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Putting the United States in North America

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Richard John

Putting the United States in North America

- 1 The recent publication of Thomas Bender's *Nation among Nations* is a welcome sign that historians are turning their attention to the writing of a history of the United States that is more fully cognizant of the relationship of the nation to the rest of the world.¹ Bender's vision of world history is most emphatically not history with the nations left out. Rather, he urges his colleagues to locate the United States—as a nation—in a transnational context. This development is hardly new. As Ian Tyrrell reminded us in a perceptive review essay in the *Journal of American History* in 1999, the first generation of professional historians of the United States—including Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard—envisioned national history not only as a primer in “past politics” but also as a window on “universal history.”² This transnational agenda was carried forward by the great Latin American historian, Herbert E. Bolton, who, in a justly celebrated presidential address before the American Historical Association in 1932, called for the writing of an epic or “greater America,” as a counterpoint to a recent U. S.-history centric “epic of America” that had been published by James Truslow Adams.³
- 2 Tyrrell and Bolton are mostly interested in social processes that transcended national boundaries. These are undeniably important. Social processes as diverse as social reform, immigration, and disease have long had a transnational dimension. Yet neither is primarily interested in the influence of transnational processes on particular nations. My theme, in contrast, is the influence on the United States of social processes that originated outside of the United States. My time span is the long nineteenth century that began with the adoption of the federal Constitution in 1788 and ended with the entry of the United States in the First World War in 1917. My theme is territorial expansion and economic development—two of the defining features of the age. The transnational social processes are territorial expansion and economic development. The influence of these social processes on the United States can be most fruitfully conceptualized not as a one-way impact, but, rather, as an entanglement.⁴
- 3 Many historians of the United States in the long nineteenth century locate it in the Atlantic world. There is good reason for this. The United States in this period remained culturally, economically, and politically an appendage of Europe. Its inhabitants traded with European countries, remained enmeshed in European power politics, and read European books. This essay shifts the angle of vision from the Atlantic world to the North American continent. Territorial expansion and economic development owed much to geographical propinquity, and Canada, Mexico, and the West Indies each abutted the United States.⁵
- 4 If the United States is viewed from a continentalist perspective, certain assumptions are called into question. Of these, perhaps the most obvious is the ubiquitous appellation “American.” Canada, Mexico, and the West Indies are also American, in the sense that they too are located in North America. Yet they are rarely characterized in this way. Mindful of this fact, I have tried to be sparing in this essay in using the adjective “American” in reference to developments specific to the United States.
- 5 Just as a North American perspective raises questions about nomenclature, so, too, it invites a reconsideration of the character of the United States government. If, for example, the government of the United States is compared with the governments of Mexico and Canada (or what was then called British North America), it is hard to sustain the longstanding convention among historians and political scientist that the United States government in this period was a mere “state of courts and parties” that boasted, at best, a minimal administrative apparatus.⁶ While this convention has not gone uncontested, it has by no means been abandoned. It remains the organizing theme, for example, for a recent synthetic history of the political history of the United States.⁷
- 6 The “state of courts and parties” thesis presupposes that the United States in the nineteenth century enjoyed an era of “free security” that set it apart from the nation-states of Europe.

From a continentalist perspective, a different picture emerges. While diplomats did their best to heed George Washington's admonition to avoid formal military alliances, the nation remained encircled by potentially hostile imperial powers. In the period between 1787 and 1920, the United States military intervened abroad on 122 separate occasions, excluding declared wars.⁸ These interventions occurred throughout the world. Yet the United States military was particularly active in North America; a fact that is easily overlooked in historical narratives that focus on the relationship of the United States and Europe. The Mexican-American vastly expanded the size of the United States, while Great Britain and the United States went to war over Canada in the 1810s. Had circumstances been slightly different, the two countries might have gone to war over Oregon in the 1840s. France intervened in Mexico in a major way in the 1860s; had the United States military been less powerful, it might well have remained. For the Indian tribes of the North American interior, the United States state in the early republic was not a "midget"—as one influential historian once termed it—but a "midget on horseback" that was fully capable of uprooting dozens of large and powerful tribes from their ancestral lands.⁹ From a continentalist perspective, the Spanish-American War was no anomaly. Rather, it was a predictable consequence of a century of military aggrandizement that had enormously expanded the boundaries of the United States.

