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Teaching in Europe and Researching in the United States

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The U.S. historian at Københavns University in Denmark devotes virtually all of her undergraduate teaching time to general surveys of colonial American and U.S. history and literature, while her graduate courses range from a survey of American legal history to a global history of human rights. A U.S. historian in Bologna in Italy teaches a comprehensive course on the entirety of American history to third-year students in International Studies, and one on transatlantic relations to American exchange students. In Belgrade University, undergraduate teaching in American history is integrated into courses on Contemporary Political History and International Relations that are taught within the Faculty of Political Sciences and the Faculty of Philosophy. In Britain, contrastingly, the larger research universities may have separate American Studies departments where, as at the University of Nottingham, up to ten academics are specialists in American history, or else have several American specialists in history departments that encompasses many kinds of history (not unlike the situation in many U.S. universities). But what impact does this diversity have on the writing of American history?

European historians of colonial America and the United States are very often generalists in their undergraduate teaching, which has significant implications for their research in an educational environment being rapidly transformed by the demands of research productivity. Of course, being a generalist in teaching is not unique to Europe: in the United States outside the large research universities most teachers of American history do not often have the luxury of specializing in small teaching areas. Yet, how generalist teaching is delivered in Europe differs from the United States, with significant consequences for how teaching is organized and thus in how research in American history is conceptualized and undertaken. The key is the nature of undergraduate teaching, with its sometimes collaborative character and its need for a scholarship of synthesis. Teaching broadly has had an impact on scholarship – providing opportunities as well as constraints, in different ways in different nations. Recently, too, the relationship between teaching and research has changed, both within and across European nations. While the research practices of U.S. historians in the United States and in European nations have begun to converge, their teaching practices have remained distinct. European-wide reforms of higher education seek, for the first time, a homogenized European teaching model that (unintentionally) gives new

impetus to the generalist tradition. These developments present particularities that shed light not only on the scholarship of European historians of the United States, but more generally on the many links, synergies and conflicts between what we teach and what we write.

It is a brave task to generalize about the teaching of American history in a diverse Europe, with its multitude of educational practices and purposes, diverse means of funding, diverse student bodies and all the complications of size, ambition, institutional and academic culture that differentiate one university or college from another. Teaching American history in 2014 in the perilous university environment of Greece or Spain is not the same as teaching American history within a department in English studies in France or in a major research university in Germany or Britain, where teaching might take second place behind research.

We admit in this essay to some biases. We concentrate here mostly on teaching in universities in which there is a significant research responsibility for academics. We do this not because research universities are more important than other places of instruction but because we want to focus on how teaching influences the research direction of Europeans doing American history. We also concentrate on the teaching and research nexus in Germany, France and Britain, which is where the major centers of scholarship on America have traditionally been located and which provide sufficient contrasts for our purpose.

We also admit to a more significant bias that shapes how American history specialists in Europe view American history. We compare ourselves to certain institutions in the United States rather than to others. The nature of international exchanges means that European academics are familiar primarily with the teaching practices in the older, richer and research-intensive U.S. universities. Many know little about the vast hinterland of American education. Such distinctive American institutions as liberal arts colleges have few equivalents in Europe, where very little tertiary education is done outside the aegis of the state. Certainly the prestigious European institutions are state institutions. Although sources of funding are becoming more diverse, university education is overwhelmingly a state preserve. So our understanding of American teaching practices is both incomplete and biased. Nevertheless, these biases are useful to have explicated, since in depth knowledge about teaching practices around the world is very rare, even for very well traveled academics. Few Americans, for example, have much knowledge of such important features of teaching as the external examination process in Britain that ensures a rough

equality of exam results throughout the country or the *agrégation* exercises in France that help determine student entry into universities or the various ways in which university degrees can be gained in Germany. Such limitations to our understanding mean that our reflections below can only hint at the complex connections between teaching and scholarship.

European educational practices are thus neither constant nor unproblematic. Nevertheless, there is a strong move towards making the European educational experience more uniform and there are powerful pan-European forces that condition how American history might be taught, which differentiates teaching practices in a European context from teaching practices in an American setting. Here are three recent imperatives that shape how scholars do their work.

