

# 21st-Century Narratives of World History

R. Charles Weller  
Editor

# 21st-Century Narratives of World History

Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives

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*In hopes of fostering greater understanding of our shared world,  
for its ultimate betterment both humanly and environmentally,...*

*...and in loving memory of:*

*Robert Edward Taylor*

*Feb 12, 1938—Mar 4, 1990*

*American and world historian,*

*Loving and devoted husband to his wife,*

*and father to his children*

## FOREWORD

Organizing an approach to world history presents some interesting challenges, for scholars, teachers, and students alike. The subject is vast, and some principles are essential in figuring out what to emphasize, and what can safely—if sometimes painfully—be omitted. Unless world history is to be simply one thing after another—always a risk to be avoided—major themes must be identified. Decisions about change over time are unavoidable: are there particular turning points, amid which more stable patterns can be explored? What factors promote change on anything like a global scale? Finally, geography requires its own priorities. How is the “whole world” most adequately, yet manageably, represented? What regional definitions work best in deploying a world history framework?

There is no magic formula, which means that different choices will emerge. Successful world history frameworks reflect disagreements over when world history effectively begins, and discussions on this crucial point have become more lively with growing attention to the importance of environmental factors. The issue of regional coverage is inevitably challenging, because of the huge range of relevant examples and identities. Change and continuity properly provoke debate, depending both on how much detail can be handled successfully and, more fundamentally, on what kinds of factors prompt the most fundamental changes on something like a global scale. While some themes are probably unavoidable—it’s hard to imagine a world history program without some attention to governance structures—thematic opportunities have been

expanding as the world history domain becomes more familiar, more open to interactions with crucial topics historians have been exploring in more limited contexts.

Different vantage points deserve juxtaposition and interaction. For many people, students particularly but even some instructors, world history as a subject area suggests a textbook, often a large textbook, and little else. But the textbook approach, though a valid first step, too often makes it difficult to challenge and question the choices that have been made about basic frameworks. Regional and chronological definitions are taken as givens, rather than as starting points toward exploring and evaluating other alternatives. The opportunity, as in this volume, to compare fundamental orientations, to highlight different options and strengths, is thus particularly welcome. Any practitioner, even the most experienced, will emerge with some new possibilities to consider, with new arguments to explore even when existing choices are defended. The chance to weigh alternatives, and the reasons that underlie the principal choices, is particularly liberating.

The essays collectively also take up another issue with which any world history program must contend: the issue of cultural perspective. Most contemporary world histories, until very recently, have emerged in the United States, Australia, or Western Europe. Many, as a result, conform directly with an older tradition that emphasized Western civilization. A few world history labels, indeed, pin to products that are only slightly modified from the Western civilization program: a chapter or two on African kingdoms and a bow to non-European religions, adorn a structure that is otherwise European to the core. This “West and the rest” approach is not, it is vital to note, represented in the present collection, where the entries all deal with world history far more directly and genuinely.

Still, world historians properly worry that even the most conscientious effort to free world history from a Western standard of judgment will fall short—will inevitably incorporate measurements and definitions that, while unquestionably extended to a global scale, still privilege a Western framework. One antidote is obvious: try harder to consider world history approaches that reflect other historiographic traditions—from Islam, for example, or East Asia or Africa, particularly as these regions begin to build their own contemporary approaches to the field. Several essays in this volume offer this welcome opportunity directly, giving readers a new chance to consider cultural alternatives as part of their decisions about appropriate frameworks.

The volume does not, however, merely highlight differences. Along with the deliberate and desirable effort to highlight some variety of analytical options in addressing world history, the essays in this collection display important areas of agreement on several key topics and issues. A focus on the advent and ramifications of agriculture—to take an admittedly obvious but essential example—is clearly going to be part of any world history narrative, no matter what its distinctive features in other respects. The collection will repay reading that not only highlights debates and alternatives, but also identifies shared understandings and approaches.

Ultimately, of course, choices must be made. Any world history experience should maintain a sense of options, an ability to debate and defend the selection of time periods or regional clusters or major themes. But it must also reflect at least tentative judgments about which emphases make most sense, what themes best capture the most fundamental features of the human experience. The judgments should always be open to revision, always tested against relevant counterarguments—but they cannot be suspended indefinitely. Collectively, the essays in this volume highlight historians who have some experience in debate and even uncertainty, but who have figured out at least one acceptable path. The goal is flexibility and openness, but not irresolution.

Finally, world history, whatever its specific contours, is a decidedly contemporary subject. Of course it deals with the past. Many of the essays in this volume stress how far back in time a valid world history approach must go. Many, also, legitimately highlight how much world history has contributed to a better understanding of past periods—for example, the role the Mongol centuries play in exchanges; the complex trade history of the early modern period, including European–Asian relations.

