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978-0-521-76333-2 - The Cambridge World History: Volume I: Introducing World History, to 10,000 BCE

Edited by David Christian

Excerpt

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I

## Introduction and overview

DAVID CHRISTIAN

As Merry Wiesner-Hanks writes in her series preface, the *Cambridge World History* is authoritative and comprehensive, but not exhaustive. World history must limit its ambitions precisely because its scope is so vast, so an exhaustive history of humanity, like a map the same size as the landscape it charts, would be of little use because it would have avoided the hard work of distillation. This is why world historians have to be good at selecting. The chapters in Volume I are indeed authoritative; they cover a great deal of territory (literally and metaphorically); but they are not exhaustive. Like all the best scholarship in world history, they try to convey both the detailed texture of human history and its major themes and trajectories.

Volume I is introductory in two distinct senses. Part I is about world history as a sub-discipline of history, while Part II is about the earliest phases of world history.

**Part I** introduces approaches, methods, and themes that have shaped and defined scholarship in world history. It ranges over world history as a whole, but does not visit every village and province. For readers new to the field, these chapters can illustrate the diversity of approaches that historians have brought to the project of world history. For world historians, they will offer recapitulations of important themes and approaches, and introductions to some less familiar aspects of world history. Many of the themes and topics introduced here are taken up with greater chronological and geographic specificity in the chapters in the second part, and also in later volumes in the series.

I have received a lot of help in editing this volume. First, I would like to thank Merry Wiesner-Hanks, who played a huge role in putting this volume together, as she did with all the volumes in this series. Second, I would like to thank Marnie Hughes-Warrington, who worked with me as we planned the basic structure of this volume. The overall shape of the volume owes much to Marnie. I would like to thank all the authors for their efficiency in getting papers to me and handling queries, and for their patience as this volume came together over several years. Finally, I would like to thank the editorial staff at CUP and in particular Michael Watson and Julene Knox.

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**Part II** surveys the earliest phases of human history during the Paleolithic era: the vast period extending back hundreds of thousands of years, in which our human and hominin ancestors laid the foundations for human history. As is appropriate in a volume intended mainly for those interested in the human past, it concentrates on the most recent phases of hominin evolution, the rise of our own strange species, *Homo sapiens*, and the very earliest human societies. Part II closes at the end of the last ice age, just over 10,000 years ago, when in some parts of the world some of our ancestors took up agriculture. Agriculture allowed human communities to divert more and more of the biosphere's energy income to their own support, and is explored in depth in Volume 2 of this series, *A World with Agriculture*. The resulting energy bonanza would drive human history into utterly new pathways, transforming human communities and accelerating the pace of change throughout the world, developments examined in Volumes 3 through 7 of this series.

This Introduction summarizes the chapters in the two parts of Volume I. It describes some of the main themes of each chapter and makes comparisons among them, but inevitably skips most of the evidential detail and interpretative nuance. Like world history itself, it is a distillation, in this case a distillation of distillations, but some readers may want to use it as an extended table of contents before going on to the chapters themselves.

### Part I: Historiography, methods, and themes

As a sub-discipline of the modern history discipline, world history is surprisingly new. In the words of the late Jerry Bentley: 'As it has developed since the 1960s and particularly since the 1980s, the new world history has focused attention on comparisons, connections, networks, and systems rather than the experiences of individual communities or discrete societies'.<sup>1</sup> Most modern world historians have been trained as historians, so they accept the discipline's ground rules. But they also try to move beyond the national frames and evidential ground rules that shaped and limited historical scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As many chapters in this volume show, world historians have worked particularly hard (though with qualified success) to escape the Eurocentrism of so much earlier historical scholarship: the sometimes unquestioned assumption that if it

<sup>1</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, 'The Task of World History', in Jerry H. Bentley (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of World History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 2.

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didn't happen in Europe or the West, it probably wasn't original or significant or influential.

The impulse to a more global understanding of the past has been driven in part by globalization and decolonization. Shifts in the global balance of economic, military, and even intellectual power and increasing global connections between scholars have exposed the severe conceptual and empirical limitations of the nationalistic and Eurocentric attitudes to the past that dominated historical scholarship in earlier centuries. The same pressures have encouraged more and more historians to explore the past as part of a shared human heritage. Paradoxically, that move has also taught us that world history is not as new as it may seem at first sight. Indeed, some form of world history can be found in most human cultures.