First, European universities have worked hard to try and standardize their teaching practices in recent years under what is known as the Bologna Process.¹ This makes firm distinctions between undergraduate education, higher degree coursework education, and research training for a PhD. Students in Europe are meant to do three years in the first area; two years in the second obtaining a Masters award of some description; and three or four years in the third stage. The idea, more theory than practice at present, is for there to be a measure of interchangeability about degrees so that students throughout Europe can move from one national system to another. Most important, the process is designed to enhance the research capacities of students and staff, thus increasing the research potential of European universities. That European universities, at least outside Britain and to an extent Germany, do not have the kind of organized system of research training found at leading U.S. universities and that serves them well in international rankings, has been an urgent concern for university leaders throughout Europe. For historians of America operating in Europe, the trend towards more uniformity of teaching practices and a greater concentration on research training and graduate education has proven to be both opportunity and problem.

Second, European systems of higher education, at least in recent years, are more willing to separate research from teaching than in the United States. In some continental countries for example, a good deal of research into American history is done in specific research centers in which there is little undergraduate teaching.² The science model of doing research is more prevalent in the humanities and social sciences in Europe than is probably the case in the United States. One reason for its greater prevalence – a central tenet of which involves a willingness to do research outside of the traditional humanities teaching/research nexus – is connected to the

more significant involvement of European universities with the state. Everywhere in at least Western Europe, governments have been keen to break down old traditions of unitary block funding to universities with funding based on purpose. They hold back much of what used to go as block grants to institutions for teaching and research in order to give monies to research councils, either national or pan-national, to distribute to deserving applicants for research support. State bureaucracies like to pick ‘winners’ – which means that there are indeed individual ‘winners’ who, if bureaucratically skilled and intellectually distinguished, can fashion lives for themselves that include relatively little teaching. In many institutions, scholars who wish to do serious research are involved, like scientists, in extensive research grant writing. If successful, the rewards can be substantial. The European Union customarily gives out multi-million Euro grants, sometimes to individuals but more often to research centers.

The effect on normal teaching patterns can be immense. A higher proportion of scholars, at least in Britain, Germany and France, especially the more distinguished, are effectively research-only academics for sometimes quite significant periods of their career. The development of a research grant culture has been accompanied by a more intrusive and elaborate auditing, accounting and evaluation culture for both research and teaching. This auditing culture is most advanced in Britain, where the Research Assessment Exercise (now called the Research Excellence Framework) has reshaped the university landscape not only for research but also for teaching in the last two decades. It is a trend apparent everywhere. To a degree not yet replicated in the United States, there is considerably variety in workplace designations in European academia, even within institutions. Significant numbers of successful academics in the humanities operate, as do scientists, with their job responsibilities being mainly research rather than teaching and their careers highly dependent on gaining access to the sometimes substantial sums provided by research councils. The advent of a research culture has also had a substantial impact on academic hiring. It is more common in some countries than in the past for the best junior researchers to spend a period following the award of a PhD on a research project in which their teaching responsibilities may be light.³ And the growing number of such short-term jobs has seemingly been at the expense of junior positions like U.S. assistant professorships. This ‘privileged insecurity’ means that teaching positions, when they are eventually filled, often go to candidates who are older, better published and with significant records of ‘grant capture’ than they used to be.

Such a research culture has, of course, an effect on teaching, with greater emphasis on higher-level teaching and more rewards for excellent research performance than in the past. There has been a considerable increase in the amount of productivity required for university academics in research, and the recent burgeoning of research publications discussed in other essays in this Forum may owe something to this. In some systems publishing expectations can be considerable. British university academics, for example, are expected to have four quality publications every five years – a degree of productivity often obtained through publishing journal articles rather than books (though for historians a book ideally would be included among the four items submitted for assessment). Auditing cultures have accompanied a research-grant culture, as well, meaning that teaching is more openly monitored and evaluated than previously.

Third, the research and teaching environment in Europe is in a process of rapid change. Some of the changes – the rise of MOOCs, the pressure to teach larger groups of students more effectively – are common to university systems across the world.⁴ But there are particular pressures in the European environment that differentiate it from systems elsewhere. Here, too, the greater involvement of the state in the provision of both teaching and research in higher education and its increasing willingness to insist that financial largesse be accompanied by rigorous regulation and evaluation is changing how academics work. The move to Open Access policies for state-funded publications, for example, which is now a subject of great attention throughout Europe, has considerable implications for how academics will order not only their research but also their teaching.

