

The Transnational Turn

And it interests him less and less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained.

—Ian McEwan, *Saturday*¹

Historical work, it would seem, consists of both explaining and reinventing. Historians have an obligation to explain past events on the basis of empirical evidence; they are also engaged in considering alternative explanations, often devising new conceptual frameworks. Explaining and reinventing may be pursued simultaneously. And in a period of momentous change, whether in the past on which historians work or in the world in which they live, “inventing” may become necessary when usual explanations no longer seem adequate.

In many ways, those of us who have been members of SHAFR from the earliest years may have been “explaining” the history of U.S. foreign relations by “inventing” and “reinventing” conceptual frameworks in response to rapidly changing world conditions. These transformations have been explored by many writers.² In *Saturday*, the protagonist deals with one aspect when he muses: “This is the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy. Not only distant peoples are our brothers and sisters, but foxes too, and laboratory mice, and now the fish.”³ The forty-year history of SHAFR has witnessed “the expanding circle of moral sympathy,” which now embraces not only the principle of racial equality and tolerance for cultural diversity but also environmental sensitivity. Such a phenomenon, “the modern condition,” did not, of course, arise all of a sudden in the last four decades, but has clearly been felt by historians of U.S. foreign relations, who have been studying not only more traditional subjects such as origins of wars, empire building, and treaty making but also gender, interracial, and intercultural relations as well as human rights, environmentalism, and other themes that have become more and more visible in the recent decades. In this brief essay, it is impossible to cite more than a few examples, but clearly books such as John McNeill’s *Something New under the Sun*, Petra Goedde’s *GIs and Germans*,

1. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (New York, 2005), 65.

2. For instance, see David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, and Jonathan Peraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford, CA, 1999), and David Held and Anthony McGrew, eds., *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* (Cambridge, 2000).

3. McEwan, 128.

Elizabeth Borgwardt's *A New Deal for the World*, or Naoko Shibusawa's *America's Geisha Ally* reflect the authors' attempt at tracing "the expanding circle of moral sympathy" in the context of the global transformation.⁴

As these books suggest, historians have become aware of the new forces that have shaped the world in the last decades of the century, coinciding with SHAFR's history. This awareness has led some of them to propose (or "invent") new ways of interpreting contemporary history. Eric Hobsbawm calls the years after the 1970s "crisis decades" in *The Age of Extremes*, characterizing developments in these decades as a "landslide." This is contrasted to "the golden age," which according to him existed between 1947 and the early 1970s.⁵ Most histories of the Cold War would probably accept the "golden age" paradigm, so that the détente and the ending of the Cold War would, in such an analysis, have to be seen as having ushered in "crisis decades." If we accept such periodization, SHAFR's existence itself might have to be seen either as an instance of the "landslide" or as an effort to stop it. But other scholars have been struck by more positive developments in world affairs since the 1970s. For instance, a number of political scientists have emphasized the increasing quantity and expanding roles played by international nongovernmental organizations, and a number of historians have followed in their footsteps.⁶ These and other authors have pointed to the growing visibility and assertiveness on the part of nonstate actors (including nongovernmental organizations, multinational business enterprises, terrorist networks, "slave labor" rings, etc.) in international affairs, a perspective that, among other things, would seem to have been one of the factors that encouraged a "cultural turn" in the study of U.S. foreign relations.⁷ In addition to more traditional concerns with big-power relations, strategy, and the international system defined geopolitically, historians began paying attention to intercultural relations, including sport, tourism, student and academic exchanges, and the like. Books such as Mark Bradley's *Imagining Vietnam* or Matthew Connelly's *A Diplomatic Revolution* could not have been written without a keen awareness of the global transformation since the 1970s, and for them the transformation would never be characterized as a "landslide," for they, and many others, stress

4. John McNeill, *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York, 2001); Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945–1949* (New Haven, CT, 2003); Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA, 2006). Because of shortage of space, and in the spirit of professional fairness, in this essay I shall not mention work by scholars on whose dissertation committees I have served.

5. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York, 1994).

6. Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State* (Cambridge, 1996); Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY, 1998); Jeremi Suri, "Non-Governmental Organizations and Non-State Actors," in *Palgrave Advances in International History*, ed. Patrick Finney (London, 2005).