7 Historians of the United States often downplay the significance of the failed conquest of Canada during the War of Independence and the War of 1812 and its successful conquest of Mexico during the Mexican-American War of 1846-48. Mexicans, in contrast, are well aware of the loss they suffered in 1846-1848, while Canadians trace the establishment of their dominion to the recognition by their political leaders that, now that the U. S. Civil War had ended, the northern third of North America was once again vulnerable to military invasion from the United States. Had the Canadian government been weaker—and had it not come under the protection of Great Britain, then the greatest military power in the world—the United States army might well have devoted its energies to the subjugation not of the Indian tribes to the west, but, instead, its Canadian neighbor to the north.

8 Why the United States failed to conquer Canada, yet succeeded in conquering Mexico, is a question that is too rarely asked in historical writing on the nineteenth-century United States. It is, for example, a remarkable fact, as Alan Taylor recently noted, that one group of settlers from the United States staged a successful revolt against Mexican Texas in the 1830s, while another group of settlers from the United States failed at almost precisely the same period to dislodge Upper Canada from the British Empire.¹⁰ A full understanding of these divergent outcomes involves a consideration of developments internal to Mexico and Canada that historians of the United States typically ignore.

9 The power of the American state in the backcountry is a common theme in recent historical writing on U. S.-Indian relations. Even so, it remains common to characterize the trajectory of U. S. territorial expansion as East-West rather than North-South or South-North.¹¹ This is unfortunate, since it has perpetuated the presumption that U. S. military aggrandizement was a popular phenomenon that originated in the yearning for territorial aggrandizement, or "manifest destiny," of the inhabitants of the United States. The unpopularity of the Mexican-American War in New England and many parts of the Mid Atlantic Midwest is forgotten, as is the proslavery logic that undergirded territorial expansion in Texas, Mexico, and the West Indies. "Go west young man" is a far more innocuous rallying cry—even notwithstanding the devastation that this social movement wrought for the Indian tribes of the interior—than the Ostend manifesto.

10 Recent historical writing on the Mexican American War points in a different direction. "Manifest destiny," as several historians have pointed out, is at best a partial explanation for U. S. victory over Mexico. Contingent factors inside Mexico also played a role. Had the Mexican state had less trouble raising money, or had its army not become embroiled in a civil war in 1847, the outcome might have been different.¹² Also important, as Andrés Reséndez has demonstrated, was the complicity in U. S. territorial expansion of tejano elites—who, largely for economic reasons, aligned themselves with the United States rather than Mexico. The collective identity of the tejanos, he concluded, owed little to their supposedly primordial

Mexican-ness. Rather, it involved deliberate choices about “the organization of the economy, the contours of the political system, and religious and moral values.”¹³

11 Reséndez’s hard-nosed realism has been echoed by the French Mexicanist Annick Lempérière. Each recognizes that the revisioning of Mexican national identity has far-reaching implications for historical writing on the nineteenth-century United States. If Mexican identity was contingent, then U. S. territorial expansion can no longer be so easily characterized as foreordained.

12 The preoccupation of U. S.-based historians of the United States with East-West territorial expansion can be highlighted by the recent fascination of cultural historians with John Gast’s “American Progress” (1872). This long-forgotten painting by an obscure English artist—in which a diaphanously clad female hovered over the North American continent with a telegraph wire in one hand and a schoolbook at the other—has since the 1970s become a fixture in textbook accounts of American territorial expansion in the early republic.

13 The popularity of Gast’s painting is unfortunate, since it reinforces the misleading presumption that U. S. territorial expansionism in the pre-Civil War period was oriented toward the West rather than the North and South. This presumption cannot be inferred from the painting itself. “American Progress” was not completed until 1872, seven years after the end of the Civil War, and twenty-four years after the end of the Mexican-American War. Equally misleading is the related presumption that the nation’s “manifest destiny” lay primarily in the West rather than the South, a presumption that is belied by the proslavery pedigree of the phrase “manifest destiny” itself.¹⁴

14 The disjunction between the completion of the painting and the era of “manifest destiny”—an era customarily associated with the 1840s—is by no means incidental. Few if any similar images exist for the pre-1861 period. Indeed, it would be hardly an exaggeration to contend that, in the period before the Civil War, such an unproblematic rendering of the settlement of the trans-Mississippi West would have been inconceivable. Prior to the Civil War, the future of the trans-Mississippi West remained hotly contested between the slaveholding and non-slaveholding states; prior to the completion of the Pacific telegraph (1861) and the transcontinental railroad (1869), the Rockies remained a formidable barrier; and prior to the redeployment of the United States army to the trans-Mississippi West following the American Civil War, the trans-Mississippi Indian tribes remained a formidable military threat. Revealingly, none of these facts have prompted historians of the pre-1861 period to stop using this image to explain the country’s territorial expansion. If they did, it might well draw attention to an oft-forgotten fact. U. S. territorial expansion in this period was not only or even primarily westward. On the contrary, it is best characterized as outward, with a focus on the North and the South as well as the West.

