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WHAT CONSTITUTES A WORLD HISTORY?


How is world history to be written? This is not only a question of writing of the past from a present viewpoint, which is unavoidable, since no one can undergo a lobotomy to remove the ideas and attitudes one has obtained from the times and places in which one has grown up. It is also a question of which contemporary viewpoint or philosophy, evaluations or concerns, the individual author has decided upon as the ones that will govern the research and writing. Let us assume that each world historian endeavors to be objective; that is, to get the facts correctly and not engage in a polemic serving some idiosyncratic idée fixe or some organization’s or movement’s favored agenda—in a word, to be properly professional. The endeavor to be objective nevertheless occurs within a specific intellectual milieu or ambiance and different historians or schools of historians will provide their readers, writing at about the same moment with essentially the same fund of facts, with quite different world histories.

Were I to attempt to produce a world history, I would not only try to keep in mind the entire world, but would commence with the geographical-ecological character of the surface of our planet, so that the readers would have some understanding of what human beings had (and have) to experience and work with, and where in the differentially patterned earth surface they were (or are) living.

Our natural environment is immensely complex, but it is sufficiently ordered that its major components are readily identifiable, and the spatial patterns of the distribution can be indicated with considerable economy of effort (on a world map). While such a presentation would fall far short of satisfying a specialist in geography or ecology, it would be very helpful for a student of history despite its broad-brush simplifications.

How is one to understand history if one has no knowledge of the stage on which the human drama has been played, and how the arrangement conditions on this complex stage have affected the way in which the drama has unfolded? The actors not only interact with each other. Their behavior is affected by where they are on the stage and the character of that portion of the stage. Earth is the home of humankind. Like any home, it presents different opportunities and hindrances for whatever actions its inhabitants wish to undertake and does so differently at different times and in different “rooms”.
The major components of our earthly environment are, simply, the atmosphere, the hydrosphere (the world’s oceans), the pedosphere (soils), the lithosphere (rock), and the biosphere (living organisms), all interacting with each other. Within the biosphere, the human species is our main concern, of course, for each species is its own chief (and usually only!) concern.²

To survive and to develop our potentials, the most important resource to be obtained from our environment is energy, which we gain from all the environment’s components, but most obviously from the pedosphere and lithosphere, aside from the oxygen we require from the atmosphere. Agriculture without soil is still a rarity, and agriculture (broadly interpreted to include horticulture and animal husbandry) provides our most basic source of energy, food. The lithosphere is the source of the mineral fuels upon which we are now so heavily dependent. It would extend this paper overly much to pursue this—to me fundamental—matter further. It does place me in quite a distinct category from all the world history textbook writers, and even the specialists in history and the social sciences generally.

There is another problem that needs to be considered. Usually, when reading historical works, I am bothered by a lack of theory and of an explicit treatment of societal structure. These topics seem to me to be too skimpily and only implicitly treated. However, readings in societal theory often leave me in doubt about their empirical grounding and the validity of their categorical concepts. It is as if one set of scholars could not see the forest for the trees and the other could not see the trees for the forests. Historians are not the only academicians with a disciplinary parochialism. This shortcoming is found in abundance among the experts whatever their academic specialty including my own discipline of geography. Such caveats stated, let us proceed.

A History of Civilization by Winks, Brinton, Christopher and Wolff, is definitely NOT a history of civilization. As Robin Winks states in the preface, it “is about how we, as readers studying the past through the traditions and biases of the West, have come to think about civilization” ... “we read history to understand OUR OWN ancient beginnings ... or OUR modern heritage.” Although Winks informs us that this seventh edition (1988) has been updated and “historical scholarship must now embrace statistics, psychohistory, geography, and the arguments usually reserved to political science, sociology and anthropology,” such recent widening of the historians’ purview does not appear to be strongly represented in this now venerable text, which began its life in 1955. I do not object to a history of Western civilization (however that civilization is delimited), but it does not seem quite proper to give such a work such an all inclusive title.

