

From Polity to Exchange: The Fate of Democracy in the Changing Fields of Early American

Historiography - Johann N. Neem (DRAFT: Do not circulate/cite without permission).

Gordon Wood stoked the ire of his fellow early American historians when, in the pages of the *Weekly Standard*, he accused the Omohundro Institute of Early American History, publishers of the prestigious *William and Mary Quarterly*, of abandoning an interest in the development of the United States. “A new generation of historians is no longer interested in how the United States came to be,” Wood argued. “That kind of narrative history of the nation, they say, is not only inherently triumphalist but has a teleological bias built into it.” Wood blamed historians’ focus on race and gender: “The inequalities of race and gender now permeate much of academic history-writing, so much so that the general reading public that wants to learn about the whole of our nation’s past has had to turn to history books written by nonacademics who have no Ph.D.s and are not involved in the incestuous conversations of the academic scholars.” Of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, Wood concluded: “Without some kind of historical GPS, it is in danger of losing its way.”¹

The responses were immediate and predictable.² What particularly riled many scholars was Wood’s dismissal of the histories of nonwhite nonmale people. The *Quarterly*’s editor Josh Piker, in a long, thoughtful blog post, responded to Wood’s accusations. He first, rightly, condemned Wood for his

¹ <http://www.weeklystandard.com/history-in-context/article/850083>

² Cites. <https://earlyamericanists.com/2015/09/09/gordon-s-wood-and-the-william-and-mary-quarterly/>;
<https://storify.com/michaelhattem/jonathan-w-wilson-on-gordon-wood-s-get-off-my-lawn>;
<https://earlyamericanists.com/2013/01/21/where-have-you-gone-gordon-wood/>;
<http://cwmemory.com/2015/02/23/gordon-wood-the-politics-of-history-and-the-history-classroom/>;
<https://earlyamericanists.com/2016/05/04/guest-post-native-american-history-within-vastearlyamerica/>;
<https://earlyamericanists.com/2016/05/04/guest-post-native-american-history-within-vastearlyamerica/>;

“decontextualized enumeration of topics that are implicitly sneer-worthy.” Then he came to the more substantive difference between his approach and Wood’s. For Piker, early America was

an expansive place—and an inclusive one. The early American world stretched to Peru and Spain and beyond; it included speakers of dozens of languages and natives of innumerable polities. And the inhabitants of that world knew all of that. Wood uses the United States as an argument for limiting the horizons of early Americans and restricting their conversations in ways that do violence to their experiences and understandings. He turns the nation into a screen that allows us to see only certain places and a filter that permits us to hear only some voices. And then he asks how, given this subset of places and that limited number of voices, Wood’s own United States came to be.

Piker understood the question facing the *Quarterly* and, more broadly, early American historians. Is there a coherent field of colonial historiography that can be contained and bounded by the emergence and development of the United States? Or do we learn more if we abandon political boundaries and national teleologies? To Piker, the answer is clear: historians “*should* be striving to get lost, at least as Wood defines the term.”³

But Wood was correct, although not for the reasons he offered. The issue is not whether historians are studying race, gender, sexuality, or the Founding Fathers, or even whether historians are interested in the Caribbean or Peru. It is also not about whether one is on the political right or left. Those are the surface tensions of something deeper. The gap between Wood’s perspective and Piker’s, I contend, reflects the emergence of two distinct, coherent, and incompatible fields of historiography which have roots in different historical contexts and ideological regimes.

³ <https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/getting-lost/>

When I use the term field, I mean it in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of a bounded space of contention with shared rules and frameworks (more on that below). Wood, and many other scholars who share his critique if not necessarily his politics, are part of a historiographical field defined by the polity. Whether studying empires, tribes, nation-states, or city-states, and whether approaching the past through the lens of politics, race, gender, sexuality, and/or many other ways, the polity provided the backdrop for framing the significance of new historiographical work. Over the last couple decades, a new field has emerged, and the *William and Mary Quarterly* is its mouthpiece for early America. This new field has been shaped by recent history. It embraces and reflects contemporary globalization by questioning the legitimacy of political boundaries and embracing cross-border exchange and pluralism. One byproduct of the new field's emphasis on exchange and pluralism is that it has tended to favor imperial forms of governance over democratic self-government. This essay unpacks why and what this drift toward empire means for scholars of early American democracy.

Changing Fields of Historiography

In the 1993 English translation of *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu offered an analysis of why and how the significance and meaning of works of art and literature—in the case of this essay, historical scholarship—depend on authors staking out positions within a broader “field” of play. A work's meaning, Bourdieu argued, is not internal to the text, but always shaped by “the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader” (31).⁴ Bourdieu defined a field as the “the space of positions and the space of the position-takings in which they are expressed.” In the case of historiography, this would mean that scholars stake out positions (arguments) *in relation to each other*

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993).

but within a bounded universe of signification (“the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in the field” [30]). To Bourdieu, these positions often involved a dominant position and various critical perspectives, both of which rely on each other. Together they form “a field of forces” but also a “field of struggles,” as scholars interact with each other to gain influence, prestige, prizes, or wealth. The field thus defines the “space of possibles” from which authors can take positions. The goal of the “social history of philosophy, art or literature” then becomes “to reconstruct these spaces of original possibles” (the field).⁵

Every field of cultural production—which includes the contexts in which specific works of art gain their meaning in relation to each other—are related to deeper power relations, Bourdieu argued. Unlike reductive Marxian analysis, which treats culture and ideas as reflexive products of class relations, Bourdieu understood that cultural fields are not only diverse and made up of contested perspectives, but have a “relative autonomy” to economic relations. In other words, a field is connected to but not completely dominated by social and economic power.

How does the field of cultural production—in our case historiographical writing—connect to power? According to Bourdieu, fields are stacked. Cultural productions are contained within a broader field he called “power,” itself within a broader field of class relations. The cultural field is not fully controlled by power and class relations—they are not simply reflexive. Indeed, the more participants in the field can generate their own discourse, the more autonomous—but never fully free—they can be from economic and political power. While the cultural field is always subject to the dominant power relations of society, there are always artists (or historians) within the field who challenge that dominance, ensuring that the field of cultural is not reducible to class relations, what Bourdieu dismissed to as “economism” (35).

