

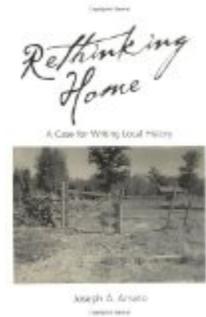
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph Anthony Amato. *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xvi + 245 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22772-9; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-23293-8.

Thomas Bender, ed. *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. ix + 427 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-23058-3; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-23057-6.

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Published on H-Florida (March, 2003)



Rethinking Florida History

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Scholars of United States history have figuratively gazed over the Atlantic to gain interpretive inspiration from colleagues grappling with European history. Leopold von Ranke instilled our early futile obsessions about writing history through the prism of objectivity. Later it would be the work of E. P. Thompson and his chronicling of English working-class society that ushered in the American social history revolution. With the publication of Thompson's seminal work, U.S. scholars brushed off the complacency and patriotic tones of the post-WWII Consensus school of scholars to re-interpret U.S. history from the bottom up. In the 1960s scholars asked themselves "who did we leave out of the historical narrative?" Historians, such as John Blassingame and Herbert Gutman, answered by examining the lives of the working class, African Americans, American Indians, women, and immigrants. By the end of the 1990s the social history school had become institutionalized and American scholars again became anxious for new directions in interpretive analysis.

If there was one word that had become overused in American academic circles by the end of the past century, it was "globalization." In the decade of the 1990s, for most people, the world had become much smaller and informa-

tion more abundant and accessible to many. By the late 1990s, the Organization of American Historians spearheaded an effort to challenge U.S. scholars to incorporate global themes into their work. First they sponsored a series of conferences, later a report titled "La Pietra," and in 1999, a special issue of the *Journal of American History* highlighting transnational themes within U.S. history. European and World History scholars have been grappling with these ideas for decades beginning with Fernand Braudel and his influential work on the Mediterranean World. World history scholars like John Thornton, Jerry Bentley, Herbert Ziegler, and Patrick Manning have been successfully examining history through the theme of global-connectedness for some time. Recent European scholars such as Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch realized the arbitrary nature of examining the past through political boundaries and utilized a transnational approach in their work on European migration. The North American answer to these efforts led scholars to examine hemispheric systems such as the Atlantic World, rather than narrowing their scope to U.S. borders.

Thomas Bender's book, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, is a symbolic passing of the torch from the social school of historians to scholars interested in finding global themes in the U.S. past. Although global themes do not necessarily conflict with social history,

this effort does represent a paradigm shift for U.S. scholars. Bender postulates that the first generation of U.S. historians, pre-Frederick Jackson Turner, would have been more amenable to global examinations of the nation's past than historians since Turner because previous writers looked toward foreign-born explanations for the origins of American institutions. With the coming of Turner and his "Frontier Thesis," future historians have shifted those debates to an examination of American "exceptionalism." What Bender hopes to accomplish with this volume is to encourage U.S. scholars to fundamentally rethink their approach to historical analysis and move past traditional histories of the nation, in order to address broader questions of time, space, and place.

Bender divides this volume into four parts: *Historicizing the Nation*, *New Historical Geographies and Temporalities*, *Opening the Frame*, and *The Constraints of Practice*. Altogether there are sixteen contributors to this volume, not all Americanists. Probably the strongest contributions to this collection are by Robin Kelly, Walter Johnson, and Dirk Hirder, each of whom addresses in some way a hemispheric, Diaspora, or migration system approach to historical analysis. They best exemplify the idea of global interconnectedness and reject the mantra of American exceptionalism. Additionally, Karen Ordahl Kupperman's piece, "International at the Creation," argues that scholars should re-conceptualize North American colonization not just as an encounter of people and culture from three different continents, but as the interaction of people from distinct ethnic groups from numerous origins.

Although this volume is a step in the right direction, there are some important issues left unstated. One important dialog that is not addressed with this issue is that of terminology. The term "American" is used in the title, yet a majority of the contributions address U.S. history only. Caribbean, Latin American, and Canadian scholars have long taken exception to the ways in which U.S. culture utilizes the term "American" as a synonym for the United States. If scholars of the U.S. are going to make the leap to a global perspective, then one of the issues they will have to confront is the fluid, and at times specious, use of the term "American" to describe the United States. If scholars begin to imagine their work in hemispheric terms, and continue to misuse the term "American," their work will be regarded more as an attempt at historiographical imperialism, rather than a genuine attempt at fostering a global perspective.

