

The World without Us

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The greatest publicist of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, even while he advocated the widening of historical inquiry to embrace social and economic activities and their effects, strongly believed that the only objects worthy of historical study were the peaks, not the valleys, of the achievements of mankind.

—Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*

Early World Historians and the Idea of Progress

The liberal idea that human history could be comprehended as a rational process having an intelligible order, which could be described in terms of successive stages of cognitive/technical and moral knowledge, commanded wide credence in the West from the Enlightenment until the 1960s. While there were many interpretations about the forces that governed the process of history and the kind of stages one would expect to find, not many world historians doubted that it was their business to construct a *universal* scheme into which all of human history could be fitted. This directional view of world history, it is true, sometimes came with assumptions of racial hierarchy. “We are fully authorized to say,” wrote William Swinton in his *Outline of the World’s History*, published in 1874, “that the Aryans are

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peculiarly the race of progress.” Similarly, in a popular high school textbook he authored in 1889, Philip Myers offered a narrative of progress with references to the “the White, or Caucasian race” as “by far the most perfect type, physically, intellectually, and morally.”¹ Myers removed these racist remarks from later editions, but the liberal idea that civilization was moving in a desirable direction continued to be infused with imperious attitudes toward cultures and peoples believed to be outside the mainstream of cultural progress.

The idea of progress had indeed developed into much more than an explanation of world history; it spawned a Western arrogance that belittled the historical role of non-Western societies. As Marshall Hodgson lamented in the early 1950s, world history was “essentially Western history amplified by a few unrelated chapters on other parts of the world.”² “Prehistoric man” and several of the ancient civilizations—Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Palestine—were sometimes treated fairly well, but once the story moved on to Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe, the Near East tended to disappear from the texts, except for a brief section on the expansion of Islam between the eighth and the twelfth centuries. Indian, Chinese, Mesoamerican, and Sub-Saharan cultures were usually given little attention until Europeans came into contact with them in modern times. There was a triumphalist assumption that Western peoples were always the progressive ones, and that Asians contributed little to human progress after the first millennium BCE. Western European civilization, having inherited the Judeo-Christian vision of a universal brotherhood of man, the Greek ideal of a free citizen, and the Roman legal tradition, was considered the “mainstream” of world history.

It would be extremely tendentious and unfair, however, to assume that the conception of world history Hodgson observed in the 1950s was simply the product of Western racial arrogance and ethnocentric malice. The study of world history was still in its infancy in the 1940s and 1950s, and yet, one can only marvel at the vast body of scholarship generated in earnest during the

¹Swinton and Myers are cited in Gilbert Allardyce, “Toward World History: American Historians and the Coming of the World History Course,” in *The New World History: A Teacher's Companion*, ed. Ross E. Dunn (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 35. Originally published in *Journal of World History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 23–76.

²Marshall G. S. Hodgson, “Hemisphere Interregional History as an Approach to World History,” in Dunn, *New World History*, 113–14. Originally published as “The Interrelations of Societies in History” in *Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale* 1 (1954): 715–23.

first half of the twentieth century by Western-trained scholars on the cultures, traditions, and histories of *all* the regions of the world. A complete listing of these works would consume the length of this essay!³ Even more remarkable perhaps is that by the early 1960s scholars in the United States were already trying to deal with the problem of ethnocentrism in the study of non-Western cultures—some loudly calling for the integration of the new findings and ideas of anthropologists, sociologists, and “area studies” historians doing research on non-Western lands. Robert Crane, a 1962–1963 fellow at the American Institute of Indian Studies, was already hoping that with “a self-conscious awareness of the problem of ethnocentrism,” it would be possible for historians to study different cultures on their own terms and not as “replicas...of our own.”⁴ In 1964 Mark Krug, an associate professor of education in history at the University of Chicago, also condemned what he called the “Europacentric” approach to world history, which assumed “that the Chinese, Indian, and Islamic civilizations attained a measure of historic importance only when they impinged upon the civilization of the West.”⁵

The more historians learned about other cultures and civilizations, the more reasons they had to heed Hodgson’s comment. In 1962, four years after he too had insisted that “world history is not European history” and that world history courses should be “genuinely global” rather than about “Europe and its world relationships,” Leften Stavrianos published a two-volume high school textbook, *A Global History of Man and Readings in World History*, from the perspective that a world history course “should include an overview of the entire history of man from a consistent global viewpoint.” Human history should not be taught “merely by adding the study of non-Western civilizations to the study of Western history,” Stavrianos contended. Only by grasping the entirety of human history would the parts become “meaningful and comprehensible.”⁶ One year later, William

³See Shirley H. Engle, ed., *New Perspectives in World History: 34th Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies* (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1964), which is a historiographical compilation of studies by specialists on all the main regions of the world.

⁴Robert Crane, “India,” in Engle, *New Perspectives in World History*, 386.

⁵Mark Krug, “The Proper Study of World History,” in Engle, *New Perspectives in World History*, 549.

⁶Leften Stavrianos, “The Teaching of World History,” in Dunn, *New World History*, 76–81. Originally published in *Journal of Modern History* 31 (June 1959): 110–16. See also Leften Stavrianos, “A Global Perspective in the Organization of World History,” in Engle, *New Perspectives in World History*, 616–20, where he discusses his two-volume work.

McNeill's *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* was out in print, and Stavrianos's thesis was quite clear: the history of the world is a panorama *not* of separate civilizations following their own rhythmic cycles, but of diverse cultures in a state of constant interaction. While Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece were different actors in world history,

there has always been a process of cultural flow, and cultural stimulation between adjacent societies...the process of collision and contact, peaceful and warlike, between peoples of different cultures [has been] the central motor of historical change....The generation of new styles of life seems to be related to the intensity of contact between people having alien ways of life.⁷

The idea that world history and Western civilization were synonymous was no longer taken for granted by scholars in the United States in the 1960s, but it was veritably the subject of much reflection.⁸

The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course

It would also be an oversimplification to view the Western Civilization requirements taught between World War I and the early 1960s as merely a way for American educators to indoctrinate undergraduates in the belief that European history was the only world history that mattered, and that the United States was the sole legitimate heir of the European democratic tradition and protector of the free world.⁹ When examining James Harvey Robinson's *An Introduction to the History of Western Europe*, published in 1902 and widely used in college classes, as well as his other textbook, *An*

⁷Leften Stavrianos, cited by Krug, "Study of World History," 547–51.

⁸Another historian who stressed the need for teaching world history as the interaction between civilizations and called upon Western historians to take seriously "the views of Asians and Africans themselves" and approach the era of European hegemony "without false pride," was M.D. Lewis in "How Many Histories Should We Teach? Asia and Africa in a Liberal Arts Education," in *The Epic of Modern Man: A Collection of Readings*, ed. Leften Stavrianos (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966). Originally published in *Liberal Education* 48 (October 1962): 1–8.

⁹This view is expressed in a moderate way by Gilbert Allardyce in "The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course," *American Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (June 1982), when he points out that this course was a "product conditioned by...a time when Americans envisioned themselves as partners with the Europeans in a great Atlantic civilization," 695. But this view is pushed too far by Roxann Prazniak when she explains the content of the course itself in terms of the political requirements of American imperialism and the cold war in "Is World History Possible?" in *History After the Three World: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*, ed. Arif Dirlik, Vinay Bahl, and Peter Gran (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

Outline of the History of the Intellectual Class in Western Europe (1915)—works Gilbert Allardyce claims prepared American educators “intellectually for the coming Western Civ course” after World War I—one simply encounters the optimistic, Whiggish idea that central to the narrative of world history is the progression of rationalism, science, and liberal values. Robinson was much less an ideologue than a scholar interested in the origins of the liberal values of his own American civilization. He saw the seventeenth-century conflict between the English “people” and their king as a watershed in the triumph of freedom against authoritarianism. Looking at the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Robinson saw a continuation, this time in France, of the struggle for “freedom of the human mind.”

Daniel Segal challenges Allardyce’s influential explanation of the rapid spread of the Western Civilization course as a “patriotic purpose” that “swept campuses” in response to American military involvement in Europe.¹⁰ The authors of Western Civilization textbooks, Segal explains, clearly envisioned these courses as contributions to the preservation of “civilization” in the face of the outbreak of “barbarism” and “savagery” in 1914. This was true of Lynn Thorndike’s *A Short History of Civilization* (F.S. Drofts, 1926), Harry Elmer Barnes’s *An Intellectual and Cultural History of the Western World* (Cordon Co., 1937) and *The History of Western Civilization* (Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1935), and Edward McNall Burns’s highly successful *Western Civilizations* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1941). These books were also committed to the idea of progress, as this quote (cited by Segal) from Burns’s introduction to *Western Civilizations* makes clear: “[A]ll progress... has resulted from the growth of intelligence and tolerance, and...therein lies the chief hope for a better world in the future.”¹¹ Similarly, as J.B. Wolf notes, when in 1929 Robinson and Charles A. Beard wrote *The Development of Modern Europe*, they too identified “modern” history with the scientific struggle to liberate the mind from superstition and obscurantism, and placed the Enlightenment in the center of their story. According to Wolf, these authors “seem to have had few doubts about the eventual victory that would free the human mind from the tyranny of old and outmoded ideas.”¹²

¹⁰Daniel A. Segal, “‘Western Civ’ and the Staging of History in American Higher Education,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (June 2000): 770–805; <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/105.3/ahr000770.html>.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²John B. Wolff, “The Early Modern Period, 1700–1789,” in Engle, *New Perspectives in World History*, 215.

