AHR Roundtable

You the People

Introduction

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DOES IT MATTER FROM WHERE we write history? Is there something specific about writing the history of a foreign country? In our case, is there a distinctive "angle" in our research projects because we write the history of the United States from Europe? The question comes up often, not just in conversations but also in print. More than half of the twenty-five European contributors to this *AHR* Roundtable have received a review of their work in either the *Journal of American History* or the *American Historical Review* that mentioned their nationality, implying that it made a difference.[1] The nationality of an author is rarely mentioned as a problem but is often offered as a detail worth mentioning for understanding the reviewed scholarship (in a way that, say, the historian's gender, race, religion, or class rarely is). But does it matter where American history—indeed, any history—is written, and if so, why?

A century ago, the answers to these questions were taken for granted, and seemed straightforward. Because of distance, isolation, and the fact that professional history as a discipline was born in service to the nation-state, foreign historians were presumed to be outsiders to the national history of the United States—bringing all the benefits and problems that implies. In 1884, Andrew White began his inaugural presidential address to the American Historical Association with a discussion of who could best write U.S. history: "An individual standing outside of the country may be so disengaged and disentangled as to take a clearer view of questions in which re-

[1] On the few occasions that a reviewer, having identified the author's nationality, offered a further comment, it was almost always to commend the fact that this was a foreign author. The assumption that foreign authorship made a difference underlay a substantial project sponsored by the American Historical Association in the 1980s, namely Lewis Hanke, ed., *Guide to the Study of United States History outside the United States, 1945–1980*, 5 vols. (White Plains, N.Y., 1985), with contributions by "five hundred scholars in many countries" (1: 2), some of whom speculated from personal experience on issues addressed here. For some specific examples, see Jeremi Suri, "Twelve Months with Dr. K," *Times Literary Supplement*, January 29, 2010; Paul V. Murphy, "The Age of (Scoop) Jackson," *Reviews in American History* 39, no. 4 (2011): 735–740. The *AHR*'s review of the first book by one British contributor to this roundtable began by referring to the Beatles and Rolling Stones (somehow relevant, apparently, to the civil rights topic), while the review of his second book in the *Journal of American History* had virtually the same opening paragraph—though minus the Beatles. Jack E. Davis, review of Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940–1980* (Athens, Ga., 2001), *American Historical Review* 107, no. 5 (December 2002): 1595–1596; Steven F. Lawson, review of Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, *Journal of American History* 97, no. 2 (2010): 479–480.

ligious or patriotic prejudices are involved than most scholars within the country are likely to do." "Still," continued White, because historians of their own nation have "closer access to its documents and finer appreciation of its modes of thought . . . the large rule is unquestionably that the main work in the development of historical knowledge concerning any country must be done by the scholars of that country." "Scholars in other nations," he warned, "must, as a rule, give the maximum of labor to the minimum of result."[2]

Today, in an era of globalization and frequent academic interchange, and when leading members of the U.S. academy have championed the internationalization of historical writing for more than two decades, the answer is less obvious.[3] "European work on American History," Eric Foner asserted in an interview with an Italian scholar in 1994, "is either good or bad . . . but . . . there is nothing very distinctively European about it."[4] The authors of this introduction would have applauded Foner's assessment at the time, since we initially resisted the idea that the history we were writing could or should be different from that of our American colleagues: our aim, after all, was to write U.S. history that was fully engaged with U.S. historiography.[5] Yet personal goals do not make an epistemological argument.

Indeed, at the heart of the internationalization project was a presumption that foreign scholars would bring new perspectives to the writing of U.S. history. David Thelen, then editor of the *Journal of American History*, justified the journal's 1992 international innovations—including international contributing editors, a major survey into overseas U.S. historians' views, and an annual award for, and translation of, an outstanding article and book on U.S. history in a foreign language—with the promise that overseas writers would reinvigorate the discipline at home.[6] And even Foner's comment about the indistinct nature of European writing was as much a lament as an observation. "Somebody in France ought to be doing a Braudelian study

[2] Andrew D. White, "On Studies in General History and the History of Civilization," http://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/andrew-dickson-white-%281884%29.

