Exceptional, National, Transnational: Comparativist Approaches to American History

For over two generations now politicians and pundits as well as critics and scholars have cherished the label “American Exceptionalism.” But what does it mean? Over the twentieth century it has functioned as a mind-bogglingly protean category evoking variously holy commonwealth, national distinctiveness, cultural parochialism, socialist critique, global capitalism, universal human rights, imperial designs, and a myriad of other supposedly American configurations and impulses. In recent years, other scholars have seized on the concepts of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism not only to jettison the idea of American Exceptionalism but also to diminish the importance of the entire category of national identity. Meanwhile, revising the revisionists, historians and other scholars have challenged this transnational project by reintroducing the nation and the nation state as vital players in global contests for identity and power.

In this graduate seminar we will take up some theories of nationality and national identity put forward by historians as well as by scholars in American Studies, political theory, social science, and literature and religious studies. Our main approach, though, will be historical, paying particular attention to change over time through reading classic and recent works produced by historians. Likewise, although questions of foreign policy will receive due attention, our primary emphasis will be on the broader thinking and culture that have underlain it.

Topics will include transatlantic revolutions, international Romanticism, transnational abolitionism and women’s rights, European and American democracy, Europe and the American Civil War, Anglo-American liberalism, transatlantic social reform, Mexican-American pragmatism, American empires, exilic intellectuals, Jewish cosmopolitanism, global Christianity, racial hybridity, American and Soviet modernizers, universal human rights, global community development, Indian nationalism and the Civil Rights Movement, transatlantic free-market conservatism, and worldwide countercultural revolt.

The agenda of each seminar will be as follows. In the first part, a student will give an oral presentation on one “presentation” book listed for that week. In the second part we will discuss the articles required for that week. The last part of the seminar will be devoted to a discussion of that week’s required book.

SEMINAR REQUIREMENTS
Discussions, Presentation, and Book Evaluation

Discussions: Seminar members should be prepared to discuss the required reading as well as from time to time other relevant works and topics that help deepen or broaden these conversations. Since much of what we learn will depend on these exchange of ideas in class, an important part of the grade will depend on the quantity and quality of oral contributions.

Book Evaluations: To help organize and focus one’s thoughts about the reading, each week students will submit short (2-3 page) responses to the central book, which will be due in class on the day it is discussed. The paper should provide a fair statement of the book’s primary themes and arguments as well as a brief evaluation of how well the historian establishes them. This assignment may be omitted once in the semester.

Presentations: Usually at each class one student will turn in a 5-6 page paper on a “Presentation” book for that week, identifying its main themes, arguments, and methods and an appraisal of how well the author succeeds in marshaling them as well as a brief indication of how these ideas can be connected with the required book assigned to the class. On the same day the student will also give an oral critique of approximately fifteen minutes based on his/her paper. Each seminar member will do this assignment twice during the semester. On the day of the student’s presentation, he/she is excused from turning in the short response paper for that week (not counting the one-time omission also allowed).

Historiography Paper

An 18-20-page essay on the place of the nation in Americanist historical scholarship based on the course’s readings and discussions will be due at the end of the semester. The texts can be taken from either the required or the presentation readings listed each week in the syllabus. Although the paper can reference an array of such works, at least three or four should be analyzed sufficiently to expose some of their driving constituents (e.g., controlling concepts, assumptions, implications, and connections to similar or contrasting texts discussed in the essay). For examples of this sort of paper, one might find it helpful to consult “state of the field” essays that appear in journals such as the American Historical Review, Journal of American History, Reviews in American History, and Modern Intellectual History.

GRADE BREAKDOWN: Discussions 40%, Response and Presentation Papers and Reports 30%, Term Paper 30%

READINGS: Required books are available at BU’s Barnes and Noble bookstore or may be ordered from various online book sellers. When they are not included in a required book, essays and chapters may be accessed in digitalized form at Mugar’s e-books or e-reserve sites. Articles from journals are on J-Stor.
ETIQUETTE: To preserve a classroom atmosphere conducive to collective learning, turn off cell phones and use laptop computers sparingly and only for taking notes on the discussion. Laptop use should not interfere with your ability to interact with the instructor and other students.