Nevertheless, world history has gained ground because it sets a historical basis for the world we live in, and the world today's youth will inherit. It explores the trajectory of regional interconnections, right up to today's globalization—and helps make sense of different cultural reactions to the same patterns. It invites fuller understanding of different regional traditions, along with some unexpected underlying similarities—again a vital aspect of global understanding. World history is the history we need to frame our own lives, at a time when interactions and comparisons impinge on literally every region and on most individuals. This means, in turn, that debating and refining the way we do world history

contributes directly to our contemporary capacity to work toward a more knowledgeable society. As a result, improving our grasp of the increasingly complex world we must all navigate becomes both a joy and a necessity.

Fairfax, VA, USA

Peter N. Stearns

## PREFACE

In both compliment and contrast to important recent literature in the field,<sup>1</sup> *21st-Century Narratives of World History: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* makes a unique and timely contribution to world/global historical studies<sup>2</sup> and related fields. It addresses essential theoretical, methodological, organizational and interpretational questions through direct engagement with the practice of world history.<sup>3</sup> It achieves this by providing concise summaries (i.e., essential frameworks) of various world historical narratives<sup>4</sup> representing well-established and influential approaches and paradigms impacting the field today.<sup>5</sup> These summaries are written by the authors of the original world historical narratives themselves. By placing these narrative summaries in clear, direct relation to and conversation with each other, they are offered the opportunity to enrich, elucidate and, at times, challenge one another in ways otherwise difficult to achieve. This approach likewise raises, at its most acute and critical level, the question of the feasibility, viability, and need for providing historians as well as other scholars, students, local and world leaders, and the general reading public with such frameworks in relation to their research, study, teaching, and/or general understanding of the world and its history.

Building from this foundation, the present volume aims to: (1) offer world historians an opportunity to critically reflect upon and refine their essential interpretational frameworks, (2) facilitate more effective and nuanced teaching and learning in and beyond the classroom with an emphasis on comparative critical thinking, (3) provide accessible world

historical contexts for specialized areas of historical as well as other fields of research in the humanities, social sciences and sciences,<sup>6</sup> and (4) promote comparative historiographical critique which (a) helps identify continuing research questions for the field of world history in particular, and (b) fosters global dialogue in relation to varying views of our ever-increasingly interconnected, interdependent, multicultural, and globalized world and its shared though diverse and often contested history.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of the latter is grounded in recognition of the fact that an individual's or, likewise and relatedly, an entire ethnic, cultural, religious, political or other social group's understanding of world history significantly shapes their response to and, thus, course of action within the world (i.e., their impact on world history). This includes their (perceived) relation to and relations with all 'others' who share in that history.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the volume takes up "some weighty problems surrounding the nature of historiography as a sociological phenomenon and epistemological endeavor,"<sup>9</sup> though it takes up much more as well. It is through ongoing study of our past—especially in its fullest, broadest context, i.e., 'grand narrative' world history—that we come to understand ourselves and those we share that world with better. With respect to the present volume, this is not, as Edward Said highlighted, for purposes of domination and exploitation, but humanitarian goodwill.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is in attempting to articulate our understanding of our history that we clarify it, for ourselves and for others. The more we are willing to articulate those understandings in earnest dialogue for the sake of ourselves as well as our global neighbors, the greater our chances of at least understanding one another and providing a clear point of reference and context for trying to correct whatever misunderstandings we may have. As J.M. Roberts notes in the Preface to his *History of the World*:

Even if we do not know it, ...[world] history is part of our mental furniture. As most men and women have some notions, however inadequate, about the way the world came to be what it is, it is all the better if they are made explicit. ...We in fact make judgments about world history all the time. All the better then to make them as seriously and as consciously as possible.<sup>11</sup>

Political, social and religious contexts do not, of course, always provide individuals with the freedom to explore, articulate and dialogue on their understandings of the world and its history.<sup>12</sup> One can only wonder how much that reality determined the response, or non-response, of

some of those who were invited to contribute to this volume. Or perhaps they declined because the project was headed up by a ‘Westerner’? Some of course declined simply due to time constraints. Others accepted the offer, pledging themselves to the project, only to drop out late in the publication process, leaving the volume without representation from their world cultural point of view. Yuval Noah Harari, professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, submitted a narrative summary of his *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, but agreement over terms of contract could not be reached between the respective publishers, forcing him to withdraw his chapter from the volume.

