

# The Oxford Handbook of World History

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### The Task of World History

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### Abstract and Keywords

This article argues that professional historical scholarship has suffered from a number of serious problems from its beginnings to the present day. Yet, in the absence of any alternative approach capable of achieving absolute objectivity or yielding perfect knowledge, professional historical scholarship, in spite of its problems, is the most reliable, most responsible, and most constructive mode of dealing with the past. The world's peoples have more commonly relied on myth, legend, memory, genealogy, song, dance, film, fiction, and other approaches as their principal and preferred guides to the past. Granting that these alternative ways of accessing and dealing with the past wield enormous cultural power, it is clear also that they do not readily open themselves to critique, revision, or improvement. Professional historical scholarship by contrast approaches the past through systematic exploration, rigorous examination of evidence, and highly disciplined reasoning.

historical scholarship, myth, historical critique, cultural power, intellectual credibility

The term *world history* has never been a clear signifier with a stable referent. It shares a semantic and analytical terrain with several alternative approaches, some of which boast long scholarly pedigrees, while others have only recently acquired distinct identities. The alternatives include universal history, comparative history, global history, big history, transnational history, connected history, entangled history, shared history, and others. World history overlaps to some greater or lesser extent with all of these alternative approaches.

World history and its companions have taken different forms and meant different things at different times to different peoples. From ancient times, many peoples—Hindus and Hebrews, Mesopotamians and Maya, Persians and Polynesians, and countless others—constructed myths of origin that located their own experiences in the larger context of world history. Taking their cues from the Bible, Christian scholars of medieval Europe traced a particular kind of universal history from Creation to their own day. Historians of the Mongol era viewed historical development in continental perspective and included most of Eurasia in their accounts. The philosopher Ibn Khaldun conceived a grand historical sociology of relations between settled and nomadic peoples. The Göttingen Enlightenment historians Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig von Schlözer worked to construct a new, professionally grounded *Universalgeschichte* that would illuminate the hidden connections of distant events. In the twentieth century, Oswald Spengler, Arnold J. Toynbee, Karl Jaspers, and others turned world history into a philosophical project to discover historical laws by distilling high-proof wisdom from the historical record. To many others throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, world history has meant foreign history—the history of peoples and societies other than one's own. Meanwhile, in schools and universities, world history has commonly referred to a synoptic and comparative survey of all the world's peoples and societies considered at a high level of abstraction.

Since the mid-twentieth century, a new kind of world history has emerged as a distinctive approach to professional historical scholarship. It is a straightforward matter to describe the general characteristics of this new world history. 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. World historians have systematically compared the experiences of different societies in the interests of identifying the dynamics that have been especially important for large-scale developments like the process of industrialization and the rise of the West. World historians have also analyzed processes of cross-cultural interaction and exchange that have influenced the experiences of individual societies while also shaping the development of the world as a whole. And world historians have focused attention on the many systems of networks that transgress the national, political, cultural, linguistic, geographical, and other boundaries that historians and other scholars have conventionally observed. World historians have not denied the significance of local, national,

and regional histories, but they have insisted on the need to locate those histories in larger relevant contexts.<sup>1</sup>

This new world history emerged at a time of dramatic expansion in the thematic scope of historical analysis. To some extent it paralleled projects such as social history, women's history, gender analysis, environmental history, and area studies, not to mention the linguistic turn and the anthropological turn, which cumulatively over the past half-century have extended historians' gaze well beyond the political, diplomatic, military, and economic horizons that largely defined the limits of historical scholarship from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

Yet the new world history has conspicuously engaged two sets of deeper issues that do not loom so large in other fields. These deeper issues arise from two unintended ideological characteristics that historical scholarship acquired—almost as birthmarks—at the time of its emergence as a professional discipline of knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century: a legacy of Eurocentric assumptions and a fixation on the nation-state as the default and even natural category of historical analysis. The early professional historians reflected the influence of these values, which were common intellectual currency in nineteenth-century Europe, and to a remarkable degree, their successors have continued to view the past through the filters of distinctively nineteenth-century perspectives. Because world historians work by definition on large-scale transregional, cross-cultural, and global issues, they regularly confront these two characteristics of professional historical scholarship more directly than their colleagues in other fields. By working through the problems arising from Eurocentric assumptions and enchantment with the nation-state, world historians have created opportunities to open new windows onto the global past and to construct visions of the past from twenty-first rather than nineteenth-century perspectives.