This progressive attitude was not consigned to the universities, but also found expression in the high schools. *Modern History: The Rise of a Democratic, Scientific, and Industrialized Civilization* (Silver, Burdett and Company, 1931), a high school textbook by Carl Becker that went through numerous editions, also emphasized the great issues and transformations of the past that carried forward the torch of progress. It was a book unafraid to raise big questions about “what history is about”—all in a straightforward manner, as if the rational directionality of history needed no justification. This same optimism is apparent in a recommendation for more European history in secondary schools that Beard made in 1934 in a report of the Commission on the Social Sciences in which he identified the “study of the evolution of Western Civilization” with the study of “the development of democratic ideals and practices,” “the accumulation and spread of knowledge and learning,” and “the advance of science and technology.”¹³

The Western Civilization course requirement in American universities came to an end in the 1960s. By the time of the campus protests, Allardyce writes, professors “had lost faith” in the educational purpose of this course. Some felt that the course had been conditioned by the era of two world wars, when Americans saw themselves as leaders of a great Atlantic civilization, an era outmoded by new imperatives of critical importance in China, Africa, Vietnam, and other parts of the globe. Others considered the course old-fashioned at a time when politicized students were calling for a liberal arts education without compulsory courses. For professional historians eager to produce “original” ideas in their increasingly fragmented fields, the concept of an all-inclusive course with a common purpose seemed dated. The question is, how did the world history curriculum that superseded the required Western Civilization course in the 1980s and 1990s ultimately come to be framed within a multicultural ideology that emphatically degraded the role of Western culture itself?

In the 1960s world historians were genuinely debating the question of Western ethnocentrism and beginning to write texts from a global perspective. This was merely the onset of what would become a crusade against the West. Just as Western Civilization texts were being produced in the United States, world historians were paying serious attention to the

¹³Beard is cited in Allardyce, “Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course,” 709.

achievements of the non-Western world, laying the groundwork for a vision in which the accomplishments of the world's peoples were recognized within the framework of a cumulative conception of history.

World History Texts from the 1920s to the 1940s

The books I've chosen as representative of a progressive vision of world history are authored by a diverse group: H.G. Wells, *Outline of History* (Macmillan, 1920); James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Times, A History of the Early World* (published in 1916 by Ginn and Company and largely rewritten in 1935); M. Rostovzeff, *A History of the Ancient World* (written in Russian between 1921 and 1923; Oxford University Press, 1926); Christopher Dawson, *The Age of the Gods: A Study in the Origins of Culture in Prehistoric Europe and the Ancient East* (John Murray, 1928); and V. Gordon Childe's widely read *Man Makes Himself* (Mentor, 1936) and *What Happened in History* (Penguin, 1942). These works, each in its own way, presented human history as a directional process of cumulative learning, not only in terms of technically useful knowledge but also of moral-practical ideas. Their basic message, even if not always explicitly stated, was that world history was a *universal* learning process that could be reconstructed on the basis of distinct eras and *successive* stages. It was a West-centered message no doubt, but one which tried, as much as the sources available at the time allowed, to understand the contributions of non-Western cultures. Each of these books contained detailed sections on all the major civilizations of the ancient world.

Let's begin with James Henry Breasted, who observed without hesitation that "while Europe still lay in Stone Age barbarism the peoples of the Ancient Near East gave the world for the first time a whole group of further inventions [in addition to those of prehistoric peoples] surpassed in importance only by those of the modern world"—in the practical arts, in the use of the potter's wheel, the potter's furnace, the earliest metal work and the art of hollow casting, glass-making, paper-making, and other industries. They also made essential contributions in writing, poetry, and recording history, in mathematics and astronomy, and in the earliest belief "in a sole God and his fatherly care for all men." But the "East" had not yet "gained the idea of a free citizen," "had made little inquiry into the natural causes of such things" as storms and eclipses, and "suffered from a lack of freedom of the

mind.” While the Greeks and Romans carried the learning process forward, Breasted appreciated the later contributions of non-Western cultures: the Muslims “developed a civilization far higher than that of the Franks, and indeed the highest of that age in Europe, [and] were the leading students of science, astronomy, mathematics, and grammar.”¹⁴

M. Rostovzeff’s two-volume work, *A History of the Ancient World*, is a true masterpiece. Written in Russian and translated into English in 1925, it was revised in 1929, after “important new discoveries” were made in excavations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Asia Minor. Rostovzeff presented a picture of successive ancient civilizations spreading “by degrees over the world,” each reaching a “zenith of cultural creation” followed by a period of stagnation and decline. But in terms of ancient history, the decline was temporary, for the accomplishments of the old civilizations served as a foundation for the creation of newer ones. If the

Greeks were especially remarkable for the power of their creative spirit... it must be remembered that the lofty creation of Greece was developed from the culture attained by the ancient East; that Greek civilization became world-wide as the result of a fresh and prolonged contact with the Eastern cultures, after the conquest of the East by Alexander the Great.¹⁵

What allowed Europe later to develop “not from the lowest stratum of prehistoric life but from a comparatively high level” was that Rome inherited, transformed, and passed on to it “the civilization of the East and of Greece.”¹⁶

These works did not always focus on the West. H.G. Wells’s classic *Outline of History* truly offers what the subtitle indicates—“a plain history of life and mankind.” The book, published in 1919, gave more attention to Europe, but dedicated many sections to India and China, and contained complete chapters on the Islamic and the Mongol empires. Wells was so impressed by the “urbanity, the culture, and the power of China under the early Tang rulers,”

¹⁴James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Times, A History of the Early World* (Boston: Ginn and Company), 279–81, 790. These are not isolated passages; in page after page Breasted expresses a deep, sincere admiration for the remarkable cultural accomplishments of the Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Persian civilizations.

¹⁵M. Rostovzeff, *A History of the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 9–10.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 9, 2–11.

he felt compelled to pose the “grand problem” we now associate with the Sinologist Joseph Needham:

The Chinese knew of gunpowder in the sixth century, they used coal and gas heating locally centuries before these things were used in Europe; their bridge-building, their hydraulic engineering were admirable; the knowledge shown in their enamel and lacquer ware is very great. Why did they never organize the system of record and cooperation in inquiry that has given the world modern science?¹⁷

The efforts of specialists had not yet provided enough sources for Wells to offer a reply. Rather than responding with the “platitudinous answers” he found elsewhere, he reminded readers that China never experienced a decline in creativity that was permanent, as did ancient Greece and Rome, or was comparable to that of the Arabs, “who blazed like a star for half a dozen generations after the appearance of Islam” but never again achieved the same level of creativity. While China was not as progressive as Europe was *after 1500*, it did experience throughout its long history “several liberalizing movements.”¹⁸ Overall, Wells had a progressive vision of the course of human history. He was disillusioned by the “disaster” and “slaughter” of World War I, but still believed that

it was possible [at least until the year 1914] to view the history of the world as a progress, interrupted but always resumed, towards peace and freedom. In most of the states of the world political and parliamentary freedom was extending, personal rights were more protected, liberty of thought and of speech was expanding, and states were beginning to be less irresponsible in their foreign policy.¹⁹

V. Gordon Childe, a Marxist who, like Friedrich Engels, espoused the nineteenth-century evolutionary concept of stages of “Savagery, Barbarism, and Civilization,” also saw progressive advances in technology stemming from the expansion of human knowledge. This growth in technology was, for

¹⁷H. G. Wells, *Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Company, 1961), 465.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 464–66. Wells also wondered “why did the Chinese never discover America or Australia” despite their “considerable overseas trade” during the period of the “cultured Mings,” 465.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 828.

Childe, the foundation for most progress in other spheres of society, art, politics, ethics, and philosophy. Childe, however, recognized that the environmental differences in the earliest centers of civilization were too great to expect parallel sequences of progress. He considered diffusion, or contact between cultures, a major factor in the process of change. He also recognized that human progress was discontinuous. But when Childe looked at history as a whole—universal history—he saw a cumulative pattern: “The upward curve,” he concluded in *What Happened in History*, “resolves itself into a series of troughs and crests. But...no trough ever declines to the low level of the preceding one; each crest out-tops its last precursor.”²⁰ In a small book, *History*, published in 1947 as volume 6 of the Past and Present: Studies in the History of Civilizations series, Childe stated in a matter-of-fact way that the main business of the world historian was “to yield a science of progress,” “to disclose an order in the process of human history.” Aware that the course human history was “distinctly erratic,” Childe thought it still possible to recombine and rearrange enough facts from the historical and archaeological records to show that world history in general did exhibit “an orderly sequence,” a “continuous linear sequence” of improvements.²¹

In 1928, the distinguished Catholic historian Christopher Dawson had already presented an even more sophisticated account of human history in *The Age of the Gods*. While “it is impossible,” he wrote, “to deny the reality and importance of cultural progress,” it “is not a continuous and uniform movement, common to the whole human race,” but rather “an exceptional condition, due to a number of distinct causes.” The adaptation of a people to their “original environment without the intrusion of human factors from outside” brings social change, but it generally exemplifies the case of primitive peoples, who barely change. Moving and having to readapt to a new geographical environment is what encourages at least the “simplest type” of cultural change. But the “most important of all the causes of cultural change,” he explained, was “the case of two different peoples, each with its own way of life and social organization, which mix with one another usually as a result of conquest, occasionally as a result of peaceful contact.”

²⁰V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1964), 292.

²¹V. Gordon Childe, *History*, vol. 6, Past and Present: Studies in the History of Civilizations (London: Corgis Press, 1947), 3–14.

It was not William McNeill, but Dawson who first hypothesized that interaction between different cultures was the chief motor of change: “It is the origin of practically all those sudden flowerings of new civilization, which impress us as almost miraculous.” Dawson thought that merely borrowing some cultural element was an important common occurrence demonstrating the “close interdependence of cultures,” but added that such borrowing did not automatically spark social progress. Real change—“intense cultural activity”—comes when (a) an old, advanced culture is reawakened via a vital “organic process of fusion” with a new people, or (b) when “the creative activity of a new people [is] stimulated by contact with the old autochthonous culture.”²² Thus, the Mycenaean culture that gradually fused with and replaced the old Minoan civilization and was a “new type of warlike society which arose from the contact between the invading Indo-European peoples and the Archaic Culture of the Near East,” in turn later fused with a new wave of Indo-European tribal peoples. This new wave would have resulted in the “complete barbarisation” of the Greek mainland world (and not the rise of Hellenic civilization), but this was averted because Mycenaean culture proved creatively resilient and because the new invaders were able to adapt to their own use some of the traditions of the older Mediterranean cultures. Dawson clearly understood that *external* contacts and borrowing were not enough; the change, if it was to be “fully progressive,” had to “come from *within*,” from the creative activity of cultures stimulated by their fusion with other cultures.²³

These early world histories gave readers the sense that over the course of human history there was a meaningful pattern in the direction of higher levels of technical knowledge, material well-being, and moral-practical insights. In their very preoccupation with Western civilization as the “high history” of mankind, they cultivated an understanding of history that was *trans-cultural*

²²Christopher Dawson, *The Age of the Gods: A Study in the Origins of Culture in Prehistoric Europe and the Ancient East* (New York: H. Fertig, 1970), xii-xx.