[3] On internationalizing the writing of U.S. history by bringing non-U.S. historians into the discourse, see David Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (1992): 432–462; Thelen, "The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 965–975. On the need for global and transnational history that de-centers the U.S., see Akira Iriye, "The Internationalization of History," *American Historical Review* 94, no. 1 (February 1989): 1–10; Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, Calif., 2002).

[4] Maurizio Vaudagna, "The American Historian in Continental Europe: An Italian Perspective," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (1992): 532–542, here 534.

[5] This view has been expressed most forcefully by Tony Badger, "Confessions of a British Americanist," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (1992): 515–523. See also François Weil, "Do U.S. Historical Narratives Travel?," in Bender, *Rethinking American History*, 317–342. For one thing, the sheer size and approachability of the American academy in recent decades has made aligning with it all but irresistible.

[6] Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons"; David Thelen, "Editor's Annual Report, 1991–1992," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (1992): 753–756. For survey design, see Thelen, "The Practice of American History," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (1994): 933–960, here 933; for survey results, see "A Statistical Summary of Survey Results," ibid., 1175–1217. The laudable interest in non-U.S. views was somewhat undermined by the fact that all non-U.S. views were lumped together in a single category. Thelen, "Editor's Annual Report," 753. Interestingly, virtually all the examples cited were from countries beyond Europe.

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of some aspects of American history," he exhorted. "Somebody in Italy ought to be using Gramsci."[7]

Unfortunately, though, there has been little serious discussion about why national location might, let alone ought to, matter. Recent overviews of U.S. historical writing ignore the issue, even those studies that address other aspects of historians' identity, such as race and gender, in shaping their research agendas.[8] This lacuna in the literature stands in stark contrast to the voluminous discussions of U.S. history (as opposed to historiography) in a global or transnational context.[9] Meanwhile, the few valuable surveys on U.S. history as it is taught and written abroad often serve more as a barometer of global interest in U.S. history than as an analysis of how and why national location might shape research.[10] The very few historians who have addressed the issue have usually done so only in brief autobiographical form.[11]

Our contention, though, is that consideration of writing U.S. history from abroad is important because it addresses a much larger epistemological question: What conditions shape historical scholarship in general? Looking at how historians of the United States and North American colonies are shaped by their structural and cul-

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[7] Vaudagna, "The American Historian in Continental Europe," 541.

[8] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988); John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (1983; new ed., Baltimore, 1989); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994); Anthony Mohlo and Gordon S. Wood, eds., *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton, N.J., 1998); Melvyn Stokes, ed., *The State of U.S. History* (Oxford, 2002); Manisha Sinha and Penny Von Eschen, eds., *Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race, and Power in American History* (New York, 2007); Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds., *American History Now* (Philadelphia, 2011).

[9] The topic was introduced in *Internationalizing the JAH*, Special Issue, *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (1992), but there has been little interest since. This contrasts with the plethora of reflections on transnational history, e.g., Frederick Cooper, "What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian's Perspective," *African Affairs* 100, no. 399 (April 1, 2001): 189–213; Jürgen Kocka, "Comparison and Beyond," *History and Theory* 42, no. 1 (2003): 39–44; Patricia Clavin, "Defining Transnationalism," *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 4 (2005): 421–439; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50; C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "*AHR* Conversation: On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441–1464; Michael Kazin, "The Vogue of Transnational History," *Raritan* 26, no. 3 (2007): 155–167; Kiran Klaus Patel, " 'Transnations' among 'Transnations'? The Debate on Transnational History in the United States and Germany," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 54, no. 3 (2009): 451–472; Ian Tyrrell, "Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice," *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 3 (2009): 453–474.

[10] Sigmund Skard, *American Studies in Europe: Their History and Present Organization* (Philadelphia, 1958); Hanke, *Guide to the Study of United States History outside the United States*; Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton, eds., *Teaching and Studying U.S. History in Europe: Past, Present and Future* (Amsterdam, 2007). The latter has a very helpful introduction, sketching general trends in teaching and studying U.S. history in Europe in relation to recent political developments. See also Vaudagna, "The American Historian in Continental Europe." There is some work comparing European and U.S. uses of public history; see David K. Adams, Maurizio Vaudagna, Günter H. Lenz, and Peter J. Ling, eds., *Transatlantic Encounters: Public Uses and Misuses of History in Europe and the United States* (Amsterdam, 2000). On European-U.S. historical (though rarely historiographical) connections, see Vaudagna, "The American Historian in Continental Europe." Tibor Frank, " 'Through the Looking-Glass': A Century of Self-Reflecting Hungarian Images of the United States (1834–1941)," in Lehel Vadon, ed., *Multicultural Challenge in American Culture* (Eger, 1999), 21–36.

