'Nation Without Borders': Our history, and its other side

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COURTESY OF THE WRITER
Steven Hahn, author of "A Nation Without Borders."

A Nation Without Borders

*The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910*

By Steven Hahn. Viking. 608 pp. $35.
Reviewed by

Glenn C. Altschuler

In the mid-20th century, historians often celebrated American "exceptionalism" and our nation’s supposedly progressive march to democracy and inclusion. Since then, accounts of the past have tended to dwell on the dark side. Historians have emphasized the increasing concentration of political and economic power and the pervasiveness of discrimination against and exploitation of African Americans, Indians, Hispanics, wage laborers, and women.

In his sweeping interpretation of the decades surrounding the Civil War, Steven Hahn, a professor of history at New York University and the author of the Pulitzer-winning *A Nation Under Our Feet*, emphasizes the emergence of the United States as a nation-state, a continental empire, and a global juggernaut, "perpetually and necessarily colonizing its own domains even as it prepared to find new ones."

That said, Hahn reminds us as well that millions of Americans imagined - and fought for - alternatives to the society “so swiftly and radically being constructed.” They mobilized around the abolition of slavery and equal opportunity for African Americans; an eight-hour workday; collective bargaining; greenbacks; public ownership of railroads, telegraphs, and other monopolistic utilities; a graduated income tax; direct democracy; and female suffrage.

It is easy, Hahn writes, to catalog their failures amid the growing centrality of the corporation (which enjoyed protection from regulations and taxation) and the hegemony of market relations in the
United States. Many reformers and radicals were not immune from ethnic, racial, and gender prejudice. But, he claims, insurgents played a pivotal role in shifting the discussion “away from pieties of individualism, competition and laissez-faire and toward a new conception of the state and civil society” involving an activist, more socially responsible government.

At the end of the 19th century, Hahn concludes, as the Army subdued the Indians and won a war against Spain, “the reach of constitutionalism was constantly being tested” as territorial acquisitions with nonwhite populations “challenged notions of birthright citizenship and statehood incorporation.” How should the borders of the United States be constructed, and with what consequences for those residing within them? These questions, of course, remain as relevant now as they are at the end of A Nation Without Borders, when the guns of World War begin firing and “the rumblings of revolution” (in Mexico and Russia) can already be heard.

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