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978-0-521-76162-8 - The Cambridge World History: Volume VI: The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE: Part 1: Foundations

Edited by Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Merry E. Wiesner-hanks

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

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Introduction

Although the practice of writing history on a large scale can be traced back many centuries – perhaps nearly as far back almost as the writing of history itself – each recent generation has refined and modified its habits in view of changes in method, as well as in perspective. Still, it is not a coincidence that the ‘early modern’ period has been the focus of a good deal of the exercise of writing ‘world history’ over the past half-century or so. Conventional dates of the Common Era such as 1453 – the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans; 1492 – the year of the trans-Atlantic voyage of Columbus and of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain; 1498 – the voyage of Vasco da Gama to India; 1519 – when the Spanish *conquistadores* arrived in Mexico; or even 1522 – the return to Spain of Juan Sebastián Elcano from the voyage of circumnavigation begun by Ferdinand Magellan, have often been used since the nineteenth century to speak of an epochal shift, though usually in terms of what still remained a heavily Eurocentric history. More recent exercises have chosen other dates, based on different geographies. The death of the great Central Asian conqueror Amir Temür, or Tamerlane, at Otrar in February 1405 is sometimes taken to be one such moment, closing a cycle of universal empire-building that had begun with Chinggis Khan in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.¹ The celebrated Ming maritime expeditions of the first third of the fifteenth century, which took Chinese fleets as far to the west as the East African coast, constitute another increasingly popular marker for world historians.

At the other end of the early modern period, as the eighteenth century drew to a close, and the world at large embarked on a distinctly industrial age based on the systematic harnessing of mechanical power, many writers

¹ John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

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reflected on what the previous three or four centuries had wrought by way of change, and they often came to the conclusion that the period that was ending was momentous for the world in more ways than one. One of the most celebrated, not to say clichéd, evocations comes to us from the pen of the Scottish philosopher and political economist Adam Smith (1723 to 1790). In Book IV of his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in the fatal year of 1776, Smith thus stated:

The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind. Their consequences have already been very great; but, in the short period of between two and three centuries which has elapsed since these discoveries were made, it is impossible that the whole extent of their consequences can have been seen. What benefits or what misfortunes to mankind may hereafter result from those great events, no human wisdom can foresee. By uniting, in some measure, the most distant parts of the world, by enabling them to relieve one another's wants, to increase one another's enjoyments, and to encourage one another's industry, their general tendency would seem to be beneficial.²

Smith's position here is typical of his thinking, but also somewhat more subtle than is sometimes suspected. He excludes from the comparison of the 'greatest and most important events' the human discovery of fire or the invention of the wheel, since these were not 'recorded' events in the history of mankind. As for 1492 and 1498, he highlights them precisely in terms of suggesting that contact and commerce are in general to be preferred to isolation and autarchy, since they increase the benefits to all participants through the division of labour and specialization. But he is also commendably cautious in distinguishing between ideal and reality.

To the natives, however, both of the East and West Indies, all the commercial benefits which can have resulted from those events have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned. These misfortunes, however, seem to have arisen rather from accident than from anything in the nature of those events themselves. At the particular time when these discoveries were made, the superiority of force happened to be so great on the side of the Europeans that they were enabled to commit with impunity every sort of injustice in those remote countries. Hereafter, perhaps, the natives of those countries may grow stronger, or those of

² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Edwin Cannan (ed.), 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1904), vol. 2, p. 125.

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Europe may grow weaker, and the inhabitants of all the different quarters of the world may arrive at that equality of courage and force which, by inspiring mutual fear, can alone overawe the injustice of independent nations into some sort of respect for the rights of one another. But nothing seems more likely to establish this equality of force than that mutual communication of knowledge and of all sorts of improvements which an extensive commerce from all countries to all countries naturally, or rather necessarily, carries along with it.