How did professional historical scholarship acquire its ideological birthmarks? How did it happen that serious scholars—who were conscientiously seeking an accurate and precise reconstruction of the past—came to view the past through powerful ideological filters that profoundly influenced professional historians' understanding of the past, their approach to their work, and the results of their studies?

Rigorous study of the past has deep historical roots. From classical antiquity to modern times, historians of many cultural traditions worked diligently to compile accurate and honest accounts of historical developments. By

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, historians in several lands were independently developing protocols for rigorous, critical, evidence-based analysis of the past.<sup>2</sup> Yet professional historical scholarship as we know it today—the highly disciplined study of the past centered principally in universities—acquired its identity and achieved institutional form only during the nineteenth century. Professional historical scholarship as we know it today derives from the efforts of Leopold von Ranke and others who worked to establish reliable foundations for historical knowledge and to enhance its credibility by insisting that historians refrain from telling colorful but fanciful stories and base their accounts instead on critically examined documentary evidence.

This essay will argue that professional historical scholarship has suffered from several serious problems from its beginnings to the present day. Let me emphasize that this argument is a critique of historical scholarship, not a rejection or condemnation. The critique does not imply that it is impossible for historians to deal responsibly with the past and still less that professional historical scholarship is a vain endeavor. In the absence of any alternative approach capable of achieving absolute objectivity or yielding perfect knowledge, professional historical scholarship, in spite of its problems, is in my opinion clearly the most reliable, most responsible, and most constructive mode of dealing with the past. It is by no means the only way or the most popular way by which the world's peoples have sought to come to terms with the past. The world's peoples have more commonly relied on myth, legend, memory, genealogy, song, dance, film, fiction, and other approaches as their principal and preferred guides to the past.<sup>3</sup> Granting that these alternative ways of accessing and dealing with the past wield enormous cultural power, it is clear also that they do not readily open themselves to critique, revision, or improvement. They stand on the foundations of unquestionable authority, long-standing tradition, emotional force, and rhetorical power. Professional historical scholarship by contrast approaches the past through systematic exploration, rigorous examination of evidence, and highly disciplined reasoning. Some practitioners have deployed their skills in such a way as to stoke the emotions or inspire a sense of absolute certainty, but as often as not, professional historical scholarship has corroded certainty, raised doubts about long-cherished convictions, and emphasized the complexities of issues that some might have preferred to view as simple. More importantly, it exposes itself to review and critique in the interests of identifying problems, correcting mistakes, and producing improved knowledge. It enjoys general intellectual credibility—properly so—and it has earned its reputation as the most reliable mode of dealing with

the past. Even if they left a problematic legacy, Leopold von Ranke and his collaborators bequeathed to the world a powerful intellectual tool in the form of professional historical scholarship.

Yet the habit of critique that is a hallmark of professional historical scholarship requires historians to undertake a critical examination of professional historical scholarship itself. This critical examination might well begin by considering the conditions under which professional historical scholarship emerged. It was significant that professional historical scholarship as we know it emerged in nineteenth-century Europe. The early professional historians fashioned study of the past into a rigorous and respectable scholarly discipline just as two other momentous developments were underway. First, during an age of industrialization and imperialism, Europe realized more global power and influence than ever before in world history. Second, in both Europe and North America, political leaders transformed ramshackle kingdoms and federations into powerful national states. Both developments had profound implications for historical scholarship and for the conception of history itself as an intellectual project.

#### Professional Historical Scholarship and the Problem of Europe

The twin processes of industrialization and imperialism created a context in which European peoples came to construe Europe as the site of genuine historical development. Michael Adas has pointed out that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European travelers found much to admire in the societies, economies, and cultural traditions of China, India, and other lands. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, after the Enlightenment and the development of modern science, followed by the tapping of new energy sources that fueled a massive technological transformation, Europeans increasingly viewed other peoples as intellectually and morally inferior while dismissing their societies as sinks of stagnation.<sup>4</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel articulated these views in stark and uncompromising terms. The Mediterranean basin was 'the centre of World-History,' he intoned, without which 'the History of the World could not be conceived.' By contrast, East Asia was 'severed from the process of general historical development, and has no share in it.' Sub-Saharan Africa was 'the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.' As a result, Africa was 'no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.' Turning his attention to the western hemisphere, Hegel declared that 'America has always shown itself physically and psychically powerless, and still shows

itself so.' Like Africa, America had no history, properly speaking, although European peoples were working to introduce history there even as he wrote, so Hegel predicted that it would be 'the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself.'<sup>5</sup>

