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## World History for International Studies

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# World History for International Studies

Isabelle Duyvesteyn and  
Anne Marieke van der Wal (EDS.)



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Edited by Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Anne Marieke van der Wal

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

To offer the student an integrated, pedagogically sound learning experience in which foundational knowledge about history, and world history in particular, is closely linked to a digital learning platform, where this knowledge is activated and stimulated – this has been the challenge we set for ourselves when drafting this book. Since the start of the International Studies bachelor program at the Faculty of Humanities at Leiden University in 2012, we have been confronted with the challenge to bring all these elements together. A handbook, which met all our requirements was not available. We decided to write our own. The result of our efforts is in front of you.

Research-based teaching is the mainstay of our activities at Leiden University. The sharing of our excitement and passion about research, but also the trials and tribulations involved in doing this, is what we aim to bring to our classrooms. We train our students in acquiring an academic attitude, not feeling daunted when confronted by large quantities of material, and reading and processing the material carefully in a critical and engaged manner. We would like our students to attain important academic research skills, as well as guide them in their first attempts at analysis. The competencies we train in the first phase of academic formation are focused on note-taking, summarizing, identifying an argument, understanding a debate, summarizing a debate and subsequently participating in one. We offer stepping stones for acquiring these competencies in this handbook, in a practical and accessible manner, by taking as a pedagogical starting point the different roles of the scholar. These will be presented in further detail below; by inviting students to become observers, conceptualizers and designers, we aim to trigger an active engagement with the research material. Moreover, we have integrated this with an online learning tool, part of the digital humanities, which builds on the main frames of reference for twenty-first century scholars. There is a wealth of material available in the online domain on which we capitalize to enhance the overall learning experience.

The idea of research-based learning, activated by an open access and online learning environment, we hope, will lead students to attain a scholarly and critical thinking attitude. By linking the story of history to sources that the historian uses, we aim to give students a grasp of what it means to be an academic and a historian in particular. The active use of sources, accessing them, evaluating them

and critically engaging with them should lead the student to gain insights into how scientists work, how they arrive at a certain result and how students can engage in this exercise of investigation, corroboration and triangulation themselves.

To give shape to this handbook we have made a series of choices. History is one of four domains in the International Studies curriculum, together with politics, culture and economics. There will be a consistent echoing of these other domains in the handbook. We have adopted as a starting point ten major themes that have featured, and continue to feature, prominently in World History discussions – Communications, Trade, Order, Slavery, Religion, War, Identity, Modernity, Norms and Ecology. The justifications for the choices made also build on the pedagogical philosophy of the program of linking the local and the global. Moreover, we identify ten world regions – Latin America, North America, Europe, Russia, Central Asia, Africa, South and South-East Asia, East Asia and the Pacific – which provide our main entry points for the discussion of the themes. We also aim to do justice to that tried and trusted benchmark for historians which is chronology, the old-fashioned Plato to NATO approach. These parameters have led to a structure for the handbook in twelve chapters, covering largely the last millennium, in which these major themes are dissected with examples and sources drawn from the regions. The handbook aims to provide bridges between regions and areas of expertise to tell this story of the human experience over time. We want to focus on how local ideas and individual contacts developed, started to overlap and became globally understood and used by ever larger groups of people.

In contrast to Global History, we award great importance to the local, the specific and also, importantly, bring in the regional and national focused expertise of Area Studies. Still, for historians this book has inherent limitations. The approach chosen does not allow us to do full justice to historiographical traditions and discussions of the field. For Area Studies scholars, the book will jump from one region to another perhaps too much to gain real depth. We would like to stress again that the text is introductory and an invitation to all readers to explore further, based on the small windows we are offering into these topics and wider debates. Our overall aim is to tell a story of major themes that have affected and effected changes in the human past, starting from a particular part of the world and extrapolating to describe the wider experience. The chapters aim to offer, most importantly, a starting point for discussion.

Each chapter addresses one theme, which is introduced based on contemporary relevance or an example. Subsequently, the theme is explained through a local or regional lens. The historiographical debate is explained, the prevalent theories and methods are presented, followed by historic case material and sources, all within a distinct time frame. In this way, the order of the chapters will end up being roughly chronological. Each chapter will present one central primary source, which is linked to the digital platform. This primary source – there is a wide diversity across the chapters – will not only illustrate the use of sources but also demonstrate how

they have been used and debated among historians. The chapters will conclude by providing the student with guiding questions, as well as suggestions for further reading. In the guide to reading below, this will be explained in more detail.

The endeavor of writing a new handbook would not have been feasible without the enthusiasm and hard work of the tutor team who have been teaching the 'Global History' course together for a number of years now. This book would not have seen the light of day without their commitment and passion to share the expertise on the pages that follow. The book has been written during a pandemic and the circumstances have not been ideal to excel academically; we worked from home, our kitchens and dining room tables became offices, we recorded our lectures, talked to our students, all while children – small and larger – as well as pets, laundry machines and parcel deliveries interrupted our trains of thought. We did persevere.

The author team would like to thank the Faculty of Humanities for a teaching innovation grant, which helped tremendously to get this project off the ground. We would like to thank in particular, Sanne Arens, who saw the value in our integrated learning vision and was instrumental in the setting up of the project. The encouragement from the International Studies program board has been greatly appreciated, especially Giles Scott-Smith and Jaap Kamphuis who cheered us on. Moreover, Annebeth Simons, our pedagogical expert, helped shape the approach adopted in this book. Leon Pauw has served this project not only as a research assistant, but also with his experiences as a former practitioner i.e. an International Studies student.

We would like to thank a large number of colleagues who made suggestions, read along and helped with larger and smaller sections of the manuscript, in particular: Elena Burgos-Martinez, Andre Gerrits, Jan Bart Gewalt, Bram Ieven, Jonathan London, Patricio Silva, Hans Wilbrink, and Casper Wits. For the development of the online platform, we are grateful to Fresco Sam-Sin the initiator of the Things That Talk platform at the Humanities Faculty, where our project found a home. Furthermore, we would like to thank Leiden University Press' editorial board, editors in chief Aniek Meinders and her successor Saskia Gieling, for the trust bestowed on us. Stephen Hart and Caroline Diepeveen were indispensable to get the manuscript print-ready. The production team also deserves our heartfelt thanks for diligence and care in the process of bringing this book to print. Last but not least, this book has benefited from the uncountable interesting and inspiring classroom conversations with our students, who questioned, probed and triggered us. To the new generations of students, this book is dedicated; the world needs more engaged and critical thinkers who understand the past in order to understand the present, and hopefully the future.

Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Anne Marieke van der Wal  
The Hague, June 2022

# A Guide to Reading

Each chapter of this book will address one theme. This theme will be discussed within the context of one specific region of the world. This does not mean that the theme is exclusive to this region or holds no relevance beyond this region. We simply wanted to make the theme come alive by focusing directly on real world events and practice. Within each thematic chapter, we have asked the authors to address a specific set of topics. Every chapter starts with one or more contemporary example to illustrate the importance and relevance of the theme. The academic debate surrounding it will be introduced, followed by an illustration of the main historical methodologies and sources. How has this issue been researched?

Moreover, each chapter puts center stage a key primary source that illustrates the main argument the chapter tries to bring forward, and which is discussed in its own context. We have tried to make sure that the range of primary sources is wide and reflective of the practice of history today. The reader will find below a selection comprising a novel, a letter, a book, a medal, a temple, a baptismal bowl, a proclamation, a shipwreck and an epic. These sources are linked to the digital platform Things That Talk, which accompanies this handbook.




Furthermore, each chapter introduces a series of concepts, for which a definition is provided in text boxes. These concepts tie in to both the study of history as a discipline, as well as the explanations and theories that have been offered by previous scholarship. They will reverberate across the International Studies program and the domains of politics, culture and economics.


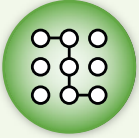
A historical narrative is introduced in each chapter which describes a case or elaborates on a historical example or process. Each chapter ends with a summary and brief conclusion and the discussion is extrapolated to its wider relevance and application. At the end of each chapter a series of guiding questions will be offered, which are aimed at helping the student process the material. Finally, a guide to further reading offers the student an entry point to further study the theme if they are so inclined.

Each chapter has been written by a different author. We draw specifically on the expertise in the International Studies program and we have tried to do justice to the rich diversity, not only in scholarly approaches, but also in the different individual styles and manners of discussion. This, we hope, will enhance the versatility in the reading and learning experience this handbook seeks to offer.



The pedagogical approach this handbook has adopted, focuses on the four key roles of a scholar. When starting out in academics, new budding researchers need equipment. We offer here the main tools of scholarship: observing, investigating, conceptualizing and designing. These tools are introduced in more detail in the overview below. All the authors, all scholars with specific training and area of expertise, aim to share their knowledge about a particular debate in world history. In their descriptions, all four roles will appear but these will be different for each chapter, in content and reach. Still, all scholars, whether they are experts on the history of Chinese religion or African art, are obliged as academics to situate their research within the prior existing context and debate, to define their terms and concepts, to make clear what their main question is, to specify how they are going to research the question, and what methods and sources they will use to arrive at an answer. These roles are complementary and no good academic work can do without them. Scholars might have to go through multiple rounds of defining, questioning and researching before their design is complete. This is the core of the academic enterprise and this handbook is aimed at introducing the budding scholar to this process and inviting them to eventually apply it.

Icon	Roles of the Scholar:	
	The Observer	<p>The scholar starts with observing the world. What do we see? What is interesting? What do we need to understand better? The observer describes the phenomenon carefully and precisely.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Knowledge, Data &amp; Information</li> </ul>
 	The Conceptualizer	<p>The scholar wants to dig deeper. How does this work? How can we understand this? What causes this pattern? The conceptualizer proposes a topic with a narrowed down scope (time, place etc.) and proposes a central question.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Definitions and Questions</li> </ul>

Icon	Roles of the Scholar:	
	The Investigator	<p>The scholar starts to think in the abstract. The investigator has to have control over existing scholarship and knowledge to make informed proposals to place the puzzle within the academic debate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Existing Literature and Debate</li> </ul>
	The Designer	<p>The scholar thinks up a pathway to investigate the phenomenon in a more profound way. What methodology can we use or devise to study the problem? What sources do we need for this investigation? The designer will activate knowledge about how to dissect the topic and make this operational</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Methodology and Sources</li> </ul>

These icons will re-appear in the chapters that follow and will be presented in the margins, where we will signal what is happening in the chapter and where these different roles are visible.

# About the Contributors

**Jochem van den Boogert** has completed a PhD in Southeast Studies and focuses on theoretical approaches in the study of religion and culture in Southeast Asia.

**Elisa Da Vià** has completed a PhD in political economy and focuses on agricultural resilience.

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## CHAPTER 1.

# Introduction: What is World History?

ISABELLE DUYVESTEYN AND ANNE MARIEKE VAN DER WAL

The aim of the chapter is to introduce the student to the academic study of history, by presenting three core concepts which are part of the traditions in the field, before moving on to discuss the World History approach and its distinctive features.



## Introduction: What is History?

The study of history is the study of the human past. This sounds quite straightforward but becomes tricky when probed in more detail. What is the past? Are there logical starting and end points? Can we actually study the past when we have no records of that past? Is what I had for breakfast this morning not also part of the past and therefore history? Or does there need to be sufficient time between the present and the past for historians to be able to more distantly and objectively reflect on past events? The answer to these questions is mostly affirmative; there is a logical starting point, which is the emergence of the early hominids, around 7 million years ago.

We can study the past also in these very early years by using the tools of archaeology, geology and carbon dating, for example. Also, what happened this morning in your kitchen, is interesting for historians writing about human diets or dietary history. In short, historians are interested in studying humans in their broadest sense, in their natural environment, across time and across place.

Still, we can and should be more specific. When we study the past, we use certain parameters. We study the past usually by dividing it up into time frames (prehistoric) or narrowing it down in geographical scope (Africa) or by focusing on one feature (emergence of hominids). History is generally a story about change over time (the migration out of Africa), about major ruptures (the end of the last ice age 12,000 years ago) and causality (the spread of homo sapiens after the end of the last ice age) and often also about big exploits and momentous events (the development of tools to survive the icy conditions). So, history is in essence the study of change over time in the human past.



**Image 1.1** Early Hominids, *Australopithecus afarensis*, cast 'Lucy'



## 1.1 The Study of History

### History

*The study of change over time in the human past.*

When studying this human past, historians have developed an important tool set. One of the most important tools, already mentioned, is compartmentalizing time. We use the idea of chronology, the measurement of time, and identify logical cut-off points when these major changes or ruptures occurred and heralded a new time frame. At the end of the last ice age, a new geological epoch started, the Holocene. This is a geological term. Geologists study the planet's surface, oceans and atmosphere and 11,700 years ago the surface of the planet changed substantially and this signaled a transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene. Geological time is different from historical time. In 2000, Dutch Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen coined the term the 'Anthropocene', referencing the Greek word *Anthropos*, which means human. It suggests the emergence of a new phase in our planetary history, based on the human imprint on the surface of the Earth, which is a requirement for geological distinction. This imprint has been argued to be visible in the shape of radioactive fallout, microplastics and heavy metals. Presently, there is no agreement among scientists whether the Anthropocene has actually started.\* Distinguishing historical time does not require geological proof and there are many examples of time frames and epochs in circulation; prehistory is such a time frame to describe the period between the invention of basic tools and the emergence of script. Scripts or basic writing systems were first developed around 5,000 years ago and signaled the transition to history and history writing based on written sources. Prehistory itself can be subdivided into three phases of Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age related to the acquiring of control over metallurgy. This will be further discussed in chapter two.

The core feature of the past is that it is a period of time that is behind us. However, this history or the story of the past is subject of perennial change. This seems paradoxical. How can we explain this? This is where history as an academic subject starts to take shape. Not only do we use chronology as a sense making tool, but there are also other important concepts that historians use. For the purposes of this handbook, we introduce three: historicism, meta-history and historiography.

### Historicism\*\*

The study of the past is an exercise in interpretation. Even if we lived through the period of the past we investigate, there is subjectivity, partial view, partiality,

\* We will return to this issue in more detail in chapter 11.

\*\* In the English language historicism is used interchangeably with historism denoting the same phenomenon. We have opted to use historicism as it was the original term 'Historismus' as developed by the German school of historical science.

perception and perspective involved. How can we attain a fuller picture? Historicism is an approach or practice which invites the historian to engage in history writing by trying to step into the shoes of contemporaries. Each period in history has its own unique beliefs, norms and values and is best understood only in its own historical terms and contexts. These internal meanings of history need to be discovered by historians. This idea of historicism is the result of the nineteenth century Rankean Revolution, named after German researcher Leopold von Ranke, who was highly influential in the process of professionalizing history writing.



**Image 1.2** Leopold von Ranke

His invitation was to focus on how it really was at the time and get as close as possible to that lived experience. Historians need to attempt to look through the eyes of the contemporaries, award importance to context, place and culture to write history. When engaging in this exercise a careful approach to interpretation (this is called hermeneutics) needs to take place, which requires the historian to be aware of biases and limitations. These need to be spelled out as much as possible.





## 1.2 The Study of History

### Historicism

*The study of history in its unique context, time and place. It is the task of the historian to try to get as close as possible to the lived historical experience.*

An example of the application of a historicist approach would be the following: The Sumerians in Mesopotamia were the first known and recorded civilization in history. Around 6000 BCE, the first cities emerged in Ancient Sumer. The Sumerians are also noted for their development of written script, the cuneiform. These written sources could only be appreciated when combined with an understanding of the Sumerian civilization.



**Image 1.3** Sumerian Cuneiform (ca. 2500 BCE), six-column Sumerian economic tablet mentioning various quantities of barley, flour, bread and beer. Excavated at Shuruppak, Tell Fara, Iraq

An important Sumerian record and often (re)interpreted is the Gilgamesh epos (c. third millennium BCE), a mythical story of a Sumerian king, which was found on clay tablets and which displayed significant similarities to the Christian Bible written in the first century CE. Only the combination of sources allows us to claim some form of understanding of Ancient Sumer.

Based on a historicist approach, investigators refrain from universalist claims about history. Trying to study history by applying a present-day moral yardstick is anathema in this approach, as it fails in the exercise of understanding history as it was.

The use of sources is of paramount importance to the historicist approach. We can distinguish two categories of sources, which can be used by the academic: primary and secondary. Primary sources consist of material that is directly related to the historical events which are the subject of study. These sources are contemporary to the events and produced by those directly involved or with direct knowledge or experience of the events. These sources can be of varying nature: written texts (diaries, notes), drawings and paintings, autobiographies, video or audio recording, interviews etc. This material is a direct link to the events and is as little moderated as possible. Secondary sources are sources that are moderated and not directly produced at the time or linked to the events. They usually involve interpretation. For historians, the main secondary sources are the books and articles written over the course of time about the historical events that are subject of study. These books and articles engage in a direct and indirect debate with each other and build our knowledge base through combination, refinement and (re)-interpretation. This debate is also called historiography, which will be discussed shortly.



### 1.3 The Study of History

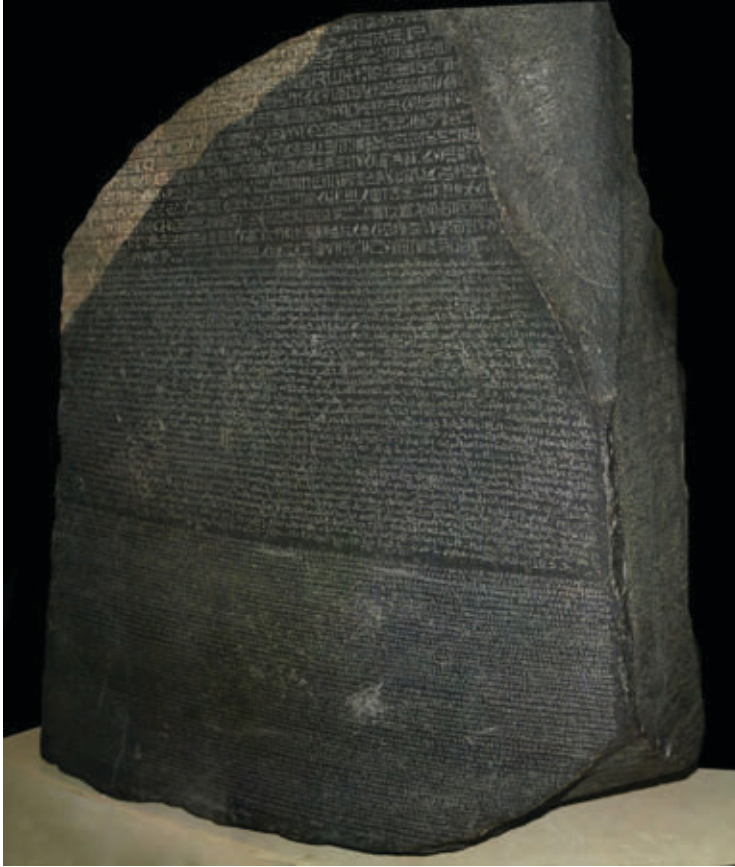
#### Primary sources

*Sources produced at the time of historical events, by contemporaries, unmediated by others in ex post facto interpretation.*

#### Secondary sources

*Sources produced after the historical events containing interpretation and assessments which are part of the debate of history.*

Thinking about primary and secondary sources in a concrete sense, we can look at the investigation of the emergence of hieroglyphs in Ancient Egypt around 2800 BCE. The historian is not only tasked with trying to understand the meaning of the script, but also needs to be aware and incorporate understandings of Egyptian society and culture. This has formed a large challenge because for most of the past two millennia the knowledge of the script had been lost. Only with the deciphering of the Rosetta stone in the 1820s have we been able to match meaning to context.



**Image 1.4** Rosetta Stone

Clay tablets containing hieroglyphs form the primary source, which could only be cracked by using the triple translation on the Rosetta stone, used here as a secondary source, containing identical texts in Greek, Demotic and Ancient Egyptian.

### **Meta-History**

Apart from historicism, a second important instrument of interpretation is the idea that there is meaning in history. In this perspective there is the possibility of an overarching logic to the course of history. This is in contrast to the idea of randomness. In some important respects, meta-history writing is the flipside of historicism because the former seeks to make universal claims about history. The task, according to the meta-history approach, is for the historian to discover patterns and regularities over the course of time.

An example of a meta-historical approach is the Christian idea of history fulfilling the will of God. With the emergence of Christendom after the birth of Christ in the year zero and the adoption of Christianity by Roman Emperor

Constantine in the fourth century CE, the interpretation of events as forming part of God's will on Earth, towards redemption in the life after death, formed a powerful frame of understanding historical events throughout the European Middle Ages. Another example of meta-historical thinking is Marx's nineteenth century theory of historical materialism, which he published in *Das Kapital* and which was the foundation of the political philosophy of Marxism.\* The perspective he presented was that history of all hitherto existing societies is in fact the history of class struggles. The structure of capitalist society displays features that ineluctably lead to exploitation, which would be a cause for revolution. Echoes of this kind of thinking of history displaying development and an endpoint are also visible in interpretations of history as constituting progress towards ever larger degrees of liberty, freedom and democracy, as argued by Francis Fukuyama in his *End of History* thesis, to which we will return below.\*\*



## 1.4 The Study of History

### Meta-History

*The interpretation of history according to an overarching meaning or internal logic, leading towards an ultimate end point.*

Similar to historicism, this approach is not without problems; it runs the risk of teleological reasoning. This means that because we think that we know the endpoint of the course of history, everything is interpreted as functioning towards that goal. Thereby other alternative and valid interpretations are overlooked.

A last concept is based on historians engaging in a discussion with each other. Debate is an inherent feature of academic life and in essence a quality check. To paraphrase Dutch historian Peter Geyl, history is a debate without an end. This debate is also called historiography.



### Historiography

History is a perennial discussion and does not possess a logical end point. We will never fully 'know' history. The discussion which is history focuses on all the possible interpretations of the past. Historiography is pre-occupied with the tenability of evidence, arguments, theories and interpretations of the past. These all change over the course of time: new sources become available, new questions are asked, new methods and theories are developed, new interpretations take place. In this way, history becomes this never-ending discussion. When scholars intend to make a contribution to a debate with their own historical investigation, they have to

\* This concept will be further elaborated in chapter 7.

\*\* Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

give proof of awareness of the pre-existing historiography in order to claim a place and also originality for their contribution.



## 1.5 The Study of History

### Historiography

*The pre-existing knowledge base including, importantly, debate about a particular historical subject. It is the existing recorded state of the understanding of history.*

Historiographic positioning within the field is an important exercise for historians. We see over the course of a debate, the emergence of schools of thought which bring scholars with a particular approach or interpretation together under the same label.

An example of a historiographical debate is the scholarly discussion about modernity. Modernity is defined as the product of the age of Enlightenment. It is marked by scientific discovery, personal liberty, religious tolerance and the idea that reason rather than beliefs guide human behavior.



### 1.a Concept Definition

#### Modernity

*A set of ideas focused on rationality, science, secularism, democracy and cosmopolitanism. It reflects both a time frame in which these ideas came about and gained traction, at the end of the eighteenth century, as well as an outlook on the world as either pre-modern and modern.\**



### 1.b Concept Definition

#### Enlightenment

*The Enlightenment is an intellectual and scientific movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in which scientists and philosophers aimed to establish dominance over natural phenomena. By using reason and rational deduction, increased insights could be gained into the workings of the natural world and humans living within it. The malleability of nature also resulted in policies aimed at 'enhancing' and 'purifying' the human race.*

One scholar who put forward an argument for an appreciation of modernity is Steven Pinker. In his 2019 book entitled *Enlightenment Now* he asked for the power of the

\* In the introduction to Part II we will elaborate further on this definition.

Enlightenment to be recognized as the reason for the spread of ideas of rationality, science, secularism, democracy and cosmopolitanism.\*



### 1.c Concept Definition

#### Democracy

*System of government by the people for the people.*

Critics have pointed out that the Enlightenment has not been a uniform experience. Instead, modernity as a product of the Enlightenment can mean different things to different people, notably it facilitated the further conquest of territories, colonization and repression. The fruits of modernity have been distributed unevenly and the question needs to be posed whether these fruits have been fruits at all when they caused racism, war and genocide.\*\* We will return to this debate at multiple occasions in the rest of this handbook, not least in the introduction to the second part of the volume.

Together with historicism and meta-history narratives, historiographic discussions are importantly a product of the professionalization of history writing in the nineteenth century. After the emergence of states, as the dominant organizational form overtaking cities, civilizations and empires in the eighteenth century, the idea of the state as a nation changed the focus on history writers. The 'Age of Revolutions'\*\*\* at the end of the eighteenth century caused the nation-state to become dominant. Commensurately, this nation-state sought a common understanding of its history. Historians started to write about their great nations that once were amazing and that had always been distinct and unique. History became a tool in the service of the nation and a form of nationalism. An important shortcoming of this approach is that it is difficult to include storylines that end up not contributing to the creation or the greatness of the nation. When nationalism contributed to the outbreak of war, the First World War being a case in point, there was a sense that nationalist histories were in need of revision. In an attempt to overcome the notion that the

\* Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (New York: Penguin 2019).

\*\* Jeremy Lent, 'Steven Pinker's Ideas About Progress are Fatally Flawed: These Eight Graphs Show Why', 18 May 2018. Available at: <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2018-05-18/steven-pinkers-ideas-about-progress-are-fatally-flawed-these-eight-graphs-show-why/> Last accessed 15 April 2022. Ian Golding, 'The Limitations of Steven Pinker's Optimism', *Nature*, 16 February 2018. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-02148-1> Last accessed 15 April 2022. See also: Steven Pinker, 'Enlightenment Wars, Some Reflections on 'Enlightenment Now' One Year Later', *Quillette*, January 2019. Available at: <https://quillette.com/2019/01/14/enlightenment-wars-some-reflections-on-enlightenment-now-one-year-later/> Last accessed 15 April 2022.

\*\*\* Term coined by Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1962).

nation is the dominant factor in history, historians in the twentieth century offered broadly three new ways of ordering history.

First, they study topics smaller than nation states. An example of this is microhistory which started to focus on small units such as individual events, communities, or sometimes even one individual. What makes it different from a case study is that micro history attempts to answer large questions and tries to draw conclusions that are larger than the case itself. A second approach has been to study areas that encompass more than one nation and engage in thematic history writing. Examples of this approach include social history, economic history, women's history, gender history, cultural history, as well as local history, subaltern history, to move in more recent years to history of pets and disability history. A third option has been to study the Earth in its totality. This entailed a shift to ever larger units of investigation, rather than the focus on specificity or themes. The history of oceans, fire or the history of space started to become mature topics of investigation. Since Yuri Gagarin became the first human to enter space in 1961, space exploration has captivated human imagination and has in the twenty-first century led to the idea of space tourism with the launch of the Virgin Galactic space tourism company. Another example of history writing taking the whole of the Earth as a starting point, is World History. Together with the speeding up of globalization, the question was raised whether globalization should be the entry point to study history.

## What is World History?

World History has a long pedigree, not so much informed or triggered by globalization but rather the realization that large parts of the human experience had remained outside of the scope of professional history writing, as outlined above. World History sees as its main contribution the history writing of interconnectedness, or entanglement, of the history of the world. There are three important forms of connections that have been identified: The exchange of people, goods, and ideas. Not all of those interactions immediately happened on a global scale, but there would not be globalization today without some of those initial connections in these domains. That does not mean that it is a linear development, where the level of globalization is ever-increasing.

People moving from one place to another, migration, has happened as long as people have existed and is still occurring today. When humans migrated, they came into contact with other humans. These contacts brought both advantages and disadvantages. Migration could lead to conflicts and it facilitated the spread of pathogens between different groups. However, it also broadened the gene pool creating a more resilient population and people could learn from one another. Moreover, it allowed people to exchange goods, which they could trade for other



goods. In order to have trade, a population needed to have a consistent food surplus. Food surplus could be brought to markets, and it allowed for specialization once the entire population was no longer needed for food production. Although there are no written primary sources to corroborate this, one of the first forms of specialization was probably violence, closely followed by spiritual guidance. Religious beliefs were one of the first ideas that easily spread when people started interacting. Eventually the spread of ideas led to world religions, but ideas about racism also spread on a global scale. Ideas had consequences when they changed practices.

The driving force of the spread of people, goods, and ideas were networks. Some networks were more formalized than others and organizations relied on intricate networks to function. A distinction between a network and an organization is not always clear-cut, but what they have in common is that they offer an opportunity to tell World History beyond the importance of the nation state, based on local, regional, national, transnational and international sources.



#### 1.d Concept Definition

##### World History

*The study of history from a world perspective focusing on the spread of people, goods and ideas and increased interconnectedness.*

To further unpack World History, we will use the three concepts introduced in the first part of this chapter – historiography, historicism and meta-history – to gain a deeper understanding of the field.



#### The Historiography of World History

There has been a long tradition of civilizational history writing with notable contributions from different parts of the world and different authors, such as Herodotus, Ssu-ma Chen, Polybius, Rashid al-Din, and Ibn Khaldoun. These studies form the core of the historiography in World History and recount the experiences of peoples in different civilizations in different parts of the world across time. Twentieth century examples of civilizational history writing are Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Spengler, in his *Untergang des Abendlandes* (Decline of the West) published in 1918, predicted the decline of the West, based on a cyclical and organic interpretation of the development of human history.\* Instead of looking at the development of human societies in the past from a linear or teleological perspective, a cyclical view is inspired by the life spans and seasonal changes which can be observed in nature. For example, the movements of the moon and the sun and the life cycles of flora and fauna, which all follow a cyclical pattern from birth

\* Oswald Spengler, *Der untergang des abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der weltgeschichte* (Muenchen: Taschenbuch, 1991).



to death and reproduction.\* Civilizations rise and decline in a similar pattern. A civilization could be best characterized by a shared culture. Spengler identified nine civilizations over the course of human history, each with a life span of around 1000 years. Western civilization, Spengler predicted, would also be inevitably heading for decline, hence the title. His ideas were very popular in the 1930s. It is a general argument against the Enlightenment and liberalism, and some of his arguments were picked up by Nazism. The book was heavily criticized also because of the absence of a proper academic standard. Arnold Toynbee also subscribed to the idea of civilizational history writing. His *A Study of History*, published between 1934 and 1961, focused on twenty-one civilizations in human history, which all rose and fell.\*\* The explanation he offered was that those civilizations which lasted the longest were best capable of warding off challenges by outsiders. Toynbee thus discarded Spengler's assumption of inevitability, yet still took a cyclical as well as dialectical approach. His challenge-response theory was very popular, but similar to Spengler criticized more recently for lacking academic standards.



