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978-1-107-00020-9 - The Cambridge World History: Volume VII: Production, Destruction, and Connection, 1750–Present: Part 1: Structures, Spaces, and Boundary Making

Edited by J. R. McNeill and Kenneth Pomeranz

Excerpt

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I

Production, destruction, and connection, 1750–present: introduction

KENNETH POMERANZ AND J. R. MCNEILL

Forty-three essays about modern world history is both too many and too few, and to begin *c.* 1750 is both too late and too early. We could not do everything, and have chosen to exhibit a wide variety of approaches to world history – focusing on regions, moments, commodities, large social processes, themes, and so on – rather than providing many examples of any one of these approaches. Sometimes our choice within categories was guided by the availability of a particular author, sometimes by a sense that one example was indeed more important than another, and sometimes by a concern for some other sort of balance. (If some topics seemed likely to yield essays in which, say, Latin America was much more prominent than the Middle East, we were that much more inclined to look for another in which the Middle East would figure prominently.) But ultimately, our offerings are much like those of chefs whose evening menus depend on what happened to be in the market this morning. We make no claim to telling the entire story, and many essays must stand not only for themselves, but also as illustrative of a certain thread in world history. We hope that readers will find that an essay on rubber or automobiles in modern world history suggests ideas about what global histories of coffee or railways might look like, or an essay on global 1956 what an essay on global 1968 might be. If so, we will be content with having perhaps whetted their appetites for more in this diverse and sprawling field.

Our chronology is also, inevitably, somewhat arbitrary, and we have been happy to let authors violate it where they thought it made sense to do so. In fact, all the volumes of this set have a somewhat ragged and overlapping chronology – that is a feature of the program, not a bug. Not only do different subjects invite different periodizations, but a single subject often looks quite different when considered on different timescales, with trends appearing, disappearing, or reversing, different parts of the world

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involved, and different results seeming more or less significant. The point is usually not that one of these timescales represents the “true” perspective, but that they must be explicitly juxtaposed to grasp the significance of the phenomenon, either as immediately experienced or as understood from the perspective of our own moment.

But that does not mean that any chronology is as good as any other, and our volume is defined by at least two decisions about periodization that are worth discussing:

- (1) why use 1750 as a rough beginning for what will, whether we like it or not, inevitably wind up being referred to as the “modern” volume of the Cambridge World History?
- (2) why not subdivide this period of enormous changes, with, say, one book on 1750–1900 and another on post-1900?

Those questions must, of course, be answered in relation to particular themes. The title of this volume “Production, Destruction, and Connection,” influenced our choice of essay topics, though it does not fully account for what appears between these covers. It also fits some essays better than others, as volumes like ours do not aim for the degree of unity that one might find in a collection of essays from a tightly focused conference. We are, moreover, quite conscious that this choice of themes risks over-emphasizing the material aspects of life; it is not our aim to do so. But we would note that there are both historiographical and historical reasons why these themes loom so large. “Connection” is, obviously, central to a work that aims to explore “world history” in particular, rather than all history that has happened in the world; along with comparison, it forms one of the major ways that we bring remote peoples and places into the same analytical frame. Second, the material aspects of life are the ones for which comparison is easiest – life expectancy in two very different societies is more easily compared than are gender roles or art forms – and for which long-distance flows are most easily traced (shipping manifests do not list the ideas on board). Third, to the extent that history is about change over time, there is reason to highlight material life during our period, in which material production and destruction have, by many measures, changed more dramatically than in all the rest of human history.

Thus, to help the reader find something in these volumes beyond the sum of their parts, it makes sense to ask to what extent the last 250 (or so) years might form a reasonably unified and distinctive epoch in terms of production, destruction, and connection.

