INTRODUCTION

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Since its inception as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, the study of history has been closely intertwined with nationalism. Historical scholarship, as Daniel T. Rodgers has pointed out, bent “to the task of specifying each nation’s distinctive culture, its peculiar history, its Sonderweg, its exceptionalism.” In recent years, however, transnational analyses of the past have increasingly come to the fore. Instead of focusing exclusively on the relationships between nation-states, transnational approaches place the emphasis upon the myriad of connections, entanglements, and transfers that link societies to one another.

The ascent of transnationalism has been a long and incremental process, influenced by changes in the political as well as academic landscape. Randolph Bourne was the first to use the term when, in 1916, he envisioned the United States of America as a “trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.” But, as David Armitage has pointed out, only in the second half of the twentieth century did “transnational” gain wide currency “as a term of art across the social sciences and, from thence, to the humanities.” Historians were especially slow to pick it up. Not before the 1990s were transnational questions explicitly raised within the profession.

The nation-centered view of the past had been challenged before the recent surge in transnational history, of course, albeit more implicitly than explicitly. International finance and the exchange of goods across national borders, for example, have always been important topics for economic historians; diplomatic historians, too, by the very nature of their subject, have had to conceptualize their analyses in broader than just national terms. Still, the nation remained at the center of historical research and was basically regarded as “a skin that contains the experience of the past.” Even studies of migration accepted the dominant theme of the nation-state and fit the transnational movement of people into national master narratives.

Over the last two decades or so, however, this nation-centered view of history has increasingly come under attack from a variety of angles. Postmodern analyses have deconstructed the nation’s seemingly essential character and have shown, in Benedict Anderson’s famous words, that nations are “imagined communities.” Also, newly developed fields of historical research often employ units of analysis other than the nation-state. In environmental history, for example, nations and nation-states certainly are important actors in shaping perceptions of nature and in
transforming the natural environment; nature itself, however, knows no boundaries. This assumption, Ted Steinberg claims, “challenges the very notion of what history has been about for more than 100 years. History is still wedded to the idea of the nation-state, a concept that is of only limited value for tracking the migratory patterns, say, of a particular species of fish.” Animals can cross borders as easily as snowstorms or diseases. Hence, environmental historians focus on sub-national, cross-national, or even global spaces such as watersheds, forests, ocean currents, or climate systems. Historians of ethnicity and migration have begun to analyze the movement of people as a system rather than simply a journey between two points. Thus, concepts that focus on communication networks, diaspora, hybridity, and in-betweenness have replaced older assimilationist approaches, and the steady and continuing ties that link regions, cities, and even villages across the globe are emphasized much more today than they were in the past.

The sea change is perhaps most evident in recent re-conceptualizations of transatlantic ties. The field of “Atlantic History” has discovered, or rather invented, the Atlantic Ocean as a distinct space for historical inquiry—just as Fernand Braudel did with the Mediterranean. Shedding the view of this ocean as merely a huge barrier separating the continents, Atlantic History instead focuses on imperial and colonial entanglements across the ocean, migration (both voluntary and forced), trade, and biological exchanges. However, many proponents of this approach suggest that Atlantic History came to an end with the formation of modern nation-states that began after 1800, triggering dissent by advocates of a continued exchange among the people of the Atlantic world. From this perspective, transatlantic history is not just defined by space (the Atlantic world); it is also a methodological approach, “which focuses on the interconnectedness of human experience over the centuries in the Atlantic Basin” and which is “dedicated to analyzing the dynamic process of encounter and interchange among the peoples on all sides of the Atlantic Ocean.” This agenda necessarily entails a break from the narrow confines of the North Atlantic World and the inclusion of transatlantic ties in the Southern Hemisphere. Consequently, Joseph Roach, building on Paul Gilroy’s seminal work *The Black Atlantic*, argues the case for the “concept of a circum-Atlantic world (as opposed to a transatlantic one),” and “insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity.”

With all these exciting new perspectives, the growing interest in transnational history also reflects the insecurity among historians who have abandoned old master narratives and are searching for ways to replace outdated national stories. Thus, the transnational turn adds not only several new angles to the study of history but also many methodological
challenges and pitfalls. Methodologically, for example, transnational his-
tory is often difficult to situate within the larger analytical realm that has
been opened up by comparative history, global history, and explicitly
non-national approaches like Histoire croisée. Furthermore, one has to be
aware that transnational actors and structures are also the result of con-
structive processes. Transnational networks, for example, have to be
reproduced constantly: by exchanging information, by traveling, by
(re-)financing the structure of such a group or simply by keeping alive the
identity that nourishes transnational associations. If national communities
are “imagined,” so are transnational communities. And finally, as Kiran
Patel has reminded us, referring to the lack of research on transnational
ties between anti-Semitic groups in Europe at the end of the nineteenth
century, transnationalism is not a progressive or liberating force by itself.

