

Oct. 8 **Global History: Economic and Environmental**

Thinking Big: The World of World History

William McNeill, The Pursuit of Power

Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Extremes

Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens, eds., Conceptualizing Global History
[see articles by Wolf Schafer and Raymond Grew]

Issues of Journal of World History

Mark Kishlansky, Patrick Geary, Patricia O'Brien, R. Bin Wong, Societies and Cultures in World History (1995)

Recommended: William McNeill, Plagues and Peoples

Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers

David Kaiser, Politics and War

Fernand Braudel, Capitalism and Material Life, 1500-1800 (3 vols., especially look at volume 1)

Charles Tilly, Huge Structures, Big Comparisons... (reviews and critiques some of the above works)

No subfield of history is more needed, or more problematic, than world history. Many historians now recognize the need to transcend national boundaries in their work, and there is a growing public demand for synthesis on the grand scale to make sense of major trends in global society. These syntheses (like Paul Kennedy), if they gain best-sellerdom, attract lots of praise and brickbats. Why is there such resistance from professional historians? We should never underestimate the "red-eye disease", as the Chinese put it: sheer envy of the wealth and fame of a colleague. But are there other less apparently sordid grounds for reservations?

I'll discuss three problems: 1) Problems of definition; 2) Problems of sources; 3) Problems of narrative and analytic structure, with reference to recent major works of Braudel, McNeill, Kennedy, and others.

First, **definition**. Should a world history include everything? If that's impossible, how do we decide what to leave out? The tempting solution is "UNESCO history" : a grand project organized in the 1950s that tried to give equal opportunity to every nation. It didn't work too well. The overall result was too diffuse. The other extreme is *The Rise of the West*: the title of McNeill's world history textbook. This gives special privilege to the European domination of military and economic power after 1500. To be fair, McNeill does a lot better than many predecessors in giving serious respect to the non-Western world. But he remains a Europeanist, fundamentally, as do nearly all of those who have tried this recently. The Age of Extremes, Eric Hobsbawm's concluding volume of his tetralogy on the story of capitalism, also raises the question of Eurocentrism explicitly: Hobsbawm explicitly defends the argument that the First World War, the Depression, Fascism, and World War II had their primary causes in Europe, which therefore deserves the main focus. Is he right? At the same time he is well aware that the twentieth century was the end of the age of Eurocentrism. New peoples claimed at least equal prominence with Western Europe and the U.S. when colonial empires collapsed. The Age of true European dominance of the globe was actually rather short: even though the discoveries of the 16th century began Europe's rise to world domination, genuine superiority across the board, in technology, military power, economic welfare by Western powers really only lasted roughly from 1850 to 1914. Will we write an Asian-centered story of world history in the twenty-first century?

2) **Sources**: All Historical work is a blend of three types of materials: primary sources, monographic works, and general theoretical and synthetic works. Different historians balance the three kinds in different ways, but in general we give pride of place to primary, especially archival research. Why? We have this prejudice that you need to get as close as possible to the people producing the texts. (some post-structuralists would question whether this is even possible in principle). World history almost always has to cut itself off from the primary sources: it's impossible to write on such a scale and master a vast range of texts in so many different languages. But the easiest way to fire cheap shots at someone doing this is to claim that his argument doesn't fit your particular piece of the world, ignores important sources or uses outdated secondary works. It's almost always true, but the more serious question is whether the new insights provided by comparative breadth outweigh the limitations of analysis of specific countries.

3) **Structure** is the most serious problem. How can you write a narrative of the world? What is the focus? Biography is the easiest way to unify a narrative. Nation-state history likewise has a false, but convenient, *persona*: a collective entity whose birth, growth, and maturity is featured. You can also define individual cities, or possibly classes, this way. But real global history has to call all these entities into question. Braudel extended his three-part division of *The Mediterranean* into an analogous division of world economic structures: Material Life, Economic Conjuncture - (Market Society), and Capitalism. McNeill's general solution is to embrace some form of determinism: he often uses population growth as his outside factor that moves everything else, or disease, or military technology. All these choices simplify the problem, but at the cost of distorting the view.

There are other solutions. Grand historical sociology takes on huge chunks of the past to illustrate a particular theoretical perspective. It's interesting how many of these volumes use the basic sociologist's tool devised by Weber: the ideal type, radically simplifying whole societies and dividing them usually into two parts. Note the dualities in the books below: dictatorship/ democracy; slavery / freedom; feudalism/ capitalism; kings/people. In different forms , they repeat the original ideal types devised at the end of the 19th century: Henry Maine 's status vs. contract; Tonnie's *Gemeinschaft* (community) vs. *Gesellschaft* (society). The danger is one of imposing a scheme derived from late 19th century European reactions to social change on the rest of the world where it may be irrelevant, or of ignoring inconvenient contradictory evidence in favor of a seductive theory.

Comparative history is the careful comparison of two societies focused on a single theme. This is more appealing, because more limited, to the less ambitious historian. There's some chance of getting enough richness into the story to be more satisfactory than the above approaches. This is not social scientific "case study" research: it isn't rigorous enough to satisfy them. But it offers some middle ground between the huge picture and the tiny one.

Others propose another possibility: global history as the study of trans-national or trans-imperial processes. [See Schafer and Grew articles; also Wang Gungwu's discussion of migration in Mazlish volume] Anything that crosses a boundary can be a theme here. The scale could be large or small. Every remote village today is tied into many global networks, evidence coming from migration, cash cropping, Coca Cola, and T-shirts. Major trading networks have long historical roots: the Silk Road, the maritime Southeast Asian routes, the Armenian, Jewish, Gujarati, Chinese diasporas (see P.Curtin). McNeill's best principle is that innovation comes from frontiers, from trans-national contacts. Here's where he greatly differs from Toynbee, who relied on the idea of self-contained civilizations as organic unity with their own autonomous cycles of growth and decline. Better to abandon such pseudo-cycles and pay attention to case of interactions and contingencies, whether cultural, commercial, military, religious, or technological.

Global Histories

Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1500-1800* (3 vols., especially look at volume 1)
K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe*
Philip Curtin, *Cross Cultural Trade in World History*
Journal of World History (scan a few articles and reviews)
Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*
William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000*;
William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*
Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450 - 1680* (Yale, 1988)
Charles Tilly, *Huge Structures, Big Comparisons...* (reviews and critiques some of the above works)

Grand Scale Historical Sociology

Reinhard Bendix, *Kings or People*
Eric Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*
Barrington Moore, *Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (England, France, Germany, Russia, China, India, US)
Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*
Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death; Freedom*
Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*
Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (3 vols. to date)
Perry Anderson: *Passages from Slavery to Feudalism; Lineages of the Absolutist State*

Comparative History:

Peter Kolchin (Free and Unfree Labor in the US and Russia);
Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*;
George Frederickson (Black-White Relations in the US and South Africa)