15 Just as a continentalist perspective alters our understanding of territorial expansion, so too does it provide insight into American economic development. Here, too, longstanding assumptions about the relationship of state and society have become an impediment to understanding. Several decades ago John Brewer demonstrated that the eighteenth-century British state was more effective than the French state in raising revenue. An analogous argument could be made about the nineteenth-century United States, if its governmental institutions are compared not with those of Great Britain and France, but, rather, with those of Canada and Mexico. From a continentalist perspective, the nineteenth-century United States state was anything but “weak.” This is particularly evident if one recognizes that the nineteenth-century state was highly decentralized, and that it embraced the states and municipalities as well as the federal government. From such a perspective, it would be hard to deny that the United States was markedly more effective than Canada or Mexico in constructing public works—whether they be roads, canals, and railroads or waterworks, sewage plants, streetcars, and telephone systems.

16 Public works projects almost always involved public funding. This was especially true of canals and waterworks—where public funding in the United States was particularly generous. Yet even when they did not, a North American perspective alters conventional assumptions. Consider, for example, the most transnational of all public works—namely, communications. The nineteenth-century U. S. postal system was far superior to the postal systems of Canada

or Mexico, as was its telegraph network, a circumstance that is obscured by the more familiar comparisons between the United States, Britain, Germany, and France.¹⁵ Communications was poor in Upper Canada in the 1790s not only or even primarily because its population was thinly scattered; even more important was the failure of the Canadian government to enact legislation that would have expanded its postal network in a manner analogous to the expansion of the U. S. postal network in the years immediately following the enactment of the Post Office Act of 1792.¹⁶

17 A continentalist perspective on economic development raises questions about the longstanding presumption that the United States state should be measured against a French or Prussian norm. Max Weber's celebrated definition of the state as a unitary bureaucracy that—as a historical agent—possessed a legitimate monopoly of violence is of limited utility in understanding the complex relationship between the United States and its northern and southern neighbors. The nineteenth-century United States state—like the United States state in the twenty-first century—was not unitary but federal. In fact, it is largely for this reason that historical sociologists reject the characterization of it as a coherent bureaucracy that was itself an agent of change, rather than as a configuration of institutions that has effects that no agent willed.¹⁷

18 Public works often spawned, and were themselves dependent on, technical innovations. These innovations, in turn, were encouraged by a constellation of governmental institutions, of which the most important was a robust patent system. Here, too, a continentalist perspective is suggestive. The nineteenth-century U. S. patent system was by far the best developed in North America. Mexico had no patent system as late as 1877, while the Canadian patent system remained tied to the patent system of Great Britain—which lagged behind the United States.¹⁸ In fact, the United States patent office in the nineteenth century was the only patent office not only in North America, but also in the world to *certify* inventions. Certification furnished would-be inventors with enticing financial incentives. Two of greatest U. S. inventors of the nineteenth-century—Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell—had Canadian roots, yet both rose to fame not in Canada but the United States. The incentives built into the American patent system helps explain why.

19 Historians of the United States sometimes err by exaggerating the similarities between the political economies of the United States and Canada. A case in point is the reliance by the American sociologist Claude Fischer on Canadian evidence to float the contention that telephone giant AT&T was slow to market its facilities for the entire population. It was not AT&T, but telephone users, Fischer contends—and, in particular, women—who “invented” telephone sociability.¹⁹

20 In point of fact, the U. S. telephone business benefitted not only from an unusually generous patent system, but also from a political economy in which municipalities could enforce performance standards. Canadian cities lacked comparable authority—as Christopher A. Armstrong and H. V. Nelles have demonstrated in their outstanding history of Canadian public utilities, *Monopoly's Moment*—and, as a consequence, the Canadian telephone business long remained a specialty service for a discriminating elite, rather than—as it quickly became in the United States after 1900—a mass service for the entire population.²⁰ The reason for this contrast lay in this political economy. Telephone regulation in Canada was a prerogative of the central government; in the United States, in contrast, municipal regulation remained as late as 1907 a major force in several of the nation's largest cities. As a consequence, U. S. telephone operating companies were much more aggressive than Canadian telephone operating companies in marketing their facilities to ordinary people, including women and the poor. The political economy was more contested, and they had no choice but to respond.²¹

