

[H-Diplo Review Essay 506: Nolan on Blower & Preston, The Cambridge History of American and the World, Vol. III](#)

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H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 506

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Brooke L. Blower and Andrew Preston, eds., *The Cambridge History of America and the World: Volume III 1900-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN 9781108419260 (hardback, \$150.)

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The history of foreign relations, transnational history, entangled histories, America and the World, America in the World—a variety of names have been applied to the multiplicity of new approaches to studying the United States, not as an isolated and exceptional nation state, but rather as a “nation among nations,” to borrow Thomas Bender’s phrase.^[1] These varied names reflect different theoretical and methodological approaches, but all seek to transcend the once narrow boundaries of diplomatic or international history. *America and the World: 1900-1945* is a welcome addition to this growing body of scholarship. It is the third of four volumes in the Cambridge series offering the most recent scholarship on America’s engagement with the world from 1500 to the present. Like the others, this rich collection shows how capacious and innovative studies of the United States and the world have become. It illustrates the multiple actors, institutions and ideas that have shaped transnational interactions and the multidirectional influences and causalities that have constructed and reconstructed those relationships and transformed the United States itself. It seeks, according to the series general editor Mark Bradley, to capture America’s multiple connections with the world as well as the particularities of its experiences in order to analyze changes in American power and its exercise in multiple regions and arenas.^[2]

Each of the 30 essays focuses on a particular theme, institution or group of agents. These range from war, technology and law to religion, sexual politics and the environment. Economic transformations and imperial competition feature prominently as do political ideologies, rival visions of world order and race relations. Economic, political and

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intellectual elites receive their due, but attention is also paid to the Black population, indigenous people, and women. While some contributions innovatively analyze the enormously important transatlantic entanglements, many move beyond the Atlantic world perspective that has structured so much scholarship to a genuinely global perspective. The essays are divided into three sections, American Power in the Modern Era, Competing Perspectives, and The Perils of Interdependence, titles which I found unhelpful if not confusing. Running through many of the essays in all parts were three interrelated themes of economic transformation, empire, and race, around which I will organize my comments.

This volume of *America and the World* covers the critical five decades in which the US rose, to quote the volume's editors, Brooke L. Blower and Andrew Preston, "from regional upstart to global superpower" (11).^[3] This rise was not predetermined in 1900, nor was it unequivocally evident in the 1920s and 1930s. Only as World War II ended was American economic hegemony, measured in production and consumption, finance and trade, both enthusiastically acknowledged by Americans and undeniably clear to all others. Instead of a linear narrative of rising American power and entanglements, this volume presents an appropriately messy picture of political engagement, partial withdrawal, and then a reassertion of power; of intensive involvement with the global economy, a limited deglobalization in the interwar years, and then unprecedented economic dominance as the Cold War began.

Katherine C. Epstein's "The Sinews of Globalization" argues persuasively that although Britain was declining industrially in relative terms at the turn of the century, it still dominated international banking, shipping, communications and insurance. Despite its impressive industrialization, enviable GDP per capita and technological prowess, the US was relatively underdeveloped until World War I, which spurred the American state and economic elites to begin building the physical and material infrastructure, such as a merchant marine, that would be a key to eventual dominance of the global economy.^[4]

In the 1920s, argues Mario Del Pero in his analysis of transatlantic relations, the US became the "indisputable but reluctant leader" (174-75) of "the imperial and (Euro-American global) order" (174). Its trade with, investments in, and loans to Europe grew exponentially, but economic power was voluntarist and evanescent, rather than formalized and institutionalized in state policies. America was "a transatlantic hegemon that suffered from a blatant deficit of hegemonic capability" (186).^[5] When the depression struck, the US withdrew from many of its international economic commitments in Western and Central Europe, even as it opened up economic ties with the Soviet Union and remained intensively involved in Latin America. It returned to internationalism, argues Eric Rauchway, only slowly in the mid and late 1930s and then rapidly during World War II, as the US consciously acknowledged its economic prowess and assumed leadership in designing the

new global financial architecture of Bretton Woods.^[6]

These essays present a persuasive overarching narrative of America's economic rise, but neglect some important complications. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union offered alternative economic systems that challenged US economic and ideological aspirations and many US corporations had complex involvements with fascist and communist economies. The American model of democratic capitalism looked much more precarious in the 1930s than its post-1945 triumph have led many to believe.

