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Teaching U.S. History Abroad

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For students outside the United States, “American history is not ‘just academic,’” in the words of a historian born and educated in Michigan who taught in Canada for thirty-five years. Students around the world know—or think they know—the United States from their immersion in American popular culture, their encounters with American political and economic power, or, more likely, both. Many of them bring divided views to their collegiate study of American history: “a complex intermingling of fascination and horror,” as Celia M. Azevedo, a Brazilian historian of the United States, puts it in her essay in this issue. These students’ instructors grapple not only with the worldwide influence and consequences of American power but also with the manifestations of that reach in a particular classroom, university, locale, and nation. To teach U.S. history abroad, or to teach abroad as an American, is “to engage with the dialectic between the global and the local on a daily basis.”^[1]

The ten articles in this section explore the challenges and opportunities of teaching American history outside the United States. Selected from twenty-three pieces submitted in response to an international call for papers, these essays describe individual practice as well as institutional and national contexts in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Germany, Ireland, Lebanon, Russia, Scotland, and Turkey.^[2] Several authors focus on their own experiences teaching a particular course or set of courses; others survey the state of the discipline at a national level. All describe in some fashion what Patrick McGreevy saw in Beirut: “For the students in my class, America was not simply a faraway land; it was a palpable, and sometimes shocking, presence in their lives.” At the same time, many of the essays suggest a countervailing opportunity: studying U.S. history offers students elsewhere a new vantage point from which to view their own cultures, perhaps even a safe place where they can discuss issues generally ignored or evaded at home. Most if not all of the authors in this section would agree with Sabine N. Meyer’s observation that exploring U.S. history aids not merely students’ *Fremdverstehen* (understanding of the other) but also their *Selbstverstehen* (understanding of themselves), particularly when problems of race and ethnicity are at stake, as described in essays by Tim Roberts (regarding Turkey) and Timothy J. Minchin (Australia).^[3]

In other ways, each author here offers a distinctive perspective on the practice of teaching American history abroad. Several essays describe pedagogical initiatives that emerged from teaching experiences outside the United States but that could equally inform practitioners at American universities: notably, JoAnne Mancini’s experiment in making students in Ireland into cultural producers and Patrick Mason’s forays into team teaching via videoconference between the American University of Cairo and Illinois State University. Sometimes, as Frank Towers concludes, teaching a topic such as the Civil War in a non-U.S. setting “is more like teaching it in the United States than it is different.” Paul Quigley tells a similar story of teaching the Civil War in Scotland, even if his students brought (in the words of one of them) “a different set of misconceptions to the topic.”^[4]

Another set of obstacles confronts scholars in universities and countries where English is not the primary language of instruction. Where students do not read and speak English, comprehending primary sources becomes more difficult—a problem surely familiar to teachers of European, Latin American, Russian, and Asian history in the United States. Of greater concern is access to such sources as well as to American historical scholarship in translation. Ivan I. Kurilla and Victoria I. Zhuravleva describe the historical contexts in which Russian translations of American sources and scholarship have become available, a process contoured by the Cold War and its aftermath. Although the Internet has enhanced global access to American sources, language barriers persist.

Taken together, these essays offer a rich, diverse portrait of the practice and state of American history in university classrooms around the world.

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James Tagg, “‘And, We Burned Down the White House, Too’: American History, Canadian Undergraduates, and Nationalism,” *History Teacher*, 37 (May 2004), 310. Celia M. Azevedo, “Ten Years of Teaching U.S.

History at unicamp, Brazil: A Memoir,” *Journal of American History*, 96 (March 2010), p. 1133. Sharon L. Mazer, “Documenting the Other Others in Bicultural New Zealand,” *Pedagogy*, 2 (Fall 2002), 382–83.

[2] For this “Textbooks and Teaching” section, the call for papers was disseminated in early 2009 to international contributing editors of the *Journal of American History*, many of whom circulated it to scholars in their countries, as well as to various listserves and to organizers and presenters of recent conference panels on this theme. For similar, though less geographically expansive collections on teaching American history abroad, see the special section “Reflections on Teaching America Abroad,” *Pedagogy*, 2 (Fall 2002), 375–408; and the special issue “Teaching the gape Internationally,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 1 (Oct. 2002), 293–363. The *Pedagogy* essays discuss teaching experiences in Australia, New Zealand, and Francophone West Africa; the essays in the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* discuss teaching experiences in Canada, Mexico, Turkey, and Egypt.

[3] Patrick McGreevy, “Living against America: Classroom Encounters in Beirut,” *Journal of American History*, 96 (March 2010), 1088. Sabine N. Meyer, “Transcending Intellectual Nationalism: Teaching U.S. History in German Universities,” *ibid.*, 1094–99.

[4] Frank Towers, “Balancing the Local and the Global: The American Civil War in Western Canadian Classrooms,” *ibid.*, 1100–1103. Paul Quigley, “Teaching Secession and the Civil War in Scotland,” *ibid.*, 1123–26.

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