Hegel was a philosopher, not a historian, and I am well aware that his conception of history was more sophisticated than his uninformed speculations on the world beyond Europe might suggest. It is clear today that Hegel spoke from profound ignorance of the larger world, but his views were plausible enough in nineteenth-century Europe. Furthermore, as the dominant philosopher of his age, who placed historical development on the philosopher's agenda, Hegel deeply influenced both the conception of history and the understanding of its purpose precisely at the moment when it was winning recognition as a professional scholarly discipline capable of yielding accurate and reliable knowledge about the past.

Although the early professional historians bridled impatiently at Hegel's speculative pronouncements, their everyday practice resonated perfectly with his notion that history in the proper sense of the term was relevant almost exclusively for Europe, not for the larger world. The early professional historians faithfully reflected Hegel's views when they radically limited the geographical scope of proper historical scholarship to the Mediterranean basin and Europe, and to a lesser extent Europe's offshoots in the western hemisphere. These were the lands with formal states and literary traditions that were supposedly unique in exhibiting conscious, purposeful historical development. Hegel and the early professional historians alike regarded them as the drivers of world history—the proper focus of historians' attention. Hegel and the historians granted that complex societies with formal states and sophisticated cultural traditions like China, India, Persia, and Egypt had once possessed history. Because they had supposedly fallen into a state of stagnation, however, they did not merit the continuing attention of historians, whose professional responsibility was to study processes of conscious, purposeful historical development.

Accordingly, for a century and more, historians largely restricted their attention to the classical Mediterranean, Europe, and Euro-American lands in the western hemisphere. Study of other world regions was the province of scholars in different fields. Until the emergence of modern area studies after World War II, for example, orientalists and missionaries were the principal scholars of both past and contemporary experiences of Asian lands, which they sought to understand largely on the basis of canonical literary

texts rather than historical research.<sup>6</sup> If the early professional historians excluded Asian lands from their purview, they certainly had no interest in sub-Saharan Africa, tropical Southeast Asia, the Americas, and Oceania. These lands without recognizable formal states or literary traditions were lands literally without history. As a result, these lands and their peoples, with their exotic and colorful but historically unimportant traditions—‘the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe,’ in the words of one latter-day Hegelian historian—fell to the tender mercies of the anthropologists.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that Leopold von Ranke echoed the language of broad-gauged Enlightenment scholars when he advocated a universal history that ‘embraces the events of all times and nations.’ He expansively envisioned this universal history not as a mere compilation of national histories but as an account from a larger perspective in which ‘the general connection of things’ would be the historian's principal interest. ‘To recognize this connection, to trace the sequence of those great events which link all nations together and control their destinies,’ he declared, ‘is the task which the science of Universal History undertakes.’ Ranke freely acknowledged that ‘the institutions of one or another of the Oriental nations, inherited from primeval times, have been regarded as the germ from which all civilization has sprung.’ Yet in the very same breath, he also held that there was no place for these ‘Oriental nations’ in his work: ‘the nations whose characteristic is eternal repose form a hopeless starting point for one who would understand the internal movement of Universal History.’ As a result, the horizons of Ranke's own universal history (published between 1880 and 1888) did not extend beyond the Mediterranean basin and Europe.<sup>8</sup> Thus, universal history meant European history, and European history was the only history that really mattered.

Over time, with accumulation of knowledge about the world beyond Europe, it is conceivable that historians might have corrected this kind of Eurocentric thinking by gradually broadening the geographical and cultural horizons of historical scholarship so as to include societies beyond Europe. But Hegel and the early professional historians were active at precisely the moment when European commentators were realizing the enormous power that mechanized industrial production lent European peoples in their dealings with the larger world. The intellectual environment that nurtured theories of pejorative orientalism, scientific racism, social Darwinism, and civilizing mission made no place for relativistic notions that Europe was one society among others. Contemporary experience seemed to demonstrate European

superiority and suggested that weaker societies would benefit from European tutelage to raise them to higher levels of development.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Hegel and the early professional historians reinforced their Eurocentric perspectives with the assumption that Europe was the *de facto* standard of historical development and indeed of civilization itself.