PLAGIARISM: Read the Academic Conduct Code to understand the college policy on plagiarism. All cases of its suspected perpetration will be referred to the Dean’s Office. If found guilty, a student will receive the maximum punishment allowed at the university.

TOPICS AND READING SCHEDULE

Jan. 23  **Toward a Post-National Synthesis**


Jan. 30  **The Providential Nation**


Perry Miller, “Errand into the Wilderness,” in Miller’s *Errand into the Wilderness* (1952)


Feb. 6  **Global Revolutions and American Enlightenments**


Thomas Jefferson, The Declaration of Independence, in *AIT1*, 148-51
Thomas Jefferson, Selection from Notes on the State of Virginia, in AIT1, 197-208
James Madison, The Federalist, “Number 10” and “Number 51,” in AIT1, 169-78


Feb. 13 The Exceptionalist Conceit I: Expansion

Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution (1955)
Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” 532-45
Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address” (1863) and “Second Inaugural,” (1865). AIT1, 559-61
Francis Lieber, “Nationalism and Internationalism” (1868), AIT1, 562-74
Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” AIT2, 55-63


Feb. 20 Presidents Holiday

Feb. 21 The Democratic Moment

James Kloppenberg, Toward Democracy, (2016)
George Bancroft, “The Office of the People in Art, Government and Religion” (1835), in AIT1, 314-323
Orestes Brownson, “The Laboring Classes” (1840), in AIT1, 324-339
Catharine Beecher, Selection from A Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841) in AIT1, 341-353
Henry C. Carey, Selection from The Harmony of Interests (1851) in AIT1, 355-366

**Feb. 27  European Revolution and American Romantic Mentalités**

Perry Miller, “New England’s Transcendentalism: Native or Imported?” (1964) [in *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism* (2001), on reserve in Mugar]
John L. Thomas, “Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865,” *American Quarterly*, 17 (Winter 1965), 656-81
Margaret Fuller, Selection from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) in *AIT1*, 421-439
Henry David Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849) in *AIT1*, 441-453


**Mar. 13 The Euro-American Black Atlantic**

Martin Delaney, Selection from *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852) in *AIT1*, 517-531


**Mar. 20  Transatlantic Social Liberalism and Borderlands Reform**

Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America” in AIT2, 185-194


**Mar 27  Exceptionalist Conceit II: Empires**
Marilyn B. Young, “The Age of Global Power” in Bender, *Rethinking*, 274--293
Woodrow Wilson, “The Ideals of America” (1902) in AIT2, 149-156
Randolph Bourne “Twilight of Idols (1917) in AIT2, 195-201


**Apr. 3  International Relations, Human Rights, and the Struggle for Christian Universalism**

Reinhold Niebuhr, Selection from *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) in AIT2, 296-301
Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Christianity’s Third Great Challenge” (1960) in AIT2, 466-470
Harold John Ockenga, “Resurgent Evangelical Leadership” (1960) in AIT2, 473-477


**Apr. 10  Exile Scholars and Transnational Modernism**

Winfried Fluck, “The Modernity of America and the Practice of Scholarship” in Bender, *Rethinking*, 343-366
Francois Weil, “Do American Historical Narratives Travel?” in Bender, *Rethinking* 317-342
Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) in AIT2, 271-279
Herbert Marcuse, Selection from One-Dimensional Man (1964) in AIT2, 522-530
Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” (1964) AIT2, 515-520

Apr. 17  Patriots Day

Apr. 24  Natives and Modernizers

Edward W. Said, Selection from *Orientalism* (1978) in *AIT2*, 552-62


May 1  Racial Cosmopolitanism and a Reassessment of Method

Prasenjit Duara, “Transnationalism and the Challenge to National Histories” in *Bender, Rethinking*, 25-46
Ian Tyrell, “Beyond the View from Euro-America: Environment, Settler Societies, and the Internationalization of American History” in *Bender, Rethinking*, 168-192
Ron Robin, “The Exhaustion of Enclosures: A Critique of Internationalization” in *Bender, Rethinking*, 367-380
David A. Hollinger, “The Historian’s Use of the United States and Vice Versa” in *Bender, Rethinking*, 381-395
Richard Rodriguez, Selection from *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, in *AIT2*, 577-88