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Globalizing the United States History Survey: Approaches and Issues

A Comment

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First of all, I want to say how delighted I am to see this kind of syllabus development appearing in graduate programs, and I commend UCSC for taking a leading role in preparing students to teach world history and to study the United States in a more global framework. It is now ten years since the first La Pietra Conference, jointly sponsored by the Organization of American Historians and New York University, opened a vital conversation between world and U.S. history. The La Pietra agenda of expanding the study of the U.S. to larger spatial, temporal, and conceptual frames was encapsulated in its 2000 report, and it has been echoed subsequently in the AHA Report on Graduate Education (*The Education of Historians for the Twenty-first Century* (2004)), and more recently, in a report to the American Council on Education on Internationalizing Learning Outcomes in History. The movement to internationalize U.S. history is clearly gaining momentum; it is germinating in graduate training and beginning to appear in introductory U.S. history courses. All this is disciplinary progress, I

believe; it is also music to my ears, since it seemed that I was playing to a nearly empty house when I introduced my globalized survey-course reader, *America Compared*, in 1995.

Exactly what does “globalizing” U.S. history entail? To my mind, these presentations and model syllabi reinforce two important points about this project. First, it is not an effort to generate a new subfield, a new specialty with its own society and journal; instead it is meant to engender a habit of mind that pervades the discipline. If successful, this new global awareness will inform the way current specialists see their particular topics in American history and will permeate the atmosphere in which we teach all our American history courses, whether explicitly or as an unannounced given. It will, in short, become part of the disciplinary air that we breathe.

The second point is that the movement to internationalize U.S. history has no unitary method, theory, or ideology to promote. So far--thank heavens!--there is no orthodoxy about ways to proceed, chronological or theoretical frameworks to use, or conclusions to test or support. Some may believe that this diversity is the temporary product of the globalizing movement’s infancy, not an endemic feature that will continue. We can expect that as studies continue and a conversation develops, more synthetic overviews will be proposed, as has happened in world history. Scholars will offer various stage theories or schemas that chart America’s place in the world from 1500 to the present, its path from “settler colony” to “global hegemon,” as Michael Adas has put it. I suspect that,

just as with world history, there will be a healthy debate among competing theories and chronologies, and a wide variety of methods that teachers adopt to highlight the critical themes and pose the particular questions that they deem important. This is exactly as it should be.

Since I've been asked to comment on these syllabi in their draft form, I offer my thoughts and impressions in hope of providing useful feedback for revisions. The commentary that follows attempts to balance praise with constructive criticism, and then offers a more detached reflection on the larger issues at stake. I am not normally obsessive about symmetry, but it turns out that I have twelve points to make: four basic features of these syllabi to praise, four reservations to express, and then, very briefly, four important questions to note that they raise. In certain sports this 4-4-4 formation would get me a penalty for an extra player on the field, but I hope the usefulness of my comments will make up for their length.

One of the strengths of the proposed syllabi is that they stress interpretation over coverage. Perhaps the most frequent objection I hear to the globalizing movement among teachers is that adding global content will force them to delete coverage of important events with regional or national importance. The teaching hour, after all, creates a zero-sum game. This is not a new problem, of course: there is always the question of what to include or exclude, and there are always constraints imposed by time, textbooks, and state standards. But the urge to touch on every event can impose what the ACE has

called the “tyranny of coverage” on teachers, deflecting them from the critical task of interpretation toward strategies of memorization that do a disservice our students in the long run. To their credit, UCSC students have bypassed this problem in search of thematic coherence and fresh perspectives. Their creative use of recent scholarship shows that there doesn’t need to be a long lag time between cutting-edge scholarly research and the introductory courses that we teach. And their incorporation of traditional topics such as immigration, industrialization and war, demonstrates how much of the traditional coverage and standard material can be included into globalized frameworks of teaching. An internationalized U.S. history discovers new events and topics, but it also offers new ways of seeing traditional ones.