In other words, Smith recognized that one of the characteristic features of the preceding three centuries had been the creation and consolidation of great colonial empires (typically centred in Europe), which had proceeded to commit 'every sort of injustice' rather than simply embarking on 'improvements'. Further, the Scottish savant did not simply lay such charges at the door of the benighted Catholic Iberians; as is well known, he reserves some of the most savage criticisms in his text for the behaviour of the East India Companies founded by the Dutch and English nations.³ Still, his use of the term 'accident' to place in parenthesis many inconvenient and painful historical processes can only appear to us today to be inadequate. In turn, such a recourse to euphemism has to be explained, as we shall see below, by a particular form of teleology, wherein such 'accidents' could be juxtaposed to the very inherent 'nature' of the broad historical process, the direction of which was already largely determined.

Adam Smith is generally recognized as one of the key innovative figures of the later phase of the Western European Enlightenment, but he shared many ideas with other thinkers of that broad movement. In his case, a particular emphasis on political economy meant that he saw the immediately preceding centuries as a struggle between forces that were attempting to stifle or control exchanges of goods and ideas (what he and others summed up under the broad heading of 'mercantilist' thinking and action), and other, far more positive, tendencies which gave humanity the possibility to engage in its natural 'propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another'. For him, the normal or default tendency of human societies was towards 'the natural progress of opulence'. Further, he writes, 'had human institutions, therefore, never disturbed the natural course of things, the progressive wealth and increase of the towns would, in every political society, be consequential, and in proportion to the improvement and cultivation of the

³ See the fine analysis by Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

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territory or country'. Thus, despite some notable caveats and reservations, Smith saw human history as regulated by a powerful motor of progress, itself underpinned by strong characteristic features of human nature.

Could one have found such a view expressed in Europe three centuries earlier? In certain respects, Smith's position shares with a broad swathe of earlier thinkers a distinct faith in a history that has both a direction and an end, in short what the German philosopher Christian Wolff first defined in 1728 as 'teleology'. Wolff himself, while professing a deep and abiding interest in distant lands such as China, was however very much intellectually located in Christian theology, albeit in a rationalistic strain thereof.⁴ Smith's rather materialistic understanding of the idea of progress would therefore not have found much of an echo with him, and even less in writers of the sixteenth century in Europe, or even the Mediterranean world. For such writers, the dominant paradigm for understanding large-scale history was an eschatological one, which sometimes shaded off into more constrained forms of providentialism with a reduction in scale. The sixteenth century saw an expansion and propagation of many such views for a variety of reasons. For most Europeans, and Iberians in particular, the opening of new routes for trade and spaces for conquest was a divine confirmation of their own status as agents in a process of eschatological revelation. Columbus, it was later recalled by his son Hernando Colón, was not merely an adept of Franciscan millenarianism, but also read much into Seneca's celebrated passage from *Medea* with its phrase *nec sit terris ultima Thule*. In the *Libro de las Profecías*, written in the early sixteenth century, Columbus offered his own loose translation of Seneca as follows.

In the late years of the world shall come certain times when the Ocean Sea shall loosen the bonds of things; a great land shall open up and a new seaman like the one who was Jason's steersman and who was called Tiphys shall discover a new world, and then the island of Thule shall no longer be the outermost of lands.⁵

Later Iberian writers like Bartolomé de las Casas, López de Gómara and even José de Acosta would continue to find in the Senecan text, if not a holy prophecy, then at least something akin to the sibylline texts in which the ancients presciently saw what the moderns would come to achieve. Such forms of reasoning and historical emplotment went far beyond the Christian

⁴ Charles A. Corr, 'The Existence of God, Natural Theology and Christian Wolff', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 4(2) (1973), 105–18.

⁵ As cited in Sabine MacCormack, *On the Wings of Time: Rome, the Incas, Spain and Peru* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 248.