⁵ For overview of Bourdieu’s field theory see, among many sources, Patricia Thompson, “Field,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Stocksfield, UK, 2008), ch4; Craig Calhoun, “Habitus, Field, and Capital,” in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Calhoun, Edward LiPuma & Moishe Postone (Chicago, 1993), ch4.

In the case of historiography, we can think of this in terms of the contexts that shape historiographical thought. Changing historical contexts—whether those contexts are shaped by economic production or not—determine the kinds of questions historians ask and the kinds of answers that they find conceivable. The history of historiography is nothing less than historians as *historical actors* making sense of the past in relation to the present. But the significance of their work—and thus the meaning of their work—is never fully captured by the internal dynamics of that work. Historical works gain their significance and meaning in relation to the broader field of historiography, in which different historians stake out positions relative to the “dominant” interpretation. For the past two centuries, the underlying field of power that has shaped cultural production, including historiographical writing, has been the polity. Today’s historical context is economic globalization, and with it the migration of people and goods, and the weakening of national borders, what is broadly considered neoliberalism. The emergence of a neoliberal cultural field, I contend, has reshaped our stories of the colonial, revolutionary, and early republic periods into the new framework of, as Piker put it, vast early America (see #vastearlyAmerica).

The Neoliberal, or Exchange, Field

Neoliberalism, geographer David Harvey argues, “is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”⁶ Scholars, however, argue that the true significance of neoliberalism is not that it celebrates free trade and markets but, as David Singh Grewal and Jedidiah Purdy writes, it creates a cultural field that promotes “the subjection of non-market practices to market

⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

logic.”⁷ Neoliberalism, in other words, is the reimagining of basic categories of human subjectivity and society in liberal economic terms.

In the field of culture—including, but certainly not limited to, historiography—this has meant the celebration of in-between spaces, where people cross borders or where narratives and identities are fragmented and plural. Scholars’ embrace of fluidity and hybridity reflect, as Frederic Jameson has argued, the cultural expressions of a world in which capital is liberated from the boundaries of nation-states.⁸ Harvey agrees. Our current celebration of “the fragmentation and instability of language” (and sovereignty, we will see below) is directly connected to transformations in the American economy. Changes in the “regime of accumulation” – of capitalism—produced broader changes in how we understood not just economics but politics and culture. As the United States moved from “Fordism” to “flexible accumulation” in the decades after World War II, but especially following the economic crises of 1973, economists and capitalists celebrated “flexible accumulation” and “flexibility and mobility,” not just in where and how goods were produced, but also in labor, where employers desired “more flexible work regimes.”⁹

One can reach the same conclusions without embracing the Marxian analyses of Harvey and Jameson. Indeed, the fact that one can come to the same conclusions using different analytical tools and methodological presuppositions is telling.¹⁰ Thus, Daniel Rodgers in *Age of Fracture* argues that the emergence of neoliberal understandings of the world are caused not by material change but by ideas. From both right and left, from theorists as diverse as Milton Friedman and Michel Foucault, there was a

⁷ David Singh Grewal and Jedidiah Purdy, “Law and Neoliberalism,” *Law and Political Economy* blog post (Nov. 6, 2017), available at <https://lpeblog.org/2017/11/06/law-neoliberalism/>.

⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, 1991).

⁹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990). On the changing nature of work see also historian Louis Hyman, “Temps, Consultants, and the Rise of the Precarious Economy,” *The Hedgehog Review* 18, 01 (Spr. 2016), 18-32.

¹⁰ That various analytical tools reach the same conclusion should be considered an asset, not a liability. See Isaac Reed, *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 2011).

turn away from notions of collective good and flourishing. It is not, Rodgers writes, “a story that falls into neat left-right camps.” Instead, it is about deeper intellectual shifts that *unite* right and left within (what I am calling) a neoliberal field. On both sides of America’s partisan divide, Rodgers argues, “conceptions of human nature that in the post-World War II era had been thick with context, social circumstance, institutions, and history gave way to conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire.” By the turn of the 21st century, “one heard less about society, history, and power and more about individuals, contingency, and choice. The importance of economic institutions gave way to notions of flexible and instantly acting markets. History was said to accelerate into a multitude of almost instantaneously accessible possibilities. Identities became fluid and elective.”¹¹

Rodgers labels the present an “age of fracture” because scholars and policy makers emphasized disaggregation rather than the integrative force of social institutions and culture within a polity. They did so in various domains of life, from economics to politics to scholarship. And they did so not because they all sought the same things but because of what he calls “a contagion of metaphors.”¹² In other words, words and phrases that might have first gained currency in one domain—economics—slipped across borders to reshape the frames and language in other domains. (From a Bourdeauvian perspective, this suggests that the field of culture was being reconfigured by broader shifts in the underlying field of economic power relations.)

As Americans borrowed from economics words such as choice and flexibility, they reimagined the basis of self and society, Rodgers concludes in his chapter, “The Little Platoons of Society.” On the right, one might have free-market advocates inspired by Ayn Rand or, if more sophisticated, Robert Nozick’s argument that “justice was nothing more or less than the product of countless acts of free,

¹¹ Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 2-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

private consent.” Indeed, conservatives looked for freedom not in the collective (and to them coercive) projects of nation and state, but in Edmund Burke’s “little platoons,” small-scale local forms of solidarity. And interestingly, so did the left, turning away from the nation and toward cultural pluralism. For the left, society was composed of groups defined by their distinct cultural traditions and histories, each of which deserved respect and autonomy, what came to be called multiculturalism. The nation emerged as a coercive and oppressive counterweight to freedom as diversity. Individuals and groups should be autonomous. The polity was a threat to that autonomy. Freedom was expressed not through collective self-government, which threatened individual and group autonomy, but through exchange between individuals and groups.¹³

Because my interest lies in the fate of democracy in the neoliberal field of historiography, I want to examine how neoliberal economic categories have transformed contemporary understandings of sovereignty. To do so I draw on Wendy Brown. I will then argue that early American historians have embraced these neoliberal categories to rethink colonial and revolutionary-era North America. To Brown, the neoliberal cultural field encourages and rewards “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms.” Within neoliberalism, political “rule transmutes into governance and management” and away from the democratic ideal of citizens engaging in collective action for their common good. This shift is captured by the trend of talking about *governance* rather than *government*. Governance, Brown writes, encompasses the movement away from state institutions to networks of competing power centers, public and private. On the other hand, it also conceives of public life as “management or administration.” Rather than a site where members of a civic community engage in common activity, governance is about “problem solving.” It can embrace devolution of authority away from collective institutions, but it can also require top-down solutions to manage