### 1.e Concept Definition

#### Civilization

*A complex society bound together by common rule, sharing a common territory, identity, means of communication and religion.*

A second strand in the historiography of World History is big or universal history. This approach focuses on the writing of the history of the Earth, starting with the Big Bang and bringing the story all the way up till today. A proponent of this approach is, for example, David Christian. In his work he argues for an understanding of big history as an increase in complexity over the course of the Earth's 13.7-billion-year history.\*\*\* Apart from increasing complexity on Earth, he emphasizes collective learning and control over bio-spheric resources as the main driving forces explaining the visible pattern of development. In order to tell this story, universal history writing borrows heavily from other fields of expertise, such as geology, chemistry and physics and is therefore decidedly multi-disciplinary in its approach.

World History borrows and builds on these approaches. It focuses on the emergence and development of contacts and interactions between civilizations over the course of time. These civilizations interact and their encounters form the main drivers of change. The core concerns of World History are again the pre-occupation with the idea of increasing connectivity, mobility of people, goods and ideas, and exchange between people transcending borders and boundaries.

\* Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007).

\*\* Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

\*\*\* David Christian, *Origin Story. A Big History of Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2018).

An example to illustrate the approach to connectivity is the age of colonialism. In a recent study, two scholars have identified a distinct ecological effect of colonialism.\* They have taken a close look at the geological effect of the colonizers travelling across the Atlantic, who brought with them germs for smallpox, measles, flu, and typhoid. These diseases killed more than fifty million indigenous Americans, almost 90% of the total indigenous population, within a few decades after their introduction. This is also known as the 'Great Dying'. This caused societal collapse and an end to the prevailing subsistence farming. The ecological effect was that forests re-emerged. This perspective subscribes to the idea of the Anthropocene, introduced above. The traces of human presence on the Earth's surface became visible through the (temporary) cessation of agriculture.

World History shares the same precursors, the ambition to provide grand narratives. Historians working in this tradition operate with long time frames, and both emphasize macro and micro processes, and they engage in a de-centering exercise by not putting Western experiences center stage. The main differences are that big history specifically includes other academic disciplines (chemistry, physics) as partners instead of simply borrowing from them. World History aims to investigate the connections between the process, interactions and interconnectedness at the center of enquiry.



### Historicism and World History

The historian practicing World History cannot possibly be an expert in all the different times and places that are of relevance to tell the story of increased connections and connectivity. Therefore, the World Historian relies heavily on the work conducted by other expert historians of different specializations. The starting point is the application of scientific methods, as outlined above. What makes World History distinct is its interdisciplinarity approach, using the insights from national, and regional history writing, as well as micro, thematic, transnational and Earth-centered approaches.

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\* Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2018). Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Santa Barbara Calif.: ABC-Clío, 1971). Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). William McNeill 'How the Potato Changed World History', *Social Research* Vol. 66, No. 1 (1999), pp. 67-83.



## 1.6 The Study of History

### Interdisciplinarity

*Several distinct academic disciplines are used to create a synergetic effect towards a common understanding.*

World Historians use these pre-existing research findings and the existing materials and do several things with them: they devise comparative research designs whereby they can compare and contrast between different places and time frames. Moreover, they use the material to discover similarities and differences, patterns and trends that are not visible when limited to one particular time frame, location or even theme.



## 1.7 The Study of History

### Comparative Research Design

*An approach to conducting research through comparison. This comparison can focus on different groups of people, time frames, locations, themes but also definitions, concepts and theories.*

When practicing World History, the historian uses primary and secondary sources. These sources are judged by the same standard applicable to every historian's work. An example of how sources are used and combined, and to illustrate the kind of inquiry that brings together these elements, is the discovery of an image of a cockatoo. This exotic bird has been found in a thirteenth century manuscript unearthed in the Vatican library among the books belonging to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. A cockatoo is a bird found originally exclusively in Australasia.



**Image 1.5** Cockatoo  
in Manuscript Emperor  
Frederick II, Vatican Library

The image dates from around 1241-1248 and is believed to be the oldest image of the bird in Europe. This in itself is an interesting find and adds to the discussion about flora and fauna present in Europe. Moreover, the image has triggered new questions about trading routes through which the Emperor managed to get hold of the bird. The specific species of yellow-crested cockatoo comes from New Guinea and the most northern part of Australia. These parts of the world, as this image proves, were part of the existing trading routes much earlier than was hitherto assumed.\*

## World History as Meta-History

What is the aim of World History writing? The focus is on telling the story of the multiplicity, but also commonality, of the human experience across time. Apart from this ambition, it is important to note that World History also subscribes to a core meta narrative. The idea that human history is a story of ever-increasing connections and connectivity to create an interconnected world is in essence a meta-history exercise. While the occasional set-back occurred, a retreat from globalization in the interbellum as well as possibly today with the rise of geopolitical rivalry, the story of World History is one of the emergence of ever tighter networks spanning the globe.

As part of this larger objective of highlighting connections, World History also exhibits a normative strand. It subscribes to the ideal of helping to create a 'global citizenship'. It is founded on a normative agenda that scholarship should be geared towards creating, especially among the younger generations, an ideal of cosmopolitanism, of global citizenship.



### 1.f Concept Definition

#### Global Citizenship

*The field of World History operates in the belief that the study of the process of ever-increasing connections can help in the formation and education of future generations of responsible and informed global citizens. This is the cosmopolitan ideal of the field.*

It is not the ambition of this book to tell the history of everything that happened in the world in the past two millennia. Instead, this book seeks to approach World History from an 'area focus'. Such an approach can seem outdated, from a by-gone era of Toynbee and Spengler. They understood World History as made up of separate and distinct cultural spheres and civilizations, while neglecting the patterns of globalization which had shaped these separate cultures and states. Since the end

\* Heather Dalton, Jukka Salo, Pekka Niemela, and Simo Orma, 'Frederick II of Hohenstaufen's Australasian cockatoo: Symbol of detente between East and West and evidence of the Ayyubids' global reach', *Parergon*, Vol. 35 No. 1 (2018), pp. 35-60.

of the Cold War, area-specific knowledge has been deemed to be less urgent in contrast to the scholarly pursuit of universal disciplinary knowledge and a deeper understanding of the historical patterns of globalization.

The approach to World History chosen for this volume is based on the understanding that the different regions of the world should not be seen as separate and essentially different from one another. This handbook seeks a more complex and comprehensive approach by trying to avoid generalizations which universal theories can produce, to understand historical patterns in different regions of the world in their locality but also in their connectivity. In this endeavor, this handbook does not argue against the existence of universal themes and global exchanges, and rejects any essentialist approach to history which suggests that there are natural and unchanging or even insurmountable differences between peoples and their cultures. Yet, universal themes and concepts, such as communication, religion, trade and identity, did not all evolve following a similar universal pattern, but rather followed local trajectories in different parts of the world and were shaped by those local conditions and developments.

There are ten thematic chapters in this volume and each take a different theme as a starting point to discuss the development of these historical phenomena. The discussions respect the locality of each region, while at the same time also showing awareness of the interaction between that region and the rest of the world. The chapters will be presented more or less chronologically. That does not mean that the relationship between that area and the world is unique for that area or for that time. Similar mechanisms and processes occurred in other times and at multiple places. The argument is that developments occurred as a result of the local context as well as the interactions with the rest of the world. Hence, the history of the world has subsequently been shaped by diverging developments in these areas. Each chapter is specifically aimed at offering a window to interpret the ordering of the world. Ultimately, it aims to tell a story of experiences of change over time in the human past.

## Guiding Questions

1. What is history?
2. What is historicism?
3. What is meta-history?
4. What is historiography?
5. What is World History?
6. What is modernity?
7. What is a civilization?

## Guide to Further Reading

### The Study of History

- Carr, E.H., *What is History?* (New York: Vintage: 1961). A classic text based on a series of public lectures at Cambridge University in which the basic skills are very eloquently discussed.
- Gaddis, John Lewis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002). Written by one of the most notable historians of the twentieth century, this book discusses important questions about the study of history, such as its practices and status within academia.
- Lowenthal, David, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). What is the role of history in our contemporary lives, how does this role change and how does history shape the present? These are just some of the questions this notable book reflects on.
- Tosh, John, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History* (London: Routledge 2015). One of the most used handbooks to introduce students to the study of history: practical and useful.

### World History

- Diamond, Jared, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton: 1997). A classic, hotly debated and controversial text about the trajectories of the development of human society based on a structural lens.
- Eaton, David, *World History Through Case Studies: Historical Skills in Practice* (London: Bloomsbury 2020). A refreshing approach to world history via case studies and based on diverse research practices.
- McNeill, J.R. and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of Human History* (London: Norton 2003). An overview of the development of human webs covering the world over the course of the past millennia.
- McNeill, William H., 'The Changing Shape of World History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 34/2 (1995), pp. 8-26. This article introduces the reader to the historiography of the field.
- Tignor, Robert, et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World From the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present* (New York: Norton 2013). A very accessible and detailed handbook with an overview of world history till today.



## INTRODUCTION PART I

# The Pre-Modern World (< 1800 CE)

“Traveling – it gives you home in thousand strange places, then leaves you a stranger in your own land”

-- Ibn Battuta (1304-1369)

World History, as the introduction indicates, is often associated with the history of globalization. Whereas this description of the field is too simple, World History does concern itself with the history of increasing global interactions and international relations. As such, the traditional and Eurocentric view of the first or true phase of globalization is one where the Columbian voyages starting in 1492 CE are seen as the starting point. Yet, as the title of this introduction to Part 1 indicates, this book



**Image I.1** Ibn Batuta in Egypt



will take a different approach and sees the period before the Columbian Exchange as a significant period in the history of increasing global connections. In order to understand the current world, this early history of the developments of global populations needs to be addressed and analyzed, as during this long period the different world regions, which we identify being Africa; Central Asia; East Asia; Europe; the Middle East; North America; Pacific; Russia; South America; and South East Asia, shaped and molded their distinct local characteristics. This long period of almost five thousand years, stretching from antiquity, when significant long distance trade between developing civilizations was taking off and in part shaping local markets and identities, up to the rise of the Atlantic World and the dawn of what we call the 'Modern era', when the Americas became more closely connected to what has been called 'the Old World' consisting of Eurasia and Africa, is thus a key period to understand the present-day practices of individuals and states formulating and negotiating their regional distinctness in the process of international relations.

Nevertheless, a five thousand year long period is certainly vast, complex and not easily summarized, certainly not on a global scale. As such this book approaches World History from a contextual and thematic angle. Using thematic as well as contextual approaches allows us to understand *long-durée* developments from a local perspective and as such resists generalizations which broad universal theories can produce. This book aims to narrate and analyze long-term processes, which can be identified at different times in different places on Earth, but always respecting the local unique context in which such global phenomena occurred. We have identified a certain number of key historical processes and thematic developments which have quintessentially shaped this long stretch of time. One such theme or historical development which defined the development of human societies during this period is **Communication**, or rather, the developments of techniques of communication such as the development of writing (ca. 3000 BCE) as well as the invention of paper (ca. 200 CE) and the cultural changes which occurred due to these innovations. Writing allowed societies to more easily store vaster amounts of information for longer periods of time, and share this information across greater distances. This boom in information-sharing sparked a global cross-pollination, which triggered a rapid cultural, economic and political development.

For example, one major development during this era which is closely linked to the emergence of writing as well as the formation of distinct regional identities, was the expansion of certain world views, traditions and teachings which purported a universal message and universal truth rather than claiming authority and legitimacy based on a local source of power or tradition. This period between ca. 1000 BCE to 300 CE saw the rise of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Greek Philosophy and the monotheistic beliefs represented by Judaism. The significance of this process cannot be underestimated. Where spiritually unified communities first bonded over local rites and/or a local deity, for example a god protecting a city or a specific lake, the

concept of a universal God or a universal set of life-guiding principles and rituals that could and should apply to all of humankind, allowed not only these ideas to spread more easily, but also encouraged people to help the expansion of such ideas, as it was considered both a collective quest and individual duty to enlighten all societies with the 'truth'. The "evangelization" of the world, be it in the name of for instance Confucius or Christ, created vast spheres of cultural influence, in which distant communities could experience a sense of belonging to one another based on a shared belief system or common practice of traditions.

We are of course all aware of the damage overtly zealous 'missionaries' caused on less willing recipients of these newly established belief systems. Several episodes of violent religious persecution or forced conversion come to mind, such as the 'Anti-Buddhist Proclamation' in 845 CE Tang China, the persecution of Christians in 64 CE Rome or the forced conversion of native-Americans in South America by the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors (see chapter 5). Nevertheless, it is also important to remember how the spread of only a handful of dominant belief systems created spheres of cultural homogenization that were previously unthinkable and did indeed make the world seem smaller or at least more comprehensible. The travel experiences of the globetrotter *par excellence* Ibn Battuta (1304-1369 CE) are a great example of this, as the North African traveler (see chapter 3 on the Silk Roads and Central Asia) found a home in almost every new and distant place he set foot, thanks to the shared customs of the Islamic faith in the 'Dar-al-Islam' which created a level of trust and understanding between himself and people as far apart as South-East Africa, Persia and the Indonesian archipelago. Similarly, Buddhist monasteries found along the Silk Roads served as landmarks and cultural 'refuges' where those who practiced the traditions accompanying the teachings of the Buddha could find rest and support (see chapter 3 on the Silk Roads).

This cultural homogenization based on a religious or philosophical understanding of the world, should also not be exaggerated. Local differences in the daily practice of religious and/or philosophical wisdoms account for some of the current regional cultural and political distinctness, such as for example the Burmese form of Buddhism (see chapter 6 on **Religion**) or the differences between Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholic Christianity, which were politically and theologically sealed with the 'Great Schism' of 1054 CE. One can also think of the Reformation of 1517 CE which set the Protestant Christians on a different trajectory of a theological as well as ritualistic expression of Christianity from the Roman Catholics, or the split between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims which originated with the dispute over succession of the Prophet Muhammad as leader of the Islamic faith, that led to regional differences in the expression and understanding of their religious beliefs.

The dominance of these handful of religious/philosophical world views also created the need for more powerful and clearly drafted doctrines, as well as more

powerful spiritual brokers who acted as the teachers and/or intermediaries between the 'common' people and their deities or inner spiritual development. This brings us to another of the central themes in this first part of the book, namely **Political Order**. Chapter 4 shows how the religious authorities in Europe have always sought to find a balance between worldly leaders (Kings/Knights, etc.) and spiritual leaders (Priests/ Pope, etc.). Europe did not follow a divergent path at this stage in World History. The struggle between religious and worldly powers is a universal phenomenon. What made it intriguing is that it occurred in a relatively small geographical area. All other major political states at the time encompassed vast areas, think for instance of the Song Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate or the Malian Empire. These empires certainly did not portray an absolute cultural uniformity and were in many instances also ruled by local lords or kingdoms loyal to a larger empire, not unlike European feudal knights and their kings. Yet, the scale of these vassal states and their overlord's empire was still significantly larger than the scale on which such processes occurred within Europe. This fierce competition for power in such a small area, and the debate, containing so many different views and voices – about who should wield power and based on what authority – profoundly shaped the thinking on political power and state formation in this area. Additionally, these ideas would have long-term global consequences as certain principles, such as the Westphalian treaty, which evolved within the local European context, would eventually become dominant throughout the world and serve as the basis for the principles of state sovereignty in the United Nations Charter.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one central theme this part of the book will address is **Trade**. This thematic lens is arguably the most obviously connected to the process of globalization. Indeed, Chapter 3 which deals with Trade through discussing the Silk Roads also shows how the power of commerce and with that the power of desire, the appreciation of fine craftsmanship and the quest for artistic and productive innovations often proved more powerful than political orders and the enforcement of state regulations. For example, the so-called commercial revolution in Song China (960-1279 CE) led to the creation of the famous Grand Canal, the invention of gunpowder, and even the concept of paper money in the eleventh century CE. This commercial boom in East Asia helped the trade all along the Silk Roads to blossom. This period thus also sees the rise of a wealthy and relatively independent merchant class, who used their money to celebrate their success and lavishly decorate themselves and their homesteads, as such supporting the local artistic industries, as well as used their money to buy political influence, thus upsetting the political order.

This great boom of global trade, however, was severely shaken in the fourteenth century by the sudden appearance of a new bacterial infectious disease, which was to kill almost half of the entire population of the 'Old World'. The bubonic plague or 'Black Death' most likely originated somewhere in Central Asia and found through

the merchant caravans and ships a way to spread rapidly to the major centres of trade and power in the entire Eurasian landmass as well as North Africa. In particular the first wave of this sudden and devastating pandemic, the likes of which the modern human population has never seen before nor since, profoundly changed societal development. It triggered religious debates on the nature of suffering and salvation amongst Christian as well as Muslim scholars. In terms of political order, people looked to their rulers for guidance and protection which most could not offer, leading for example to the end of the Yuan Dynasty, which was toppled in 1368 CE in the ensuing chaos which emerged after the plague erupted in 1331 CE. In Europe lower population numbers led to higher wages which in return led people to invest in labor-saving ways to produce food and products, starting the so-called proto-industrialization.

The Black Death was certainly not the only time biological exchanges proved crucial in the shaping of societies' futures. Chapter five for instance addresses the biological nature of the Columbian Exchange, which caused the native population of the Americas to die in great numbers due to imported diseases from the 'Old World' to which the population in the Americas had no immunity. This rapid and massive depopulation in turn brought the Spanish and Portuguese colonists to consider importing enslaved individuals from Africa to work on the newly established plantations. As early as 1493, African enslaved were forcibly shipped from the south west African coast, near present-day Angola, to be put to work in Brazil. This mass movement of peoples from across different continents coming together in the Americas caused people to reflect on who they were and how they related to one another. The Casta paintings (see chapter 5) which were produced in much of Spanish America are a clear example of the growing tendency to identify and classify people based on superficial physical traits as essential characteristics of one's being. This injurious **Race** thinking would have profound effects on the history of not only the Americas and Africa but on the whole of world history since. At the dawn of what we call the 'modern era', racist thinking had become an integral ideology in the thinking about 'the other' and would come to influence direct global encounters in the ensuing age of Industrialization, Nationalism and 'New Imperialism' (see part 2).

## CHAPTER 2.

# Communication: The Writing Revolution

ANNE MARIEKE VAN DER WAL



**Image 2.1** San Rock Art, Cederberg Mountains, South Africa



## Introduction

In 2018 in a cave at the southern tip of the African continent, scientists identified an object which changed our understanding of the development of human communication. Scientists discovered a 73,000-year-old stone, which had been ‘decorated’ with clear and straight lines, drawn with an ochre crayon. This object presents the first known form of intelligible communication by homo sapiens to date.\* It shows us how our desire to leave a mark goes back to the earliest stages of human evolution. Moreover, it provides evidence that we can trace not only human evolution to Africa, but also the origins of human communication technologies. Indeed, in the

\* Christopher S. Henshilwood, Francesco D’Errico, Karen L. Van Niekerk, Laure Dayet, Alain Queffelec and Luca Pollarolo, ‘An abstract drawing from the 73,000-year-old levels at Blombos Cave, South Africa’, *Nature*, Vol. 562 (2018) pp. 115-118.

yellow and orange rocks of the semi-arid rocky terrain of Southern Africa, countless red pigmented symbols appear on hidden and sheltered rock walls. They preserve these ancient expressive statements, transmitting information across thousands of years about the flora and fauna, which once marked the landscape. Moreover, they bear testament to the human communities who eked out an existence at the southern tip of the African continent. Such rock art has an incredible appeal to archeologists and historians, as they are beautiful and delicate primary sources of a 'prehistoric' era, as well as testimony to humanity's primordial and profound urge for meaningful communication.

The study of history is intimately connected to the study of communication, as historians are first and foremost interested in the recorded past, in the history of who we are and where we came from, and how we have narrated and recorded that process. Yet in studying the history of communication there is a tendency to focus on communication as a tool, and as such give more weight to understanding its changing speed, latency and scope rather than looking at how innovation has changed the nature and culture of communication itself. Chronological overviews, provided in history textbooks, of the major breakthroughs in the history of communication usually list technological advancements in modes of writing that have increased the magnitude of this mode of transmittance, such as the invention of writing (c. 3400 BCE); the invention of the printing press (woodblock printing c. 200 CE; Gutenberg 1440 CE); the invention of the telegraph (1844) and the invention of the internet (c. 1970 CE), and these are presented as pivotal turning points in the history of human civilization. However, there is an anachronistic element in this modern obsession of historians with written forms of communication, as it hinders our understanding of previous societies and civilizations who, for the most part of human history, despite the ability to write, were predominantly oral cultures.

Recent paleoanthropological and archeological research into the origins of meaningful communication in human societies has recognized how developments of visual symbolic communication (rock art) often developed in close collaboration with the development of acoustic expressions.



## 2.a Concept Definition

### Meaningful Communication

*The deliberate act of transferring information through a verbal (speech or writing) or non-verbal (such as drawing, movement, objects) medium.*

It appears that many ancient rock art sites were either located in naturally sonorous landscapes or in caves with high levels of resonance and reverberations\*, suggesting

\* Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Tommaso Mattioli, 'Rock Art, Music and Acoustics: A Global Overview', in: Bruno David and Ian J. McNiven (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Rock Art* (Oxford:



that the performance of acoustic sounds was equally important for early human societies to transmit information as the more tangible signs left on the rock walls. Moreover, evidence of the abundance and importance of these non-textual or non-tangible forms of communication can also be clearly seen in these ancient rock art drawings themselves. The rock painting shown in image 2.1 depicts human figures who seem to dance, and where there is dancing there is music and/or singing, an integrated and complex form of human communication. Several historians, notably Global Historians William McNeill & John R. McNeill, have argued that more collaborative acts of communication, such as singing and dancing, were fundamental for the evolution of human civilizations.\* This idea was already expressed in the mid-nineteenth century by the ‘father of evolution’ himself, Charles Darwin, who speculated in his book *The Descent of Man*, that “We must suppose that the rhythms and cadences of oratory are derived from previously developed musical powers. We can thus understand how it is that music, dancing, song, and poetry are such very ancient arts. We may go even further than this, and [...] believe that musical sounds afforded one of the bases for the development of language” (1871).\*\* One can easily imagine how call and response singing techniques, found in many folk music across the globe, or the focus and collaboration required for keeping rhythm and time during exertive synchronized movements such as group dances, are what strengthened the bonds between kinsmen, villagers and even larger social groups.

The wish to communicate and the evolution of tangible and intangible communication modes is what has shaped the progress of our species as social animals. To be able to converse and make ourselves intelligible to one another is what has helped us collaborate and cement social cohesion. Thus, in understanding the rise of human civilizations, we need to simultaneously look at the development of communication and the reasons why certain more ‘primary’, such as non-written, modes of communication continued to be used. It is after all not only the story of the past that should interest us but also how the story is told and how we came to use certain communicative ways to shape and narrate those stories that bind us.

The history of Africa provides a logical starting point in this search for the meaning of modes of communication and its connection to the development of human civilizations, as the region is seen as ‘the cradle of human kind’ as well as part of what is known as the ‘fertile crescent’ where most of the earliest civilizations and written scripts developed. This chapter will look at different cultures of communication and how they have shaped the development of several key civilizations in the history of Africa, notably Ancient Egypt and the Sahelian Empire of Mali, as well as our modern understanding of these historical states. Both

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Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 503-528.

\* William McNeill and J.R. McNeill, *The Human Web. A Birds Eye View of World History* (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 13.

\*\* Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1872), p. 572.

these ancient societies provide an interesting case study in which written language had evolved to a very high level, yet, oral communication remained central in the day-to-day activities of these societies, not unlike our modern societies today. The main argument of this chapter is that the oral recounting of history forms a long standing pattern in human societies and forms an important entry point in the understanding of human connections and the human relationship to history.



## Historiography

### Storytellers, Oral Literature & the Revolution of Writing

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of transmitting complex information. Stories to make sense of the natural world, to transmit experiences and skills, and stories about social groups and their ancestry. These oral traditions about our ancestral heritage are the earliest forms of history, the practice of narrating past events and providing meaning and significance for those people and events that came before.



## 2.1 The Study of History

### Oral History

*The study of history through orally transmitted sources. Historians distinguish between sources which are part of an oral tradition and the field of Oral Literature, such as epic poetry or folklore, and oral sources which recount only a one generational/individual memory of certain historical events. Such life stories and interviews are recorded after the historical events have occurred, and as such provide a testimony of both the past and the present. At the same time, they offer historians evidence of otherwise undocumented events or perspectives.*

Early ‘historians’ were thus master storytellers. They were charged with preserving the living and distant memories of a people. At the same time, such stories about the past were used to justify certain societal structures and values. What binds us as a group? What are the cultural norms which we adhere to? What justifies the authority of those in power? As these genesis traditions, normative narratives or stories about royal lineages were both lengthy and important and memory strategies were used to make sure the storytellers could remember crucial information and faithfully transmit this. Such strategies were mostly stylistic adaptations, such as formulaic composition, alliteration and ring composition.\* As such, these ancient stories about the past became forms of literature, oral literature, in which fact and

\* Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 1960/2000). John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition. History and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).



myth became entangled. Examples of this can be found in some of the earliest known oral traditions, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh (written down c. 2100 BCE) and already mentioned in the introductory chapter; the Indian Rig Veda (c. 1500–1200 BCE) or the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers (c. 1200 to 1194 BCE) and the Iliad and Odyssey (fall of Troy c. 1260–1180 BCE; publication of the Epic c. 800–700 BCE).

The emergence of writing provided new ways to record and share information. Many linguistic historians expect that the early written languages, which emerged independently in different locations across the world, developed predominantly out of a need for counting and calculating. For example, the earliest known form of writing, the Sumerian cuneiform (see also chapter 1), seemed to have developed predominantly from accounting systems more than 5000 years ago.\* Writing thus initially served the purpose of recording numbers in a very meticulous and indisputable way, which made long distance trade or tax collections, especially through third parties, easier and more reliable. These archaic scripts like cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphs (see image 2.2) were thus not immediately used for recording authoritative texts on religion or philosophy, as is often imagined, but were rather used for more mundane but nonetheless important purposes like recording ownership or values of goods.\*\* Nevertheless, the revolution that written languages caused was the change in thinking about recording and disseminating information.

This orality-literacy shift was one of the most profound cognitive revolutions in human history, as it changed the way we think and remember. In practice, it meant, among other things, that expressions of thought went from, for example being predominantly participatory, as communication was mostly uttered in the presence of other people, to becoming more internalized and ‘distanced’ with regards to time, space and community. This change caused expressions of information to become more eternalized but at the same time also disconnected from immediate feedback.\*\*\* The Greek philosopher Plato warned that writing “weakens and destroys memory”.\*\*\*\* And several Griots, professional storytellers and keepers of African history, have pointed out that whereas “other peoples use writing to record the past, [...] this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past anymore, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice”.\*\*\*\*\* This ‘revolution’ was, however, one of slow pace, as writing did not take over all aspects of significant communication, nor immediately erode the status and authority of the spoken word. Indeed, Plato also noted, referring to

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\* Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *How Writing Came About* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

\*\* Toby Wilkinson emphasises the importance of writing for the economic management for early pharaohs, in his work *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt. The History of a Civilization from 3000 BC to Cleopatra* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 55.

\*\*\* Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982/2005)

\*\*\*\* Plato's dialogue Phaedrus 274c–277a.

\*\*\*\*\* Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté cited in: D. T. Niane and Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, *Sundiata. An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Pearson, 2006).

Socrates words, that “he who [...] believes that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person”.\*



**Image 2.2** Proto-Hieroglyphs

Herodotus, by many still considered as the ‘father of history’ in the Western tradition, used oral sources throughout his work, and prided himself on having first account oral testimonies to give his work more credibility. He was as such practicing a field of history that we today would call ‘Oral History’. Moreover, several scholars have suggested that Herodotus’s famous work *The Histories* (c. 430 BCE) was in fact composed as an oral performance for the purpose of public lectures, and only later written down in book form.\*\* This shows that in the late Iron Age, written transmissions of historical information were certainly not deemed more reliable than oral communication. Similarly, Sima Qian (202 BCE – 25 CE), the Chinese ‘father of history’ equally attached tremendous value to oral sources such as proverbs, folk tales and poems which he collected during his travels throughout China and used for writing his all-encompassing history of China and masterpiece *Shi Ji* (Historical Records).\*\*\* In the same fashion, the North-African historian Ibn Khaldun (1332 CE – 1406 CE) based much of his writing on information received through oral traditions and interviews. In his celebrated collection of books called the *Kitāb al-‘ibar* (Book of Lessons), Khaldun demonstrates one of the first recorded instances of historicist thinking when he argues for understanding the past as strange and different from

\* Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus* 274c-277a.

\*\* William A. Johnson, ‘Oral Performance and the Composition of Herodotus’ “Histories”, *Journal of Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1994) pp. 229-254.

\*\*\* Yang Li-Wen, ‘Oral History in China’, *Oral History*, Vol. 15, No.1 (1987), pp. 22-25.

the present. He warns historians of too eagerly believing historical narratives that are rooted in the present, stating that (oral) narratives of, for example, royal genealogies are: “For a pedigree [...] something imaginary and devoid of reality. Its usefulness consists only in the resulting connection and close contact”.\* At the same time, for Khaldun this source critique applied to both oral as well as written sources. He saw no difficulty in accepting oral accounts as primary sources, under the condition that the author would be committed to apply source critique in analyzing these sources. As such, written and oral accounts were considered to be equally valuable.