History, my predilections inform me, is really quite dramatic when
taken in the *longue dure’e*, however mundane the details may be. It is a story of the conflicts of personalities, movements, interest groups, institutions, states, and ideas. I find much of that sort of excitement missing in this text even tho’ the authors do attend muchly to wars, dynastic struggles, and political matters. Perhaps this is merely their writing style, or perhaps it can be attributed to excessive concern with objectivity or nonpartisanship.

This is very much a history of wars, kings, art, literature and religion. Perhaps I have been overly influenced by the school of anthropologists who consider culture to be tripartite: to consist of material, behavioral and ideational culture. The material is the realm of the artifact: tools, implements, equipment, machines, built structures of all sorts, clothing, and the like. The behavioral is the realm of institutions (or organizations or collectivities) as well as personal behavior. The ideational is the product of the mind—ideas, values, ideologies, philosophies, and so forth. It seems to me a practical procedure to ask what a given portion of humankind has in mind about what it wants to do (ideational), how it organizes itself to do what it has in mind to do (behavioral), and the material means by which it can accomplish these tasks (material culture). Perhaps some day a historian will approach the task in this way. Meanwhile, let us return to the book at hand.

Accepting the fact that this is indeed a history of *western* civilization, I paid especial attention to topics I find particularly interesting. As a cultural geographer, my first topic of interest is one which answers the question “Where?” Where did Western civilization start? For Winks and company, the beginning is Greece. “The Greeks are the first ancient civilization with which modern society feels an immediate affinity.” (p.33). I must concur, except that societies do not feel anything. The civilization of the Greeks is the first of the ancient civilizations with which educated westerners can feel an immediate affinity. Yes, there is something about the way educated Hellenes thought that is more akin to our ways of thinking than that of the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians. The authors provide information on the Greek gods, their tragedies and comedies, arts, and historians and philosophers (28X of a 32-page chapter). Wars and politics occupy 56X. It is not easy task to depict a civilization in a mere 32 pages, but I was left with the feeling that the economy, polity, the arts, religion, etc., just happened, and not that they were related to each other causally. Tangentially, one may note that the only reference to homosexuality in the entire volume is a very brief reference to Alexander the Great, as if this phenomenon’s various manifestations were not a thread running through the warp and woof of western civilization. Some attention is paid to the changing position of women through the centuries. Admittedly, questions of gender have moved into a more central position in our awareness of human affairs since this
Of the geography of Greece and the Aegean, virtually nothing is said despite the importance of the mountains and the little scattered fragments of lowland, or of the climate. The olive is cited, but apparently only as an occasion to remark on Greek religion.

Of the dependence of the Greeks on the intellectual achievements of Egypt and Mesopotamia for the foundations upon which they built their impressive intellectual achievements, nought but a brief sentence is provided.

I have a problem with assigning the origin of Western civilization to Greece altho’ I know this is a commonly accepted idea, and not only among historians. It is appealing to all those who prize ideational culture above all else and those who have the elitist view that “high” culture, wars, and politics are what really matters, these being the “turf” of the ruling class. There is no doubting the indebtedness of the West to the ancient Greeks, but their culture was very much Middle Eastern. In terms of religion, diet, clothing, daily commodities, and much else, the Greeks were close kin to the older civilizations of Egypt, the Levant, Persia, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia than to any post-Roman westerners. Nor was their treatment of sex and family life much like ours at all.

A good argument can be made that The West’s earliest beginnings came after Charlemagne’s (Karl der Grosse’s) abortive civilizing efforts. There was an interval of many centuries between the deterioration of the western portion of the Roman Empire (with all its Greek influences) and the birth of an embryonic West. Or, if one insists that this hiatus be minimized, then one must recognize the continuum that occurs from Sumer and Egypt to Rome, Sumer and Egypt then being the earliest West (and China as the East as usual, and the Indus valley civilization as a relatively isolated “Near West” or “Near East” or center.)