²³*Ibid.*, 256, 360–61, 383. Dawson was a superb world historian in his day, as a collection of his articles in *Dynamics of World History*, first edited with an introduction by John J. Mulloy in 1958, reveals. Reissued in 1978, the book was recently released again with a new introduction by Dermot Quinn (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002). For a fascinating interpretation of the way Greece, Rome, Christianity, and Celtic-Germanic cultures blended to produce the cultural restlessness of the West, see Dawson’s *The Making of Europe* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1935).

in the sense that successive, *connected* cultures were interpreted as steps in a *single universal* process.²⁴

World History Texts in the 1960s

This progressive, hopeful vision continued into the 1960s, as world historians increasingly wrote from a world-oriented perspective. It was certainly articulated in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) *History of Mankind: Cultural and Scientific Developments, volume 1, Prehistory and the Beginnings of Civilization*, published in 1963. This massive volume (873 pages of small print) was intended to shed light on mankind's "cultural and scientific development," starting with the prehistory of the peoples of Asia, Africa, and America—"all alike discussed"—and ending with Bronze Age civilizations. It gave "equal time" to the history of the world's cultures without hesitating to trace the "expansion of human consciousness" and the higher stage of cultural development achieved by the Upper over the Middle Palaeolithic cultures—higher because "the latest Palaeolithic hunters had at last succeeded in bringing speech to a point where the precise naming of things and the elementary discussion of ideas had become possible." It spoke of the "continuous improvement of material equipment" by the Palaeolithic and Neolithic cultures and showed how they laid the foundation on which later civilizations would be built.²⁵ It contrasted the "barbarism of the Neolithic period" with the birth of urbanized life, and described in detail "the immense progress in culture and in technical knowledge" achieved by "mankind"

²⁴See the conclusion of another inspiring work, *The Conquest of Civilization* (Harper & Brothers, 1926), by James Henry Breasted:

Today, still disclosing the successive stages of the long human career, the stone first-hatchets lie deep in the river gravels of Egypt and France; the furniture of the pile-villages rests at the bottom of the Swiss lakes; the majestic pyramids and temples announcing the dawn of civilization rise along the Nile; the silent and deserted city-mounds by the Tigris and Euphrates shelter their myriads of clay tablets; the palaces of Crete look out toward the sea they once ruled; the Hittite cities yield up the wonderful story of their newly deciphered writing; the noble temples and sculptures of Greece still proclaim the new world of beauty and of freedom first revealed by the Greeks; the splendid Roman roads and aqueducts assert the supremacy and organized control of Rome; and the Christian church spires proclaim the new ideal of universal human brotherhood. These things continue to reveal the age-long course along which the developing life of man has moved; and in thus following his conquest of civilization, we have been following a *rising trail*. (650)

²⁵Jacquetta Hawkes and Sir Leonard Woolley, *History of Mankind: Cultural and Scientific Developments*, vol. 1, *Prehistory and the Beginnings of Civilization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 820, 104, 111, 351.

during the Bronze Age.²⁶ By studying “the interrelations, across time and space, of ideas, values and techniques,” the *History of Mankind* sought to offer a true universal history—a history of Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, India, and Phoenicia that is the history of “the advance of man in general.”²⁷

This concept of progress was also visible in William McNeill’s highly spirited *Rise of the West*. Generally considered the most comprehensive account of human history at the time, the book nonetheless argued that mankind’s predominant development after 1500 was the ascendancy of Western culture. McNeill, always careful to avoid pat answers about the nature of human history, seemed confident enough to assert—particularly in considering the dazzling political and scientific changes of modern Europe—“Progress there has most certainly been in science and technology; progress also, it seems to me, in many important aspects of human relations.”²⁸ Less hesitant in its appreciation of human progress was Fernand Braudel’s *A History of Civilizations*, first published in 1963 in France as part of *Le Monde actuel, histoire et civilisation*.²⁹ This may seem surprising, since commentators have generally downplayed the liberal theme of progress in his books. Braudel viewed the world’s civilizations as “the history of continual and mutual borrowing over many centuries,” but he also believed that each civilization was “very different” and played a unique role in the march of human progress. Differences between cultures arose from the variety of “material and biological conditions [that] always help determine the destiny of civilizations,” cultural origins, and geographical links to the world.

If China and Black Africa were relatively isolated, Islam was an “intermediary” civilization linking the Far East, Europe, and Black Africa. Europe was the only civilization “linked in all directions to the seven seas.” If China was a continuous civilization—“imagine the Egypt of the Pharaohs miraculously preserved”—Europe and Islam were “derivative civilizations” built on those that “preceded it in the Near East.” If Islam rose and declined, the “West” experienced “breaks with the past and the birth of new civilizations,” from Greece to Rome to Christian Europe through Islam to Renaissance Europe. If Islam was “the most brilliant civilization in the Old

²⁶Ibid., 359, 834.

²⁷Ibid., xiii, xiv, 829.

²⁸William McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 729. He writes further on the same page: “However weak the reed, human reason has yet a rapier point...”

²⁹Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. Richard Mayne (New York: Penguin, 1993).

World” between the eighth and twelfth centuries, and China was “ahead of the West in science and technology” until at least the thirteenth century, Europe “took up the torch” of progress in the fourteenth century.

Since its origins in Greek culture, “the tendency of Western civilization,” Braudel observed, “has been towards rationalism”—as well as greater freedom.³⁰ Echoing the “great idea” of Western Civilization courses, Braudel embraced the notion that the growth of liberty was “one of the secrets that explain[ed] Europe’s progress”: from the development of towns “marked by unparalleled freedom”; through franchises or corporate groups that operated independently of the state; through the Renaissance’s “intellectual ferment,” which “preached respect for the greatness of the human being as an individual”; through the Reformation, which “laid the bases for freedom of conscience”; to the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, which stated that all Frenchmen were citizens with equal liberties; to the revolutions of 1848, which established the principle of universal suffrage.³¹

The Assault on Western Modernization and the Rise of Dependency Theory

Just as this particular vision of world history was gaining ground, it came under fierce attack in the 1960s and 1970s.³² In the context of the Soviet socialist experiment, the threat of nuclear destruction, the Vietnam War, the (relative) growing gap between poor and rich nations, and the creation of

³⁰Ibid., 8, 42, 73, 168, 23.

³¹Ibid., 307, 315–16, 325, 329–31. Given this history, Braudel considered it “both fair and appropriate” for the Western world, during the cold war conflict of ideologies, “to call itself ‘the free world,’” 315.

³²Many other world history textbooks published or redesigned in the 1960s, however, continued to articulate the idea of progress; and they did so in the context of a less Eurocentric narrative. The two-volume text, *A History of the World* (Rand McNally, 1960), by Chester Starr, Charles Nowell, Bryce Lyon, Raymond Stearns and Theodore Hamerow, contained chapters and sections on the cultural achievements of all the world’s peoples, although most of the book was still dedicated to the progress of Western civilization. Thomas P. Neill’s *Story of Mankind* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) also devoted more attention to Western civilization, but it did at least “assume a unity in the story of mankind that is based on its common origin, its common destiny, its common human nature, and its occupancy of a common globe,” 6. In his foreword to the English edition of the *Histoire Universelle Larousse*, the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Ancient and Medieval History* (1964; Hamlyn: London, 1981), Arnold Toynbee wrote: “In this work, Western writers and editors have made a valiant effort to transcend the parochial Western point of view and to present the history of mankind as the sum of all the efforts of all sections of the human race....[This work] has earned the right to its title. It has made a notable new departure in giving non-Western contributions to mankind’s culture a place in the sun,” xxv–xxvi. The fifth edition of Edward M. Burns and Philip L. Ralph’s *World Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), was “thoroughly revised” to include materials and recent historical research on the history of Africa, China, Japan, and the Indian subcontinent—all in a text in which the “basic philosophical interpretation underlying the narrative is the conviction that most human progress thus far has resulted from the growth of intelligence and respect for the rights of man,” xxv–xxvi.

pan-Arab and pan-African identities, the notion that Western Europe and the United States—as liberal-democratic cultures—were frontrunners on the path of human progress seemed naive and ethnocentric. In the past, voices of discontent had protested Whiggish and Enlightenment notions of progress and human “perfectibility.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) argued that the happiest period of the human race ended with civilization. Robert Malthus (1766–1834) observed that an increased population would always tend to outrun the ability to produce enough food. And Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) complained that since the “last great age” of the Renaissance, history appeared to be “a development in decline.” However, from the 1960s forward, the notion of sustained progress in human history came under increasing and continuous criticism by scholars interested in the causes of persistent poverty in the third world.³³ Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, Walter Rodney, and others charged that Western “progress” was really a process by which Europe and the United States had enriched themselves through the exploitation of Africa, the Americas, and Asia.³⁴ These critics insisted that it was wrong to regard Western societies as self-sustaining, and repudiated the idea that European civilization on its own generated the means to out-develop the rest of the world. It was, they argued, the systematic conquest and destruction of the Incas and the Aztecs and the extraction of gold and silver from the Americas in the sixteenth century that boosted the fortunes of Europe, and that included the brutal importation of African slaves to work in sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations in the Americas from about 1600 until 1850.

