

# **A Nation Among Nations : America's Place in World History [Thomas Bender]**

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die Unabhängigkeitserklärungen, die seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts weltweit erlassen wurden. Er sichtet sie auf ihre Verwandtschaft mit der *Declaration* von 1776 hin, sucht nach den (zahlreichen) Entsprechungen und konstatiert vorhandene Differenzen. Geleitet wird seine Suche jedoch von dem Bemühen, den Einfluss der amerikanischen *Declaration* als weltweit wirkendes Vorbild und Modell für eine Vielzahl anderer Erklärungen nachzuweisen. Wertvoll ist in diesem Zusammenhang der Anhang des Buches mit einer chronologischen Liste von Unabhängigkeitserklärungen und dem Abdruck von zehn besonders interessanten Beispielen.

Wer die Entstehung der *Declaration* und ihre globale Rezeption in ihren ideen- und diskursgeschichtlichen, aber auch politischen Dimensionen verfolgen will, kommt in diesem kenntnisreichen Buch auf seine Rechnung. Der Autor beschreibt die erstaunliche Verbreitung der «Erklärung» als einen Prozess, den er weder als geradlinig noch als zielgerichtet auffasst. Doch wird die «Geschichte», die er erzählt, dem Anspruch von *global history* auch gerecht? Insofern ja, als er sie entlang einer transnationalen Achse konzipiert. Insofern aber nein, als sie einen zentralen Orientierungspunkt von Globalgeschichte ausser Acht lässt. In einem kürzlich in der französischen Zeitschrift *Esprit* veröffentlichten Aufsatz mit dem Titel «Dire l'histoire à l'échelle du monde» (No. 325, Juni 2007, 74–85) diskutiert Karoline Postel-Vinay (Autorin des Buches *L'Occident et sa bonne parole. Nos représentations du monde, de l'Europe coloniale à l'Amérique hégémonique*, Paris 2005) anhand der Wortschöpfung «Weltkrieg» die Frage: «Quel récit pour un univers pluriel et un monde globalisé?» Zurecht mahnt sie an, dass Globalgeschichtsschreibung mit einer pluriformen Welt, mit der Multipolarität sozialer und politischer Prozesse rechnen müsse, dass sie Minoritäten und

«peoples without history» (Eric Wolf) ernst nehmen, also Ethnozentrismen abbauen solle, dass sie die Verschiebung von Untersuchungsperspektiven und Erzählachsen praktizieren und die Gleichsetzung von «universell» und «global» aufgeben müsse. Im Hinblick auf dieses Programm geht Armitage entschieden zu wenig weit. Auch wenn sein Narrativ die Optik einer engen amerikanischen Nationalgeschichte ausweitet, so bleibt es doch einem Modell von Weltgeschichte verhaftet, das die mächtigen Impulse aus den USA in der Geschichte der «Erklärung» überhöht und als entscheidenden Faktor viel stärker gewichtet als die Geschichte und die Logik ihrer Rezeption, Adaptation oder Transformation durch Akteure in anderen politischen und kulturellen Kontexten. In diesem Sinn erzählt Armitage nur eine Seite einer komplexen und widerspruchsvollen Geschichte. Das ist legitim, aber kollidiert mit dem Anspruch des Untertitels. Und angesichts des gegenwärtigen Stands der internationalen Beziehungen bleibt es zweifelhaft, ob der Autor mit seinem engen Verständnis von *global history* die Gefahr identitärer Missdeutungen seiner Argumentation ausschliessen kann.

*Martin Schaffner (Basel)*

**Thomas Bender**  
**A Nation Among Nations**  
**America's Place in World History**

Hill and Wang, New York 2006, 368 p.

Early scholars with a global outlook on history such as the Civil Rights activist W. E. B. DuBois, have rightly pointed out that the United States has never been a self-generating force in the world, but rather was acted on by the “interworking” effects of many forces. He observed that the United States has been living “not to itself, but as part of the strain and stress of

the world” during the “awful cataclysms” of World War I. DuBois certainly has not been alone in his attempt to hold up such a view; historians such as Henry Adams or Herbert E. Bolton also sought to write histories of the United States that moved between local, national and transnational contexts. The book by Thomas Bender, professor of history and former director of the International Center for Advanced Studies at New York University, adds an important dimension to earlier studies by seeking to provide a transnational synthesis of American history. His study both broadens the scope of historical inquiry by including the non-Western world while at the same time paying attention to the parameters of race, gender and class shaping historical events. Bender had already called for alternative approaches to historical writing by empirically re-thinking history on a global scale in his earlier “manifestos”, particularly the *La Pietra report* (2000) based on a series of conferences and his influential volume *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (2002). In *A Nation among Nations* he brilliantly takes to task the pertinacious notion of American “exceptionalism” and makes plain that “the nation cannot be its own historical context”.

The author examines five major themes and events in American history and illustrates the importance of national political culture within the larger, shared global history. By following this approach he calls attention to the differences and resemblances between nations as well as to the self-conscious communication between historical actors. The book is organized around five issues that he argues mark key moments and turning points in American history: the beginnings of American history during the age of discovery, the American Revolution, the age of Civil War, the centrality of empire and the Progressive Era.

