

Review of the book *Teaching American history in a global context* by C. Guarneri & J. Davis (Eds.)

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Abstract:

Education is deeply rooted in tradition, particularly within disciplines that help shape the cultural and political identity of nations. As a result, survey courses in American history, regardless of academic level or location within the United States, utilize a familiar Eurocentric perspective and are often taught in isolation from other social science courses. In their edited volume, Guarneri and Davis encourage educators to break from this traditional pedagogy and approach teaching American history from a global context that highlights the historical relationship between the United States and the rest of the world. They argue that the resulting curriculum will produce a richer understanding for students, one that conceptualizes American history through cultural diversity and global interdependence, two particularly relevant goals for a post-September 11th world.

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Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Teaching American History in a Global Context, edited by Carl Guarneri and James Davis. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008. 334 pages. \$34.95, paper.

Education is deeply rooted in tradition, particularly within disciplines that help shape the cultural and political identity of nations. As a result, survey courses in American history, regardless of academic level or location within the United States, utilize a familiar Euro-centric perspective and are often taught in isolation from other social science courses. In their edited volume, Guarneri and Davis encourage educators to break from this traditional pedagogy and approach teaching American history from a global context that highlights the historical relationship between the United States and the rest of the world. They argue that the resulting curriculum will produce a richer understanding for students, one that conceptualizes American history through cultural diversity and global interdependence, two particularly relevant goals for a post-September 11th world.

The volume is broken into five sections, with the first four containing reprints of salient articles and policy statements from respected journals and authors within the field of history. The final section contains a list of resources compiled by the editors for educators wishing to learn more about incorporating a global context into the teaching of American history and ways to implement this goal successfully in the classroom. The contributors to this volume include many prominent names within history education, both from the United States and abroad, and they represent a wide variety of viewpoints and areas of specialization.

The first two sections present the rationale for teaching American history from a global perspective. In the first, the editors include directives from organizations relating to history and social studies education, most notably the *La Pietra* report from the Organization of American Historians, which is referenced multiple times throughout the book. The second section provides the theoretical background required for educators to understand the need to reorganize their existing history curriculum to fit within a cosmopolitan model. The articles selected by Guarneri and Davis challenge teachers to pursue an accurate version of American history, one that does not treat the establishment of the United States and subsequent rise of the American empire as a unique historical event, but rather as part of a global history that reflects the interdependence between the United States and the rest of the world. In other words, in order for students to understand the complexities of living within a global society, students must conceptualize American history by looking beyond our borders and shedding the "us versus them" mentality perpetuated by the traditional canon.

The true value of this book lies in the third section, where the editors broach the issues associated with bucking tradition. Again, Guarneri and Davis select several articles that either outline plans of study or give examples of topics that show the effectiveness of such an approach. However, the majority of the section is allotted to course syllabi, lesson plans, and strategies that present practical examples of how to implement a global focus in the American history classroom. These real-life examples provide a nice complement to the theoretical arguments presented earlier in the book and allow educators to better conceptualize a pedagogical approach that initially may be unnatural to them.

The fourth section offers views on teaching American history from foreign scholars. While this section seems slightly out of place within the book, the articles selected by Guarneri and Davis effectively illustrate the anti-American sentiment often found in other areas of the world, including nations where we maintain friendly political relations. In the end, these essays serve to reinforce the importance of altering our notion of a national history from one that treats the American experience as privileged to one that shares experiences similar to other nations throughout the world.

In short, Guarneri and Davis do an excellent job of balancing theory and practice, which makes their book useful for both veteran and future educators at all levels. That said, the one criticism I have with the book is that many of the articles selected appear to focus on the American survey at the undergraduate level where there may be more flexibility to alter the curriculum. As a former secondary history teacher, I know the difficulties of trying to break with the traditional canon, particularly in this current era of state requirements and standardized tests. Chapters on how to incorporate a global focus within the confines of a state-mandated curriculum would have been useful to pre-service secondary educators. However, that is but one small blemish on what is an otherwise excellent resource.

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The Mexican Wars for Independence, by Timothy J. Henderson. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009. 246 pages. \$27.50, cloth.

The events that changed New Spain into Mexico have engaged generations of scholars. Covering the topic well is a challenge. Studies that focused on leaders often left unexplained what motivated their followers. Narratives of key events overlooked important developments in cities and territories outside of Guanajuato, from which Father Miguel Hidalgo's popular army rose, and Mexico City, the capital of the colony and base of the Royalists' effort to stamp out rebellion. Most commonly, efforts to explain the roots, course, and results of the Mexican events left their history unconnected to considerations of the broader context of how this part of Latin America's independence struggle compared to others during the "Age of Revolution" that swept the Atlantic World between 1776 and 1825.

Timothy Henderson presents a synthetic narrative that balances the stories of protagonists with explanations of what factors shaped Mexico's break from Spain. He presents the Independence struggle as a series of civil wars that united and divided individual actors, social groups, and regions. For students who are not familiar with the full historiography of Mexican Independence, Henderson's text provides an excellent overview of the events, key actors, and major issues involved. It begins with a map that notes the locations of important cities and battles and a chronology that covers the lives and acts of the leading figures on both sides of the conflict. The first chapter describes political, social, and material conditions in Spain and its most important colony. Subsequent chapters address the phases of the independence struggle: its planning, its launch, its splintering into regional focal points, and its surprising conclusion. In an epilogue, Henderson reflects broadly on what the achievement of independence meant for Mexico in the decades and generations that followed. In the place of a bibliography, he provides "Suggestions for Further Reading," which will help those who wish to dive deeply into particular aspects of the Independence era.

Henderson's achievements are many. The narrative is engaging and accessible. In particular, the chapters that focus on the military engagements make both the power and the limitations of the popular forces that united behind Miguel Hidalgo, José María Morelos y Pavón, and subsequent rebel leaders clear. He also describes well the attitudes and opinions that separated colonial authorities from the Creole and lower caste groups, and the ambitions and intrigues that for many years hampered the ability of the viceroys and military officers to meet the rebels' challenge.

It is, however, a relatively traditional narrative. Henderson's decision to follow closely