Introduction

There are many ways to tell the history of the world. Oral histories that were later written down, including the Book of Genesis, the Rig Veda, and the Popul Vuh, focused especially on the actions of gods and on human/divine interactions. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus drew on such oral traditions along with eyewitness testimony to provide deep background for his story of the war between the Persians and the Greeks, setting this within the context of the world as he knew it. The ancient Chinese historian Sima Qian told history through an encyclopedic presentation of events, activities, and biographies of emperors, officials, and other important people, beginning with the semi-mythical first sage rulers of China. The tenth-century Muslim historian Abu Ja'far al-Tabari began before the creation of Adam and Eve, and used biblical, Greek, Roman, Persian, and Byzantine sources to present history as a long and unbroken process of cultural transmission. Dynastic chroniclers in medieval Europe and Mughal India often began their accounts with the creation of the world to devise "universal histories," then moved quickly through the millennia, slowing down as they neared the present to focus on political developments in their own locale. Histories that had a broad scope were among the flood of books produced after the development of printing technology in the fifteenth century, most written by highly learned male scholars, but some by poets, nuns, physicians, obscure officials, former slaves, and others. With the expansion of literacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, authors wrote world histories full of

moral lessons, some of them designed specifically for children or female readers.

Throughout much of the twentieth century scholarly history focused on nations, but world history did not disappear. For example, right after the devastation of World War I, and in part as a response to the slaughter, H.G. Wells wrote *The Outline of History*, which told the history of the world as a story of human efforts to "conceive a common purpose in relation to which all men may live happily." Readers could buy this in cheap bi-weekly installments, just as they had Wells' earlier novel *The War of the Worlds*, and millions did. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, the increasing integration of world regions into a single system through globalization led to a re-emergence of scholarly history conceptualized on a global scale, and the intensifying flows and interactions of people, goods, and ideas across national borders inspired histories that focused on those flows and interactions themselves. So today there are imperial histories, transnational and borderlands histories, postcolonial histories, histories of migrations and diasporas, and global histories of individual commodities such as salt, silver, or porcelain.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL WORLD HISTORY

This book thus draws on long traditions and recent developments. Like all world histories, it highlights certain things and leaves many others out, for there is no way to tell the whole story within the pages of a book that could be read (to say nothing of written) within one lifetime. It tells the story of humans as producers and reproducers, understanding these terms in a social and cultural as well as material sense. My notion of humans as "producers" incorporates not only foragers, farmers, and factory workers, but also shamans, scribes, and secretaries. Discussions of family and kin structures, sexuality, demography, and other issues that are often seen as "reproduction" examine the ways these are socially determined and change with interactions between cultures. The book also underlines the constant connections between production and reproduction throughout human history, as changes in the modes or meaning of one led to changes in the other. It does not ignore

political and military developments, but examines the way these shaped and were shaped by social and cultural factors. Doing this provides a fuller and more accurate picture of both politics and war than does analyzing these more traditional topics as somehow divorced from society.

This social and cultural focus brings a new perspective to a brief world history. Along with global history, social and cultural history—and related fields that have developed within them—have been the most important new approaches in history over the last half century. Through them, the focus of history has broadened from politics and great men to a huge range of topics—labor, families, women and gender, sexuality, childhood, material culture, the body, identity, race and ethnicity, consumption, and many others. The actions and ideas of a wide variety of people, and not simply members of the elite, have become part of the history we know. World history was developing as a field during the same time, but it generally emphasized political economy, and focused on large-scale political and economic processes carried out by governments and commercial leaders. It has had a powerful materialist tradition, in part because material objects seem relatively unproblematic to compare and connect across regions. By contrast, social and cultural forms and categories appear more particular to individual societies, and have a very different meaning in different places. Thus trying to compare them or make generalizations seems to require glossing over differences and reducing complexities, the opposite of what social and cultural historians generally seek to do. In addition, in the world histories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, making comparisons among social and cultural forms was often part of ranking them—groups were "primitive" or "advanced," cultures were "civilizations" or they were not—and most contemporary historians try to avoid such rankings.

