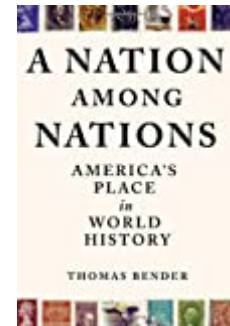


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Thomas Bender. *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2006. 368 S. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-7235-4; \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9527-8.



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Context Matters

Thomas Bender, an accomplished and versatile historian at New York University, has undertaken a synthetic narrative of American history from a global perspective. By some measures, this might seem an impossible or contradictory task because it entails dissolving the solitary, progressive, and self-aggrandizing story of discovery, settlement, nation building, and international hegemony in favor of an international point of view from which the nation itself seems less in focus than the interplay of larger forces shaping development, economic change, competition among empires, and so on. Unlike modernization theory with its depiction of inevitability and a more or less singular model of success, this bird's-eye view of the nation links it to larger developments and thus forces frequent comparisons. Building a narrative out of the process of interchange and broad-scale trends is a difficult task. The point—and I think it is Bender's central one—is that national history is not lost in the process so much as it appears very different. To sacrifice the ultimate centrality of the national narrative in the modern world would, in a curious sense, diminish what is really new in this account.

Bender's strategy is to segment U.S. history into five broad sections, discussed within a general chronological framework. These sections depict (in my own words) 1) beginnings, 2) the American Revolution, 3) concepts of freedom, 4) the self-denying American Empire, and 5) social freedom and the welfare state. Within these rubrics, Bender describes ways in which the United States is part of a shifting constellation of nations and regions, which interact to form new shapes and meanings. Indeed, what is most striking in this work is the ability of the author to discover the very broad connections among all of these subjects between what occurs in the United States and elsewhere. And the elsewhere is not just confined to Western Europe (England, Germany, and France), even if these nations loom particularly large in our history.

One of the two most successful chapters (although the others are also quite good) discusses the problem of freedom and slavery in the United States. Bender is quite right to see anti-slavery as an international development and convincing in his discussion, for example, of the centrality of the Haitian Revolution to the century that eventually liberated slaves. Beyond this, I was particularly

struck by his portrayal of Abraham Lincoln, not just as an emancipator, but also as a subtle and thoughtful proponent of liberal nationalism and a major influence on European thinkers. Placed within the continuum of antislavery movements worldwide, the United States looks both different from but similar to other nations engaged in breaking the shackles of bondage. Perhaps we have heretofore thought so much about slavery as a uniquely American dilemma that we have lost sight of its ubiquity in the world as well as the general movement of abolition in which the nation participated.

The other chapter that most clearly demonstrates the importance of an international perspective describes the evolution of the American empire. In some respects, this revision follows the lead of historian William Appleman Williams who developed the notion of an American informal empire, growing out of nineteenth-century “Manifest Destiny,” aggressive protection of free trade and open markets, and finally, into direct confrontation with the old empires of Europe in the twentieth century.[1] Bender’s view is slightly different, emphasizing the very long history of American engagement with European Empires—the successful American Revolution was, after all, partly a consequence of the enmity of France and Britain. As Bender concludes: the “American way of empire was even presented as anti-imperialism because it guaranteed openness, in contrast to the exclusivity of the old empires” (p. 233). This statement is an important argument because it links the visionary perspectives of Thomas Jefferson, for example, to the much later engagement of the United States with European colonial empires. It also illustrates an essential point, which is the moral center of the work. It is Bender’s contention that “American Exceptionalism,” the notion that the peculiar circumstances of American history exempted the United

States from many of the struggles and brutalities of Europe, is not only a misjudgment, but that, in a curious way, any inward-looking national narrative almost inevitably reproduces this exceptionalist story. This is not to deny difference, but rather to contextualize it within a larger framework to see connections and similarities as well as the simultaneous engagement of ideas and the play of related forces. As a thoughtful summation of research in areas like the transatlantic exchange of social welfare reform ideas, the African Diaspora, European expansion, and comparative studies of empire, this is a fine, even innovative work.

While it touches on many subjects, it remains a suggestive, rather than a comprehensive work. Bender might, for example, have chosen to emphasize questions of women’s equality. Or he might have concentrated on science and technology, or perhaps, ecology. Given the cyclical predominance of first liberal and then conservative notions of the state, he might have emphasized the latter. Finally, it seems to me that a chapter on religions, their interactions with state and society, would be a very important story to follow. This list, which can certainly be extended, suggests the real limitations, or rather, the enormity of the task of rethinking American history from an international perspective. Bender has accomplished a great deal. He is convincing in his argument that the United States is not unique, but just different in the way that other nations also differ from each other. This is, however, much more than a shift in nuance. It makes all the difference in the world to see the United States as a nation among nations.

Note

[1]. William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dell, 1972).

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