Transnational analyses will not obliterate the historical significance of
nationalism and the nation-state. However, stripped of its essential char-
acter, the nation appears as but one of many different forms of social, cul-
tural, and political organization. Traditional national histories are incapable
of grasping the importance of the hitherto marginalized but increasingly
visible web of intercultural entanglements. This is the task of transnational
history. What is still lacking, though, is a large body of empirical research
on the actual workings of transnational forces and actors in the past. The
seven papers assembled in this volume aim to contribute to closing this
gap.

Non-state actors play an important role in transnational history,
whether these are tightly knit organizations like religious groups or pri-
ivate foundations, individuals, or a rather loose assembly of intellectuals.
The transatlantic network to promote the rescue and resuscitation of vic-
tims of drowning and similar accidents, which Amanda Moniz describes
in her contribution, provides an example. After the first Society for the
Recovery of the Drowned had been founded in Amsterdam in 1767, Hu-
mane Societies sprang up in many cities in the North Atlantic region.
Through philanthropic and medical networks, information about innova-
tions in lifesaving techniques was shared and knowledge about the rescue
and resuscitation of accident victims was exchanged across the ocean. The
Philadelphia Humane Society, for example, sent lifesaving directions and
pamphlets not only to similar associations in Baltimore, Wilmington, and
Cincinnati, but also to such faraway places as St. Petersburg, Russia. This
practice of communication, Moniz holds, “typified the outward and ex-
pansive nature of later eighteenth-century philanthropy.”

An important problem raised by Moniz’s essay is the question of
whether there could have been transnational forces at work before the
concept of the nation became so powerful in the nineteenth century. If one
argues with Ian Tyrrell that transnational history “concerns the period
since the emergence of nation-states as important phenomena in world history” (the creation of which he dates to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648), then there obviously is a problem concerning U.S. history, since, of course, “there was no nation as such until 1776.” Even then it took at least two decades for a powerful national entity to emerge on North American soil. For two reasons, however, it does make perfect sense to use a transnational approach to colonial history and to the history of the Early American Republic, as Moniz does in her contribution. First, many European elements of the transatlantic philanthropic network that she analyzes already existed within a national framework. This was certainly true for the philanthropic organizations in London and Paris (less so, however, for those in, say, Hamburg and Vienna). Secondly, and maybe more importantly, transnational ties do not only come into being when a nation is created. Rather, they often predate, “survive,” and may even outlive the historical prevalence of nationalism.

Ely Janis addresses a different but no less challenging problem for transnational history in his essay: the problem of transnational ties to support a national cause. Janis highlights the financial and political support of Irish America for the fight against British rule in Ireland as exemplified in Charles Stewart Parnell’s 1880 tour through the United States and Canada. On his three-month trip, the president of the Irish National Land League tried to mobilize public opinion and raise money for famine relief in order to change the Irish land system. At first glance, these kinds of connections appear to be of a more national than transnational character. On closer examination, however, such entanglements indicate the ambiguous nature not only of nationalism but also of transnationalism, which can hardly be observed in a “pure” form, independent of and uninfluenced by nationalist forces.

Parnell’s mission to America in early 1880 was a crucial component in strengthening the transnational links between the Irish at home and in the United States and Canada. As Janis points out, “Nationalism served as the primary tool in this transnational project.” Its ambivalence is starkly revealed in the title of a regular column of the official Land League paper called “Transatlantic Ireland.” At the same time, Irish nationalism was important in shaping a distinct ethnic identity of Irish Americans, of which “a diasporic sense of Irishness” was a central part.

Mass migration in the nineteenth century not only challenged individual loyalties; it also transformed the traditional concept of territorial sovereignty, as Nicole M. Phelps shows in her essay on migration and United States consular officials in the Habsburg empire. Between the 1880s and the First World War, millions of people with Austrian or Hungarian citizenship traveled to the United States and became naturalized citizens. Many of these migrants returned to Europe or sent their children back to their
home countries to pursue an education there. Under Austro-Hungarian law, however, a child born to a man who held Austrian or Hungarian citizenship was an Austrian or Hungarian citizen. As Phelps shows, this dual citizenship could create many problems for the individuals affected, the most common ones being impressment into Habsburg military service and arrest for nationalist agitation. Challenged by these and other new problems deriving from transatlantic mass migration, both the United States and the Austro-Hungarian Empire expanded their consular services and increasingly claimed jurisdiction over “their” citizens abroad, thereby strengthening a new, body-based concept of sovereignty.

