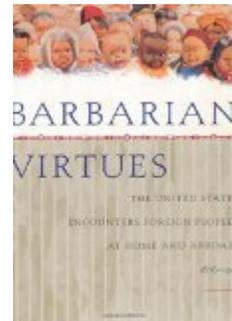


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew Frye Jacobson. *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2001. 336 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-1628-0.

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Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Barbarian Virtues*, published in paperback last year, has only become more timely and important since the events of September 11. A provocative synthesis when it first came out two years ago, Jacobson's arguments about how the United States encountered "foreigners" both at home and abroad in the period between 1876 and 1917 have taken on an increasing contemporary resonance. At the time that Jacobson, a recently tenured associate professor at Yale, first wrote *Barbarian Virtues*, one of his purposes was to remind Americans about an earlier national fascination with empire and expansion, a commitment to colonization now relatively forgotten that nevertheless netted territories such as Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, and the Philippines. With the break-up of the Soviet Union over a decade ago, a new world order with the United States in charge seemed imminent, although the contours of that new world seemed more disorderly than ever. Jacobson shows how there was a similar disorder a century ago, and how a wide spectrum of American politicians, social thinkers, businessmen, and military expansionists dreamed of imposing an American order on that unruly world.

Using a wide array of historical evidence, Jacobson shows how dreams of economic expansion and global markets for American products created a foreign policy geared toward protecting American access to China. The vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean needed to be crossed and Pacific Islands such as Guam were imagined and then acquired as refueling stops for American naval ships. The acquisition of crucial stepping stones such as the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippines was justified by fanciful rhetoric about civilizing missions and "Great White Burdens." Well-illustrated in cartoons and drawings of the time, images of the "primitives" abroad needing Amer-

ican rule, according to Jacobson, combined with ambiguous domestic reactions to mass immigration. Racial and gendered hierarchies intersected with class snobbery to create vicious characterizations of foreigners, both at home and across the seas. The daily urban encounters of earlier American immigrants (who coined the new term "Nativists") with recent waves of migrants from southern and eastern Europe as well as eastern and central Asia, gave a visceral resonance to representations of foreigners in far away places. Thus, American expansion and mass migration to the United States played off each other within the cultural representations of the day.

Just as in the last three decades since the immigration reforms of 1965, the decades before and after the turn of the nineteenth century were marked by massive waves of migration to the United States. As much as the country States reaching a strong fist out into the world, the world's people seemed to be entering in droves, symbolically accepting the welcoming hand of the Statue of Liberty. Jacobson does a fine job of describing how the hard-working hands of such migrants made them the most welcome in a rapidly industrializing United States, and also how labor unions formed around white supremacy led to the successful efforts to exclude Chinese and other Asian workers (and eventually to the across-the-board exclusions of the 1924 National Origins Act). Intellectuals advanced ideas about progress and advancement that supported racial and gendered differentiation. Scientific theories about racial inferiority, for instance, could undergird calls for the exclusion of foreigners from home, but also for the need to extend colonial rule over barbaric foreigners overseas. "Progress" became the justification for eugenics campaigns that supposedly fought racial degeneracy domestically—at the same time, it provided a

banner for imperial annexation that imposed civilization abroad.

More than any other history book that has been published recently, Jacobson's book shows the importance of understanding earlier patterns in how Americans have understood and misunderstood their place in the world. This is a well written, accessible book ideal for assignment to undergraduates. Pictures and images gathered in the middle of the text illustrate Jacobson's points, and at 265 pages of text, it is not too long for classroom use. I have used it in my classes already, and it conveys powerfully the idea that our current times may not have been

the first to consider what the boundaries between Americans and "foreigners" mean. If anything, Jacobson's book serves as a call to think more about what those other people might think of us, and for historians to consider further the questions of not only what "virtues" the "barbarians" may have had for Americans, but what barbaric vices U.S. economic and military expansion have created for those people unfortunate enough to have encountered American civilization. In a time when the United States seems more than ever before ready to consider a broad extension of its military and sovereign power, Jacobson's history of this earlier period of American overseas expansion is even more important to read.

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