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American Exceptionalism at Its End

An interview with Thomas Bender

Nicolas DELALANDE

What are the origins of American exceptionalism? How much of the Bush administration's foreign policy and the temptation of imperialism can one ascribe to this belief in an America outside of the world stage? Thomas Bender, American historian, proposes a new narrative of American history in this time of change to give it back its rightful place, as a history among histories.

Thomas Bender is an American historian who teaches at New York University. His main areas of research have been American urban and intellectual history, but he has also been known for his continuing concern for the way historians and history teachers are taught, as well as for building bridges between international perspectives on global history. In 2006 he published *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History*, hailed as a landmark work in American historiography, in which he seeks to bring into the light the many connexions that exist between American history and other histories throughout the world so as to try and put an end to the recent revival of American exceptionalism, a defect he esteems to be inherited from the Cold War. Other famous works include *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. (University of California Press, 2002) and *The Education of Historians in the 21st century* (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

1. The American nation, globalization and multiculturalism

La Vie des Idées: In the introduction of *A Nation among Nations*, you write that “this book proposes to mark the end of American history as we have known it”. What are your criticisms about this “old history”? Why has American history been shaped in such a way that it now should be abandoned?

Tom Bender: Well, I think that the first thing to say is that history, as a discipline, grew up with the making of the modern nation-state, and was an agent of the state. One of its purposes as it became academicized was to create a common story that would be the foundation for national self-identity. That story seemed to me to become more obvious than it actually had been before in the 1990s, when there was all this talk about globalization and, in the US, multiculturalism; and it seemed to me that these two discussions suggested that the nation-state was not this inherent natural carrier of history that we seemed to assume it was, but actually something to be examined as to how it was constructed and how it changed over time. It seemed like the suggestion was that a national history is some kind of sum, or result, of the collision of histories larger than the state and smaller than the state; that is, globalization on the one side, and our big debates on multiculturalism on the other side. That was where I sort of moved from that position, that was a kind of purely intellectual thing about how one might construct a new narrative.

There was also, in the United States, the question of – and this got worse a few years later as I started working on the book, beginning with the Bush administration – this revival of American exceptionalism; that we do not share the history of the rest of the world. Particularly in the recent years, this notion that the international is everything but us. It’s an intriguing usage, that we’re not in the international. In fact, when they created American Studies programs in the beginning of the Cold War, they created Area Studies and those at the same time, but didn’t grasp that American Studies was also an area, in the international world.

VDI: Global history sometimes suggests that historians should leave aside the category of the “nation” and focus more specifically on global concepts and experiences. Your

position seems to be different, as you hold the nation to remain a crucial political entity. How do you view the relationship between national and transnational factors?

Tom Bender: I think that, basically, the idea of abandoning the study of the nation for the study of globalization misses an absolutely fundamental point about the nation-state. It is, I think, perhaps the most powerful mobilizer of human beings in history, and whatever its future may be it will have different permutations – but I don't think it's going to go away very soon. It has shaped the world we live in, the world that is the product of the 19th and 20th century and of the nation-states and their system, so I don't see how we can understand where we are without taking that in as a factor. Then, is the nation-state as autonomous, and as self-contained as we thought? No. Is it also sometimes the product or deeply affected by global processes? Absolutely. One can see it as both floating on a sea of global processes, but at the same time these global processes are profoundly shaped by the activity and the interaction of these different nation-states as well.

We've seen in recent years that people can't cross borders very well. So this notion that we have of a seamless world: it's not that seamless; that was a fantasy; it was seamless for certain people in certain circumstances. So I think we have now, I hope, a more complicated notion of the nation, and a more complicated notion of global processes.

VDI: What do you think of the efforts of historians such as Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank who are trying to rewrite world history with the category of the “empire”, suggesting that nations should be understood as empires rather than strictly-speaking national political bodies?