A second strength of these syllabi is their focus on oceans as a link between the local and the global, especially in the first half of the survey. Using the Atlantic and Pacific worlds as organizing themes challenges the “default narrative” of American history, which has always stressed the nation’s fortunate isolation from world trends and problems thanks to its snug location inside dual ocean barriers from Eurasia. An alternative approach shows how these oceans were highways, not barriers, and how from the outset the land that became the U.S. was implicated in a dense, multi-directional network of exchanges with Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The oceanic approach allows instructors and students to link the local, the regional, and the global in myriad ways. The proposed syllabus for Part I of the survey uses specific cities of the

North and South Atlantic – Quebec, Charleston, and Havana – to examine how larger patterns of trade and migration worked themselves into and created distinctive local environments in the New World. This hemispheric approach not only locates the North American colonies in the Atlantic trading system, it encourages students to do what David Armitage has labeled “cis-Atlantic” history, or what we might simply call globally-informed local history. It repositions Spanish, French, and Dutch colonial projects in the New World into the story of American history and encourages discussion of connections and comparisons with Britain’s colonial realms. Viewing the colonial period as a whole, the oceanic approach shows vividly how the eastern and western shores of North America were “international before they were national,” in the words of Karen Kupperman.

Inclusion of the Pacific world is especially innovative. Along with penetration of the continent by French traders from the north and Spanish colonists from the south, discussion of Hawaii, the Northwest otter trade, and early California provides a welcome corrective to the dominant east-to-west narrative of American history. It opens the possibility that historians might metaphorically position ourselves not in Jamestown or Plymouth but in the center of the continent, much as Alan Taylor has done, and from there watch everyone converge. It also suggests the continuing importance of China for

world trade, a theme that helps connect U.S. history to the findings and debates of world historians.

Third, I like very much the way that Part I of the syllabus opens up the American nineteenth century to a wider geographic frame. The dominant U.S. narrative, especially in textbooks and survey courses, concentrates on the “landward turn” that the United States took as it expanded its domain westward in steps that culminated at the Pacific rim. (That other settler colonies and nations made analogous moves in Canada, Argentina, Brazil, and Australia is often overlooked.) This inward focus encourages a myopic treatment of expansion, one that neglects the westward surge’s links to European capital and population flows, to overseas trade, and to geopolitical conflicts with Mexico, Britain, and Russia, among others. Elsewhere I have noted how this myopia produces an hourglass-shaped survey course, whose horizons begin as transoceanic and hemispheric in the colonial period but shrink to continental size, at most, in the century after independence, only to expand again with the Spanish-American War and formal overseas imperialism. Part I of this syllabus avoids this trap by keeping in view the transatlantic and hemispheric contexts of slavery, citizenship, and migration, encouraging especially glances at parallel developments in Latin America. Its coverage of ocean trade in hides and pelts helps to tie the American frontier to Atlantic and Pacific trade systems and hence to the world economy. “Frontier of what?” historian Carleton Hayes long ago asked of the Turner thesis. Following the flows of people, capital, and goods to

and from the American West suggests that it was one of many nineteenth-century frontiers of an expanding European-based capitalist system, distinctive perhaps in its ability to develop rapidly from a commodity-providing periphery to a commercial/industrial “semiperiphery,” but otherwise sharing many features with other New World frontiers.

Speaking of frontiers, the fourth feature I’d like to commend is the highlighting of the California Gold Rush. This epochal mid-nineteenth-century episode tends to get lost in conventional survey-course configurations, which either omit it entirely or squeeze it in awkwardly to explain how California could apply for statehood so quickly and thus help reignite the territorial slavery controversy. As UCSC students make clear, the Gold Rush was important for many reasons besides its connection to the Civil War. It was the terminus of westward continental expansion and a symbol of the multicultural collision that America became. And make no mistake about it, the Gold Rush was a transnational episode. At least ten percent of the gold-seekers came from abroad, probably more, including Chinese, Peruvians, and Chileans, the last two of whom heard about it sooner than Europeans – a symptom of thriving Pacific rim trade. Its reverberations were global, ranging from human migratory flows to currency-based economic effects. Thanks to the Gold Rush, California became the key American link between the Atlantic and Pacific trade worlds. It became a bridge from U.S. continental to overseas expansion as the nation moved to secure passage through the Isthmus of Panama, Protestant missionaries used California

as base to proselytize Asia, and the federal government developed San Francisco harbor to facilitate the China trade.

