well-crafted and informative comparison by Norbert MacDonald of the divergent histories of Vancouver and Seattle illustrates the point. Here are two similarly situated cities. Geographical influences are relatively constant, therefore a comparison may reveal something significant about the national scene. Such a comparison suggested to this author striking differences "in local characteristics and processes" that reflected "the distinctive histories, roles and values of two separate nations."\textsuperscript{19} Urban history, in this account, is national history writ small. At least one reviewer understood the message to be that such a comparison showed up the distinctive national features of American history identified with exceptionalism.\textsuperscript{20} But how different would the perspective be if Vancouver were contrasted with other Canadian cities or port cities elsewhere in the world? We cannot know at present, because the research design in comparative history is narrowly conceived to test purely national differences rather than convey a more varied sense of the elements that make up the diversity of historical experience. The focus on national factors as an explanation of urban trends ignores the very real uncertainty among Canadians about their national culture and their frank recognition of regional differences. It also fails to take into account the degree of American cultural penetration that makes a sense of "Canadian" difference impossible to measure in terms of a two-way national comparative framework.

Most comparative history involves just two countries, but the choice of countries for comparison is as important as the number of countries studied. Take the recent example of Donald Meyer's learned foray into feminist history, \textit{Sex and Power} (1987).\textsuperscript{21} Meyer synthesized recent women's history to ask, in effect, if the American women's movement has been exceptional. Comparing the case of the United States with those of Sweden, the Soviet Union, and Italy, Meyer answered


\textsuperscript{18} Louis Hartz, \textit{Liberal Tradition}; Hartz, \textit{Founding of New Societies}.

\textsuperscript{19} Norbert MacDonald, \textit{Distant Neighbors: A Comparative History of Seattle and Vancouver} (Lincoln, Neb., 1987), 195.


\textsuperscript{21} Meyer, \textit{Sex and Power}. 
this question in the affirmative, but he did not make comparisons with Britain or its colonies, where similar movements for women's emancipation flourished. In this respect, Meyer's analysis can be contrasted with the older but still useful survey by Richard Evans in *The Feminists* (1977). A British historian of German history, Evans was not preoccupied with American national distinctiveness. He acknowledged important differences between the United States and some other key countries in the timing and scope of women's reform and feminist agitation but also stressed regional comparisons between, for example, the American West and some of the Australian colonies. More important, he grouped sets of countries together to produce a typology of movements for women's emancipation. Although his particular typology had the disadvantage of overemphasizing the "liberal" and "bourgeois" character of feminism in the Anglo-American world, his approach did enable him to set the question of American feminism in a broader international context that emphasized the American case as a variation on a theme.22

Seymour Martin Lipset acknowledged the complication that the choice of countries introduces into comparative history. "Generalizations may invert when the unit of comparison changes. For example, Canada looks different when compared to the U.S. than when contrasted to Britain." Yet Lipset has not fully overcome the problem, as his own illustration shows. "Figuratively, on a scale of zero to one hundred, with the U.S. close to zero on a given trait and Britain at one hundred, Canada would fall around thirty. Thus, when Canada is evaluated by reference to the United States, it appears as more elitist, law-abiding, and statist, but when considering the variations between Canada and Britain, Canada looks more anti-statist, violent, and egalitarian."23 But Lipset's own standard of comparison is revealed in his deployment of the numerical grid. Almost invariably in American scholarship, the benchmark is the United States. Comparisons between the other countries are either ignored or played down. This procedure cannot test notions of American exceptionalism adequately, and the outcome of the piling up of differences between the United States and a variety of other cases in a range of miscellaneous matters is to ensure that American exceptionalism is "reaffirmed."

This penchant for stressing national difference has some practical roots. Modern archives are organized nationally, and historians making comparisons have to rely to a large extent on these, as well as on the national historical traditions in each country that are in part a product of such mundane matters. Dependence on the existing monographic scholarship is particularly noticeable in comparative work done by historical sociologists and political scientists. By relying on national historiographies for the basic building blocks of comparative history, scholars do not validate exceptionalism but rather reflect the disciplinary traditions of the academic world they have inherited.

For Americanists, this means making the problematic of American exception-
alist historiography central to comparative analysis. Much comparative history is written from the perspective of key issues in U.S. history. As Raymond Grew has perceptively noted, comparisons have “typically . . . dealt with issues that rise from within American historiography—frontiers, slavery, and immigrant groups . . . But rarely . . . has the exploration moved from the other direction, beginning with issues identified more fully in some other historical tradition to reveal something previously overlooked about American society . . . [E]ven the most successful systematic, transnational comparisons have led American historians back to the familiar mines rather than out toward new horizons.”

Among those familiar mines, none is more prominent than the topic of American uniqueness. It should be clear by now that the critics of exceptionalism cannot defeat the notion by exposing its illogicalities or by using the methodology of comparative history. The legacy of exceptionalism can only be laid to rest in two ways: by confronting the national focus of exceptionalist analysis, and by dealing with the special conditions of historical production that have shaped and sustained exceptionalism through the organization of historical knowledge in national units. This is why exceptionalism must be linked to national history and why the paradigm of national history must be rigorously scrutinized from the perspective of alternative transnational approaches. I do not mean to suggest that American history must be homogenized as part of some amorphous international history. The alternatives to national history I propose would contextualize nationalism and depict U.S. history as a variation on transnational themes.