In this intellectual atmosphere, the early professional historians universalized European categories of analysis, thereby ensuring, perhaps unintentionally, that societies in the larger world would look deficient when viewed in the light of analytical standards derived from European experience. Many critics have pointed out the distinctly European valence of terms like state and nation, culture and civilization, tradition and modernity, trade, labor, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and others that have become workhorses of professional historical scholarship.<sup>10</sup> When professional historians began to broaden their geographical horizons after the mid-twentieth century and extend historical recognition to lands beyond Europe, they continued to employ these inherited concepts and thus viewed societies in the larger world through the lenses of European categories of analysis. The effect of this practice was to deepen and consolidate Eurocentric assumptions by producing a body of historical knowledge that evaluated the world's societies against standards manufactured in Europe.

In an influential article of 1992, Dipesh Chakrabarty offered a darkly pessimistic view of the resulting historiography and its potential to deal responsibly with the world beyond Europe. He argued that Europe had become the reference point of professional historical scholarship. 'There is a peculiar way,' he observed, 'in which all...other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe".' Further, 'so long as one operates within the discourse of "history" produced at the institutional site of the university, it is not possible simply to walk out of the deep collusion between "history" and the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation state.' Thus, professional historical scholarship as an intellectual project fell inevitably and completely within the orbit of European modernity. As of 1992, Chakrabarty regarded its value as a form of knowledge as dubious and possibly nil.<sup>11</sup>

It is not necessary to accept all the dire implications drawn by Chakrabarty and some other postcolonial critics to recognize that it is indeed problematic procedure to universalize categories of analysis that originated as culturally specific concepts in one society and then apply them broadly in studies of societies throughout the world, and to acknowledge further that capitalism,



imperialism, and other elements of European modernity have profoundly influenced both the conception and the practice of professional historical scholarship.<sup>12</sup> Rather than throwing up hands and jumping to the conclusion that historical scholarship is a vain pursuit, however, a more constructive approach might be to entertain the possibility that professional historians are capable of transcending the original limitations of their discipline. Before exploring that possibility, though, a second problem of professional historical scholarship calls for attention.

### Professional Historical Scholarship and the Problem of the Nation

Alongside a cluster of Eurocentric assumptions, professional historical scholarship acquired a second ideological birthmark in the form of a fixation on the nation-state as the default and even natural focus of historical analysis. This was not inevitable. From ancient times to the present, many historians sought ways to understand the experiences of their own societies in larger context. This was true of Herodotus in the fifth century bce and Sima Qian in the second century bce.<sup>13</sup> It was true in the thirteenth century ce of the Persian historians of the Mongols, Juvaini and Rashid al-Din. In the Enlightenment era, it was true of amateur historians like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and the authors of the English *Universal History* who managed to compile some sixty-five volumes on the histories of all world regions (1736–65), as well as the professional historians Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig von Schlözer at the University of Göttingen. Even throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a tradition of popular interest in world history persisted stubbornly in the face of university-based professional historical scholarship. Obscure individuals like Robert Benjamin Lewis and William Wells Brown published world histories from African perspectives, while prominent figures like H. G. Wells and Jawaharlal Nehru essayed comprehensive surveys of the global past.<sup>14</sup>

During the nineteenth century, however, as professional historians were narrowing their geographical horizons, they also chose a thematic focus for their studies that reflected the political environment in which their newly fortified discipline emerged. The nineteenth century was an age of heady nationalism and intense state building in Europe. Along with their contemporaries, historians witnessed the potential of the nation-state to mobilize human resources and marshal human energies. They became fascinated or even enchanted by national communities and the nation-state as a form of political organization. Notwithstanding the Rankean requirement that historians base their accounts on critically examined documentary

evidence, they made the assumption that the national communities of the nineteenth century had deep historical roots reaching back into deep antiquity. So it was that they took the nation, the national community, and its political expressions, culminating in the nation-state, as the default and indeed almost the only proper focus of professional historical scholarship.