The California Gold Rush was also the first of several such rushes around the Pacific basin, which in the following decades included Victoria (Australia), Peru, New Zealand, and British Columbia. All of these boom-and-bust settlements shared common features – another instance of how the frontier paradigm can be globalized – including the migration and then the exclusion of Chinese sojourners. This wider view can give instructors another opportunity to point out the global features of an emblematic and supposedly uniquely American event.

Having found much to like in these syllabi – and for brevity's sake I am leaving out other plusses--let me now offer a few critical comments in a constructive spirit. My first reservation concerns a couple of features that are advertised but seem to be missing, or at least shortchanged, in the preliminary version of these syllabi. Discussion of pre-contact Native American societies is promised, but at least in the draft I have seen, only part of only one lecture seems to offer it. The question of where and how the survey course begins is an important one, with several possible answers – more on this later – but at some point the long and rich history of North American natives prior to the incursions of Coronado, de Soto, and Cartier needs to be explored. This sets the theme of Indians as agents rather than simply victims of whites – one that can be returned to throughout the course. At the very least, it creates the conditions under which

the fluid intergroup relations of the colonial era and the “middle ground” can be understood.

Issues of gender, too, are mentioned as a focus, but they do not seem to be prominent in the syllabus. One of the challenges of the survey course is to find ways to keep women and gender in view as participants and running themes in the course, not subjects that are trotted out only at critical or obvious junctures. Entwined with this is the larger question of integrating into the survey the different timetables and paces of “structures” and “events,” a challenge that was raised by the *Annales* school long ago and remains endemic to our quest to combine social and political history in a common narrative.

My second qualm might be labeled “if all the world were California.” I’m somewhat reluctant to voice it because I want to applaud the effort shown here to engage students by including local topics in the survey course. I especially like the way these syllabi use such topics – the otter trade, for example – to lead students empirically from the local to regional, national, and even global arenas of exchange and systems of explanation. I do think, however, that the question of proportion needs to be raised, for we need to be aware of the trap of overstating, explicitly or by implication, the importance of the West Coast in the nation’s trade network. From the outset, for example, trade traffic on the Pacific Coast was tiny compared to the Atlantic. David Igler has been able to document some 60 stops on the West Coast by Russian, British, and American ships in the 1780s. In the same decade several thousand ships called at North America’s

Atlantic ports, including vessels carrying more than 10,000 slaves. It is only appropriate that the Atlantic trade system, with its ties to slavery and the plantation complex, diverse migrations, cultural transmissions, and revolutions, looms large in American history. By contrast, trade along the Pacific Coast begins to reverberate nationally only in the 1840s, and not until our own day has it outstripped Atlantic trade in volume and importance. I do not mean to say that Pacific Rim history is too marginal to be included in survey courses. On the contrary, it is clear that we need to do much more work to integrate the Pacific into the larger story of US overland and overseas trade and imperialism. But part of our job is to convey to students the relative impact of events and processes, and we must keep this task in view, too.

Another kind of localistic distortion involves not exaggerations but absences. The Pacific Coast remains the most unchurched region of the United States. Perhaps because of this, it is too easy for California teachers to overlook the profound influence that religion has played in American history and culture. I see little consideration of the many roles and ramifications of religion in these syllabi. I urge students to sample the vast literature on this subject and to find ways to thread religious themes, movements, and influences through the introductory course.

My third qualm revolves around the Compromise of 1850— with a pun intended, because 1850 does seem to be a compromising position for splitting the survey. Periodization is one of our fundamental tasks as historians, and in U.S.

history it is made even more pressing by the convention of offering a two-semester introductory U.S. history course. Where do we create the break? The conventional answer, of course, is 1877, when the official end of Reconstruction settled the questions of slavery and race that the Civil War involved – or at least appeared to bring a settlement. Looking back from the late nineteenth century, however, it becomes clear this date perhaps unfairly privileges the Civil War, and it forces teachers to break in two rather than consider as a whole such ongoing developments as frontier expansion, immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and the labor movement. One could also argue that with many instructors moving back the course's starting point to the 1400s, and with the explosion of colonial studies covering the intervening three-plus centuries, the breakpoint of the survey should also be moved back. On the other hand, history is being made forward not backward, and each year adds more events to consider in the survey's second half. Many students already complain that their survey instructor never got past the Second World War.