Tom Bender: I think that their recovery of “empire” is extremely important. Part of my experience of writing this book was to learn a great deal about empires. I think that there may be three categories in the world: empires, nation-states, and what I would call – and something I would think that the United States in the 20th century is, and most 20th century nations who've at least aspired to this, I think certainly the Soviet Union was too – a “nation/empire” with some of the characteristics of a nation-state but some of the ambitions of an empire. And I think that empire, at least to an americanist, is quite striking because empires did not demand the kind of homogeneity that nations do – because of the nature of citizenship, which is a fundamental part of the nation-state – they are less interested in borders, it's the

dynasty that has to survive. If they lose a province, it's not fatal; to a nation-state, this is catastrophic.

They don't even have to have all their provinces continuous: you can have colonies in all kind of places, so I think that thinking about that solves a lot of multicultural problems that we have in the nation-state because you don't demand uniformity, in fact there are different rules for several sub-units of the empire. The nation-state looks for a certain kind of homogeneity, at least formally equal citizens although we know that socially they're not, and so that's a whole set of alternative problems. I've been much taken by a book, recently, written by a historian, I guess, named Harold James; it's called *The Roman Predicament*¹. To crudely summarize the argument, it is that republics often end up becoming empires while trying to save the republic because the only way you can save the republic is by becoming an empire. For example, I just finished collaborating with a German historian, Michael Geyer, on an essay on Germany and the United States in the 20th century as "nation/empires" competing with each other and I think that this third category helps, as we think about it.

2. A new narrative for the American nation

VDI: In all of your five chapters, you aim at showing how deep the connections between American history and other histories have always been. You concentrate on major events of American history, such as the discovery of the Continent and the War of Independence. One of the most illuminating examples of your approach seems to be the chapter on the Civil War. How does this apparently internal war between Northern and Southern States connect to global history?

Tom Bender: It is indeed such a very central American event, it seems implausible that it is part of something larger. But it actually is part of what we've just been talking about: it is a part of the construction of modern nation-state. And this is what the Republican Party understood: they were seeking a stronger, more centralized state than the Jacksonian period had had. And so we see, roughly around this time, that there are a number of these kinds of consolidations, they take different forms: there's Germany, Italy, Japan, those are the most classic ones but there are other that are less obvious. Argentina is centralizing at the same

¹ Harold James, *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

time, and the world is starting to get divided up between those in nation-states and those in something else.

But the other thing that really struck me is that throughout that period, say from 1840 to 1880, there's a tremendous amount of violence, that our civil war is not the only one. By one count there were 177 wars during that forty-year period, and many of these are connected to the consolidation of modern nation-states. The other thing I would say, which is what really enabled me to understand this the way I ended up understanding it, is Abraham Lincoln's fascination with the 1848 revolutions in Europe. It seemed to me that these are exactly the ideology of the Republican Party: they were about freedom, and the nation, and the idea that the nation is the vehicle to achieve that freedom. So it's not just in the United States that you have the emancipation of four million slaves, you also have the emancipation, in the same period, of forty million serfs. And I think that there is both the notion of consolidation but also a complete restructuring of the notion of capital and labour. In the US "Free Labour" was the big slogan of the Republican Party, but in a certain sense that was the slogan everywhere, along with constitutionalism, parliamentary government and the like.

One of the things that happens after the American Revolution is that Britain, which had always thought itself the paragon of liberty, is getting challenged; it gets challenged by the American Revolution which claimed that British rule was a tyranny and by the French Revolution, which may scrape claims of freedoms, of liberties. And this, it's been recently argued, made Great Britain decide they were going to regain the high moral ground by leading the anti-slavery thing globally, which they did, and this is a very honourable period of British history. So that changes the context of the United States.

I think the ideologies of the revolutions of 1848 were not necessarily anti-slavery, at least not in Europe because it was serfdom, but anti-"un-free labour" in that sense; and it's also liberalism, there's a kind of liberalism *à la* John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith operating here, very much operating in the United States as well. So it is a shift and I would attribute it to the liberal ideologies. Again, and again, and again, Lincoln talks about slavery as a "black mark" on our position among the liberal thinkers of the world, who think that we're ruining the greatest human experiment of all time. And that was a very conscious awareness, and at a certain point you know we're among the last in the Americas as only non-republics still had

slavery: Brazil was still an Empire, and you had the Spanish colonies, and the Caribbean; everyone else had abolished it. So, there was a global pressure on the United States.