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@1750: destruction, connection, and a world
of colliding empires

It is convenient, then, that the beginning of our period is sharply marked by an increase in the prevalence of world wars – events that connected larger-than-ever parts of the globe in overlapping campaigns of destruction with world-altering consequences. While earlier conflicts had involved broadly dispersed battles – particularly the long-running conflict between the Dutch and the Iberian powers – the Seven Years' War (1754–1763) was more truly global, both in its venues and in its consequences. The French loss of Quebec and Louisiana (the latter briefly and partially recovered in 1800 before being sold to the United States) and the resulting shifts in the balance of power between Native Americans, European settlers, and the British crown fundamentally changed the history of North America. The British victory at Plassey (1757) over the Nawab of Bengal (a French ally) was an equally epochal event in the history of South Asia, and of global imperialism. It marked, among other things, the first acquisition by a European power of a piece of the Asian mainland beyond a small port and its hinterland, and began the English East India Company's second (and more consequential) life as a territorial government that could tax land, adjudicate disputes, enforce monopolies, and raise and deploy significant armies. Other territory changed hands, either permanently or temporarily, on almost all inhabited continents: examples ranged from Manila to Senegal to Havana to Dresden to Pondicherry to Sacramento in Brazil (Map 1.1). The financial and strategic consequences of the war ultimately set the stage for the Atlantic revolutions of c. 1775–1825; taken together, they triggered an enormous shift in the focus of European colonialism from the western hemisphere to the eastern.

Moreover, the Atlantic revolutions and wars were epochal in at least two other senses. From today's retrospective standpoint, they mark the first retreat of a wave of European colonialism that had begun as far back as the capture of Ceuta in 1415. As such, those revolutions also created precedents and icons which would inspire participants in the second, twentieth-century, wave of decolonization: George Washington, Simon Bolivar, Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and so on. Equally fundamentally, the Atlantic revolutions would also reorder the politics of large parts of the world and introduce political forms – the large-scale republic, and, in some sense, the national state itself – that dominate the world today.

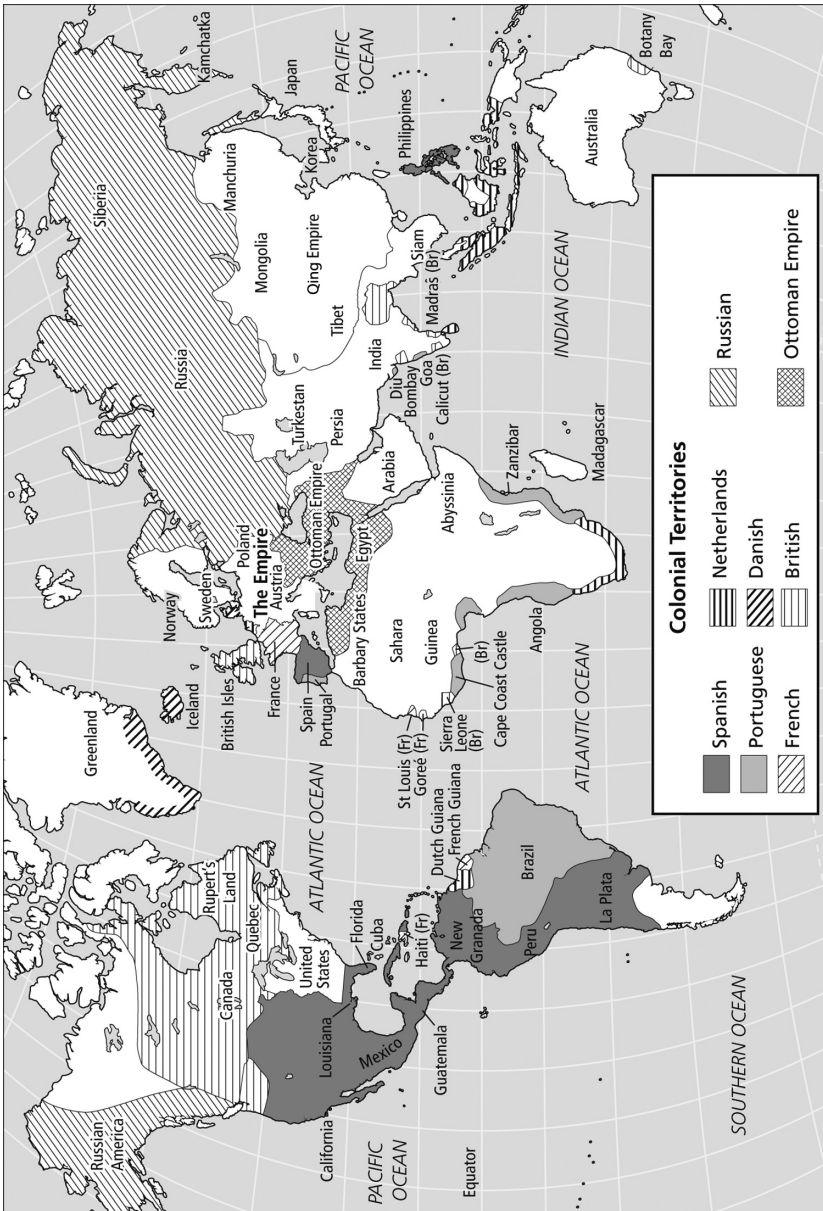
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Map 1.1. Basic political map of the world in 1800