Like Hegel once again, the early professional historians regarded states—especially the nation-states of their own day—as the pre-eminent agents of history. Leopold von Ranke himself once referred to states as ‘spiritual substances...thoughts of God.’<sup>15</sup> (Peter Novick aptly characterized his approach to the past as one of ‘pantheistic state-worship.’<sup>16</sup>) Ranke and his professional colleagues focused their gaze on the experiences of national communities and nation-states as viewed through their institutions, constitutions, political experiences, cultural expressions, and relations with neighbors. They took the nation as the default subject of historical scholarship, and they treated history as though it were a property attaching primarily or exclusively to national communities and nation-states. They often composed intensely patriotic accounts that served as legitimizing genealogies of national communities. This involved the retrojection of national narratives into the distant past so as to appropriate some earlier events and experiences (while excluding others) and to forge linear national narratives.<sup>17</sup>

For their own part, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nation-states responded enthusiastically to historians' attention: they supported and even subsidized the discipline of history by maintaining national archives, founding societies to publish historical documents, funding universities, establishing professorial chairs in national histories, and including the study of patriotic history in school curricula. In the absence of the symbiotic relationship between historians and nation-states since the nineteenth century, professional historical scholarship as we know it is almost inconceivable. Historical scholarship became in large measure an ideological servant of that particular form of political organization known as the nation-state. Indeed, professional historical scholarship is in many ways an intellectual artifact of the nation-state era of world history.<sup>18</sup>

The past century has brought enormous change to the theory and practice of professional historical scholarship. Contemporary historians have broadened the thematic scope of historical analysis, and they have mostly moderated the intense nationalism of their nineteenth-century predecessors. Yet their *de facto* attachment to national communities and nation-states persists

to the present day. While addressing themes quite different from those of traditional political and diplomatic history, for example, social historians and feminist scholars have cast their studies mostly within the frameworks of national communities. It is a simple matter to think of studies on topics like the formation of the English working class, the subjugation of subalterns in colonial India, or the experiences of women in American history. The metanarratives underpinning these works explicitly regard class and gender as portable categories of universal significance, but historians have rarely undertaken basic research addressing issues of class and gender in contexts larger than national communities. Historians who have attacked patriotic and hyper-nationalist narratives have focused their own critiques mostly on specifically national policies and thus have viewed the past through the lenses of the very nation-states they criticize. And even when historians have dealt with eras long before the emergence of modern nation-states, they have routinely focused their analyses on individual societies such as early imperial 'China' or late medieval 'Germany,' thus construing the past through the optic of a world divided into national communities. Fixation on the nation-state remains a prominent characteristic of professional historical scholarship to the present day.

The point here is not to attack national history *per se* and certainly not to question the historical significance of national communities or nation-states themselves. National communities and nation-states have powerfully influenced the conditions under which the world's peoples have led their lives during the past two centuries, when the organization of ostensibly coherent and distinct national communities into nation-states has emerged as a conspicuous global historical process. Furthermore, individual nation-states have played out-sized roles in world history: in light of their proven abilities to command popular loyalty and mobilize human resources, they demand attention from historians and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

It is not so clear, however, that historians should permit nation-based political organization to obscure the significance and roles of the many alternative ways human beings have expressed their solidarity with others by forming communities based on sex, gender, race, ethnicity, language, religion, ideology, caste, occupation, economic interest, status, taste, or many other conceivable foundations. Nor is it clear that historians should turn a blind eye toward the ways human groups, however diversely organized, have engaged other groups and the world beyond their own communities.

## The Task of World History

How might professional historians deal constructively with the ideologically tinged discipline they have inherited? There can be no question of ignoring European history or abolishing national history, nor can there be any serious expectation that professional historians might find some privileged route to the holy grail of absolute objectivity. Having identified the issues, however, historians might work toward the construction of historiographies that mitigate even if they cannot entirely eliminate problems arising from Eurocentric ideologies and fixation on the nation-state.

To the extent that professional historical scholarship as a form of knowledge emerged as an integral element of European modernity—characterized by nation-states, mechanized industry, and global empire as well as a distinctive form of historical knowledge—it is a delicate operation to extricate the methods and analytical techniques of historical scholarship from ideological associations that have pervaded historical thinking for the past century and more. This task involves unthinking some perspectives on the world that have conditioned the foundations of professional historical scholarship itself. Yet there is no *a priori* reason to doubt that historians are able to root unhelpful assumptions out of their discipline: the historical record is full of cultural projects that started along one set of lines only to undergo radical changes of direction as later practitioners recognized problems and found ways to deal with them.