As Marnie Hughes-Warrington points out in her brief history of world history in **Chapter 2**, we find many different labels for the same core project. They include 'universal history', 'global history', 'transnational history', 'macrohistory', 'comparative history', 'big history', and more. She also points out that, whatever we call it, the world history project is ancient. All attempts to make sense of the past depend on imagining a coherent and meaningful 'world' of some kind, though they vary in the extent to which 'the purpose of world construction is explicit'. But as this suggests, constructing a world that is *ours* also encourages an interest in the worlds of *others*. Over 2,000 years ago, Herodotus in Greece and Sima Qian in Han China drew sharp lines between their own world of civilization and the barbarous realms beyond the borders. For some writers, gender divided the barbarian from the non-barbarian: witness the contrast between Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), a 'universal history of female warriors, good wives and saintly women', and Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle and Forward Women* (1615), which insisted that women, being fashioned from Adam's rib, are 'crooked by nature'.

Printing, the 'philosophical turn' of the Enlightenment, and the professionalization of scholarship in the nineteenth century might have helped erase these lines, but in practice, they redrew them. Historians became entranced by the nation state and the challenge of constructing national histories; and world history fell into disfavour. Much world history continued to be written, often outside the formal structures of the history profession, but from the late nineteenth century, professional historians began to frown on the practice. From the middle of the twentieth century, new themes for historical research, including modernization, world-systems, area studies, and post-colonial studies encouraged new ways of framing historical problems.

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So, too, did new approaches to history in general, including gender history (Chapter 10), environmental history, and the rapid increase in research on inherently worldish themes such as migration (Chapter 12). This broadening of the scope of historical research, along with increasing global integration, helps explain the modern revival of world history within the institutional structures and conventions of modern historical scholarship.

Dominic Sachsenmaier's **Chapter 3** also surveys the history of world history. But while Hughes-Warrington notes the importance of world history scholarship outside the academy, Sachsenmaier focuses on secular academic writing in world history. He agrees that in some sense all history is world history, because every community and every historian understands the past as the past of a particular 'world'.

In any culture and time period, the history of the world could only possibly mean the history of one's own world, that is, the world one was exposed to through lived experiences, personal travels and the accounts of others. In that sense, the worlds of a fourteenth-century Maya, a Northern European, a Japanese or a Polynesian were certainly unlike each other. Yet at the same time they had a decisive element in common: they all reached far beyond single political realms or cultural habitats.

Of course, such world histories always had to take notice of 'others', so that Sachsenmaier, like Hughes-Warrington, notes a fault line in all early world histories (and perhaps within the very nature of world history) between our world and the world of others, a tension visible at least from the time of Herodotus and Sima Qian and apparent also in Muslim historiography. Indeed, the very idea of world history seems to imply an interest in what lies beyond 'our' world.

From the sixteenth century, the number of possible 'other worlds' multiplied. Connections with worlds never imagined before helped detach world histories from their traditional roots, particularly in Europe. The creation of the first global networks of exchange prompted the earliest attempts to write history on planetary scales, such as George Sale's 65-volume *Universal History*, published between 1747 and 1768. But globalization also sharpened the familiar dichotomies of world histories, now re-cast as contrasts between Europe and the rest of the world. European writers as influential as G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Max Weber put Europe at the centre of their global vision, and pushed other regions to the margins: 'Generally speaking, the rest of the world was seen as too far behind the Western engine to be seriously studied as a guide or reference'. Eurocentric world histories became less Universal and less 'worldish'.

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Globalization also shaped historiographical traditions outside of Europe, but in different ways. Outside the emerging ‘West’, national historiographical traditions emerged in tension with or opposition to the history of the West, which was often re-classified as ‘world history’. Here, therefore, ‘world history’ gained in importance because it meant the study of ‘the West’. Professionalization of the history discipline, often on European models, heightened the sense of European exceptionalism. Even Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Glimpses of World History*, though critical of the West, treated the West as paradigmatic of historical processes in general. So, too, did the historiography of most Communist societies, which retained the vision and spirit of Marx’s Eurocentric accounts of world history.