Historians of America both benefit and suffer from these general changes in the European higher education landscape. They have been remarkably productive in the last half century, arguably benefiting as much as any other group of humanists and social scientists from the expansion of research culture, not least in access to research grants. But the development of the research and audit culture sits uncomfortably with some aspects of the teaching experience of European historians of the United States. In Europe the United States is a foreign country. By that we mean that American historians are almost always a minority, often a very small one, in their institutions, and more importantly that European students usually come into their classes with relatively little knowledge of the subject. What understanding these students have is generally filtered through their understanding of the historical patterns of their own country and that country's involvement with the United States. This filtering process means that European

historians of the United States tend to teach far more general survey courses tracing American history from European settlement to the present than do their U.S. counterparts in research universities. Virtually every European teacher of American history would be expected to know enough about all of American history between the Puritans and 9/11 to teach the subject to undergraduates.

Thus it is the undergraduate level – with a tendency to general teaching for rising numbers – rather than the graduate level, which differentiates European and U.S. teaching practices of American history. And given that undergraduates take up the majority of a post holder’s teaching time, and that the undergraduate market far outweighs that of graduates, it is also undergraduate teaching duties which have the most impact upon research. This remains true even in the rapidly evolving European higher education environment in which research and research training are emphasized. In the first place, undergraduate teaching has affected the kinds of publications that continental European historians have written, namely, set textbooks.⁵ In most countries teachers cannot easily assign textbooks designed and published in the United States for American students. This is largely due to language barriers and also partly to price in countries where students are not expected to pay large sums for their higher education. It is also due to teaching norms and practices. In France and Britain, for example, lectures are accompanied by tutorial classes, where students learn to work with primary sources (through the formalized exercise called in France *commentaire de documents* and sometime in Britain by the undignified name of ‘gobbets’), but these students are rarely assigned monographs to discuss. In the present, the textbook is supplemented by online resources that provide overviews of the topic at hand, serve as valuable portals to research websites or point the reader to primary and secondary print materials. It is quite common for European historians of America to have written the first modern American history survey textbooks in their language. Nevertheless, in a culture in which original research is highly prized, this necessary pedagogical function that university teachers perform is increasingly undervalued. Moderating between research imperatives and the particular responsibility that scholars have towards their undergraduate students’ learning is a difficult balancing act.

The generalist teaching also partly accounts for a tradition in some European countries of writing interpretative syntheses of American historical topics. In his assessment of British writing on American history in 1994, for example, Cambridge Professor Tony Badger – himself

the author of an interpretive overview of the New Deal – reckoned the fact that his British colleagues “seem to be adept at general synthesis” was the main reason they “need not be too apologetic” for what he described as their lack of innovative contributions to the field. European historians of North America have sometimes taken the opportunity to write synthetic texts in their national language with their own students in mind, making it possible for them to then teach in their own research area.⁶ Indeed, for continental Europe-based historians especially, becoming generalists in teaching American history need not be a disadvantage. It must enhance the capacity noted elsewhere in this Forum for Europeans to bring a comparative perspective to bear when they write American history, and it can enrich understanding about *longue durée* processes, with the potential to nurture conceptual innovation.⁷ It also provides a means of satisfying the demands of the general public. The relative scarcity of American historians in continental Europe, at a time when the United States has become ever been more prominent in European concerns, helps to explain their relative prominence in public life, for example in giving media interviews and participating in government-sponsored symposia on American matters. They are very aware of the need to address non-specialists. If there is only one U.S. Civil War historian in a particular country, he or she must write and even broadcast for all American historians, or lose an audience.⁸

Just as teaching structures encourage European historians to think broadly about U.S. history, they also provide opportunities to think across disciplines, and collaboratively – in other words, more broadly still. On the Continent, American history is often taught in American Studies departments and also as part of broader subjects, such as Anglophone studies (along with Britain and, at a pinch, Ireland: the rest of the English-speaking world is usually given short shrift). In Spain “Americanists” traditionally and overwhelmingly teach literature and cultural studies; American history teaching has grown out of its sister disciplines, and remains intimately interconnected with them. The single compulsory history course at Complutense University of Madrid is now called “Anglophone Worlds: Historical and Cultural Perspectives” – at once both interdisciplinary and generalist. Interdisciplinary teaching is matched by international teaching – U.S. history specialists may teach in the context of international relations, global history and the Anglo world more generally. Again this reinforces the generalist focus of teaching, since many American specialists dedicate only some of their teaching hours to American history, however broadly conceived. Having to teach other subjects can provide continental European historians of

the United States with some of the tools they need to communicate American history to their publics, by drawing links with national historiographies and with the English language itself. These conditions can inspire collaborative projects, both in teaching and research, making a virtue out of the minority position of historians of North America in Europe.