### Historism, Written Communication & the Concept of Civilization

Despite the continuing importance of oral traditions, the emergence of writing has become intertwined with our modern understanding of the rise of civilizations (for definition, see chapter 1). Most textbook definitions of civilization integrate a reference to written language, and as such become normative devices through which our perception of previous oral cultures is negatively influenced. In fact, definitions of civilization are in more ways normative and problematic, as they are often presented as clear and static binary opposites such as civilized and uncivilized; cultured vs. uncultured; urban vs. rural; sedentary vs. nomadic; state vs. stateless, etc. Scholars have pointed out that many of these dichotomies, for instance the division between democratically or autocratically organized societies or the urban-rural dichotomy, are problematic as they assume, for example, that only democratic city dwellers are civilized and in effect more autocratic rural societies are not. This divisionism is not a modern phenomenon; ancient societies were similarly keen on mirroring themselves to others who they usually regarded as lesser developed. In the process, they elevated their own society to the highest level of civilization. Think of the dichotomy of Greek vs. Barbarian, or Chinese vs. the Siyí 四夷.

For early historians the focus on writing became dominant in thinking and writing about what constitutes a civilization. Writing became associated with a higher level of thinking. Early western scholars distinguished between ‘prelogical’ or magical vs. ‘logical’ cultures or civilizations, instead of distinguishing simply between predominantly oral vs. literate societies.\*\* This negative assessment of ‘non-literate’ societies became more dominant with the professionalization of the historical discipline in the nineteenth century, and the development of methodological doctrines such as the Rankean school of Historicism (see chapter 1). Since then, the historical discipline has come to focus predominantly on the recorded (written) human past. All human history that could only be reconstructed based on non-written evidence became classified as ‘prehistoric’ and became the

\* Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah an Introduction to History*, trans Franz Rosenthal, 3 volumes (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 1265. Cited in: Ralph A. Austen and Jan Jansen, ‘History, Oral Transmission and Structure in Ibn Khaldun’s Chronology of Mali Rulers’, *History of Africa*, Vol. 23 (1996), pp. 17–28, p. 17.

\*\* Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 29, 59.

field of archeologists and (paleo)anthropologists. Oral sources were left out of the professional study of history for a considerable amount of time, and this meant in practice that those societies that had preserved the story of their past through oral communication were neglected and ultimately seen to be ‘people without history’\*.

It was this legacy, among others, that led to the devaluation of oral cultures and in particular of African History. Some western historians of the nineteenth century went so far as to dismiss the African origins of early civilizations such as Ancient Egypt. The German philosopher Hegel for example infamously wrote:

“[Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit”.\*\*

Such obvious biased and dismissive interpretations of non-Western and non-‘literate’ histories cast a long shadow on the field of African history, as well as on the interpretation of what it meant to be ‘civilized’.

## The Cultural Turn and the Rediscovery of Oral Sources

In the later decades of the twentieth century, a shift occurred within the historical discipline and other fields in the Humanities that placed culture and the ordinary lives of people at the center of investigation as well as moving from a more positivist epistemology that aimed to understand and study the past in a completely neutral and objective manner, to a post-modern understanding of knowledge production and scientific enquiry.



### 2.2 The Study of History

#### Epistemology

*The approach to knowledge and how to arrive at it, taking into account its foundations, methods, and validity.*



### 2.b Concept Definition

#### Culture

*The ideas and practices that award meaning to activities in human societies.*

\* Eric Wolff, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

\*\* G.F.W. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1892) p. 99.

Exemplary for this focus on culture as well as attention for discourse and meaning, is the work by communication specialists Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan. These scholars highlighted how not only was the content of the message important, but also that the chosen medium through which a message is communicated is equally part of that message and worthy of study.\* Additionally, both scholars argued that the technologies used for communication changed the nature of communication and changed our cultures. Several (modern) cultures retain, what Ong calls, a 'secondary orality residue' as opposed to a primary orality found in non-literature societies. This persistence of oral communication is seen as more deliberate and self-conscious\*\*, and continues to thrive as sound. In particular, the human voice presents such a powerful and experiential acuteness and connectedness that almost all literate societies still favor oral communications. Even today in our highly literate societies, we prefer hearing human voices over mere textual communication as becomes evident from the continuing success of radio, podcasts and vlogs.

Emancipatory movements in the twentieth century had their effect on the historical profession, as newly independent countries in, among others, Africa sought to retell their own histories from a postcolonial perspective. The study of oral sources, which were seen as untainted and authentic African voices as opposed to the colonial narratives in the written conventional accounts of colonial archives, became more popular. Several historians as well as anthropologists paved the way for contemporary historians by developing methodologies for the use of oral traditions as well as creating collections of transcribed traditions for future researchers. The Malian historian Hampâté Bâ gave voice to the tremendous fervor that was felt by these historians during the last decades of the twentieth century to save and collect as much information before it would be lost to 'modern life' when he stated that "Every time an old man dies in Africa, it is as if a library has burnt down" ("En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle").\*\*\*

## Communication in African History

### Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt is probably one of the most enigmatic of all early human civilizations. From its beginnings in the third millennium BCE until its final collapse under Roman occupation in 641 CE, this mighty civilization persisted for over 4000 years and during this long stretch of time it had a tremendous influence on all its neighbors, ranging

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\* Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964).

\*\* Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (2005), 133.

\*\*\* Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul: Mémoires, 1900-1991* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1992).

from the ancient Greeks, Assyrians, the Berbers and the Nubian Kingdom. Several African scholars, notably the Senegalese historian Cheick Anta Diop, have argued that ancient Egyptians were ethnically sub-Saharan African, and their civilization the quintessence and archetype of all African cultures that followed, and, as such, was what Ancient Greek and Roman civilization is for most Western cultures.\* This claim is, however, disputed by other African scholars for being too Nilocentric, as well as by contemporary scholars of genetics and archeology who have concluded that due to numerous large scale migrations and imperial conquests ancient Egypt can be rather defined as a multiethnic, multilinguistic Afro-Asiatic state.\*\*

From a geographical and topographical point of view there is of course no denying that Ancient Egypt was a civilization situated in Africa and thus an African civilization. Scholars agree that Ancient Egypt's power and wealth was largely based on the life-giving might of the river Nile. The Egyptian control over water supplies and hydration of agricultural lands through basin irrigation was perhaps not as complex as the water engineering projects of the Indus Valley or Mesopotamia, the two other major early civilizations, but the reliability, sheer volume and might of the Nile made Egypt the most durable civilization the world has ever seen. With the annual flooding of the Nile, predominantly caused by monsoon rainfalls in the mountains of Ethiopia, the river left fertile mud behind on its banks, stretching sometimes a hundred meters inland, transforming an otherwise arid desert land into a lush green strip stretching down all the way from the Great Lakes in Central Africa and the Ethiopian highlands towards the Nile Delta in 'Lower Egypt' on the Mediterranean coast, with an incredible length of 6,650 km. So important was the Nile to Egyptian civilization, that the calendar was based on its seasonal tides. There were three seasons, *Akhet*, the period of flooding; *Peret*, the sowing season; and *Shemu*, the harvest season.

Thanks to these annual inundations, Ancient Egypt featured two important elements of an advanced and complex social organization, namely a steady food supply and technological innovations. But it also had several other distinct features which historians have associated with 'civilizations', such as a clear, and often times hierarchical, social structure; a system of government and an organized religious system.

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\* Cheick Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974).

\*\* See for a detailed discussion on ethnicity in ancient Egypt, for example: Juan Carlos Moreno García, 'Ethnicity in Ancient Egypt: An Introduction to Key Issues', *Journal of Egyptian History*, Vol. 11, No. 1-2 (2018), pp. 1-17.



**Image 2.3** Map of Ancient Egypt



In addition, ancient Egypt of course also featured that other typical but by no means conditional element of what constitutes a classic ‘civilization’, the development of writing. The origins of the Hieroglyphic script dates back to the fourth millennium BCE, and scholars assume it developed out of a need for tax administration. Small labels with pictorial information on them (see image 2.2) have been discovered by archeologists, who assume these labels were used for keeping track of paid tax *in natura*, and the pictorial symbols referred to both the products stored and the regions from which they came. These proto-writing symbols developed into the more complex script of Hieroglyphs.

The expansion of a writing culture and corpus of literary texts in ancient Egypt developed through the practice of writing down so-called ‘mortuary texts’, being chants and ritual procedures for funerals, as *aide-mémoire*.<sup>\*</sup> These written texts never replaced the oral performances, but over time developed into the dominant authority on which scribes and priests came to rely. Scribes (see image 2.4) were the professional class of skilled workers charged with decorating temple walls and recording and copying moral and religious texts as well as tax collections.



**Image 2.4** Seated Scribe, New Kingdom, 1391-1353 BCE

<sup>\*</sup> Antonio J. Morales, ‘Text-building and Transmission of Pyramid Texts in the Third Millennium BCE: Iteration, Objectification, and Change’, *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* Vol. 15, No. 2 (2015), pp. 169-201.



The image of the scribes represents the well-known Egyptian hankering for immortality. The drive to preserve the body through mummification, to preserve a faithful image of an individual through visual art and to preserve the memory of an individual by a written record of his or her name and deeds, showed the Egyptian quest for and obsession with a state of permanence and eternity in the present and in the afterlife.

In modern imagination scribes are often represented as the bearers of high Egyptian civilization, but there is a debate among Egyptologists whether scribes should indeed be seen as part of the elite of Egyptian society. For example, Chloé Ragazolli has noted that as opposed to seeing them as the absolute elite and part of the aristocracy, this class of skilled workers formed an intermediary elite, as they held the key to a body of knowledge that sustained and legitimized the Egyptian state.\* As the legitimacy of the Pharaoh, who was deemed a divine ruler, depended on the preservation and continuation of religious rites, which in turn had become increasingly dependent on writing, scribes played an essential role in maintaining the socio-political status-quo. This made them relatively powerful people within Egyptian society. Alternatively, Massimiliano Pinarello has argued that our modern perception of literacy being the prime marker of social distinction is a misconception and based on an anachronistic appraisal of Egyptian culture.\*\* Scribes were first and foremost artisans, charged with a specific purpose, and as such part of the ‘middle class’ that consisted of free men (as opposed to the enslaved) who worked in the fields, in construction or as artists such as architects and painters. At the same time, literacy was essential for certain top offices in the state bureaucracy and the best way to ensure access to and close contact with those in power.\*\*\* Yet, scribes worked in very diverse positions with different levels of social status, ranging from bookkeepers for traders, administrative clerks in the army to priests copying sacred texts in temples.\*\*\*\* Seeing scribes as being part of a noble ‘upper class’ because of their literacy comes from the same misconception of seeing literate societies as the epitome of civilization and thus illiterate cultures and illiterate people as being less civilized and lower ranked.

The slightly conscious shift from depending on oral traditions to trusting in the written word echoes, among others, from the pages of the Old Testament shared by Jews and Christians, in which the prophet Isaiah is cited to have said: “Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness” (Isaiah 30:8). At the same time, this trust in the everlasting

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\* Chloé Ragazolli, *Scribes. Les artisans du texte de l'Égypte ancienne. 1550-1000* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2019).

\*\* Massimiliano S. Pinarello, *An Archaeological Discussion of Writing Practice. Deconstruction of the Ancient Egyptian Scribe* (London: Golden House, 2016).

\*\*\* Penelope Wilson, *Sacred Signs. Hieroglyphs in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 96. Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*, 56.

\*\*\*\* Wilson, *Sacred Signs*, p. 96-97.

witness of the written record often went hand in hand with a trust in the ability of storytellers to keep the memory of individuals and their deeds alive, as becomes apparent from an inscription on papyrus rolls of Coptic funeral texts dating back to the second and third century CE. “A man has perished, and his corpse has become dust. [...] But writings cause him to be remembered in the mouth of the storyteller.”\* It is a mistake to think that ancient Egypt was predominantly a literate society. Egyptologists have pointed out that the level of literacy was relatively low, with the lowest estimates of only around 1% of society during the Old Kingdom (c. 2700–2200 BCE) and perhaps as high as 20–30% among skilled workers in the New Kingdom (c. 1570–1069 BCE), meaning that ancient Egyptian civilization remained for the most part an oral society.\*\* Moreover, it would also be a mistake to assume that the oral traditions which continued to exist parallel to the emerging written traditions were somehow less civilized and only performed and appreciated by ‘lower classes’. The orality-literary shift was gradual and did not mean a sudden and complete rejection of the more primary forms of communication, instead for most of the history of ancient Egypt literacy aided and strengthened oral traditions and vice versa.

The story of the origins of Hieroglyphs and Hieratic, a more cursive script deriving from the pictorial Hieroglyphs, and the development of literacy in ancient Egypt shows that writing did not enable the rise of complex culture, nor feature a necessity or perquisite for a society to be deemed ‘civilized’; rather, it was mostly a practical adaptation and consequence of a more complex social governing structure and seems to have first and foremost been developed to aid a growing bureaucracy and increasingly integrate religious rites. In a way, the invention of writing became a ‘memory trap’ as societies steadily became dependent on written sources as their main storage system of information. This meant that those who had trained themselves in working with this new technology, such as scribes, eventually gained an upper hand in steering and regulating knowledge accumulation.

### *The Empire of Mali*

What the Mediterranean sea was for several ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Greece, the Sahara proved to be, as a sea of sand and the highway of trade, for the Sahelian civilizations bordering on its shores. The word Sahel derives from the Arab word *Sāḥil* (ساحل) which means coast, and sums up what this region of savannah grasslands just beneath the Sahara was for the peoples living there.

\* Cited in: Daniel Viktor Takacs, “Performing Eternally: Visible Signs of Oral Tradition in Ancient Egypt”, in Zuzanna Augustyniak and Hanna Rubinkowska-Aniot (eds), ‘The Artistic Traditions of Non-European Cultures Series, Vol. 6’, *The Art, The Oral and the Written Intertwined in African Cultures*, special journal issue (2018), pp. 13–34, p. 18.

\*\* John Baines, *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 67.



**Image 2.5** Empires of Western Sudan

We often think of deserts as natural barriers, but with the domestication of the dromedary camel in the Arabian peninsula around 3000 and 2500 BCE and its subsequent spread across North Africa and the Sahel, movement across the desert became much easier and frequent. Similar also to the role of the Nile in Ancient Egypt, the river Niger functioned as the lifeline for societies in the western Sudan. Many important trading and governing cities such as Timbuktu, Djenné and Gao were along the banks of this more than four thousand kilometer long river flowing East from the Guinean highlands to the West into the Niger Delta at the Atlantic Ocean. With the exception of the inner-Delta in Mali, this river did not provide the same level of fertile silt deposits like the Nile, making farming along its banks more challenging. Yet, it was a very easily navigable river which enabled trade up and down the river with large canoes. The people of the Sahel were situated at the crossroads of trading networks that linked Sub-Saharan Africa to the rest of the then known world, and allowed them to become the intermediaries of trade between the societies in equatorial Africa and North Africa. Three consecutive empires flourished and dominated the area, the Ghana Empire (c. 300 until c. 1100 CE), the Mali Empire (c. 1235 to 1670 CE) and the Songhai Empire (1375-1591 CE).

Apart from being the middlemen for trade in salt from the North and among others kola nuts, ivory and enslaved from the South, the tremendous power and wealth of these Sahelian civilizations rested on the large gold deposits in the region. In Equatorial Africa, gold deposits were mostly found underground, and were thus very labor intensive to obtain, yet in the Sahel gold could be found in the river

sediments of the Niger and could be sifted out of the river beds quite easily. Early descriptions by Arab scholars note the incredible wealth of gold that attracted and lured foreign travelers to the region. For example, the eighth century Arab scholar Ibrahim al-Fazari called (ancient) Ghana “the land of gold”.\*

The decline of Ancient Ghana in the early twelfth century allowed the Keita dynasty of the Mandinka people to rise to power. Information about the origins of the Mali Empire has come to us through the oral tradition known as the Sundiata Keita. This is the key primary source for this chapter and consists of a great epic story of the founding father of the Mali Empire. It narrates the life events of the courageous ‘Lion King’ Sundiata of the Western Sudan who faced betrayal, exile and unexpected friendship in neighboring kingdoms which helped the young prince to reclaim his throne.

### *The Sundiata Keita*

[...] “We are now coming to the great moments in the life of Sundiata. The exile will end and another sun will arise. It is the sun of Sundiata. Griots know the history of kings and kingdoms and that is why they are the best counsellors of kings. Every king wants to have a singer to perpetuate his memory, for it is the griot who rescues the memories of kings from oblivion, as men have short memories”.\*\*



The Epic of Sundiata is an example of how most of the civilizations south of the Sahara narrated and preserved their history orally. The keepers of history and knowledge were Griots or Jali or Djeli (the term used by the Mande people), a class of bards and storytellers who were charged with remembering and reciting the genealogies of the royal blood lines and the oral literature of their people. Like the early ‘singer of tales’ of Homeric Greece or Ancient Egypt, West African Griots used memory strategies and musical aids to recount the lengthy stories about the past. As such, Griots were next to great storytellers also artists, excelling in the playing of instruments such as the *N’goni* and *Kora* (see image 2.6), types of harp-lutes, and the *Bafalon*, a wooden xylophone.

What makes the persistence of the Griots as the King’s official keepers of history throughout the twelfth century up until the end of the Mali Empire intriguing, is that the Malian Empire had come to adopt writing and even came to be known as one of the leading centers of learning in the world at the time thanks to the reputation of the famous library and University of Timbuktu.

\* N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (1981). Cited in: David C. Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali and Songhay* (New York: Chelsea House, 2010) p. 15.

\*\* Niane and Mamoudou Kouyaté, *Sundiata. An Epic of Old Mali*, p. 40-42.



**Image 2.6** Kora Playing Griots, Sénégal, 1900 – Colonies Françaises, Sénégal, Soudan Français

Through trade contacts and conquest, Islam had spread to North Africa in the late seventh and eighth century, and progressively reached the West African courts through contact with the merchant classes from the tenth to the fifteenth century. With Islam, the Arabic language and especially Arabic script came to be adopted in the Mali Empire. The rich kings of Mali sought to exhibit their wealth as well as new found devoutness through the patronage of (religious) scholarship. The Malian Emperor Mansa Musa (c. 1280 – c. 1337 CE) (see image 2.7), said to have been the richest man in history, became one of the main patrons of scholarship by financing the Sankoré Madrassah (school of religious learning) in the early fourteenth century, which together with the Djinguereber Madrasah built in 1327 and the Sidi Yahya Madrasah completed in 1440 CE, became part of the University of Timbuktu. The city flourished as the seat of Islamic learning in West Africa. Its Arabophone scholars used Ajami, African languages in Arabic script, to produce great texts of literature and science, thereby promoting African languages as languages of science.\* At its height, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the university town boasted 25,000 students.\*\*

\* Ousmane Oumar Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

\*\* Timbuktu, Unesco. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/119>

One of the reasons for the continuing importance of oral traditions was that paper remained a very expensive and scarce item in West Africa. Whereas the technique of making plant-based paper, which had been invented in China around the first millennium CE, had rapidly spread to the Islamic world, the technique had not spread to the Muslim communities in the Sahel. They came to be dependent on paper as well as (animal skin) parchment imports from production centers in Spain and North Africa. This greatly reduced the reliance of the West African societies on paper and as such on writing. As opposed to other great Islamic centers of power in for instance West Asia, the Empire of Mali did not use paper for the bureaucratic governance of its territory. The use of paper became almost exclusively designated for theological and philosophical scholarly work, such as copying religious texts, in the newly established university.\* Additionally, as initially only the urban merchant classes and some of the nobility had converted to Islam and the majority of the West African population, certainly those living outside the urban centers, retained their animist beliefs, there was less need for a wide adoption of writing for the purpose of studying Koranic texts. Moreover, in contrast to for example the ancient Egyptian state, the state administration of the Mali empire was very decentralized, allowing local rulers to effectively govern smaller units of people depending on oral communication, which also reduced the necessity for the state to be dependent on a written bureaucracy.

Interestingly, those religious scholars studying and working at the Madrassahs were also expected to memorize large tracts of texts and be able to recite the Quran by heart. As such, literary traditions did not replace oral traditions nor orality in science and theology. Senegalese historian Ousmane Kane argues that the ability to memorize texts by rote became a marker of scholarly excellence, a tradition that not only existed in the Sahel but throughout the Islamic world\*\*, as indeed becomes apparent from these following verses:

Idha lam takun hafizan wa'iyān	If retentive memory is not what you possess,
Fa-jam'uka li l-kutubi la yanfa'u	Your collection of books is quite useless,
A-tantuqu bi- l-jahli fi majlisin,	Would you dare, in company, nonsense say,
Wa-'ilmuka fil-bayti mustawda'u?	When your learning at home is stored away?***

Griots, who were as highly regarded as the literate scholars in university, formed the intermediaries between the converted and largely literate urban populations and the rural and largely illiterate population, bridging the two cultures through their oral literature. More so, Griots often functioned as mediators in conflict situations

\* Jonathan M. Bloom, 'Paper in Sudanic Africa', in: Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (eds) *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2008) p. 45-48, 51-52.

\*\* Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, p. 11.

\*\*\* Ibn Najjar, cited in: Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, p. 11.



as their knowledge of local histories was seen to ensure wisdom and mutual understanding.\* The diverging roles of Griots and the university scholars shows the different expectations of the role and place of history in West African society, as well as an alternative to the orality-literary shift. As opposed to largely literate societies who came to write down their people's histories and as such became dependent on recorded knowledge, distant and disconnected from the lived experiences of society, the Griots sought to preserve the living memories of their people.



**Image 2.7** Mansa Musa, Emperor of Mali. Catalan World Map (1375)

The praise poetry and epic stories that make up the historical narratives in the repertoire of the Griots, and the fusion of art and history that it entails, indicates that Griots and their audiences see the purpose of history mainly in its significance for the present as moral lessons and as a continuing dialogue with society to ensure acceptance and relevance for these historical narratives, as opposed to a rigorous pursuit of factual knowledge alone. As such, the persistence of Griots reminds us

\* Barbara Hoffman, 'The Roles of the Griot in the Future of Mali: A Twenty-First-Century Institutionalization of a Thirteenth-Century Traditional Institution', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2017) pp. 101-122.

of one of the reasons why we as a human species started telling each other history stories in the first place a hundred thousand years ago or more.

After the destruction of the university library and the looting of many precious manuscripts by an Moroccan army in 1591, which also ended the reign of the last of the Sahelian Empires, the Songhai, local scholars who had avoided forced exile to Morocco, dedicated themselves to saving the remaining manuscripts by hiding them in their homes and under the desert sand and kept them safe throughout the following tumultuous centuries of political upheaval, colonization and the struggles for independence. Together with the oral traditions, which were much harder to eradicate or censor, these written manuscripts and oral literature continued to safeguard the accumulated knowledge on West African history.

## Conclusion

The intrinsic need to communicate has led human kind to find ever more effective ways to connect and transmit and share information, from the development of language to the invention of writing and the emergence of scribes, scholars, and scientific societies who professionalized the processes of accumulating knowledge. The rise to some relative power of the first scribes in Ancient Egypt and later the scholars in Madrasahs of the Kingdom of Mali, showed that in the evolutionary trajectory of 'knowledge sharing', the written scripts had enabled human societies to increase their ability of obtaining and sharing knowledge, making the spread of religion or state bureaucracy over larger areas easier; those that had mastered the technique of writing became more important figures in society. However, the ability to communicate orally and to remember large amounts of information without the aid of the written word, remained a crucial feature of what it meant to be 'learned' and perhaps even 'civilized'. This 'secondary' or 'enduring orality' which was clearly visible in both Ancient Egypt and West African society, as well as other civilizations across the world from South-East Asia (think of the oral tradition of the Vedas) to Latin America (for example the Aztec who combined oral traditions with pictorial communication), highlights that new communication technologies never fully replace the old, but merely change the nature of the old techniques. Perhaps we are entering an age in which the new scribes of our modern society are those computer programmers who can read and write algorithms, and as such presently hold the key to the next level of 'knowledge sharing'. However, we can be assured that forms of orality will remain with us, no matter the technological advancements.



## Guiding Questions

- 1 What did the orality-literacy shift entail?
- 2 How would you link the concepts of communication and 'civilization', and what are the problems scholars encounter when trying to conceptualize and describe 'civilization'?
- 3 How did the emergence of a class of scribes reflect the impact of writing on Egyptian civilization?
- 4 Why did orality continue to play an important role in the social fabric of the Mali Empire?
- 5 How is the double role of oral traditions, with factual historical information on the one hand and moral lessons on the other, visible in the oral epic of Sundiata Keita?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Allon, Niv and Hana Navratilova (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Scribes. A Cultural Exploration* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). To understand what life was like as a scribe in ancient Egypt is the central focus in this book. Scribes were administrators or guardians of the state's religious and cultural textual traditions. The authors of this book also seek to find out what the scribe's position in society meant for ancient Egyptian ideas on meritocracy and literacy in an otherwise very traditional and hierarchical society.
- Diop, Cheick Anta, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974). This much debated and revolutionary book called into question the then dominant ideas on the supposed lack of African influences on Ancient Egyptian civilization. Diop argued that Ancient Egyptians were not only culturally influenced by sub-Saharan Africans, but were, in fact, of Sub-Saharan ethnic descent. Ironically, in his attempt to rectify the bias in Western science of seeing Egyptians as predominantly white, Diop falls into the trap of racial or ethnic essentialism himself as he insists there is one identifiable homogenous African population dominating ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, the book is considered today as a paradigm shifting publication, highlighting Africa's central place in the history of human civilizational development.
- Kane, Ousmane Oumar, *Beyond Timbuktu. An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016). In this masterfully written book, Kane argues that the great scholarly centers in West Africa, such as in Timbuktu and Djenné, not only influenced West African intellectual traditions but also the wider Islamic scholarly world. As such the book challenges the ideas that Africa did not have a scholarly tradition before colonization, and that connections between West Africa and other centers of Islamic learning were solid and long-standing.
- Okpewho, Isidore, *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). As a novelist and poet as well as literary scholar, Isidore Okpewho was one of the scholars who pioneered the field of Oral Tradition and Oral Literature

in literary studies. In this book he asserted that epic poetry as genre existed in Africa, breaking with the then dominant and Eurocentric conventions on what epic poetry entailed.

- Ong, Walter, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982/2012). This book has already become a modern classic in communication studies, as it innovatively opened up the field to consider how changes in communication media affected how individuals, as well societies as a whole, think about and value information and information sharing.
- Schmandt-Besserat, Denise, *How Writing Came About* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). This book argues that writing evolved out of the need for accurate accounting, and thus evolved in symbioses with mathematics. As such the author illuminated how early scripts, such as the cuneiform script, were the cultural evolutionary consequence of humanity's shift from a hunter-gatherer life to a sedentary farming society.
- Vansina, Jan, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1985). Part of the UNESCO History of Africa editorial board, Vansina's scholarly work engages with questions about how to decolonize the sources and narratives of African History. This revolutionary book greatly aided this ambition, influencing generations of historians to consider and use alternative sources such as Oral Traditions.

## CHAPTER 3.

# Trade: The Ancient Silks Roads

RICHARD T. GRIFFITHS



**Image 3.1** Catalan Atlas Silk Road caravan (detail)



## Introduction

It is impossible to remove the association of the 'silk road' with the image of a 'camel train'. Owen Lattimore, an American scholar of Central Asia, travelled in one in 1926 and his account allows us to reconstruct how they operated. At the bottom end of the scale there would be traders in the train owning two or three camels (and possibly a horse for themselves) rising at the top to those owning many times that number. They would combine into 'trains' for reasons of safety and benefits of scale. The camel train would typically be led by a camel leader, in charge of all the decisions affecting the train, a camel master in control of all of the personnel and one or two accountants in charge of all expenditure. Assisting the camel master would be several scouts, usually on horseback, who would survey the ground ahead looking for dangers and for suitable foraging areas. At the front of the

train would be the cook and his assistants. The rest of the personnel would be the pullers, each in charge of a line of 18 camels. These pullers would work in pairs so that two men would be responsible for loading and unloading two rows of camels, with baggage outside them for protection. The individual merchants, if they were there, would ride with their lines either on a horse or on one of the camels. All of the men (and they usually were all men) would dine together and sleep in tents in the same area. A camel train would typically comprise 200-300 camels, though it would not be unusual for two (or even three) trains to travel together – more than that, and it would overtax the water and grazing available whenever they stopped. A typical journey could be as much as several thousand kilometers and take several months, fitted into that short period between the freezing winters and the scorching summers. After resting for several months and feeding up the camels, they would make the return journey.

## The Start of the Silk Roads

Trade and exchange has existed almost everywhere since the Bronze Age, based on specialization and needs. Typical was that between pastoral and settled agricultural societies, which persisted in regions of semi-arid grasslands and small urban settlements at their edge. The first long-distance exchange started some 4500 years ago between the city of Ur (in present-day Iraq) and the Indus valley, a distance by sea of some 2000 km. That specific trade was abandoned around 1600 BCE after the defeat of Samaria and the drying up of the Indus river. Trade, however, persisted. In 1993 scientists examining a mummy of a 30-50 year-old female found in the ‘workers’ burial site in Thebes, Deir el Medina, discovered traces of fabric in her hair. Using infra-red studies, they ascertained that the fabric was indeed silk, probably Chinese in origin. Further tests showed the same level and characteristics of amino-acids in the hair and silk, thereby eliminating the possibility of contamination or that the silk had been added later. The mummy was assigned to the twenty-first dynasty, approximately 1000 BCE. The silk had probably made its journey by land and sea to India and then made the crossing by sea to the Red Sea. Trade links between the Egyptian empire and India had already been established when the Romans conquered the country in 30 BCE. They almost immediately built a large merchant fleet to exploit that trade route and develop the Red Sea port of Berenice. Excavations of the site continue to reveal large quantities of pepper corns as well as frankincense and fine Indian silverware and pottery. It provides an idea of the sea-trade in those years. Indeed, most of the ‘silk road’ traded goods, such as cinnamon, myrrh, pepper, and silk reached Rome by sea either through Red Sea port cities, followed by a 380 km caravan trek to the Nile, and 760 km from there to the Mediterranean. An alternative route was to ports in the Persian Gulf and a

1,400 km caravan journey through the Syrian desert to Antioch, passing through the Roman city of Palmyra.