Comparing does not have to mean ranking, however, and historical analysis always involves comparison, if only the comparison between something at one point in time and at a later point, or between the past and the present. No question about change, continuity, causation, or connections can be answered without making comparisons. History also always involves generalization and a selection of evidence. Even histories that look very closely at one

event or one individual leave out things that the historian judges to be less important, and suggest parallels with developments in different places or times. The search for patterns is what allows historians to create categories that can organize and make sense of the past. (Anyone who tells a story about past events, including us as we talk to our friends about our own experiences yesterday, does the same thing.) There are categories based on chronology, including large ones such as ancient, medieval, and modern, and smaller ones such as the Song dynasty or the 1950s. There are categories based on geography—Australia, the Amazon basin; on politics—Brazil, Berlin; on occupation—doctor, data processor; on religion—Muslim, Mormon; on social group—noble, nun; and on many other things. Most of these categories are human constructions, of course, although sometimes this is forgotten and they come to be seen as self-evident, divinely created, or naturally occurring. Their boundaries are frequently contested, and blurry lines of division are more common than sharp borders. And all of these categories—even the geographic ones, as we see in our era of rising ocean levels and dried-up rivers—change over time. In examining social and cultural developments on a global scale, this book will make comparisons and generalizations just as earlier world histories of trade, commodity flows, and empires have done, but also note diversities and counter-examples. You might think of this in musical terms, as a theme and variations.

Social and cultural matters are at the heart of big questions in world history today, from the Paleolithic (Did early *Homo sapiens* begin creating social institutions, art, and complex language as the result of a sudden cognitive revolution, or was this a gradual process?) to the present (Are technology and globalization destroying local cultures through greater homogenization or providing more opportunities for democratization and diversity?). Social and cultural matters are also part of issues in world history that might seem to be about political economy, such as whether European dominance of most of the world in the nineteenth century was the result of accidents like easy access to coal or learned behaviors like a Protestant work ethic or competition.

This book differs from other world histories in its social and cultural focus, but it shares certain basic aspects of world history

as a field. Most obviously, world historians use a wide spatial lens, although they do not always take the entire world as their unit of analysis. They tend to de-emphasize individual nations or civilizations, and focus instead on regions defined differently, including zones of interaction, or on the ways in which people or goods or ideas moved across regions. Oceans are just as important as continents, or perhaps even more important, especially in the era before mechanized transport, when travel by sea was far easier and cheaper than travel by land. Islands are interesting, as are the beaches on those islands, often the first place that interactions occurred.

As with any history, some world history has a very narrow temporal framework, examining developments around the world in a single decade or even a single year: 1688, for example, saw dramatic events in many places, as did the 1960s. Other world history has a broader temporal framework, and stretches far back into the past. Just as they have de-emphasized the nation as the most significant geographic unit, most global historians have also de-emphasized the invention of writing as a sharp dividing line in human history, separating the "prehistoric" from the "historic." With this the border between archaeology and history disappears, and the Paleolithic and Neolithic become part of history. Some expand their time frames even further, and begin history with the Big Bang, thus incorporating developments that have usually been studied through astrophysics, chemistry, geology, and biology within what they term "Big History." Others are not willing to go this far, but most world historians agree that history should be studied on a range of chronological and spatial scales, including, but not limited to, very large ones.

World historians also agree that we should always be conscious and careful about how we divide history into periods and determine which events and developments are key turning points between one era and another, although they often disagree about those periods and turning points. Some argue, for example, that the modern world began with the establishment of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century, while others would say that this happened in 1492, with Columbus' voyages, and still others in 1789, with the French Revolution. Other world historians would say that the search for one single point is misguided, because it implies there is

only one path to modernity, or that the whole notion of "the modern" is so value-laden that we should stop using the term.