These radicals, better known as “dependency” theorists, were not really world historians as much as pioneers of “development studies,” and their attacks were not directed at the liberal world histories produced in the West, but a group of social scientists writing under the rubric of “modernization theory.” Modernization theories enjoyed their greatest popularity during the

³³Outside the United States, the idea of progress faced considerable challenges, particularly in France and Germany after World War I. Discontent with modernity, liberal, secular, and industrial civilization began with the romantics and ethnic-nationalists, swelling by the early twentieth century into a veritable mass movement that culminated in the “national socialist” revolution of the Nazis. See the fascinating account by Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology* (University of California Press, 1961).

³⁴See Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment* (Monthly Review Press, 1970); Andre G. Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (Monthly Review Press, 1967) and *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (Monthly Review Press, 1969); and Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Ikeganga, 1972).

1950s and 1960s, when Talcott Parsons, Neil Smelser, Daniel Lerner, Richard Bendix, Samuel Huntington, and Walt Rostow published some of their most influential works.³⁵ These scholars, too, were not world historians but sociologists and political scientists. They did, however, draw heavily on nineteenth-century classical evolutionary theory and its assumption that the course of human history had a *universal* pattern underlying the multitude of seemingly accidental and unconnected events. Modernization theorists believed that long-term trends were clearly evident in human history, from traditional to modern societies, from relationships based on ascription to relationships based on personal effort and merit, from focus on groups to focus on autonomous individuals, from patrimonial adjudication and enforcement to universally applicable laws and rights. While aware that not all societies followed the same evolutionary path, they believed that the course of history overall had resulted in the betterment of human existence. And they were optimistic that rich liberal-democratic nations could accelerate the development of poor traditional societies through programs of population control, the transfer of technology, investment capital in the form of foreign aid, and the diffusion of liberal attitudes and entrepreneurial skills.

But the modernizing efforts of Western elites did not create the results theorists had anticipated, at least in the short term. Poverty persisted or even worsened in many newly independent countries in the third world. In the 1970s dictatorial regimes rather than democracies appeared to be gaining ground in much of Latin America. Recurrent national and local wars, swelling populations, increasing social inequalities, and ethnic factionalism plagued most of Africa and the Middle East. Life in the advanced nations did not seem so rosy either, as modernization itself seemed to be producing numerous pathological side-effects such as increasing delinquency, urban decay, the breakdown of community bonds, pollution, and economic dislocation. Just as important perhaps was the charge that modernization theory was ethnocentric in that it elevated the history of Western civilization to the level of universal truth, as “the model”—of rationalism, secularism,

³⁵Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Prentice Hall, Inc., 1966); Neil Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (Routledge, 1959); Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (Free Press, 1958); Richard Bendix, *Nation Building and Citizenship* (University of California Press, 1964); Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968); and W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 1960).

and liberalism—to be followed by “less developed” nations rather than their own preferred paths.³⁶ This charge of ethnocentrism eroded the confidence of modernization theorists, who basically agreed with the relativistic assumptions of their critics that there were no value-neutral grounds on which they could defend Western values. Modernization theory had drawn heavily from Max Weber’s argument that ultimate principles and moral values, as opposed to empirical or technocratic problems of efficiency, are not amenable to rational evaluation. Even though considerable evidence that in such third world countries as Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea as well as Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina education was expanding, per capita GNP was growing, and infant mortality was dropping, the influence of modernization theory declined sharply over the 1970s.³⁷

Wallerstein’s World System, Critical Theory, and Cultural Anthropology

Meanwhile, the anti-imperialist world outlook of dependency theory was no longer confined to a few academics but gained a popular following among young sociologists and political scientists. Much as dependency theory was carefully criticized for ignoring factors inside third world countries such as political corruption, gender inequality, and the concentration of farmland in a few families, an enormous mass of anti-imperialist literature appeared in the 1970s. This was the context for the publication of Immanuel Wallerstein’s multivolume *The Modern World-System*, which exercised a long-lasting, commanding influence on the writing of world history.³⁸ Wallerstein added little to the dependency theory argument that the world economy was structured in such a manner that core societies developed at the expense of peripheral ones. However, his global or “world-system” perspective was seen

³⁶See Mark Kesselman, “Order or Movement? The Literature of Political Development as Ideology,” *World Politics* 26, no. 1 (October 1973): 139–54; and Howard Wiarda, “The Ethnocentrism of the Social Science: Implications for Research and Policy,” *Review of Politics* 43, no. 2 (April 1981): 163–97.

³⁷It came as a surprise to the leftist world when the Marxist Bill Warren observed in “Imperialism and Capitalist Industrialization” that capitalist development, not “underdevelopment,” had been taking place through the 1960s in some third world countries as a result of foreign investments. *New Left Review* (September–October 1973): 3–44. Peter Berger’s *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions About Prosperity, Equality, and Liberty* (Basic Books, 1986) used the experience of East Asian industrialization as a refutation of dependency theory.

³⁸Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); and *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730–1840s* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1989).

as a new contribution “in emphasizing,” in Roland Robertson’s words, “the idea that the world is a systemic phenomenon and that much of what has been traditionally analysed by social scientists in societal, or more broadly, civilizational terms can and should be relativized and discussed along global-systemic lines.”³⁹

Wallerstein distinguished three major stages in history. He called the first the stage of “mini-systems,” in which relatively small, self-sufficient economic regions with a single cultural outlook dominated. These mini-systems—minute and short-lived—existed throughout the long eras of hunting and gathering, horticultural, and early agricultural societies. The basic principles of exchange of these mini-systems were “reciprocity” and “gift-giving.” The second stage was that of “world-empires” (such as ancient Egypt, the Persian Empire, and Imperial Rome), which were founded on an agricultural economy, connected by wide networks of commerce, and supported by strong military and political rule, coercive taxation, and conquest. The third stage began in the sixteenth century, when Europe’s merchant economy expanded throughout the globe, creating a “new division of labor” based primarily on economic-market exploitation rather than political-military domination. This was the birth of modern capitalism, when the globe was gradually incorporated into a single, so-called “modern world-system” of economic interdependencies. It was a stage in which the world’s peripheral or less developed societies were eventually drawn into the dominant capitalist system to support the leading societies of the West by providing inexpensive labor, accessible raw materials, and markets for manufactured goods.⁴⁰

As one admirer, Jerry Bentley, noted in *Shapes of World History in Twentieth-Century Scholarship*, the world-system approach of Wallerstein, a sociologist, “deeply influenced the way historians, anthropologists, and scholars in other disciplines [understood] the dynamics of modern world history.” The essential message of his approach was that “modern world

³⁹Roland Robertson, “Globality, Global Culture, and Images of World Order,” in Hans Haferkamp and Neil J. Smelser, eds., *Social Change and Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 400.

⁴⁰In the last chapter of the *Modern World-System I* Wallerstein drew a clear distinction between world-empires and “the modern world-system,” 346–57, but articulated the idea of three stages in history and spoke of “mini-systems” in *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms* (1991; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 231–32, 247–48.

history made sense only in the context of Western imperial and colonial hegemony.”⁴¹ The attack on the West and on the possibility of a universal history, however, did not stem from any one person or school of thought. It was the work of many elite groups, cultural relativists, feminists, post-colonialists, environmentalists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, and deconstructionists. It is beyond the scope of this essay to analyse the influence of all these groups, but two philosophical outlooks deserve further reflection. The first is the “negative philosophy of history” of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, expressed most forcefully in their influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1944. The second is the cultural relativism that grew out of the field of anthropology in the early twentieth century, which by the 1980s captured the social sciences and the humanities throughout institutions of higher learning.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* turned the nineteenth-century liberal idea of human progress on its head: the history of Western civilization was a history of regress. The book sought to explain how Nazism and the Holocaust had been possible in Western Europe, how modern science, technology, and instrumental reason had been employed in the service of fascism, and how Western culture had brought “mankind into a new kind of barbarism.”⁴² It offered a sweeping critique of the Occidental tradition of reason. It traced the increasing power of “instrumental reason”—domination over human nature, the environment, and labor through factory organization—back to the “turning points” of Western civilization: from the “enlightened character of Homer,” to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, to the mass culture industry and the capitalist bureaucratic state. Much as “bourgeois” ideology postulated the idea of a free and humane social life, political domination was at the base of modern Galilean and Newtonian science. Calculability, efficiency, and impersonality were the basic characteristics of this pattern of domination: to the extent that nature was perceived by Westerners as neutral, disenchanting, and without intrinsic qualities, it was open to manipulation, alteration, and destruction.

The radical critique of Western civilization found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and numerous other writings by Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as in Herbert Marcuse’s celebrated *Reason and Revolution* (Oxford

⁴¹Jerry H. Bentley, *Shapes of World History in Twentieth-Century Scholarship: Essays on Global and Comparative History* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1996), 3–35; also available at <http://www.riseofthewest.com/thinkers/bentley01.htm>.

⁴²Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum 1982), 3–42.

University Press, 1941) and *One-Dimensional Man* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964)—which claimed that bourgeois society threatened the existence of “human reality” and that a “total and radical revolution” was both necessary and defensible—did not directly impact the writing of world history. However, it did capture the political imagination of students and intellectuals during the 1960s and 1970s, and became a key component in the formation of the New Left. In many parts of the world, radical protest movements against American foreign policy, the private extraction of resources, and Western modernization at large found much inspiration in the writings of the “Critical” school.⁴³

But perhaps the most devastating assault on the idea of a universal history may have *originated* from the pen of an unrelenting worker named Franz Boas. Known for his accomplishments as a teacher, administrator, researcher, founder and president of societies, editor, lecturer, and field worker, as well as the author of half a dozen books and over 700 articles (!), Boas has been claimed by Margaret Mead as “the man who made anthropology into a science,” and by Marvin Harris as “one of the most influential figures in the history of the social sciences.”⁴⁴ Although Boas did not use the term “cultural relativism,” the thrust of his classic 1911 work, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, was that Western culture (and the “White race”) should not be seen as superior just because it had “advanced far beyond the stages” in which other cultures were still living. The idea of directionality in history and the tendency to view Western culture as mankind’s highest achievement created the inevitable impression that primitive cultures were inferior:

The superiority of our inventions, the extent of our scientific knowledge, the complexity of our social institutions, our attempts to promote the welfare of all members of the social body, create the impression that we, the civilized people, have advanced far beyond the stages on which other people linger, and the assumption has arisen of an innate superiority of the European nations and of their descendants....Since the intellectual

⁴³Two readable sources on the “Critical” school and its impact on social science studies and radical politics are David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980) and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and Institute of Social Research 1923–1950* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1973). The widespread insistence that the role of a university education is to create “critical” thinkers owes much to this school.