The expansion of the Roman Empire provided the final link in a chain of large land empires that spanned most of the Eurasian continent – the Han Empire of China, the Kushan Empire and the Parthian Empire that provided the conditions of (relative) peace and stability that allowed trade and exchange to flourish. Silk was, by then, becoming part of that trade. Excavations are also yielding promising discoveries at the Chinese end of the route. The excavation of the ‘Hanging Spring’ post- and relay-station near the Chinese oasis town of Dunhuang uncovered thousands of documents written on strips of bamboo. Written between 111 BCE and 107 CE they showed the existence of a network of such relay stations placed at intervals of about 40 km along the route from the capital Chang’an (present-day Xián). Travelers along the route were documented at each stop. Most of the travelers came as part of ‘official’ delegations, as part of a tribute trade system, but undoubtedly private merchants also attached themselves to such parties. Among the merchants, the Sogdians were already prominent. The Sogdians were of Eastern Iranian origins and originally inhabited an area broadly congruous with present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, specifically in the region around Samarkand. They were a nomadic people and formed much of the itinerant merchant class operating along the Eurasian trade routes. When Emperor Wu opened up China to trade with the west, Sogdian merchants started entering the country and settling in the neighboring villages and towns across the border. There was almost no mention of caravans, and no mention of silk. Yet silk has clearly been a much sought-after fashion accessory in ancient Rome. We will return to this paradox later in this chapter.

The ‘Silk Road(s)’ was the label coined in the nineteenth century by the German archaeologist Ferdinand von Richthofen to the network of paths and tracks that formed the overland trade routes between China and Europe which emerged in the first century CE and lasted, sporadically, for the next 1500 years. These Silk Roads can be seen as communication, while along the routes ideas travelled, together with people and goods.



### 3.a Concept Definition

#### Silk Roads

*Concept used to describe the trade routes connecting, via land and sea, Asia, Europe and Africa.*

The Silk Roads concept was revived in recent years in two speeches by President Xi Jinping, as a metaphor to support a new Chinese foreign policy, described as the largest infrastructure project the world had ever seen, involving the expenditure of trillions of dollars in foreign projects. In China it is known as ‘One Belt One Road’

(一带一路) but Chinese officials prefer the term 'the Belt and Road Initiative' (which de-emphasizes implication of 'one and only' in the original) for use outside China. The Belt was envisaged as economic belts linking China (originally) with other countries on the Eurasian landmass. Later the scope of the initiative was widened to cover the whole world, which rather weakened the effect of the metaphor. China would finance and help build roads and railways, airports and power plants, and special enterprise zones. Moreover, China would promote and facilitate the movement of goods and peoples across national and geographical borders. The twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road is its waterborne equivalent.

The two references neatly frame the periods of Chinese involvement in this Eurasian trading network. In the first speech, in September 2013, President Xi recalled the decision of Emperor Wu, founder of the Han dynasty and today famous for the terracotta army guarding his tomb, in 137 BCE to send an envoy into the western territories to secure an alliance against the Xiongnu people of the northern steppes who were threatening his realm. The envoy was captured (twice) and returned only seventeen years later without the alliance, but with stories of a vast trading network stretching ever westward, generating immense wealth for the peoples involved. This marked the first Chinese engagement in a trade route that reached the heart of the Roman Empire. The second speech recalled the seven voyages ordered by the third Ming Emperor Yongle into the western oceans between 1405 and 1433 CE. All the voyages passed through South East Asia and reached Southern India. In the last three, the fleet split up and sailed as far as Arabia, and possibly the east coast of Africa. These voyages, with huge fleets of over 300 vessels (some, the largest ever built) were a cross between diplomatic and trading missions, with the odd anti-piracy operation and foreign intervention thrown in for good measure. Diplomatic relations were established, gifts were exchanged and goods traded on the side. After the final voyage, the Chinese turned inwards, overseas trade was forbidden and, officially at least, the 'maritime silk road' came to an end.

In Europe, much of the focus of interest in China's Belt and Road has been in the freight trains travelling along railway links connecting China and Europe via Kazakhstan (and later Mongolia) and Russia. A shipping container can make the journey in 12-14 days instead of a month or more by sea. The route has expanded dramatically from its start in 2011 to a total of 8,225 trains (in both directions) in 2020. Each train is capable of carrying 82 standard (twenty foot) containers. Making the very generous assumption that all trains are fully loaded and that no containers are empty, that would mean that in 2019 the China-Europe freight trains carried 725,000 standard containers. This may seem impressive, but it needs to be put into context. In 2019 Asia-Europe long-distance seaborne container trade amounted to 24.7 million standard container equivalents. It is true that this figure includes shipping from Korea and Japan, but it would be difficult to argue that rail carries more than five per cent of long-distant trade.

The main argument of the chapter is that the Silk Roads have been very important routes of exchange. While the overland routes have triggered our imagination and scholarly interest, it has been long-distance trade by sea has been more important. Unfortunately, it is relatively neglected by the academic literature.



## Historiography: Framing Narratives of the Past

The traditional view of the history of the Silk Roads was shaped by historians writing at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They focused on great powers shaping history and assigned a pivotal role to Central Asia. Writing in 1904, when Central Asia formed part of the ‘great game’ of imperial powers vying for influence and control, Halford Mackinder in his *Democratic Ideals and Reality* from 1904, developed his idea that the geographical pivot of history revolves around control over the heartland – ‘Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland, who rules the Heartland commands the World Island, who rules the World Island commands the world’.



### 3.b Concept Definition

#### The Great Game

*Concept used to describe the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires in the nineteenth century over control of the central Asian landmass.*

This approach of writing history through the lens of great and powerful empires, as also discussed in the introductory chapter, is still present today.\* Let us take a quick look at this traditional chronology.

The first phase of expansion dates from the expansion of the Roman Empire. This provided the final link in a chain of large land empires that spanned most of the Eurasian continent – the Han Empire of China, the Kushan Empire and the Parthian Empire. This phase of Silk Roads trade flourished until sometime from the start of the third century CE (when the Han Empire collapsed) and the early fourth century (when the Roman Empire began to retreat). Of course, trade did not collapse. Sources of certain goods may have diminished and overland routes may have become more dangerous. However, more local and regional trades will have continued and sea routes will have provided alternative channels of exchange of goods and cultures.

The growth phase of the overland occurred under the influence of the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate (749-945) and by the increasing prosperity of China under the

\* Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).



Tang Empire (618-907 CE). The Byzantine Empire afforded a connection to the final link into the Mediterranean. Bulk trade in silk now played a far lesser role than it (ever) had before. This was because as early as the sixth century CE, silk worm larvae had been smuggled into the Roman Empire and the Persians had also mastered the techniques of silk production. Silk thread, rather than cloth, was increasingly shipped to India where it was incorporated into different fabrics, such as damask. The collapse of the Tang Empire and the fragmentation of the Abbasid Caliphate curtailed the growth of long-distance overland trade. Nevertheless, in the South of China, from the early tenth century CE maritime trade rapidly increased in importance, but now with pottery as a main bulk export item.

The third period of Silk Roads prosperity occurred in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This coincided with the rise and expansion of the Mongol Empire whose conquests led to a Pax Mongolica over much of the traditional Silk Roads, facilitating trade and travel along many of these routes. However, the importance of the land routes declined again after the break-up of the Timurid Empire in the mid-fifteenth century CE.

An alternative to the traditional 'great powers' interpretation is offered by the Marxist analysis of the world economy.\* However, in Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System*\*\* the old Silk Roads only played a role by creating the modern 'world system', characterized by an exploitative 'core' and an exploited 'periphery', by virtue of its collapse clearing the way for European capitalism and imperialism.



### 3.c Concept Definition

#### World System Theory

*The world is divided into three sets of states depending on the role they play in economic production: Core-countries, semi-periphery and periphery countries. Core countries rely on capital intensive production and a skilled labor force, whereas periphery countries have production processes focused on labor intensive production with low-skilled workers.*

This idea was challenged by André Gunter Frank and Barry Gill's *The World System: 500 years or 5000?*, which argued that an exploitative world system has existed for at least 5,000 years and that the period dismissed by Wallerstein represented an exploitative world system, one with China as the 'core'.\*\*\*

There are other broad approaches that catch Central Asia in their scope. Notable is the environmental lens that is applied in these contributions. Jared Diamond's much criticized *Guns, Germs and Steel* argues that societies' progression from

\* Marxism will be further elaborated in chapter 7.

\*\* Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

\*\*\* André Gunter Frank and Barry Gill (eds) *The World System: 500 years or 5000?* (London: Routledge: 1994).



warring bands to sedentary civilizations was determined by environmental factors and paints a sway of common characteristics and shared development in the semi-arid belt across North Africa and Central Asia.\* This ecological approach is also employed by David Christian's 'Silk Roads or Steppe Road', to demonstrate the diversity of local produce available for exchange and trade.\*\* He also pushes the time frame of analysis back several thousand years.

Peter Turchin in 'A Theory for Formation of Large Empires' suggests that large empires emerged at the borders of regions of co-existence between nomadic pastoralist and settled agriculturalists.\*\*\* He argues that the development and expansion of large-scale empires represents 'one of the strongest macro-historical regularities over the long term', and he has identified more than 60 such 'mega-empires' in world history between 3000 BCE and 1800 CE. These territorial states with control over roughly one million square kilometers at their high point, Turchin argues, are formed through confrontation. When nomadic populations confront sedentary or settled populations, the challenge and subsequent synthesis of the two systems of social hierarchy trigger significant organizational growth and expansion. Nomadic groups have historically confronted settled agriculturalists on the edges of existing states, which frequently meant on the frontiers of steppe lands. Interactions were initially limited to nomads' attempts to appropriate or steal harvests and stored agricultural products, which led the agriculturalists to fortify both their physical defenses and internal cohesion. It became collectively necessary to invest in political organization to have any chance of warding off the nomadic threat, while the nomadic conglomerates also equivalently improved their political and military capacity to further challenge the growing power of the agriculturalists. Turchin identified three conditions for this process to occur. First, the existence of an environmental gradient, i.e. close proximity of the groups; second, the military superiority of the nomads such that they are able to attack the agriculturalists; and third, space or a deep hinterland for expansion.



### 3.d Concept Definition

#### Imperiogenesis theory

*An explanation for the development of mega-empires through the confrontation between nomadic and sedentary populations, triggering a mutual reinforcing cycle of organization and confrontation.*

\* Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton 1997)

\*\* David Christian, 'Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History', *Journal of World History*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1-26.

\*\*\* Peter Turchin, 'A Theory for Formation of Large Empires', *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2000), pp. 191-217.

Another interesting piece of research by Niel Petersen and his team, 'Pluvials, Droughts, the Mongol Empire, and Modern Mongolia' has linked the rise and fall of the Mongol Empire specifically to climate change whereby wetter and warmer conditions in the early thirteenth century stimulated the growth of grasslands and permitted the growth in the number of horses that made up their formidable cavalry, and that a return to drought conditions precipitated the Empire's decline.\*

It is a characteristic of historians and social scientists to label things. It makes it easier to identify common characteristics and to clarify the exact subjects of discussion. Once we start labelling, we establish hierarchies. These usually move 'progressively' to ever higher levels of sophistication. Let us take a few examples. In defining human settlement, we move from pastoral (ranging from 'hunter gatherers' to nomads) to agricultural (tending crops and settled herds) to urban. Looking at political economy, Karl Marx took us from feudalism to bourgeois capitalism and, through the proletarian revolution, to communism.\*\*



### 3.e Concept Definition

#### Capitalism

*An economic system in which the means of production are privately owned (instead of by the state) and used to generate and maximize profit.*

Development economists measure the relative size of sectors to take us from agriculture, through industry to trade and services as a route to increase prosperity. Political scientists measure systems of governance of a scale from autocracy (hard and moderate) through hybrid regimes to democracy (deficient and working). For Europeans, this labelling is all very convenient since they see themselves (despite or because of the absence of a proletarian revolution) at the top of all of these scales – urban, capitalist, service-based, democratic and rich – and they see these as interrelated explanations. Feeling blessed indeed by history, Europeans back-project their own (narrowly defined) past as the single most important perspective. The rest matters only to the extent that it follows. Ferdinand von Richthofen's coining of the term 'the silk road' is a case in point. The trade was never primarily in silk, it was never primarily between the ends of the continent (a great deal was between steppe and sedentary civilizations in the middle) and it predated China's (and Rome's) entry into the exchange. But linking the narrative to 'Rome', and to the stories of high-class Roman ladies' fashion for wearing virtually transparent Chinese silks, the term focused the narrative on Europe.

\* Niel Petersen et al., 'Pluvials, Droughts, the Mongol Empire, and Modern Mongolia', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 111, No. 12 (2014), pp. 4375-379.

\*\* This concept will be further elaborated in chapter 7.

The history of the Silk Roads blows all these hierarchies apart. It tells of sophisticated complex interlocking short- and long-range networks of trade in a world dominated by huge, feudal, autocratic empires; of trading networks conducted largely by nomadic, pastoral peoples; of systems of money and credit that long predate their introduction in Europe; and of intercultural exchanges of knowledge, technologies, ideas and religions that shaped the entire known world. It is true that it is framed by periods of relative peace and stability that allow exchanges to flourish, sometimes sustained by the existence of large empires. However, the real story of the Silk Roads is one populated by merchants, craftsmen, adventurers, sailors, monks, refugees and slaves. It is being vigorously researched by good old-fashioned archaeology, the rereading of documents previously regarded as being of marginal importance and by the application of state-of-the-art technology.

One historical debate has been well and truly resolved – the importance of long-distance Eurasian overland trade and the role played therein by silk. Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: a New History* even suggested that the silk road was ‘possibly not worth studying – if the tonnage carried, traffic or numbers of travelers at any time were the sole measures of a given route’s significance. True, in terms of volume and size, the trade of the silk road was not as important as thought’\*.

## The Overland Trade Roads

A direct line drawn between Xian, the ancient capital of China, and Antioch, on the shores of the Mediterranean is 6,461 km. The shortest feasible overland route would be 7,250 km. There was no single road winding from Asia to Europe. Rather there was a diversity of paths, tracks and roads that changed over time and also fluctuated seasonally as river crossings and mountain passes became impassable. Regional conflicts, changing markets and shifts in political power meant that the Silk Roads were never static. Some of the routes emerged from South-East Asia and the Indian subcontinent and joined the routes joining East and West. Still others took goods and travelers to and from sea-ports.

The Polish researcher T. Matthew Ciolek, in his ‘Old World Trading Routes’ website, has collected data for all the known references to cities, market places, caravanserais, way-stations and monasteries (and the distances between them) and projected them all onto maps.\*\* One of the projections for the period 1200-1400 CE, based on 121 data-points is shown below.

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\* Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 235.

\*\* T. Matthew Ciolek, ‘Old World Trading Routes’. Available at: <http://www.ciolek.com/owtrad.html> Last accessed 15 April 2022.

However, this approach fails to give any indication of the relative importance of different routes. It is not enough to data-point them by the distance between them. The proper mapping of the routes has to take account of the presence of natural barriers, by the availability of water and grazing fields and by the risk of robbery and attack. By adding a qualitative dimension to the quantitative data, Tim Williams, working for the International Council on Monuments and Sites to prepare a report for the UNESCO listing of Silk Roads sites, produced a network of 75,000 km of routes (subdivided into major and important) within the area of his investigation.\* Because of the Report's intention to help select World Heritage Sites, the scope of the routes covers the entire period 200 BCE-1500 CE.



**Image 3.2** Silk Roads Map: The vast geographical extent of the terrestrial Silk Roads, showing major routes (in red) and other significant routes (orange)

Both of the surveys stop at the shores of the Mediterranean, where there is a long and reliable record of trade. One consequence, however, is that they miss one important route, northwards, linking the overland routes to the Black Sea with the river routes to northern Russia and thence to Scandinavia. The Vikings inhabited an area coinciding with southern Sweden. Between 800 and 1000 CE they expanded into Western Europe. However, around the same date they were also sailing down the Dnieper river to Constantinople, trading furs, amber and slaves in exchange for silver. For historians two questions emerge. First, when did the river trade begin? Second, how important was it for accumulating wealth compared with the plunder and Danegeld (a tribute to avoid being attacked) from their forages into Western

\* Tim Williams, *The Silk Roads. An Icomos Thematic Study*, Working Paper ICOMOS (Charenton-le-Pont, France, 2014).

Europe? One way of answering the question is to see whether the coins discovered in Viking sites are of western or eastern origin. The problem here is that the Vikings carried most of their wealth with them in the form of intricate silver neck-rings (or smaller versions worn on their arms or wrists) that reflected both wealth and status.



**Image 3.3** A collection of Permian Rings

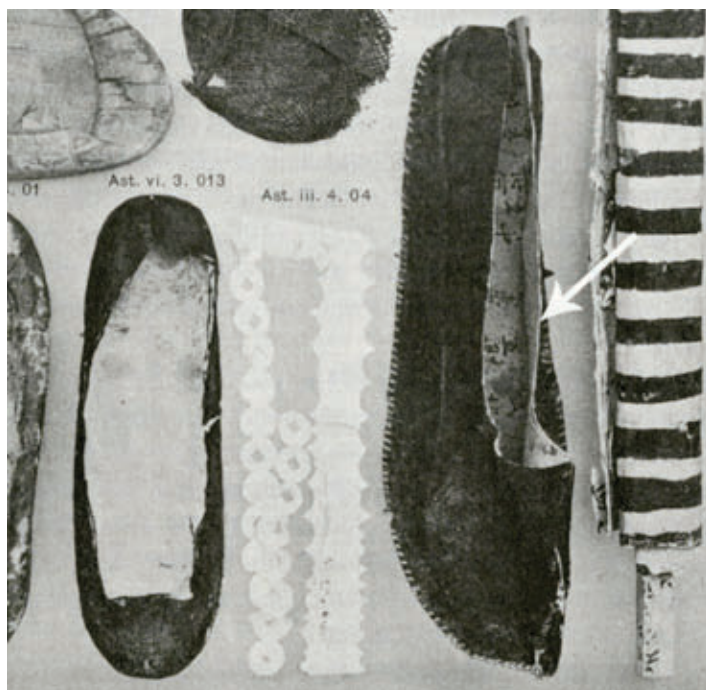
These 'Permian' rings, so called because of the quantity found in Perm (deep inside Russian territory), would have been made by melting down silver coins. The rings seem to be made in standard weights (approximately 200 grams for the neck rings, 100 grams for the arms and 50 grams for the wrist rings), suggesting that they were used as a form of currency. The composition of eastern silver differs from the composition of silver coming from western mines. All of the rings, as well as most of the silver ingots and jewelry that have been found, have silver of eastern origin. With expansion of the Muslim Caliphates in the eighth century CE, the coinage changed and so did the source of the silver. In 2018, Jane Kershaw started a major research project using advanced laser ablation techniques to determine the lead content in the silver (without damaging the objects) that will allow the silver to be matched to the date of the dirhams from which they were made, and therefore we expect to be able to date more accurately the timing of Viking engagement in the Silk Roads.\*

\* Jane Kershaw, Blogpost 'New Project, 'Silver and the Origins of the Viking Age' <https://vikingmetalwork.blogspot.com/2019/> and telephone conversation with the author.



## Exchanges of the Silk Roads

It is important to stress up front that it was not traders that moved along the Silk Roads, but goods. All delivered to market places, resold and moved on – the price rising according to the taxes levied upon them and by the scarcity value as they moved further away from their origins. It is true that there were exceptions. Individual diplomats and missionaries and the occasional adventurer, such as Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta that made the entire journey from west to east and back. At other times large groups migrated along stretches of the Silk Roads, driven by war or famine and often appearing in new locations as raiders or ‘barbarians’. Smaller numbers, such as the Sogdians, moved along the trading routes to settle in market towns, where they would form enclaves of similar nationality, culture or religion until, over time, they formed part of the towns’ multicultural fabric. However, the durability of this seemingly harmonious existence should not be exaggerated either. When rebel forces attacked the Chinese port city of Guangzhou in 874 CE it is estimated that they killed 120,000 foreign residents of the city. A century later the city was back in business, characterized by one historian as ‘the most globalized place on Earth’.\*



**Image 3.4** Sogdian shoes

\* Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World and Globalization Began* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), pp. 199–226.

The picture of trade is one of traders moving relatively short distances between market cities, and then returning with a different cargo to their home base. Many products were traded in this way. It was the custom of the 500 residents of the oasis town of Turfan (near present-day Urumqi, Xinjiang province) to bury their dead with garments (shoes, belts, hats and clothing) made from recycled paper. The dry climate ensured that they were preserved. Analysis of the clothing showed that many had been made of recycled documents – contracts or tax records. One particular set of documents (pieced together from ten paper shoes) records the names of the merchants and the weekly sales. The most common sales were for gold, silver, silk thread, ‘aromatics’ (which could include spices, fragrances and medicine) and ammonium chloride (used for dyeing, leather and metal working). Silk cloth is not mentioned as a commodity. It does, however, appear in other reconstructed records – as payment or collateral for commercial transactions. The answer to the riddle is that bolts of cloth were used as money. They were not transported by merchants but by army convoys. One use was to pay the troops. Since Turfan was a border town, bolts of silk were readily available in the vicinity. The other use was in cross-border trade. And the one commodity that the army wanted was horses. The horses of the steppes, the ‘heavenly horses’ so coveted by Emperor Wu and rumored to ‘sweat blood’ when ridden hard (probably caused by skin sores produced by small parasites), were far superior to those domestically available in China (where the lack of selenium in the grass had disastrous effects on the horses’ health and strength). During the early Tang Empire (ca. 750 CE) the army alone needed 80,000 horses and it imported about 7,500 a year at an average price for each of 38-40 bolts of silk. This amounts to almost 300,000 bolts of silk. Some of it the horse merchants and the Sogdian traders used as a store of money and collateral for their dealings with the Chinese, and some of it entered the long-distance trade, especially before the diffusion of silk making from the sixth century CE onwards.

As goods moved across vast distances, so did the technologies that made their productions possible. We have already seen that silk production had moved westward as early as 500 CE. The secret of paper production passed to the Abbasid Caliphate with the capture of Chinese paper-makers in the battle of Talas in 751 CE and eventually spread to Europe some 400 years later. By contrast, the knowledge of gunpowder, possibly invented in China in the eleventh century CE, took a relatively short 200 years to reach Europe. The spread of knowledge was not one-way. The techniques of producing translucent glass passed from Europe to China around the sixth century CE. It would be wrong to focus on the transfers of ‘important’ knowledge and techniques. Information on foods and medicine passed across cultures as well as artistic designs and motifs. As people moved, so did their language, cultures, knowledge but also germs and pathogens moved with them.

One important part of that culture was the pattern of the spread of religious beliefs. It is not known when Buddhism spread to China.\* The religion had been founded in India in the sixth century BCE but may have entrenched itself sufficiently to have formed part of the sweeping ban on all religions imposed by Emperor Qin Shi Huang (221-206 BCE). However, it certainly survived independently and many of its beliefs were incorporated in Taoism and animist religions. By 399 CE there were so many Buddhist texts in the country, in so many versions and so many bad translations, that the Buddhist monk Faxian set off to India to collect original Buddhist sutra. He also produced an account of his hard overland journey to northern India and Sri Lanka. Interestingly, he made the return journey, via Java, by ship. Some three hundred years later the monk Yijing made a similar voyage three times, on each occasion returning by boat. Interestingly, over half of the fellow monks that he met on his journeys had travelled this way. Buddhist shrines can be found all along the caravan routes of the 'silk road', including the seventy-seven rock caves at Bezeklik near Turfan and the almost 500 caves at Mogao near Dunhuang. The latter is the complex where Aurel Stein and the French explorer Paul Pelliot recovered (stole) thousands of documents from a walled-up cave, which attest to the variety of religious beliefs in the region over the thousand years after 400CE.



**Image 3.5** Paul Pelliot examining manuscripts in Cave 17 at Mogao Caves, Dunhuang (1908)

\* Buddhism will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.



Islam made its way across the Eurasian land-mass in the wake of the conquests of the Islamic armies. Their speed had been helped by allowing cities that surrendered to escape unscathed and, if they wished, to keep their religious beliefs. They would, however, be taxed as non-Muslims, a fact that provided a pecuniary incentive for conversion which helped the faith to blanket the territory up to and including the western provinces of China. In addition, Muslim communities established themselves in market towns along trade routes and in port cities, such as in Guangzhou where, as we have seen, they were the target of a massacre in 874CE.

One other religion prevalent in Central Asia in this period was Zoroastrianism, based on the teachings of Zoroastra in modern-day Iran some three thousand years ago. It was the main religion of the Sogdians. Most of the merchants in Turfan were Sogdians, and they too settled in major trading cities, where they kept hold of their beliefs. One further group, scattered along the Silk Road towns were Nestorian Christians. These formed an off-shoot from the Orthodox Christian church. The teachings of Nestorius held that Jesus had two natures – one divine and one human – and the Church declared his teachings heretical in 450CE. As a result of the subsequent persecutions, his followers fled East and spread along the trading routes. Interestingly, knowledge of their existence fed the myth of Prester John, prevalent in Europe in the twelfth century CE, that suggested that there was a leader of the (Nestorian) Christian Empire who would join the fight against Islam – if only he could be found.

## The Size of the Trades

One question that needs answering is: how much would a caravan carry? First, we have to appreciate that not all of the camels would be carrying the final cargo. Some camels were needed for the food and equipment for the men. Others carried the fodder for the camels themselves. They might be able to travel long distances without water, but not without food. In addition, half or a whole of a camel load would be for private trade during the journey by the pullers, accounting for another 2.75-5.50 per cent of the total. Let us assume that 50 per cent of the camel train is actually carrying trade goods (I have seen estimates as low as 30 per cent). A fully loaded adult camel can carry a weight of 300 kg, but these are long journeys and the camel has to be loaded and unloaded twice a day – even with two people, 300 kg is a big ask. It seems fair to assume that the average adult would be carrying half of that (and camels under seven years of age would be ‘broken in’ with even lighter loads). Using generous assumptions, we can assume that a single camel train of 200-300 camels would be carrying 15-22.5 tons of cargo. That cargo has to pay for the journey, and pay the various taxes and charges levied en route (someone paid for all those beautiful buildings that adorned the legendary Silk Road cities). The

cargoes, therefore, would be high-value, low-weight goods that were plentiful (and cheap) at the point of origin and scarce (and expensive) at the point of arrival, and preferably not too fragile.

It is easy to see why romance swirls around the legends of the Silk Roads, exotic cargoes and colorful destinations. It is also easy to see why people have long been drawn to rediscovering its past. Titanic battles with vast armies have been fought along its route. Whole civilizations have risen and fallen over the ages. Larger-than-life leaders and kings have strutted across the pages of its history and unknown treasures still await discovery. This is all because this part of history plays out on land. You cannot build at sea and there are fewer borders to define it. Yet we ignore the sea to our peril.

We know that when the Romans opened the trade between the Red Sea and India, they were engaging in already established routes. The sailors, however, were probably Greek or Arab. By then the seafarers had started to manage the seasonal monsoon winds and traded further southwards along the Indian coast. At that time, Indian and Asian traders in the East were still hugging the coastal routes around the Bay of Bengal. Chinese ships were confined mainly in trade along China's own coastline and with what are now Korea and Japan.

By the year 800 CE, both Arab and Indian sailors were using the Monsoons and were actively trading in Sri Lanka and the southernmost ports of India. China, however, was still content to rely on Indian and Asian shipping for the conduct of its global overseas trade. The absence of Chinese wrecks in the Java Sea confirms the



**Image 3.6** Map of Silk Road Sea Routes

suspicion that Chinese ships did not venture actively into South East Asian trade until after 1100 CE. Moreover, until the diplomatic/trading missions of Admiral Zheng He, it is unlikely that Chinese ships engaged much in the Indian Ocean trade. The ‘pirates’ plaguing the straits of Malacca may simply have been guarding a shipping monopoly in the waters of the Bay of Bengal.

Just as we have suggested that it is unlikely that many camel trains made the entire journey from Europe to China themselves, so it is equally improbable that ships did so either. Goods were traded in rich entrepot ports. These would have been clustered around the southern tip of India, in Sumatra (that controlled the access to the Straits of Malacca) and at the great Persian, Arab and Chinese end destinations. Very occasionally we can obtain an insight into the nature of this trade. In 2003 local fishermen, 100 km from the Javan port of Cirebon, retrieved shards of pottery in their nets. Marine archaeologists discovered the wreck of an ‘Arab style’ dhow that had sunk around 970 CE. It was 30 meters long, ten meters wide, and capable of carrying 300 tons of cargo (equivalent to twenty trains of 200-camels). Divers recovered 200 tons of Chinese earthenware and 40 tons of metal ingots. Possibly more remarkable still was the Intan wreck, the key source of this chapter, which had sunk a little earlier, if the dates of the coins are any indication. The cargo included bottles from Southern Thailand, large shards from blue-green iridescent glazed jars from West Asia and a hundred silver ingots and a wide range of Buddhist and Hindu cultural items.

Not only have we, relatively speaking, neglected the maritime Silk Roads, which have been far more important in their tonnage of trade compared to the overland routes, but also the evidence from the maritime archaeological investigations reveals the order and importance of the ports of call for the ships. The overland camel trains which trigger our imagination, carrying cargoes of treasure, have likely overshadowed their actual importance. Further maritime archaeology holds promise of more clarity on this issue.