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world, even if they were not always intended to analyse the same sequences of events. For Muslims, the tenth century of their Hegiran calendar began in 1494 to 1495 of the Common Era, and ended in 1591 to 1592. As a consequence of this brute calendric fact, there was both much popular expectation and sophisticated theological speculation on what that century would bring in terms of world-historical events. Several monarchs of the Muslim world, from those of Morocco to the Ottoman Empire, to Mughal India, seized the occasion to present their own claims as the central millenarian figures that would 'renew' the Muslim community. Key amongst them were the Ottoman ruler Süleyman the Lawgiver (r. 1520 to 1566), and the Mughal emperor Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556 to 1605).⁶ While Süleyman's claims were made in the context of a titanic struggle for control over both the Mediterranean and Central Europe with the Habsburgs (and notably Charles V), Akbar made his own later ambitions known in a context that included not only Christians (both Armenians and Iberian Catholics), but also his many and diverse 'Hindu' subjects. In each of these imperial projects, the claim was that of introducing a form of universal peace (what the Mughal called *sulh-i kull*), permitting diverse communities to coexist and prosper. Significantly, both these rulers promoted the writing of powerful ideological texts that tried to sustain their arguments, drawing both on theology and on other sources, including secular histories. The cultural confidence of the Mughals is evident in letters, such as the following one written in 1581, on behalf of Akbar, to the Habsburg ruler Philip II:

It is not concealed and veiled from the minds of intelligent people, who have received the light of divine aid and are illuminated by the rays of wisdom and knowledge, that in this terrestrial world, which is the mirror of the celestial, there is nothing that excels love and no propensity so worthy of cultivation as philanthropy, because the peace of the world and the harmony of existence are based upon friendship and association, and in each heart illuminated by the rays of the sun of love, the world of the soul, or the faculties of the mind are by them purged of human darkness; and much more is this the case, when they subsist between monarchs, peace among whom implies the peace of the world and of the denizens thereof.

Composed by Akbar's chief ideologue of the time, the celebrated Shaikh Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak, this opening passage is thus a call for peaceful

⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Turning the Stones Over: Sixteenth-century Millenarianism from the Tagus to the Ganges', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 40(3) (2003), 131–63.

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exchange, at a great distance from the realities of Mughal–Habsburg relations, which consisted of an ongoing series of petty skirmishes both on land and on sea. The next passage then embarks on a still bolder gambit, relativizing the truth of various religions:

As most men are fettered by the bonds of tradition, and by imitating the ways followed by their fathers, ancestors, relatives and acquaintances, every one continues, without investigating the arguments and reasons, to follow the religion in which he was born and educated, thus excluding himself from the possibility of ascertaining the truth, which is the noblest aim of the human intellect. Therefore we associate at convenient seasons with learned men of all religions, and thus derive profit from their exquisite discourses and exalted aspirations.⁷

The letter then goes on to ask that the Habsburgs send the Mughals an authentic version of the Christian scriptures, so that they might examine them in the context of wide-ranging discussions in their court. The implication here is that the Mughal ruler, as a millenarian and messianic figure, pretty much stands above religions and their petty differences. Rather than promoting a project for the worldwide spread of a single faith, the Mughals claim to stand here for a policy of balance, in which different communities and their beliefs can find a place.

This exchange between Mughals and Habsburgs allows us to consider at least one broad framework within which early modern world history could be conceived and written, namely that of inter-imperial competition. About a dozen significant empires of varying dimensions can be said to have existed between about 1400 and 1800. These would include the Russian state based at Moscow and expanding to the east and southeast, the Chinese state of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Mughal Empire in South Asia, the Ottoman domains stretching from Basra and Baghdad in the east to the Maghreb in the west, and the Spanish, Portuguese, French, British and Dutch Empires. Other imperial projects of shorter duration can be found in Central Asia, Southeast Asia and also arguably in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. These empires coexisted in turn with smaller states, sometimes by co-opting them into larger systems, but also by using them as ideological foils – as we can see in the relationship between Safavid Iran, on the one hand, and the Ottoman and Mughal Empires on the other. At the same time, it is one of the characteristics of the early modern period that no single empire from

⁷ Edward Rehatsek, 'A letter of the Emperor Akbar asking for the Christian Scriptures', *Indian Antiquary*, 16 (April 1887), 135–39.

