

United States History: A Special Issue

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In our interview with the former American ambassador to Turkey, Eric Edelman, which appears in this issue, he noted, “the value of American Studies is that it helps people get a better, more nuanced, and textured understanding of the American reality.” We couldn’t agree more. Because of the way America dominates headlines around the world, not to mention popular culture, foreign observers are prone to make assumptions about the United States based on only the flimsiest of evidence. For the past twenty years the value of the American Studies Association of Turkey, and of this *Journal*, is that they have worked to enlighten Turkish opinion about the United States based on scholarly work addressing culture, literature, and art.

American history, however, has received much less attention, which is why we were pleased to undertake bringing out a special issue of the *Journal of American Studies* dedicated to United States History. From our European and Ottomanist colleagues we have often heard how “easy” U.S. history is because it is so brief: if “modern history” began with the fall of Rome, the American republic, like the Turkish republic, must still be young!

But just as the United States rapidly became an incredibly diverse nation in geography, ethnicity, and beliefs, so, too, is the field of American History. Through the mid-twentieth century, the practice of history was largely the political history of elite individuals: leaders of government, labor, and suffrage reform, and practitioners of high culture, for example. But in the 1960s and 1970s something new began to happen. Historians shifted focus towards ordinary people, those not in front of society but in its midst: not politicians but voters; not labor leaders but workers; not suffrage leaders but those denied the vote; not Winslow Homer but MC Hammer. As John Grabowski notes in his article in this issue, this era, ironically, also culminated an unusual period of increased support by the U.S. national government for history, not only academic history but also public or popular history. Thus new fields emerged: not only women’s history but also the history of gender; ethnic history and African-American history; the history of the land; the history of children. Popular “living history” sites, such as Williamsburg, Virginia became “a bit scruffier around the edges,” as

Grabowski puts it, displaying not only re-creations of elite white society but also of non-elites, white and black alike.

But in the early twenty-first century the new social history of the 1960s, as Professor Richard Pells of the University of Texas notes in an interview in this issue, has become not radical but orthodox, comprising how much if not most of American academic history is practiced. Yet such revisionist interpretations frequently have not squared with laypersons' understanding of and interest in American history. Meanwhile the old history, focused as it was on policies, ideas, and the men who conceived them, today seems to loiter in the wings.

Much, but not all, of this *JAST* issue reflects what is considered American history today. Three fine articles, by Ted Eversole, John Grabowski, and Mary Lou O'Neil explore modern art, the peculiarities of "consumer history" in America, and its juvenile justice system, respectively. Eversole grounds the revolutionary photography of Alfred Stieglitz in its historical context, thus asking us to rethink the assumptions of postmodern approaches towards assessment of American culture. Grabowski studies not the American past but why and how Americans have interpreted their past. Given the country's free market orientation, he finds an intersection of ideas and interests in Americans' understanding of history as a for-profit or at least private enterprise. O'Neil, showing the intersection of social and legal history, traces the changing treatment of children in American courts of law.

As such, then, these writings suggest a combination of old and new histories. Alfred Stieglitz was a practitioner of high culture and an exceptional individual, but Eversole places him in his social context. Grabowski implicitly calls for a greater intersection between the high and low cultures of history, between what is taught in the history classroom and ordinary people's interests to visit history museums. Americans' definition of "juvenile justice" has changed over time according to social experience. But, as O'Neil illustrates, those social experiences were revealed and had consequences within a powerful American institution, the legal system.

If this issue's articles are explorations in American cultural history, the book reviews reflect the more traditional interests of foreign observers of the United States, especially the theme of America's place in the world: critiques of its foreign relations, and inquiries into the experiences of its immigrants (as all of the book reviews have been written by Turkish graduate students, their insights also suggest the quality and exciting directions that the academic practice of American history is heading these days). In the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, observers of America, both within and outside the United States, have re-assessed not

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only American foreign policies but also, interestingly, its domestic institutions – on the well-founded assumption that if the United States is a democracy, its foreign relations must somehow reflect its popular attitudes.

The film reviews also fit within the same frame in that they are the efforts of another medium of looking at a troubled time in American history: the Great Depression. For a reader largely unfamiliar with the field of American history, the contents of this journal provide a crash-course in current historiography and debates in academia and in the town square.

We would like to thank the many people who contributed to this special issue: the authors of the articles and book reviews, the anonymous readers who reviewed the original submissions, and especially Ambassador Edelman and Professor Pells. Finally, we would like to thank Gülriz Büken, President of the Association of American Studies of Turkey, Ayşe Lahur Kırtunç, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal*, and our friend Barış Gümüşbaş, whose experience editing several past issues aided us tremendously.