Along with disagreeing about when history starts and how it should be periodized, historians who study the whole world also disagree about what to call their field. Some draw a distinction between world history and global history, and guard the borders of one or the other, or the borders of other related approaches, such as transnational or diasporic history. I do not find guarding borders very interesting or fruitful, and I use "world" and "global" interchangeably, choosing one or the other sometimes simply because of the structure of a sentence. "World" can be used both as an adjective (world literature, world music) or a noun (a history of the world), while "global" is always an adjective. To most people "a history of the globe" would be a history of spherical maps.

You might be asking why all this matters, why you need to know about my approach in this book. Because writing history (or producing it in other ways, such as films, television programs, websites, or museum displays) is a selective process of inclusion and exclusion, it is important for you as its reader or viewer to think about the conscious or unconscious assumptions and perspective of whoever produced it. These were themselves shaped by historical processes, for the questions we (as historians or just as human beings) think are interesting and important about the past change, as do the ways we try to answer them. It is no surprise that social and labor history developed when working-class students entered universities and graduate programs in larger numbers, nor that women's and gender history did when women did. It is no surprise that world, global, transnational, postcolonial, and diasporic history have become increasingly common approaches in the interconnected world of the twenty-first century. It would have been strange had it been otherwise.

THE PLAN

The book is arranged chronologically in five chapters, each covering a shorter time frame than its predecessor. Each chapter includes some discussion of the way people have thought about the era covered by the chapter and the important forms of evidence they

have used in order to learn about it. Thus you will get a sense not only of what happened, but also of how people have discovered what happened and how they have given it meaning. For every chapter except Chapter 1, this includes writings of people living at the time about their own society and era. Because world history can be studied on many different scales, each chapter contains a few embedded micro-histories, specific examples that use a narrower range of focus.

Certain topics emerge in most chapters— families and lineages, food production and preparation, social and gender hierarchies, slavery, cities, organized violence, religious practices, migration— because these were structures that men and women created or activities they engaged in that were spread widely across time and space and had significant impact everywhere. None of these was static, however, and each chapter notes how they changed, sometimes through internal developments, sometimes through encounters with others, and most often through a combination of these. Each chapter also centers on one or two particular developments that mark the era covered in the chapter, such as the growth of cities or the creation of a global trading network. These developments are those generally viewed as central by world historians, but their social and cultural aspects have sometimes been ignored.

Reflecting the view among world historians that writing was not the beginning of history, Chapter 1, "Foraging and farming families (to 3000 BCE)," discusses the Paleolithic and Neolithic, thus covering the vast majority of human history. It examines the more complex social structures and cultural forms that plant and animal domestication enabled, as the simple stone hand axes of the Paleolithic were replaced by more specialized tools, small kin groups gave way to ever larger villages, egalitarian foragers became stratified by gender distinctions and divisions of wealth and power, and spirits were transformed into hierarchies of divinities worshipped at permanent human-built structures. The basic social pattern set in early agricultural societies—with the majority of people farming the land and a small elite who lived off their labor—was remarkably resilient, lasting well into the twentieth century for most of the world.

Villages became cities and city-states, which grew in some places into larger-scale states and empires. That process is traced in

Chapter 2, "Cities and classical societies (3000 BCE–500 CE)," with a focus on the social institutions and cultural norms that facilitated these developments, including hereditary dynasties, hierarchical families, and notions of ethnicity. Writing and other means of recording information were invented to serve the needs of people who lived close to one another in cities and states. Oral rituals of worship, healing, and celebration in which everyone participated grew into religions, philosophies, and branches of knowledge presided over by specialists, including Judaism and Confucian thought. Social differences became formalized in systems that divided slave and free, or that grouped people into castes or orders, distinctions that were maintained through marriage and cultural ideologies. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity were created and then expanded in the cosmopolitan worlds of classical empires, shaping family life and social practices.