21 Economic historians have long emphasized that in the long nineteenth century Canada, the United States, and Mexico were major exporters of commodities that were traded in international markets. In Mexico, the commodity was precious metals; in the United States, cotton; in Canada, furs and timber. Many if not most of these commodities were destined for Europe. To highlight the links between North America and Europe, however, can be misleading; also consequential were links within North America. Napoleon lost interest in Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution. Now that France had lost the jewel of its Caribbean

sugar empire, he no longer needed the North American interior to keep it fed. John Quincy Adams was a brilliant geopolitical strategist, yet his presidency was dogged by his inability to convince the British government to improve the terms of the West Indies trade. Had the British government not abolished slavery in the British West Indies in 1833, American slaveholders would have been less determined to maintain their lock on political power not only in the slaveholding states of the South, but also in the non-slaveholding states of the North. Canadian entrepreneurs like shipping magnate Samuel Cunard played a key role in shaping transatlantic trade. Had Canada not supplied the United States with large quantities of cheap paper pulp, the U. S. newspaper business would have been far less robust.

22 The United States in the nineteenth century was, of course, far more than merely an exporter of commodities. By the First World War, it had also become one of the world's leading industrial powers. In explaining this remarkable transformation, a continentalist perspective is germane. The political scientist Richard Bense has persuasively demonstrated in his *magisterial Political Economy of American Industrialization* that the rise of the United States as an industrial power in the decades after 1877 owed much to a political economy that favored investors and manufacturers. Canada and Mexico, of course, boasted far smaller populations. Yet it is at least pondering whether the failure of Canada and Mexico to industrialize may have owed something not only to their factor endowments, but also to the political framework in which economic activity occurred.

23 Mexico City was the largest building project of the Renaissance, and remains today the largest city in North America, as it was in the nineteenth century. Only recently, however, has it become an economic powerhouse to rival New York, Chicago, or Toronto. Large cities are often economic powerhouses. Why not Mexico City? To explain this anomaly, economic historian John H. Coatsworth looks to political economy of the Mexican state, and, in particular, to the success with which Mexican elites subjugated the indigenous population.²² The political economy of the United States was also, of course, exploitative, yet in different ways. Its major commercial centers, for example, were located almost without exception in the non-slaveholding states that were far-removed from the indigenous population. The Canadian political economy, in turn, remained tied to Great Britain's in ways that channeled its economic development. In the long nineteenth century, economic development in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and the West Indies was dependent not only on factor endowments, but also on a legal and institutional framework that was nation-specific. A continentalist perspective on the political history of the United States has the potential to illuminate how this framework worked, who it benefited, who it harmed, and to what extent it has endured.

Notas

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2 Ian Tyrrell, "Making Nations/Making States: American Historians in the Context of Empire," *Journal of American History*, 86 (Dec. 1999): 1015-1044. See also David Thelen, ed., "The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History," *Journal of American History*, 86 (Dec. 1999): 965-1307, and idem, "Rethinking History and the Nation-State: Mexico and the United States," *Journal of American History*, 86 (Sept. 1999): 439-455.

3 Herbert E. Bolton, "The Epic of Greater America," *American Historical Review*, 38 (April 1933): 448-474.

4 Eliga Gould, "Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery," *American Historical Review*, 112 (June 2007): 764-786; Alan Taylor, "Continental Crossings," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 24 (Summer 2004): 188.

5 A continentalist history of the nineteenth-century United States has yet to be written. For a major step in this direction, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Though Howe by no means neglects linkages between the United States and Europe—and, in particular, Great Britain—he is far more attentive than most previous historians to the embeddedness of the United States in North America. For example, his narrative opens in Mexico City, a distinctly unorthodox vantage point for most historians of the nineteenth-century United States. For a resolutely continentalist overview of the territorial expansion

of the nineteenth century United States by a historical geographer, see D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on Five-Hundred Years of History*: vol. 2: *Continental America, 1800-1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

6 For a related discussion, see Richard R. John, "Farewell to the 'Party Period': Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Policy History*, 16 no. 2 (2004): 117-125. Also pertinent is Brian Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority of Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

7 Morton Keller, *American's Three Regimes: A New Political History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

8 Bender, *Nation among Nations*, p. 213.

9 Jeff Pasley, "Midget on Horseback: American Indians and the History of the American State," *Common-Place*, 9 (Oct. 2008), available at <http://www.common-place.org>

10 Alan Taylor, "The Late Loyalists: Northern Reflections of the Early American Republic," *Journal of the Early American Republic*, 27 (March 2007): 1-34.