[11] See the various essays in *BAAS Jubilee Issue*, *Journal of American Studies* 14, no. 1 (1980); in *The View from Abroad*, Special Issue, *Reviews in American History* 14, no. 4 (1986); and in *Internationalizing the JAH* (1992). See also Harry C. Allen, "United States History in Great Britain and the European Association for American Studies: A Personal Memoir," in Hanke, *Guide to the Study of United States History outside the United States*, 1: 46–85; and Max Silberschmidt, "My Life Experience with the United States and Its History," ibid., 1: 86–101.

tural contexts opens up consideration of how all historians are shaped by their location. As the following essays will show, such conditions cannot be reduced to the national identity of individual historians. Scholars are entangled in much more complex webs of sociological factors. Some of those factors are common to all of us; others differ. The hypothesis upon which this roundtable builds is that the way our field is structured makes a difference in the scholarship we collectively produce. This includes the concrete organization of the profession, the paths into academic careers, the audiences that need to be addressed, and the institutions that hire us and determine our work duties and opportunities. When those issues are discussed, it is generally as part of professional debates separate from our intellectual exchanges on historiography. This roundtable, on the contrary, offers some reflection on the way both realms are intrinsically linked.

The following coffee-break-length essays address this broad issue through the example of the writing of U.S. history by European scholars.[12] It is, of course, not the only example that could be chosen, and we are well aware that there are academics in other parts of the world who are also writing American history. Further, many other historians write history from "abroad," not least the substantial numbers that engage in imperial history. Indeed, in countries that were once part of European empires, the rewriting of their histories by native-born scholars gave rise to lively debate on the nature of the exercise as they contested the narratives of imperial historians—debate that necessarily drew attention to the question of where history is written.[13] But we believe that European writing on the North American colonies and the United States—in addition to being the field we are familiar with—provides a good case study for both its exemplarity and its peculiarities. Overseas historians of the United States and its antecedents are but a subset of all historians working on foreign nations and overseas lands. As such, they share the same difficulties of distance and differences in national cultures.[14] They also share the position of being specialists in foreign history in a profession that still heavily bears the imprint of its national, even nationalist, past.

Yet a historian in, say, Belgium who specializes in the history of the United States is making a decidedly different choice than is one who focuses on the history of Japan, Italy, or India. This has to do with the role of the U.S. as the world's (almost) uncontested superpower, the global reach of the English language, and the current

[12] By "U.S. history" in these essays, we mean the history of the United States and of the colonies and territories that formed it. It has been suggested that this subject could be covered by the term "USAmerica," but it seems unlikely to catch on. In some countries the noun "America" is frowned upon as shorthand for the United States, but we have sometimes resorted to it for convenience, and the use of "American" as an adjective is inescapable. Some of what we say here may also apply to Canada, but only a few European historians are doing research in Canadian history. For a more in-depth and wide-ranging exploration of various aspects of writing U.S. history abroad, to which the process of composing those essays contributed, see Nicolas Barreyre, Michael Heale, Stephen Tuck, and Cécile Vidal, eds., *Historians across Borders: Writing American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, Calif., 2014).

[13] See, e.g., Vinay Lal, "Imperial Nostalgia," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 29–30 (July 17–24, 1993): 1511–1513 (review essay on C. A. Bayly, general ed., *The Raj: India and the British, 1600–1947* [London, 1990]); Lal, *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (New Delhi, 2003); Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, 2003).

[14] These are all reasons mentioned by the few historians who have put their reflections on paper. See Badger, "Confessions of a British Americanist"; Vaudagna, "The American Historian in Continental Europe"; M. J. Heale, "American History: The View from Britain," *Reviews in American History* 14, no. 4 (1986): 501–522.