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Nor were the Seven Years' War and its sequels the only reason to think of the mid-eighteenth century as inaugurating a new, and more global, geopolitical landscape. The final defeat of the Zunghar Mongols by the Qing dynasty in 1759 marked the end of a century of expansion, and gave what we today call China something very close to its modern borders. Crucially, this conquest was made possible not only by unprecedented Qing achievements in logistics but by Russian expansion, which limited the ability of the Mongols to retreat into safety. It thus marked a new era in which clear-cut geographic borders like those we take for granted today were becoming more important, and agrarian (and later industrial) polities would marginalize nomadic peoples as never before. Russian victory in its 1768–1774 war with the Ottomans – resulting in the exodus of about 100,000 Crimean Tatars – was part of the same advance of sedentary peoples and territorial states.

The defeat of the Zunghars in particular marked a milestone in a long-running global story: the victory of sedentary states over horse-riding nomadic confederations, after roughly three millennia of seesaw competition (and co-operation) between these different kinds of polities. That story was far from over in 1759, as we shall see shortly: its last act should probably be dated to the nineteenth century, with the defeat of the Sioux, the Comanche, and other Native American federations. But in North America, equestrian states were novelties, because horses were a recent import. On the Eurasian steppe, where horse nomads helped shape politics for far longer, the meeting of two huge agrarian empires in Central Eurasia, enabling the destruction of the last major remnant of Mongol power, marks a particularly important moment in that story.

Indeed, the Zunghar defeat can be seen as part of an even larger tale: the subjugation and sometimes destruction of “tribal” peoples generally – including forest, marsh, and other peoples who, unlike horse-riders, had rarely threatened agrarian polities, but often stood in the way of their expansion. Here, too, the eighteenth century, seen globally, marks a fateful, though not final, shift in a long-running set of struggles.

A few decades before 1750, the discovery of gold and diamonds in the interior of Brazil had helped spark a massive movement of people (including African slaves) from the coast into areas to which coastal residents had previously paid little attention. In North America, as already mentioned, the end of the Seven Years' War placed the Atlantic colonies at least nominally under the same flag as the vast fertile plains west of the Appalachians, deprived indigenous people of a powerful potential ally (the French, having been more interested in fur trading than agricultural settlement, had had an

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easier time reaching accommodations with Native Americans) and thus opened the way for an especially dramatic (and traumatic) assault on both nomadic and settled Native societies. When this and other results of the Seven Years' War helped lead some British colonies in North America to declare and win their independence, Britain would start shipping convicts to Australia rather than Georgia, extending this process to the one inhabited continent that it had not yet affected. The continuing succession of wars allowed American-born descendants of Europeans (usually called "creoles") to form independent states in what had been the Spanish Empire across most of mainland Central and South America as well; they, too, tended to take a more consistently aggressive stance towards indigenous communities than their predecessors had.

The British colonial regime that was taking shape in South Asia during these same wars – a process that began in Bengal in the 1750s and reached new heights during South Asian conflicts that became intertwined with Britain's wars against revolutionary and Napoleonic France – also took a much more consistently hostile stance towards non-agricultural (or semi-agricultural) populations than most of its predecessors had. This was not a settler-dominated regime, like those which emerged from Europe's American colonies. It was, however, a regime determined to increase its tax revenues, in part by encouraging intensive cultivation and agricultural commercialization; it was also less dependent than its predecessors had been on locally raised cavalry and fodder.¹ Moreover, it was ideologically hostile to those who failed to "improve" property – or, because they moved frequently, seemed indifferent to it – seeing this as a barrier to "civilized" life more generally.