One thing is certain: efforts have been made to include representatives from as many world cultural and linguistic points of view as possible, within the limited space afforded. Invitations were thus sent to qualified scholars representing Pacific/Australasian, East, South, Southeast and Central Asian, Middle Eastern, Sub-Saharan African, Latin American, Slavic/East European, West European and North American cultural backgrounds. Specifically, I contacted scholars from Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Afghanistan, India, Japan, China, Korea, the Philippines, Nigeria, Ghana, Argentina, Israel, Germany, UK, USA and Australia. Efforts were likewise made to include varying world historical viewpoints, including Western democratic, neo-Marxian leftist, civilizational, world-system theory, gender, cross-cultural, global-multicultural, and more. That the volume lacks certain representation is not to be attributed to any narrowness of vision or prejudice of effort. All those who were invited to contribute were carefully selected for their unique world cultural-linguistic vantage, their specific area of world historical expertise and the distinctiveness of their approach. In the absence of those who, for whatever reason, have not joined the project, those who have provide, within the necessarily limited scope, a well-rounded representation of an array of cultural-linguistic backgrounds, areas of expertise and uniqueness of approach. While most (though not all) of the contributors are physically located within ‘the West’, their personal cultural and religious backgrounds include Afro-Caribbean, Spanish, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, Russian, Australasian, West European, and North American as well as Christian, Muslim, religious humanist, secular, and possibly atheist.<sup>13</sup> To their diverse cultural backgrounds and linguistic abilities could be added their international travel experience. From this vantage, the volume not only merits the subtitle *Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*,<sup>14</sup> but provides source material for comparative cultural, religious, sociological and political research concerned with major world

historiographical traditions informed by multiple world cultural traditions in the early 21st century. Areas of expertise, likewise, range from women's and gender history, to big history, cultural history, religious-cultural-national history and identity, and food history, as well as African, Russian, Central Asian, Middle Eastern, Islamic, East Asian, Latin American, Afro-Caribbean, and Indian Ocean history. Beyond this, each of the world history narratives is informed by some 30–50 years and the comparative critiques some 15–20 years of research and writing, all enriched by an equal depth of cross-cultural and international experience. The editorial dimensions of the volume are, likewise, informed by some 25 years of research, translation, teaching and publication work, including a total of 14 years of residence in Asia, namely Kazakhstan and Japan.

It is hoped that these multiple world cultural backgrounds, diverse fields of expertise, varying approaches and long years of experience in the field of world history have all merged together to produce a high quality work 'worth its weight in salt', though judgment of that must be left to each reader. No doubt, certain weaknesses will be identified in due course. Whatever they prove to be, it would be, as highlighted immediately above, unfair to call the volume 'U.S.-' or 'Eurocentric' simply because of the residential location of the majority of contributors. While the introductory and concluding sections may focus on the Western tradition of 'grand narrative' and 'new' world histories, this is only due to the nature of the subject matter as well as the intended aims of those chapters. That the main narratives and critiques of Parts Two and Three should be called 'Eurocentric' in some fashion would be contested by all the various contributors as well as the editor. Indeed, 'Eurocentric' as a term typically refers to historiography, not (the location of) the people writing it. Beyond this, in order to help round out the global scope of the volume, I sketch, in Appendix One, a select number of 'grand narrative' world histories which have been published since 1990 in Russian, Polish, Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Kazakh, Hindi, Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese.

In terms of the volume's research profile, there is one thing to bear in mind: the contributors to the Part II narratives were, based on their many qualifications and previous publications, explicitly requested to keep their references to a minimum. The main aims of the volume are to facilitate comparative critique of major 21st-century world history narratives while also supplying substantially informed yet readily accessible world history frames to supply context for various settings of research

and teaching, not to provide endless references to every detail of their interpretational schemes. This is sufficiently achieved through reference to their many previous (or forthcoming) publications. Meanwhile, the Part Three authors were asked to anchor their critiques through reference to as much of the scholarly literature as they were reasonably able within the limited scope of their essays. Their accomplishments in this regard are reflected in their respective chapters.<sup>15</sup> The chapters of historical background (Part I) along with Appendix A comprise the main research contributions of the volume.

All things considered, if this work furthers the cause of world historical research, teaching and dialogue, it will have accomplished its main aims. Only time will tell how effectively it achieves those ends.