¹³ *Ibid.*, 188-196-98.

conflict. What neoliberal governance does not require, however, is citizens. Instead, “public life is reduced to problem solving and program implementation.”¹⁴

Brown captured one trend in contemporary thought about government—the managerial. She missed, however, how neoliberalism posits a second challenge to democratic governance. If, on the one hand, there is a trend toward managerial rule (including in, as we will see, empires), other scholars have turned away from all forms of authority. To such scholars as James Scott and Neil Roberts, true freedom comes not through participation in common institutions but in “the art of not being governed” or “freedom as marronage.” Freedom, for both Scott and Roberts, takes place outside and beyond political structures, especially those of national political entities.¹⁵ Just as advocates of neoliberal economics celebrate free exchange beyond the control of national states, so too does recent social theory. And so too do many recent early American historians who, as participants in the neoliberal cultural field of historiography, embrace ideas of exchange, plurality, and hybridity. And they, as Brown would have predicted, have implicitly or explicitly come to favor managerial forms of governance (such as empires) or freedom beyond the reach of political states (such as in borderlands and seas), instead of the collective, flawed, and difficult work of citizenship in a democratic polity.

Historians of vast early America, of course, do not see themselves as allies of global capitalism.¹⁶ This is why Bourdieu is so helpful. Although the field of culture has relative autonomy from the field of

¹⁴ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, 2015), quotes at 127.

¹⁵ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 2009); Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago, 2015).

¹⁶ Although we reach different conclusions, Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” in *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London & New York, 2013), ch9, makes a similar point concerning the rise of feminist identity politics and its rejection of the nation-state: “Unambiguously emancipatory in the era of state-organized capitalism, critiques of economism, androcentrism, étatism, and Westphalianism now appear fraught with ambiguity, susceptible to serving the legitimation needs of a new form of capitalism. After all, this capitalism would much prefer to confront claims for recognition over claims for redistribution.” (Quoted at 223.) One need only remember the righteous protests global corporations offered against North Carolina’s efforts to limit transgender rights. Imagine those same corporations’ response if, instead of gender identity, North Carolinians had sought to pass stronger labor laws.

economic power relations, Bourdieu posited, it is also shaped and contained by the dominant power relations of society. Moreover, within any field, scholars and artists stake out competing positions. There are always “bourgeois” intellectuals who speak for the dominant class. (One might think of Thomas Friedman.) But there are also those who oppose that perspective from a critical perspective. Even the critics, however, are bounded by the field and its rules.

In the case of the older polity field, scholars of the right and left struggled to control the narrative of the United States. Yet the polity field, too, was shaped by the dominant economic, social, and political structures of the time. As many scholars have written, modern historiography emerged alongside the nation-state and, to some extent, exists to justify it.¹⁷ The result was that modern historiography has long been organized around political-geographical units. For historians of early America, that entity was the United States; historians sought the roots of American politics, culture, institutions, and ideals, whether from a whiggish or critical perspective. That debate continues to this day, with new theories and new questions, such as gender and sexuality, becoming part of the conversation. The significance of work in the polity field, however, remains framed by the existence of the United States.

The more recent neoliberal cultural field has emerged in the context of globalization. Whereas the polity field drew its categories of analysis and signification from the nation-state, the new field draws its categories and analysis—indeed its very vocabulary—from global capitalism. Exchange is its central motif; when it turns to human beings and government, it emphasizes movement across porous boundaries, rather than political and cultural solidarities. In making this shift, historians in the new field have paid less attention to polity-centered questions of citizenship and equality within a democratic

¹⁷ See discussion in Johann N. Neem, “American History in a Global Age,” *History and Theory* 50, 01 (Feb. 2011), 41-70, for arguments and references.

regime and have, in fact, found non-democratic forms of rule—particularly, for 18th-century historians, the British Empire—more appealing.

Neoliberalism in Vast Early America

Because scholars in the neoliberal field question the legitimacy—historical and normative—of political borders, and because they tend to celebrate movement and exchange across borders and pluralism, they have been skeptical about the virtues of both nation-states in general, and the emergence of the American democratic nation-state in 1776 in particular. There is a striking overlap between how historians understand sovereignty in the past (or, rather, have reinterpreted it in the light of today's world) and the forces reshaping sovereignty in the present: just as economic globalization has fragmented sovereignty today, so historians of vast early America have looked to the past for forms of sovereignty that sustain flexibility, hybridity, and pluralism.

Under the polity field, the nation-state was the ideal type for historiography because it presumed unity between a government and the governed, what geographer James Anderson calls the “territorialization of politics.”¹⁸ Today we inhabit a world in which those territorial assumptions are breaking down. Nation-states are becoming more porous as globalization takes hold. Legal pluralism is reasserting itself as supra-national entities such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the

¹⁸ James Anderson, “The Shifting Stage of Politics: New Medieval and Postmodern Territorialities?” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 (1996), 133-53, at 141. On the unity of self, nation, and time see Nicholas Onuf and Peter Onuf, *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (Charlottesville, 2006); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York, 2008); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, 2004).

International Monetary Fund exert greater influence over large parts of our social, political, and economic lives. Multinational corporations, because of their size and scope, have imposed a form of political rule that can rival national governments. Globalization has made goods, capital, and people more mobile. Economic production today is a global phenomenon, as is what sociologist Saskia Sassen calls the “global footlooseness of corporate capital.”¹⁹

Ideas of sovereignty today are in flux, as they were in the eighteenth century. Globalization is a historically contingent process, yet in many ways the contemporary order appears to be a return to an earlier order before nation-states. To Anderson, contemporary globalization is producing “political forms reminiscent of late medieval Europe.” For most of European history, overlapping and competing layers of governance were taken for granted. Only with the rise of the nation-state did Europeans “experience territoriality, sovereignty, nationalism, and states as all tightly packaged together.” If the nation-state territorialized politics, today “globalization and technological innovations are now rendering geographic space increasingly complex, variable, and relative.”²⁰

Our current global order grants rights to non-state actors, whether corporations with legal privileges built into GATT, NAFTA, and other trade agreements, or to individuals protected by an emergent global human rights regime. Nation-states, Sassen argues, are at a relative disadvantage against multinationals’ “highly integrated corporate structures with strong tendencies toward concentration in control and profit appropriation.” This new order was brought into being by nation-states pursuing their own economic interests, Sassen recognizes, but it ultimately weakens the sovereignty on which those nation-states depend. Today we are witnessing the “unbundling of

¹⁹ Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (New York, 1996), 6. See also Joshua Barkan, *Corporate Sovereignty: Law and Government under Capitalism* (Minneapolis, 2013); Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (New York, 2011).