In the twentieth century, several historians tried to break with overly Eurocentric approaches to the past. They include Oswald Spengler, who offered a vision of a declining West; Arnold Toynbee, who described a world of multiple distinct ‘civilizations’; William McNeill, who stressed the importance of connections between civilizations; and other historiographical traditions such as world-systems historiography and the Négritude Movement. But their impact on historiography was limited until after the collapse of Communism in the last decade of the twentieth century. The breakdown of Cold War divisions gave a powerful new impetus to research on global processes and global connections, which is why world history can seem like a new historiographical project. But even today, and even in work produced by world historians, there remains a complex but powerful tension between traditional ways of framing the past around regions or nations (traditions still supported by the educational policies of most governments), and attempts at more global accounts of the past, ‘bordercrossing scholarship’, as Sachsenmaier calls it. We should not expect a homogeneous global historical scholarship to emerge from these efforts, but what we can expect is increasing dialogue between different traditions of world history scholarship.

In **Chapter 4**, Michael Lang tackles the problem of periodization. Though fundamental to all historical writing, periodization takes distinctive forms and raises distinctive problems within world history. ‘To use the language of Kracauer and Adorno, the historiographical period is a “force field.” It is pulled between poles of chronology and immanence, perpetually in tension, and without resolution’. By its very nature, the idea of a period hints at ‘the universal of time, and therefore indicates, even when unexpressed, the history of the world’. Lang describes a series of attempts within modern historiography to manage the tension between the particular, and what Leopold von Ranke called the ‘great whole’ of universal history.

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When Ranke wrote, periodizations based on national histories were already shaping much historical scholarship. But most historians retained a sense of multiple times, from those of evolution or geology ('nature's epochs' in Comte de Buffon's phrase), to the 'innumerable times, all at one time' of Johann Gottfried Herder. Ranke saw the nation itself as a partial resolution of the tensions between universality and particularity. The state itself was a sort of universal, integrating many within a larger unity; but of course each state was also its own specific universal. At times, though, even Ranke found the tensions insoluble, at least for humans: 'God alone knows world history. We perceive the contradictions'.

Other nineteenth-century historians were equally sceptical of universals, and equally captivated by the strange universal of the nation state. William Stubbs wrote that history showed endless differentiation rather than 'elemental unity'; yet he wrote, too, of a larger English national identity. At a more practical level, of course, the state provided a sort of methodological universal in the nineteenth century because it shaped not just the thinking of historians, but also the institutions they worked in and the conventions that shaped their careers and scholarship. And, as if to illustrate the tensions that frustrated Ranke, each state shaped historical scholarship in its own distinctive way.

In the twentieth century, the national conflicts that helped generate two World Wars undermined the assumption that the nation state offered a natural frame for historical periodization. But what could replace it? Toynbee offered civilizations. McNeill offered the world as a whole and the history of humanity as an evolutionary process. Was there a 'meaningful past' shared by humanity as a whole? McNeill found periodizations for such a past in processes of cultural diffusion (or even epidemiological diffusion) that linked large areas through evolutionary patterns of change. McNeill was not alone in seeking new universals. But is there a danger that, as Lang puts it, world history merely 'shifts the spiritual unity of the nation onto the world as a whole'? Many modern historians and historiographers have been deeply suspicious of such apparently universalizing projects. Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida insisted on the selectiveness of universalist histories and the roles they played as ideologies and as forms of power. But what was the alternative? Was it perhaps to move back towards the specific and the contingent, towards the world of lived experience? In 1956, Roland Barthes wrote: 'It seems that this is a difficulty of our epoch . . . either posit a reality which is entirely permeable by history and ideologize; or else, inversely, posit a reality ultimately impenetrable, irreducible, and in this case, poeticize'. So, while attempts at world history moved towards universality,

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postmodern or post-colonial history moved towards particularity. 'Between these poles – chronology and immanence, evolution and rupture, universal-ity and meaning – historiography employs the period'.