Economic interactions and projections of American power came in many forms beyond GDP, trade, and loans. As Julia Irwin shows, American humanitarianism and foreign assistance, built around public-private partnerships, expanded steadily from the turn of the century

disaster relief through post World War I famine aid to Lend-Lease during World War II.^[7] The Green Revolution did not mark the beginning American efforts to impose its vision of agrarian modernity across the globe. Rather, as Cortney Fullilove argues, the US was a leader in industrializing agriculture in the first half of the twentieth century and encouraged

others to produce standardized crops.^[8] This both restructured global commodity markets and produced ecological problems and conflicts that are still with us today. Similarly, the long history of debates about and experimentation with international economic development

lay in the decades before World War I.^[9] US officials, economists, and foundations both shaped and were influenced by the international dialogue about industrialization and planning. They saw international development programs as a means of economic modernization and political stabilization in places like China. Economics and politics, public and private were inextricably intertwined in the ways that America projected its power abroad and laid the bases for its post 1945 domination of the global economy.

As Blower and Preston, note, in the early twentieth century "many Americans embraced an

ideologically expansionist sensibility" (19).^[10] More than that, argues Daniel Immerwahr, from the late nineteenth century on America built a territorial empire, even as so many of its leaders denied and still deny that the U.S. was/is one. By 1940, 12.6 % of the US population lived in such colonies as Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Alaska, and Hawai'i and assorted Pacific Islands. Yet, the US governed its varied colonies without a formal colonial office or consistent policies of governance across regions and they invested in them only fitfully. Overseas colonies left little imprint on mainland American culture and consciousness. Few American's paid attention to their poverty and lack of rights; few remember that the bloodiest battles fought on US soil in World War II were those in the Philippines and Guam.

^[11]

While Immerwahr focuses on empire as the direct rule of overseas territories, other essays

explore diverse aspects of the American public and private exercise of imperial power. The essays on Latin America, the Middle East, and East Asia analyze growing U.S. efforts to exercise power and compete with European empires without ruling directly (even if American military interventions were frequent, especially in Latin America.)^[12] Benjamin Coates traces the ways in which international law was used to promote American imperial interests and legitimate interventions in Latin America. Although the Constitution did not specify how the US could or should rule non-state territories, aka colonies, the Supreme Court in the 1901 Insular Cases empowered Congress to rule such territories differently and treat their populations unequally. In the interwar years, a series of court cases greatly expanded the power of the executive branch to act autonomously in foreign relations. International law was central to visions of a world order serving American interests. It facilitated the projection of American power abroad throughout the first half of the twentieth century and even more so after 1945. Applying international law concepts to the Constitution, Coates argues, paved the way for the imperial presidency that we have today.^[13]

Megan Black unpacks the multiple ways in which the US government's Indian policies were entangled with its rule of overseas colonies. Indian policy was not "merely a 'prelude' or 'rehearsal' to the action in an overseas theater. Rather, campaigns enforcing acculturation, continental and overseas, were mutually reinforcing" (456). Law, economic policy, and popular cultural representations attacked and eroded indigenous claims to sovereignty in the continental US and in its empire. But Indigenous peoples across the US and its colonies resisted such efforts at assimilation and subordination by building networks within the US and transnationally and by appealing to international organizations and public opinion. They acted globally just as did the American government.^[14]

Nan Enstad successfully deploys the concept of "corporate imperialism" (539) to argue that a focus on corporations and commodities shows that the U.S. was "already part of a complex, multinational imperial formation" (541). Corporate imperialism reveals the connections between the territorial and non-territorial exercise of power, blurs the line between state and American international capitalism, and uncovers links between geopolitics and personal consumption.^[15] Shanon Fitzpatrick's "The Body Politics of US Imperial Power," analyzes the embodied representations of America. In the Progressive Era, the US was perceived as "an imperiled heterosexual white male body" (567). In response, foreign, non-white bodies were scientifically analyzed, politically controlled, economically penetrated, and culturally represented so as to ward off real challenges and imagined dangers. Discourses of an endangered America, were accompanied and ultimately displaced by more positive ones, emphasizing benevolence and prosperity. In the first three decades of the century The New Woman/Modern Girl was a key symbol of American soft power;

during and after World War II it was the amorous GI. Both became flashpoints for Americans, Europeans, and the colonized to debate the promise and the perils of the American model of empire, modernity and sexuality.^[16]

Race and racism is a third theme running through many essays on empire, war, and law, for as Adriane Lentz-Smith aptly noted “Race was never far from conversations about empire” (293). Nor from conversations about commodity imperialism and economic development, one might add. She uses the careers of the lawyer and poet James Weldon Johnson and teacher and World War I camp volunteer Kathryn Johnson to highlight how Black citizens struggled for equality and freedom by linking the fight against Jim Crow with anticolonial struggles, and critiquing both segregation at home and US treatment of non-white nations abroad.^[17] Meredith Oyen traces the origins of federal control of immigration and exclusion at the border to early twentieth century efforts to ban Chinese immigration. Nativism and the concepts of ‘scientific racism’ structured subsequent immigration legislation with their national quotas and racial exclusions, while Mexicans were subject to administrative deportations.^[18]