²⁰ Anderson, “The Shifting Stage of Politics.” On the contingent, and changing, forms of globalization, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton, 2005).

sovereignty as we have known it for many centuries.”²¹ In fact, according to international relations scholar Nicholas Onuf, we must admit “the declining intelligibility of the concept of sovereignty.” Nation-states were premised on the unity of territory, culture, and sovereignty, but today’s world is not. And as we move forward, we look back to find the world that existed before the nation-state. Our ideas of sovereignty could soon “decompose into the elements from which it fused centuries ago.”²²

Historians of vast early America have found that the pre-national past provides precedence and even justification for the potentially post-national future. “Sovereignty and jurisdiction have always been intertwined, but they have not always been territorial in nature,” Lisa Ford reminds us.²³ Charles S. Maier agrees. “Territory is the premise of state sovereignty,” he writes, but the connection that we assume between territory and jurisdiction is a modern one: “alternatives for political organization existed before territoriality and sovereignty became such obsessive preoccupations.” Feudal and religious claims over people were not territorial in nature, for example. Only in the 17th century, as sovereigns sought to create coherent states, did borders and membership come to matter. But not today. “Territoriality no longer assures whether a given political unit has jurisdiction and effective power to secure desired legal much less economic outcomes,” Maier concludes.²⁴

The modern global order, with its overlapping, fragmented, and competing layers of governing institutions, often working at cross purposes, and without coordination nor consent by the governed, looks much like a world that scholars of the 18th century are familiar with. It should not surprise us then that historians of 18th-century British North America have sought to find roots for our contemporary

²¹ Sassen, *Losing Control*.

²² Nicholas G. Onuf, “Sovereignty: Outline of a Conceptual History,” *Alternatives* 16 (1991), 425-66.

²³ Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia 1788-1836* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), 2; Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge, UK, 2010). See also Jeremy Adelman & Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples Between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104, 03 (June 1999), 814-41.

²⁴ Charles S. Maier, “Transformations of Territoriality 1600-2000,” in *Transnationale Gesichte: Themem, Tendenzen and Theorien*, 32-55.

lives in the historical past.²⁵ As David Armitage writes, our current understanding of empire “remained invisible as long as history was viewed through nation-shaped spectacles. They returned to view only when older experiences of space—more extensive, more fluid and less confined by territorial boundaries—again framed questions of the past.”²⁶ Indeed, as our world looks increasingly early modern, scholars of empire have become its interpreters and have laid down a new founding myth for the global present. In his recent book, historical sociologist Krishan Kumar notes that many of the issues that confront us today—multiculturalism, emigration and immigration, and economic globalization—were issues that empires faced. “Empire, in sum, can be the prism through which to examine many of the pressing problems of the contemporary world—perhaps even the birth pangs of a new world order. Wherever we turn we seem to encounter problems and situations for which there are precedents in the historic empires.”²⁷ Today empires represent not just a past vision of the modern order, but for some a better vision than that offered by the nation-state, including the democratic nation-state.

An increasing number of American historians now contrast the flexibility of imperial rule against the social order created by the post-Revolutionary United States. Historians of British North America emphasize the hybrid forms and plural modes of governance that defined imperial rule. Joshua Piker has called it “a standard trope” that “empires were negotiated (not dictatorial), composite (not homogenous), and driven by innovations and events at the periphery (not the metropole).”²⁸ Empires today are understood not as a “structure of command” but “as a set of fluid institutional and cultural practices.”²⁹ This perspective rejects earlier more critical accounts of empires which portrayed them as

²⁵ For overviews of historians’ changing approaches to studying the British Empire, see Richard R. Johnson, “Empire,” in *A Companion to Colonial America*, ed. Daniel Vickers (Malden, Mass., 2003), 99-117; Benton, “Constitutions and Empires,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 31, 01 (Winter 2006), 177-98; Trevor Burnard, “Empire Matters? The Historiography of Imperialism in Early America, 1492-1830,” *History of European Ideas* 33, 01 (2007), 87-107.

²⁶ Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge, U.K., 2013), 21.

²⁷ Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World* (Princeton, 2017), 3.

²⁸ Joshua Piker, Review of Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Commanche Empire*, *WMQ* 67, 02 (Apr. 2010), 379-82.

²⁹ Benton & Richard J. Ross, “Empires and Legal Pluralism: Jurisdiction, Sovereignty, and Political Imagination in the Early Modern World,” in *Legal Pluralism and Empires, 1500-1850*, eds. Benton & Ross (New York, 2013), 2. See also

limiting the political freedom of their subjects (the standard story of the American, Haitian, and Indian revolutions). It also stands in tension with accounts of North American imperialism that highlight the racial violence, the slavery, and the commercial interests that accompanied and fueled imperial expansion in the New World. This is not because contemporary scholars are ignorant of these facts, but instead, as historians of empire have turned their attention from empire as a category to analyzing empire as a set of practices, they have discovered the complexity, plurality, contradiction, and even fragility at the heart of imperial projects.³⁰ As Kathleen DuVal writes, “imperial relationships were almost always personal.”³¹

This new, humbler, understanding of empire may well be correct. Indeed, it might be true of democratic nation-states as well. Even in the context of national regimes, the political, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has written, is always composed of “irreducible pluralities.”³² At stake are not just the facts,

Benton, “AHR Forum: Law and Empire in Global Perspective,” *American Historical Review* 117, 04 (Oct. 2012), 1092-1100; Benton, “Historical Perspectives on Legal Pluralism,” *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 03, 01 (Mar. 2011), 57-69; Christopher Grasso and Karin Wulf, “Nothing Says ‘Democracy’ Like a Visit from the Queen: Reflections on Empire and Nation in Early American Histories,” *J. of American History* 95, 03 (Dec. 2008), 764-81. Recent examples include Eric Lewis Beverley, “Frontier as Resource: Law, Crime, and Sovereignty on the Margins of Empire,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, 02 (2013), 241-72.).