**Image 3.7** Ceramics from the Intan Wreck

## The End of the Silk Roads

In 1405 the collapse of Tamerlane's Samarkand-based empire led to anarchy in the region, forcing traders to make long and dangerous detours and damaging long-distance trade through the region. Then, when in 1453 the Ottoman Empire captured the last European stronghold in the eastern Mediterranean, Constantinople, they cut off the overland routes to Europe. In China, after the last of Admiral He's voyages, the Emperor outlawed Chinese engagement in overseas trade, possibly because of the restoration of Confucians in the administration. Confucianism, with its emphasis on land and family and on social stability and hierarchy, had little time for the disruption caused by private capital and enterprise. In neither case did the trade disappear. Overland, short-distance pedlar trade in all probability continued more or less as usual. In overseas trade, inferior Thai earthenware replaced Chinese ceramics and Chinese merchants began themselves to operate from foreign ports. It was probably ever so, the ebb and flow of human exchange, whenever peace permitted it.

## Guiding Questions

1. Where does the name Silk Roads derive from?
2. Which goods were traded along the Silk Roads?
3. What is the significance of the maritime Silk Road?
4. How have Silk Roads been investigated?
5. What is the debate about the Silk Roads?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Abulafia, David, *The Boundless Sea. A Human History of the Oceans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 85-188, 236-296. A challenging, question-driven guide to trade and exchanges in the world's oceans.
- Bergreen, Laurence, *Marco Polo. From Venice to Xanadu* (London: Vintage, 2008). Following the adventures of fourteenth century explorer Marco Polo, accompanied by a knowledgeable guide from the twenty-first century.
- Frankopan, Peter, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). A mixture of the great, the good and the bad, carving out territories for themselves whilst below the convulsions vast cultural (and material) exchanges occur.
- Hopkirk, Peter, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). An account of the explorers who found/robbed, bought/stole and preserved/destroyed the cultural relics of the Silk Roads.
- Jarman, Cat, *River Kings. A New History of the Vikings from Scandinavia to the Silk Roads* (London: William Collins, 2021). Discover how advanced scientific techniques allow us to trace a rare piece of carellian found in a Viking grave in England back to its origins in Gujarat in India.
- Lattimore, Owen, *The Desert Road to Turkestan* (New York: Kodansha, 1995), (original 1929). In 1925 Owen Lattimore travelled 1,500 kilometres with a camel train through Mongolia, and kept a detailed account of his journey.
- Levathes, Louise, *When China ruled the Seas. The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). A rich account of the seven voyages of Admiral Zheng He through lands of the maritime Silk Roads.
- Hansen, Valerie, *The Silk Road. A New History with Documents*, Oxford, 2017. A richly illustrated history of the overland silk road with extracts of over fifty original documents.
- Whitfield, Susan, *Life along the Silk Road* (Oakland Calif.: University of California Press, 2015). A view of the Silk Road through the experiences of twelve travelers from different cultures and different epochs.
- Wood, Frances, *The Silk Road. Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2002). It is unfashionable to approach history through the lens of western explorers, but indulge yourself in this lavishly illustrated history.

## CHAPTER 4.

# Political Order: From Coercion to Constitution

BRIAN SHAEV



## Introduction

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,” English novelist L.P. Hartley wrote in the mid-twentieth century. Hartley presents a concept of history as distance and alienation, like visiting a foreign land. Exploring European cities, some more than a thousand years old, is a journey through time, through centuries and therefore through different lands, perhaps within the space of a few city blocks, or simply by climbing the steps of a museum. Nowhere is this truer than in Italy, where fantastic remnants of ancient Rome share the same ground with startling Renaissance art and architecture. In between are all the trappings of our modern times that, in some cases, have had to adapt to their ancient surroundings. Plans to expand the metro system in Rome, for instance, have long been stunted by the incredible archeological treasures still lying underground.

In Hartley’s concept, Romans, or Florentines, or Venetians today, who admire the riches surrounding them on coffee breaks, on family outings, or on a Vespa wisping through town, are not visiting *their* past. Rather, they are visiting *the* past. This fundamental and unshakeable difference between past and present, even when their objects share the same physical ground, was one of the key breakthroughs in the art of understanding and writing history. When a hunt for ancient Roman texts and art turned into a frenzy in thirteenth century Italy, medieval writers looked at their discoveries less for what they communicated about the past than for what they could perhaps say about their present. They peered at old texts like lost brothers, studied ancient law books and Aristotle’s *Politics* to analyze their contemporary conditions, and called on leaders to rebuild the glory of Rome. Their past was not gone – it was all around them. They could even touch it.

Then one of the greatest achievements of Renaissance Italy arrived: humanism. An artistic, literary, and intellectual movement, humanism was born when the Italian poet Petrarch climbed a mountain in 1336 and wrote a manuscript celebrating the immense beauty of human interaction with its natural environment.



**Image 4.1** Petrarch

Against the austere climate of his age, with its focus on Man's fall in Christian theology, Petrarch proffered an optimistic image of humanity, a celebration of humanity which came to be known as humanism.



#### **4.a Concept Definition**

##### **Humanism**

*Intellectual movement focused on the human in its natural environment.*

Over the next centuries, humanism developed into a cultural renaissance inspiring the literature, paintings, scientific achievements, and statues of Donatello, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Niccolò Machiavelli, and many more. It then passed to northern Europe in the sixteenth century, finding fullest expression in the biting sarcasm of Erasmus of Rotterdam and the stunning beauty of the paintings of the seventeenth century Dutch United Provinces. By then it had become the core curriculum of Europe's great universities – the humanities, which has passed all the way down to our university curriculum today.



Petrarch was more than a great poet. He reintroduced Europe to the idea that the present is not the same as the past, that times change, and people change. Ancient historians in Greece and Rome had developed a similar concept of history but that had been lost to the region following the fall of Rome in the fifth century. Most importantly, Petrarch employed an essential tool of the historical craft: periodization. Casting a disapproving eye back to the period that came before him, he designated the period between the fall of Rome and his present as the 'Dark Ages' or 'middle age'. There was no continuity between contemporary Italy and ancient Rome in his sense of historical time. Rome had ended long ago. The duty of the present was not to restore antiquity but to learn from it, to 'shine the light' on past and present in order to create a new future that valued human achievements and that encouraged the pursuit of greatness in all walks of life, as the Romans had done. He announced the dawn of a new era and, in doing so, he essentially created one.

Petrarch's division of time into three periods not only helped kick off the Italian Renaissance: it created a structure to European history that historians still largely accept – and teach – today (historians now divide the period into the Low Middle Ages, ca. 400s-1000, and the High Middle Ages, ca. 1000-1250, when there was renewed civilizational expansion). It also gave rise to a new confidence – even conceit – among humanists of the next generations as to how one should read history, i.e., what the proper *methodology* for understanding the past should be. As Italian humanists interacted with writers from other intellectual traditions, in particular scholasticists inspired by Thomas Aquinas' concept of natural law, they could at times barely conceal their contempt. Texts had to be analyzed within the contexts in which they were produced, they insisted. Writers who snatched ancient texts out of their contexts deserved nothing more than ridicule. In the end, humanists were convinced, scholasticists were just making things up.

A single intellectual tradition rarely achieves total victory, however. For centuries humanism and scholasticism competed and interacted in European thought as 'two languages of politics,' to use historian J.G.A. Pocock's phrasing. From the 1200s to 1500s, the two traditions contributed to an increasingly sophisticated concept that is central to our own understanding today of politics and international relations: the state. According to a classic interpretation, this happened in Renaissance Italy, though some scholars think it originated in Europe's largest medieval kingdoms (France and Spain) before migrating to Italy. Regardless, the concept underwent further elaboration after it migrated to Italy, a bit ironically as Italy was among the areas of early modern Europe where centralized rule was weakest. After the pope's power collapsed in the 1100s in northern areas of Italy, hundreds of republican city-states proliferated, many with written constitutions and elected governments like those in Florence, Milan, and Venice. Over time these tended to devolve into oligarchies ruled by wealthy families, of whom the Medici family of Florence was most famous.





**Image 4.2** Cosimo de Medici, statue Piazza de Signoria, Florence

When French armies invaded in the Italian Wars of the late fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, northern Italy descended into a vicious cycle of war, instability, and decline. The Medici – as elsewhere – dissolved the Florentine Republic in the sixteenth century, and instituted an inherited system of family rule.

Republicans – followers of an ideology that celebrated the ‘freedom’ of the Italian republics and promoted concepts of popular sovereignty – were aghast at these developments. Out of their increasingly sophisticated analyses of their contemporary woes emerged a new form of political science informed by comparative history. Renaissance scholars assembled what they could about past and present communities. They celebrated the Roman Republic as *an example* rather than as *their inheritance*. A ‘cult of Brutus,’ the figure who murdered Roman Emperor Julius Caesar, swept popular culture in Northern Italy. Renaissance humanists at first emphasized the virtues, e.g. of Brutus – or lack of virtues, e.g. of Julius Caesar – of rulers to explain the success or failure of political communities. Deeply influenced by medieval Christian concepts even as they were moving away from some of them, they measured the virtues of rulers by whether or not they followed the will of God. Over time, their inquisitive gaze moved beyond a focus on the ruling figure itself to the web of social relations: the system and organization that allowed a ruler to rule.

This decisive shift – from a *personal* to *impersonal* understanding of the art of governing as taking place through institutions – implied a secular shift in how to analyze politics.

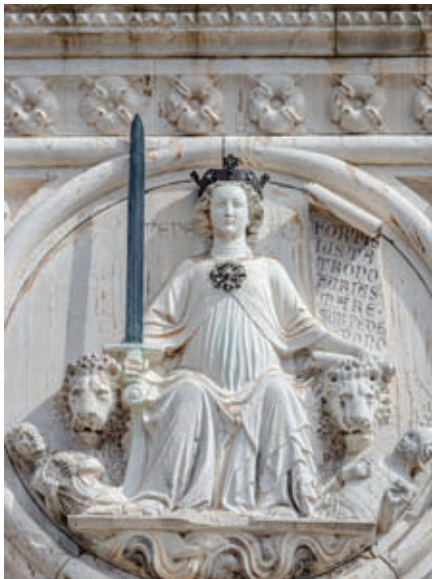


#### 4.b Concept Definition

##### Politics

*The ability to decide who gets what, where, when and how.\**

It also allowed for the emergence of a mature concept of ‘a state’ as separate from both ruler and ruled, a ruling body that might outlive its present occupants, though this idea remained tentative. An early move came from Italian lawyers in the 1200s, who developed the idea that a *civitas*, the Latin word for city or community, and *corporation*, by which they meant a university, a municipality, or another recognized institution, were more than a sum of their members. Rather they were single entities with their own legal personality that could be ‘represented’ by individuals who had the legitimacy to speak in their names. From the 1300s, the concept was employed for governing and territorial units, for instance in a statue titled ‘Venice,’ represented as a woman sitting on a throne at the Palazzo Ducale.



**Image 4.3** Ancient Façade Sculpture of a Princess with Sword and Lions at the top Decoration of Doge’s Palace in Venice



**Image 4.4** Nicolo Machiavelli

\* Based on the famous definition of: Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How* (New York: Smith 1950).

Renaissance ideas of politics culminated in Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) and *The Discourses on Livy* (1516). Placing Machiavelli in his historical context has led historians to reframe *The Prince* in part as a job application. Cast out of public employment when Lorenzo de Medici attacked the Florentine Republic, he looked to ingratiate himself to the new ruler with his book. Though he was unsuccessful – he was even tortured under suspicion of conspiracy – his writings had a profound impact on the development of political thought and concepts of the state in early modern Europe. Machiavelli – in a shocking manner – placed power, brute force, at the center of his politics. Building on the republican humanist tradition, which he shared, he embarked on a comparative history of ancient Roman rulers and exhorted the prince to model himself on an exemplary historical figure. Rather than valorizing good intentions and good will in a ruler as had been the prevailing norm, his understanding of politics led him to conclude that what matters is a ruler's 'appearance'. He argued that a ruler pursuing personal virtue at the expense of the community is engaging in vanity rather than virtue. His point was not that one should behave badly, but that one should recognize when it is necessary to behave badly. The principal task of a ruler was not to walk in the path of God, Machiavelli insisted, but to protect the security of himself and those over whom he rules.

Under Machiavelli's pen, the ruler was, therefore, divested of Christian obligation. When necessary, he should act as a 'beast' and model himself on the strength of the lion and the cunning of the fox. 'Maintaining his state' became the ruler's main task, to which all else was subordinate. 'Maintaining his state' was a cliché found widely in late Renaissance Italian texts, but Machiavelli took the language a step further, detaching the concept from its possessive form, writing about 'a state' and 'the state' in *The Prince*.<sup>\*</sup> Machiavelli's secular concept of the state, the self-preservation of which was the supreme virtue, was to become an enormously powerful concept shaping the politics and history of Europe.<sup>\*\*</sup> The main argument of this chapter is that the emergence of political order was a long and conflictual process. Along the way, several ordering principles were developed and tried, such as religious, dynastic and legal.

<sup>\*</sup> Machiavelli employs the terms 'uno stato' and 'lo stato' multiple times in *The Prince*. [http://www.letteraturaitaliana.net/pdf/Volume\\_4/t324.pdf](http://www.letteraturaitaliana.net/pdf/Volume_4/t324.pdf)

<sup>\*\*</sup> Anthony Grafton, 'The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice, 1950-2000 and Beyond', *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 67, No. 1 (2006), pp. 1-32; Miguel Vatter, 'Republics are a species of state: Machiavelli and the Genealogy of the Modern State', *Social Research* Vol. 81, No. 1 (2014), pp. 217-242.



## Historiography of European Political Thought

This early ‘genealogy of the state’ was a central part of the life’s work of Quentin Skinner, a leading thinker in the twentieth-century ‘Cambridge School’ of history.\* Locating the conceptual roots of ‘the state’ in the republican humanist traditions of the Italian Renaissance is one of Skinner’s defining legacies. This was a novel approach in the mid-twentieth century, as intellectual history and the history of ideas had previously focused on art and metaphysics, not on politics. The Cambridge School’s major contribution was to insist that political philosophy could only be understood within the historical context in which it was written.

Placing historical figures widely dispersed in time and space into conversation with each other, as philosophers do, in a sort of transhistorical pantheon of great thinkers, was *ahistorical* and led to false scholarly claims, among the most important of which were *anachronisms*.



### 4.1 The Study of History

#### Anachronism

*An error of chronological logic or misplacement of chronology.*

Rather than placing Machiavelli in extended dialogue with ancient and classical writers like Aristotle and St. Augustine, it would be far more revealing to study how Machiavelli interacted with the people who lived around him – his contemporaries. Of course, as elite thought was communicated primarily through texts in early modern Europe – and Renaissance authors had recovered many Roman texts – Machiavelli did interact with and learn from ancient and classical texts, but only within the modes of thought and in the contexts of interpretation and understanding of sixteenth-century Italy.

Historicist approaches to political philosophy – the history of political thought – have ruffled more than a few feathers. As detailed in the introductory chapter, historicism tries to understand history in its unique context, time and place. The potential of historicism to reveal new insights into long-studied figures comes out, for instance, in Peter Laslett’s study of John Locke’s *Two Treatises*. John Locke’s classic text expounded our modern concept of liberalism as a system of constrained representation accompanied by constitutional checks on monarchical power.

\* Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 2: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).



#### 4.c Concept Definition

##### Liberalism

*Political philosophy focused on the individual, bestowed with individual rights, liberties and equality before the law.*

Since Locke's text was published in 1689, it was thought to have been written to celebrate and justify the English Glorious Revolution of the previous year, in which the 'absolutist' government of James II ceded power to William I, who bound himself to constitutional monarchy in exchange for the crown of England in alliance with the 'Whigs' or liberals in Parliament. This *myth* was decisively challenged by Laslett, who subjected the *Two Treatises* to close textual reading and employed the historical method to uncover how Locke reflected on his own work in letters and other writings. In other words, Laslett turned to study Locke as an actual historical figure, rather than simply as a great thinker. Historicism allowed him to argue, to general astonishment, that Locke had composed the *Two Treaties* between 1679 and 1683, well before the 1688 Glorious Revolution. 'Two Treatises in fact turns out,' Laslett concludes, 'to be not the rationalization of a revolution in need of defense, but a demand for a revolution yet to be brought about.'\*

There is a tension on display here between the historicist insistence that concepts can only be understood in their contexts and historians' mission to narrate the origins of our present moment, e.g. the origins of European democracy. As is clear by now, people in the past frequently used history to fight their political struggles. George Orwell was perceptive in this regard, writing in his novel *1984* that 'Who controls the present controls the past. Who controls the past controls the future.' Orwell was imagining a future dystopia, but his basic point linking who is in power to how history is told is one which historians have long had to grapple.\*\*

There was a romanticist tradition in history in the nineteenth century especially that presented heroic national histories in the style of early nationalism. By the early twentieth century, these had often been replaced with narratives that focused on the emergence of liberal democracy. Historians traced such developments back to the Glorious Revolution and the Enlightenment period that followed. Concepts of history were changing – liberalism was replacing nationalism as a hegemonic discourse of what constituted progress. It was in this context that historian Herbert Butterfield wrote *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), in which he denounced as victors' history the tendency for early-modern histories to culminate in the rise of liberalism in the English and Glorious Revolutions. The term 'Whig history' then

\* Peter Laslett, 'The English Constitution and Locke's "Two Treatises of Government"', *The Cambridge Historical Journal* Vol. 12, No. 1 (1956), pp. 40–55.

\*\* George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949).

entered usage as a means of denouncing ideologically-tainted teleology and the abuse of history as propaganda in service of a state or ruling elite.



## 4.2 The Study of History

### Teleology

*Reasoning based on the perceived outcome. Evidence is interpreted in such a way that it confirms the supposed outcome of events.*

Laslett struck an early blow on Whig history in his article about Locke, a hero of the Whig faction. It follows that the constitutional monarchies and property-based right to representation advocated by Locke in the *Two Treatises* were less important in a longer historical view.

One powerful version of 'Whig history' is the continued prevalence in public discourses that the Protestant Reformation was the origin of democracy and freedom (mediated later through Locke and constitutional liberalism). Recent work in conceptual history shows how these historical myths continue to structure our politics in the twenty-first century. Annelien de Dijn traces how our concept of freedom as the government leaving us alone is surprisingly new.\* She argues that Italian humanists *understood freedom to mean popular sovereignty*, the ability of individuals *to participate* in government and politics. This concept of freedom prevailed for centuries until conservative opponents of the American and French Revolutions in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries redefined the concept. Only by recovering this conceptual history – and the 'antidemocratic' intentions of the authors who reframed freedom to mean limited government – can we ourselves come to recognize the power structures lurking behind the language of politics we inherit.

## Political Ordering in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

### Universal vs Territorial Order: The Birth of Europe in the Middle Ages

In 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne 'King of the Romans,' making Charlemagne the western successor to the mighty Roman Emperors after the papacy had lost faith in eastern Byzantine Emperors based in Constantinople. The papacy traced its authority back to Jesus Christ, who it claimed had appointed St. Peter leader of the Christian church. Peter, in turn, passed this authority to the Bishop of Rome, so beginning the lineage of Christian popes. The pope was spiritual leader of the church, and hence of Christendom (the 'Holy See'), but he became a territorial ruler as well in Rome and in papal territories spread throughout Italy after the

\* Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2020)



Roman Empire collapsed in the 400s CE. Crowning Charlemagne Emperor was a daring move by the medieval pope further into the realm of secular power. It laid the political basis for a refoundation of the Roman Empire while claiming for the papacy the authority to anoint emperors to their thrones.

Universal order over Christendom, the combining of spiritual and secular power in alliance with a revived empire, was the pope's striking ambition. Charlemagne's Carolingian Empire managed to extend Frankish rule over modern day France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Switzerland, northern Italy and Spain, and parts of Croatia and Czechia. His rule rested on a web of interpersonal relations with leading power-brokers (magnates) and oaths of fidelity between ruler and ruled that bound them together in contractual relationships of reciprocal rights and duties, a governing system known as feudalism.



#### 4.d Concept Definition

##### Feudalism

*Type of rule based on a hierarchy of patrons who are tied to clients, who in their turn can act as patrons to others. In this hierarchical system goods, labor and favors flow up and down this system, to substantiate claims to authority, legitimacy and rule. This was the dominant system of rule in Medieval Europe until the 'Age of Revolutions' and is still in existence in many other parts of the world.*

After his death, Charlemagne's Empire broke in three in the Treaty of Verdun (843), with two of its pieces, Eastern and Western Frankia, developing into what are today France and Germany. The breakup of Charlemagne's empire into personal kingdoms is dramatic evidence that rulership was not linked to a territorial state. Western Christendom emerged weakened from this partition. After Otto of Saxony defeated a wave of Hungarian invasions, the pope crowned him Holy Roman Emperor in 962, an imperial throne that persisted for over 800 years, but the break with France became permanent.

By 1000, western Christendom had fragmented into innumerable political units. Besides the papacy, the most important polities in Europe in the High Middle Ages (1000-1250) were kingdoms and city-states.



#### 4.e Concept Definition

##### Kingdom

*Territorial unit ruled by a hereditary monarch, i.e. a king or queen.*



#### 4.f Concept Definition

##### City-state

*Territorial unit based on a city and its immediate surroundings.*

The Frankish and Gothic kingdoms that replaced Rome in the 400s-600s theorized that royal power was passed down by God but at the same time had to conform with the law of custom. These twin bases of authority provided the model for medieval kingship. Rarely did the power of medieval kings extend far beyond the area around the royal court itself. Carrying sword and religion, Frankish knights spread Christian rule to Bohemia, Hungary, Poland and Scandinavia. They constructed thousands of castles across Europe's landscape – and theoretically grounded their rule on the 'right to conquest'. Castles served economic as well as political and military functions because they were centers of communication that extracted rents and tolls and extended rule into the countryside. This is how *Europe* was made, historian Robert Bartlett argues, because the lands west of Byzantine attained an unprecedented level of cultural, social, religious, and political homogenization between 1000 and 1300.\*

Faced with the universal pretensions of the Holy See, medieval rulers elaborated early concepts of territorial and local rule that we later would come to call sovereignty.



#### 4.g Concept Definition

##### Sovereignty

*Supreme or ultimate authority and freedom of action. There is no internal or external higher source of authority.*



#### 4.h Concept Definition

##### Republic

*Form of government in which authority is held by the people through elective representation.*

Most explosive was the question of whether papal anointment was needed for monarchs to rightfully hold office and, by extension, whether popes could 'de-crown' kings. During the Investiture Controversy (1075-1122) the pope excommunicated Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV and freed his subjects from their oaths of loyalty. Royal defenders responded that kings are granted 'two swords', the one secular and the other religious, and hence monarchical authority came directly from God, rather than from the papacy. Controversy erupted again in the fourteenth century, as Pope Boniface VIII insisted that only the church could tax or imprison French clergy and bishops. Not intimidated, French King Philip the Fair rallied opinion to his side by calling an *Estates General* of bishops, nobles, and leading Parisian burghers for the first time. Boniface responded with *Unam Sanctum*, the most extreme articulation of papal power in history, which insisted that monarchs are entirely subordinate

\* Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).



to Rome.\* Boniface's overreach led to an ignominious end. Captured by French forces, he died in captivity, and Philip established a puppet papacy in Avignon, over which he kept a close eye, to compete with the one in Rome. Papal pretensions to universal, secular power, shattered. Once fully restored to Rome, the papacy focused on maintaining power in Italy.

These were ideal conditions for the development of smaller, more compact, but more efficient and innovative territorial units: medieval and early Renaissance *city-states*. Nothing could be more indicative of the failure of the universal ordering project of the papacy, or of the limited reach of the Holy Roman Empire (whose leaders repeatedly failed to conquer northern Italy) than the dynamism of Italian city-states in the 1000s-1200s. It is there, rather than in seventeenth-century England, where Quintin Skinner and Annelien de Dijn locate the origins of European traditions of liberty and freedom. Several city-states like Venice and Genoa built trading empires in the northern Mediterranean. Florence and Padua, among others, had citizen assemblies. They had written constitutions, which were rare outside of Italy, and gave birth to humanism and the Renaissance, enormous cultural and political achievements. In the 1200s-1500s, republican city-states fell to conquest, despotism and oligarchy.



#### 4.i Concept Definition

##### Despotism

*Repressive rule based on the exercise of dictatorial power, usually by one individual sometimes also by a group.*



#### 4.j Concept Definition

##### Oligarchy

*Rule by a small group, often sharing a distinct identity of ethnicity, social-class, military standing or religion.*

Italian humanists valorized republican liberties even more as they slipped away. Tract after tract condemned the wickedness of kings and called for the restoration of ancient republican freedoms. Even in defeat, republicans left a powerful legacy to be taken up, in new circumstances, by constitutionalists and revolutionaries in later centuries.

## The Rise of Kingdoms in Medieval and Renaissance Europe

In the 1100s-1200s, monarchical power revived, first in England, and then in France and the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon (which united to form Spain in the 1400s). Their growth over the next centuries made kingdoms the main political

\* Joseph Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300-1450* (London: Routledge, 2014).

unit exercising power in early modern Europe. At first little more than royal courts that could be called upon to raise armies when needed, kingdoms extended their political influence internally first by creating a legal order of courts as well as a fiscal order of taxation and tax collectors. Crucially, over time kingdoms were able to gain the loyalty of most of the people over whom they ruled. Professionalization ensued, resulting in lawyers and accountants staffing royal bureaucracies, and kingdoms developed into administrative monarchies. In the 1500s-1600s, monarchs gained legislative powers to create new laws whereas previously their executive powers had been to defend existing law and customs – but here they ran into challenges from constitutionalists (see the next section). By then, the large kingdoms had become permanent political systems, an essential attribute of statehood. Interestingly, the creation of permanent institutions of foreign policy expertise was one of the last areas to develop.\*



#### 4.k Concept Definition

##### State

*A territorial unit with a monopoly of force within that territory. Usually with a bureaucracy entailing a legal, fiscal and social order.*

Nowhere was legal order as strong a factor in centralizing political power in territorial units as it was in medieval and early modern Europe. Early court systems were ad hoc gatherings of power barons called to pass judgement over cases. The most important cases were heard and decided by the king. In England, locals were brought into the delivery of justice itself in jury systems, which contributed to their growing popularity. In the 1200s, law became increasingly professionalized, and cases could be judged on the basis of existing precedents. In France and Spain, more fragmented polities, there was suspicion that local power brokers would bend justice to their own purposes if left unchecked; jury systems were therefore not adopted. Still, their justice systems began seeking out criminal offences like heresy for punishment in defense of the ‘common good’ rather than just arbitrating between private disputes.\*\* Building a legal order proved not only an excellent means of enhancing royal power in far-flung parts of a kingdom, but also of building popular support. Low nobility, townspeople, and commoners all availed themselves of royal courts to seek redress from their local superiors, a powerful motivation for people to support kingly power.

The second feature of early state centralization was the building of fiscal order. This first took the form of personal accountants to the king, who were private estate managers. They drew up balance sheets of royal revenues and expenses, and

\* Joseph R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

\*\* Roger I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008).

oversaw the development of tax systems. Like law, accountancy became refined and professionalized. Kings came to value legal and financial expertise as much as military expertise. Power in the 1200s gradually shifted from knights called to the king's defense to 'magistrates', i.e. government officials such as bureaucrats, accountants, surveyors and lawyers. Royal courts were staffed with university graduates, and monarchs made haste to establish universities specialized in law, finance, and religion. These professional standards were nurtured, and patterns of routinization allowed for predictability and standardization in the management of royal affairs. In this way, England, France and Spain developed into *administrative* monarchies, but the more centralized England was able to apply uniform laws and taxes throughout the realm, whereas the French appointed royal officials to apply local laws and taxes in line with provincial customs. Castile appointed governors but failed in its efforts to impose a uniform set of laws due to provincial resistance.

While courts made kings more popular, taxation arose resentment. External enemies and war proved a powerful basis to throw the balance towards a kingdom gaining the loyalty of the people over whom they ruled. In the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), generations of English invaded, plundered, and colonized France, wielding terrifying long-bows. Englanders organized large food shipments to feed their armies, a massive logistical endeavor. An important step towards a modern concept of statehood came in France with the Treaty of Brétigny (1360): the French monarch was henceforth forbidden from selling or partitioning crown lands. The invaders displayed contempt for their hapless foes, while a French national identity developed against the hated 'foreigners,' blamed for mass popular misery in the 1300s-1400s. \* The conflict gave birth to the legend of Joan of Arc, a girl who felt called by God to expel the English from France, and who whipped up French feelings of divine fury to fight the English before she was caught and burned alive by English forces.



**Image 4.5** Joan of Arc

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\* Desmond Seward, *The Hundred Years War: The English in France, 1337-1453* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

For Joan of Arc faith in God meant faith in France, a powerful sign that the French monarchy had acquired sacred status in the eyes of commoners. England was eventually defeated, and the French monarch emerged stronger than ever in the 1400s-1500s, instituting permanent taxation to finance Europe's first standing army in peacetime.

## Religious and Constitutional Order: War and Revolution in early modern Europe

By 1500, major European kingdoms had developed governing capacities to finance naval expeditions across the globe, which prepared the ground for colonial settlements in the Americas, Asia, and coastal areas of Africa. Despite such political success, core aspects of the European model of statehood (what states are, what states should do) remained unresolved. Did a political territory require religious order? Was it the duty of rulers to enforce religious uniformity on their subjects? Did rulers have the right to change their territory's religion? By the end of the 1500s controversies over religious order intersected with another unresolved aspect of European statehood: constitutional order. Did monarchs have not only their traditional right to defend existing customs and law, but to change them? Did assemblies, the consent of which were usually required to raise new taxes, share legislative powers with executives, or would monarchies develop absolutist forms of rule? Reaching settlements on these questions entailed two centuries of (often violent) conflict.



