

Comments on “American Studies in Japan: Its History, Present Situation, and Future Course” Nanzan University, July 2, 2016

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It is a great honor to be here today to mark 40th Anniversary of Nanzan University’s Center for American Studies. I would like to thank Professor Kawashima Masaki, one of Japan’s most distinguished American historians, for inviting me to be part of this symposium and for introducing me to the exciting work of both senior and junior scholars in American studies here in Japan. In July and August 2007, I was a visiting professor at Nanzan University as part of the Japan Residencies Program, sponsored by the Japanese Association of American Studies and the Organization of American Historians.¹ While in Japan, I attended the immensely stimulating Nagoya American Studies Summer Seminar. Being here today gives me a distinctive perspective on the pursuit of American Studies in Japan. I have two data points—two snapshots—of cutting-edge research in the field, nearly a decade apart. I can say with great confidence that the field of American Studies in Japan is even stronger today than it was back then.

In this essay, I take an even longer term view, reflecting on the relationship of American Studies in Japan to major trends in the study of American culture, society, and politics over the last seventy-five years, with attention to the question of transnational or global approaches to American history. I will argue that we American-trained, American-born U.S. historians have a lot to learn from the contributions of Japanese scholars to our field.

Nearly twenty years ago, the Organization of American Historians, led by my New York University colleague, Professor Thomas Bender, held a series of conferences in Italy, where historians explored the state of the field in a “self-consciously global age.” The results included a special issue of the *Journal of American History* as well as the *La Pietra Report*, a manifesto that called for the reorientation of American history toward the world. Eventually, Bender edited a major collection of essays, bringing together sixteen historians from around the

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1. The Japan Residencies Program. Organization of American Historians. <http://www.oah.org/programs/residencies/japan/> (accessed August 18, 2016).

world (but tilted rather heavily toward Europe) who offered different models for the globalization of American history.²

The process of creating a transnational U.S. history—like the very process of globalization itself—was not a one-way street. Bender and his colleagues did not have a single model for how we should practice a transnational history. One group of scholars advocated for the study of macro-level connections between places—namely the flow of capital, of commodities, of ideas, and of people across national boundaries. Another group offered a radical challenge to American nationalism. For them, global history was a way to challenge the reification of national boundaries and to express skepticism about the modern project of nationalism itself. Still others called for a methodological transformation in how we train American historians. The vast majority of graduate students in the United States do not have the linguistic skills to do research in non-English language archives or the historiographical training to understand the histories of other parts of the world. And others argued for the necessity of international exchange—both for U.S. based Americanists who can learn from international collaboration and discussion, and for non-U.S. based Americanists who often chose dissertation topics that they could research from their own libraries, rather than by visiting American archives.

This call to a transnational American history was long in coming—and it offered a profound critique of the field of American Studies. Most importantly, it grew out of a necessary challenge to the very idea of American exceptionalism. The field of American Studies, which emerged in the United States after World War II, was premised on the notion of American exceptionalism. American studies emerged in the midst of the Cold War, when the United States was unchallenged in its exercise of power globally, when the American economy was the world's richest, when nearly 60 percent of the American population could be defined as middle class, and when scholars, journalists, and pundits emphasized a broad “liberal consensus.” Proponents of American studies, like the great historians Richard Hofstadter and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and political scientist Louis Hartz, looked for singular, distinctive American political tradition, a distinctive set of political institutions, and a distinctive ideology that emphasized individualism and resisted statism. Literary scholars and intellectual historians, building from the work of Perry Miller, sought to understand American culture as

2. Special issue on “The Nation and Beyond,” *Journal of American History* 86: 3 (1999); Thomas Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); for background see, Thomas Bender, *The La Pietra Report: A Report to the Profession*, Organization of American Historians. <http://www.oah.org/about/reports/reports-statements/the-lapietra-report-a-report-to-the-profession/> (accessed September 12, 2016).

descended from the Puritans of colonial New England.³

American Studies during this postwar period was implicitly comparative, even though the comparisons between the United States and the rest of the world were mostly assumed, rather than researched. The central comparative question for Americanists—one that had shaped the agenda of scholars since the German-born sociologist Werner Sombart argued that the United States was exceptional because of its supposed lack of class conflict, was “Why is there no socialism in the United States?” The United States appeared to be a society without a rigid class system, with a relatively weak welfare state, and without the intense conflict that characterized politics throughout the world.⁴