³⁰ On this point, see as examples, Joshua Piker, “Lying Together: The Imperial Implications of Cross-Cultural Untruths,” *American Historical Review* 116, 04 (Oct. 2011), 964-86; Vicki Hsueh, *Hybrid Constitutions: Challenging Legacies of Law, Privilege, and Culture in Colonial America* (Durham, 2010); Daniel J. Hulsebosch, *Constituting Empire: New York and the Transformation of Constitutionalism in the Atlantic World, 1664-1830* (Chapel Hill, 2005); Piker, *Okfuskee: A Creek Indian Town in Colonial America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400-1900* (New York, 2002). Hsueh emphasizes the importance of looking at on-the-ground practices over constitutional rhetoric, but she also recognizes that “while some accommodation between colonists and indigenes was possible because of features such as discretion, adaptation, and negotiation, it was also the case that accommodation did not prevent exploitation and coercion” (p124). This point is made clear in Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (Chapel Hill, 2012). On the pluralism of the law see also Christopher L. Tomlins & Bruce H. Mann, eds., *The Many Legalities of Early America* (Chapel Hill, 2001).

³¹ DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York, 2016), xvii. In contrast, Adelman and Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders,” 839, remind us that even in the borderlands, political institutions exerted an autonomous force: “Cross-cultural brokering and conflict shaped but did not determine the patterns of coexistence. In the end, Old World conflicts and eighteenth-century warfare provided the decisive markers for hinterland processes.”

³² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), 179.

however, but how those facts are narrated and given significance. Paul Halliday writes that legal pluralism might well have been a fact of imperial regimes but that does not invest the fact with normative power: “it is not the role of histories or their authors to adjudicate the moral claims of laws’ pluralities.”³³ Yet perhaps it is inevitable that historians’ narratives are also moral tales. Historical writing is a combination of the philosophical quest for truth and the rhetorical desire to speak with a public about the present. It is in the nature of historical narratives, therefore, to have ethical and political implications because historians create stories with a beginning, middle, and end. These narratives matter because, in Allan Megill’s words, they are “intimately connected with the processes by which individuals and groups make sense of themselves—even define themselves.” Historical accounts, Megill argues, always include both description (the telling of a tale) and explanation (using data to attribute causes to effects).³⁴ The focus in this essay is on the former.

In *Metahistory* (1973), Hayden White famously argued that narratives have forms and those forms have content. Historians do not just find the past but must turn a chronicle of events into a story. This requires what White called “emplotment,” or the fitting of a series of events into a narrative arc. As a result, historical narratives can be subject to interpretive strategies employed upon other literary texts.³⁵ If the older, whiggish story of the American Revolution was a heroic narrative of “the opening act in a conflict between democracy and imperialism,” many historians today are offering instead a tragic alternative in which a world of cosmopolitan diversity and legal pluralism was replaced after the American Revolution with a modern nation-state determined to achieve territorial control and cultural uniformity.³⁶ Importantly, these new narratives are no less focused on the Revolution than previous

³³ Paul Halliday, “Laws’ Histories: Pluralism, Pluralities, Diversity,” in *Legal Pluralism and Empires, 1500-1850*, ch10.

³⁴ Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago, 2007), 72. More generally, see *Ibid.*, chs.3-4; Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (New York, 2003).

³⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), esp. 7-11.

³⁶ Phrase is from Sylvia Frey, “Causes of the American Revolution,” in *A Companion to Colonial America*, ed. Vickers, 508-29, at 511.

scholarship, but the meaning of the Revolution is best understood as a cathartic moment implied from the beginning.

Richard White's path-breaking *The Middle Ground* (1991) might be considered the paradigm-setting book for the new narrative. He opened a new world for scholars, one in which Native American and European encounters took place on neither group's terms, and the meaning each gave to their interactions was never fully available to the other. Divided by language, culture, and purpose, "on the middle ground" of the pays d'en haut, "diverse peoples adjust their differences by what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings." White focused on practices on the ground, helping us see the local contexts of imperialism. His middle ground was always fragile and subject to conflict and violence, but it also represented a moment in which neither Native Americans nor Europeans could dominate each other. But everything changed with the American Revolution. The new American nation-state eradicated this "complicated world that could be both dreamscape and landscape." The middle ground "vanished" as "the Americans arrived and dictated."³⁷

The Revolution does appear different when one is "facing east from Indian country," as Daniel Richter put it in his 2001 book of that name. For Native Americans, the pre-Revolutionary imperial world was one of negotiation and accommodation. But, again, it ended with the Revolution, as an older, more fluid world gave way surprisingly quickly to the United States' ambitions. "The end of the imperial world that had made the coexistence of Indians and European colonials possible ushered in the beginning of a revolutionary era." A new republic, controlled by "the minority who were White, male and free," invented a "novel, polyglot national identity." This national imaginary had no place for Native Americans. Under the British Empire, Native Americans had "struggled to find ways to incorporate

³⁷ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York, 1991); Brian DeLay, "Introduction" to *North American Borderlands*, ed. DeLay (New York, 2013), 1-8.