7. See Jessica Gienow Hecht and Frank Schumacher, eds., *Culture and International History* (New York, 2006).

the theme of global interconnectedness, not just politically and economically but also culturally and psychologically.⁸

The growing awareness of such interconnectedness has encouraged students of contemporary history, including SHAFR members, to try to “invent” fresh ways of examining the past. We can see this in the recent and current popularity of concepts such as “globalization” and “transnationalism” in historical writings. “Globalization” was a term first used by economists and then by sociologists and anthropologists. Historians were rather slow to adopt it as an explanatory framework, although Bruce Mazlish, A. G. Hopkins, and others began to write about “global history” in the 1990s. Today the term “globalization” would seem to have been fully incorporated into the vocabulary of historical study, thanks to the work of Mazlish, Hopkins, and other pioneering scholars such as C. A. Bayly and Patrick Manning.⁹ Global history, in the sense of the history of globalization, is distinct from world history and may be more useful as an analytical category to students of the history of U.S. foreign relations. A book title like *Globalization and the American South* (edited by James C. Cobb and William Stueck) suggests that this history may be understood in the framework of global forces impinging upon American society as well as of the nation’s contributions to an increasingly globalizing world.¹⁰ Whereas a world history survey would include a discussion of U.S. involvement in world wars, empire building, or the world economy, a global history perspective would put the nation’s history, including its foreign relations, more explicitly in the context of the evolution of globalization.

“Transnational history” has been of even more recent origin than global history, but it seems to be fast catching up. Just as global history distinguishes itself conceptually from world history, transnational history may also be differentiated from global history in that it deals with forces and themes that may not necessarily be global but still cross-national, such as regional communities, interregional migrations, diseases, and environmental problems. Such themes as human rights and terrorism are, of course, comprehensible in the conceptual framework of global history, but transnational history would give them chronological specificity inasmuch as the history of transnational connections and phenomena may be said to have developed side by side with that of national histories, going back to the seventeenth century. It is possible, however, to argue that whereas the development of international history has paralleled that of

8. Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1952* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002); Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York, 2004).

9. Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens, eds., *Conceptualizing Global History* (Boulder, CO, 1993); A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Global History: Interactions between the Universal and the Local* (London, 2006); C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Malden, MA, 2004); Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York, 2003).

10. James C. Cobb and William Stueck, eds., *Globalization and the American South* (Athens, GA, 2005).

national histories, transnational history really began in the nineteenth century, propelled by technological innovations as well as by supranational consciousness. When, in 1979, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on “activities of states on the moon and other celestial bodies,” to take one instance of a transnational, planetary awareness, it was a milestone in the history of transnationalism in that it incorporated the recent landings on the moon into an expanding definition of international affairs and adopted the principle that “the exploration and use of outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies, shall be carried out for the benefit and in the interests of all countries . . . and shall be the province of all mankind.” This was an expression less of internationalism than of transnationalism, and much less of national interest than of human aspiration. It is no accident that themes like “human security” and “dialogue (or conflict) among civilizations” came to attract the attention of scholars and nonscholars alike in the decades following the 1970s, for these were nonnational concepts and phenomena that could not be easily comprehended within national or even international frameworks.

In some such ways, reflecting all these developments in the last several decades, more and more scholars have been examining historical phenomena transnationally, rather than in single national frameworks. By “inventing” the category of transnational history, historians are trying to “explain” recent (and modern) developments, and historians of U.S. foreign relations seem to be playing an important role in such work. Of course, transnational history would have to be pursued by historians of all nations, and the history of U.S. foreign relations is no exception. Monographs by European and Asian historians, as well as by those in North and South America and in Australia and New Zealand, are daily adding layers of explanation and of invention as they seek to place the United States in the context of transnational communities and opportunities. In such a situation, “foreign” ceases to mean “external” or “non-U.S.” The boundaries between countries become blurred, as do lines separating foreign and domestic affairs. All affairs are transnational, and they are also human. To have helped us arrive at such realization may be considered one of the significant achievements of SHAFR and *Diplomatic History*.