Next door to Britain's emerging Indian empire, a new round of wars was also reshaping mainland Southeast Asia. They began c. 1740 in Burma as Mon rebels (who had French support) were ultimately defeated by a reinvigorated central government, and increasingly marginalized thereafter. Khmers and Chams would become increasingly subordinated by a more centralized

1 Mahesh Rangarajan, "Environmental histories of India: of states, landscapes, and ecologies," in Edmund T. Burke III and Kenneth Pomeranz, eds., *The Environment and World History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 232–237, 240; Kaushik Roy, "The hybrid military establishment of the East India Company in South Asia: 1750–1849," *Journal of Global History* 6:2 (July 2011), 18. The Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries intermittently pursued a policy of settling or destroying nomadic populations within its borders, with similar motives: Resat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009).

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Vietnamese state a few decades later; Siam would likewise place Malay, Lao, and Khmer tributaries under tighter control; imported guns and profits from participation in expanding maritime trade would play important parts in all of these campaigns of territorial consolidation, which were also marked by extended battles among the consolidating states themselves (especially Burma and Siam).² North and east of those battles, Chinese dynamics showed that agrarian empires in crisis could sometimes be as dangerous to their neighbors as those in the flush of success. One after another “minority uprising” occurred in China’s borderlands from c. 1780 onwards. Often these were in response to an influx of disaster-stricken farmers from China’s interior and/or the inability of an over-extended imperial administration to keep order; in many cases, though, the ultimate result was no better for the indigenous peoples than in places where they faced a systematic campaign of expansion organized from a position of strength. Any analogy between these varied processes and, say, the Qing and Romanovs squeezing the Mongols must be a loose one – and any comparison to the expansion of creole regimes in the Americas much looser still. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that even in the absence of formal treaties and alliance systems, and in the absence of real threats from the peoples on their frontiers, expanding and centralizing empires were often engaged in increasingly similar, and mutually entangled, enterprises.

We must be careful not to assume that what we see in retrospect was visible in advance. The battle between sedentary and horse-riding nomads was, as we have already noted, a protracted one, stretching almost to 1900; the survival struggles of many forest peoples continue today. Nomads in particular had won many previous contests with agrarian regimes, and it was hardly foreseeable that a long string of particularly damaging defeats awaited them this time – especially since railways, repeating rifles, barbed wire, and other nineteenth-century innovations were as yet unknown. Indeed, the late eighteenth century was marked in many places by a seemingly opposite process, in which nomadic or semi-nomadic conquerors took the offensive against fragile agrarian states. This “tribal breakout” (to use Christopher Bayly’s term)³ inflicted serious damage on Muslim empires arrayed across southern Asia, from the Ottoman realm to Java,

2 Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in a Global Context, c. 800–1830*, Vol. 1: *Integration of the Mainland* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 202–206, 335, 430–435.

3 Christopher Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 33–54.

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and did much to create the context in which European (mostly British) invaders could do a great deal with relatively small forces, establishing themselves as colonial rulers, with agricultural and mercantile elites who needed security becoming junior partners. Nadir Shah and the Marathas in India, the founders of the Qajar state in Iran, the founders of the house of Sa'ud who challenged Ottoman power on the Arabian peninsula, and others, may now seem like a last gasp of nomadic power, but that is clear only in retrospect. That temporary expansions of equestrian (or camel-raising) nomadic power ultimately aided sea-borne conquerors who would press even harder than indigenous sedentary states had – not just against particular nomads, but against nomadism – complicates this long historical arc, but does not change the fact that the mid-eighteenth century marked one of its notable inflection points.

Chronologies of production and connection: unprecedented demographic and economic growth

In demography, economy, and ecology, the 1750s is likewise a watershed. Here, too, one can make a strong case for the special character of the twentieth century (as one of us has done in book-length form), but there is also much to be said for marking some eighteenth-century origins. Let us begin with population: the focus of Massimo Livi-Bacci's chapter, and also touched on in those by John McNeill and Alison Bashford (Chapters 7, 2, and 8).

The years from about 1610 to 1680 marked the last long period (so far) in which global population grew very little, and perhaps not at all. In the eighteenth century, by contrast, world population grew by almost 50 percent, which had probably never happened before in just 100 years. In the nineteenth century, human numbers grew by perhaps 80 percent, and in the twentieth century they added a stunning 4.4 billion people: an increment almost three times (275 percent) the 1.6 billion people with which the century started.