European peoples, objects, and ideas into Indian country on Indian terms,” but Native Americans “could find no place in the mythology of a nation marching triumphantly westward across the continent.”³⁸

White’s, Richter’s, and other scholars’ work is a necessary and important corrective to previous narratives which portrayed Native Americans through white racist lenses or as passive victims of imperial ambitions. On the other hand, even if Europeans had never arrived on the continent, North America would have been a violent theater of competing tribes and empires. Warfare, commerce, environmental degradation, forced assimilation, and slavery were already here as Native Americans struggled to command resources and land, just as European settler colonists did upon their arrival. Pre-Columbian Native America was much like Europe in this sense. Europeans entered a game in progress—Jamestown was situated within the pre-existing, and stronger, Algonquin empire. Yet narratives that imply that historical contingency ended with the American Revolution ignore recent work, such as Daniel Sharfstein’s *Thunder in the Mountains* (2017), Pekka Hämäläinen’s *Comanche Empire* (2009), and Leonard Sadosky’s *Revolutionary Negotiations* (2009), which demonstrate how uncertain the new republic’s fate remained vis-à-vis Native and European powers.³⁹

We are aware today of both Native Americans’ agency and the violence that accompanied the formation of the American republic.⁴⁰ We do not wish to repeat those things that, as Suzanne Marchand

³⁸ Daniel Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). Richter’s book builds on the work of many scholars, including his own earlier works. See also Kathleen DuVal, “Debating Identity, Sovereignty, and Civilization,” in *North American Borderlands*, ed. Delay, 263-83; Katherine Hermes, “The Law of Native Americans, to 1815,” in *The Cambridge History of Law in America. Volume I: Early America (1580-1815)*, eds. Michael Grossberg and Christopher Tomlins (New York, 2008), 32-62; Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians & Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700-1763* (Chapel Hill, 2003).

³⁹ Daniel Sharfstein, *Thunder in the Mountains: Chief Joseph, Oliver Otis Howard, and the Nez Perce War* (New York, 2017); Leonard Sadosky, *Revolutionary Negotiations: Indians, Empires, and Diplomats in the Founding of America* (Charlottesville, 2009); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, 2009); James Horn, *A Land as God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America* (New York, 2005). Native Americans played an active role in this re-imagining of their own past during the 1960s. See Sherry L. Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* (New York, 2012).

⁴⁰ On this point see, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of American National Identity* (Chapel Hill, 2010).

has written, leave us “embarrassed by the nineteenth century.”⁴¹ Indeed, scholars of American slavery also argue that the Revolution not only failed to produce African American freedom but secured slavery and enabled its expansion. These scholars, too, have noted the irony that it was the British empire, not American republicans, who offered enslaved people freedom.⁴² In short, new work has reminded historians of the United States that the new republic’s impact on non-citizens was starkly different from how the story played out for citizens. This is a lesson that has been hard earned and should not be forgotten.

The Benefits of Empire

What began as an effort to see the Revolution from Native American perspectives threatens to become a broader narrative about the benefits of empire itself as part of a broader neoliberal re-narration of eighteenth-century British America. As historians increasingly question the national paradigm, they have come to appreciate the ability of the British Empire to sustain racial and ethnic diversity through legal pluralism. In doing so, they have, intentionally or not, elevated imperial forms of governance over those of the new American republic.⁴³ If the older story celebrated a shift from many to one, *e pluribus unum*, today’s narratives lament the change. For example, in *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australasia, 1788-1836* (2010), Lisa Ford narrates how Americans’ understanding of law shifted from one in which law was defined by the community to which

⁴¹ Suzanne Marchand, “Embarrassed by the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850: Selected Papers*, eds. Bernard Cook et al. (Florida State University, 2002), 1-16.

⁴² Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2014); Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832* (New York, 2013); Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York, 2011); George Van Cleve, *A Slaveholders’ Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic* (Chicago, 2010); David Waldstreicher, *Slavery’s Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (New York, 2009); Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery*, ed. Ward M. McAfee (Oxford, 2001)

⁴³ On early Americanists’ moving beyond the national paradigm, see Josh Piker, “Getting Lost,” *Uncommon Sense-the Blog* (Jan. 21, 2016); Neem, “American History in a Global Age”; Eric Hinderaker and Rebecca Horn, “Territorial Crossings: Histories and Historiographies of the Early Americas,” *WMQ* 67, 03 (July 2010), 395-432.

one belonged to one in which legal sovereignty was determined by “territory and jurisdiction.” At the center of this redefinition stood Native Americans. In the 1733 Treaty of Augusta, “settler jurisdiction was explicitly defined by British subjecthood rather than territory.” The imperial world recognized “plurality of jurisdiction,” allowing Britons to be responsible for their own, and Native Americans for their own. Ford’s deep archival research unearths a world defined by “the fluidity of sovereignty” in settler-Native American relations. Under the Empire, and then after the Revolution, Native Americans, the British in London and then the new United States’ federal government, and Georgia shared authority over common space. Georgians found this “fluidity” untenable. As Native Americans sought to sustain “indigenous jurisdiction,” Georgians demanded a more uniform understanding of law in which sovereignty applied to everyone living within a territory. In short, they wanted to get rid of the Indians. The result, however, was the end of “a century of (increasingly contentious) plural practice” as Georgians imposed “perfect settler sovereignty.”⁴⁴

Pluralism, fragmentation, hybridity, and mobility are the coins of the realm. For Atlantic historians, Trevor Burnard writes, “discontinuities are welcomed, [and] multiplicities of places and perspectives are normative.”⁴⁵ In their introduction to a forum in *Early American Studies*, Jerusha Westbury and Anelise Hanson ShROUT argue that while the 18th-century Atlantic world was hardly “free from political and social upheaval,” it offers us today an image of a world of “multiple and alternative forms of affiliation.” As people moved across the Atlantic littoral, they engaged in “a creative process” that produced “unique populations and ‘hybrid’ polities.”⁴⁶ To Kathleen DuVal, in her recent

⁴⁴ Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australasia, 1788-1836* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

⁴⁵ Trevor Burnard, “The British Atlantic,” in *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*, eds. Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan (New York, 2009), 111-36, at 128. See also Burnard and Cécile Vidal, “Location and the Conceptualization of Historical Frameworks: Early American History and Its Multiple Reconfigurations in the United States and Europe,” in *Historians Across Borders: Writing American History in a Global Age*, eds. Nicolas Barreyre et al. (Berkeley, 2014), 141-62.

⁴⁶ Jerusha Westbury & Anelise Hanson ShROUT, “An Entangled World: Loyalties, Allegiances, and Affiliations in the Long Eighteenth Century,” *Early American Studies* 11, 01 (Winter 2013), 1-14.

Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution (2015), the Revolution's significance lies in "the shift from multiple empires and powerful Indian nations to one dominant United States," transforming "an eighteenth-century world with its diversity of polities, shifting networks of interdependence, and more inclusive (and often more hierarchical) definitions of belonging" to one defined by "the white male individual."⁴⁷ In short, in much recent work, a new plot is clear: empire fostered a fluid, mobile, diverse world that was brought to a tragic close by the American Revolution.