⁴⁴Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: Crowell, 1971), 250–89.

development of the White race is the highest, it is assumed that its intellectuality is supreme and that its mind has the most subtle organization.⁴⁵

This was no doubt a powerful appraisal against the sometimes snobbish definition of progress which dominated, for example, the writings of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and influenced the racist ideas of H.S. Chamberlain. Boas's critique soon gained popularity within cultural anthropology, which by its very nature calls on field workers to imagine unfamiliar cultural traits from the point of view of *them* rather than *us*.

Margaret Mead was very clear about the meaning of Boasian relativism:

[I]t stood against any grading of cultures in hierarchical systems which would place our own culture at the top and place other cultures of the world in a descending scale according to the extent that they differ from ours.⁴⁶

While there were still anthropologists like Leslie White, who continued to defend “neoevolutionist” ideas of historical directionality through the 1940s and 1950s, by the early 1960s this relativism had gained much favor within the social sciences and humanities. In 1963, for example, Lucian Pye, a political scientist studying development, wrote that “a generation of instruction in cultural relativism has had its influence, and social thinkers are no longer comfortable with any concept which might suggest a belief in ‘progress’ or ‘stages of civilization.’”⁴⁷ We discussed above, too, how historians like Mark Krug and Leften Stavrianos were trying to think of new ways to teach and write world history without a “Western-European ethnocentric bias,” and how modernization theory seemed unable to respond to the charges of ethnocentrism.

But this was only the beginning. By the mid-1980s, as Allan Bloom observed, “there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth

⁴⁵Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911; New York: Collier, 1963), 20. Boas was more concerned with the implication of racial superiority, but his arguments can also be read as a warning against the arrogance of cultural superiority implied in the idea of historical stages.

⁴⁶Margaret Mead, cited in Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 14.

⁴⁷Lucian Pye, cited in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), 352 n. 41.

is relative.”⁴⁸ Not only had the notion of scientific truth been relativized, but also the very ideals of Western democratic-liberalism. Tracing the full flowering of cultural relativism—its textured combination with post-modernism, multiculturalism, and world-systems theory; along with the rise of new academic disciplines such as women’s studies, black history, Chicano studies, and Asian studies; not to mention the increasing proportion of citizens in Western countries claiming their ethnic background as “Chinese,” “South-Asian,” “Black,” “Arab/West Asian,” “Filipino,” Southeast Asian,” “Latin American,” “Japanese,” “Korean,” or “Other”—is too difficult a task to take on in one article.⁴⁹

The Conversion of William McNeill: From “Rise of the West” to “Interactive Webs”

One thing is certain, by the 1970s world historians had generally lost faith in Western civilization ideas and had given up the old liberal interpretation of the meaning and course of human history. In 1974, when William McNeill published his short book, *The Shape of European History*, parts of which he presented in September 1973 to a session of the Eleventh International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, under the encouragement of Sol Tax, professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, he observed that “few living historians accept” the “no longer very

⁴⁸Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25.

⁴⁹As I was completing this essay I discovered in a used bookstore *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, by Arthur Herman (Free Press, 1997), which contains excellent chapters on “the Frankfurt School and Herbert Marcuse,” “Sartre, Foucault, Fanon,” “the Multicultural Impulse,” and “Eco-Pessimism.” Although the chapter on multiculturalism examines the writings of Afrocentrics and critics of American culture, Herman does not examine the role of anthropological relativists. He draws attention to admirers of third world customs but without speaking of “dependency” theory or world-system analysis. Still, he offers a captivating account of Arthur de Gobineau, Cesare Lombroso, Henry Adams, Marcus Garvey, Arnold Toynbee, and many other influential figures from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

Herman’s panoramic outlook on the replacement of the idea of progress by the idea of decline combines critiques from the “left” and the “authoritarian right.” For example, he thinks that the Marxists, multiculturalists, post-modernists, and radical environmentalists shared “the same contempt for the liberal, rational traditions of post-Enlightenment Europe” as Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, and Heidegger (446). This judgment ignores certain conservative thinkers (Jacob Burckhardt, Tocqueville, Weber, and T.S. Eliot) who were certainly not against the intellectual legacy of the West, but did warn against a purely hedonistic materialism with no sense of community, religion, and respect for the past. I would also say that Nietzsche, Spengler, and Heidegger, unlike many on the left who came to embrace popular and non-European culture, were aristocratic elitists who valued the high culture of Europe.

convincing idea” that “Europe’s history is the history of liberty.”⁵⁰ In searching for another organizing vision that would give meaning to the whole of European history, McNeill relied on the anthropological notion of “cultural pattern,” which he defined as “repeatable behaviour recognizable in the lives of relatively large numbers of men, often millions or hundreds of millions.”⁵¹ This bland structuralist definition of culture was specifically set against the traditional emphasis on the elite culture of the West; it minimized rational patterns of behavior in support of unconscious behaviors performed by anonymous faces on a regular basis. This definition was well-suited to anthropologists, who spent a good part of their research lives with peasants and tribesmen. When seen from the standpoint of the daily lives of ordinary people, European history did not appear particularly unique. If it still seemed “worthwhile” to study it, McNeill concluded, it was because of the predominant role of European industrial and military power in world affairs in recent centuries.⁵²

To be precise, McNeill has recollected that when he was writing *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (University of Chicago Press, 1963), on which he worked for ten years, he was under the influence of the anthropologist Robert Redfield, from whom he had learned that historical change was “largely provoked” by encounters between “separate civilizations.”⁵³ Redfield had indeed gained a reputation for his pioneering idea that seemingly isolated small peasant villages, with their customs, religious beliefs, and standard of living, should not be studied as isolated units but as parts of a wider set of connections between many villages and states. McNeill went so far as to argue in 1982 that “it is from [anthropologists] that I borrowed most of my conceptual baggage.”⁵⁴ It was from anthropologists indeed that McNeill learned to “escape the hampering ethnocentrism” of “contemporary American and European society.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰William McNeill, *The Shape of European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 3.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 24.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 176.

⁵³See William McNeill, “The Changing Shape of World History,” a paper originally presented at the “History and Theory World History Conference,” March 25–26, 1994, and reprinted in Dunn, *New World History*.

⁵⁴This quote comes from “A Defense of World History,” published in 1982 and reprinted in William McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 94.

⁵⁵William McNeill, “The Rise of the West as a Long-Term Process,” *Mythistory*, 54.

It is no wonder, then, when the Western Civilization course was abandoned in the 1960s, McNeill did not grieve its disappearance, despite being a course teacher at the University of Chicago as well as the author of *History Handbook of Western Civilization* (University of Chicago Press, 1953). What he lamented in 1976 at an American Historical Association session was the lack of development of a *new* required course that “all educated persons should know; something every active citizen ought to be familiar with in order to conduct his life well and perform public duties effectively.”⁵⁶ In this lecture McNeill left no doubt that for him world history was the most suitable survey to introduce American students to the great cultures and complex affairs of a world far greater than Europe. But if the Western Civilization view of history as the evolution of freedom was parochial and lacked evidence, what would be the organizing vision of this new required world history course? It would be an amplification of the anthropological ideas McNeill had long been adopting.

In the self-critical article, “The Changing Shape of World History,” McNeill proudly explained how he had gradually come to accept a slightly revised version of Wallerstein’s world-system analysis, together with a new environmental perspective that placed micro-parasites rather than European ideas at the center of global history. He felt he had not gone far enough in *The Rise of the West* in his emphasis on interaction between civilizations, in that he had restricted them to geographical regions like the Near East rather than including the entire world. In writing *The Pursuit of Power* (University of Chicago Press, 1982) and researching the strong effects Chinese commercial expansion had on the European economy after 1000 AD, McNeill realized “that a proper world history ought to focus *primarily* upon changes in the ecumenical world system.”⁵⁷ The very idea that civilizations were distinct cultural entities that, despite their interactions, could be appraised the same way an art critic evaluated styles of art was no longer tenable. The civilizations of the past were too “internally confused and contradictory”—“no single recognizable style of life” could be attributed to any of them.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶William McNeill, lecture, “Beyond Western Civilization: Rebuilding the Survey,” *Mythistory*, 97.

⁵⁷McNeill, “Changing Shape of World History,” 148.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 148–49.

In an earlier self-appraisal originally published in 1984, “The Rise of the West as a Long-Term Process,” McNeill repeated with conviction that the “principal motor of social change within civilized and simpler societies alike” was “contact with strangers.”⁵⁹ Stability and repetition were normal; it was mostly “encounters” with other cultures that provoked “innovation.” “Borrowing,” however—not “invention”—was “the principal impetus to social change.” The successive cultural efflorescences of world history, after the first in Mesopotamia (3000–1800 BC), “involved a preparatory period of large scale borrowing from more accomplished cultures...in the immediately preceding era.”⁶⁰

McNeill recognized that “such borrowed elements entered a distinct institutional and cultural setting” that affected their importance, but he did so incidentally in the context of persistently asserting that world history writing should be mostly about cross-cultural exchanges.⁶¹ He also insisted that world historians should concentrate on the everyday culture of the majority, in contrast to Western Civilization courses that had been too preoccupied with “elite culture.” The high culture of the West, for all its accredited virtues, was immaterial to the vast majority: a civilization was “no more than a shorthand summation for myriads of messages exchanged among large populations.”⁶² Indeed, in a tone similar to Wallerstein, McNeill suggested in “The Changing Shape of World History” that the moral and religious patterns that distinguished a civilization’s elite were in truth ideologies of oppression, which the rulers themselves disregarded since their real interests were plundering, taxing, and reaping profits unjustly, although the principal religions of the core regions of the world system—Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islam—did soften somewhat the suffering that accompanied the imperial subordination of less powerful cultures.⁶³

McNeill also went on to claim that next to cultural exchanges, the environment was the second most significant factor in world history. He had

⁵⁹William McNeill, “Rise of the West,” 57. This essay was reprinted yet again in 1990 in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of World History*.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 62–63.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 63.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 64.

