

General Introduction

Let Us Start with a Question

Why bother with World History? Why try to examine so much material in so short a time, especially when most history courses focus on much smaller, and hence more manageable, units of time and space? Most contemporary world history surveys seek to cover the grand sweep of human history in the space of a single year of study, a daunting prospect for both faculty and students. Professors often fear that they will be unable to adequately present material that is outside their field of specialization, or that they will simply leave out too many important topics. Students, with no small justification, worry that courses in world history will overwhelm them with information, demanding that they remember even more unfamiliar names and dates than the average history class. Still others object to world history because it seems to demand teaching about “them” when we should be learning about “us” (whoever them and us may be). Given such challenges, there are those (faculty and students) who believe that it is impossible to do world history well—and that history is something that is better studied in smaller pieces, focusing on smaller units of time and space to allow for greater focus and detail.

Despite such reservations, world history has been growing in popularity. In recent years more and more schools and universities have added surveys of world history to their curricula, to the point where world history is now almost as large a teaching market as is American history. Obviously, this means that lots of teachers and students have decided that world history is worth the challenge. And since we decided to dedicate a good chunk of our lives to writing *World in Motion*, we obviously agree. In that vein, let us offer what we believe to be a few of the key reasons why world history is worth the effort.

The Human Story

History classes often are built around units of identity. Many classes are taught to remind us about why we are “American” or “Western” or “Chinese” or [insert alternate national, political, racial, ethnic, economic, or gender identity group here]. Alternatively, classes are designed to teach us about why those other people are the way they are. On one level, this situation is perfectly natural, because one of the things human beings apparently do best is construct notions of “us” and “them.” But, while world history helps to tell us about the diversity of what it has meant to be human, it also helps us to understand that our modern constructions of identity are just that—constructions. Rather than being fixed historical realities, they are themselves the results of

historical processes, and in time they will almost certainly give way to different systems of identity. Thus, the only universal and consistent unit of identity is that of our shared humanity—and it is world history that tells this tale. World history tells us about the great variety of ways people have found to go about the business of being human. On one hand, this will help highlight human commonalities in that we all share a fairly predictable set of motivations. On the other hand, humans have found a variety of ways to attain these human goals, and as such world history provides us with insights into the diversity of human cultures.

Perspective

While many history courses seek to make history manageable by breaking it down into relatively small units of time and space, world history takes a decidedly different approach. By “zooming out” to get the big picture, world history hopes to bring into focus themes and dynamics that are only apparent when one takes a grand view of time and space. Thus, world history often seeks to identify what are called “grand narratives”—themes of human experience which sweep across (and are perhaps only dimly visible at) the typically “up close” focus of most history courses. Thus, while a course on the American Civil War might explain this particular conflict in terms of American society and politics during the nineteenth century, a world history class would provide students with the ability to see this war in the context of global migrations from Europe and Africa, in light of global economic and technological transformations, influenced by shifting notions of state power and individual rights, and as yet another tragic episode of human conflict. Certainly, details about the Civil War would be lost, but a different perspective would be gained.

Context

As already stated, the massive scope of world history can be daunting. But rather than viewing it as an overwhelming wave of information that threatens to engulf and drown us, we recommend a less threatening and more empowering metaphor. World history offers students a sort of *cognitive map* of the human community across time and space. Thus, at the end of a successful survey of world history, the curious and diligent student should have gained the ability to place information from a great diversity of sources (not only history, but also science, literature, and the like) in context. Rather than learning information limited in relevance only to a specific field, students will ideally be able to gain an appreciation for the way seemingly distinct fields of knowledge (for example, economics, technology, and politics) have interacted over time. Indeed, world history doesn't just provide information about history. It also serves to help bind together and give meaning to the diversity of fields that make up human knowledge.

Meaning

By providing a comparative perspective on history, world history also helps students gain a larger sense of the significance of human events. While a course on French history might present the French Revolution as the most important thing ever (and it is, of course, pretty important), world history helps students to recognize that a great variety of significant things have happened all over the world at different times. Thus, world history might show students that the Jihadist movements of the West African savannahs also transformed a large chunk of the world, and that they were roughly coterminous with the Enlightenment revolutions of Europe and the Americas. Similarly, world history might show that many other sorts of revolutions have had substantial impacts on human societies around the world, such as the exchange of crops between the Old World and New World after Columbian contact.