The new world history has emerged as one of the more promising disciplinary venues for efforts to deal with both Europe and the larger world without taking Europe as an unproblematic starting point or universal standard for historical analysis. World historians have not adopted any single formula or method as a general remedy for Eurocentric assumptions. Rather, they have constructed a less ideological and more transparent historiography through self-reflection, self-correction, and application of various *ad hoc* methods and approaches.

Not to attempt an exhaustive listing, several of these methods and approaches merit special mention. R. Bin Wong has advocated a method of reciprocal comparison that has the advantage of highlighting the distinctive characteristics and values of societies without comparing one invidiously against another.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Jack Goody has suggested the adoption of analytical grids that would facilitate cross-cultural comparisons on specific characteristics (such as the cultural preferences and traits that some have thought were unique to European peoples), thus creating a context for

the comparison of multiple societies with respect to particular traits or forms of organization.<sup>20</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam has turned less to explicit comparison than to the analysis of ‘connected histories’ and particularly the cultural influences that touched societies throughout the early modern world.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, moving beyond the bleak views expressed in his article of 1992, Dipesh Chakrabarty has more recently sought to redeem historical scholarship through the project of ‘provincializing Europe’—locating European modernity as one local expression in a larger constellation of many alternative modernities.<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz has laid a solid foundation for the effort to understand industrialization from global perspectives through careful, controlled comparison of early modern Europe and China.<sup>23</sup> And C. A. Bayly has advanced a complex analysis that makes generous room for local experiences while exploring the early phase of modern globalization.<sup>24</sup> It would be possible to mention many additional contributions, but these half-dozen will serve as salient examples of the different ways world historians have sought alternatives to Eurocentric conceptions of the global past.

The approaches mentioned here do not seek to replace Eurocentric with Sinocentric, Indocentric, or other ideological preferences—and they emphatically do not dismiss Europe altogether—so much as they strive to decenter all ethnocentric conceptions. They are not entirely free of imperfection, but in combination they nevertheless clear a good deal of conceptual ground and open the door to more constructive analysis of the global past. Further possibilities for improved analysis will undoubtedly arise as reflexive historians find additional ways to avoid Eurocentric and other unhelpful ideologies when dealing with the global past.

Remedies for fixation on the nation-state as a focus of historical analysis are more straightforward than those for Eurocentric assumptions. Two main alternative strategies have emerged to deal with the problem. One approach, which has taken several distinctive forms, involves a turn to the local in an effort to discover historical meaning in intimate contexts much smaller than the nation-state. In philosophical dress, this turn to the local found expression in the famous pronouncement of Jean-François Lyotard that the defining characteristic of the postmodern age is ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ because the only meaningful narratives were intensely local.<sup>25</sup> In methodological dress, the turn to the local made a prominent appearance in the spirited critique of European analytical categories by Steven Feierman, who insisted that scholars must adopt African categories in order to understand African historical experience.<sup>26</sup> In empirical dress, the local turn informed Clifford Geertz's anthropology based on local knowledge

and the project of microhistory, which has discovered historical meaning in the lives, experiences, and relationships of individual men and women rather than in their societies' political organs or larger structural elements.<sup>27</sup>

The turn to the local has in many ways enriched understanding of the past without making the nation-state the natural focus of historical analysis, but it is also capable of obscuring influences and connections that condition the lives and experiences of local subjects themselves. Focusing on the lives and experiences of the marginal, the rebellious, and the subaltern, history reflecting the local turn has provided a convenient foundation for political and social criticism as well as identity politics in search of a usable past. Yet the local turn comes at high cost if it ignores the larger frameworks (including the nation-state) and large-scale processes that profoundly influence the experiences of local subjects. To the extent that it declines to engage the larger world and the links that tie societies together, the turn to the local has the potential to encourage the production of unrelated micronarratives and a vision of history driven *de facto* by local cultural determinisms. As Fernando Coronil has pointed out, 'this popular trend leaves us facing a world of disjointed elements at a time when the globalization of space—marked by integrative and exclusionary processes—makes it intellectually compelling and politically indispensable to understand how parts and whole hang together.'<sup>28</sup>

A second alternative to nation-state history involves a turn toward the global by situating local, national, and regional histories in larger transregional, transcultural, and global contexts. The turn toward the global is not an unproblematic project. To the contrary, it is fraught with logical, epistemological, moral, and other kinds of difficulties. Some efforts at world history have assimilated readily to the familiar Eurocentric assumptions considered earlier. Others have drawn inspiration exclusively from the social theories, especially Marxist and Weberian, that were characteristic cultural productions of European modernity. Too many formulations have flattened differences between societies and homogenized peoples in the interests of grand abstractions.