Most of the classical empires collapsed in the middle of the first millennium, but despite this collapse various regions of the world became more culturally, commercially, and politically integrated in the millennium that followed, a process traced in Chapter 3, "Expanding networks of interaction (500 CE–1500 CE)." Mercantile and religious networks, including Islam, linked growing cities and glittering courts, where hereditary rulers and their entourages of elites developed institutions and ceremonies that strengthened royal authority, and created courtly cultures with distinctive codes of behavior. All of these relied for their wealth on a spread and intensification of agriculture, which happened in both the eastern and western hemispheres, and was interwoven with changes in social and gender structures. Cites such as Constantinople, Tenochtitlan, and Hangzhou grew into large metropolises, and religion, trade, and diplomacy motivated people to travel, creating regional and transregional zones of exchange in goods and ideas.

The voyages of Columbus and his successors linked the two hemispheres, and Chapter 4, "A new world of connections (1500 CE–1800 CE)," surveys the positive and negative biological, cultural, and social consequences of this "Columbian Exchange." Among these were the spread of disease and the transfer of plants, animals, and consumer goods, along with economic changes that led to social protests, revolts, warfare, and forced migrations in an

increasingly interdependent world. Religious transformations, including the Protestant and Catholic Reformations and the creation of Sikhism, were interwoven with all of these developments, as religions, too, migrated and morphed. New urban social settings and cultural institutions, such as coffee and tea houses, theatres, and salons, offered men—and sometimes women—opportunities for entertainment, sociability, consumption, and the exchange of ideas, but the increasing contacts among peoples also resulted in more rigid notions of human difference.

The transformations of the modern era have led to today's vast social divisions between wealth and poverty, but also created a human community that is interconnected on a global scale, processes that are examined in Chapter 5, "Industrialization, imperialism, and inequality (1800 CE–2015 CE)." Major economic and political changes, such as industrialization and de-industrialization, imperialism and anti-imperialism, the rise and collapse of communism, and the expansion of nationalism, have intersected with social and cultural changes within a framework of rapidly increasing population and human impact on the environment. International movements for social justice have called for greater egalitarianism and understanding, while ethnic, religious, and social divisions have led to brutality, genocides, and war. Technological developments in agriculture, medicine, and weaponry have both extended human life and extinguished it at levels unimagined in earlier eras, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing long-standing social hierarchies and cultural patterns.

One of those mass wars led H.G. Wells to write *The Outline of History* a century ago, as he sought examples in history of the search for happiness and a common purpose to counteract the misery and carnage he had just witnessed. My aims with this book are not as sweeping, but, like all global historians, I hope to widen (and lengthen) your view of the human past, and, like all social and cultural historians, to make it a more complicated (and more interesting) story.

FURTHER READING

As I was writing this book, I was also serving as the editor-in-chief of the *Cambridge World History* (2015). Its seven volumes provide an excellent

overview of the dynamic field of world history today, with essays by historians, art historians, anthropologists, classicists, archaeologists, economists, sociologists, and area studies specialists from universities around the world; their insights are reflected in the pages of this book. For one-volume introductions to world and global history as a field, see: Bruce Mazlish and R. Buultjens, eds., *Conceptualizing Global History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Ross Dunn, ed., *The New World History: A Teacher's Companion* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000); Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Marnie Hughes-Warrington, ed., *Palgrave Advances in World Histories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Douglas Northrop, ed., *A Companion to World History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Kenneth R. Curtis and Jerry H. Bentley, eds., *Architects of World History: Researching the Global Past* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014). For studies of how history has been written around the world, see: Eckhardt Fuchs and Benedikt Stuchtey, eds., *Across Cultural Borders: Historiography in Global Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Global World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori, eds., *A Companion to Global Historical Thought* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

Useful surveys of historical practice today that include consideration of world and global history are: David Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Today?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd edn. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006); Ulinka Rublack, *A Concise Companion to History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The website "Making history: the changing face of the profession in Britain" developed by the Institute of Historical Research in London has some excellent short essays on current approaches: www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/themes/.

No overview of social history has been published recently, but for cultural history see Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) and Alessandro Arcangeli, *Cultural History: A Concise Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011). Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) provides an introduction to gender history, which has been an important component of both social and cultural history. For global gender history, see Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds., *A Companion to Gender History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).