By the 1960s and 1970s, however, a new generation of historians challenged the triumphalist view of postwar history. Influenced by the social movements of the left, these scholars transformed the field of American studies. A key turning point was the Vietnam War. Rather than describing the United States in largely benign terms, scholars as diverse as William Appleman Williams and Richard Slotkin began to describe the United States as an empire. This perspective grew increasingly important among a generation of historians who were radicalized by the student and antiwar movements, by the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, especially the struggle between Israel and Palestine, and by advocates of black power who built on a long black tradition of anti-imperialism to argue that the black experience in the United States was a form of colonialism, with white Americans as the agents of empire and African Americans as repressed and rebellious colonial subjects.⁵

3. Some of the classic works in the field include Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (New York, 1955); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind from Colony to Province* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953) and Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).

4. Werner Sombart, *Why is There no Socialism in the United States?* trans. C. T. Husbands and P. M. Hocking ([Orig. 1906], White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1976). For an influential overview of the topic, see John H. M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Failure of a Dream: Essays in the History of American Socialism*, revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

5. Barton Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Pantheon, 1968); Paul Buhle, ed., *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972); William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Penny von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–57* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); Peniel E. Joseph, “The Black Power Movement, Democracy, and America in the King Years,” *American*

A related current of scholarship challenged the notion of that there was a single American political tradition—maybe best represented by the work of Eric Foner and Sean Wilentz—discovered deep currents of radicalism that coursed through American history from the Workingmen’s Party of 1830s era New York to the free labor politics of the 1850s to the revolutionary potential of Reconstruction.⁶ In a field-defining article in political theory, political scientist Rogers Smith posited that American politics and constitutional law was characterized by “multiple traditions,” including liberalism, Republicanism, and particularly an “ascriptive” Americanism that rested on notions of white superiority and racial exclusion rather than equality and liberty.⁷

Another group of scholars beginning in the 1970s (the beginning of the period that Daniel Rodgers calls the “age of fracture”) attacked the notion of consensus from every side. In place of unity or a common American identity, these scholars discovered conflict everywhere—especially around the unresolved issues of labor, race, ethnicity, and gender. Whereas scholars of American exceptionalism emphasized America’s ostensibly middle-class character, New Left historians, among them Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery, argued that the country had always been bitterly divided by class, and shaped by the self-organization of laborers.⁸ Linda Kerber, Carroll Smith Rosenberg, Gerda Lerner, Jacqueline Jones, Nancy Hewitt, Deborah Gray White, and Linda Gordon all discovered deep currents of women’s activism that pushed at the boundaries of citizenship from the colonial period to the mid-twentieth century and also undermined notions of some common American national identity or tradition.⁹

The explosion of works in social and cultural history—in the histories of

Historical Review 114 (2009), 1001–16.

6. Eric Foner, “Why is there No Socialism in the United States?” *History Workshop Journal* 17 (1984): 57–80; Sean Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 26 (1984): 1–24.

7. Rogers M. Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” *The American Political Science Review* 87: 3 (1993): 549–66.

8. Daniel Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); for an excellent collection of interviews of leading New Left historians, see MARHO: The Radical Historians’ Organization, ed., *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

9. For overviews of the field, see Jacqueline Jones, “Race and Gender in Modern America,” *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998), 220–38; Nancy F. Cott, Gerda Lerner, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Ellen Carol DuBois, and Nancy A. Hewitt, “Considering the State of U.S. Women’s History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15 (2003), 145–63; Cornelia H. Dayton and Lisa Levenstein, “The Big Tent of U.S. Women’s and Gender History: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 99 (2012), 793–817; Aruga Natsuki, “Can We Have a Total American History: A Comment on the Achievements of Women’s and Gender History,” *Journal of American History* 99 (2012), 818–21; Crystal N. Feimster, “The Impact of Racial and Sexual Politics on Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 99 (2012), 822–26.

women and gender and, later sexuality—utterly transformed the field. American historians repudiated the notion of a common Americanness, a unitary American culture. But in the 1980s, a slew of critics began to argue against what they called the fragmentation of the field, or the lack of a common narrative. The whole of American history seemed to be less than the sum of all of its contentious, fractious parts. They called for a revival of narrative or a new synthetic approach to the field.¹⁰