Pullman, USA

R. Charles Weller

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In comparison to the present volume, see esp. Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); K.R. Curtis and J.H. Bentley, eds., *Architects of World History: Researching the Global Past* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Blackwell, 2014); UNESCO's seven-volume *History of Humanity* (Paris: UNESCO, 1994–2008); and Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow and New York: Pearson Education, 2008). See also: Ross E. Dunn, Laura J. Mitchell and Kerry Ward, eds., *The New World History: A Field Guide for Teachers and Researchers*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016); Jerry H. Bentley, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, tr. M.K. Bourdaghs (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Diego Olstein, *Thinking History Globally* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
2. I am in essential agreement with those who find no clear, technical distinction between 'world' and 'global' history; see esp. Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *A Concise History of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 6; Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History*, notes that "the research commonly subsumed under 'global history' is so

diverse that it cannot possibly be pinned down through exact definitions and precise categorizations. It is also not feasible to properly separate ‘global history’ from several other terminological options such as ‘world history’ or ‘transnational history’” (pp. 2–3); See also: G.G. Iggers, Q.E. Wang, and S. Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow and New York: Pearson Education, 2008), pp. 389–390; and Arif Dirlik, “Confounding Metaphors, Inventions of the World: What is World History for?,” in *Writing World History, 1800–2000*, ed. B. Stuchtey and E. Fuchs (London: Oxford University Press on behalf of the German Historical Institute London, 2002), p. 91, fn1. See also Q. Edward Wang, ed., *World History vs. Global History? The Changing Worldview in Contemporary China*, Special Issue, *Chinese Studies in History*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2009); Pamela Crossley, *What is Global History?* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008); and Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). If any distinctions between ‘world history’ and ‘global history’ are to be made, I suggest the following: ‘world history’ is the diachronic study of the way in which world connections have taken shape across time, whether these be limited, select connections or all known connections either within or between distinct, defined eras of ‘world history’ or across the entire span of that history; ‘global history’ is the synchronic study of either limited select or all known global connections at more specific points of time within that history. There are bound to be points of debate between these proposed definitions, particularly in allowing more narrow definitions of ‘world history’ to include studies of world connections “within or between distinct, defined eras of ‘world history’.” But if these definitions were upheld, those debates would be more about periodization and would, in fact, contribute to continuing refinement of world (and thus contextually all) history periodization, sharpening focus and thus expertise, as well as possibly methodology within both fields in the process. Note that there must necessarily be a diachronic dimension to every synchronic study and a synchronic dimension to every diachronic study. This reflects the tension between change and continuity, fleeting moments vs. long durations. The historian, while concentrating on ‘change’, must at the same time acknowledge the real historical relation of the past to the present, i.e., some aspect of the past preserved in the present, transformed though still containing real historical remnants of the original form resulting in both continuity and change (cf. humans themselves as ever-transforming yet remaining integrally themselves). But no sense of ‘superiority’ of one approach over the other should be posited at the other’s expense. Both are vital and essential to the continuing task of historical study.

3. Part of the conviction behind this volume is that theorizing or philosophizing about history means little until put into practice. Theory and philosophy must be tested by attempts to apply them through the actual writing of history. Indeed, the best theorizing and philosophizing derives from the actual practice of writing history, as opposed to the imposition of theoretical or philosophical frameworks upon historical narratives. Cf. Paul Costello, *World Historians and Their Goals: Twentieth-Century Answers to Modernism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 221, who insists on the actual writing of world history as opposed to merely theorizing about it as one of the criteria for inclusion in his study.
4. Among the numerous kinds of ‘world history’ which have been both proposed and undertaken in recent decades—including ‘global’, ‘transnational’, ‘transregional’, ‘comparative’, ‘crosscultural’, oceanic, and the like—‘world histories’ for our purposes within this volume, refer specifically to what critics have categorized as ‘meta-’, ‘grand’, ‘all-encompassing’, or ‘totalizing’ narratives (cf. also ‘macro-histories’); that is, narratives which attempt to cover the entire history of...what? ‘The history of humanity?’ ‘Deep history?’ ‘Life history?’ ‘Earth history?’ ‘Big history?’ In fact, these five distinct types of ‘meta-narrative’ are vastly different in scope and range, each ‘all-encompassing’ and ‘totalizing’ in their own ‘grand’ way. (Note that Breisach is too narrow and even misleading in suggesting that “[s]ince the 1980s, the term metanarrative has replaced the formerly used phrase philosophy of history.” Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 122).
5. Providing an essential framework for understanding world history was a chief concern in the keynote address by Bob Bain, “Parachutists and Truffle Hunters: Meeting Student Challenges with Scale and Agency in World History,” at the 22nd Annual World History Association Conference (North Hennepin Community College, June 26–29, 2013, Minneapolis, MN).
6. Ongoing dialogue between history and science, both with respect to overall frameworks for understanding our world as well as specialized areas of research, is both valid and vital. This is especially true in relation to the still-emerging fields of ‘Big history’ and ‘Deep history’ as well as more established fields such as ‘Life history’, ‘Earth history’ and evolutionary human history.
7. See esp. D. Sachsenmaier, “World History as Ecumenical History?,” in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2007): 465–489. Cf. also the concern and vision expressed in one of UNESCO’s current history projects, “Promoting Intercultural Dialogue and a Culture of Peace in