### 4.1 Concept Definition

#### Constitutional Order

*A political order based on a constitution. Usually based on a written foundational document to specify rights and obligations and also inform norms, expectations and behaviors.*

Most affected was the Holy Roman Empire, where political developments took a different turn than in the monarchies of Western Europe. After repeated conflicts over imperial succession, the Empire agreed the Golden Bull (1346) in which the Holy Roman Emperor was to be elected by a majority vote in a college of princes and archbishops. The Emperor was recognized as superior but bound by customs and law that allowed territories to refuse to apply some imperial decisions. In the political void, princes attempted to subject all persons in their territory to their own rule. When pastor Martin Luther posted his 95 theses condemning Catholic practices in 1517, many German princes rallied to his call for a Protestant Reformation. Luther demanded that they reform the church and destroy papal power in Germany. This presented a serious challenge to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who was also King of Spain. Lutheranism gained rapid ground, and so too did the teachings of John

Calvin, who set up a repressive Calvinist theocracy in Geneva, where heretics were burned at the stake.



#### 4.m Concept Definition

##### Theocracy

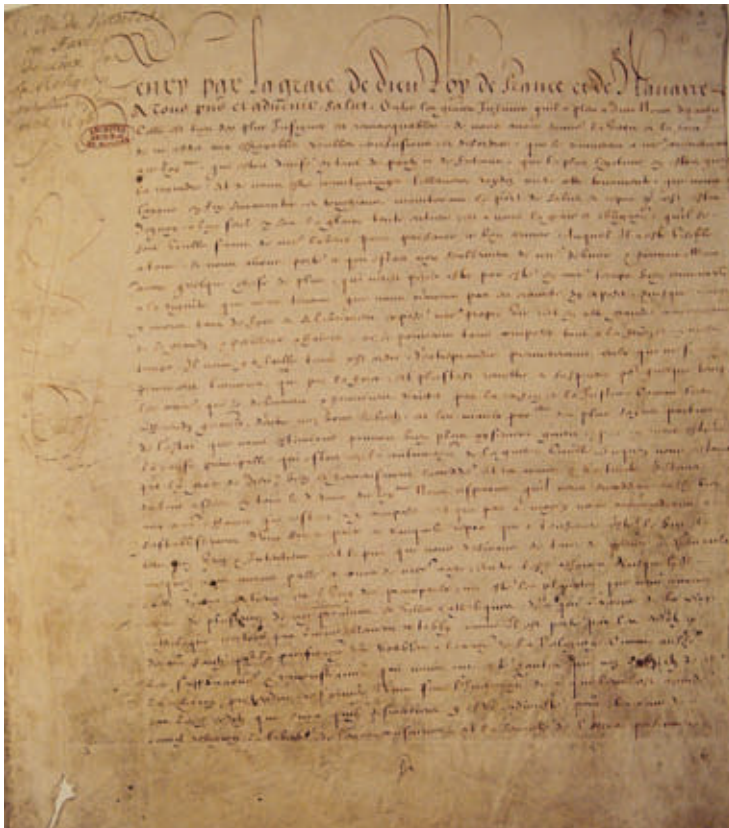
*A system of rule based on ultimate power resting with God. God's representatives on Earth rule on his behalf.*

Luther argued that only one faith should be allowed within a territory; those who rejected it should emigrate. War broke out between German Protestant and Catholic lands. After a Protestant victory, the Peace of Augsburg (1555) allowed princes to choose their territory's religion – this became known as *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, their religion).

Conflict over religious order spread throughout Europe in the 1500s, prompting government repression, civil war, and widespread death and misery. Spain had increased officially-sanctioned religious violence even before the Protestant Reformation, launching the Spanish Inquisition in 1478 to identify and prosecute heretics. The French king called for local parliaments to hunt down Protestants through the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1540, which contributed to one of the bloodiest anti-Protestant acts of popular violence during the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. The arch-Catholic Mary Tudor ascended the English throne, restored Catholicism and executed Protestants for heresy, earning the moniker 'Bloody Mary'. On the other side, John Knox, a Scottish radical, launched the first successful Calvinist revolution in 1557, proclaiming a Christian duty to resist tyranny. In 1566, Dutch noblemen's request for a policy of toleration was rejected by the Spanish king and popular uprisings and iconoclastic furies on Catholic images and effigies swept the Low Countries. This started a series of civil wars commonly known as the Eighty Years' War. After declaring independence from the Spanish Crown in 1581, Spain recognized this independence in 1648. This new Dutch Republic became the wealthiest country in Europe over the course of the seventeenth century.

Religious violence was only quelled when leaders adopted policies of toleration inspired by a new intellectual tradition that argued that it was not the role of government to enforce religious uniformity. Sebastian Castellión, a Huguenot (French Protestant) helped introduce the concept. While some promoted toleration for practical reasons, Castellión turned toleration into a moral virtue. He emphasized the importance of doubt, arguing that belief could never be absolutely certain. It followed that killing based on belief was ungodly. When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, she reverted the kingdom back to Protestantism but ruled with moderation on the religious question. In France cooler heads prevailed when King Henry IV issued the Edict of Nantes (1598) that Protestantism would be tolerated by the French monarchy. The Edict, the key primary source in this chapter, remained

in effect until Louis XIV (the ‘Sun King’) revoked it in 1685. The significance of the Edict of Nantes was that it signaled the separation of civil from religious rights and guaranteed a measure of religious freedom. It provided a way out of the religious strife that had plagued the country.



**Image 4.6** Edict of Nantes

Where protestants were in power, they often demonstrated the same intolerance as Catholic rulers, but where they were a minority, like in France, they came to support religious toleration. Religious minorities were attracted to the second major challenge to statehood in early modern Europe: constitutionalism. In England, constitutionalism developed both as a battle of King versus Parliament and of Catholicism versus Protestantism, as protestants sought to block the monarch from restoring Catholicism.\* Parliament executed King Charles II and established a republican Commonwealth in the English Civil War, though this soon descended

\* Jonathan Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).



into an authoritarian Protectorate. In this context, Thomas Hobbes developed a secular defense of monarchical power in *The Leviathan* (1651), arguing that a strong state was necessary to maintain order. In 1660, the monarchy was restored, but parliament was divided between Whigs (supporters of constitutional monarchy) and Tories (advocates of royal power). England's century of revolution concluded with the Glorious Revolution (1688) so celebrated by Locke, which created a constitutional monarchy and the English Bill of Rights. Despite the civil liberties it contained, the English Bill of Rights banned Catholics from holding public office.

In the meantime, religious conflict returned to the Holy Roman Empire, where questions of religious and constitutional order became intertwined in the apocalyptic Thirty Years War (1618-1648).<sup>\*</sup> Approximately 40% of the German population died in this war of famine, plague, displacement, and even cannibalism. Originally a battle between Catholics and Protestants that broke out in Bohemia, it evolved into a war between Habsburg Emperors and German princes. The Emperor tried to use the conflict to impose 'absolute rule' over princes, asserting his right



**Image 4.7** Peace of Westphalia

<sup>\*</sup> Robert von Friedeburg, *Luther's Legacy: The Thirty Years War and the Modern Notion of 'State' in the Empire, 1530s to 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

to depose princes, impose Catholicism on Protestant lands, expropriate Protestant estates, and alter laws at will without approval of the Imperial Diet or parliament. This cross of religious and political conflict then became international with the interventions of Cardinal Richelieu's France and King Gustav Adolphus of Sweden. Enemies of the Habsburgs, they turned the tide of war against the Emperor. The war concluded with the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which resolved questions of religious order by granting local German rulers the right to select their territory's religion but mandated toleration in all territories (though only for Calvinism, Catholicism and Lutheranism). The previous German constitutional order of shared sovereignty between local territories and imperial institutions like the Diet and Emperor was confirmed with minor adjustments.

## Conclusion

Political order in Europe took the form of a state-based system that developed from the 1000s to the 1600s, first in England, France, and Spain and then, partly by emulation, in Scandinavia and parts of Central and Eastern Europe. The defeat of universal models of ordering the whole of Europe under a Christian empire by medieval popes and the Holy Roman Empire was a prerequisite for the emergence of a state-based political order, even though the Holy Roman Empire persisted until 1806. The medieval origin of states lay in the creation of a legal and fiscal order, out of which evolved concepts of a permanent state to which subjects owed obedience.

External struggle was important in increasing people's loyalty to the new states, as happened in England and France during the Hundred Years War. Concepts of rulership matured as states gradually emerged out of the personal estates of rulers. The highest duty of a ruler became the defense of the state, rather than personal ambition or defense of the faith. In the 1500s-1600s, an interrelated set of controversies challenged the religious and constitutional order of the emerging states. Out of these struggles sprang concepts of political toleration and, not long after, separation of powers (this term was first coined in 1748 by French political theorist Montesquieu). At the same time, monarchical claims to authority had to compete with the growth of republican ideas, which eventually culminated in the great American and French Revolutions in the late 1700s that put an end to Europe's *ancien regime*.

In other parts of the globe – including areas that fell under European empire – imperial or decentralized models of rule tended to prevail before the 1800s. In the 1900s, the concept of a 'Westphalian order' in international relations, first discussed at length in the nineteenth century, came into widespread use. International relations scholarship typically presents the Peace of Westphalia as a pivotal moment, in which statehood became the highest ordering principle of the



international system. Premised on a doctrine of external nonintervention, states were considered formally equal within the international system even though they varied greatly in their ability to assert their will. Locating the origin of this system in Westphalia suffers from anachronism and teleology. A historicist reading of the Westphalian peace negotiations by an international relations scholar reveals that the treaty's international components emerged from French and Swedish intentions to weaken their antagonist, the Holy Roman Empire.\* There was no intention to fundamentally reshape the international order. Further, concepts of domestic sovereignty long predated Westphalia, as we have seen, while ideas of international sovereignty in the sense of formal equality of states in the international arena were inventions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.\*\*

Picking apart international relations interpretations of the Peace of Westphalia, as scholars did to 'Whig History,' is only instructive if we are able to replace them with new historical interpretations, as Skinner and De Dijn have done for the concept of freedom. In this case, though, an entirely new interpretation is unnecessary. The main premise of the Westphalian argument – that the international order was evolving towards a states-based system based on formally equal sovereignty – is convincing from a historical perspective as long as it is understood that it did not happen at Westphalia. What is called the 'Westphalian Order' evolved gradually over centuries, like the concept of the state. 'Westphalia' is best considered a metaphor for what was actually a *longue durée* historical evolution, an important moment, but not the decisive one.

The multiethnic, multilingual Holy Roman Empire continued for another 158 years after Westphalia. Even then, it was replaced first by states that formed part of an imperial Napoleonic order, and then part of a Concert of Europe, which had external intervention, rather than nonintervention, as its defining feature. A states-based system did spread to Latin America through national independence in the early 1800s. Later, in Asia and Africa, a 'third-worldist' project in the 1950s-1970s demanded national independence from European colonialism and the creation of sovereign states as their entry tickets into the international system. At the same time, Western European states were developing supranational institutions, to which they transferred aspects of national sovereignty, in a project known as European integration.

After the European Union (EU) was born in the 1990s, some scholars compared its political order favorably to the Holy Roman Empire because its model of shared sovereignty arguably resembled it.\*\*\* The example of the EU contributed to the

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\* Andreas Osiander, 'Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth,' *International Organization* Vol. 55, No. 2 (2001), pp. 251-287.

\*\* Peter M.R. Stirk, 'The Westphalian Model and Sovereign Equality,' *Review of International Studies* Vol. 38, No. 3 (2012), pp. 641-660.

\*\*\* Osiander, 'Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth'.

development of regional organizations in other areas of the world, including the African Union, ASEAN and Mercosur (though these organizations are based more on national sovereignty than the EU). Regional organizations attempt to reconcile increasing global interdependence with the continued potency of national demands for independence or autonomy. Machiavelli, we recall in conclusion, claimed that the highest duty of a ruler is to protect his subjects. Whether the state-based system remains the best means of protecting human life in the face of today's challenges like climate change, migration, and terrorism may be one of the most important questions we grapple with in the twenty-first century.

## Guiding Questions

- 1 What contributions did humanists make to the study of history?
- 2 What is 'Whig History'? Can you think of examples outside of England?
- 3 How did territorial models of rule conflict with universal models in medieval Europe?
- 4 How did the concept of the 'state' develop in Europe?
- 5 What are the main political features in the rise of European kingdoms?
- 6 How did conflicts over religious order relate to conflicts over constitutional order in early modern Europe?
- 7 What significance does the Peace of Westphalia (1648) have for international relations?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Bartlett, Robert, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). A sweeping journey of conquest, castles, and churches, this book shows how civilizational outward expansion from Frankish lands ‘made’ Europe in medieval times.
- Canning, Joseph, *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300-1450* (London: Routledge, 2014). A comprehensive synthesis of intellectual and political history about concepts of rulership in Europe, reaching from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance.
- Collins, James B. *The State in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). An introduction to the political history of France, which emerged as the most powerful early kingdom of early modern Europe.
- Dijn, Annelien de, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020). A conceptual history of ‘freedom’ from ancient Greece to our modern age, which highlights in particular the importance of the Renaissance and the American and French Revolutions.
- Friedeburg, Robert von, *Luther’s Legacy: The Thirty Years War and the Modern Notion of ‘State’ in the Empire, 1530s to 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). A history of political thought in the Holy Roman Empire, showing how concepts of rulership intersected with religion during and after the Protestant Reformation and Thirty Years War.
- Greenberg, Janelle, *The Radical Face of the Ancient Constitution: St Edwards ‘Laws’ in Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). An intellectual history exploring how an imagined ‘ancient constitution’ of supposedly lost freedoms had revolutionary implications in England’s century of revolution in the 1600s.
- Moore, Roger I., *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2008). A social and economic history emphasizing how Europe recovered from economic stagnation and achieved new levels of economic and social development in the High Middle Ages.
- Scott, Jonathan, *England’s Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). A journey through England’s century of revolution, in which ideas of political representation and constitutionalism intersected with religious struggles to topple kings and create constitutional monarchy.
- Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). A history of how political ideas of liberty and rulership came of age in the city-states of the Italian Renaissance.
- Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 2: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Picking up where volume one left off, Skinner explores how political ideas migrated from Italy to Northwestern Europe, where they crystallized in a centuries-long conflict between constitutionalists and absolutists.
- Skinner, Quentin, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). A fascinating intellectual history exploring how Machiavellian ideas of rulership contributed to Hobbes’ concept of a state Leviathan.

- Tilly, Charles, *Coercion, Capital, and European States: AD 990-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell 2015; Cambridge, Mass., 1992). A millennium long book of historical sociology, Tilly explores how European war and military expenses interacted with capitalism and finance to create our modern model of a state.

## CHAPTER 5.

# Slavery: Capitalism & Racism

JORIS VAN DEN TOL AND ANNE MARIEKE VAN DER WAL



## Introduction

Slavery is not a phenomenon of history. Forms of coerced labor are intimately intertwined with our daily lives. Tomatoes you bought in the supermarket were picked by (illegal) migrants who earn €12 for eight hours of work in the full sun in southern Italy.\* The hazelnuts in your Nutella were probably picked by one of the circa 900,000 children between the ages of 6 and 14 that are forced to work in Turkey – these children include Syrian refugees that escaped the war.\*\* The clothes you wear were likely produced by victims of modern-day slavery and human-trafficking in South-East Asia.\*\*\* A report from the *International Labor Organization* from 2017 estimates – conservatively – that around 25 million people are currently in forced labor.\*\*\*\* Affordable consumption in a system of globalized production is based on unpaid labor.

When thinking about slavery, many people think of enslaved people picking cotton on a plantation in North America and as something of the past. While the trans-Atlantic slave trade ended in the nineteenth century, slavery continues in many forms. Likewise, slavery did not start when Europeans forcefully transported circa 12-13 million enslaved Africans to the Americas and slave labor occurred not only on plantations, but also in cities and in houses. Moreover, enslaved Africans also ended up in Asia, enslaved Asians labored for Europeans too, and North African ships raided European cities to take men as galley slaves and women as concubines in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.\*\*\*\*\* It is a myth that coerced labor died

\* Neil Howard and Roberto Forin, 'Migrant Workers, "Modern Slavery" and the Politics of Representation,' *Economy and Society* Vol. 48, No. 4 (2019) pp. 579-601.

\*\* Report US DOL 2018: *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Turkey* Available at: [https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child\\_labor\\_reports/tda2018/Turkey.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2018/Turkey.pdf) Last accessed 15 April 2022.

\*\*\* Bobby Banerjee, 'Modern Slavery Is an Enabling Condition of Global Neoliberal Capitalism: Commentary on Modern Slavery in Business,' *Business and Society* Vol. 60, No. 2 (2021) pp. 415-419.

\*\*\*\* International Labour Organization, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* (Geneva: 2017).

\*\*\*\*\* N.I. Matar, 'Wives, Captive Husbands, and Turks: The First Women Petitioners in Caroline England,' *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* Vol. 23, No.1 (1997) pp. 111-128; R.C. Davis, 'Counting European Slaves on the Barbary Coast,' *Past and Present* Vol. 172 (2001) pp. 87-124; S. Arasaratnam, 'Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century', in: K. S. Mathew (ed.), *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans. Studies in Maritime History* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995).

with the Black Death (ca. 1346-1353) in Medieval Europe; serfdom continued all over continental Europe and was abolished in the Austrian Empire in 1781 and in Russia as late as 1861. As for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, in contrast to popular opinion, the largest share of enslaved Africans was brought not to North America but to Latin America and the Caribbean (see image 5.1). This chapter focuses on slavery and enslaved Africans in Latin America not because it is an exception, but because it is a large window into something that has been a constant in human history. The main argument of this chapter is that inequality has been a perennial feature of societies, while the issue of racism is the product of a specific time and place.



**Image 5.1** Volume and direction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from all African to all American regions

## Historiography

Notwithstanding slavery's consistency over time and in different places, historians have questioned why trans-Atlantic slavery emerged and ended. One of the most influential publications in this historiographical debate is Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* originally published in 1944.\* The Williams thesis, as it has become known, is comprised of three main elements:

1. The economic structure of capitalism replaced slavery once British elites accumulated surplus capital through slavery that was required for the industrial revolution;

\* E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery – Third Edition* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021).

2. The abolishment of slavery in the British West Indies in 1834 can be explained through the declining economic importance of these colonies at the time because of industrialization;
3. 'Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery'.\*

In other words, capitalism allowed British elites to extract the necessary money to bankroll the Industrial Revolution.\*\* The British colonies in the West Indies produced primarily sugar and tobacco, while cotton was a more important commodity for the emerging industrial economy. This removed economic objections to abolishing slavery in the British West Indies. And thirdly, once the enslaved Africans were no longer socially stratified through slavery, the white population relied on racism to maintain their social position in society.



### 5.a Concept Definition

#### Economy

*Social arrangements or aspects of social relations that concern the provisioning of (im)material needs and wants, in different forms and social scales (households, local, national and world). Economies share several key features, including social actors (e.g., individuals, firms, and states), institutions (i.e., formal and informal rules), as well as technologies and organizational techniques.*

Every element of the Williams thesis has since been scrutinized or criticized.\*\*\* Defenders of humanitarian, ethical, and moral motives in the abolition movement argued that Williams was perhaps too Marxist in his economic interpretation.\*\*\*\* Historians of racism, furthermore, have attempted to “move away from mechanistic economic explanations [...] to show the evolution of racist thinking from feudalism to capitalism”.\*\*\*\* Others criticized Williams’ reliance of the thesis on only English sources and questioned the profitability of slavery – after all, in order for the European elites to extract surplus to finance industrialization, slavery needed to yield surplus in the first place.\*\*\*\*\* Notwithstanding a possible decrease in profitability of British

\* Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 9.

\*\* The concept of capitalism has been introduced in chapter three.

\*\*\* Pepijn Brandon, ‘Rethinking Capitalism and Slavery: New perspectives from American debates,’ *Tijdschrift voor Sociaal Economische Geschiedenis* Vol. 12, No.4 (2015) pp. 117-137; Pepijn Brandon, ‘From Williams’s Thesis to Williams Thesis: An Anti-Colonial Trajectory,’ *International Review of Social History* Vol. 62, No.2 (2017) pp. 305-327.

\*\*\*\* Thomas Bender (ed), *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1992). Marxism will be further elaborated in chapter 7.

\*\*\*\*\* James H. Sweet, ‘The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,’ *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No.1 (1997), pp. 143-166, p. 144.

\*\*\*\*\* D. Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); S.H.H. Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Gainesville: Florida University Press,

West Indian sugar colonies, examples from the slave-based economies of Cuba and Brazil in the nineteenth century demonstrated that – beyond the British Empire – sugar productions in Cuba and coffee production in Brazil remained very profitable. The consensus among historians, for now, seems to be that although the Williams thesis describes the situation in a British context quite adequately, it cannot be transposed to other empires. For slave-based colonies in Brazil and Cuba in the nineteenth century, historians now use the term ‘Second Slavery’, to describe the processes and mechanisms of industrialization that went hand in hand with slavery.\*

## Theories and methods

Whether or not slavery was profitable for European elites and fueled industrialization – and thus contributed to the Great Divergence between Europe and Asia – it provides us with an opportunity to discuss this history with a focus on Brazil in a global context.



### 5.b Concept Definition

#### The Great Divergence

*Historians use the term ‘The Great Divergence’ to describe the process where Europe’s GDP per capita grew much faster than the GDP per capita of the rest of the world. While before roughly 1800 all places in the world were equally prosperous, and perhaps China was the wealthiest part of the world, Europe – in particular Britain – diverged from the rest of the world after 1800.*

One of the problems of studying slavery in the period before 1800 is that there are very few primary sources made by enslaved people; the bulk of the archival material is created by slaveholders, which creates an inherent bias in the source material.



### 5.1 The Study of History

#### Bias

*A prejudice against someone or something that leads to unfair attention or representation in research.*

2002); F.H. Cardoso, *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional: O negro na sociedade escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1962).

\* D. Tomich and M. Zeuske, ‘Introduction, the Second Slavery: Mass Slavery, World-Economy, and Comparative Microhistories,’ *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* Vol. 31, No.2 (2008) pp. 91-100.



Slaveholders recorded what they thought was of interest (e.g., name, age, marital status) but they were generally less interested in the ideas or practices of the enslaved people; that is, unless their ideas or practices intervened with the economic interests of the slaveholders. Therefore, these primary sources have an overrepresentation of rebellions and runaways (maroons).

A second problem comes with the interpretation of primary sources about slavery. An example of a source that has survived and that allows historians to say something about colonial societies and the interactions between European slaveholders and enslaved Africans are baptismal records. In these baptismal records it is possible to see who were the father and mother of a new-born. What these records mean is open to interpretation. For example, a historian finds in the baptismal records three instances where one free European fathered a child with the same enslaved woman. Traditionally, historians might interpret this as evidence of a harmonious relationship between the slaveholder and the enslaved; the man seemed to care for the woman as he repeatedly had a child with her. More recently, historians have emphasized that the structural circumstances of slavery make harmonious relationships between slaveholder and enslaved very unlikely. If the enslaved woman did not want to have sex with the man, her position did not give her many options; if she refused or resisted, her owner could rape her as she was his property. Acknowledging that structural systems and practices such as laws, policies, and regulations limited the agency of the enslaved and black population in a society and thus influenced the historical records, shapes the interpretation of these records.

## Objects

This chapter focuses on the global connections of Dutch Brazil through objects, people, and ideas. The story of the key primary source for this chapter does not start in Latin America, but instead commences in Germany, in the small town of Siegen. There, a church, the *Nikolaikirche*, holds a silver baptismal basin. How did this basin end up in this church, and what does it have to do with slavery?

Close inspection of the silver basin reveals the numbers '1586', the letters 'PHI', and around the edge are shown a series of camel-like figures. The numbers refer to the year it was likely produced, and the letters refer to Philip II King of Spain (r. 1556-1598) who in 1586 was the sovereign of the Habsburg Empire. The camel-like animals are in fact llamas and the engravings resemble other works of indigenous artists from a Spanish colony: the viceroyalty of Peru. The silver mines of Potosí were located in this viceroyalty, and through *mita* – a type of unfree labor by the indigenous population – the Spanish Crown extracted the silver required to create the basin. Some of the



**Image 5.2** Baptismal basin (Taufschale) from the Nikolaikirche in Siegen, Germany

freshly-mined silver was transported to Spain, some of it was transported directly to the Ming empire in East Asia, and some was used to create cultural artefacts in situ.\*

After its creation in Peru in the sixteenth century, the basin ended up in the hands of Portuguese merchants who dominated the slave trade between West Africa and the Spanish colonies. These Portuguese merchants used it as a means of payment and exchanged it for slaves in São Paulo de Luanda – in what is present-day Angola. Here it ended up in the hands of Dom Garcia II, the King of Kongo (r. 1641-1661).\*\* Dom Garcia II wished to expel the Portuguese from his Kingdom and forged a strategic alliance with the Dutch. By 1630, the Dutch had captured North-eastern Brazil from the Portuguese, but required access to the African slave markets to obtain the labor force for their sugar plantations.\*\*\* In the diplomatic gift exchanges Dom Garcia II offered Johan Maurits, the count of Nassau-Siegen and the Governor-General of Dutch Brazil (r. 1637-1644) two-hundred slaves, a necklace, and the silver basin. Johan Maurits' counter-gift was equally valuable, as it was important to maintain good relations with the King of Kongo because he provided the access to this part of the African slave market.\*\*\*\* According to a 1640 report by a Dutch official, enslaved people coming from Kongo were the most sought-after, while those from the Kingdom of Ardra (in present-day Benin) were 'often angry' and ran away. Moreover, 'the negroes from Guinea to Sierra Leone and Cape Verde do

\* D.O. Flynn and A. Giráldez, 'Born with a "Silver Spoon": The Origin of World Trade in 1571,' *Journal of World History* Vol. 6, No.2 (1995) pp. 201-221.

\*\* M. Françaço, 'Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen's Collection of Curiosities,' in: M. van Groesen (ed.), *The Legacy of Dutch Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 105-123.

\*\*\* C. Boxer, *The Dutch in Brazil* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957) pp. 82-88.

\*\*\*\* Françaço, 'Johan Maurits,' 110.

not work very hard', but they were 'neater' and therefore better suited as household slaves – particularly 'the womenfolk'.\*

The diplomatic gift exchanges between Dom Garcia II and Johan Maurits were beneficial for both parties. Without military support from the Kingdom of Kongo the Dutch would be unable to fight the Portuguese for access to the African slave market. Without competition from the Dutch, the Portuguese would be the only buyers (*Monopsony*) of enslaved Africans on this part of the coast, which would be a bad deal for the sellers from the Kingdom of Kongo. The Europeans were militarily inferior and relied on African rulers like Dom Garcia II tolerating European forts and trading posts. Moreover, the Europeans relied on military assistance from African allies to settle intra-European conflicts. Europeans (e.g., the Portuguese or the Dutch) had to pay tribute to African rulers to maintain their position on the coast, and it was not until after the Industrial Revolution that Europeans were able to venture beyond coastal forts and penetrate the African hinterland. African rulers and African slave sellers knew very well who could supply the best goods to exchange for slaves and there was no shortage of Europeans competing with each other. African merchants selling slaves preferred Swedish iron over iron from Liège for example, and could easily differentiate between (and had very strong preference for) European and Indian textiles. As such, the consumption preferences on the African continent dictated which goods the Europeans supplied and who was allowed to buy slaves.\*\*



**Image 5.3** Johan Maurits posing with a black servant in 1666, by Pieter Nason

\* Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, The Netherlands (NL-HaNA), 1.05.01.01 Archief Oude WIC, inv. nr. 46, [scans 242-243].

\*\* C. Evans and G. Rydén, 'Voyage Iron': An Atlantic Slave Trade Currency, its European Origins, and West African Impact', *Past and Present* Vol. 239 (2018), pp. 41-70; J. Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990) p. 86-89, 96-97.

After his tenure as Governor-General ended in 1644, Johan Maurits returned to Europe and took the silver basin for a third trip across the Atlantic as part of his collection. Johan Maurits took up residence in the Mauritshuis – the building in The Hague that is currently a museum that hosts *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* and other famous paintings by Vermeer, Rembrandt and others. Not long after his return, Johan Maurits proudly presented the silver basin as part of his collection that further included paintings by Frans Post and half-naked dancing indigenous Brazilians. A few years later, Johan Maurits and his collection of curiosities moved to Kleve in present-day Germany, where there is evidence his collection also included “moors” (Africans). This is not altogether surprising considering he traded, lent, and owned enslaved Africans in Brazil.\* In 1658, Johan Maurits presented the basin – that now included his coat of arms – to the *Nicolaikirche* in Siegen and in doing so connected that area of his dynastic rights to Africa and Latin America.\*\*

## People

The human connection between Latin America and the rest of the world is most clearly illustrated through the large-scale decimation of original populations through the arrival of European colonists and the arrival of enslaved people from Africa in Latin America. It is estimated that after the landings of Spanish conquistadors, between 60-90% of the local populations perished in a large scale pandemic, which has become known as ‘The Great Dying’, already discussed in chapter 1.\*\*\* To substitute the lack of labor force, Portuguese and Spanish colonists began importing enslaved people to work in their newly founded colonies. The most important source for estimations of the number of transported enslaved Africans is the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.\*\*\*\* This TSTD estimates that between 1500 and 1866, 12.5 million enslaved Africans disembarked a ship. The majority (5.5 million or ca. 44%) ended up in Brazil and 1.6 million (ca. 12%) in Spanish America, meaning that more than half of the enslaved Africans were sold in Latin America. It dwarfs the share of North America (less than 500,000) and Europe (ca. 10,000) and the remaining enslaved Africans disembarked in the Caribbean and other parts of Africa.