Even if those complaints about fragmentation never added up to a new agenda, many historians, myself among them, began to think more synthetically than many of our predecessors had. Unlike the social and cultural historians of the 1970s and 1980s, most of whom were not interested in structure (social structure, the macro economy, or high politics), these new historians combined the social, political, and sometimes cultural, focusing both on grassroots activism and on community studies, but with attention to the ways that they were shaped and sometimes constrained by executive branch policies, by the courts, by capitalists and business people, and by elites.¹¹ After a period of stasis in political history, younger scholars like Julian Zelizer and Brian Balogh rediscovered the history of the federal government, turning to the history of Congress and of the administrative state.¹² Other historians, among them Stephen Mihm, Jonathan Levy, Louis Hyman, Julia Ott, and Nathan D. B. Connolly revived fields like business and economic history, recasting them as the history of capitalism.¹³ But

10. The most prominent call for synthesis was Thomas Bender, “Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History,” *Journal of American History* 73 (1986), 120–36. His critics included Eric Monkonen, “The Dangers of Synthesis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 1146–57, and Nell Painter, “Bias and Synthesis in History,” *Journal of American History* 74 (1987), 109–12.

11. See for example Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

12. Julian Zelizer, “Clio’s Lost Tribe: Policy History Since 1978,” *Journal of Policy History* 12 (2000): 369–94; Thomas J. Sugrue, “The Reconfiguration of Political History,” *Tocqueville Review/la Revue Tocqueville* 36 (2015), 11–20; Meg Jacobs, Julian E. Zelizer, and William Novak, *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Brian Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Brian Balogh, *The Associational State: American Governance in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

13. For an overview, see Seth Rockman, “What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 34 (2014), 439–66. For influential new works, see Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America*

for the most part, these younger historians share one major orientation with the American Studies scholars of the Cold War era and the “bottom up” historians of the post-1960s years. The vast majority of them, whether or not they believed in American exceptionalism, paid little or no attention to the place of the United States in the world.

Political historians mostly wrote histories that took the nation-state for granted. At best, business and economic historians superficially placed the United States in the context of global capitalism, or the global circulation of ideas. At worst—and most commonly—they said absolutely nothing about the global context of the United States. Even historians of international relations and empire (particularly those without the linguistic skills to do research in non-English language sources) told their story from the perspective of Washington, DC. They remained U.S.-centric; they were parochial in both their questions and in their research methods.

Labor historians, women’s historians, historians of race and ethnicity, and scholars of social movements tended to explore their topics through local case studies or by focusing on single organizations. Even when their activists were global (part of an international movement of suffrage or of temperance or of antislavery or of labor reform), scholars tended to marginalize the international context.

This offers us the context for the rise of arguments for a globalized American history: it is now commonplace for Americanists to consider the international context of public policy (consider for example Daniel Rodgers’s field-defining history of social policy in late nineteenth century Europe and the United States, *Atlantic Crossings*; Christopher Klemek’s important book on urban renewal in Germany, Canada and the U.S.); and Daniel Immerwahr’s brilliant book on development economics in the U.S., Asia, and elsewhere. It is now commonplace for Americanists to talk about American empire, and to explore the ways that American antiwar activists and social movements drew from struggles for self-determination worldwide. A growing number of Americanists (perhaps most powerfully, economic and political historian Sven Beckert) demonstrate how the American economy was shaped by global flows of capital. But, having encountered the work of Japanese historians of the U.S., and in a different context

(Harvard University Press, 2012); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Julia Ott, *When Wall Street Met Main Street: The Quest for an Investors’ Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Nathan D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Making of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Louis Hyman, *Debtor Nation: The History of America in Red Ink* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Kimberly Phillips-Fein and Julian Zelizer, eds., *What’s Good for Business: Business and Politics Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

of French historians of the U.S., it is clear that U.S. based Americanists are still very parochial in their choice of topics, in their orientation toward the world, and in their general ignorance of work on the United States published in other countries and in other languages.¹⁴

I have learned much at this conference about the ways that American history can be enriched by listening to the questions generated from outside and decentering the view of the United States from within the bounds of the Atlantic and Pacific. I agree with Professor Nishizaki's comments—regarding diplomatic history—that few “have advocated the need to listen to the questions generated from outside” and that “aside from a few notable exceptions, people are not very interested in what is being discussed outside the United States.” We also need to challenge what Professor Oshio calls the “self-referential view of national cultures.”