In Lauren Benton's memorable words, empires composed "a fabric that was full of holes, stitched together out of pieces, a tangle of strings."⁴⁸ Perhaps, then, empires offer more guidance for our diverse interconnected global future than more recent national pasts. In her groundbreaking book *Law and Colonial Cultures* (2002), Benton argues that central colonial states, whether in New Spain or Bengal, emerged from, and as a result of, conflicts spurred by legal and ethnic pluralism. The result was that "routines for subordinating the law of ethnic and religious communities to state law replaced more fluid forms of legal pluralism." The older pluralistic legal order, full of conflict as it was, represented "an ordered and contested multiculturalism" but this gave way by the end of the nineteenth century to "state-dominated legal orders." Benton hopes that by demonstrating central state authority as "historically recent and contingent," the possibility will open up for "alternative legal authorities centered in ethnic subpolities or cross-border communities." But, she warns, given that the central colonial state was itself an outgrowth of legal pluralism, efforts for a new plural order will require more than turning back the clock through "state *unmaking*."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ DuVal, *Independence Lost*, xxv-xxvi.

⁴⁸ Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (New York, 2010), 2.

⁴⁹ Lauren Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400-1900* (Cambridge, UK, 2002), 6-7, 28, 30, 265-65. For a contrasting perspective, which emphasizes the benefits of order and shared norms, see Mark G. Hanna, *Pirate's Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740* (Chapel Hill, 2015).

The case for unmaking is made more optimistically in Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's interpretive synthesis, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (2010). As the title suggests, the question is which kind of regime—empire or nation-state—is better suited for a diverse world. The authors argue that empires are too often seen as relics of the era before World War II, but imperial forms of rule are still part of the modern global order, both in old-fashioned ways and new ways (such as the European Union). In fact, “making state conform with nation is a recent phenomenon, neither fully carried out nor universally desired.” And recent efforts to make nations—such as in Yugoslavia and Rwanda—“led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people.”⁵⁰

Empires might provide an alternative. While the authors do not downplay imperial violence, they are taken by the ability of empires to sustain diversity. “Empires, of course, hardly represented a spontaneous embrace of diversity.” Imperial orders also relied on “violence and day-to-day coercion.” But empires, unlike nation-states, had to figure out ways to rule “unlike populations.” A key difference between empires and nation-states is that empires demand “loyalty, not likeness.” Imperial rulers want peace and profit, and they demand less of their subjects than does a democratic nation-state of its citizens. This is particularly relevant today, they conclude, because historically “unitary kingdoms, city-states, tribes, and nation-states were less able to respond as flexibly to a changing world.” But empires thrived in a fluid, diverse, global world much like ours today. We might learn much from “the pragmatic, interactive, accommodating capacity of empires.” The nation-state seeks to dominate a territory politically and culturally—but the history of empires offers us lessons “about our own time.” “Sovereignty can be shared, layered, and transformed.” The conclusion is clear:

“Empires, for better or worse, dealt directly with difference; nation-states had the idea—illusion perhaps—that difference could be overcome by the appeal of the national idea and of

⁵⁰ Jane Burbank & Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010).

participation in state institutions, or negatively by exclusion, expulsion, and compulsory assimilation.”

In his detailed historical examination of modern empires, Krishan Kumar also concludes, “empires, in their historic forms, may have had their day; but it is not at all clear that the desirable alternative is today’s system of two hundred or so nation-states all claiming sovereignty and all tending toward ethnic uniformity. That seems a recipe for unending conflict, both within and between states. Empires, for all their faults, show us another way, a way of managing diversity and differences that are now the inescapable fate of practically all so-called nation-states. That by itself seems sufficient grounds for continuing to study them, and to reflect on what they may be able to teach us.”⁵¹

Nation-states are, to both Burbank and Cooper and Kumar, an outdated assumption for today’s transnational world. Empire offers an option, or at least a set of options. We must take the best of the history of empires, Burbank and Cooper conclude, in order to imagine “new and different forms of layered and overlapping sovereignty.”

Alan Taylor and the Shifting Fields of Historiography

A close analysis of Alan Taylor’s work illustrates both his own trajectory from the polity to neoliberal fields, and what the emergence of the new neoliberal historiographical field means for scholars of early American democracy. Between his first and more recent books, Taylor embraced the neoliberal turn, and in doing so, reassessed his original heroes. In his first book, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors* (1990), Taylor offered a path-breaking narrative of settlement on Maine’s frontier. The core tension was one at the heart of the American political narrative—battles between large landholders

⁵¹ Kumar, 475.

(capital) and small farmers for political and economic power. Taylor considered Maine's small farmers' efforts to gain access to land and independence "a new, internal, and attenuated stage of the continuing American Revolution." When the Liberty Men organized to demand economic justice, they did so to challenge the hierarchical inheritances of the old imperial order. Taylor thus offered a story of how ordinary white Americans claimed a right to be citizens, a story he told from a different perspective in his Pulitzer prize-winning *William Cooper's Town* (1995) about the upstate New York frontier. There, the aftermath of the American Revolution was nothing less than "a more dynamic and competitive social order" in which genteel Federalists competed against "rural democrats" for social and political dominance. At a time when egalitarian-minded politicians were claiming to be friends of the people, William Cooper sought to serve as their father.⁵²

The tension in *Liberty Men* and *William Cooper's Town* remains present, if muted, in *American Colonies* (2001), Taylor's contribution to the Penguin History of the United States. In *American Colonies*, Taylor offers a critique of traditional colonial American narratives, which favored English colonists at the expense of Native Americans, African Americans, and other Europeans. He argues that our diverse society might find a usable past in more pluralistic narrative based on past "encounters." As Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans made a new world with, and against, each other, "they defined an array of new identities as Americans." It is in these "exchanges and composites, we find the true measure of American distinctiveness, the true foundation for the diverse America of our time." Put simply, the real American founding took place under imperial rule and was threatened by the American Revolution.⁵³

⁵² Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1990), quote at 5; Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995), 5-6.

⁵³ Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York, 2001), xi-xii.