The opening is there, in short, for a debate on moving the survey's break point. Still, I think that the 1850 split that is being proposed here creates more problems than it solves. We must remember that many students take only one half of the course. Even more than 1877 or 1865, stopping the first half at 1850 interrupts the American narratives of nation-building, economic development, slavery and antislavery, race relations, immigration, westward expansion and Indian mobilization at a critical juncture. And politically, stopping the course at

1850 would be akin to ending a course on early American history at the repeal of the Stamp Act, implying, in effect, that a momentary cease-fire meant the end of warfare. The precedent that first comes to mind is Frederick Jackson Turner's narratives of the New West and the sections, which he terminated in the antebellum years and whose subjects he never could quite bring himself to admit played a key role in igniting a catastrophic civil war.

Michael Geyer and Charles Bright have made an eloquent special plea for the mid-nineteenth century as a critical turning point in global history, and it is not surprising that UCSC students have been influenced by their important work. But the political and economic "self-strengthening" that Geyer and Bright see at work in wars of national unification, "Listian" programs of import substitution, and anti-imperial rebellions from Asia to the Americas took place over several decades, and in each case they had different starting and turning points. Geyer and Bright condense this process by telescoping it into a few decades rather than charting its various local timetables. "The condition of globality" meant that nations shared large processes, but not that they marched in unison. For the United States, industrial development, the transportation revolution, a surge of landward imperialism and steps toward political consolidation all took off around 1815, the same year from which Paul Johnson dates "the birth of the modern" in western Europe. Given that that year confirmed American independence through the end of the War of 1812, ended the century-long Anglo-French War with Napoleon's defeat, realigned US

foreign policy aims with Britain's, and saw a surge of migration by cotton planters to newly-opened western lands, setting the stage for a territorial showdown over slavery, it might make sense to designate 1815, not 1850, as a logical break in a two-part survey course. (Or perhaps, because UC Santa Cruz is on a quarter system, an entirely different periodization could be worked out in three parts, say 1400-1783, 1783-1917, 1917-present. The possibilities are multiple.)

Finally, it occurs to me that the syllabi I have seen embody quite different approaches to the pre-1850 and post-1850 periods without providing a clear rationale for it. Before 1850 the dominant trajectory is "outside/in": beginning with larger systems and relations in the Atlantic and Pacific worlds, the course aims to see how the land that eventually became the U.S. fit into them. After 1850, the dominant approach seems to be "inside/out," moving outward from key American events to find parallel and related ones elsewhere. In the first half, the nation is the site where global changes can be analyzed; in the second it is the more self-contained originator of change. Ironically, during the era when American political and economic power begins to exert itself forcefully abroad, this survey course seems to take a less global approach. Clearly the second half needs to make a greater effort to trace the nation's impact abroad. Speaking more structurally, a way to remedy the disparity between halves might be to organize the course's large units around the changing position and role of the U.S. in the world. Using such a scaffolding, whether it is the world-system

trajectory of periphery to semiperiphery to core or the less doctrinaire, overlapping schema of frontier, colony, nation, and empire that I advocate in my book, *America in the World*, would help to keep both domestic and transnational events in view at all times. It would also explain how the balance between absorbing foreign influence and exerting power abroad tips toward the latter over the course of the nation's history.

I offer the above mixed bag of bouquets and brickbats in full recognition that those of us who are working on globalizing the U.S. narrative share a common endeavor. I have expanded upon my comments because I wanted to suggest how these syllabi raise larger questions that all of us face in "worlding" U.S. history, and with it the survey course. Four of those central questions are touched on above, but in closing let me make them more explicit and concise.