While Lang's chapter sees no easy resolution to the problem of periodization in world history, in **Chapter 5** David Northrup defends a powerful but extraordinarily simple periodization of human history. For most of human history we see divergence and diversification. But then, during the last thousand years, we begin to see convergence everywhere. 'At some point, centrifugal forces for global divergence began to be overtaken by centripetal forces for convergence. Despite some interruptions, that trend continued and gradually gained momentum. This was the Great Convergence'.

As Northrup points out, the most influential historical periodizations have cut across the very project of world history. Some, such as the traditional European partitioning of the past into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern periods, work best for particular regions; while some periodizations ignore everything before Sumer; and others ban the historical study of today's world. Yet world history cannot ignore the problem of periodization without turning into a random collection of local histories. The simple periodization Northrup proposes really is global; it embraces the whole of human history; and it encourages discussion of future trajectories.

For most of human history long-distance exchanges were limited, and each community constructed its own distinctive history. Genomes diverged, so did languages, lifeways, and religious beliefs and rituals. Early modern Papua New Guinea illustrates the spectacular possibilities for linguistic divergence. Here, 1 million people spoke 500 distinct languages from 33 different language families. Similarly, a single proto-Bantu language split into 250 different languages in less than 3,000 years. In retrospect, historians can see the commonality between these languages; contemporaries were surely more aware of the differences.

Today, though, the commonalities are more apparent. English and Spanish have spread not as language families, but as single languages, while many local languages are dying out so that the total number of languages is declining fast. Meanwhile, diseases, technologies, and conflicts (or news of conflicts) hurtle around the globe, creating what V. S. Naipaul called 'universal civilization'. When did convergence become the dominant trend? Regular contacts between all parts of the world began only in the sixteenth century, but Northrup argues that convergence has deeper roots. We find important exchanges of people, goods, ideas, and ritual objects deep in the Paleolithic. In the last 5,000 years, empires and trading diasporas multiplied

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exchanges of goods, ideas, fashions, and religions. When did the balance tip? Northrup inspects several possible dates before opting for 1,000 CE, when, as John Man argued, one can for the first time imagine a message being transmitted right around the inhabited world. Perhaps, as Northrup argues, the problem of periodization in world history is not quite as intractable as some historians imagine.

In Chapter 6, Luke Clossey explores the world history of ideas and thought. Can there be a world history of belief, knowledge, and language? This chapter, too, is shaped by the problem of Eurocentrism. It tracks the evolution of the idea that European science and secularism have colonized the world of thought, and it asks if a world history of ideas should or can yield a more ecumenical history of human thought.

In fact, as Clossey points out, there has been little ‘world history’ of ideas. ‘Most of our books about knowledge are in fact about Euro-knowledge, rather than about the Wider World’s ethno-knowledges’. Even the idea of ‘ethno-knowledges’ implicitly distinguishes them from ‘knowledge’ pure and simple, which is assumed to work everywhere, while ethno-knowledges are assumed to work only on their home grounds. Can we (particularly if ‘we’ are historians based in the ‘West’) possibly study ideas or beliefs free of such assumptions?

Some of the earliest attempts at a worldish understanding of religion and language were European, the products of some of the earliest global empires. But they launched a tradition of comparative scholarship that, in retrospect, seems surprisingly un-Eurocentric. That tradition begins with the work of William Jones, an English judge in British Bengal who lived in the eighteenth century and initiated the comparative study of languages and religions. The tradition he began was continued in the work of the philologist, Max Müller, and in that of George Sarton, who founded a journal on the history of science, called *Isis*, in 1927. Sarton came to appreciate the crucial role of Muslim science and duly learnt Arabic to pursue this insight.

Eventually, though, historians of thought became dissatisfied with the broad generalizations of the pioneers, and began to narrow the scope of their work, focusing increasingly on regional traditions, which they often portrayed as foils to modern European science. Seeing European thought itself as a local tradition is not easy, though there have been some remarkable attempts, such as Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People Without History*, and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*. But even these help us do little more than nibble at the edges of Eurocentrism in the world history of thought.