Another issue missing from this work is the utiliza-

tion of a global perspective for state and local history. State and local history does not garner the same attention from mainstream academia as other subfields such as African American, legal, Southern, or diplomatic history. Yet Bender in this volume acknowledges that writers have been chronicling local history before the first national histories were ever written. Bender also clearly implies in the introduction that these ideas can be used as a framework for regional and local histories. Why a contributor was not asked to offer their perspective as it may apply to state and local history is unclear. It probably reflects the provincial attitude of a majority of the profession that believe the practitioners of state and local history are at best antiquarians and at worst amateur historians. What Bender left out of this volume can be supplemented with Joseph A. Amato's *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History*.

Rethinking Home is Amato's reflection on a career in local history. Since arriving at Southwest State University, Amato has been active in chronicling the local and regional history of southwestern Minnesota, as well as being a founder of the Society for Local and Regional History. This book is a testament to the challenges facing state and local historians. In some ways it identifies the short comings of local history as well as ways scholars can rethink state history in order to make it more utilitarian not only to other scholars, but to a broader audience. The chapters in this book are eclectic, yet uniform in their goal to inspire local historians to transcend the traditional narrative many community scholars rely on today.

To a large extent Amato bangs the drum in the same way Bender does, but to a much different audience. Bender wants to inspire mainstream U.S. historians to recast their work for an international audience, while Amato wants to challenge local and regional historians to transcend localized community studies. Amato admits that the market, support, and respect for local history is dwindling, and local scholars must move beyond "fact finding." He also challenges the idea that regional or microcosm histories intrinsically do not offer a significant contribution to the canon of historical literature. This book offers suggestions to local historians so that their work would gain attention from a mainstream academic audience and at the same time reel in interested readers beyond the affected communities.

Amato uses his own work as a template to paint a blueprint for a new generation of local historians. Amato himself has purposely chosen unusual subjects as a

window into understanding a local community, such as dust, artichokes, and grasshoppers. Parts of this book are autobiographical as he informs the reader why he chose those subjects and the methodology he utilized so that something that may seem so innocuously mundane could actually become a key to understanding a local community. Amato encourages local historians to move beyond the chronicling of names, dates, and locations into studying the more esoteric subjects previously overlooked. He believes a local examination of climate, environment, and ecology could serve to answer important questions of how a community interacts with a region and that region interacts with a global system. Amato also encourages local scholars to move beyond traditional methodologies. Additionally, he believes community historians have missed a treasure trove of sources by irrationally ignoring literature written by residents or by authors inspired by a specific community. Amato thinks that by utilizing literature, along with traditional local sources, historians can unlock a wealth of new inspiration and perspective for local histories. Although the practice of New Historicism has gone out of fashion in recent years, its methodology could be useful within this context.

There is one overall problem with Amato's work. *Rethinking Home* is geared for local scholars who are chronicling rural communities. Amato is under the assumption that historians who study cities or urban communities are not faced with the same challenges as rural historians, because an urban study inherently has more applicability to a wider audience. Although one could make the case that more people are touched by an urban existence than a rural existence in North America today, the overall principles of this book can apply to community scholars interested in urban or suburban themes. Even with this small flaw, local and regional historians should

consume and engage in active discourse about the ideas Amato raises.

Both these books offer a light in the window to Florida area historians. Like other state and local historians, Florida scholars and the state's history in general have suffered from neglect throughout the era of professional academia. In national histories, Florida is little more than a footnote to historical cycles of the U.S. narrative. Typically, Florida scholarship follows at least one to two generations behind historiographical schools of thought. It took over twenty years for a Florida revisionist school of Reconstruction history to emerge; we have yet to have a Herbert Gutman school of working-class history to chronicle the labor movement in Florida, and needless to say most labor historians have long moved passed Gutman. Florida is one of the most populated states in the country, yet histories of the state's Depression Era, New Deal, and Civil Rights past go to a large extent unpublished.

Yet if Florida scholars were to incorporate the ideas that Bender and Amato pose, Florida's story could become more central within academic circles. Like its colonial past, modern Florida has become a bridge between the Caribbean, Latin America, and continental North America. It would possibly take more effort not to locate global or transnational themes within the state. In addition Florida has made such a rapid transformation in such a short period of time that local studies of its climate, environment, and ecology could offer readers inspiration elsewhere as well as insight for communities with similar growth patterns throughout the world. The current generation of Florida scholars has an opportunity to achieve what previous generations of area scholars have not been able to garner: attention and acceptance.

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Citation: Robert Cassanello. Review of Amato, Joseph Anthony, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History* and Bender, Thomas, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003.

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