U.S. National Preliminary Exam  September 2010
Answer a total of THREE questions, including at least one from Part A, one from Part B. Your responses to the questions should be anchored in a clearly-defined argument, while engaging relevant historiography and directing specific historical examples/evidence to each issue raised by the question. Be sure also that your exam as a whole gives the 19th century component of the U.S. National field its due.

Part A

A1. How has recent scholarship on consumption affected our understandings of democracy, capitalism, and identity in the nineteenth and twentieth century United States? In answering this question, you should consider what, if any, are the big debates pertaining to the history of consumption.

A2. Historians of women and gender have argued for the potential of gender history to change the contours of all history. How have insights derived from women’s and gender history altered leading paradigms of immigration history, if at all?

A3. In Rethinking American History in a Global Age, Thomas Bender urges historians to historicize the nation, in part by imagining “a spectrum of social scales, both larger and smaller than the nation and not excluding the nation” (8). Taking histories of slavery, emancipation, and the Civil War/Reconstruction as your case studies, how well have historians of the United States historicized the nation, and how have their choices of scale affected their interpretations?

Part B:

B1. “…[P]ublic officials not only respond to the demands of a fearful public but sometimes deliberately manipulate the public in order to create national hysteria. History teaches that it is the interaction of ‘ordinary’ war fever with cynical efforts by opportunistic political leaders that is most likely to result in what Jefferson called ‘the reign of witches.’... Laws punishing dissent are especially appealing to public officials in wartime because they are relatively inexpensive, cater to the public’s witch-hunt mentality, create the illusion of decisive action, burden only those who already are viewed with contempt, and enable public officials to silence their critics in the guise of serving the national interest.”

Geoffrey Stone, Perilous Times, 2004, pp. 535 and 545

Draw from the civil liberties record of at least three war periods between the Civil War and the post-9/11 decade to consider Stone’s claims above. Where does this quotation fall short of capturing the dynamics that can turn wars into “witch hunts”?

B2. Discuss the institutions and social/economic/political forces (including residential and migration patterns, the Cold War, and global decolonization) that you consider most important to the mobilization and impact of the African-American struggle for equal rights in both the Southern states and urban centers elsewhere in the U.S. between the 1940s and the 1970s.

B3. Eric Foner contends that the history of the United States might best be framed as “a story of debates, disagreements, and struggles over freedom” as both a reality and a set of competing mythic ideals.” Assess the value of this framework by considering the meanings and boundaries of the contentious concept of “American freedom” through several case studies of social/political movements and “reform” periods. Your “case studies” should include social/political movements from each of the following: 19th century struggles over a “market revolution,” industrialization and working conditions; the New Deal; and movements of “cultural liberation” and “empowerment” of the 1960s and 1970s.