⁶³McNeill, “Changing Shape of World History,” 148–49.

already focused on “infectious diseases” in *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor Press, 1976), but in the 1980s and 1990s he came to the more sweeping observation that humans were essentially organic creatures conditioned by the forces of nature. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, and “ecological crises” were powerful forces inducing humans to alter their behavior, “thereby creating historical change and maintaining its momentum across the centuries.”⁶⁴ The stuff of world history consisted in the communications carried by countless anonymous strangers across the globe in response to environmental pressures and opportunities. World history, he concluded in *The Human Web*, co-authored with his son, was simply the study of interactive webs of plants, animals, parasites, and “common everyday” humans. It was McNeill’s hope that this new world history would “play a modest but useful part in facilitating a tolerable future for humanity.”⁶⁵

While McNeill was revising his ideas, the author of the world-system theory, Immanuel Wallerstein, was busy writing essays (some of which appeared in his 1991 book *Unthinking Social Sciences*) turning his critique of modern Western imperialism into a complete rejection of the assumptions underlying the concept of “development.” According to Wallerstein this concept, which social scientists inherited from the nineteenth century, was highly misleading and unacceptable because it falsified the dominant historical trend of the modern world. By definition, “development” explained change as a gradual unfolding of internal potentialities within societies or civilizations. It assumed, as McNeill noted elsewhere, that changes within civilizations were “autocatalytic.” The main role in the dynamics of society, Wallerstein insisted, was played by global factors and influences. The drive for change came from inter-societal contacts, competition, conflict, and conquest. Societies were *not* autonomous and did not evolve independently since they were primarily created by “world-scale processes.” The concept of development also had to be abandoned because of its intimate association with progress and the idea that history moved forward in a better direction. The later stages of the “world-system” could hardly be considered improvements

⁶⁴William McNeill, “Defense of World History,” 76.

⁶⁵William McNeill and John McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird’s-Eye View of World History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003). This short book has been widely adopted in courses. The citation is from “The Changing Shape of World History,” 157. See also McNeill’s “An Emerging Consensus about World History?” in the inaugural issue of *World History Connected* (November 2003), a widely read online journal, <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuc.edu/#>.

over earlier stages, when egalitarian “mini-systems” prevailed. “Progress” must be treated as historically contingent and culturally relative.⁶⁶

By the 1990s the influence of cultural relativism was powerful enough that when Stephen K. Sanderson decided in *Social Transformations: A General Theory of Historical Development* (1995) to revive and defend the nineteenth-century evolutionary theory of history, he did so by completely rejecting the idea that social evolution had generally been progressive. “There is nothing inherent in the concept of evolution that requires anyone to assume that it must be linked with progress.”⁶⁷ Synthesizing the anthropological findings of Marvin Harris and Mark Nathan Cohen, the evolutionary sociological ideas of Gerhard Lenski, and the world-system perspective of Wallerstein, Sanderson argued to the contrary that “throughout most of world history social evolution has been largely regressive.”⁶⁸ Upon examining the material standard of living, the quality of work and the human workload, the degree of social and economic equality, and the extent of democracy and freedom, Sanderson concluded that hunter-gatherer societies were the most progressive. While he recognized that with the rise of industrial capitalism the standard of living of advanced societies had improved, and in recent decades some gains had been achieved in less developed countries, he still pointed out that the absolute number of people living in abject poverty had increased and the gap between developed and less developed countries had steadily widened. Sanderson did not deny that individual autonomy and freedom had increased in modern capitalist societies compared to agrarian civilizations, but insisted that hunting and gathering bands and horticultural tribes were “the truest democracies,” and that primitive peoples enjoyed about the same if not greater individual freedom.⁶⁹

⁶⁶Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1991; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 2, 64–79, 253–54. In one essay, written in 1987, Wallerstein observed that the idea of progress was still dominant despite a few detractors. He hoped that world-system analysis would “remove the idea of progress from the status of a trajectory.” I tend to agree with Robert Nisbet that by the late 1970s this idea was disowned by much of the intelligentsia; see his *History of the Idea of Progress*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1980; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 317–51. Nisbet also makes the crucial point—which would require more space than is available here to consider fully—that the idea of progress contains a “belief in the value of the past [and] a conviction of the nobility, even superiority of Western civilization,” 317. Herman’s *Idea of Decline* misses this point to the extent that he defines progress in purely secular and scientific terms.

⁶⁷Stephen K. Sanderson, *Social Transformations: A General Theory of Historical Development* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 356.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 336.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 337–56.

The Ascendancy of Multicultural World Historians

This attack against the idea of human progress in general and the high culture of Western civilization in particular coincided with the growth of world history courses in high schools, colleges, and universities across the United States. World history curricula gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s by repudiating the very idea of “the West” as a unique civilization. Ross Dunn, Jerry Bentley, Patrick Manning, David Christian, and others took over the cause of world history in the 1980s, promoting graduate programs in the field and founding the World History Association (1982), the *World History Bulletin* (1983), the *Journal of World History* (1990), and the online journal *World History Connected* (2003). These scholars reached the conclusion that the great events of European history could only be explained within the wider context of interrelated events happening around the globe. They agreed that world history should be defined as the study of past “connections in the human community,” the story of humanity’s “common experience.” Some, like Bentley and A.G. Frank, reached backward in time using Wallerstein’s world-system approach by emphasising mass migrations, imperial accumulation, and long-distance trade in pre-modern times. Others, like Clive Ponting and Christian, pointed to the common physical and biological nature of humanity, the propensities and desires of the human species, the universal ecosystem of the earth, and the ways in which people have been interdependent with all other forms of life. If Dunn focused on trans-hemispheric intercommunicating zones, Alfred Crosby illustrated the ways in which plants, animals, and germs moved across continents beyond the boundaries of nations and civilizations.⁷⁰

There is no denying that this emphasis on the historical interactions of communities and cultures produced indispensable insights on the global impact of modern as well as pre-modern forces and movements. The trend toward a more even-handed evaluation of non-European peoples, initiated by

⁷⁰See, Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (Oxford University Press, 1993); A. G. Frank, and Barry Gills, eds., *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (Routledge, 1993); Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World* (Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd., 1991); David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (University of California Press, 2005); Ross E. Dunn, *Links Across Time and Place: A World History* (McDougal, Littell & Company, 1990); and Alfred Crosby, *Germs, Seeds, and Animals: Studies in Ecological History* (M. E. Sharpe, 1994).

Western scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, deserves to be celebrated. It is, after all, a trend in character with the ideals of human rights and dignity advanced by European civilization. But I believe that a narrow-minded, anti-Western ideology has taken hold of much of world history writing in recent decades. This ideology no longer finds singular expression in overzealous books like Kete Molefi Asante's *The Afrocentric Idea* (Temple University Press, 1987).⁷¹ It comes in seemingly objective and temperate writings such as the earlier mentioned "Shapes of World History in Twentieth-Century Scholarship," by Jerry Bentley, professor of world history at the University of Hawaii, founding editor of the *Journal of World History*, and co-author of the widely popular college text, *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (McGraw-Hill, 1999).

Bentley's essay may be read as a fair treatment of the unfolding of world history as a "professional" field of study in the second half of the twentieth century. He does not make the predictable attacks of world-system theorists against the "modernization school of history," but recognizes that Walt Rostow, Cyril Black, and Richard Bendix "made contributions of large significance." He also pays attention to reappraisals by modernization historians such as E. L. Jones, who came to reevaluate the earlier "ethnocentric assumption" that intensive economic growth was a peculiarly Western phenomenon, and recognizes that Jones placed the "European experience in [a] global context by comparing it with those of other societies."⁷²

In the end, Bentley's ideological intentions become apparent. His statement that "world history represents a particularly appropriate means of recognizing the contributions of all peoples to the world's common history" sounds benign.⁷³ Why reject a conception of world history calling for the inclusion of the achievements of all peoples? Because what Bentley actually promotes is not simply the positive idea that the world's peoples deserve serious consideration but primarily the negative idea that there was nothing distinctive about the European Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, or the rise of representative institutions. Much as Bentley chastises world-system theory for focusing too much "on

⁷¹For more on the Afrocentrist movement, see Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, 390–99.

⁷²Bentley, "Shapes of World History," 9–13.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 4–5.

the interests and activities of Western capitalists” and overlooking “the roles played by peoples in the satellite or periphery as participants in the making of the world’s history,” he is endorsing its basic tenets.⁷⁴

Nearly all the world history books produced during the 1980s and early 1990s Bentley examines focus on how Europeans came to establish economic, cultural, and ecological hegemony over the world and how non-European cultures sometimes “succumbed” to European “numbers, weapons, and disease” but occasionally fought heroically against European “deculturation.” Among his favorites is Daniel Headrick’s three-volume *Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*; *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940*; and *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851–1945*. According to Bentley, these works “explore the technological dimension of European imperialism....how Europeans rapidly extended their influence throughout the world during the age of the new imperialism.”⁷⁵ Even books on the history of tiny islands, informed by ethnographic insights, such as Greg Dening’s *Islands and Beaches: Discourses on a Silent Land: Marquesas, 1774–1880* (Dorsey Press, 1988) and David Hanlon’s *Upon a Stone Altar: A History of the Island of Pohnpei to 1890* (University of Hawaii Press, 1988), are celebrated as “world histories” inasmuch as they discuss how “Europeans approached the islands in large numbers equipped with firearms, alcohol, and exotic diseases,” and how the cultures of these islands were destroyed by white settlements, weapons, and diseases.⁷⁶ Works on the indigenous peoples of North America are also listed as insightful studies of a hemispheric encounter that “brought demographic collapse, ecological imbalance, dependence on trade goods from abroad, heightened intertribal tensions, psychological despair, alcoholism, and deculturation.”⁷⁷

Bentley is hardly unique. Ross Dunn has observed that when the first volume of Wallerstein’s *Modern World-System* was published in 1974 it “excited” many historians who were just beginning to promote world history

⁷⁴Ibid., 16.