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amongst these achieved a hegemonic status, even to the extent that the British Empire was able to do so in the nineteenth century. The greatest of the early modern imperial enterprises in terms of physical extent at least (if not of population) was the joint Hispano-Portuguese monarchy of the period 1580 to 1640. Although three Habsburg rulers of that time claimed that they ruled notionally over the ‘four parts of the world’ (in the sense of having possessions in the four continents – albeit not in Australia), they could never claim a real superiority or domination over some of the other empires of the time.⁸

From this simple political fact alone, we can deduce that early modern world history should not be written from a single centre, and that it must necessarily be thought of as polyphonic. It would be a signal error to see these centuries as just preparing the ground for the hegemonic systems that would emerge later, and we would thus ourselves succumb to a particularly simplistic form of teleological thinking. Processes leading towards unification and homogenization certainly existed, but they were also accompanied by other processes which led to political, economic and cultural division and fragmentation. This is one of the reasons why not every significant trend of this period can be summed up under the heading of a single characterizing scheme such as ‘globalization’. It is precisely in order to have a better grasp of this complexity that we have chosen in these volumes to vary scales of analysis, as well as varying the points of perspective. Before turning to a consideration of these, however, some further macroscopic considerations may be in order.

Debates and differences

The two parts of Volume 6 of the *The Cambridge World History* essentially concern the ‘early modern’ centuries, those running from about 1400 to 1800. This is a period characterized by an intensification of long-distance contacts, best symbolized perhaps by Ferdinand Magellan’s project of a voyage of global circumnavigation from west to east. Magellan (in Portuguese: Fernão de Magalhães) was born into a family of minor nobility in the north of Portugal in about 1480, and first made his way to the Indian Ocean when he was about 25 years of age. There, he participated in a number of naval combats, and came to acquire first-hand knowledge of Southeast Asia in the

⁸ Serge Gruzinski, *Les Quatre Parties du Monde: Histoire d’une mondialisation* (Paris: La Martinière, 2004).

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aftermath of the Portuguese conquest of the great port-city of Melaka in August 1511. On returning to Portugal, he was eventually disappointed with the rewards he received for his services, and therefore resolved to mount his project of circumnavigation from west to east with Spanish support, using his own cartographic knowledge as well as the networks of correspondents and informants he possessed in the larger Iberian world. Magellan misread the location of the anti-meridian defining the geographic partition between Spaniards and Portuguese, and claimed that a significant part of the Moluccas (or Spice Islands) could be seen as falling to the Spanish Crown. He was thus able to gather enough financial support to set out with a fleet of five vessels and some 230 men in late September 1519, and after numerous difficulties entered the Pacific Ocean over a year later, at the end of 1520. By March, Magellan found himself in the Philippines, and began a process there of trade and negotiation, amply mixed with threats of violence. A reaction inevitably ensued, and the Portuguese captain was eventually killed on the small island of Mactan (near Cebu) in April 1521. The feeble remnants of the fleet eventually limped home to Spain in early September 1522, just under three years from the day of their departure. Yet, when compared to the voyages of 1492 and 1498, there is a reason that this voyage of 1519 to 1522 stands out. Conceptually, in terms of the redefinition of space that it produced, and its implications for cosmography, it may be seen as more important in many ways than Gama's voyage a quarter of a century earlier. But it also remained orphaned, in the sense of having no rapid follow-up or consolidation. The expeditions of García Jofre de Loyasa and Álvaro de Saavedra in 1525 to 1527 were unable to return to their points of departure, and the same fate befell the Grijalva and Villalobos expeditions of the late 1530s and early 1540s. It was not until 1565, then, that Andrés de Urdaneta was able successfully to complete a return voyage from the Philippines to New Spain, making a trans-Pacific economic and cultural link a real possibility on an ongoing basis.⁹

From the last quarter of the sixteenth century onwards then, the idea of an integrated global history based on the existence of worldwide networks of trade, exchange, conquest and circulation can be thought to have at least partly become a reality. American plants, birds and even some animals now reached the Indian Ocean not only via the Atlantic and Europe, but directly through the Pacific. The so-called 'Manila Galleon', which linked together the Mexican port of Acapulco and the Philippines, was perhaps a fragile

⁹ Avelino Teixeira da Mota (ed.), *A viagem de Fernão de Magalhães e a questão das Molucas* (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações Científicas do Ultramar, 1975).