The new transnational history could be constructed in several complementary ways. The first is a regional analysis drawing on the innovations and the inspiration of French Annales historiography and building on the earlier work done in various schools of local and regional historiography in the United States. In the celebrated work of Fernand Braudel, Emanuel LeRoy Ladurie, Marc Bloch, and others, national boundaries have been subordinated to the analysis of regional economies and viewpoints that reflect the local environment. These influences of climate, geography, outlook, and material life do not neatly follow the story of the rise of nation-states in the historiography of Annales.

American historians have praised Annales as a method of historical analysis, but they have not rushed to take up Annaliste themes. Where Braudel’s example has been employed to elucidate the deeper structures of American social history, these structures are used in a typical example to explain assumed national differences.

24 Grew, “Comparative Weakness,” 99–100. This inheritance is the product of more than such practical problems as the archival organization of research. Both theoretical issues and the intellectual inheritance are involved. The methodology of comparative history has had, since the nineteenth century, a strongly positivist tone. National units are assumed to be more or less self-contained specimens for historical analysis and comparison. Through such analysis, differences and similarities in national traditions can be ascertained in a method analogous to the laboratory testing of the natural sciences. The connections between the units considered for testing cannot be admitted or brought to the center of concern. For an excellent discussion of the varieties of comparative history, see A. A. Van Den Braembussche, “Historical Explanation and Comparative Method: Towards a Theory of the History of Society,” History and Theory, 28 (1989): 1–24.
characteristics. But even such limited applications are rare. Outside the colonial period, where studies of both demography and mentalité evidence an Annalist influence, little at all has been done. Why?

The scales of both time and place used by Braudel in The Mediterranean (1972–73) have not appealed to American historians because these do not square with the American historiographical preoccupation with the nation-state. The longue durée of Braudel’s Mediterranean region has not seemed convincing to American scholars concerned with the themes of democratic politics and ideology thrown up by the American Revolution and inherent in the subsequent history of the making of the American nation. The dominance of Progressive historiography, symbolized in the work of Charles Beard and Mary Beard’s Rise of American Civilization (1927) in the interwar period, suggests the vice-like grip these themes have had on professional historians and a wider public alike. Study of the material environment or enduring collective attitudes has not had appeal in a historiographical tradition concerned with rapid change and process rather than continuity and structure.

To be sure, precedents for a regional approach to the study of material life can be located in American scholarship. In the 1920s and 1930s, Walter Prescott Webb explored the history of the Great Plains as an environment shaping a regional tradition. Later, in The Great Frontier (1952), he extended his interest in the dynamic influence of frontier environments to a bold reinterpretation of Western civilization. Also in the interwar years, Herbert Eugene Bolton treated, on a slightly smaller scale, the transnational interaction of cultures in the Spanish borderlands and went on to propose a hemispheric approach to American studies. But Webb’s attempt at a universal history of the frontier elicited ridicule from specialists in European and British history like J. H. Hexter, and even Webb’s study of The Great Plains (1931) was denounced as overly deterministic. But there was a second reason inhibiting the reception of Bolton’s thesis. Bolton’s approach, which had its origins in work done before World War I, had relied...
primarily on looking at the sweep of American history from the colonial perspective. As modern American history loomed larger in the view of American historians, Bolton’s work diminished in importance. Bolton’s thesis, like Webb’s, failed because of the resistance of historians interested in the role national historical traditions played in the emergence of the modern world. In this sense, the pre-national history of what became the United States remained important to Americanists but chiefly as a condition for the emergence of national greatness.

One regional project has produced a more formidable body of research than these: the Atlantic system. Beginning with the seminal work of Charles McLean Andrews, this “imperial” school of thought provided in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a major point of reference for the study of the colonial era and the age of the American Revolution. Granted, Andrews’s insistence on imperial connections gave way in the 1920s to the focus of the Progressive historians on the rise of the American nation with its internal class and sectional conflicts, but there are signs that the Atlantic is once again regarded in colonial studies as a very powerful framework. The Atlantic trading network is, for much of American history, a key region within which to explore links of a transnational kind. This need not entail the old project of the United States as an extension of European civilization or, still less, English colonialism. The Atlantic world must encompass Africa as well as Europe and the Americas and, as scholars like Gary Nash have argued, focus on the cultural and social interchange of Native Americans, Africans, African-American slaves, and a variety of European peoples. Such new studies must also transcend the Andrews school by focusing more on regional environmental factors than on political and institutional concerns. D. W. Meinig’s magisterial Atlantic America (1986) did just this. He showed how the United States emerged from a set of disparate regions; each was carefully studied in its geographic peculiarities and relationships to the politics, culture, economy, and society of a larger Atlantic system of trade and the movement of peoples.

The study of slavery is one area that has benefited markedly from an Atlantic focus, beginning with Philip Curtin’s pioneering work on the African slave trade. His work has influenced many American historians. Yet the barriers of nation-state historiography remain strong. The impressive series edited by Richard Price and titled “Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture” has tended to neglect North American topics. Perhaps this reflects the divisions of area

31 See, for example, the way Kenneth Lockridge tied the work on colonial American demography into an interpretation of the origins of an American national character; Lockridge, “Social Change and the Meaning of the American Revolution,” Journal of Social History, 6 (Summer 1973): 403–39.
34 Philip D. Curtin, The African Slave Trade: A Census (Madison, Wis., 1969); Peter H. Wood, Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion (New York, 1974);
specialization. Within U.S. history, slavery is still seen primarily as a unique phenomenon, to be compared with slavery in other national settings rather than as part of Atlantic history.