Taylor hopes that his new, more pluralistic, narrative—which covers not only more groups, but the entire geography of what would become the United States—will enable us to move beyond the national narrative altogether. Our globally interconnected world today, Taylor writes, has witnessed the “escalating integration of North America—by treaty, investment, trade, migration, travel, mass media, and environmental pollution,” making “national boundaries more porous.” We need a history that accounts for this new world. Taylor hopes his book will be “a half step toward a more global (and less national) sensibility for our place in time.”⁵⁴ The new American republic, which had been, in *Liberty Men* and *William Cooper’s Town*, described as a battle between capital and labor or aristocracy and democracy, is now portrayed as a “a vision of white liberty.” Yet there remains an implicit critique of empire. Americans, Taylor concludes, “proved worthy heirs to the British as predominant colonizers of North America.” A reader of *American Colonies* would be forced to ask herself why a Revolution in the name of republicanism embraced imperialism.

This critical perspective towards empire slowly drops away. In *The Divided Ground* (2006), Taylor turns to the complex question of how and why nation-states “define and control their peripheries.” Nation-states depend on borders but borders are always arbitrary and constructed. Taking a borderlands perspective, Taylor describes a “porous” region which experienced “an invasion of settlers, coming in great and growing numbers to divide the land into farms, reservations, and nations.” He asks readers to question the cost of borders for our post-national era, most notably given the “fluidity” of today’s Mexico-US border.⁵⁵ By the *Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (2010), a new narrative is in place. Focusing on the area between Montreal and Detroit, *Civil War of 1812* “attempts a borderlands rather than a national history.” Before the war, Native

⁵⁴ Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York, 2001).

⁵⁵ Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (New York, 2007). On this point, see also Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, 2011). For an interesting discussion of the meaning of borders in the context of contemporary globalization, see Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York, 2014).

Americans, British subjects, and Americans all competed for dominance in Upper Canada and New York, but they also cooperated for trade and other purposes in an area where borders were “blurred.” The war changed all this by drawing a clear line between British and American territory and jurisdiction. Only after the war could Americans and Britons be said to occupy “distinct nations.”⁵⁶

In his monumental 2016 *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*, Taylor attempts to hold together in one narrative the polity and exchange fields. He demonstrates just how violent the Revolutionary war was within the thirteen colonies, in the west, and on the seas. The Revolution created anarchy across the continent as Patriots, British, common people, Native Americans, enslaved people, and European empires struggled to respond to fast-changing events. Taylor draws attention to the West as the spark that lit the fuse of Revolution as settlers continued to enter Indian lands. The conflicts at the center of *Liberty Men* and *William Cooper’s Town* return, but they play a subordinate role to a deeper narrative in which whiteness is central to the Revolution, sustaining a precarious and divided patriot cause, and then generating support for the new federal government and Jeffersonian republicanism. In the years leading to the Imperial Crisis, Taylor writes, white settlers did not want a multicultural empire but “counted on their British culture and white skins to justify superior privileges.” It was this affront to their whiteness, not their liberties, that made them fear slavery: “if denied dominion over natives and Francophones, the colonists worried that they would become dependents ruled by Britain.”⁵⁷ The ideas and words of the Revolution, and even the class politics that animated *Liberty Men* and *William Cooper’s Town*, float like ephemera above a deeper racial substrate.

Over the course of his work, Taylor’s emphasis shifted from defining freedom as class solidarity and democratic politics to the free borderless economic and cultural exchange that was brought to an end by the Revolution. In *American Revolutions*, Taylor seeks to bridge the divide, but his focus on

⁵⁶ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York, 2010).

⁵⁷ Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York, 2016), 6.

pluralism leads him to conflate democratic rule and whiteness, in contrast to the multicultural benefits of empire and exchange across borders. The neoliberal narrative overcomes the polity narrative.

For Taylor and other scholars, the new narrative has chronological and geographical implications. North Americans experienced freedom prior to the American Revolution or in imperial borderlands where the republic's hold remained weak. One cannot help wonder, however, what this new narrative might mean for the political aspirations of the Liberty Men.

Democracy and Solidarity

Because many scholars equate pluralism and exchange with freedom, they have concluded that empires can secure freedom more effectively than democratic nation-states. This is much like Hobbes's argument during the English Civil Wars that freedom is about movement, not republican liberty and popular consent.⁵⁸ Scholars' distrust of democracy draws from the fact that democracies, unlike empires, depend on solidarity and boundaries.⁵⁹ And there is no denying that for much of its history, one of the bases of American solidarity was white skin. Unfortunately, there is also no denying that democracy cannot survive without ongoing efforts to foster solidarity in the face of the fragmenting forces of modern globalization and pluralism. Compared to more coercive regimes, social theorist Charles Taylor writes, democracies require a "strong form of cohesion" since citizens must be able to work together peaceably. Sociologist Craig Calhoun argues that democratic politics "requires thinking of 'the people' as active and coherent and oneself as both a member and an agent."⁶⁰ Achieving this solidarity is no easy task, and it depends, at least in part, on what Rogers Smith has called the "stories of

⁵⁸ Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge, UK, 2008).

⁵⁹ Sarah Song, "Three Models of Civic Solidarity," in *Citizens, Borders, and Human Needs*, ed. Rogers Smith (Philadelphia, 2011), ch9.

⁶⁰ Charles Taylor, "No Community, No Democracy, Part 1," *The Responsive Community* 13 (2003): 17–27; Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (London, 2007).

peoplehood,” the very stories being challenged by the fragmenting and fragmented narratives offered by scholars of #vastearlyAmerica.⁶¹

Because the vast early American approach draws from, offers a founding narrative for, and is compatible with neoliberal forms of globalization, its scholars’ narratives lack the capacity to challenge the capitalist forces reshaping American society and the world. These forces are weakening the capacity of democratic nation-states to make collective decisions about their people’s welfare.⁶² It is not clear that scholars in vast early America are concerned about the kinds of political freedom that motivated America’s founding generation. For many scholars today, the sacrifice—in terms of the need for solidarity over diversity—is just too great. In recent historical narratives, cultural freedom and the freedom of people and goods to cross borders matters more than political freedom. Ideas of consent that preoccupied America’s revolutionary generation and generations of scholars have been sidestepped. If empires secure global trade, migration, and cultural pluralism better than democratic nation-states then, the answer seems to be, we’ll take empire.

⁶¹ Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (New York, 2003); Neem, “American History in a Global Age.”

⁶² See Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (New York, 2011).