In spite of all the potential problems and pitfalls, the turn toward the global is a necessary and indispensable project for purposes of constructing realistic visions and meaningful understandings of the world and its development through time. Without denying the significance of the nation-state, world historians have decentered it by focusing their analyses on networks of communication and exchange and by exploring processes of interaction

between peoples of different states, societies, and cultural traditions. They have in many ways portrayed messy worlds and resisted temptations to reduce all the multiplicity and variety of historical experience to simple principles. They have sought to recognize both the claim that the world is a site of radical heterogeneity and the reality of transregional systems linking the fortunes of different heterogeneous peoples. In doing so, they have worked to construct visions of the past that are capable of accounting for both fragmentation and integration on multiple levels—local, regional, national, continental, hemispheric, oceanic, and global as well.<sup>29</sup>

The turn toward the global in the form of the new world history does not represent a cure-all, either for historical scholarship or for the more general effort to understand the larger world. It does not dwell on the experiences of individual communities, except insofar as they have participated in larger historical processes linking them to others. In taking long-term perspectives, it runs some risk of obscuring the contingency of history, even if it brings some large-scale processes into clearer focus. Moreover, it admittedly reflects modern cultural perspectives and might well seem impertinent to observers situated beyond the horizon of high modernity.

Yet the turn toward the historical global enables historians to address some significant issues that alternative approaches do not bring into focus. It offers a framework permitting historians to move beyond the issues that have been the principal concerns of professional historical scholarship since the mid-nineteenth century—cultural distinctions, exclusive identities, local knowledge, and the experiences of individual societies, most of them construed in fact as national communities—by making a place on historians' agenda for large-scale processes that connect the world's many ostensibly distinct and discrete societies. The global turn facilitates historians' efforts to deal analytically with a range of large-scale processes such as mass migrations, campaigns of imperial expansion, cross-cultural trade, environmental changes, biological exchanges, transfers of technology, and cultural exchanges, including the spread of ideas, ideals, ideologies, religious faiths, and cultural traditions. These processes do not respect national frontiers or even geographical, linguistic, or cultural boundaries. Rather, they work their effects on large transregional, transcultural, and global scales. In combination, they have profoundly influenced both the experiences of individual societies and the development of the larger world as a whole. If one of the goals of professional historical scholarship is to understand the world and its development through time, these processes demand historians'

attention alongside the experiences of national communities and nation-states.

The turn toward the global in the form of the new world history has become an essential perspective for contemporary thinking about the past. While recognizing that local communities and national states have figured as crucial contexts of all peoples' historical experiences, this project makes it possible to bring historical focus also to large-scale, transregional, globalizing processes that have touched many peoples and profoundly influenced the development of individual societies as well as the world as a whole. Networks of cross-cultural interaction, communication, and exchange, after all, are defining contexts of human experience just as surely as are the myriad local communities and nation-states that scholars have conventionally accepted as the default categories of historical analysis. The challenge for the new world historians is to clear paths leading beyond assumptions that European modernity is the appropriate standard for the measurement of all the world's societies, beyond notions that the world is a site divided naturally into national spaces, and beyond temptations to take refuge in the individual histories of local communities as the only knowable subjects of history.

In the volume that follows, world historians take up this challenge in four groups of essays on salient topics in the new world history. The first group deals with the most basic conceptual issues of the new world history—theories of historical development, frameworks of time and space, the constructs of modernity and globalization, and the analytical tools that new world historians have inherited or devised. A second group turns attention to the most prominent themes that world historians have explored on a transregional and global basis—the natural environment, settled agriculture, nomadic pastoralism, states and state formation, gender, religion, technology, and science. Essays in the third group focus on more or less discrete processes that have worked their effects on large scales—large-scale migrations, cross-cultural trade, industrialization, biological diffusions, cultural exchanges, and campaigns of imperial expansion in pre-modern as well as modern times. The book closes with a final group of essays that locate the major world regions in global historical perspective—by tracing the distinctive lines of development within particular geographical and cultural regions while also taking note of the links connecting individual regions to others in the larger world. In combination, the essays in this volume represent contributions to the understanding of the global past from fresh perspectives, and they reflect both the creativity and the vitality of the new world history.