Contemporary Relevance

Finally, it is worth noting that without having a broad sense of world history, it is really nigh to impossible to understand what is going on in the world around us today. An analogy here is that being born into the process of world history is not unlike walking into a movie that has already been showing for a while. You see things happening on the screen, but you don't really know what's going on. Why are those people fighting? What is it these people are searching for? Why are some things funny and some things not? World history provides us with the "backstory" to make sense of what is happening around us.

A Brief History of World History

World history is not necessarily something new. The idea of relating a "universal" or "human" history has been around for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. However, the ways in which people have imagined, constructed, recorded, and given meaning to their history have gone through a host of transformations over time. History itself, or at least our understanding of it, has always been in motion.

Perhaps the earliest attempts at explaining human history were constructed through a religious lens. Every society in the world has what are often called "creation stories," oral or written narratives of the creation of the universe. These traditions generally share a number of common characteristics. They not only explain the creation and nature of the physical universe, but they also provide insights into the nature of the divine, the creation (and special status) of humans, and the relationship of humans to the world and to the divine, and they also often offer explanations or provide frameworks for the nature of gender and social relations as well. Of course, these creation stories were not based upon what we would recognize as modern standards of

historical evidence, but that is in part because the professional field of history itself is a recent development. What we can draw out of these traditions is that every human society has had a notion of world history, and that there is a basic human need to have a sense of place in that world history.

Notably, creation stories tend to be particular rather than universal. That is, they tell the history of the world only from the perspective of a single group. Indeed, they often give primacy to one group as being the “first” humans, as in the case of Abrahamic, Japanese, and Yoruba creation myths. Thus, creation stories tend to explain the origins of one group, but don’t invest much time in explaining the origins or history of others. However, as human societies became more mobile, and as systems of trade and political connections became more extensive, the growing awareness of human diversity on the part of some individuals demanded a different approach to explaining the history of the world. Thus, over the course of the first millennium CE there were a few attempts at writing accounts of the “known” world. These were still not histories as we think of them today, but rather these early Chinese, Greek, and Arabic accounts (to name a few) blurred the lines between what we might now think of as theology, history, geography, and anthropology.

It was not until the nineteenth century that the field of history as we now conceive it began to take form. Drawing upon a flood of new sources of information about the world, and also deeply influenced by ideas of “scientific objectivity,” early historians were often consumed with the idea that comprehensive accounts of different areas of human knowledge, whether geographical, biological, or historical, could be successfully created. However, despite their aspirations to objectivity, these early historians, most of whom were rooted in the recent intellectual framework of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were all too often mired in their own notions of cultural superiority to be able to provide what we would now think of as balanced accounts of human history. In their defense, they also lacked the sort of source base that contemporary historians now see as critical to undertaking the study of world history. Nonetheless, the works created during this period often fell prey to an overt Eurocentrism that divided the world into regions with history (progress) and regions without (primitive people who lived in an unchanging “past”).

Over the course of the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, this division of the world into regions with and without history often took on racial overtones, with races being organized into a hierarchy wherein notions of intelligence, progress, and history were roughly interchangeable. Certain races were deemed more or less historical, and others were not. Witness this brief passage from one of the first widely read world history textbooks—William Swinton’s *Outlines of the World’s History: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, with Special Relation to the History of Civilization and the Progress of Mankind* (1874):

Viewing history as confined to the series of leading civilized nations, we observe that it has to do with but one grand division of the human family, namely, with the Caucasian, or white race. . . . Thus we see that history proper concerns itself with but one highly developed type of mankind; for though the great bulk of the population of the globe has, and does still belong, to other types of mankind, yet the Caucasians form the only truly *historical* race. Hence we may say that civilization is the product of the brain of this race.

A critical point here is that during this overtly racialized period, which dominated the writing of the field from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, world history was synonymous with Western civilization. That is, that since Caucasians were the source of all civilization, then all civilization was basically “Western”—and only expanded to other parts of the world when white people went there. From this perspective, the Americas were uncivilized and without history until Europeans began to colonize them after 1492. Similarly, Africa would only become historical after European colonial conquest in the late nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, this version of world history was popular in Europe and the Americas during the heyday of European colonialism and imperialism in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

By the early twentieth century, this overtly racial organization of world history was gradually falling out of favor, at least in some circles. In its place was a somewhat more inclusive notion of world history that was built around the use of apparently coherent “civilizations” as units of analysis. While these civilizations often had racial overtones, they were generally constructed around the idea of cultural coherence. Thus, one might study “European” civilization one week and “Asian” civilization the next. However, the term “civilization” also came with the assumption of a certain sort of social, economic, and political complexity. In particular, civilizations were defined by powerful political elites and strict social hierarchies, and they had a propensity to build really big things, including massive armies with which to invade their neighbors. Thus, not everyone in the world belonged to a “civilization” and as such was unlikely to be included in world history textbooks or classes. Much of the world, according to this model, was still outside of history. Textbooks during this period, particularly during the period from the 1960s to 1980s, all tended to all have “World Civilizations” in their titles.