The transition from feudalism to capitalism is another topic I find especially intriguing. I therefore examined chapters 5 to 17 (except for 6 and 9, which were not cogent). These treat a span in western Europe from the period of the disintegrated Roman rule and the invasions up to, but exclusive of, the French Revolution. All the material is pertinent to a history of Europe, but some things seem lacking. One set of conditions seems to turn into another, but I do not sense causal process. If feudalism gradually changed because the population grew, agriculture improved, cities and trade developed, and cash replaced barter, I am left wondering WHY these developments occurred. And, aside from the conflict between the secular and the church authorities, why did the character of the State change as it did, and why did major changes occur in religion? I am left, again, with the impression that all this’just happened’.
The contents of the chapters were analyzed to test my impression that this is largely a political history, with the arts and religion given more attention than the economy. Of the total of 287 pages of text in these 11 chapters, c. 56% dealt with kings and dynastic matters, matters of State, and wars; c. 14% discussed religion, c. 2X the arts (literature, art, architecture, etc.) and c. 7% was given over to economic matters, c. 10% devoted to science, daily life, chapter summaries, etc. As aforementioned, the approach of these authors is very much a "top-down" rather than a comprehensive approach to history and civilization, despite their inclusion of some notice of the position of women and of daily life.

Furthermore, it is very much a history of England and France and their immediate vicinity. Chapter 6 does deal with the crusades, Byzantium, the Russians, and the Ottomans, and Scandinavia remains terra incognita (insufficient military force or literature in the far north, I guess.) This portion of the text is not merely Eurocentric, it is Anglo-franco-centric. The West is not Europe, it is merely Europe west of the Rhine, sometimes extended as far east as the Oder and the Adriatic, with some mention of Russia. There is no explanation of this restricted geographic base or its subsequent expansion. It is taken for granted.

All that said, one must remark that this is a handsome volume. The many illustrations are in color and quite well reproduced. The use of color and choice of typography has provided us with exceptionally legible maps. Unfortunately, the cartographic editing did not equal the cartographic design. I found 72 flaws in 23 of the 61 maps. Most of these were simple drafting or printing errors or misspellings that should not have gotten past a competent editor. A few were more serious. On p. 781 the Basque Country was clearly in Catalonia, and on p. 507, the Piedmont was in Provence. The world political map seems to've been drawn by someone unacquainted with a world political map, so numerous are its flaws.3

I could not review this text without examining others, and therefore turned for assistance to my colleague, Dr. Arnold Schrier. As a result, I examined fairly carefully two other texts, one authored by Anthony Esler, and one by a team consisting of Peter Stearns, Michael Adas and Stuart Schwartz. Space and time prevent more than a few remarks concerning these. Insofar as the allocation of text space to the West can be ascertained, the comparison of Winks et al. with these two is revealed in the following tabulation.
Esler’s volumes provide a world history. The first five chapters provide, in 82 pages, an introduction to pre-civilized peoples, to Sumer, Egypt, India, and China. Chapter Six presents Greece under the rubric “Western Beginnings.” Three chapters then follow on civilizations in Africa and Latin America, on pre-civilized peoples and on early agriculture and religion. We do not get to The West until page 136 and then only for one chapter.

Esler’s text is in two slim volumes. The first carries us up to 1500: the second takes us from 1500 to the present. The second volume, not unexpectedly, is mostly about the West and what I dub “The West and its global hegemony”. The scope of this two-volume text is far wider, but the number of pages somewhat less than is the case with Winks book. The pictures and maps are all black and white, so that it lacks the visual attractiveness of the Winks book. However, from my vantage point, it is a text which is much better suited to our contemporary needs.