How do we do this? Both institutionally and in their own scholarship, Japanese-based American studies scholars offer many important lessons. From Professor Kawashima, we have the inspiring example of the Nagoya American Studies Summer Seminars (NASSS), and especially its ambitious program to bring together graduate students from Japan and elsewhere in Asia with American graduate students, including some of mine. To encourage transnational dialogue, they engaged in workshops to share each other's work and in late night discussions about the profession, about research, and methods.

From Professor Oshio, we get another valuable outside perspective that grows from Sophia University's institutional configuration. Sophia brings together American and Canadian studies in ways that are very instructive. Despite the fact that there are some young scholars doing interesting work on Canada and the U.S. (Oklahoma State professor Holly Karibo is one of the few), it is revealing that the idea of bringing together U.S. and Canadian landscape art would never come from a university in the United States, where, with only a few exceptions, Canada is treated as a place of little interest. Most American historians know more about

14. Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Nico Slate, *Black Power Beyond Borders* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012); Sven Beckert, *Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2015). For a particularly striking example of the resistance of some American-trained historians to foreign language acquisition, see John McMillian, “Against Language Requirements,” *The American Historian*, <http://tah.oah.org/august-2014/against-language-requirements/> (accessed September 13, 2016).

Victorian England than they do about post-confederation Canada.¹⁵

Professor Matsubara offers one warning about the dangers of a global history that loses sight of culture and contestation. Globalizing American history can come at a high price. As he shows, Beckert's work on New York is a demonstration of the power and limits of a place-based case study, which allows us to see that the rise of an elite was anything but inevitable. By contrast, Beckert's work on the global history of cotton is without contestation: it is teleological. I might suggest that Matsubara's lesson is that when we look at the world from a satellite view, we are in danger of losing sight of the processes of history itself.

Professor Engetsu highlights the tremendous successes of American studies as a discipline in Japan, and notes that the key to the achievement of American studies is its "transgression of boundaries." In many respects, those words "transgression of boundaries" summarize this conference and the work of Nanzan's American Studies Center for the last forty years.

The three projects of the younger scholars who presented their work at the Nanzan anniversary conference engage questions central to American historiography, but bring important perspectives from "outside." Each of them transgresses boundaries in very important ways. Each offers original research, and each is methodologically innovative. Each is distinctively shaped by a global consciousness, but at the same time each is deeply grounded in rigorous local research. This is scholarship that thinks globally and researches locally. Each suggests a very bright future course for American studies in Japan.

Masaki Sho offers a promising example of what we can learn about Japanese-American relations by focusing on a place that is both on the margins of Japan and remote from the United States, but represented an important place of conflict, encounter, and potential reconciliation. By focusing on the Bonin Islands, Masaki offers an excellent example of the power of a case study that teaches us something about mainstream American and Japanese politics, international relations, and historical memory from a place on the fringes.

Tsukamoto Emi works on a topic that is central to modern American historiography—race and housing segregation in four major American cities. Her approach is innovative: she combines deep archival research, interviews, and the study of public policy. In many respects, hers is the most American of research topics, something that one of my own students could have written. But she too brings a distinctive voice to her research: it grows out of her experience dealing with the diverse population of Toyota City in Japan. She makes a very important argument that Japanese urban policy makers have much to learn from the American urban experience and vice versa.

15. Holly M. Karibo, *Sin City North: Sex, Drugs, and Citizenship in the Detroit-Windsor Borderland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Yamanaka Mishio begins with her personal reflections on her place as a Japanese student in the United States working on African American history. She is training in one of America's premiere history departments, and arguably one of the best places in the United States to study African American History. From early in her career in the United States, she confronted one of the most important but little discussed manifestations of the parochialism in American history as practiced in the U.S. Some of her advisors suggested that she should choose a topic in U.S.-Japanese relations, or in Asian American history. But to her credit, she resisted that advice, and instead focused on Creole culture. In a way, her point of entry—as an outsider, non-American, non-African American—shapes her research agenda. Her use of GIS and digital data is a model of engaged history of education, a stellar example of urban and public history, and it grows out of her need as an outsider to find patterns that might be invisible to a historical actor or to a scholarly insider.

Together, these projects by junior and senior scholars alike give me great hope for the future of American Studies in Japan. I can only hope that my fellow scholars in the United States will take heed of the lessons of your work on our history.