⁷⁵Ibid., 19.

⁷⁶Ibid., 25.

⁷⁷Ibid., 26.

courses on college campuses.⁷⁸ At first, not everyone was sure how to apply Wallerstein's analysis of the origins and dynamics of the modern capitalist system to global developments before 1500 CE. When in 1981 Craig Lockard wrote "Global History, Modernization, and the World-System Approach," he opined that it was "the most exciting and influential" approach for global historians seeking to explain trans-continental developments, but that it had not yet "penetrated the pages of world history textbooks."⁷⁹ By the late 1980s, however, after scholars had found enough time to improve, revise, and enlarge on Wallerstein, his concept of "world-system," according to Dunn, proved to be a "multifunctional tool" used to comprehend all sorts of interactions and exchanges throughout the world even in pre-modern times.⁸⁰

Patrick Manning's *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (2003), lauded on the book's back cover as an excellent reference "for instructors seeking to create programs in graduate world history education," actually appoints Wallerstein one of three "founding fathers" of world history, along with Philip Curtin and Alfred Crosby. (Bentley also acknowledges Curtin's and Crosby's "seminal" contributions.) A specialist in African history, founder of Northeastern University's World History Center, and currently Andrew W. Mellon Professor of World History at the University of Pittsburgh, Manning believes that Wallerstein, Curtin, and Crosby made the "most lasting contributions" to the development of the idea that world history is "the study of connections between communities and between communities and their environments."⁸¹ Manning himself calls for a world history that emphasizes "interconnections rather than dominance" and celebrates the equal interplay and collective experiences of all regions of the world.⁸²

Forget for the moment the apparent lack of connection between this harmonious view and Wallerstein's system of dominance. Manning adds that Africa—yes, the same Black Africa that Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of*

⁷⁸Dunn, *New World History*, 225. I recommend this collection as the most appropriate introduction to trends in world history in the last three decades.

⁷⁹Craig Lockard, "Global History, Modernization, and the World-System Approach," in Dunn, *New World History*, 233, 238.

⁸⁰Dunn, *New World History*, 226. In his 1987 article "Periodization of World History Teaching," Peter Stearns also refers to Wallerstein's model as "one of the most fruitful general theories for world history." Dunn, *New World History*, 371.

⁸¹Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15.

⁸²*Ibid.*, xi.

Darkness called “the blankest of blank spaces” on a map—has not only been “a region connected to most other world areas,” but also one in which its own regional connections were more about mutual interaction and less about dominance.⁸³ The history of Africa has been uniquely connected to Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East; it has also been a land in which the Bantu-speaking peoples, for example, managed to disperse their languages by absorbing other peoples and cultures rather than by conquering them. African history can thus be narrated in terms of international experiences of enslavement and racism—“largely imposed from outside the community”—and an idyllic pre-colonial existence, which presumably was the Ibo way of life described by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (Fawcett Premier, 1959).⁸⁴

Manning is singularly interested in Europe’s relations of dominance and its imposition of slavery on peaceful African communities. It is no accident that his selection of world history founders has dedicated their research careers to the study of European imperialism. Wallerstein’s first two books were on African politics.⁸⁵ Likewise, Curtin’s research has focused on African history and European colonization. His best-known works include: *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); *Disease and Empire: The Health of European Troops in the Conquest of Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); and *The World and the West: European Challenge and the Overseas Response in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). One book, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), seems global in scope, but is primarily preoccupied with “trade diasporas” connected to Africa. And the titles of his two most celebrated books attest to Crosby’s research interests: *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Greenwood Press, 1972) and *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge University

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid., 159. Jan Vansina’s book on the migrations of the Bantu peoples, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), receives the most detailed appraisal in Manning’s bibliographical book (240–46, 254).

⁸⁵See Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “The African Prism of Immanuel Wallerstein,” *Radical History Review* (September 1987): 50–68. In my estimation, Wallerstein—who views everything from the perspective of the structural logic of the “world capitalist system”—has had far greater academic influence than Noam Chomsky. Many of Chomsky’s pamphlets became “best-sellers,” but mostly among undergraduates; his scholarly influence has been limited to the arcane field of linguistics. By contrast, Wallerstein’s impact, as can be gathered from Google, has been heavily felt throughout the social sciences.

Press, 1986). These works argue that the histories of nations have been fundamentally affected by the trans-hemispheric movements of micro-parasites, diseases, plants, and animals.

What Manning really objects to are the relations of dominance that recount the ascendancy of the West in terms of its own cultural and institutional attributes. He repeatedly tries to downplay transformations and events traditionally associated with European history by portraying them as global processes to the point of trivializing them. For example, regarding Magellan's circumnavigation of the earth, Manning says: "it was not just Europeans who confirmed that the world was spherical" (as if this voyage was about verifying what the Greeks already knew), but "literate and informed people everywhere, of all backgrounds, who could henceforth state with precision the geological extent and limits of the planet."⁸⁶ Manning justifies this conclusion on the strength of a single fact communicated to him by Adam McKeown of Columbia University about an unidentified sailor who "joined Magellan's fleet in 1519, and survived the voyage."⁸⁷ For all I know this sailor found himself circling the globe after falling asleep drunk on the ship.

Manning also asserts that the Italian Renaissance should be portrayed as a global process occasioned by Europe's connections to the New World and the more "advanced" cultures of the Near East. World historians should presumably focus on these connections if they wish to understand the achievements of Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Pico della Mirandola. In truth it is the duchy of Milan, the republics of Florence and Venice, the Papal States, and the Kingdom of Naples that produced a culture that should be *esteemed* as the highest achievement of the fourteenth-century world. As Nietzsche's Zarathustra says,

To esteem is to create: hear this, you creators. Esteeming itself is of all esteemed things the most estimable treasure. Through esteeming alone is there value: and without esteeming, the nut of existence would be hollow.⁸⁸

Hear this, world historians! Political aims should never be the criteria for determining what is a great work of art or philosophy. Unfortunately, the current trend in world history writing and teaching is to minimize, ignore,

⁸⁶Manning, *Navigating World History*, 111.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), 170.

and explain away any cultural distinctions traditionally associated with Western civilization. To use the phrase of one of the most influential writers of our time, anthropologist Clifford Geertz, the “frames of meaning,” in which people everywhere live out their lives are equally valid and authentic on their own terms.⁸⁹ The modern philosophy of Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant was no more profound and self-aware than the mythical beliefs of the Zulus and the Papuans. The interconnected regions of Afro-Eurasia had roughly the same potential for modernity. Only a sequence of accidental/imperial factors accounted for Europe’s sudden (and recent) divergence from the rest of the world.⁹⁰

⁸⁹For a cogent critique of cultural relativism and how this ideology excited Geertz to write a description of the burning of widows “as a spectacle of awesome beauty,” see Keith Windschuttle, “The Ethnocentrism of Clifford Geertz” *New Criterion* 21, no. 2 (October 2002): 5–12. I should mention the highly influential “postcolonial” school engendered by Edward Said after the 1978 publication of his best-seller *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1978), which offered an “adversarial critique” of the “essentialized” way European artists, travelers, and writers portrayed non-Western cultures as the “Other” (illogical and despotic) of everything that was thought to be progressive (rational and liberal) about the West. Windschuttle also takes on these claims in “Edward Said’s *Orientalism* Revisited,” *New Criterion* 17, no. 5 (January 1999): 30–39. He argues effectively that it was Said who presented an essentialist account of Western civilization in his silent treatment of the majority of Western scholars who had long transcended the ethnic prejudices of the past in their diligent devotion to understanding the histories and traditions of the world’s cultures. Another example: during the 1960s Time-Life Books released a series called *Great Ages of Man: A History of the World’s Cultures* that included such volumes as *Byzantium*, *Historic India*, *The First Horsemen*, and *Early Islam*, authored by prominent experts. These volumes were not only fair but quite generous in their evaluation of non-Western contributions. Desmond Steward’s *Early Islam* (1967), for example, is filled with praises such as: “From the dawn of Islam...until the...Mongol nomads sacked the Muslim capital of Bagdad in 1258—Islam was the world’s most challenging religion, its strongest political force and its most vital culture,” 11–12.

⁹⁰These accounts can be found in a recent wave of influential works, including Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of the European Experience* (Cornell University Press, 1997); A. G. Frank, *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (University of California Press, 1998); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2000); and James Lee and Wang Feng, *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities, 1700–2000* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

I have challenged most of the empirical claims of these books in a number of articles: “Between Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism: Debating Andre Gunder Frank’s Re-Orient,” *Science and Society* 65, no. 4 (Winter 2001–2002): 428–463; “What Is Living and What Is Dead in Eurocentrism,” *Comparative Civilizations Review* 47 (Fall 2002): 25–44; “The Post-Malthusian World Began in Western Europe in the Eighteenth Century: A Reply to Goldstone and Wong,” *Science and Society* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 195–205; “Malthus and the Demographic Systems of Modern Europe and Imperial China: A Critique of Lee and Feng,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 35, no. 4 (December 2003): 534–42; and “On the Rise of the West: Researching Kenneth Pomeranz’s Great Divergence,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 36, no. 1 (March 2004): 52–81. See also “Asia First?” for a detailed challenge of John Hobson’s *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and its wondrous claims that all of Europe’s major ideas and inventions came from Asia, in *The Journal of the Historical Society* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): 69–91.