Despite the value of these studies of the Atlantic world, they are mostly concentrated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before the emergence of the American nation-state. Meinig has made clear that the successor volumes to his *Atlantic America*, dealing with the period after 1800, will return to a more traditional emphasis on what Americans have had in common rather than continue to focus on the regional diversity and Atlantic links that distinguished his first volume. This maneuver underscores the difficulty that even persistent advocates of geographical and environmental factors have in coming to terms with the cluster of ideological, social, and political developments transforming the American colonies into a nation in the age of the democratic revolutions. Any regional history with transnational implications faces this difficulty. Regional approaches are not going to be persuasive so long as they seem merely the precursors or the building blocks of a national story.

Another problem with the regional approach is the inability of any one regional frame of reference to encompass the sheer variety of transnational regional affiliations in American history. If Atlantic studies have been stressed, the hemispheric links identified by Bolton have been neglected. The impact of the United States on Latin America, the comparative history of revolution and state making in the New World, and the cultural interchange between Hispanic America and the United States in the “borderlands” region from Texas to California are key cases calling out for further historical investigation.35 Another neglected regional framework is the continental focus pioneered in studies of Canadian-American relations done under the auspices of the Carnegie Endowment and directed by James T. Shotwell in the 1930s. Still another area of interest is the contacts of various kinds with East Asia and the Pacific.36 While it would be valuable to see American historiography stress the variety of these regional frameworks, a geographic focus does not show how the American nation, particularly in the nineteenth century and after, has related to them and how the different regional transnational pressures on American history relate to one another. Both East Asian and Atlantic connections have been important, but, from the point of view of synthesis, the common denominator between Pacific and


Atlantic contacts has been the history of the United States. This is not a way to transcend the nation-state framework. Some transnational processes, moreover, have effects far beyond particular regions, even those as broad as the Atlantic system. There are strong arguments to be made in favor of approaches of a global kind, especially those that give proper place to local and national peculiarities.

The most influential attempt at this type of transnational historical analysis has come from Immanuel Wallerstein and the world-systems theory he has promoted. Building on the insights of both Marx and Braudel, Wallerstein discussed the rise of capitalism since the fifteenth century as a “world-economy” that is not coterminous with national borders. He recognized the dominance of particular nation-states at various times in the “core” of the system and was also able to explain, through his model of core versus periphery, variations in state structure and labor systems between the different parts of the “modern world-system.” It is important to the survival of any world system that no one state remain dominant indefinitely, since that will tend in turn to produce a world empire in which the political and economic boundaries of the system are the same. This had happened with previous and transitory world economies but has yet not happened to the modern world system precisely because its basis is capitalist. That is, there is a functional geographical division in the system between economic and political activities. A capitalist world economy is superior to a world empire (and previous world economies) in terms of its ability to accumulate capital, because the tasks of policing the system are not done by any particular area. Core states can instead concentrate on the building of comparative economic advantages to advance capitalism and the world system as a whole. Wallerstein’s approach has the advantage of combining both local conditions and systemic influences into one broad theory of historical change.37

Despite its insights, Wallerstein’s work has received only marginal endorsement from American historians.38 Little effort has been made to explore the relevance of Wallerstein for specifically American topics, in which “America” is understood to mean what has become the United States. Yet world-systems theory is important because it enables us to put America’s national and regional developments into better focus. The issue of American exceptionalism is largely meaningless within this framework. This is perhaps best seen in the recent work of the historical geographer John Agnew, in The United States in the World-Economy (1987).39 Agnew charted the changing relationship of regions within the United States to the world economy and explained how and why the Northeast shifted from peripheral status in that international system in the eighteenth century to core status by the end of the nineteenth century, then was in turn challenged by other regions as the United States was progressively integrated into the world


39 Agnew, United States in the World-Economy, 8–15.
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economy. For Agnew, the question of American power and its threatened decline in recent years is really a story of these shifting relationships to the world system. As Agnew himself emphasized strongly, the history of the United States seen in such a framework cannot be exceptional or unique. It is significant that such an insightful synthesis has come from a historical geographer.

Nonetheless, valid empirical and theoretical objections to Wallerstein’s theory have been made. Many scholars believe that Wallerstein’s model is too rigid to cover the variety of social, cultural, and economic factors that explain how regional competitive advantages take shape within the system. Some critics from the Marxist tradition believe that only class forces within the emergent states can explain the process of capital accumulation and change in the capitalist system over time. As defined by Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, the study of national political economies and their constituent class and ideological forces was undervalued by Wallerstein.

If, because of the nature of his enterprise, Wallerstein was, on the one hand, insufficiently attentive to internal class and cultural factors, he did not, on the other hand, explore the range and complexity of international influences fully, either. Like other comparativists, he was largely dependent on the existing nation-state historiographies. Wallerstein synthesized this work in a most admirable way and related the economic history of states to the world economy, but he focused in that system on the impersonal economic force of the capitalist marketplace. Relatively little attention has been given by world-system theorists to concrete transnational institutions such as foreign trading companies and the specific financial and monetary mechanisms of the international market economy.

Nor does world-systems theory tell us anything about noneconomic factors of a transnational kind that might influence the market.


Because of the difficulties in using world-systems theory, historians interested in transnational connections should consider two strategies: one is to revive the various regional projects discussed above, the other and perhaps more revolutionary move would be to strike out in the direction of a global focus more attentive to historical specificity and variety than Wallerstein's largely economistic model. It is this second approach that I now want to consider in some detail. European expansionism has gradually created a global economy and is today in the process of creating a global society as well. These developments in the spread of European values, technologies, peoples, and power began in the sixteenth century and encompass the opening of the Americas, although the evolution of a specifically global pattern of relations is typically tied by scholars to the era of late nineteenth-century imperialism. As Stephen Kern showed, this change to a global outlook included culture as well as technology and heralded new ways of thinking about both time and space.