VDI: You are also challenging another common statement about American history, which was summed up a century ago by Werner Sombart in a famous question: “Why is there no socialism in the USA?” What is your answer to this seemingly American exception?

Tom Bender: Well, this question has been haunting us ever since 1904, I think actually he was simply wrong but I will say why. It fits into this American exceptionalist argument that assumes that there is a norm, a norm from which we deviate. But tell me where socialism was everywhere else in 1904? It’s hard to find. In 1912 we have a socialist candidate for the presidency, who wins 6% of the vote against what were probably fairly called three other candidates, it was the only time there were four candidates with the exception of at one point in the civil war, all of them by some definition “liberal” or progressive, that is Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Taft (and Eugene V. Debs on the Socialist party ticket) so I think that was as good a show, for 1912, as any place else. But without arguing that one, the question is the norm: where’s the norm? There’s a presumed norm that actually didn’t exist, the norm it turns out is a social democratic party, as in Germany I suppose, but in fact the global norm? There isn’t one; there is a whole spectrum of different and sometimes complicated positions, so it’s a bad question for which we’ve given a lot of bad answers.

VDI: How do you situate your approach among other historical currents such as comparative history, connected history or global studies?

Tom Bender: In a certain sense, I end up trying to weave them all together. At the beginning of all of my thinking on this I wanted to distinguish myself from comparative history because comparative history isn’t real-time history necessarily: you can study comparative slavery in the Greeks and the Antebellum South but they’re not sharing the same history, so I was against it but in fact once I started doing a connected history it was irresistible not to comment that it went this way in one place and differently in another. So I think the kinds of connected or the transnational histories are almost inevitably implicitly comparative, and that’s not a bad thing.

As far as global studies go, I think I've come up with a notion that there are global processes out there, there have been global processes around for a very long time, they're only much denser now than they were a century or two ago. But they're there, and there's communication, and more communication in the earlier period than I would ever imagine, so that people know what other people are thinking on similar issues, but where national history – as I'm trying to do it – connects with global history is that although there may be a common understanding of a problem, some common potential solutions, the actual political resolutions in a given state will have to do with the political traditions, the array of interests which will all be slightly unique, and I was really quite struck by the fact that in our progressive era of reform the opponents were businessmen, they were the principal opponents. In Japan as well, the businessmen were the principal opponents. But in Russia, in Argentina, it was the landed elite – well, in the whole of Latin America it was the landed elite, still is – and so you have a lot of the same issues, but the way they work through the local political system often produce different results, not radically different results, but those affect the pace of reform as well.

3. America and the world: past and present

VDI: It seems obvious that your book has a political and civic intent. Were the Bush presidency and its contempt for other nations' opinions in leading the war on terror important motivations for your work?

Tom Bender: They weren't motivations at the beginning. As I've said, I started thinking about this in the 1990s, but I was writing it during the Bush presidency and indeed it was constantly on my mind that one of the things I really wanted to do was to fight against this notion of "us and the rest of the world", and whether we care about them or not is an option. It was very much there, and in some of the reviews of the book in its more general publications, not academic publications, I'm thinking particularly of *The Economist* who were by that point getting upset with Bush after originally supporting him, they made the point that this is a timely kind of thing, that Americans have to, as the reviewer put it, "keep re-learning this lesson".

One of the things that I realized was that this *is* a re-learning, that American history wasn't always as exceptionalist as it was during my lifetime, that the frame that we've been operating in is heavily the result of the Cold War. Until 1940 there were most of what were called the

“great American historians” – although when they thought of “the world” they only thought of the North Atlantic – who certainly understood American history to be entangled with other histories going all the way back to Francis Parkman in the 19th century and Henry Adams, and so we have been in a kind of bubble in the Cold War era, and it’s probably not an accident that we got a little bit out of it, before getting right back into it in the 1990s. But it was there, and I did want it to have some impact on that thinking.