Research specialization in the context of continued generalized teaching can produce disconnect between research and undergraduate teaching for European historians of the United States. In some European countries, such a disconnect has existed for some time as part of the institutional makeup of higher education, with the creation of national institutes solely devoted to research, such as the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas* (Spanish National Research Council), the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (National Center for Scientific Research), and the *Max-Planck-Gesellschaft* (Max-Planck-Society). Now major players in all sciences and humanities, these institutes employ scholars who are full-time researchers. In France, this development led to the coining of a specific term for all of the *other* scholars who research *and* teach: *enseignant-chercheur*. In such a system, teaching and research duties are conceived as separate spheres, even though many scholars are expected to do both.

More generally, while European identity and community remain contested, they now operate with an increasingly powerful reach and authority (not least as the source of the largest amount of academic research funding), and the federal system and Europe's own court of human rights have assumed an ever-greater role, further reinforcing statist influence. Consequently, the origins and the history of the United States appear ever less 'exceptional' to students and teachers in Europe. Even in a globalizing world, with increasing interest in American history and adoption of U.S. research practice, the tension – sometimes problematic, often creative – between teaching and researching the subject in Europe is growing faster than in any previous generation. These tensions are not to be lamented but recognized and utilized. In a world where it will be increasingly difficult to assume that either European or American influences will be paramount in influencing European students, the challenge will be to work out ways in which teachers can use their experience to continue to convey a distinctively European perspective on American history that ideally enriches both European and American understandings.

¹ Bologna Declaration, June 19, 1999, http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/bologna_declaration.pdf (accessed March 16, 2014).

² The École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris is an example of an institution that takes research and research training as its primary remit. The science model also obtains in some eastern European countries, most notably in this context the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

³ In Germany, the states have established new junior professorships, alongside the old system of chairs which are associated to full professorship and required the *Habilitationschrift* (the second dissertation/book). For those new positions, they have enforced a new evaluation system which influences how much academics are paid. Currently, bonuses can be obtained only through research performance, with teaching merely taken into consideration.

⁴ Massive Open Online Courses

⁵ H el ene Trocm e and Jacqueline Rovet, *Naissance de l'Am erique moderne, XVe-XIXe si ecle* (Paris, 1997); Yves-Henri Nouilhat, *Les  tats-Unis de 1917   nos jours* (Paris, 2009); Giuseppe Mammarella, *Storia degli Stati Uniti dal 1945 a oggi* (Roma, 1992); Oliverio Bergamini, *Storia degli Stati Uniti*, Roma-Bari, 2002, 2010); Krzysztof Micha ek *Ameryka skie stulecie : historia Stan w Zjednoczonych Ameryki, 1900-2001* (Warsaw, 2004).

⁶ Tony Badger, "Confessions of a British Americanist," *Journal of American History* 79, No. 2 (1992): 522. Such syntheses on particular topics may allow European historians to bridge the gap between their teaching and research interests. U.S. academics do the same of course, but this is a genre of which European scholars have seemed particularly fond. For example, several British historians have published work on the civil rights movement aimed at an undergraduate audience, e.g. Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty? The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Harlow, 1998); Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (London: 2002); John Kirk, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Harlow, 2005). Thematic surveys on African Americans and the South have appeared also in other countries, e.g. Horst Ihde, *Von der Plantage zum schwarzen Ghetto: Geschichte und Kultur der Afroamerikaner in den USA* (Leipzig, 1975); Norbert Finzsch, *Von Benin nach Baltimore: Die Geschichte der African Americans* (Hamburg, 1999); Claudio Gorlier, *Storia dei negri degli Stati Uniti* (Bologna, 1963); Raimondo Luraghi, *La spada e le magnolie : il sud nella storia degli Stati Uniti* [The Sword

and the Magnolias: The South in US History] (Firenze, 2007). U.S. foreign policy also attracts thematic surveys, e.g. Mario Del Pero, *Libertà e impero. Gli Stati Uniti e il mondo, 1776-2006* (Roma-Bari, 2008).

⁷ For successful publications that have taken the long view, see for instance Jean Heffer, *Les États-Unis et le Pacifique. Histoire d'une frontière* (Paris, 1995) and François Weil, *Histoire de New York* (Paris, 2000).

⁸ See Jörg Nagler ed., "Lincoln's Legacy: Nation Building, Democracy, and the Question of Civil Rights and Race," *American Studies Journal*, 53 (2009). <http://www.asjournal.org/archive/53/index.html> Accessed 16 March, 2014.