Global pressures are evident in a number of ways: the emergence of a set of interdependent economic relations to which American history could be connected; the related development of communications systems and technology; global environmental constraints, both natural and constructed; systems of alliances and political blocs; the international movements and organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, that have influenced nation-states; and the growth since the turn of the century of obligations under international law that, in some cases, override national laws. These processes are creating a global context that demonstrates the inadequacy of a national framework for comprehending the present historical circumstances of the United States and that could form the basis of a new approach to important aspects of the American past. I do not propose to discuss each of these in detail. Instead, I shall focus first on economic connections, then the environment, and finally organizations, ideologies, and movements to illustrate how American history can be related to transnational influences and how such influences point up the weakness of exceptionalist explanations.

For the development of a transnational project using an American base, the study of the interaction of the American Colonies and republic with the international economic system remains crucial, whatever the weaknesses found in


44 I am indebted to David Held, “The Decline of the Nation State,” in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, eds., New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s (London, 1989), 35–37, for this formulation. The study of these processes is by no means the preserve of historians alone. In the field of international politics, see, for example, Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Transnational Relations and World Politics (Cambridge, Mass., 1973); David Calleo, Beyond American Hegemony: The Future of the Western Alliance (New York, 1987); and Held, “Beyond the Nation State.” American historians could, by looking at American international connections from the perspective of social, economic, and cultural history, complement the work being done on international history from the perspective of world politics.
Wallerstein's model. Because of the growing divorce between economic history and general history since the 1960s, the insights of the older traditions of economic history that stressed international connections have not been consolidated. What exactly has been the role over time of such critical economic factors as trade, investment, and immigration? Even though the United States built a strong national economy in the nineteenth century, international influences must not be underestimated. Much dispute exists over the importance of international trade vis-à-vis the development of a national market. Among economic historians, critics of transnational approaches argue that the role of international trade in the core economies of the world system in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was far from spectacular. The tendency to stress domestic factors is most tempting of all for econometric historians, who are preoccupied with measuring national incomes and rates of national economic growth.

These choices involve theoretical assumptions on the part of American economic historians that indicate they, too, are not free from the legacy of American exceptionalism. Most recent syntheses emphasize the vast internal market and natural resources of the nineteenth-century United States and treat the European economies in a positivistic way as a purely external stimulus to be added to the internal factors of land, capital, and labor as variables. To be sure, there have been dissenters. Brinley Thomas's study of Atlantic migration vigorously contested this paradigm and focused instead on the interrelation of economic growth, migration, and capital formation in an international economy. That his thesis has often been criticized or, alternatively, ignored by modern American economic historians suggests the extent to which they are prepared to work within a national framework of economic analysis.

The importance of trading interdependence cannot be easily discounted. In the colonial era, the volume of export trade ranged from 20 to 30 percent of gross national product (GNP), according to the best estimates, and the presence of an imperial system based on mercantilism made the political economy of “foreign trade” of greater importance than even this high volume of trade would suggest. For later periods, the significance of foreign trade declined from its high levels of the colonial and early republican era, and exports as a percentage of GNP never exceeded 7 percent in the nineteenth century. But this figure is rarely set in comparative perspective. In Britain, the ratio of foreign trade to GNP was scarcely


47 Thomas, Migration and Economic Growth. It is true that Jonathan Hughes, American Economic History, 2d edn. (Glenview, Ill., 1987), 298, argued that “Thomas’ grand thesis … has withstood well the test of critical examination by scholars for nearly three decades and remains intact.” Hughes, however, gave more extended attention to international trade, immigration, international financial institutions, and foreign capital than most American economic historians do.
higher, and Patrick O'Brien's study noted that in 1790 only 4 percent of Europe's GNP was exported across national boundaries. Nonetheless, most observers concede that international trade grew at an impressive rate within the Atlantic economy and provided a notable stimulus to the system in the nineteenth century. Simon Kuznets long ago argued persuasively that foreign trade has followed cyclical patterns, with much of the nineteenth century characterized by unprecedented "high rates of growth." Historical Statistics of the United States (1976) commented correctly that the "United States was more heavily dependent upon foreign markets and sources at that time than it has been in the 20th century." Moreover, it is the composition of that trade that is most important. Key sectors like agriculture in the nineteenth century and manufacturing since World War I have been relatively more involved in international trade than other sectors. Cotton before the Civil War is a well-known case, since 50 percent of American exports by value at that time were provided by the cotton economy. The political and economic ramifications of cotton's position in the American economy for national politics (and international diplomacy) are widely recognized, but the purely economic aspects of the cotton trade require further research. Douglass North's analysis of the crucial role of cotton exports has been subjected to severe criticism from some econometric historians, but little work has been done on the overall significance of the cotton export trade and its interrelation with finance, shipping, foreign capital imports, and immigration. For the late nineteenth century, the impact of farm politics and the search for markets for agricultural products has been extensively treated, thus testifying to the continuing importance of foreign agriculture in American political economy. In the twentieth century, the shift to an exchange of sophisticated industrial commodities has


50 I have used this publication in the retitled 1976 edition, with introduction by Ben J. Wattenberg, The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present (New York, 1976), 876.