\* C. Monteiro and E. Odegard, ‘Slavery at the Court of the ‘Humanist Prince’ Reexamining Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen and his Role in Slavery, Slave Trade and Slave-smuggling in Dutch Brazil,’ *Journal of Early American History* Vol. 10, No.1 (2020), pp. 3-32.

\*\* Françoze, ‘Johan Maurits,’ 115-119.

\*\*\* Alexander Koch et al., “Earth System Impacts of the European Arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492,” *Quaternary Science Reviews*, Vol. 207 (1 March 2019), pp. 13-36. The exact percentage is subject to scientific debate.

\*\*\*\* Available at: [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org) Last accessed 15 April 2022.

The unfree labor force in Latin America was not exclusively enslaved people from sub-Saharan Africa. It also included small numbers of enslaved people from the Ottoman Empire and the North African Coast (then called the Barbary Coast), as well as indentured laborers from Europe.\* Indentured servitude was a form of unfree labor where the European poor agreed to work on a plantation for a certain number of years (often seven) in exchange for transport across the Atlantic and a plot of land in the Americas after their servitude ended. However, after arrival the employer often found excuses to extend their servitude beyond the initially agreed-upon term. Even though these other unfree laborers and many white European colonists also ended up in Latin America, the largest outside population were the enslaved Africans.

By the time the Europeans purchased enslaved people on the African coast, these people had often already travelled great distances. Often by foot or by barge, they had been brought as slaves to the coast from the hinterland.\*\* Many had been made slaves as a result of warfare, kidnapping, court ruling, or debt. Although the practice of enslavement existed in Africa prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the increased demand for slaves by Europeans meant that more Africans were enslaved than before. Europeans were not the only buyers, and high local demand meant that (at least through the second half of the seventeenth century) only a minority of the enslaved were put aboard European ships for export. While enslaved women could quite easily be absorbed in the slave population of groups such as the Akwamu on the African Gold Coast, it was particularly the enslaved male population who – because they were considered less valuable – were sold to the Europeans.\*\*\*

Once the European ships were full with human cargo, they departed for the long and dangerous trans-Atlantic journey. Notwithstanding the economic incentive to keep the enslaved cargo alive, the journey was especially perilous for the enslaved because of diseases such as dysentery that easily spread below deck, harsh treatment and violence by the crew, despair, hunger strikes, suicide, mutiny, and pirates and privateers. Men and women were generally separated, with men being kept below deck in chains the entire journey, while women had more freedom. This sounds better for the enslaved women than it actually was. What the men endured in physical punishment, the women endured in the crew's sexual desires through rape. It is telling that the female slave quarter on the ships was commonly referred to as 'the whore hole'.\*\*\*\*

\* J. van den Tol, *Lobbying in Company* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), p. 73-74.

\*\* B.W. Kankpeyeng, 'The Slave Trade in Northern Ghana: Landmarks, Legacies and Connections,' *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 30, No.2 (2009), pp. 209-221.

\*\*\* S.E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 27-28.

\*\*\*\* Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 241-243; J. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Upon arrival in the Americas and Caribbean, the enslaved were considered able-bodied if they could walk off the ships without support. The women, children, and less-abled were sold at a discount at auction. Purchasers were often careful to separate families and ethnic and linguistic groups in order to limit the possibilities of the enslaved for organizing resistance.

Leaving the auction with their buyer, the enslaved could end up in roughly four different situations. The first two options meant the enslaved stayed in the cities. This type of urban slavery meant they either worked as servants or did physically demanding jobs such as a porter in the harbor. The enslaved in the cities were bought by private individuals as well as by religious institutions and colonial governments. Colonial governments also used some of the enslaved Africans to increase their armies, which – notwithstanding its risks on the battlefield – at least offered the enslaved a path to manumission. The fourth option for the enslaved was to be put to work in the mines or on a plantation. In countries such as Brazil and Cuba, a large part of the plantations were sugar plantations.

Sugar was made from sugar cane that was harvested with slave labor that happened around the clock. During the day, the cane was harvested and transported to a sugar mill (*engenho*). At the end of the afternoon the mill grinding started, which produced a juice that was boiled in kettles until around ten in the morning. The enslaved labored for 18 to 20 hours a day and the work in the fields and the mills was gendered. The men cut the sugar cane, chopping the tops, taking off the leaves, and cutting the stalks close to the ground. Women bundled the cane together and loaded it on oxcarts for transportation to the mill.\* As can be seen in the legend of an image from the mid-seventeenth century, the men manned the oxen that powered the rollers and fed the cane to the rollers. Then, the women carried the ground cane away, while other women poured the juice in a wooden pipe connected to the boiling house. The juice was boiled in multiple copper kettles of different size and temperature that were usually manned by men. After the final boil, the sugar syrup was poured into a clay pot to harden, and afterwards emerged inverted in their characteristic sugarloaf shape.\*\* This product was then transported to Europe – particularly Amsterdam and Hamburg – to be further processed in sugar refineries before being brought to market.

The forced transportation of a large number of enslaved Africans to the Americas by Europeans introduced new diseases as well as new cultural expressions. While many diseases were endemic in Europe and Africa, there is evidence that suggests that malaria spread mainly from Africa to the Americas aboard European slave

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\* S. B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 100-109.

\*\* Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations*, p. 116-21.





**Image 5.4** A drawing by Frans Post of a sugar mill (engenho) in Pernambuco, Brazil from the middle of the seventeenth century

ships, and the same goes for variants of other diseases such as hepatitis B.\* Battling these various pathogens required cooperation, the exchange of information, and contributions from Africans, European traders and surgeons, planters, medical doctors and many others. Malaria was only successfully remedied – all across the Atlantic basin – by quinine made from Peruvian bark.\*\* Other lasting legacies of slavery in Latin America are found in a variety of cultural expressions that enslaved Africans brought with them to the Americas. Two such legacies in Brazil are *Quilombos* and *Candomblé*.

It was not rare for enslaved Africans to try escape the harsh work on plantations. For example, during errands to another plantation or in a city or under the cover of darkness at night, enslaved Africans tried their luck at living away from a plantation. It was also not rare that after a short period of maybe three weeks, a runaway, or so-called *maroon*, returned to their plantation. This could be because of the difficulties of feeding oneself in the wild, missing one's family, or a range of

\* Rodrigo Barquera et al., "Origin and Health Status of First-Generation Africans from Early Colonial Mexico," *Current Biology*, Vol. 30, No. 11 (8 June 2020), pp. 2078-2091.

\*\* Manuel Barcia, *The Yellow Demon of Fever: Fighting Disease in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 12-16.



different reasons, but whatever the reason for returning, the reward was usually hard physical punishment. The runaways that succeeded in surviving outside the plantation often formed maroon settlements far away in the hinterland, which in Brazil were called *quilombos* or *macambos* if they were smaller. The European colonists lived mostly on the coastal areas and along rivers of the Americas, laying only a paper claim to the areas further inland. In Brazil, the most famous and largest quilombo was *Palmares*.

Notwithstanding untiring attempts by both Dutch and Portuguese colonizing powers, Palmares existed for probably the entire seventeenth century in the hinterland of the present-day state of Alagoas, not too far from the European settlements in Recife and Salvador. Consisting of two large *mocambos* with many smaller settlements around it and a population between 11,000 and 20,000 Africans made Palmares less a town and more like a 'neo-African kingdom' in Brazil.\* Its organization was based on a number of African forms of political and social organization which it combined with European elements and specific local adaptations. At the head of the society was a king in the African tradition. Within Palmares slavery existed, runaways lived in freedom, but enslaved Africans captured during raids remained in bondage. Traditions from Angola (or the kingdom of Ndongo) seemed to have been dominant in this society, but there is archaeological evidence that there was also a large influence from Amerindian societies.\*\*

In Palmares, as well as in European settlements, the enslaved Africans predominantly practiced a religion that was a fusion between (European) Christian and African elements. Enslaved Africans brought with them African spiritual traditions that were as diverse as the areas in Africa where they originated. In the early nineteenth century, the African and Catholic traditions solidified in a combined, syncretic, religion called *Candomblé*.\*\*\* In this belief system there is all-powerful God (*Oludumaré*) served by lesser deities called *orixas*. The *orixas* have names and attributes comparable to West African gods, and can be equated to Catholic saints. For example, *Oxóssi*, the male *orixá* of hunting, was linked to St. George who is normally depicted on a horse while slaying a dragon.\*\*\*\* Unlike Catholicism though, *Candomblé* has no central authority, but it is organized through autonomous groups.

The arrival of enslaved Africans and free and indentured Europeans in the Americas introduced to the Americas new cultural and religious expressions, as well as new pathogens. Notions about what was feminine or masculine work on a

\* S. B. Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 120-23.

\*\* A. C. Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 273.

\*\*\* The concept of syncretism will be elaborated in chapter 6.

\*\*\*\* Sheila Walker, 'Every day and Esoteric Reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé', *History of Religions*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1999), pp. 103-128, p. 111-12.

plantation was often formed by European traditions, and maroons built their societal structure based on certain African political and societal customs. The repeated exchanges between Europeans, Africans, and indigenous American groups led to new cultural expressions that were unique to Latin America.

## Racism

The question, as it arose at the start of this chapter, whether racism led to the enslavement of predominantly Africans versus racism being the result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, has long been discussed within academia, but has more recently found resonance within societal debates on the legacies of colonialism. To many descendants of enslaved Africans living currently in the Americas, the thought of a lack of pan-African solidarity based on a shared sense of ‘race’ within Africa during the period of trans-Atlantic slave trade, is painful to contemplate. Yet, this anachronistic understanding of this history is a reflection of the social reality in which these African-American communities found and continue to find themselves. It was in the ‘New World’, where the concept of “race” first arose and became much more important, as opposed to it having been important for seventeenth- or eighteenth-century African societies. Certain prejudices concerning ‘the other’ have always existed and shaped the expectations and actual relations between different communities. Hierarchies within societies, as well as between societies, were deemed a natural given for much of human history. Several historians have pointed out that as far back as antiquity, ‘ethnic’ stereotypes existed about almost all the different regions within the then known world, and that many of the theories which fed such prejudice came from ideas about the effect of climate on behavioral patterns as well as physical appearances.\* In this antiquated Hippocratic environmental determinism, and what some scholars call ‘proto-racist’\*\* reasoning, ancient societies like the Greeks for instance thought of Ethiopians being dark skinned caused by the scorching of the sun.\*\*\* This climate theory of human difference was also dominant among medieval Arab scholars, who viewed black Africans as less ‘civilized’ due to their proximity to the Equator, which was thought to make “their temperaments hot and their humors fiery, their color black and their hair woolly”, which was seen to cause a lack of “self-control and steadiness of mind and [they]

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\* Claire Weeda, ‘Ethnic Identification and Stereotypes in Western Europe, circa 110–1300’, *History Compass*, Vol.12, No.7 (2014), pp. 586–606.

\*\* B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). D. McCoskey, *Race: Antiquity and its Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

\*\*\* Rebecca Futo Kennedy, ‘Airs, Waters, Metals, Earth. People and Environment in Archaic and Classical Greek Thought’, in: Rebecca Futo Kennedy and Molly Jones-Lewis (eds) *Routledge Handbook to Identity and the Environment* (London: Routledge: 2016), p. 21.

are overcome by fickleness, foolishness and ignorance”.\* At the same time, such obvious xenophobic or proto-racist prejudiced beliefs usually did not consider these characteristics to be hereditary, and as such biologically deterministic (one of the key features of racist ideology). Moreover, since the debate about Darwin’s evolutionary theory, we know that evolution does not follow a purposeful and linear progress, but that evolution is random and most importantly neutral. There is no survival of the fittest, only random selection of certain genetic traits which have been able to survive or even become dominant within a particular group of people due to reproductive success. Yet, the idea of some groups of people having developed into more ‘perfect’ versions of humanity is ancient, universal, persistent and difficult to eradicate. Over the course of time, this belief in a more ‘perfect human’ or a ‘higher civilization’ has surfaced whenever it could be used to someone’s advantage.

For example, in the wake of the Inquisition and the Reconquista (i.e. the war between Christian kingdoms and the Umayyad Caliphate over the control of the Iberian peninsula), the concept of ‘purity of blood’ had become a dominant factor in the Iberian peninsula for determining social status and allocating official roles in the governing of the state. This bloodline obsession was mainly concerned with the religious, and to some extent ethnic, ancestry of families.\*\* Having Jewish or ‘Moorish’, i.e. Muslim ancestry, in one’s family ancestry was deemed suspicious in a time of absolute religious intolerance. By some scholars labelled as the ‘invention of racial exclusion laws’\*\*\*, this prejudice became institutionalized and legalized starting in 1449 through the Sentencia-Estatuto declaration, which forbade converted (to Catholicism) Jews from holding public offices (being Jewish was completely prohibited during this time and punishable by death or exile).\*\*\*\* The Spanish and Portuguese brought their social ordering based on ‘casta’ or ‘limpieza’, meaning lineage and purity of blood, with them to their colonial territories in the Americas. From 1552 Iberian immigrants to the Spanish territories in the New World were even required to produce proof of their bloodlines in order to be eligible for settlement or public office.\*\*\*\*\* Here, however, the casta, or castes as it became known in English, became more and more associated with the color of one’s complexion as opposed to a religious and/or ‘ethnic’ heritage, as those who were considered not ‘pure-

\* Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) p. 36. Cited in: Sweet, *Iberian Roots*, p. 146.

\*\* Maria Elena Martinez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2008), p. 265.

\*\*\* Jeffrey Gorsky, *Exiles in Sepharad. The Jewish Millennium in Spain* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), p. 311. See also: Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalistic Ideas In Europe* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996).

\*\*\*\* Gregory B. Kaplan, ‘The Inception of Limpieza de Sangre (purity of Blood) and Its Impact in Medieval and Golden Age Spain’, in: Amy Aronson-Friedman and Gregory B. Kaplan, *Marginal Voices. Studies in Converso Literature of Medieval and Golden Age Spain*, Vol. 46. (2012), pp. 19-41.

\*\*\*\*\* Gorsky, *Exiles in Sepharad*. p. 331.



**Image 5.5** Albert Eckhout, 'Esposa Tupi' (c. 1640)



**Image 5.6** Albert Eckhout, 'Esposa Mameluca' (c. 1640)

blooded Christians' were either native-American or of African descent. As such, the social classes soon became 'racial' classes, and a 'color-line' was invented which had previously not been part of 'ethnic' stereotyping per se. As in any situation of classification and ordering, the borders were never absolute and remained to some extent fluid and often depended on economic status as well as social perceptions. Nevertheless, a seed had been planted in the minds of European colonizers that social standing depended on someone's 'racial' lineage.\* Moreover, the 'Latin-American' model of plantation slavery, "of lifetime, inheritable servitude" was deemed profitable and the Spanish and Portuguese economic success coveted by other European colonists, which meant that the British and other European settlers, who started settling in the Americas and engaging in the Transatlantic slave trade a century after the Spanish and Portuguese, saw no need to invent a new system or model of slavery.\*\*

\* G. Frederickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 31-35.

\*\* Alden T. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism. Essays on the Colonial Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 145. Cited in: Gorsky, *Exiles in Sepharad*, p. 337. See also: J.H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America. 1492-1830* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2020).

Coincidentally, the emergence of ‘racial’ thinking coalesced with an artistic revolution which is called ‘the art of describing’ in the seventeenth century.\* This genre of art in which nature was sought to be depicted as honestly and faithfully as possible, as opposed to the depiction of the world based on a more mythical or spiritual interpretation of reality, was part of a broader scientific and artistic development, which commenced with the Renaissance and was further influenced by the Enlightenment, with its increased appreciation for empiricism. Humankind came to be seen as part of the natural world, and as such should be studied and depicted realistically rather than philosophically. The many voyages of ‘discovery’ in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries not only encouraged scientists to study and analyze the newly encountered flora, fauna and peoples, but also this accumulation of ‘new’ (from a European perspective) knowledge was visually recorded. One such example is the patronage of arts and science by the Governor General of Dutch Brazil, Johan Maurits, who has already been introduced above, see also image 5.3. He commanded, for instance, the *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae* (1648), the first scientific work on the natural history of Brazil, by naturalist Willem Piso. Additionally, Maurits ordered two painters, Albert Eckhout and Frans Post, to visually record the landscapes and peoples living in Dutch Brazil. This earliest known series of paintings of Brazil (see images 5.5 and 5.6) clearly depicts the ‘exoticism’ of ‘the other’ and the desire to find and apply order to the natural world as well as to the human world by labelling and categorizing everything and everyone encountered.\*\*

In some parts of Spanish America, in particular in Mexico, societal anxiety of ‘racial-mixing’ had led to the development of the aforementioned Casta painting genre, which served not only to visually represent ‘reality’ but also to inform society on the supposed inherent characteristics of each ‘racial’ caste. This visual categorizing was, however, not neutral, as Spanish males were always depicted as being most civilized, protective and as ‘possessors of culture’, as opposed to native Americans or Africans, who were mostly depicted as being less civilized. Societies’ obsession with Casta (lineage) becomes even more clear from the general warnings of the believed degeneration caused by ‘racial mixing’, obviously present in most Casta paintings, which in the colonial mind led to “the contraction of debased sentiments, immoral proclivities, and ability to a decivilized state”.\*\*\* As such, those visual productions of the perceived reality, in South America, were part of a colonial

\* Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger, ‘Science and Art in the Dutch Period in Northeast Brazil: The representation of cannibals and Africans as allies overseas’, *Circumscribe*, Vol. 7 (2009), pp. 37-47, p. 37. S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 163.

\*\* Benjamin Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

\*\*\* Ilona Katzew, ‘Casta Painting: Identity and Social Stratification in Colonial Mexico’, in: *Catalog for the exhibition New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*, organized by the Americas Society Art Gallery, Sept. 26-Dec. 22, 1996, p. 29.

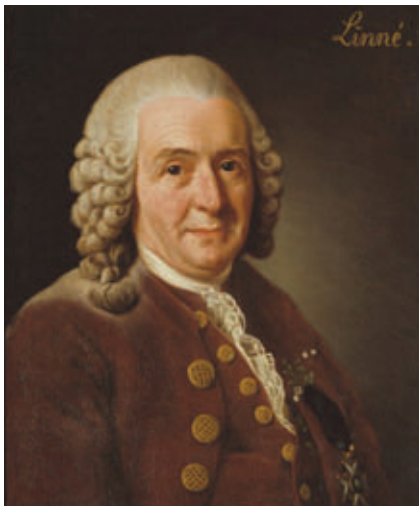
discourse of regulation and control of the social order, objectifying non-Europeans and putting forward justifications for the continued dominance of European control over the 'New World'.\*



### 5.c Concept Definition

#### Racism

*The belief that the human population can be biologically categorized in clear and distinct groups, i.e. 'races', which have inherited and essential characteristics that define their behavior and abilities, and that these differences mark a 'natural' and inevitable inferiority or superiority.*



**Image 5.7** Carl Linnaeus

Seeing cultural or physical differences as being fixed and hereditary, so in other words biological as opposed to contextual and fluid, turned into a deterministic and normative understanding by attributing an integral value to these differences. A turning point was when prejudice and othering became racism. Most scholars agree that racism as a belief or ideology is a modern phenomenon and arose, paradoxically, as a consequence of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Due to the discoveries of previously unknown and undescribed plants and animals, scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth century embraced empiricism as the foremost way to knowledge production, and in the process challenged the then dominant religious dogmas about the world. This newly embraced scientific method

\* Magali M. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).



of observation and experiment led to the modernization of several fields of science such as Anatomy and Botany.

Andreas Vesalius' revolutionary work *Fabric of the Human Body* (1543) introduced new ways of measuring and analyzing the human body, laying the groundwork for understanding humans as biological beings. Carl Linnaeus, often called the 'father of taxonomy', led the way with the publication of his work *Systema Naturae* in 1735 for showing the order in nature and the possibility of discovering the natural laws which underpinned such order.

This frantic quest to scientifically understand and analyze humankind as part of nature, ultimately led to the taxonomizing of human 'types' as 'natural kinds'\* of which Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775) is perhaps one of the earliest and most striking examples. Whereas the proclivity for classifications was not per se normative, it nonetheless gained a hierarchical and normative outlook due to the association many intellectuals at the time made between sub-Saharan Africans and an enslaved condition.\*\* Indeed, when philosophers like Hume, Kant, Voltaire or Rousseau formulated their thoughts on the equality of all human beings, and as such questioned the age-old belief of the naturalness of inequality between humans, they sought a rational and objective explanation for the inequality they witnessed around them, and believed it to be explained by, among others, the biological adaptability of certain human populations.

This paradox of the Enlightenment, where concepts of equality and meritocracy allowed ideas of 'race-as-biology' to develop simultaneously, can thus not be separated from the time in which it arose, one in which trans-Atlantic slavery existed. Notwithstanding its unintentional contribution to racial ideas, the Enlightenment also contributed ideas that challenged an existing world order that was based on the God-given right of some to rule over many, and gave rise to such famous slogans of the French Revolution as *liberté, égalité, fraternité* that led history-altering revolutions, including abolition (of slavery) movements in the Americas and in Europe.

## Ideas

One of the most famous beaches in the world is the Copacabana in Rio de Janeiro. On both ends of the beach are historical forts: *Forte Duque de Caxias* from 1779 and *Forte de Copacabana* from 1914. The latter is currently a museum and on the outside

\* Justin E. H. Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 11-12.

\*\* Devin Vartjia, *The Color of Equality, Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press: 2021) p. 199.



visitors can see a mural that depicts the Battle of Guararapes, which was part of the “War of Divine Liberty”.<sup>\*</sup> An accompanying sign in Portuguese explains the mural to visitors not intimately acquainted with the historical significance of this particular battle: ‘people of diverse origins, different social classes, *negros*, *brancos*, and *indios* came together for a common cause: defending their ground and their families against an invader’; the sign continues to say that these *patriotas* obtained ‘a victory without precedent’. Perhaps surprisingly, this idyllic story of all different groups coming together to fight a common enemy is not the story of Brazilian independence in 1822, but the story of Portuguese colonizers fighting Dutch colonizers in a global geopolitical struggle in the seventeenth century.



#### 5.d Concept Definition

##### Geopolitics

*Approach to international affairs which focuses on the interplay between geography, power and politics.*

There were European, black, and indigenous soldiers fighting on both sides, and for the majority of the enslaved population the transfer from Dutch to Portuguese rules meant little change in the day-to-day reality of living under an extractive and racist capitalist system. The color of the flag changed, but behind the colonial façade lives and ownership remained largely the same.

The history of Latin America is filled with stories of revolt and warfare that share a similar fate. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Atlantic basin was the central theatre of rebellions and insurgencies. This so-called ‘Age of Revolutions’ marked the start of anticolonial, antislavery, and anti-establishment struggles of which the United States’ independence from Britain in 1776, the Haitian Revolution on Saint Domingue in 1791, and the French Revolution of 1789 are the most well-known examples. Decades before, however, at least three resurrections – by the enslaved populations on St John in 1733, on Jamaica in 1760, and in Berbice (present-day Guyana) in 1763 – were already extremely effective and nearly became the first successful independence and abolitionist movements in Atlantic history. In Berbice, the revolutionaries controlled the colony for little more than a year, but their success tantalized the African-descended people with the prospect of liberation and autonomy. In no-time, songs that celebrated the Berbice uprising appeared in the repertoire of the enslaved population of the neighboring colony of Suriname. Plantation owners, fearing that one revolt might inspire another, tried to limit the circulation of news about successful uprisings, but inevitably stories and rumors circulated among the enslaved all across the Atlantic.

<sup>\*</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch in Brazil, 1624-1654* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957).

The extraordinary rich sources for the Berbice uprising of 1763 reveal that, while thousands of enslaved people joined the rebellion, many were not purposeful rebels. Like the maroon society of Palmares, the revolutionaries of Berbice created a socially stratified society that combined African political customs with European and New-World institutions. The leaders knew very well that if they wanted to survive long-term, they would need to participate in the global economy with sugar from the plantations. They forced the enslaved that previously had worked the plantations for the Europeans to now cut the sugar cane for them. Moreover, the leaders' African traditions and cultural norms required people of their social position to be attended by servants and slaves. The Afro-Berbicians did not have a uniform vision of post-rebellion society.\* It seemed that the only durable way out of slavery for most was to rely on subsistence farming and local barter trade, and to bid adieu to the global capitalist economy.

The successful wars for independence in Latin America at the beginning of the nineteenth century did not focus specifically on slavery, although many formerly enslaved people received manumission by fighting in patriot armies. The quest for meritocracy and democracy that had instigated the 'Atlantic revolutions' also found resonance amongst the bourgeois classes of Latin America, in particular the Spanish born in the Americas, then referred to as 'criollo', who seized this revolutionary moment to gain more independence from the colonial motherland. Similar to the demands of American revolutionaries, these wealthy men of property in Spanish America also sought to obtain governing power over their own local affairs, and demanded the same legal rights as the so-called Peninsulares (Spanish born in Spain). Most of these bourgeois revolutionaries were however less concerned with the rights and wellbeing of the lower classes, including slaves. Even the 'great liberator' Simon Bolivar mostly sought to establish an independent Gran-Columbia governed by a creole aristocracy rather than advocate for universal suffrage and a people's republic. Moreover, his decision to manumit the enslaved was born mostly out of fear of slave revolts like the one in Haiti, dreading that such a revolt would lead to the expulsion of all whites from Latin America. It would take more than half a century before slavery was abolished in all of independent Spanish-speaking America (in Cuba as late as 1886), and even longer in Lusophone Brazil (1888). The newly-established countries that were more dependent on slave-based cash crops to participate in the global economic system were to abolish slavery later than countries where slavery was not a primary source of labor. The Latin American independence movements were primarily bourgeois revolutions, that borrowed heavily from Enlightenment slogans and iconography of white revolutions, such as the French. The clearest example of this is probably the Phrygian cap or liberty cap

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\* Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York: The New Press, 2020), pp. 75-94.



**Image 5.8** A French army standard from 1793 displaying a Phrygian cap on all four corners



**Image 5.9** The Argentinian Coat of Arms displaying the Phrygian cap in the center on top of a pole

that still has a prominent place in several Latin American countries' coat of arms. Going back thousands of years to the Roman Empire, the cap originated as an icon of freemen that was symbolically given to slaves upon manumission. It had been popularized during the French Revolution and came to represent liberty in general.

Ideas about slavery, abolition, political organization, economic systems, revolution, and freedom did not appear in isolation, but in dialogue between different places. As people moved between places they brought with them conceptions about order in the world, they borrowed ideas and images from other places, and they inspired others with their ideals.

## Conclusion

Affordable consumption in a system of globalized production was only possible through unpaid labor. In order to compete in a global market with their goods, plantation owners used slave labor and environmentally damning production practices. As information about the hard realities of these production practices percolated through society and as the 'consumer class' emerged in Europe and North America in the early nineteenth century, buyers started to demand ethically sourced goods. This 'fair trade' movement contributed to the abolishment of slavery



**Image 5.10** Blue glass sugar bowl from circa 1820-1830, inscribed in gilt: East India Sugar Not Made by Slaves

alongside a whole range of factors. This was not a consumer revolution to end capitalism, but a reformation campaign in which abolitionist consumers across the Atlantic World reimagined a global capitalism that would benefit everyone.\* Just like ideas, objects, and people had spread throughout the Atlantic to support the system of slavery, ideas, objects, and people against slavery spread as well. These ideas and objects came together in a sugar bowl that can be seen in the image above.

Of course, slavery did not end with the abolishment of slavery in the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. Slavery still exists in the world and it is intimately connected to our everyday lives. The continued globalization of the world has made people, ideas, and goods more connected than ever before, and information is more readily available about the conditions on plantations. Fruit produced with slave labor on Latin American plantations can still be found in your local supermarket – either as juice or as fresh fruit. If there is a lesson to be learned from history in this regard, it is that ethical capitalism can contribute to a world where nobody has to live in slavery.

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\* Bronwen Everill, *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020).

## Guiding Questions

1. What is the Williams Thesis?
2. What is the issue with a lot of primary source material about slavery, and why is that a problem?
3. What did societies of maroons and revolutionary slaves have in common?
4. What are three examples of how Latin America was connected to the rest of the world in the period 1600-1800?
5. Is there ethical consumption in global capitalism, and why?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Barcia, M., *The Yellow Demon of Fever: Fighting Disease in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2020). As the slave trade brought Europeans, Africans, and Americans into contact, diseases were traded along with human lives. Manuel Barcia examines the battle waged against disease, where traders fought against loss of profits while enslaved Africans fought for survival.
- Bethencourt, F., *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014). Demonstrating that there is not one continuous tradition of racism, Francisco Bethencourt shows that racism preceded any theories of race and must be viewed within the prism and context of social hierarchies and local conditions. He argues that in its various aspects, all racism has been triggered by political projects monopolizing specific economic and social resources.
- Cardoso, F.H., *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional: O negro na sociedade escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1962). Fernando Henrique Cardoso focuses on the state of Rio Grande do Sul to explore the relationship between slavery and capitalism in Brazil.
- Elliott, J.H., *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America. 1492-1830* (Yale University Press, 2020). John H. Elliott identifies and explains both the similarities and differences in the Spanish and the British empires' processes of colonization, the character of their colonial societies, their distinctive styles of imperial government, and the independence movements mounted against them.
- Eltis, D., *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). In this book David Eltis argues that the British led the way in ending the slave trade just when it was beginning to be important for the world economy, when there was a great need for labor around the world, and shows that Britain's control of the slave trade and great reliance on slave labor played a major role in its empire's rise to world economic dominance.