However, the transnational, national, and international should not be regarded as separate spheres, as Katharina Rietzler argues in her essay on Rockefeller and Carnegie support for the study of international relations in Weimar Germany. This is especially true for philanthropy, a field of activity that has always had a strong transnational character. She claims that nation-states may disrupt, change, or encourage transnational relations. Indeed, in the interwar years, state powers and national loyalties interfered with the transnational scholarly networks dedicated to the study of ‘International Relations’ that American foundations sought to encourage. German government officials tried to exploit the foundations’ efforts to secure their own policy aims. The Ministry of External Affairs, in particular, influenced the relationships between foundations and collaborators, effectively limiting transnational agency. By seeking the approval of state authorities before becoming active in Germany, philanthropic foundations generally accepted such limitations. If it is true that “even the most isolated of nation-states is a semipermeable container, washed over by forces originating beyond its shores,” then one has to acknowledge that transnational actors are profoundly shaped and influenced by nation-states, too, and a complex web of entangled relationships emerges. Rietzler’s case study is even more complicated as it involves two foundations with different values, goals, and modes of operation. Still, the personal networks the foundations had built up in the preceding years remained in place, as Rietzler argues, “while the institutions supported by American philanthropy were completely transformed in the process of Nazi Gleichschaltung.”

Like Ely Janis, Birte Timm emphasizes the importance of transnational connections in fostering nationalism and national identities, especially when a new nation-state is supposed to be carved out of the realm of an empire. Timm focuses on the workings of the Jamaica Progressive League (JPL) in New York and its ties to the local political scene in Jamaica. Founded in 1936 by Jamaican migrants Wilfred A. Domingo, Ethelred Brown, and Walter Adolphe Roberts, the JPL played an important role in the creation of a national movement for self-government in Jamaica. Many
of its members also participated in the African-American civil rights movement and international black nationalist organizations. In this respect, Timm holds, “migration was one of the most important catalysts for the intertwined histories” of the “Black Atlantic.” In Jamaica as well as in Ireland, transnational ties to ethnic groups in the United States were instrumental in shaping anti-imperialist nationalism. Not surprisingly, ties also developed between these nationally minded ethnic groups. For instance, Eileen Curran, a politically active Irish actress, was invited to give a speech at a public meeting of the Jamaica Progressive League in 1937 on “how Irish-Americans fought for Irish Freedom.”

Christina Oppel, in her essay on W. E. B. Du Bois and Nazi Germany, also dwells upon Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic. She reminds us that “Gilroy calls upon historians to consider the Black Atlantic one unit of analysis as it modifies traditional nationalist concepts of modern transatlantic history.” In other words, the Black Atlantic is a notion intended to expand our focus beyond the nation-state or the relations between such nation-states. At the same time, Oppel challenges recent normative approaches to diaspora that oversimplify the concept by using it as an antithesis of the national. Rereading and reinterpretting Du Bois’s writings, she maintains that the famous African-American scholar’s accounts of his visit to Berlin in 1936 are hardly reconcilable with newly established binary oppositions (like the one between nation and diaspora). Rather, Du Bois’s writings call for the application of a “transnational concept more tolerant of the national,” which leaves enough analytical space for the inclusion of hybrid, intermediary, and ambivalent identities.

Finally, in her contribution, Katja Naumann analyzes processes of transnationalization in American higher education from 1918 to 1968. During this period, she argues, history teaching at American universities underwent profound changes. Developing parallel to the rise of the United States as a world power and the increase in globalization, history teaching broadened its geographical scope. She also follows the continuities and discontinuities from the teaching of Western Civilization in the context of the First World War to the establishment of the new field of world history in response to the challenges of globalization and Westernization after the Second World War. This essay challenges older notions of the distinctiveness and separateness of the concepts of “Western Civilization” and “World History.” Naumann argues that both concepts are, in fact, closely intertwined and are “part of a more general transformation of history teaching” in American universities.

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Notes

1 Cf. Thomas Bender, “Introduction: Historians, the Nation, and the Plenitude of Narratives,”
in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley, Los Angeles,

2 Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, London,

3 Randolph Bourne’s article “Trans-National America” originally appeared in *Atlantic
Monthly* 118 (1916): 86–97. A reprint can be found in Carl Resek, ed., *War and the Intellectuals:

4 David Armitage, “Is There a Pre-History of Globalization?” in *Comparison and History:
Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, ed. Deborah Cohen and Maura O’Connor (New York,

5 Although it is, of course, impossible to reconstruct an exact chronology of the rise of transna-
tional history, two “events” stand out: the publication of an American Historical Association
Forum (*American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 [1991]), and a series of four Conferences on Interna-
tionalizing American History which took place from 1997 to 2000. The official “La Pietra” re-

6 Prasenjit Duara, “Transnationalism and the Challenge to National Histories,” in *Rethinking

7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*
(London, 1983).


11 David Buisseret, “Introduction,” in Creolization in the Americas, ed. Steven G. Reinhardt and David Buisseret (College Station, TX, 2000), 3–18, 5.


14 Axel R. Schäfer, American Progressives and German Social Reform 1875–1920: Social Ethics, Moral Control, and the Regulatory State in a Transatlantic Context (Stuttgart, 2000); Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings; Thomas Adam and Ruth Gross, eds., Traveling between Worlds: German-American Encounters (College Station, TX, 2006).


19 Ian Tyrrell, Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789 (Houndmills, NY, 2007), 3.


22 See Thomas Adam, Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s to the 1930s (Bloomington, IN, 2009).

23 Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings, 1.