51 Douglass North, Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860 (New York, 1966), 75-77; D. P. Crook, The North, the South, and the Powers, 1861-1865 (New York, 1974). Susan Previant Lee and Peter Passell, New Economic View, attacked Douglass North's contention that external demand for cotton was the driving force in southern economic expansion, yet they focused only on North's interregional trade argument that southern cotton specialization stimulated midwestern farmers to supply grain to cotton producers. They failed to assess other aspects of international economic interdependence, such as the role of immigrant labor. They also conceded, ironically, that "the dependence of the East on western foodstuffs does offer some indirect confirmation of North's thesis. Southern cotton production generated export revenues used by the East to purchase foreign capital, and thereby to specialize in nonagricultural production"; p. 151. For a summary of arguments against the North thesis, see also Stanley Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, "U.S. Economic Growth, 1790-1860," Research in Economic History, 8 (1983): 1-46. Engerman and Gallman accepted the paradigm of the nation-state as the focus of economic growth, as first articulated by Kuznets; pp. 2-3.

perpetuated the interdependence of the world and American economies, though in different ways than in earlier periods. The reliance of the United States on Third World countries for key raw materials required for a complex industrial economy has increased markedly since the 1920s and forms an underpinning to the hegemonic political role assumed by the United States since World War II.\(^{53}\)

It is possible to go further to suggest the importance of long waves of economic change in the cycles of world trade, investment, and economic growth. This theme can be tied to the integration of the United States into the capitalist world economy. A comparison of American wholesale price indexes with the long wave cycles of international capitalist development originally proposed by the Russian economist N. D. Kondratieff shows a remarkable concurrence of cyclical trends in the American and world economies since the late eighteenth century.\(^{54}\) Although the internal market was large, the United States developed this market in the nineteenth century with the help of heavy importation of capital and labor, factors that made the international connections of the American economy vital. The importance of British capital flows in the nineteenth-century American economy was long ago suggested by the work of Alec Cairncross, and the impact of international financial fluctuations has been charted, for the turbulent 1830s, by Peter Temin.\(^{55}\) Nor should migration be neglected. The existence of abundant land or resources meant nothing without the labor to develop those resources, as well as the technologies and know-how that immigrants brought with them. Even if immigration studies have moved away from consideration of migration as a flow of human capital, the work of Brinley Thomas on the economic significance of international migration remains largely sound.\(^{56}\) The United States was, like some West European countries in the 1970s, able to “export” part of its unemployment problem by massive repatriation of Mediterranean labor in the era of classic imperialism before World War I. The benefits in reducing the social costs of industrialization are difficult to calculate, but they must be taken into account when assessing American abundance and economic growth as somehow exceptional in the nineteenth century.\(^{57}\) The United States built its strong national

\(^{53}\) This is a point cogently made by Gabriel Kolko, Main Currents in Modern American History (New York, 1976), 197–98, 383–86.

\(^{54}\) In the case of the late 1830s, Peter Temin, The Jacksonian Economy (New York, 1969), stressed international financial correlations as the root cause of fluctuations in the American economy. For price and cyclical correlations, see Agnew, United States in the World Economy, 22. In Carville Earle, “The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner: Macrohistory, Agricultural Innovation, and Environmental Change,” in Donald Worster, ed., The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History (Cambridge, 1988), 182 and following, the cycle is applied to the prerevolutionary Tidewater as well.


\(^{56}\) Hughes, American Economic History, 298; Darwin H. Stapleton, The Transfer of Early Industrial Technology to America (Philadelphia, 1987), stresses the importation of human capital as a boost to technological know-how.

\(^{57}\) The importance of repatriation as a factor in American social and economic development has not been given the attention it deserves. See Betty Boyd Caroli, Italian Repatriation from the United States, 1900–1914 (New York, 1973); Theodore Saloutos, They Remember America: The Story of the Repatriated Greek-Americans (Berkeley, Calif., 1956); Alexander Keyssar, Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts (Cambridge, 1986), 78–79. Keyssar stated the position nicely: “Workmen in Europe and Canada constituted a reservoir of labor that was tapped when needed and that reabsorbed jobless workers when business was slow in Massachusetts”; p. 79.
economy using international labor supplies and capital of vast extent, and it relied—more than in the period 1913–1950—on international trade and a buoyant world economy; thus the very era in which American ideas of exceptionalism were most prominent is revealed as an era of economic interdependence.

This global economic focus is valuable in part because it provides essential background for assessing the arguments made for American isolation, free security, and abundance that litter the discourse of American historiography. At the same time, a focus on the relationship between international economic development and shifts in the American economy raises important issues for social, political, and cultural development. Most obviously, the ebb and flow of immigration facilitated the interchange of ideas and cultural values. Far too often, the question of immigration has been seen in terms of assimilation and upward mobility, as one would expect in exceptionalist historiography. The cultural meanings of large-scale repatriation of immigrants, which often reached a third of the total number of immigrants, have been largely ignored. Equally important is the impact of the international economy on regional subcultures and on classes and social structures. For the colonial period, one authority has commented, “transatlantic commerce altered the structure of communities by raising living standards and widening the gap between those at the top and the rest of colonial society.” The impact of external factors on domestic development may be both less and different for later periods, yet regional disparities of wealth and power remain a marked feature of the United States that might be linked to the fluctuations of the world economy.