Stearns et al. is, like Esler’s, truly a world text. It is a much longer text. Altho’ the tabulated data might lead one with views such as mine to prefer Esler’s by a slight margin, I find the Stearns work to be the better of the two. It does make mention of Greek indebtedness to earlier civilizations. While Esler considers the Greeks to be the first westerners, Stearns and Company recognizes the post-Roman West as a new civilization, and even goes so far as to mention that India and China had, in some matters, greater achievements than the GrecoRomans. That is, however, not by any means the basis of my evaluation. Rather, I am favorably impressed with the authors’ concern for causation which, they note, is multiple). They do not favor any particular theory of causation, but do make the student aware that history is something more than “just one damn thing after another.” This text is conceptually
richer than either of the other books.

This text is blessed with 101 maps, many of them small, but almost all of them easily read. Some even have an indication of the terrain, and many have an indication of scale, features which are almost always missing on maps used in history texts. I have questions of accuracy for only six or seven of the maps. Altho' the map projections are not named (historians never seem to think of this), their use is innovative (for history texts !) and appropriate. Unfortunately, color has not been employed for the maps or the illustrations.

The world, we've been told so often, has shrunk, and sure enough, there it is in "World Civilizations: The Global Experience" as the title of Part Four (covering the years 1450-1750). Like so many glib phrases, it misdirects our understanding.

The world (Earth) is the same size it always was. What has drawn us closer together is the recent development of instantaneous communication via satellites, TV, and the electronic transmittal of funds and information. In the 1500s, the successful transoceanic sailing by Westerners drastically increased interactions among distant countries. However, we are not physically any closer to everyone else. We are emotionally and behaviorally more intensely interrelated, a condition which began its modern acceleration in the 1500s. Human geography has been transformed; physical geography remains rather constant, but we always ignore physical geography as much as possible, not only in textbooks, but in daily personal life as well. If this criticism seems quite minor I make it only because I’ve noticed several of our common figures of speech and ordinarily used words and phrases serve unintentionally to mask out of our consciousness the physical geographic facts of life.

In all three of the books I’ve commented upon, I find missing a map depicting the extent of the great Eurasian steppes, altho’ the role the nomads have played in the history of all the Eurasian civilizations is mentioned. The Mongols, just to cite one case of nomadic intrusion, did not sweep all the way from north of China to eastern Poland and the Balkans purely on the basis of their superior military craft. With all of that, they had to have a geographic condition that could give their military superiority continental access. No steppe, no Mongol Empire! The is never shown WHERE this crucial extensive bioregion is. Can one imagine relating the history of Columbus without a map of the Atlantic Ocean?

These texts are not likely to satisfy civilizationists, nor will they satisfy societal theorists, geographers or ecologists, even as introductory texts, but
there does seem to be, clearly, progress in the presentation of world history to undergraduate college students if these three texts can be taken as in any way representative of world history textbooks generally. The purview of these historians has widened. A considerable effort to leave ethnocentricity behind has been made. This is to be hailed and encouraged.

NOTES
1) Unfortunately our terminology serves us poorly. The non-human-produced environment is traditionally and commonly referred to as the "natural" environment, as if human beings were not also part of nature, and as if it were not natural for humans to be creative in thought and behavior. and then there is also the fact that this natural environment is very much modified by human beings, a state of affairs that had its beginnings in pre-agricultural times!.

2) Some environmentalists oppose anthropocentric approaches. It seems to me that each species has as its purpose in life the survival of itself. We, therefore, act in accordance with this biological universal if we attend to our survival. The problem with that is that traditionally we have not realized how intimately our survival is related to the survival of other life forms and the ecosystems of which we are all a part.

3) I taught college-level introductory cartography for several decades. Political geography was also one of my teaching fields. I know from experience that many students tend to regard maps as a part of the text that they need not pay attention to, and many instructors do not appreciate the pedagogic effort required to get students to appreciate maps as conveyors of important information (and even ideas) that can be of analytical value as well as being mnemonic devices. Nevertheless, in the service of that minority of students and instructors who do actually use the maps, accuracy of the highest possible level is requisite.

4) Dr. Schrier is professor of history, University of Cincinnati, and past president of the World History Association. He, of course, bears absolutely no responsibility for any of the contents of this review.


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