Developing in no small part to counter this notion of “people without history” was the “area studies” movement of the twentieth century. Beginning first with Latin American studies in the 1920s and later expanding to include such fields as African and Australasian history, these fields developed with the specific goal of proving that these regions had always been a part of the historical world. Through the development of innovative historical methodologies (often drawing upon “nonhistorical” fields such as linguistics and archaeology) scholars could reconstruct the histories of regions that

lacked extensive written records of their own. The area studies model grew rapidly after World War II, largely due to funding from US and Western governments as they sought to gain an upper hand over the Soviet Union in the Cold War via greater knowledge of the wider world. By the 1980s, most world history classes (and textbooks) had embraced the area studies model for the organization of human history. This model of world history had the distinct advantage over previous approaches that it sought to be comprehensive in its approach to human history, and it did not seek to define some regions or peoples as being without history.

However, the area studies model was not without its faults. Underlying the model was the idea that the “areas” as defined (often continents or large portions of continents) were somehow coherent units of analysis. That is, there was something uniquely “African” about everything that happened on the African continent or something uniquely “Latin” about what happened in Latin America. Similarly, there was a certain degree of overlap between area studies units of analysis and racial or ethnic categories, and by the latter twentieth century many scholars were growing uncomfortable with validating the “social construction” of race with frameworks of historical analysis. Further, because the area studies model often emphasized what was unique about each unit of analysis, it had the perhaps unintended consequence of stressing the separation and differences between peoples. Thus, Asians were presented as having a different history which was distinct and unrelated to that of Europeans, Middle Easterners, or Latin Americans, for example.

The emphasis on distinctiveness and separation that characterized the area studies approach to world history had yet another side effect, which was that connections between regions or groups, and any approach which seemed to complicate units of analysis by suggesting that perhaps some people in different areas might have many things in common, tended to be downplayed. By the 1970s and 1980s, many world history textbooks were being written by “teams” of area studies scholars, each of whom wrote the chapters relating to their own regional specializations. The result was textbooks that often presented world history as a series of parallel but still distinct histories.

By the 1980s, a small cohort of scholars were becoming uneasy with these paradigms for organizing world history. Perhaps in part because of the growing awareness of globalization and cultural exchange that was increasingly defining human culture by the late twentieth century, a growing number of historians began to call for an approach to world history that examined what human communities around the world had in common rather than what made them distinct. This approach focused on not only comparative history (such as how different peoples in the world developed agriculture independently of one another), but also the connections and migrations that blurred the lines between allegedly separate populations. In 1982, a few dozen historians, hailing from different fields of specialization, came together to create the World History Association with this exact goal in mind. Together they conceived of

a “New World History,” an approach that grew in popularity in the new millennium and increasingly came to dominate the field. Crucial to this approach was the idea that it is often in the spaces that lie between seemingly distinct landmasses or societies that the most interesting history takes place. Thus, oceans, which had once been seen as things that separated populations, were redefined as zones of interaction—or even units of analysis in their own right. Indeed, as world history has grown in influence, so have subfields such as Atlantic or Indian Ocean history. Textbooks of the New World History school generally emphasize exchange and interaction, and feature titles such as *Traditions and Encounters*, *Voyages in World History*, and *Societies, Networks, and Transitions*. We like to think that *World in Motion* continues this tradition of blurring the boundaries of previous models of world history.

Where Does *World in Motion* Fit In?

World in Motion seeks to offer a different presentation of world history through the use of three key methodological perspectives—each of which relates to the concept of *motion* itself.