A second major area that illustrates the potential for a transnational approach is environmental history. Because modern environmental movements have had strong American roots, environmental history is, in the United States, a promising and sophisticated historical specialty. Yet Donald Worster has noted sadly that some environmental historians have, in order to gain acceptance in a profession dominated by the idea of history as the study of nations and national cultures, “already gone far to mold” themselves “to fit the national boundaries mindset.” His call is for an alternative synthesis that “moves easily across national

59 See, for example, how repatriation is discussed purely in terms of an American impact on the countries to which immigrants returned in Carl Degler, Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America, 3d edn. (New York, 1984), 301–02. A fascinating account of how migration patterns can reveal much about networks of international communication is found in the work of two German historians, Dirk Hoerder and Harmut Keil, “The American Case and German Social Democracy at the Turn of the 20th Century, 1878–1907,” in Heffer and Rovet, Why Is There No Socialism in the United States, 141–63.
61 Agnew, United States in the World-Economy.
Environmental damage has not been confined within narrow and often arbitrary political boundaries; drought, industrial pollution, land settlement, and the overuse of natural resources such as marine life, soil, and water could be studied in a wider, transnational framework. Doing so could build on work done by the Canadian economic historian Harold Innis and others in the 1930s. Because environmental damage has not been confined within national boundaries, environmental ideas and movements have often been transnational in scope. Most important, investigations of environmental ideas and contexts could comment on American exceptionalism by inquiring into the transnational ecological consequences of American "abundance." To what extent has American wealth and power been acquired by transferring to other peoples the environmental costs of economic development?

Studies of systemic connections in trade, labor, immigration, investment, and environmental constraints leave open the possibility that shared material processes were interpreted differently in the United States. Transnational similarities of structure may confound American exceptionalism, only to give way to profound differences of meaning at the ideological and cultural levels. Since much of American historiography is taken up with the exploration of cultural meanings and social and political activism, exceptionalism could still be rescued at the level of consciousness. In part, this pitfall might be avoided by historicizing American exceptionalism as a set of ideas in cultural history. Dorothy Ross has done this, for American social science theory, by tracing the intellectual crisis of exceptionalism in the Gilded Age, when immigration and class conflict made


63 The focus in this case would be a North American one for much of what has conventionally been "American" history. See the studies in the Carnegie Series on Canadian-American relations described in Berger, Writing of Canadian History, chap. 6; Harold A. Innis, The Cod Fisheries (New Haven, 1940).

64 As long ago as the mid-nineteenth century, environmentalist ideas had a transnational focus. George Perkins Marsh, the Vermonter who wrote the seminal work Man and Nature (1864), gleaned major insights from comparing the experience of land use in the New World with that in the Old, especially during his years as an American diplomat in Italy in the 1860s. Man and Nature's search for the causes of ecological degradation was of great interest to scientists in many countries, and topics like the effects of the destruction of the forests on climate and soil erosion on rivers and seas had obvious global implications. Given the wealth of his data and the breadth of his insights, Marsh's reputation was an international one. The impact of his ideas abroad has not yet been studied by historians. The way is open in the case of Marsh's work for a comparative study of conservation that pays attention to the flow of ideas across national boundaries as well. David Lowenthal, George Perkins Marsh: Versatile Vermonter (New York, 1958), chap. 13. This point is confirmed in Michel F. Girard, "Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: Un Modèle de gestion de l'environnement venu d'Europe?" Histoire sociale/Social History, 23 (May 1990): 63-80.

many elite Americans fear that their society was no longer unique.66 If exceptionalist ideas have their own history in this way, they cannot be assumed to have been hegemonic in all periods. The power of exceptionalism to explain American circumstances has varied over time and must be assessed against alternative ideologies. Among these ideological influences, the impact of transnational sentiments must be addressed.

The third aspect of a transnational research project requiring urgent attention is the study of organizations, movements, and ideologies. Since the time of de Tocqueville, the American republic has been characterized as a nation of joiners. Despite this emphasis on American uniqueness in the study of voluntary organizations, a large number of international associations with American connections await historical treatment. Little American research has been done on such organizations, even though an exhaustive survey of the internationalist impulse in Europe has demonstrated that they were ubiquitous in the nineteenth century.67 Many of these organizations have had American leadership or support; for instance, reform movements such as the Good Templars and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, working-class organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World, social service organizations such as Rotary International, church and missionary groups such as the United Society for Christian Endeavor, and scientific and academic groups such as the International Geodesic Association. These groups need to be investigated to see to what extent their internationalism was genuine and to what extent they represented a spread of American influence and cultural hegemony. Either way, they illustrate the profound international connections of modern American society.68

As the case of international organizations suggests, the entire ideology of "internationalism" as a concept requires examination. Problematic as the concept may be, the study of internationalism is important as a context for other types of transnational action and for developing a perspective on the limitations of the nation-state framework. Many manifestations of internationalism have had strong roots in American experience, yet American historians have largely ignored this evidence. Such a focus would not neglect nationalism. Indeed, the very concept of nationalism as a motivating ideology implies both localism and internationalism as its points of contrast. The study of internationalist ideologies would be particularly important in relation to political elites, intellectuals, and reform movements. The international dimension has been unavoidably confronted in histories of the peace crusade but often neglected in the case of other reforms. It is true that a


start has been made, often by British historians, on the topic of transatlantic reform. Frank Thistlethwaite's pioneering work has been consolidated in such areas as abolitionism and revivalism. In the late nineteenth century, a host of reform groups reflected the imperial context and aspired toward a global, not just an Atlantic, focus. They constituted themselves as specifically international organizations, campaigned on transnational themes, fostered international contacts, and promoted their own versions of international ideologies. The International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) started by Carrie Chapman Catt was a prominent example among women's groups. Sometimes, as in the case of the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union, these women's organizations have mobilized grass-roots support and identified women in other lands as part of an "international sisterhood."