First, how can we tie the different geographic scales of our story together in a sustained and vivid way? Globalizing U.S. history is preeminently a strategy of making connections among circles of contacts and contexts that widen as they move outward from their local manifestations—or constrict as they work their way down to local events. We need to find narrative strategies that make visible the global in the local and vice versa. As we do so, we will also develop theories and models to describe how local, regional, national, and international forces interact to change one another. These are tasks generic to any globally-informed regional history, but in U.S. history there is also the special task of relating the transcontinental and the transoceanic movements of people, goods,

and ideas. The UCSC syllabi exemplify in their two halves contrasting “outside/in” and “inside/out” approaches to these questions. The first half also uses a resolutely case-study method for relating the specific and general that the second half abandons. These strategic decisions and the strengths and weaknesses that follow from them should be discussed more self-consciously as the search for ways to globalize the local and vice versa progresses.

Second, when and where does a globalized American history begin? The broader view that historians now take has moved the date back to the 1400s and even earlier, but there remains the issue of where to begin. A view that emphasizes America as the product of expanding Eurasian trade often begins with relations between the Mediterranean, Trans-Saharan, and Indian Ocean trade webs and western Europeans’ search for alternatives to Middle-Eastern middlemen. On the other hand, a course that starts in North America might begin many millenia earlier, with the peoples who crossed over from northeastern Asia some 20,000 years ago. Right now, the “three worlds collide” paradigm, where the peoples of Europe, Africa and the Americas converge, seems to have won the day. But even so, there are different ways to narrate it. Do we begin by tracing the different lives of Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans in their homelands, as the UCSC syllabus advocates? Do we open the story instead with the drama of contact, then tell each group’s “back story”? Might we simply station ourselves on the North American continent and watch

each group arrive in sequence? Do these exhaust the possibilities, or are there other alternatives?

Third, what is the changing nature of America's connection to the world? Documenting the nation's outside connections and examining its history comparatively episode by episode can open up conventional survey-course topics to global awareness. The preliminary UCSC syllabi do a good job of this. But in the end instructors will want to sketch a bigger picture and suggest a larger overall assessment, or at least prod students to do so. One way to build this larger story is to ask how and why North America moved from the margins to the mainstream of the Eurasian-dominated global economy, and how the rising trajectory of U.S. power changed the terms of the nation's relations with the rest of the world. These kinds of questions have the potential to give the overall course trajectory a larger meaning for today. Such a scaffolding does not need to achieve the hegemony and inclusiveness of a "master narrative," and in fact many instructors will resist the idea of imposing a rigid framework upon the material and our students. Still, big questions like this open the widest vistas on American history, stimulate productive classroom debates, and bring the record of the past to speak to the nation's present situation as a conflicted and contested superpower in a multipolar global environment.

Really, it is only when such themes and ends are decided upon than we can tackle issues of periodization effectively, answering the fourth question of exactly when and where we begin our narrative and what are its major periods

and turning points. Only when we know where we are going, or (speaking historically) when we look back from where we have arrived, can we recreate our journey and its major features. To take one example, if we end the two-semester survey by assessing the nature of current globalization, as the preliminary UCSC syllabus does, we may well want to connect and perhaps synchronize its earlier events to a larger history that opens with the “first globalization” of 1500 and develops in tandem with the imperial and industrial “second globalization” of the long nineteenth century. At key points along the way the course could examine the place of North America, and later the United States, in this process. On the other hand, if the related but not identical concept of empire is an organizing theme, it will suggest its own chronology and set of questions. Viewed through this prism, the American story reflects a trajectory from imperial outpost and cluster of European colonies to an independent, expanding nation and not long thereafter a global imperial power. Each phase of this process comes with its own set of interpretive and evaluative questions; their relation to the preceding and following phases can give the course a coherence and relevance that more episodic approaches often lack.

Addressing all four of these questions seems to me an essential step in the process of constructing coherent and meaningful versions of a globalized U.S. history. Please note--to return to what I said at the outset--that I use the plural “versions” advisedly because I hope that this globalizing project will inspire many different models and solutions, and will generate lively debates among

professors and among students, too. We should even consider the extent to which we can ask aloud and problematize these four questions for survey-course students.

No draft syllabus can be expected to settle these questions, or perhaps even to address them all in depth. I have tried to point out places where the UCSC syllabi suggest interesting answers as well as where they seem less probing or persuasive. Still, it is a credit to the thoughtfulness and originality of these students that their syllabi raise these questions implicitly and sometimes explicitly, and that they offer so much good material for reflecting upon them.