Michaela Hoenicke Moore explores the American manifestations of the contested concepts of fascism and nativism. In a transatlantic perspective, she argues, white supremacy racism was the most salient characteristic of fascism, while nativism targeted immigrants, leftists, and Catholics as well as people of color. “The domestic racial and economic order shaped foreign policies and was frequently exported to other parts of the world” (480). During the Thirties and World War II, American opponents of fascism were often motivated by patriotism rather than anti-racism; nativism flourished as did anti-Semitism and the military remained segregated.^[19] Regrettably missing from the volume is a discussion of how nativism and fascism were bolstered by the prominence of eugenics in the US, which was a leading promotor of that pseudo-science around the globe.

The concluding essay by Erez Manela argues that during World War II the US “discovered” (704) the global South and came to view it as vital to America’s security and the world order it sought to shape.^[20] Certainly, American’s sense of geography and geopolitics expanded, and varied parts of the globe came into sharper focus. Yet, the volume’s preceding essays show that Latin America, China, and the Middle East had been ‘discovered’ and engaged with much earlier. China was accorded new prominence in the vision of one world, developed by Wendell Willkie, the Republican who ran unsuccessfully against President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940, and in President Franklin Roosevelt’s postwar plans, but other parts of Asia and Latin America were not, and Africa continued to occupy a marginal and subordinate place. Persistent racism among elites and the general population goes far to explain this.

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1945 did not mark a sharp rupture in America's engagement in the world. We are living with the legacies of America's imperial aspirations and policies, its racial attitudes and practices, its economic prowess and now declining hegemony. Yet, the contemporary culture war with its educational gag orders, book bans and prohibition of 'divisive concepts' seeks to mandate a sanitized history of America as the always exceptional, always beneficent nation, which is destined to dominate the global order economically, politically and militarily.^[21] The complex and critical investigation of changes in American power and its exercise around the globe presented in this collection is needed now more than ever.

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^[1] Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

^[2] Mark Philip Bradley, "General Introduction: What is America and the World?" in Brooke L. Blower and Andrew Preston, eds., *The Cambridge History of America and the World: Volume III 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021; hereafter *CHAW III*.)1-7.

^[3] Blower and Preston, "Introduction to Volume III," *CHAW III*: 8-33.

^[4] Katherine C. Epstein, "The Sinews of Globalization," *CHAW III*: 37-61.

^[5] Mario Del Pero, "Transatlantic Relations," *CHAW III*:174-195.

^[6] Eric Rauchway, "Economic Catastrophes," *CHAW III*: 519-538.

[7]
___ Julia F. Irwin, "Humanitarianism and US Foreign Assistance," *CHAW III*: 337-359.

[8]
___ Courtney Fullilove, "Agriculture and Biodiversity," *CHAW III*: 591-616.

[9]
___ David Ekbladh, "Worlds of International Development," *CHAW III*: 617-638.

[10]
___ Blower and Preston, *CHAW III*.

[11]
___ Daniel Immerwahr, "The Territorial Empire," *CHAW III*: 62-84.

[12]
___ Rebecca Herman, "Latin America and US Global Governance," *CHAW III*: 153-173; Charlie Laderman, "The Rise of the Modern Middle East," *CHAW III*: 222-246; Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "Competing Empires in Asia," *CHAW III*: 247-267.

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___ Benjamin A. Coates, "Law and American Power," *CHAW III*: 130-152.

[14]
___ Megan Black, "Indigenous Sovereignties and Social Movements," *CHAW III*: 452-474.

[15]
___ Nan Enstad, "Corporate Imperialism and the World of Goods," *CHAW III*: 539-561.

[16]
___ Shanon Fitzpatrick, "The Body Politics of US Imperial Power," *CHAW III*: 562-590.

[17]
___ Adriane Lentz-Smith, "Fighting Jim Crow in a World of Empire," *CHAW III*: 293-314.

[18]
___ Meredith Oyen, "Borders and Migrants," *CHAW III*: 499-518.

[19]
___ Michaela Hoenicke Moore, "Fascism and Nativism," *CHAW III*: 475-496.

[20]
____ Erez Manela, "Visions of One World," *CHAW III*: 702-722.

[21]
____ For an introduction to the current attacks on history, see PEN America, "Educational Gag Orders: Legislative restrictions on the freedom to Read, Learn, and Teach," <https://pen.org/report/educational-gag-orders/>