Such expressions of internationalism have usually been associated with elites. Yet transnational ideologies have at times had wider purchase. Working-class participation could be explored in such rituals of the socialist and labor movements as the May Day celebrations of the European working classes in the late nineteenth century. The American Federation of Labor staged such a May Day demonstration in 1890, and similar celebrations proliferated among immigrant workers who made up much of the American working class in the Progressive Era. Internationalist sentiment among workers could also be traced back into earlier periods of American history. The creation of strong nationalist sentiments as an aspect of popular culture has been largely a product of the nineteenth century; prior to that time, it was laboring people like the seaman of Marcus Rediker's fine study, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea (1987), who carried with them in their lives and work the baggage of a transnational cultural system. National identities that cut across such allegiances grew during the era of the American Revolution and national consolidation thereafter, but national traditions had to be patiently constructed, indeed, "invented," in the language of Eric


On international organizations, see especially Lyons, Internationalism in Europe, 263–307, 309–61. This material is primarily European, although there are some American references. For an American example, see Ian Tyrrell, Woman's World/Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991). A comprehensive and critical study of Catt's international activities and the IWSA is needed. In the meantime, see Mary Gray Peck, Carrie Chapman Catt: A Biography (New York, 1944); Edith Hurwitz, "The International Sisterhood," in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., Becoming Visible: Women in European History (Boston, 1977), 327–45.

Tyrrell, Woman's World/Woman's Empire; Hurwitz, "International Sisterhood," 327–45; Evans, Feminists, 246–53.

Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Even in the era after the emergence of American nationalism, deprived groups such as African Americans continued to harbor dreams of transnational ideologies. The long history of Back-to-Africa movements testifies to this point.

These examples suggest that the United States—the home of an influential ideology of exceptionalism—may, paradoxically, be a prime site for the study of transnational ideologies. Something similar was suggested long ago by Randolph Bourne in an important but neglected essay, titled “Trans-National America” (1916). Bourne rejected the melting pot ideology in favor of a more multicultural approach to the problems of American nationalism and immigration. He saw the United States as the scene of a cosmopolitan interchange that involved a simultaneous consideration of national and transnational allegiances, “a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.”

Bourne’s essay has been treated as the outpouring of a literary eccentric, but his view bears a striking resemblance to the thought of Jane Addams in her Newer Ideals of Peace (1907). Addams’s time in the Chicago settlement house movement did not lead her to emphasize national xenophobia or exclusiveness. Rather, immigrants were in the slums “laying the simple and inevitable foundations of an international order” through the cosmopolitan “intermingling of the nations.”

The process of immigration may have made social reformers like Jane Addams more inclined toward internationalism and peace agitation than they would otherwise have been. The international connections of American development on the economic, social, and cultural planes may be responsible for the proliferation of “international” movements and sentiments in the United States. But the irony was the close association between such versions of American internationalism and the ideology of exceptionalism. Bourne, in particular, could not conceive of any other nation as the site of such a cosmopolitan interchange. The United States was “a unique sociological fabric.” This approach suggests that any consideration of international ideologies starting from an American base must still come to grips with the specific roles of the nation-state and nationalism in the articulation of those very dreams for transnational futures. In turn, the emphasis in American forms of internationalism on the outreach of specific cultural institutions rooted in American experience indicates how closely “internationalism” has been linked to American exceptionalism through concepts of cultural expansionism. Bourne saw the United States as helping through its diverse society the uplift of “uncivilized” peoples. In the process of repatriation of immigrant groups, he saw not the activities of “the parasitic alien” but the mechanisms of Americanization abroad. “They return [to their homelands] with an entirely new critical outlook, and a sense of the superiority of American organization to the primitive living around them.” In such judgments, Bourne’s cosmopolitan vision becomes con-


75 Jane Addams, Newer Ideals of Peace (New York, 1907), 18.
fused and scarcely rises above the level of cultural imperialism advocated by some missionary groups and their supporters. If a history of transnationalism is to have any meaning, therefore, it must explore the complex dialectic between exceptionalism and internationalism. Only this dialectic explains the enthusiasm among intellectuals—and academic historians, no less—for the study of an American character on the one hand and an insistence on the interdependence of peoples on the other. Arthur Schlesinger’s remarks in *Paths to the Present* were in this respect neither atypical nor contradictory but indicative of the complexities of the relations between the American nation-state and its international environment.

How transnationalism is approached in American history, the question of its relationship to the history of the nation cannot be avoided. This is a problem for all historiographies, because of the importance of the nation-state in the modern world, but, for much of American history, it is a crucial point. The United States may be enmeshed in a global interdependence, but the relationship of U.S. history to transnational themes is different from that of many—though not all—other countries. A great power does not have the same relation to systems of international law, organizations, or movements that a small power does. Transnational analysis must therefore confront the problem of hegemony on the international level. This is not the same as saying that the United States is exceptional, since power is transitory and has shifted markedly over the course of the five hundred years of European exploration and settlement of the Americas. Nationalism and the state must still be historicized, and in so doing exceptionalism may be put in its proper place.