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hegemony and mass production of the American academy. Put simply, an American historian of the United States can spend his or her entire career without meeting a non-U.S. specialist in the same field, while a French historian of France simply cannot ignore the voluminous historiography produced at U.S. universities.[15] This, we believe, says nothing about a comparative willingness to be open; even less is it a claim that European historians are more receptive to the work of foreign scholars. On the contrary, it simply tells us something about the conditions in which we work.[16]

Focusing on this particular case of European historians of the United States offers several advantages in making sense of the influences and constraints that shape every historian's scholarship. European historical writing has a long, entangled relationship with its U.S. counterpart. But this case also affords two useful comparative perspectives: between American and European historians of the United States; and between the various European historians of the United States, since they hail from different national academies. Each Americanist in Europe is potentially a double outsider—to the U.S. academy and to his or her own national academy, with both academic worlds largely dominated by historians studying their own nation.[17] Moreover, Europe is not one homogeneous block. The national academies of Europe share common traits, and yet—the uniformizing pressures of the European Union notwithstanding—they are also diverse, thus highlighting the particular influence of the institutions and structures that each historian works within.[18] (Of course, institutional settings vary within European countries, too, as indeed they do, often markedly, within the United States.) There is also a third comparison, between those European historians who work on aspects of U.S. history directly related to their own domestic history—notably those who work on U.S.-European diplomatic history, on European colonization, or on emigration to North America—and those who focus on what are usually regarded as purely "internal" American history topics.

In order to make these comparisons most effectively, the following essays were written in a truly collaborative process by twenty-five historians of different aspects

[15] The high level of production of historical writing on U.S. history in recent years also means that U.S. historians are often hard-pressed to engage with work on foreign nations by colleagues at their own universities. On the problem of overproduction, see, e.g., Stephen Tuck, "The New American Histories," *Historical Journal* 48, no. 3 (2005): 811–832.

[16] It would be wrong to exaggerate the distinction between the U.S. and European academic communities. European scholars not infrequently make their careers in the United States, and U.S.-born historians of American history have often served in visiting or even permanent posts in Europe. But U.S. visitors are now only a small proportion of the scholars practicing American history in Europe, and for the most part research in American history is carried out by men and women reared in their own country's culture, shaped by its educational institutions, subject to its academic traditions and structures, and conditioned by the political and popular expectations placed on their activities.

[17] The degree to which national histories dominate their respective national academies varies between countries, and the American academy shows much more commitment to the study of other countries than usually obtains in the European academies. Robert B. Townsend found that around 40 percent of faculty members in U.S. history departments work on North America, and an equal number on Europe as a whole; Townsend, "A Profile of the History Profession, 2010," *Perspectives on History* 48, no. 7 (October 2010), https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2010/a-profile-of-the-history-profession-2010. A subsequent survey by Luke Clossey and Nicholas Guyatt put the proportion of U.S. historians working on North American history at one-third; Clossey and Guyatt, "It's a Small World after All: The Wider World in Historians' Peripheral Vision," *Perspectives on History* 51, no. 5 (May 2013), https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2013/its-a-small-world-after-all.

[18] Martin Conway and Kiran Klaus Patel, eds., *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century: Historical Approaches* (Basingstoke, 2010).

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of American history from twelve countries spanning the regions of Europe. At an initial workshop in Paris, network members reported on the practice of American history in their own countries, and in discussing the problem of writing history from abroad identified a number of salient dimensions. Each of these was assigned a multinational team of three to five members, who met, physically and online, to write their papers together. A second general conference in Oxford allowed the whole group again to contribute specific ideas and examples across the range of essays presented here.[19] Subsequent online communications furthered this collaborative process. Given the technology now available, it may be that other subjects in transatlantic or global history could be pursued using a model of this kind.

In the first essay, "Characteristics and Contours: Mapping American History in Europe," Susan-Mary Grant, Michael Heale, Halina Parafianowicz, and Maurizio Vaudagna trace the trajectories of historical writing about the United States in Europe since the Second World War (there had been little of it previously), demonstrating that national location has made a difference in the past—though in ways that changed across time, place, and subject matter.[20] The heritage of totalitarian regimes, of course, left its inescapable marks on this scholarship. In Eastern Europe, much of the early writing focused on American political and economic history, but the lifting of the constraints on academic freedom after the collapse of those regimes resulted in a broadening of the scope of political explorations and in new attention to other kinds of history.