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## Notes:

(1.) Jerry H. Bentley, 'The New World History,' in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza, eds., *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 393–416.

(2.) Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (London: Pearson, 2008), 19–68.

(3.) For a statement along these lines, see Ashis Nandy, 'History's Forgotten Doubles,' in Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick, and Richard T. Vann, eds., *World History: Ideologies, Structures, and Identities* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 159–78; and the critique in Jerry H. Bentley, 'Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History,' *Journal of World History* 16 (2005), 72–6.

(4.) Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

(5.) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), quoting from 79–102. Cf. slightly different formulations of these points in the more recent translation of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 152–96.

(6.) Robert A. McCaughey, *International Studies and Academic Enterprise: A Chapter in the Enclosure of American Learning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

(7.) The quotation is from Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 9.

(8.) Leopold von Ranke, 'Preface to Universal History (1880),' in Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke, eds., *Leopold von Ranke: The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), 160–4. See also Michael Harbsmeier, 'World Histories before Domestication: The Writing of Universal Histories, Histories of Mankind and World Histories in Late Eighteenth Century Germany,' *Culture and History* 5 (1989), 93–131; and Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 106–15.

(9.) Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, 133–270; Jürgen Osterhammel, “Peoples without History” in British and German Historical Thought,’ in Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende, eds., *British and German Historiography, 1750–1950: Traditions, Perceptions, and Transfers* (Oxford, 2000), 265–87; Bruce Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

(10.) For a single pointed critique out of many that might be cited, see Steven Feierman, ‘African Histories and the Dissolution of World History,’ in Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O’Barr, eds., *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 167–212.

(11.) Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?,’ *Representations* 37 (1992), 1–26, quoting from 1, 19. Chakrabarty later modified these views and sought to salvage historical scholarship through the project of ‘provincializing Europe.’ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), quoting from 27, 41.

(12.) Alongside Chakrabarty, see also the critiques of Eurocentric historiography by Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, trans. by R. Moore (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989); and Arif Dirlik, ‘Is There History after Eurocentrism? Globalism, Postcolonialism, and the Disavowal of History,’ *Cultural Critique* 42 (1999), 1–34.

(13.) Siep Stuurman, ‘Herodotus and Sima Qian: History and the Anthropological Turn in Ancient Greece and Han China,’ *Journal of World History* 19:1 (2008), 1–40.

(14.) Marnie Hughes-Warrington, ‘Coloring Universal History: Robert Benjamin Lewis’s *Light and Truth* (1843) and William Wells Brown’s *The Black Man* (1863),’ *Journal of World History* 20:1 (2009), 99–130; David Kopf, ‘A Look at Nehru’s *World History* from the Dark Side of Modernity,’ *Journal of World History* 2:1 (1991), 47–63; Paul Costello, *World Historians and Their Goals: Twentieth-Century Answers to Modernism* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993).

(15.) Leopold von Ranke, ‘A Dialogue on Politics (1836),’ in Iggers and von Moltke, eds., *Leopold von Ranke: The Theory and Practice of History*, 119.

(16.) Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 27.

(17.) See Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

(18.) For examples of states' contributions to the emerging discipline of history, see G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon, 1959); Felix Gilbert, 'European and American Historiography,' in John Higham, Leonard Krieger, and Felix Gilbert, eds., *History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 315–87; and William R. Keylor, *Academy and Community: The Foundation of the French Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

(19.) R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

(20.) Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge, 2006).

(21.) Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes toward a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,' in Victor Lieberman, ed., *Beyond Binary Histories: Re-Imagining Eurasia to c.1830* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 289–316; and *Explorations in Connected History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

(22.) Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

(23.) Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

(24.) C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

(25.) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

(26.) Feierman, African Histories and the Dissolution of World History.,' in Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, eds., *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993)

(27.) Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); and *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); and Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds., *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

(28.) Fernando Coronil, 'Can Postcoloniality Be Decolonized? Imperial Banality and Postcolonial Power,' *Public Culture* 5 (1992), 89–108, quoting from 99–100. For a similar assessment see Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997).

(29.) Bentley, 'The New World History'.