How can the nation-state be incorporated in this project? American historians interested in developing a transnational approach must specify the relations of three phenomena: first, the international context of national action in all of its manifestations. This would include not only international economic relations but also transnational connections in religion, culture, and social life; second, the development of the nation-state constrained by these international contexts; third, the groups and classes that operate both within the nation-state and at the international level. A key example would be the way certain American women reformers at the turn of the century, dispirited in some measure by the failure to achieve the vote in the United States, established international feminist connections and proposed that feminism be the basis of a new internationalism. The failure of the American nation-state to give equal citizenship rights made some feminists hostile to nationalism. Said Ellen Sargent, a California suffragist, in 1910: “who that realizes the situation can be patriotic? . . . Our own United States have the home made material of which anarchists are made.” In her study of

77 Schlesinger, *Paths to the Present*. In a recent study of movements for world government, Wesley Wooley noted the “paradoxical nationalism” of those he termed “supranationalists.” “[O]ne-worlders have seldom neglected American national interests or been hesitant to suggest that reformed global institutions be patterned after American experience”; Wooley, *Alternatives to Anarchy: American Supranationalism since World War II* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), ix.
Feminism in Germany and Scandinavia (1915), Katharine Anthony expanded on the point: “The disenfranchisement of a whole sex, a condition which has existed throughout the civilized world until a comparatively recent date, has bred in half the population an unconscious internationalism. The man without a country was a tragic exception; the woman without a country was the accepted rule.” The result? “The enfranchisement of women now under way” had in Anthony’s view “come too late to inculcate in them the narrow views of citizenship which were once supposed to accompany the gift of the vote. Its effect” would, she predicted, “rather be to make the unconscious internationalism of the past the conscious internationalism of the future.”

Anthony’s predictions went astray, but that does not make her sentiments unimportant. The goals of feminists were diverse; their aims to bolster international solidarity between women and to provide compensation for losses at home were salient ones. Yet international ideology and organization also served to achieve goals at the national level. American women stepped in this case outside the boundaries of the state in order to put pressure on it by manipulating international opinion.

The choice was not necessarily a clear one between international and national action. Both planes of activity could be pursued simultaneously; what on one level is an internationalist strategy could also have force in building a social movement in the United States. Take the case of Pan-Africanism as practiced by Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). This ideology could be interpreted as much as an attempt to create a racial solidarity that could aid upward social mobility as a concrete endeavor to leave the United States. The Garvey movement was rooted in a long tradition of African-American emigrant sentiment. Migration was not necessarily out of the country; it is arguable that such migration had its psychological and ideological dimension and that its spatial dimensions depended on particular circumstances. Thus southern black “exodusters” of the 1870s went to Kansas; a later generation of ghetto migrants continued to reject racism and socioeconomic deprivation in different ways through the “Back-to-Africa” movement. Local social conditions proved fertile for the development of Pan-African ideology as a response to an intellectual climate of European colonialism and racism. In this way, the local history of social movements can be linked to international contexts.

This three-tiered model of social action can illuminate the relationship between transnational patterns on the one hand and the development of the state and modern nationalism on the other. Such an approach would tie in with the concern of political scientists and sociologists such as Theda Skocpol to examine the relationship between class forces and the growth of state power in comparative

79 Judith Stein, The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society (Baton Rouge, La., 1986), stresses the international connections of Garveyism. For the use of black Zionism to build racial solidarity in the United States, see E. David Cronon, Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (Madison, Wis., 1955), 185–87. On the millennial tradition in black migration within the United States, see, for example, Nell Irvin Painter, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction (New York, 1977).
perspective. What needs to be added to their reconceptualization of the role of the state is a stronger sense of the interplay between domestic and international forces in the shaping of state power. Transnational factors do not simply define the possibilities for social action within the state in the way that Skocpol has indicated; classes and groups have on occasion moved beyond state boundaries to contribute to the international forces shaping and limiting state power.80 This perspective helps contextualize American exceptionalism. The particular constellation of international and domestic class and group forces gives the state its specific character. In this way, American national power can be historicized by relating it to the changing balance of these forces. The growth of the American nation-state can thereby be depicted not as an exception to patterns of national power in a world of nations but as a particular, and constantly changing, expression of complex forces.

All this is a formidable task for any group of historians yet not an impossible one. The chief obstacles are practical and are connected to the resilience of historiography written from the national point of view. The detailed strategy of execution would demand a separate essay, since changes in historians' ways of producing knowledge are required, but the main points can be swiftly indicated. The growing strength of international connections in the contemporary world will surely make historians reconsider these relationships in past times. The internationalization of scholarship itself is steadily eroding the boundaries that at the turn of the century created strong national historiographical traditions, including American exceptionalism. In part, historians could achieve much along the lines suggested were they simply to build on work already done by the Americanists on international history, comparative history, and regional history discussed in this essay. A new focus on the interplay of global connections and local variations would bring much of this older work into a more helpful relation to current political and economic concerns in ways that would by-pass the temptation to revive exceptionalism. But other strategies are required as well. More could be done by scholarly associations and universities to create institutional frameworks in which these issues could be addressed. Certainly, such tasks cannot be accomplished through individual action alone. Pooling the talents of historians to explore transnational themes is needed.81 More than at any time since the turn of the century, American historians are alive to the potential for a historiography that transcends national boundaries. Yet only with institutional support can the momentous changes occurring today in global relations be matched in American historical writing by a new "age of international history."

80 Theda Skocpol, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Peter B. Evans, eds., Bringing the State Back In (Cambridge, 1985); a stimulus to my argument, suggesting the importance of international connections, is Block and Somers, "Beyond the Economistic Fallacy," 73–75.

81 I have in mind the cooperation evidenced in Canny and Padgen, Colonial Identity, in which common social processes are treated in a range of local variations and the emergence of national identity is not assumed but treated as contingent. Some practical suggestions have been canvassed in an essay that is congenial to my argument: Akira Iriye, "The Internationalization of History," AHR, 94 (February 1989): 1–10, esp. 2–3.