The next three essays discuss some of the reasons why location makes an important difference. "'Brokering' or 'Going Native': Professional Structures and Intellectual Trajectories for European Historians of the United States," by Nicolas Barreyre, Max Edling, Simon Middleton, Sandra Scanlon, and Irmina Wawrzyczek, addresses the career dilemmas of American history specialists in European university structures, poised as they are between two academic communities (the U.S. academy and colleagues preoccupied with European history), and hence their choice of strategies, either "brokering" between the two—that is, identifying research topics that bridge American and European historiographies—or "going native," fully embracing the course of American historiography so that they can "pass" as U.S. historians in the United States. These scholars need to teach, too, which for the most part means large classes of undergraduates who know little about the United States apart from what they have gleaned from popular culture; thus the next essay, "Teaching in Europe and Researching in the United States," by Trevor Burnard, Jörg Nagler, Simon Newman, and Dragan Živojinović, discusses the relationship between

[19] Where network members made substantive contributions to an essay besides their own, their help is acknowledged in a footnote. More information about the network and its activities can be found on the website, http://youthepeople.history.ox.ac.uk/. In addition to thanking all the network members, we would especially like to thank François Weil, who co-directed the project during its founding year; Eleanor Thompson, the indefatigable network facilitator; and Steven Tuffnell, who has helped administer the drafting of these essays. Thanks also to the Leverhulme Trust; without its generous funding, the network's activities would have been severely constrained. Further underlining the fact that there is no simple Europe vs. U.S. divide in an era of globalization, a third of the network were not based in their home institution for a major part of the year during which this collaboration took place—between network meetings, conversations had to be scheduled across multiple time zones.

[20] Thus any convergence in the present needs explanation, although, as the authors make clear, such convergence also has very real limits.

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scholarship and teaching regimes, such as the implications of developing very broad survey courses, which can sometimes impact on European writing in insights prompted by the comparative dimension or the *longue durée*. It also underlines the importance of the state in influencing the research and teaching strategies of the European academies (enlarging on an important feature briefly noted in the "brokering" essay). For an academic genre to flourish successfully in a particular country, it needs to be made "relevant" to that country's perceived needs, and so the fourth essay, "American History and European Identity," by Mario Del Pero, Tibor Frank, Martin Klimke, Helle Porsdam, and Stephen Tuck, discusses the political and popular pressures that can bear on historians, the need to respond to public expectations and nurture support for their activity, and thus the importance of finding within the American experience something that touches a chord with domestic audiences.

What historians write, then, is shaped to a significant degree by *where* they write. The final two essays explore some of the consequences of these influences for historical research and the writing of U.S. history, focusing on the proclivity for comparative history and the translation of concepts across national boundaries. Writing American history in Europe, insist Susanna Delfino, Marcus Gräser, Hans Krabbendam, and Vincent Michelot in "Europeans Writing American History: The Comparative Trope," is inevitably a comparative exercise, whether wittingly or not, as is the writing of any foreign history, saying something about the society in which it is written as well as the society that is written about; and it argues further that an explicitly comparative approach may serve to counter the hegemonic tendency of U.S. historiography. The final essay, "The Weight of Words: Writing about Race in the United States and Europe," by Manfred Berg, Isabel Soto, and Paul Schor, reflects on the medium of language in historical writing, for not only may something be lost (or gained!) in translation, but the same word or concept can have differing connotations in different cultures. The various essays in this roundtable reflect on the ambivalence of European historians about notions of American exceptionalism, as they also raise questions about the hegemony of the American academy. They also reveal that the internationalization project, if it is to realize its goals, requires historians to understand the context of the production of scholarship in different parts of the world, rather than simply to read or translate such work.

These essays are short; they cannot be detailed expositions. They are intended to be suggestive rather than definitive, interventions rather than surveys, in order to spark discussion rather than be comprehensive. They focus on the particular issue of writing U.S. history in Europe, but, by implication and comparison, they raise questions about the structures that shape the writing of U.S. historians of their own country or of other parts of the world—structures that are all too easily presumed to be normative, even though they are specific. Shifting our gaze from the center of the production of U.S. history, where the nation and history coincide, to the periphery, where there is a disconnect, helps to put them into sharper relief. Above all, we trust that these essays will raise issues of wider relevance to anyone who reads them—issues that remind us that even in a liberal democratic age, we are not free-

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floating individuals, and that even in a global age, the nation can still shape our scholarship in unexpected ways.

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