Conclusion: World History Is the “History of the Non-Western World”

This discursive shift away from the great themes of freedom and rationality, which students learned from the traditional Western Civilization courses, and which world historians still accepted in the 1960s, was perhaps the most important event in twentieth-century historiography.⁹¹ It is tempting to conclude that this liberal idea of progress was rightfully abandoned because it was massively contradicted by the facts of the twentieth century—the century of two global wars, the Great Depression, Vietnam, Chernobyl, Ozone layer depletion, AIDS. But the idea of progress may be moderately conceived à la Voltaire (1694–1778), who did not indulge in Utopian speculations about the future but simply celebrated the progression of the human spirit from savagery, superstition, and theocracy. If Voltaire believed that life in the Paris or London of his day was preferable to life in the Garden of Eden, he also recognized that the advancement of human reason was frail and precarious and that progress could be followed by decay and regress.⁹² The idea of progress is indeed incompatible with the belief that human nature is good and that all is for the best in this world.

As we learn from Mandelville’s provocative book *The Fable of the Bees* (1723), the innocence of manners of people living an Arcadian existence cannot be reconciled with the “worldly greatness” of civilizations. A society of people living peacefully in a friendly and easy style would be the safest and “happiest,” but it would also be stagnant. The force that makes progress possible in history, as Turgot, Kant, and Hegel realized, is not some initial state of wisdom and enlightenment, but the “tumultuous and dangerous passions” of pride, ambition, and greed. These are the passions that brought

⁹¹Of course, not everyone stopped teaching Western Civilization courses or writing Eurocentric world histories. Two world histories published in the 1970s, *History of the World* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), by J.M. Roberts, and *A History of the World* (Harper & Row, 1979), by Hugh Thomas, devoted even less space to Asia and Africa than McNeill’s *Rise of the West* and Braudel’s *History of Civilizations*. Although Roberts expanded the areas dedicated to non-Western histories in later editions, he also added in the preface to the 1995 edition that he was even more convinced about “the centrality of Europe’s role in the making of the modern world,” xiii–xiv. What is illuminating about this attitude is that Roberts was also no longer convinced about the progressive role of the West, but felt that the only “general trend” that could be observed in history was “a growing unity of human experience” and “a growing human capacity to control the environment.” While the West was the main source of this trend, he did *not* think it was possible to decide whether the European tradition was “greedy, oppressive, brutal and exploitative,” or “objectively improving, beneficent and humane,” 1098–1109. Similarly, Thomas may seem too Eurocentric in his obvious identification with Western liberal values, but he also could not help writing: “it is obvious that it is Western Europe with North America which, since the fifteenth century at least, for good or evil, has provided the world’s dynamism,” xvii.

⁹²See J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (1932; New York: Dover, 1960), 149–50.

an end to the Garden of Eden and that “nature” used to promote the material and intellectual advancement of the human species. Humans were not rational and free at the beginning of history.⁹³ As Hegel liked to remind his readers, God ratifies Satan’s prophesy after Adam has eaten the forbidden fruit: “Look, Adam has become like one of us, and knows what is good and evil.”⁹⁴ If Adam and Eve were happy in paradise, they had not yet discovered the *reason* why they were happy, what the good life was, or what was the meaning of hard work and achievement. It is self-consciousness as *reason* that comes on the scene with the ancient Greeks. The detachment of consciousness from its immediacy in the traditions and customs of society was a critical step in the progression of humanity. Modern life is progressive insofar as it is based on a wholly critical, self-reflexive culture, that is, a culture in which the norms and principles of life are not given by external, unquestioned authorities, but are justified by the appeal to rational debate and to the capacities for free agency presupposed in such appeals. The teaching of Western civilization, seen from this realistic view of progress, does not leave out its banal or deplorable aspects, but neither does it ignore the unique ways in which it has cultivated religious tolerance, human rights, democratic government, the scientific tradition, cultural pluralism, and a free market economy.⁹⁵

Regrettably, the idea of progress has been pushed out. In 1991, the National Endowment for the Humanities estimated that students could graduate from 78 percent of American colleges and universities without having taken a course in Western Civilization. Meanwhile, a world history that belittles the achievements of the West is increasingly becoming a required class. In 2003 in the inaugural issue of the online journal *World History Connected* Ane Lintvedt, who welcomes these trends, estimated that

⁹³These words come from Turgot, as cited by Bury, *Idea of Progress*, 156. Kant used the term “asocial sociability” to refer to this dilemma; Hegel called it the “cunning of reason.” For a short but competent discussion of Kant’s essay “An Idea for a Universal History from the Cosmopolitan Point of View,” written in 1784, see R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 93–104.

⁹⁴This passage and other aspects of Hegel’s philosophy of history are well examined by Stanley Rosen in *G. W. F. Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 3–46.

⁹⁵In *Europe: A History* (Oxford University Press, 1996), Norman Davies criticizes the teaching of Western civilization as an idealized list of Great Books that “filter out anything that might appear mundane or repulsive,” 28. He nevertheless appreciates the importance of European cultures for the understanding of the roots of America’s liberal traditions (1–31).

in the 2000–2001 academic year 59 percent of American colleges and universities offered world history, while only 46 percent offered Western Civilization courses. At public universities, the figure for world history was 69 percent.⁹⁶ According to Lintvedt, these trends were also more marked in secondary education: twenty-eight states required some type of world history course for graduation from their public high schools. She also observed that through the 1990s, a significant *and growing* majority of high school graduates had studied world history: 59.59 percent in 1990, 66.72 percent in 1994, and 66.41 percent in 1998.⁹⁷

Lintvedt did not investigate the number of students who completed a bachelor's degree without taking a Western Civilization course. Rather, she lamented that only three American universities—Northeastern, Columbia, and Washington State University—offered a PhD in world history. She did acknowledge that many universities offered PhD examinations or teaching fields in world history, and that a large number of programs in global studies and international history existed. However, Lintvedt did *not* mention that not a single institution of higher education offered a Western Civilization graduate studies program nor any graduate examinations or teaching fields in Western civilization.

The extent to which the study of Western Civilization has been pushed out of education can be indirectly verified by searching the H-NET Job Guide (<http://www.h-net.org/jobs/>), which posts openings for academic positions in history, the humanities, and the social sciences. I invite readers to peruse this guide. I have been looking at it regularly for two years and these are my general observations: Rarely are any job announcements listed under the heading “Western Civilization.” The few openings I have observed have typically been for single courses on a part-time or temporary basis. By contrast, numerous tenure-track openings in world history are posted. But what I find most troubling, and what demonstrates the extent to which the historiographical trends cataloged here have been embraced by American institutions of higher education, is that close to *100 percent* of the descriptions I have seen for world history positions *exclude* expertise in European and North American history. In fact, many descriptions identify

⁹⁶Ane Lintvedt, “The Demography of World History in the United States,” *World History Connected* 1, no. 1 (November 2003), <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuc.edu/1.1/lintvedt.html>.

⁹⁷Ibid.

world history as the “history of the non-Western world.” When the words “European” or “North American” appear, they do so in relation to such themes as “imperial or colonial studies,” “British imperial history,” or the “Atlantic slave trade.” By contrast, the few openings offered in Western Civilization invariably call for a “global perspective.”

Let me emphasize, moreover, that there are numerous openings listed in such “Area Studies” as African, African-American, Islamic, Asian, Hispanic, and Aboriginal studies. Occasionally, openings in ancient Greece and Rome are listed, but these are increasingly advertized as fractional members of a larger field of multicultural connections called “Mediterranean Studies.” In fact, while there are undergraduate and graduate programs in area studies—combined with countless programs in ethnic, black, Chicano, colonial, Atlantic, labor, gender, native, and media studies—today there are no graduate programs in Western civilization. Moreover, the few Western Civilization undergraduate programs I have encountered are hardly self-sufficient fields of study. The University of Texas at Austin has a “concentration” in Western Civilization that fits within the broader College of Liberal Arts and American Institutions. At Bradley University the Western Civilization program consists of two required courses. At the University of Colorado at Boulder there is a Center for Western Civilization, but it merely offers an undergraduate *certificate*. At Colgate University the Center for Freedom and Western Civilization is one among several that includes the Center for Learning, Teaching and Research; the Center for Women’s Studies; the ALANA Cultural Center—“to understand Africana, Latin American, Asian American, and Native American cultures, struggles and accomplishments”;⁹⁸ and, of course, the Writing Center. The University of Kansas has a two-semester Humanities and Western Civilization Program, but it is “committed” to the issues of gender, race, and non-Western cultures.

Since Herodotus wrote his fascinating ethnographic tales of the Scythians, Sarmatians, Egyptians, Phoenicians, and others, Westerners have shown a unique interest in, and willingness to learn from, other cultures; this makes the current academic reluctance to take the West seriously all the more unseemly. Multiculturalism is a paradoxical product of the progression of Western history and of the making of a rational self detached from its own

⁹⁸Colgate University, <http://www.colgate.edu>, “Centers and Institutes,” description of ALANA Cultural Center, at <http://www.colgate.edu/DesktopDefault1.aspx?tabid=1138&pgID=80>.

past. The Western “critical” personality needs to rediscover the basis of its own possibility: the Greek invention of philosophy and democratic politics, the Roman creation of the legal persona, the Christian recognition of the dignity of the individual, the Medieval creation of autonomous universities, the Reformation and the separation of state and church, the Newtonian Revolution, the rise of representative institutions, the Enlightenment, the Romantic Movement, and the Industrial Revolution. The demand for world history is itself a product of the West’s universal ideal that our highest ethical duties apply to all humans irrespective of ethnicity. A world history without the distinctive features of the West is a history without a past. The universal ideals of the West are not timeless and without context and tradition—they are historical. The teaching of this history offers a singular opportunity for the promotion of “cultured” students consistent with the spirit of “higher learning.”