Theme One: *Everything Moves*

First and foremost, *World in Motion* approaches human history from the perspective that no society or time period has ever been fixed, unchanging, or stagnant. In direct contravention to the traditional dichotomies of “civilized versus barbaric,” “developing versus undeveloped,” or “modern versus primitive,” *World in Motion* stresses that the human experience, viewed from the macro perspective of world history, has always been one of adaptation, innovation, exchange, and interaction. As such, *every human society* has been “in motion” throughout history. To this end, several themes of motion will be examined in the text:

People—Humans don’t tend to stay put. This theme will examine how people, whether in small or large groups, tend to be in constant motion. Migrations (willing and unwilling), trade diasporas, conquests, and genetic exchange are all considered as central elements of *motion* in world history.

Goods—Like people, stuff gets around. The movement of scarce and valuable goods over distances is a critical component of world history and a key means of showing the way distant human communities were linked by trade even in antiquity. This theme examines the movement of raw materials, finished goods, and foodstuffs as critical components of physical exchange. It also highlights that goods can be “sticky” in terms of how they can carry and transmit concepts and culture from one part of the world to another.

Ideas—Like goods, ideas move with, among, and between human groups . . . often traveling and having profound impacts far from their places of origin. This theme incorporates the study of the movement and impact of a wide variety of ideas ranging from religious and political ideologies, to social norms and cultural expressions, to technologies.

The Environment—The very face of the living world has itself been in motion over the broad sweep of history. Indeed, environmental changes, whether natural or human-induced, have had a myriad of profound effects upon human history. This theme highlights the interaction between human populations and the changing physical world via the study of climatic shifts, the spread of flora and fauna (including disease), and human environmental modification.

Theme Two: Layered Worlds, Layered Identities

People don't only move physically and genetically. Their constructions of culture and self are also in constant motion—sometimes as a result of local innovations, but also because of expanded interaction with wider regional and global communities. *World in Motion* will show that over human history there has been an ongoing process wherein local systems have been incorporated into larger regional frameworks of interaction. In turn, these regional frameworks eventually become subsumed into global systems of interaction and exchange. Crucial to this process is the idea that identities are neither fixed nor solitary. As such, *World in Motion* explores not only how identities change, but also how humans, as individuals and societies, often juggle multiple levels of identity. Identities do not simply change as people's worlds become larger. They also become increasingly complex and layered. Thus, one does not cease to be Florentine when Italy becomes a nation. And when Italy becomes part of the European Union, one does not stop being Italian. And at the same time, one may simultaneously identify as a Catholic, as a socialist, and as an engineer. By embracing the complexity of changing, interacting, and layering issues of identity, *World in Motion* will highlight how individuals and communities navigate the ongoing interaction of local, regional, and global systems.

Theme Three: Our Very Understanding of World History Has Been and Continues to Be in Motion

Almost all world history texts to date have shared a common failing. They imply, perhaps unintentionally, that our understanding of the past is fixed—and each text attempts to teach students the “right” version of history. In contrast, *World in Motion* embraces the fluidity of human understandings of history. Building upon the theme that human notions of identity have always been in motion, we hope to show that as peoples' senses of identity have changed, and as our abilities to research and reconstruct the past have

improved, our understanding of the past has also been in a state of constant change. To this end, *World in Motion* presents and actively engages previous models and arguments from world history scholarship and also examines the contemporary grey areas of the field. In so doing, *World in Motion* helps present students with an introduction to both historiography and changing historical methodologies.

World in Motion seeks to get students to look at history differently. In particular, by complicating existing geographical and civilization models of organization, this text seeks to get you, the student, to question your own perspectives on geographical, cultural, social, and racial divisions in history. Further, by drawing upon anthropological, archaeological, scientific, and oral sources of historical data, rather than emphasizing only written sources, *World in Motion's* interdisciplinary approach seeks to avoid many of the Eurocentric pitfalls so common to some previous world history texts.

Additionally, rather than providing students with simple descriptions of “what happened where and when,” *World in Motion* seeks to highlight the fact that world history is full of grey areas—areas where it is up to students to decide for themselves the significance of historical events.

Finally, *World in Motion* hopes to share with students some of the fun of doing history. For those open to the majesty, disappointment, horror, and humor that is the human story, world history is a vast museum of humanity. Nothing represents the best and worst of human beings better than the story of our triumphs, transformations, and failures on the grandest of scales. And few things tell us more about ourselves than how we view our past. It is an epic journey, and we hope that taking it will transform not only the way you see history, but also your perspective on the world around you. We often forget that we, like those who came before us, are living in historic times. To be aware of the depth and complexity of the events that seem to swirl around us is to have a level of insight that is deeply empowering.



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