By drawing attention to the processes of human interaction and to the transfer of ideas, people and commodities across borders that is characteristic of transnational perspectives, Bender takes the reader on a breathtaking trip around the globe. In his first chapter he shifts the view away from the discovery of a landmass unknown to the Europeans – in popular narratives described as the “age of discovery” or “age of invasion” – towards the importance of the “oceanic space”. Until the 20th century, the United States was entangled in the histories it shared with other peoples – and its context was the oceanic trade and naval power. As he demonstrates in the following chapters, these provided the context for the American Revolution and the later emergence of the United States as a world power. Furthermore, by disrupting the traditional narrative of American history, which understands the American development as a continuous process of “westering from the northeastern colonies”, he reminds us that the initial settlements in what is today regarded as the United States were in Florida (St. Augustine, 1560), Virginia (Jamestown, 1607), and New Mexico (Santa Fe, 1610). The territory that was to become the United States touched both the Pacific and the Atlantic and was shaped by complex historical processes. No-one in the 16th and 17th century, Bender argues, could have foreseen a single polity being formed in this huge continental space; the early settlements were merely “points on a map of European global quests for wealth and power”. Moreover, the native peoples set the agenda for the first interactions, helping the not particularly capable settlers survive in the New World. The author dismisses the commonly held assumption that westward expansion is to be explained by Europeans’ superiority in wealth, technology, and culture and argues that it may be better explained by a sense of weakness and inferiority vis-à-vis the Asian and Is-

lamic worlds. This set the stage for the rise of new forms of slavery and competition for power among European nations.

Chapter two reconsiders the American Revolution not only as a struggle for independence and as a social conflict within the colonies, but also as a war between European great powers played out on a global stage. Furthermore, Bender analyses the American Revolution as an integral part of an age of revolutions and wars, including not only the Franco-British conflict and the history of the Haitian revolution, but also revolts reaching from Peru and Brazil to Bengal – and therefore reaching beyond the limits of the Atlantic world. In the third chapter, on the Civil War, the author draws parallels between the developments in modern nation-making in the United States and other countries around the globe during the 1830s to 1870s. In most cases the original quest for national unity and uniformity fused with democracy and (racial) justice had been profoundly weakened by the end of the century. He argues that this led to a racist distortion of qualifications for citizenship, and the United States joined other North Atlantic nations in establishing a new age of imperialism.

Whereas in chapter five Bender analyses the age of American progressive reform as part of a global response to the exceptional expansion of industrial capitalism and of the rapid urbanization, it is in the intriguing fourth chapter that the author puts forth a thought-provoking thesis, that the events of 1898 (the so-called Spanish-American War) and the following imperial endeavors were a continuation of America's westward expansion. He elegantly reassesses the long-standing denial of the United States as an imperial power. The author argues that the imperial war of 1898 was in large part prompted by worries over the closing of the frontier, by fears about the overproduction of ma-

nufactured and agricultural goods as well as by a stern belief in the rights of "civilized" nations to rule lesser, uncivilized nations. Although never formally colonizing oversea territories, the new nation did acquire an entire continent through conquest – and often violence – by which whole populations were denied of their existence. An expansionist spirit, moral regeneration, the fear of internal division and the aggressive protection of American commercial interests abroad pressed the newly consolidated nation-state towards empire at the turn of the century (comparable to Germany) – hoping that possible divisions may be replaced by a "collective imperial pride". According to Bender, masculine Anglo-Saxonism was possibly as prominent and influential a motivation for this expansionism as the strategic and economic arguments of Americans favoring an empire in the United States. The continuity in the relations of the Americans with the Native Americans and with the peoples abroad during their imperial drive (Mexico, Cuba, Korea, Philippines) show the severe divergence between the outlook of the colonized and the American self-perception as benefactor. In a clever twist, Bender deploys Herman Melville's main protagonist Ahab in *Moby Dick* and the question of whaling to elucidate the ways Americans lived empire during that age – seeking to expand a temporal and spatial future, and seldom understanding what those on the other side of the territorial and commercial frontier thought or felt about the interactions.

While one might take issue with Bender's use of traditional parameters of time frame (starting in 1492) as well as his heavy reliance on the voices of "famous men", his urge to understand American history as being significantly shaped by its global context as well as by his desire to examine America's influence in a global context, is important – and timely. As the

historian Amy Kaplan had pointed out in her Presidential Address to the American Studies Association in 2003, “the notion of the nation as a home, as a domestic space, relies structurally on its intimate opposition to the notion of the foreign”. Thomas Bender successfully attempts to rethink these assumptions so strongly imbued in US society by bringing the concepts of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism back on the agenda in his fascinating narrative of the United States place in the world: “If we can begin to think about

American history as a local instance of a general history”, he argues, “as one history among others, not only will historical knowledge be improved, but the cultural foundations of a needed cosmopolitanism will be enhanced. We do not want to reinforce a narrow and exclusive notion of citizenship.” (14) In times of “homeland insecurities”, affecting not only the United States but rather the whole globe, this seems to be a wise approach.

*Barbara Lüthi (Basel)*