Crucially, both the motors of that change and its geographic centers have changed greatly over time, as Livi-Bacci emphasizes. Until at least 1850, there was not much improvement anywhere in life expectancies, so that almost all the increase came from higher birth rates. Still, the end of the worst phases of the Little Ice Age c. 1710 improved survival rates in much of the world, and at least some societies, perhaps chastened by the horrors of the seventeenth century, made greater efforts to provide their members with a safety

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net.⁴ In the nineteenth century – mostly the second half – life expectancies began to improve in a few, mostly Western, areas, and birth rates declined beginning a few decades later. In the twentieth century, especially after the Second World War, death rates have declined sharply almost everywhere; birth rates have also fallen, but not as fast or (thus far) as universally. Here, too, then, we see a case for a unified, though not homogeneous historical period running from some time in the eighteenth century to the present.

At first, the declines in mortality were probably driven mostly by improved nutrition, and by the retreat of plague: in other words by the same sorts of factors that had driven most past fluctuations in death rates. But in the latter half of the nineteenth century, changes in sanitation and public health (especially improved access to clean water) became increasingly important; in the twentieth century, direct medical interventions began to matter as never before (though, as William McAllister points out in his chapter on both licit and illicit drugs [Volume VII Part 2, Chapter 19], at least one-third of the world's people lack reliable access to modern pharmaceuticals).

These may appear, then, to be transformations driven by science and technology. But it would be more accurate to say that they were enabled by those factors. As both Mark Harrison and Erez Manela make clear (Chapters 9 and 10), the timing and geography of advances in both public and individual medicine were and are very much influenced by politics. And when it comes to the decline in birth rates, politics looms even larger, as Alison Bashford shows. Politicians, intellectuals, and others have debated intensely whether anyone should be allowed or forced to limit their births, and by what means; not surprisingly, the outcomes have varied in different societies, and continue to do so even as the debates themselves have become increasingly global. Moreover, the winners of the public debates could not necessarily override the private ideas and desires of couples. Pro-natalist policies, as Bashford shows, have failed more often than succeeded; some sterilization campaigns have been strongly and effectively resisted. Even in post-1980 China, where a particularly determined and coercive birth control campaign has contributed to a dramatic decline in birth rates, the state was

⁴ Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013) is the major work on the climate-related catastrophes of the 1600s, and argues (more suggestively) that lessons learned from these years were crucial to the creation of stronger guarantees of minimum welfare hereafter, which in turn gave people in certain societies enough security to encourage productive risk-taking in the eighteenth century.

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forced to compromise in significant ways with the norms of rural society.⁵ In most parts of the world, the decline in birth rates has been a recent occurrence, and has been largely the result of people making their own decisions in the light of shifting norms and incentives.

With regard to the economy more generally there would be a good case for a slightly different periodization, in which the peculiarity of the last 175–200 years was much more marked than that of the last 265. Despite various signs that important structural changes were underway in some economies during the eighteenth century, there is general agreement that even in Britain, sustained and significant per capita growth was not clearly present until some years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815; clear-cut improvements in the living standards of ordinary people would have to wait another generation beyond that. As late as 1830, even Britain still used as much power from waterwheels as from stationary steam engines; and in 1840, Britain still had considerably more installed steam capacity than the rest of the world combined.⁶ For the most part, the dramatic transformations that we associate with the nineteenth century – not to mention the quantitatively even greater changes of the post-Second World War period – still lay ahead at that point, even in Europe; in most of the rest of the world they were further off still.

Probably the most striking and fundamental discontinuity is summarized by Vaclav Smil as an “energy transition from plant fuels to fossil fuels and from animate prime movers to machines powered by fossil fuel use” (Chapter 6). There is no need to review his figures in detail here, nor the somewhat higher estimates in John McNeill’s chapter on environmental change. Suffice it to say that total human energy use has multiplied somewhere between fifty- and one hundred-fold since 1750, with the largest increases coming in the twentieth century; even that greatly understates the increase in effective human energy use, as the efficiency with which our technologies convert combustion into the motion, heat, or light we desire has increased anywhere from 35 times (today’s best diesel engine versus a 1750 steam engine) to 1,600 times (today’s halide light versus a tallow candle). Moreover, since some “engines” have been much less susceptible to transformation than others – most notably, our digestive tracts have not gained in efficiency, and putting more calories into them rapidly reaches

5 Susan Greenhalgh, “Controlling bodies and births in village China,” *American Ethnologist* 21:1 (February 1994), 1–30, provides some telling examples.

6 Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 173, 179.