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The rest of Clossey's chapter assesses the nature and extent of Eurocentrism in debates over four worldish topics: hominization (the processes by which our ancestors became human), the idea of the Axial Age, the study of the European Scientific Revolution, and the idea that religion is in decline in the modern world. In all four discussions, he finds that Eurocentrism survives in subtle and not-so-subtle forms, despite growing awareness of its limitations. For example, it might seem that the study of hominization has to be 'worldish'; yet even here it is possible to identify subtle forms of Eurocentrism, if only because so many of those who study the subject are European or Western. (Some of the consequences will be discussed in Chapter 16.)

And this may lead to the heart of the problem of Eurocentrism; so much world history is the work of 'Western' scholars. So it is hardly surprising if a casual survey of courses and textbooks used in the University of Cambridge yields a list of 'knowledge makers' that is overwhelmingly European. Similarly, a quick survey of modern world history textbooks shows that science looms large in accounts of Western societies, while religion looms larger in accounts of non-Western societies. Is it surprising if a world history dominated by Western scholars is Eurocentric? And even if we can imagine a non-Eurocentric world history of thought, will it simply be from the perspective of another 'centrism', like the delightful *Beijing History of the World*, published in the year 2174, with which Clossey ends his chapter?

In Chapter 7, Dan Headrick explores a specific but critical aspect of intellectual history: the history of technology and innovation. Headrick defines technology as: 'the use of materials, energy, and living beings for practical purposes'. Of course, we can identify technologies in many non-human species. But humans are so good at dreaming up new technologies, and technological innovation has given our species such power over our surroundings (and over each other), that technological innovation counts as a defining feature of humanity, and a fundamental driver of human history. Despite this, the history of technology is a relatively new field of historical research; it is hard to trace it back much further than the Enlightenment and the *Encyclopédie* (1751–72). The first serious scholarly treatment of the history of technology is Johann Heinrich Moritz von Poppe's *Geschichte aller Erfindungen und Entdeckungen im Bereiche der Gewerbe, Künste und Wissenschaften von der frühesten Zeit bis auf unsere Tage* (History of all the Inventions and Discoveries in the Trades, Arts, and Sciences from Earliest Times to Our Day), first published in 1837. In the decades that followed, many scholars and thinkers, including Marx, took up the idea that technological innovation

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might be a fundamental driver of historical change. As Marx famously wrote in 1847, in his critique of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*: ‘The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist’. Such claims raised a fundamental question for historians: if technological innovation is a powerful driver, what drives technological innovation?

Rapid technological change stimulated popular interest in technology in the nineteenth century. That interest was evident in the great exhibitions, beginning with the French industrial exposition of 1844; in the building of museums of science and technology, and museums dedicated to particular technologies, such as the railways; as well as in exhibitions such as Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, which recreated displays of traditional technologies such as blacksmithing. *Scientific American*, a journal dedicated to disseminating information about science and technology, was founded in 1845. Popular interest in technology was normally, as Headrick puts it, ‘Whiggish’. It assumed that technological and scientific change represented progress; and it assumed technological determinism – the belief that technological innovation drove historical change. Like many other historical sub-disciplines, the history of technology also fell into the force field of nationalistic historiography, as historians defended national claims for technological leadership. Was it a Briton, William Fox Talbot, who invented photography, or a Frenchman, Louis Daguerre? Was it a Frenchman, Clément Ader, who pioneered heavier-than-air flight, or the American brothers, Orville and Wilbur Wright?

Modern scholarship in the history of technology really begins in the twentieth century. George Sarton’s multi-volume history of science was exceptionally broad in its approach and particularly in its willingness to highlight the achievements of Islamic science. Classic studies, such as those of Lewis Mumford and Abbott Payson Usher, also approached the history of technology with unusual sophistication. But much scholarship remained nationalistic and individualistic, focusing largely on the work of individual inventors.

The history of technology matured as a field after the Second World War, with the emergence of new journals and scholarly societies (such as the Society for the History of Technology, SHOT). The field became less Whiggish, more interested in technological failures, and less interested in the national origins of particular technologies. The International Committee for the History of Technology, founded in 1968, encouraged a more global approach; while scholarship by Joseph Needham and Vaclav Smil helped undermine the field’s Eurocentric traditions. Needham’s work, possibly the