- South-East Asia through Shared Histories”: “Events in recent years have pointed to some contradicting understandings of the past which have led to tensions between various countries in the sub-region. Some of these tensions can be seen as grounded in the way past events are taught in schools and the lingering influence these lessons have on the mind sets of people. If we wish to change the attitude of the younger generations towards each other, transformations in the way the history of South-East Asia is taught at national levels could play a vital role in promoting mutual understanding and peace among future generations.” UNESCO Bangkok (URL: <http://www.unescobkk.org/culture/heritage/shared-histories-sea/>; last accessed: May 26, 2015). This same concern and approach has been advocated in relation to Jewish–Christian–Muslim and other international, intercultural, and interreligious relations contexts.
8. Cf. Paul Costello citing W.H. McNeill: “unalterable and eternal Truth remains, like the Kingdom of Heaven, an eschatological hope. Mythistory is what we actually have—a useful instrument for piloting human groups in their encounter with one another” (*World Historians and Their Goals*, p. 222); cf. also Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, *Myth and Narrative in International Politics: Interpretive Approaches to the Study of IR* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
  9. Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History*, p. 6.
  10. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Penguin Books, 2003), p. xix.
  11. J.M. Roberts, “Preface,” in *A History of the World*, Updated (Ashland, OR: Blackstone Audio, Inc., 2005), ch. 1, 3:25–4:23. Note that the Preface which was used for the 2005 audio edition was from the 1987 edition of Roberts’ book.
  12. Making a slightly different but related point, cf. Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History*, where he takes concern for “factors such as the international academic settings underlying the field, for these doubtlessly influence the ideas of historians” (p. 3).
  13. These observations are based on public knowledge available through (auto-)biographical or professional reference, not on any explicit attempt to inquire regarding either their cultural or religious identity. Use of the term ‘background’ also reflects a conscious choice to avoid assigning a particular ethnic, cultural, religious, national or other identity, instead emphasizing the historical context which has shaped and informed the various contributors.
  14. The term ‘multidisciplinary’ was chosen for two reasons: One, while most of the contributors are situated professionally within the discipline of history, a number of them, including the editor, have formal training in other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, religious studies,

cultural studies and so on. Two, the term ‘multifield’ is not used to describe multiple fields of expertise. In this sense, ‘multidisciplinary’ is being used in a broader sense.

15. Note that I have added, by his consent, all the references to the chapter by Diego Olstein.
16. “A World History Skeleton,” in *World History: The Basics*, by Peter N. Stearns (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 17–47.

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and editorial assistance over the years, including for the present volume. Much the same could be said for Pat Manning, who chaired one of the several panels I organized for WHA annual conferences between 2008 and 2011 on the topic of religious interpretations of world history and their implications for global peace and dialogue. Under his leadership, the World History Center (WHC) at the University of Pittsburgh supported that original research project out of which this more broadly conceived volume eventually emerged. In conjunction with the WHC, he has remained a mentor across the years, enthusiastically supporting and obviously contributing to the present work. In fact, I first met Pat at the World History Center in Tokyo, Japan, during one of his visits there, where his book on *Navigating World History* was being translated by Japanese scholars at the time. Pat also introduced me to Heather Streets-Salter, who has since become a support, guide and colleague on several WHA panels, not to mention the one to hire me and first serve as my director in the world history program at Washington State University (WSU). John Voll has, likewise, served as a support and guide in my research since as far back as 2007, offering critical feedback on individual publications as well as my overall research agenda. This includes not only the present project, but his sponsorship of me at Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU) during my continuing appointment there as a (non-residential) visiting researcher (2014–18). Peter Stearns, however, was the first one I approached, and the first one to agree to contribute to as well as provide guidance for this project. Indeed, his chapter titled “A World History Skeleton” in *World History: The Basics* provided the initial model and inspiration.<sup>16</sup> He has counseled me at crucial junctures along the way as I shaped the prospectus, invited contributors, and prepared the volume for publication. Along with a world history narrative, therefore, the Foreword flows fittingly from his pen. Indeed, all the contributors to this volume deserve thanks for their enthusiastic support and participation which has made this project possible. This would include the numerous emails and requests from me which they have so graciously endured. It has been a genuine privilege and pleasure to work with such deservingly reputable world history scholars.

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