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thread, but it was nevertheless an important one. To some extent, Asian spices and other plants were also to have an impact on the Americas as a result. Not only administrators and powerful traders, but even more humble travellers with some degree of curiosity, could think of making a voyage around the world. An important early example is the Italian Francesco Carletti, who after trading slaves alongside his father in the Atlantic, then embarked on a voyage that took him from Mexico and Peru to the Philippines, to China and Japan, then to Goa, and eventually back to his native Italy, where he wrote his *Ragionamenti*, devoted to his circumnavigation between the years 1594 and 1602. His rough contemporary was the Breton Pierre-Olivier Malherbe, who claimed for his part to have made a leisurely voyage around the world from 1581 onwards, eventually returning to his native France only in 1608. Malherbe was to boast not only of having known the Mughal emperor Akbar, but of having ‘gone by land from New Spain or Mexico, where he stayed a long time, to Peru and the extremity of the kingdom of Chile, making it a point to see all that was rare and singular by way of cities, inhabitants, countries, plants, animals, and ruins’. Not least of all, Malherbe claimed he had ‘seen and descended [the mine] of Potosí, where he learned to be a great miner of metals, since the said [mine] is the richest in the world, and has no end to it’.¹⁰

This evocation of the iconic Bolivian mine of Potosí was to be very nearly an obligatory point of passage from the last third of the sixteenth century onwards. The mine came to stand not only for the unparalleled riches of America (also evoked in the celebrated myth of El-Dorado), but for the Spanish Empire that largely controlled them. But these were ambiguous riches, as we already see in the closing years of the sixteenth century, when the precious metals brought by the returning Spanish fleets to Europe were blamed for inflation and social instability in Iberia, as well as in the world beyond, even as far as the Ottoman Empire. A widespread ‘decline’ literature began to arise in this period, in which empire and its attendant novelties were portrayed as much as a curse as a blessing. However, it is now increasingly clear that a good part of Potosí’s silver went not to Europe, but across the Pacific. In other words, the substantial Chinese demand for silver in the period was met in part through the ramifications of the

¹⁰ See Grégoire Holtz, ‘Pierre-Olivier Malherbe: The Journey of a Manuscript from India to France (First Half of the 17th Century)’ in Vijaya Rao, (ed.), *Reaching the Great Moghul: Francophone Travel Writing on India of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2012), pp. 20–39.

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Acapulco–Manila link, as a complex trade-pattern grew up linking Manila, Melaka, the Portuguese settlement of Macau and the port of Nagasaki in southern Japan. It was also through this network that the first Tokugawa ambassadors appeared in Mexico in 1614, en route to Europe, attracting the attention of the Nahuatl-language chronicler Chimalpahín. Again, the first colonies of East Asians who appeared in American cities such as Lima and Mexico clearly traversed this passage, as did a good many of the more ambitious merchants of the time, whether *marranos* or Armenians.

Every history of the early modern period is thus at least partly a history of trade and merchants, who were the most conspicuous actors of the period alongside the usual warriors and conquerors who populate earlier epochs as well. Two of the most substantial attempts to write early modern world histories in the second half of the twentieth century demonstrate this fact well enough. The first is Fernand Braudel's three-volume work, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XVe–XVIIIe siècle*, which first appeared in 1979, and was translated soon after into English and a host of other languages.¹¹ The second, more schematic and certainly more controversial, is the historical sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System*, the first volume of which – largely devoted to the sixteenth century – appeared already in 1974, and of which subsequent volumes dealing with the periods from 1600 to 1750, from the 1730s to the 1840s, and from 1789 to 1914, have since been published.¹² Braudel in his volumes evoked the encounters between different 'world-economies' (*économies-mondes*) at a variety of levels, defining a 'world-economy' as 'a fragment of the universe, a part of the planet that is economically autonomous, and essentially capable of being self-sufficient, and whose connections and internal exchanges give it a certain organic unity'. From this perspective, quite large zones such as the Indian Ocean, pre-Columbian America or the Russian Empire could be thought of in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries as 'world-economies', without a clear hierarchy between them. While each of these 'world-economies' might possess some degree of internal differentiation, their interactions might then produce further integration or frictional conflict, with no outcome being considered as historically inevitable. Braudel's world history, while largely focused on material life, nevertheless remained remarkably open-ended.

¹¹ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, Siân Reynolds, (trans.), 3 vols (London: Collins, 1981–4).

¹² Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, re-edn, 4 vols (1974–2011) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).