11 For a recent restatement of this common theme, see Francois Furstenberg, "The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History," *American Historical Review*, 113 (June 2008): 647-677.

12 The much greater organizational capabilities of the mid-nineteenth-century U. S. state in comparison to the mid-nineteenth-century Mexican state is a theme of a work-in-progress by Max Edling that is tentatively entitled "A Hercules in the Cradle: War, Money, and the American State, 1783-1867."

13 Andrés Reséndez, "National Identity on a Shifting Border: Texas and New Mexico in the Age of Transition, 1821-1848," *Journal of American History*, 86 (Sept. 1999): 687-688.

14 Julius W. Pratt, "The Origin of 'Manifest Destiny,'" *American Historical Review*, 32 (July 1927): 795-798.

15 On the nineteenth-century Mexican postal system, see Rachel A. Moore, *Transient Loyalties: The Atlantic World and the Public Sphere in Nineteenth-Century Veracruz* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, forthcoming). On the Canadian postal system in this period, see William Smith, *The History of the Post Office of British North America, 1639-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920).

16 Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 1; Taylor, "Late Loyalists," pp. 16-17.

17 Theda Skocpol, "Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 3-37.

18 B. Zorina Khan, *The Democratization of Invention: Patents and Copyrights in American Economic Development, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

19 Claude Fischer, *America Calling: America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). For an ambitious attempt by a historical sociologist to compare the trajectory of political development in the United States and Canada, see Jason Kaufman, *The Origins of Canadian and American Political Differences* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

20 Christopher A. Armstrong and H. V. Nelles, *Monopoly's Moment: The Organization and Regulation of Canadian Utilities, 1830-1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

21 Robert MacDougall, "The People's Telephone: The Politics of Telephony in the United States and Canada, 1876-1926," *Enterprise and Society*, 6 (Dec. 2005): 581-587; Richard R. John, "Telecommunications," *Enterprise and Society*, 9 (Sept. 2008): 507-520. See also John, *Network Nation: Inventing American Telecommunications* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2010), chap. 10.

22 John H. Coatsworth, "Structures, Endowments, and Institutions in the Economic History of Latin America," *Latin American Research Review*, 40, no. 3 (2005): 126-44

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Resúmenes

L'article concerne l'influence des processus sociaux transnationaux – expansion territoriale, développement économique – sur le cours de l'histoire des Etats-Unis entre leur accession à l'Indépendance à la fin du 18^e siècle et leur entrée en guerre en 1917. Contrairement à ce qu'affirme l'essentiel de l'historiographie, durant cette période l'histoire des États-Unis n'est pas connectée seulement à celle du monde atlantique et de l'Europe, mais aussi et plus encore à l'Amérique du nord et au voisinage avec le Canada et le Mexique. A partir de cette perspective « continentale », l'article remet en question bien des certitudes, depuis le nom même de « Américain » jusqu'à l'idée de « conquête de l'ouest », remplacée par la mise en évidence d'un expansionnisme nord-sud, ou celle de la supposée « faiblesse » de l'État US au 19^e siècle, comparé à ses homologues mexicain et canadien.

This essay surveys the transnational social processes that shaped the United States in the period between the American War of Independence (1775-1781) and the entry of the United States in the First World War in 1917. The focus is on territorial expansion and economic development. Contrary to a common assumption in the historiography, it contends that, during this period, the United States was linked not only to the Europe, but also to North America, and, in particular, to Canada and Mexico. Building on this “continentalist” perspective, the essay raises questions about the concept “American”; the expansionist impulse that is often called the “conquest of the West”; and the so-called “weakness” of the nineteenth-century U. S. state. Each of these constructs shifts its meaning if the United States is compared with its neighbors to the north and south, rather than to the nation-states of Europe.

Entradas del índice

Mots clés : développement économique ; Amérique du Nord, économie politique ; Etat ; expansion territoriale ; Etats-Unis

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