VDI: In your book, you insist on the fact that the USA has been a “self-denying empire» since the end of the 19th century. You also write that “Americans have always found it difficult to imagine themselves as an enemy, as a problem for other people”. Could we say that the Americans’ refusal of seeing themselves as having imperial powers explain George W. Bush’s foreign policy during the last eight years ?

Tom Bender: I think that the really interesting thing, for me, for the Bush period, in the neo-conservative sort of visibility during this period, was the acceptance of empire. Historically, the Americans have always denied it. The Left always said there was an American empire and they were always criticized for that, and in fact when I was beginning this book and I’d talk to people and said that there was going to be a chapter on empire they would say: “Well, how could there be a chapter on empire?”, “Well, because!”, “But there were just the Philippines, you know, that little moment”; “What about coming across the continent?”, “Oh, that was westward expansion, not an empire!” There were all kinds of ways of avoiding it.

But suddenly with the Bush presidency there is this revival – well, now it’s in bad odour – for five or six years with the neoconservatives defending the idea, and Niall Ferguson asking Americans to be like the Great British Empire. It was the first time in American historiography and American public discussion that the Right and the mainstream were using the word “empire” in an affirmative sense. That didn’t change, however, the problem which goes all the way back to the beginning and hasn’t changed: this inability to see how we appear to other people. We look at our motives. We don’t look at our consequences. So Americans say, even if they’re doing terrible things, “It’s our goodness that brought us to Iraq, why don’t they understand that?”, “It’s our goodness that brought us to Vietnam; we just wanted to save them from Communism”.

When everyone thinks about that statement the really amazing thing is that they can't see that sometimes even what is genuinely a generous act can sometimes look from the other side like one more exertion of American power over people. I think that just a vast amount of international education has to start to occur in this society, otherwise we'll just keep doing what we do because we just don't look at consequences, we only look at our goodwill, or our rightness in doing what we're doing, as if rightness were some absolute that one actor can know what it is and the other affected people have no insight into it.

VDI: One wonders if historians, as a community, can have enough intellectual power to rival with the political uses of history. In France for instance, the creation in 2007 of a Ministry in charge of designing the “national identity” was viewed as a major step back by historians and citizens trying to explain how the nation has been shaped by international migrations and values. How can historians succeed in promoting more open narratives of the nation?

Tom Bender: It's a big challenge. I think that historians have to get much more involved, that is to say academic historians, with the way our children are taught in schools, especially at the high school level. And, for whatever it's worth, that's what I'm doing now. I'm now trying to write a college US history survey textbook, putting American history into a global perspective, the way this other book did, a few episodes.

I also think that George W. Bush has helped on this particular thing. American intellectuals don't have, and never have had, a tremendous impact – I mean, one of the issues of the presidential campaign was that one of the candidates was actually too highly educated and too smart according to some people – but I think that one of the things Bush has done is show the limits of ignorance.

It's a long struggle for education, in part. I think that academics have enclosed themselves too much into their own little world and it is costly, it has cost students and it is costing us seriously; and it's not to say that if we raised our hand and said we were happy to come and join in the public discussion everyone would invite us in... but I think that one of the things that academics think, maybe because they have an image of the French intellectual, of great power and influence in society, is that you have to start at the top, and that that's the only

place to influence; but actually we're scattered all through the country, and in fact education in this country is locally controlled: there's no national curriculum.

And one doesn't have to publish an article in *The New York Times* telling people what to do about this matter. That's actually a point that Richard Rorty made about academics some years ago, in a previous financial crisis, in the 1980s: "Just write for your local newspapers, those are voters, those are citizens! Sometimes we reach too high, and get nowhere, but if a lot of people were operating on a lot of fronts we could do a lot."

The other thing is, again just sticking with history, the high school textbook business is something that has been outsourced to multinational corporations who are interested in selling textbooks, and the political Right has organized hit squads that read these things and then testify before state legislators and state education-adoption committees with all kinds of outrageous complaints about things, evolution and history being the two big hits that they go after, and there are rarely any historians at these things... and we may just have to start showing up!

Interview by Nicolas Delalande – Transcription by Alexandre Brunet.

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