- Everill, B., *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020). Bronwen Everill illuminates the early years of global consumer society, while placing the politics of antislavery firmly in the history of capitalism. It is also a stark reminder that the struggle to ensure fair trade and labor conditions continues.
- Kars, M., *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York: The New Press, 2020). Drawing on nine hundred interrogation transcripts, Marjoleine Kars tells the explosive story of a little-known revolution in Berbice, one that almost changed the face of the Americas. She has won multiple awards for this book.
- Metcalf, A.C., *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005). Alida Metcalf argues that “go-betweeners” – individuals who could bridge indigenous and European cultures – helped shape Brazilian society in the sixteenth century.
- Schwartz, S.B., *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992). This book provides insights on how the shifting power relationship between enslaved people and slaveholders reshaped the contours of Brazilian society. Stuart Schwartz demonstrates the complexity of the system by reconsidering work, resistance, kinship, and relations between enslaved persons and peasants.
- Smallwood, S., *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Stephanie Smallwood examines how the people at the center of her story – merchant capitalists, sailors, and slaves – made sense of the bloody process in which they were joined. The result is both a remarkable transatlantic view of the culture of enslavement, and a painful, intimate vision of the bloody, daily business of the slave trade.
- Williams, E., *Capitalism and Slavery – Third Edition* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021). Arguing that the slave trade was at the heart of Britain’s economic progress, Eric Williams’s landmark 1944 study revealed the connections between capitalism and racism, and has influenced generations of historians ever since.

## CHAPTER 6.

# Religion: Perspective and Practice

JOCHEM VAN DEN BOOGERT



## Introduction

Over the last two decades, especially since the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, a global rise in religious violence appears undeniable. From Islamophobia in North America to Hindu-Nationalism in India, from the persecution of Yazidis in the Middle East to militant Buddhist monks in mainland Southeast Asia: across the globe, religious intolerance dominates social and political agendas.\* For a long time the stereotypical image of the peaceful and tranquil Buddhist was very powerful. A case in point is the peaceful resistance of Aung San Suu Kyi against the military government in Myanmar, which won her a Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Her participation in Burmese politics was widely regarded as a crucial step towards a full-fledged democracy and fueled hopes for an end to half a century of military rule in the country. However, since 2016 military-dominated factions of the Burmese government organized, together with extremist Buddhist monks, a violent persecution and expulsion of the Rohingya, an Islamic minority living near the border with Bangladesh. Failing to condemn these actions, the international community called upon Aung San Suu Kyi to return her Nobel prize.



**Image 6.1** Aung San Suu Kyi

\* The Clash of Civilizations thesis which informs some of this thinking will be discussed in chapter 12.



The image of the peaceful Buddhist has been tarnished. This chapter dives into the discussion about the role religion plays and has played in defining and understanding non-Western cultures. It investigates, with a specific focus on Buddhism and Myanmar, how one culture (the West) came to understand another (the East) in terms of religious beliefs and practices. The main argument of this chapter is that the lens we use to study phenomena is important for what we see. This applies here, in particular, to the study of religion in its historical context.

The matter of defining religion is well known for being a theoretical minefield. This is easily illustrated by reflecting on a typical definition of religion, such as the one from the 1991 edition of Webster's dictionary of the English language: "Man's [humankind's] expression of his [its] acknowledgment of the divine: a system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred and uniting its adherents in a community". A couple of things should strike us in this definition. Firstly, religion is said to be something that is inherent to humankind. In other words, humans have the capacity to religion, and all over the world different people have their religion. Secondly, religion is focused on the divine, this could be one god, or multiple gods, or a supernatural power. Thirdly, religion revolves around a particular set of beliefs and practices related to the sacred or the divine. Lastly, although the capacity to religion is located in the individual, religion is something that pertains to a community. This means that when we speak of a religion, we often mean a group of people that adhere to the same religious beliefs and practice the same religious rites and traditions. The same dictionary entry continues by identifying a number of major religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism.

This is where problems start: when we compare, for example, Islam and Buddhism, the former perfectly fits the category as defined above, the latter does not. Muslims, despite great internal variety within Islam, do share a number of religious beliefs, such as faith in Allah as the one and only God, the omnipotent creator of the universe. Being a Muslim implies one subjects oneself to the will of Allah, as it was revealed to Mohammed, the last Prophet, and has been recorded in the Qur'an. Buddhism, however, in none of its variations, knows such a divinity or god. The Buddha is not divine, he is neither a god nor a prophet, but a mere human who found a way (not *the* way) to Nirvana, i.e. the cessation of human suffering. Moreover, his teachings are not a divine revelation, but a set of practical instructions on how to achieve that enlightened state. The Tripitaka (the Buddhist canon) does not record a divine revelation, but lists the rules and prohibitions of monastic life, the teaching of the Buddha, and the analysis and interpretation thereof.

In short, although Islam and Buddhism are both categorized as religions, they appear to be fundamentally different. This incongruity has, of course, not escaped scholars of religion and many have attempted to explain and rectify these and similar dissonances in their respective theories. Not only did this lead to a rampant

growth in the number of definitions of religion – especially in the latter half of the twentieth century – but there also seems to be no consensus on which to employ. Since the jury is still out on the issue, one should not expect us to solve the issue here.

Most historical, archeological, and anthropological scholarship considers religion to be a constituent component of the societies and cultures that populate our world. For example, the historical emergence of civilizations, i.e. complex societies, was for a long time thought to have been accompanied by an increasing complexity in religious thought and practice.\* Whether or not, and to what extent, religion facilitated the rise of complex, urbanized and hierarchical societies is a matter of scholarly debate. The dominant theory in both History and Archeology has long been that a more organized, ritualized and monumentalized form of spiritualism or religion, as opposed to a more intangible, individual, family or clan based spiritual experience, became dominant throughout the world with the first Agrarian or Neolithic Revolution (ca. 10.000-8000 BCE). This revolution entailed that humankind shifted from being (semi-)nomadic, following wild game and/or seasonal ripening in order to gather their food supplies, to becoming settled and dependent on planned food production (agriculture). As a result, societies became more stratified: the food resources which were firstly produced also had to be stored and thus guarded, leading to the diversification of tasks within a community. The increase in diversification of tasks was thought to have sparked a continuously more hierarchical organization of societies in which those who guard and protect were ranked higher than those who produce. For instance, those who became tasked with seeking and ‘guarding’ the blessings of god, the blessing of a good harvest, were seen to be even more important in early societies. However, recent archeological evidence has been taken to indicate that religion, as a monumental and complex organized communal expression of spirituality, probably predates the Neolithic revolution. Scholars think that certain prehistoric sites of devotion coalesced with sites of seasonal markets. For example, in Bronze Age South East Asia, great ceremonial drums cast in bronze (Image 6.2), which scholars believe have played an important role in religious ceremonies, were unearthed in places where seasonal markets and gatherings are known to have been held.\*\* On that basis it has been speculated that such rituals served the purpose of celebrating successful harvests or mercantile exchanges. Moreover, scholars hypothesize that such rituals helped to cement bonds between non-familial communities, who perhaps met only once a year. Contemporary scholarship thus argues that, from the earliest times, religious

\* J.R. McNeill and H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of Human History* (London: Norton, 2003); Harvey Whitehouse et al., “Complex Societies precede Moralizing Gods throughout World History,” *Nature* Vol. 595, No. 320 (2021). Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03656-3> Last accessed 15 April 2022.

\*\* Charles F.W. Higham, ‘Ritual and Religion in South-East Asia’, in: Timothy Insoll (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 470-481.

practices have helped societies that were scattered over great distances to retain a sense of belonging and communality.



**Image 6.2** Dong Son Type 1 Bronze Drum, 300 to 200 BCE, Vietnam

Another notable departure point for the discussion of the origins of religion is the idea of the Axial Age, a period from 800 till 200 BCE that is believed to have seen the emergence of more universally oriented religious and philosophical thought. It is argued by scholars such as Karl Jaspers and more recently by Karen Armstrong that world religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism came about during this period, as did the Greek philosophy of amongst others Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. These world religions and philosophies are believed to distinguish themselves from earlier forms of religion by the universality of their message. Although religions without such a universal message or outlook had already been widely spread, they did not cut across different societies. This then is what is thought to differentiate the philosophies and religions of the Axial Age: the capacity to extend a universal and unifying message across different societies and spheres of political influence. The new world religions with their universal message could find practitioners of faith in vast areas which did not have a political unity.

Religious studies is the academic discipline that aims to study religious beliefs, practices, and institutions from a non-theological perspective. This means that it

wishes to study religion, without taking up a particular religious viewpoint. It relies on methodologies and insights from philology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, etc. It has roots in late nineteenth century scholarships, such as that of the famous Indologist Max Müller, whose 1873 *Introduction to the Science of Religion* is considered a foundational work. The discipline rose to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. Works such as Mircea Eliade's *A History of Religious Ideas* and Ninian Smart's *World Religions: A Dialogue* are typical of this period.\*

Religious studies distinguishes between world religions and local religions. A world religion refers to a large and internationally widespread religion. Typically, the term is used for Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These “world religions” are regarded as different entities of similar stature. Publications such as Karl Jaspers's *The Origin and Goal of History* rely heavily on this idea.\*\* The concept of world religion is commonly contrasted with that of local religion, which denotes religious beliefs and practices that are deemed unique to a specific region and community. As such, they do not transcend social or national boundaries. Although the categories of world and local religion are commonly accepted in religious studies, the task of explaining what religion is – and also of defining it – is usually avoided.

Each of the five world religions can be found in the South and Southeast Asian region. For example, India is home to, amongst others, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism; the main religion in the Philippines is Catholicism; the principal religion in Malaysia, Pakistan and Indonesia is Islam; Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao and Cambodia practice Buddhism. Add to this the myriad of local religious traditions and the virtually endless array of cross-pollinations, and it is easy to understand the region's reputation for harboring an immense religious variety. However, things have not always been that straightforward. In fact, it has taken centuries of investigation to identify and label this region's traditions in terms of religion, to frame their central religious tenets, and to link them to ethnic, social, or national groups. This chapter is restricted to just one piece of this puzzle: Buddhism in Burma and its Western roots.

As our contemporary world at large, and the region of South and Southeast Asia in particular, is reportedly seeing more than its share of religious intolerance and identity politics based on religious norms and values, it pays off to have a basic understanding of the historical process by which the religions in this region came to be identified, imagined, and even constructed.

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\* Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, 3 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976-1986); Ninian Smart, *World Religions: A Dialogue* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1960).

\*\* Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zürich: Artemis, 1949).



## Historiography: World Religion: Buddhism

Virtually since its inception, the scholarship on Buddhism has faced a conundrum: is it a religion or not? Consider, for example, the following statement of S.N. Goenka (1924–2013), an immensely influential Buddhist teacher: “The Buddha taught practical Dhamma, the actual way to live a wholesome life. And Vipassana is the practical know-how to lead a life of real happiness.”\* Goenka considers Vipassana, a meditation technique, to be at the heart of the Buddha’s teachings. Furthermore, neither Vipassana nor the Buddha’s teachings are religion to him. However, if Buddhism is not a religion, then what is it? A philosophy? A way of life? These and associated questions have been endemic to the study of Buddhism. From the broader perspective of Religious Studies, a discipline that came to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century, such questions have been related to the issue of defining religion.

In order to decide which phenomena do or do not belong to the category of religion, we need to know what its essential characteristics are: a sacred scripture, a community of believers, a prophet, belief in god(s)? If we define a religion as a system of beliefs that revolves around a revelation which concerns an omnipotent god, then Christianity, Islam and Judaism fall into that category.



### 6.a Concept Definition

#### Religion

*A set of beliefs inherent to humankind focused on the divine which inform a set of practices which are carried out individually as well as communally.*

Consequently, if Buddhism is a tradition of practical teachings that does not rely on any such revelation and is basically atheistic, is it then still a religion? Is there a way to define religion that allows for categorizing both Christianity and Buddhism as such? Questions such as these have occupied scholars of Religious Studies since the 1950s. Today, however, most religious scholars appear to agree that defining religion is a futile, if not impossible, task. Hence, they prefer to avoid these gnarly questions. Nevertheless, the issue is hardly settled and every now and then it is brought up again.

This perplexing state of affairs is related to the historiography of Buddhism: how, when, and by whom the history of Buddhism as a religion came to be written has everything to do with the ambiguity of its status as a religion. In particular, the conceptual framework within which this was executed plays a significant role. By

\* FAQs on Vipassana Meditation. Questions and answers with Mr. S.N. Goenka, <https://www.vridhamma.org/Questions-and-Answers-About-the-Technique-of-Vipassana-Meditation>. Last consulted 15 April 2022.

means of illustration, consider the following facts. The origins of Hinduism – which is considered the religion of which Buddhism is an offshoot – are usually traced back to roughly 1750 BCE, sometimes even to 3500 BCE. Buddhism is thought to have been founded in the sixth century BCE. However, the term ‘Hinduism’ was coined as late as 1787 CE.\* Similarly, the term ‘Buddhism’ was first used in print in 1817.\*\* Before that time, the myriad traditions these terms refer to were labelled heathenism, paganism, superstition or idolatry. One can find such descriptions in the travel accounts of the numerous Western travelers to Asia from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. These terms of description were part of a Western, Christian vocabulary and indicate what they regarded as primitive religions, false beliefs, and the worship of false gods respectively. A case in point could be Marco Polo’s travel account. Although experts disagree on whether or not his discussion of the city of Mien concerns Pegu, a port city in Myanmar, we can at least discern the way he speaks about their religion, viz. he calls the inhabitants idolaters.\*\*\* Interestingly, there were no indigenous counterparts for the terms “Hinduism” and “Buddhism” and associated concepts in Sanskrit or Pali, the languages of the ‘sacred’ Hindu and Buddhist texts. These terms were actually introduced into Asian languages by Western scholars and missionaries. It certainly is telling that there was no Burmese equivalent for either the term and concept of religion or for the term and concept of Buddhism. Both were coined by the missionary Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) in the 1820s.\*\*\*\* The identification and study of Buddhism as a religion also entailed writing its history – who its founder was, when he lived, how this religion spread, etc. This historiography is to be credited first to eighteenth century missionaries and then to nineteenth century scholars. Hence, the concept of Buddhism as a religion, its history, and the study of both have demonstrable geographical and conceptual roots in Western scholarship. Finally, through (colonial) education and missionary activities, these ideas found their way into the minds of the actual Burmese ‘Buddhists’. In short, the conceptualization of Buddhism and its continuous study represent not just how people, but also how ideas, travel.

The scientific study of Buddhism was initiated with the discovery, translation, and analysis of Sanskrit and Pali scriptures by mostly British and German philologists in the course of the nineteenth century. However, Western travelers and missionaries had already for centuries been describing the beliefs and practices of what they thought were the indigenous religions of South and Southeast Asia.

\* Geoffrey A. Oddie, ‘Hindu Religious Identity with Special Reference to the Origin and Significance of the Term “Hinduism” c. 1787-1947’, in: Esther Bloch and Marianne Keppens (eds) *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 45.

\*\* Michel Jean François Ozeray and Urs App, *First Western Book on Buddhism and Buddha: Ozeray's Recherches sur Buddou of 1817* (Paris: University Media, 2017).

\*\*\* Hugh Murray, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Harper: New York, 1845), p. 147.

\*\*\*\* Gustaaf Houtman, ‘How a Foreigner Invented “Buddhendom” in Burmese: From Tha-tha-na to Bok-da’Ba-tha, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Oxford* ‘Vol. 21, No. 2 (1990), pp. 113-128.



Especially the missionaries, such as the Jesuits, a Catholic missionary order founded in the sixteenth century, were instrumental in tracing back numerous local traditions to one original teacher, Gautama Buddha, thereby aiding in the conceptualization of a single religion that had spread over the entire region. Their missionary zeal encouraged them to study the languages, histories, customs, and what they held to be the religious views of the many different societies of Asia. One such missionary was Francis Xavier, a founding member of the Jesuit order, who preached in India and China. These Jesuits were ethnographers *avant la lettre*, and their descriptions were based upon the same familiar categories as discussed above. In the course of the seventeenth century, Jesuits would speak of a *doctrina orientalis* (oriental belief system) that was supposedly present across Asia and revolved around certain essential doctrines, such as the belief in reincarnation.\* Parts of this allegedly pan-Asian religion correspond to what we now recognize as Buddhism. This phase was thus conducive to conceiving of a religion that had spread over a large geographical area and had in the process differentiated into separate, yet related, religious traditions. This entity became known as Buddhism only as late as the early nineteenth century. Subsequently, in the course of the latter half of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century, Western philologists provided it with a textual foundation through the translation of Sanskrit and Pali texts. Once this entity was established as a scholarly object, archeology and anthropology added detail and nuance.

Knowledge is power, and this is certainly the case for colonial rule in South and Southeast Asia. In order to better govern their colonies, subsequent colonial governments needed administrators familiar with the customs, laws, and languages of the peoples inhabiting their 'possessions'. To this end, these men (they were all men) received an education in assigned colleges, tailored to their future tasks in the colonies. These administrators-to-be would be trained in administration and accounting, agricultural sciences, civil engineering, and/or the colonial judiciary system – the skills necessary to develop and manage a profitable colony. They would also receive an education in the cultures of the colonies: the 'character', customs, languages, and so on, of the peoples living there. Strikingly, at the heart of this endeavor to understand the cultures of South and Southeast Asia lies the question of religion.

What concepts and theories were available to them to make sense of the cultures they encountered? A very limited amount of literature on the region was available in the late fifteenth, early sixteenth century. There were some fragments dating back to Antiquity, some rare travel accounts, but mostly there was the Bible, which provided an account both of the history of the world and of the peoples inhabiting it. The importance of this source cannot be overstated, as at least up until the end

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\* Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 4-5.





**Image 6.3** André Reinoso. Francis Xavier Preaching in Goa (India), 1619-1622

of the nineteenth century most elements of the Biblical account of the origin and spread of humankind were taken literally. After all, Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published only in 1859, *The Descent of Man* in 1871, and it took decades for his ideas to become generally accepted. Thus, for centuries on end it was taken for a fact that the Earth had been repopulated after the Deluge by Noah's sons – Shem, Ham, Japheth – and their wives.\* Consequently, it was also taken to be true that Noah's offspring had spread the original religion, i.e. Christianity, to all corners of the world, and that over time, due to the machinations of the devil and his minions, most of the peoples inhabiting the Earth had strayed from the true religion. This implies that to the Western travelers at the dawn of the *Age of Discovery* it was unfathomable that the peoples they were to meet at the other end of the world would be deprived of religion.



## 6.b Concept Definition

### Age of Discovery

*The period in history from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century when the European seafaring powers commanded the sea and 'discovered' other parts of the globe.*

\* The Deluge is the worldwide flood by which, according to the Bible, God purged the Earth of the corruption and wickedness humankind had fallen into. Only Noah, his family, and the animals on his ark were spared from God's wrath.

This conceptual framework was to a very large degree explicitly theologically Christian in nature. Within this Christian theological framework, people would be either Christian, i.e. adherents to the one true faith; Jewish, i.e. those who (erroneously) had not accepted Christ as the Messiah; Muslim, i.e. those who (erroneously) had accepted Mohammed as the last prophet; or Heathen, those who (erroneously) worshipped something or someone other than the god of Israel. In short, the conceptual apparatus with which to make sense of those cultures so radically different from their own would have been extremely limited. However, it is important to identify the one element that is crucial to the story at hand: the assumption that religion is a cultural universal given.



### Historiography: Local Religion: Burmese Buddhism

The universality of religion – or rather the assumption of it – underlies and helps to structure the Western observations, descriptions and understanding of the cultures of South and Southeast Asia. For one thing, since each culture is thought to be home to its religion(s), cultures can be distinguished accordingly. A case in point is Myanmar which is said to sport its own kind of Buddhism, a combination of Buddhism and local beliefs and customs.\* However, such an understanding of Burmese culture emerged only over the course of an extended period of time, the process of which will be illustrated through the following punctuated overview. We can distinguish four stages.

In the first stage, in a period before we can speak of Western colonization, we find the very first identification of a religious entity. With only a very modest frame of reference and virtually no accounts of Burma available, the groundwork for the conceptualization of Burmese Buddhism is carried out in this period. These early descriptions reflect the above sketched Biblical expectations, as they speak of the Burmese as heathens, idolaters and devil worshippers.

During the second phase, knowledge about the ‘religion’ of the Burmese increased. Interestingly, these findings, drawn from observations of practices and from conversations with locals, were still mapped on the conceptual mold most familiar to them, that of Christianity. The main point of convergence: as it is assumed that the Burmese adhere to a false religion – Christianity being the true one – the focus of the investigation is on the (false) god and the (false) beliefs the Burmese adhere to.

\* Myanmar and Burma mean the same thing and both terms are in use in the country itself. The first is more literary, the second is more colloquial. In 1989, after the authoritarian rule of Ne Win, the then new military government decided to name the country Myanmar instead of Burma, indicating a break with the colonial past. Today however, using the term Myanmar is sometimes taken as an implicit recognition of the military rule, which has become discredited.

It is only during the third stage, with the scholarly study of it, that the term Buddhism appears. The first time it does so in print would be in Michel Ozeray's 1817 *Recherches sur Buddou ou Boudou, Instituteur Religieux de l'Asie Orientale*. This work is one of the first to provide a systematic account of what was known about Buddhism to that day. It relies on an extensive number of primary and secondary sources, amongst which are reports from Western scholars, merchants, missionaries and diplomats. As such it is more a compendium of received knowledge than an original work. Buddhism is presented as a religion with a core set of beliefs, a shared body of practices, and a community of believers (both monks and lay people). As before, Buddhism is described along the lines of Christianity, even up to the point of discussing heresies within Buddhism.

A subsequent boost to the scholarship of Buddhism came from the 'discovery', translation, and analysis of Buddhist texts, which took off in earnest after 1837 when Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) received a series of Sanskrit manuscripts that Brian Hodgson (1800-1894) had collected in Nepal. Based upon these texts, Burnouf wrote *Introduction à l'Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (1844) and from it he published *Le Lotus de la bonne Loi* (1852), a translation of a key Buddhist text, the Lotus Sutra. Thus, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Buddhism came to be studied from a textual perspective: based upon Sanskrit and Pali sources, the already well-known themes of historical founder, ethics, theology/doctrine, and monasticism are further developed. That is to say, these already familiar themes are provided with a textual foundation. Notably, the previously explicitly Biblical framework gradually receded into the background: there is less talk of devil's worship, idolatry, and superstition. Certain scholars even admired Buddha and Buddhism. However, this did not mean that the old Christian mold was no longer in effect. The mentioned focal points were still present and an additional Christian theme was added: Buddhism was now conceived of as a reformation of Hinduism, along the lines of the Protestant Reformation vs. Catholicism. Buddha thus becomes to Hinduism what Martin Luther was to Catholicism.\*

Additionally, the historical connections between the 'Buddhisms' of the different Asian regions now became consolidated on a scriptural basis. Based upon lineages of text, by which scriptures can be traced back to their supposed original, the historical spread of Buddhism from somewhere in India, over Southeast Asia, all the way to East Asia was reconstructed. As a result, Buddhism received the status of a world religion, i.e. it became recognized as one of the five largest and most widespread religions on the globe. Its status as a world religion distinguishes it from, on the one hand, other world religions and, on the other, from local religions.\*\*

\* Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 70-74.

\*\* Tomoku Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions. Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 262-263.

A final phase sees a move away from this large and all-encompassing category of Buddhism, towards the idea of different, local 'Buddhisms'. From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, especially as a result of anthropological fieldwork, scholars started to focus on what they considered local religious practices, rather than on textual standards. In their efforts to make sense of the culture of the Burmese, scholars noted that few Burmese were strict Buddhists. Firstly, they were not that orthodox, i.e. their practices and beliefs were not always vindicated by Buddhist scriptures. Secondly, the Burmese were also engaged in many other practices, such as Weikza cults and Nat worship, both of which could be considered to be at odds with Buddhism. The former indicates alchemist practices and cults revolving around wizards who, among other things, strive for immortality. The latter refers to the rituals and traditions surrounding Nats, powerful spirits who need to be propitiated on a regular basis in order to avert misfortune or to obtain certain material goods or success.



**Image 6.4** Shwedagon Pagoda

The Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon (Myanmar) offers an illustration of this blending of different traditions. Although Shwedagon is a Buddhist pagoda, many of its constitutive parts have little to do with Buddhism. Firstly, there is the practice of Hindu astrology. Within Shwedagon there are 8 planetary posts which correspond to the days of the week (Wednesday is split in two). People visit the planetary post that corresponds with the day they were born. Each post is marked by an animal representing that day, a guardian spirit or Nat, and a Buddha image. Here, people offer flowers and flags, and pour water on the image, while pronouncing a recitation. This ritual, which blends these different traditions, is called the Blessing Ritual.

Architecturally speaking as well, the Shwedagon pagoda contains elements that can be traced back to different traditions. There is a Banyan tree, descended from the Mahabodhi Temple in India, the place where Buddha is said to have reached enlightenment. Besides shrines devoted to the Buddha and famous monks, there are shrines devoted to Nats, god-like spirits that need to be appeased by means of offerings and paying respect. Additionally, there are shrines devoted to Weikza, a kind of wizard or alchemist who is believed to have obtained eternal life. All of these receive special attention by the visitors to the temple.

### Burmese Buddhism as a local religion

The combination of such divergent elements, as exemplified in the different shrines of the Shwedagon pagoda and in practices such as the Blessing Ritual, have presented scholars with a puzzle. If the Burmese are Buddhists, then how do we explain this simultaneous adherence to other practices, many of which are at odds with Buddhism: e.g. the Weikza's striving for immortality does not fit well with the Buddhist goal of nirvana, i.e. ending the cycle of rebirth, a cessation of life. Similarly, placating Nats out of fear or desire is at odds with the Buddhist ideal of equanimity. Currently, there are two main solutions to this problem. The first is to think of the Burmese Buddhist as adhering to two or more religious systems: besides adherence to a Buddhist religion, the Burmese Buddhist also practices alternative religions, such as Nat worship. A second solution, currently more popular, is to think of the



**Image 6.5** Guardian of the Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon, Burma





**Image 6.6** Shwedagon Ritual (1)



**Image 6.7** Shwedagon Ritual (2)

Burmese as adherents to a local religion, called Burmese Buddhism. This Burmese Buddhism is regarded as a combination of Buddhism, Nat worship, and Weikza cults. It is then argued that Buddhism encompasses the practices and beliefs of the other 'religious' systems, i.e. they have been 'Buddhified'. Both solutions lead to new conundrums, such as: How committed to Buddhism are the Burmese really? Or, how does one explain that the Burmese are not perturbed by the above-mentioned apparent contradictions?

In the conceptualization of the local religion called Burmese Buddhism, it is claimed that this is the way Buddhism is expressed locally, in Burma. The

underlying argument is that when Buddhism arrived in Burma, it did not remain unaltered, but somehow absorbed local practices and beliefs. Consequently, it came to diverge from orthodox Buddhism as sanctified by the canonical scriptures. It is important to point out how this idea of a local Buddhism is still embedded in the same old conceptual framework. Firstly, the practices the Burmese are engaged in are thought to be expressions of certain (religious) beliefs. Secondly, there is a tendency to think of Weikza cults and Nat worship in terms of religion and belief. This too is not self-evident. Thirdly, the 'beliefs' of the Burmese are compared with what is considered Buddhist beliefs. Consequently, it is established that some of the Burmese and Buddhist 'beliefs' and their concomitant practices are at odds with each other. Or, alternatively, it is argued that certain beliefs and practices have been brought in line with Buddhist beliefs.



### 6.c Concept Definition

#### Religious Syncretism

*A combination of different, usually opposing, religious beliefs and practices.*

In the domain of Religious Studies, the term syncretism means the combination of different religious beliefs and practices. In that sense all religions are syncretist. For instance, wherever Christianity settled, it absorbed local practices and beliefs. This is why e.g. Catholicism in Belgium is different from that in Mexico or the Philippines. The same can be said about Islam in Tunisia and in Indonesia. In these cases it is more accurate to speak of religious assimilation, or acculturation. A more precise understanding of syncretism holds that it is the combination of religious beliefs and practices that actually cannot go together. For example, in the case of Burmese Buddhism it is argued that the belief in nirvana, which is to be attained through the cessation of all desire, is in contradiction with the religious practice of making offerings to Nats for the purpose of obtaining something, which is a condonation of desire. Suggesting that the Burmese adhere to such contradictory beliefs falls under the banner of syncretism. Both in its broad and narrow understanding, syncretism carries the connotation of heterodoxy; it is not in line with sacred scripture. For this reason, syncretism is more often associated with local religions, and as such, religious studies recognize syncretism all over the world. For instance, in the eighteenth century many Wampanoag – a Native American tribe – were reported to blend elements of Reformed Protestantism, such as pastoral care, a providential worldview, and elements of Protestant ethics with their native traditions, such as fasting, dream interpretation, and shamanism.\* The Sukuma of

\* Julius H. Rubin, *Tears of Repentance: Christian Indian Identity and Community in Colonial Southern New England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).



West-Central Tanzania are said to practice a syncretist mixture of African religion – mostly ancestral worship and witchcraft – and Christian tradition.\* As discussed in chapter five, Brazil knows of Cadomblé, which is understood to be a syncretist blend of Roman Catholicism and West-African traditions that came about amidst the Atlantic slave trade.

## The Burmese Reception of “Buddhism”

If Buddhism as a religion is the way the West has made sense of certain traditions in South and Southeast Asia and if we have good reasons to doubt the veracity and accuracy of such an understanding, then an obvious question follows: If Buddhism is not a religion, then what is it? Here too there are no easy answers. However, the reception of the concept of “Buddhism” in Burma might provide us the beginnings of an answer. In order to translate the Western term Buddhism into Burmese, and in the absence of a conceptual counterpart in that language, the Burmese neologism *botdabada* was coined. This feat has been credited to the American Baptist missionary Judson, who preached in Burma from the 1810s to 1840s.\*\* *Botdabada* is a combination of *botda*, the Pali term for Buddha, and *bada*, the Pali term for language and text. It is thus not featured in Buddhist scriptures. Over time, however, the word came to be adopted by the Burmese themselves, but it appears that they use it to refer to something different from what Western missionaries and scholars had in mind. For the Burmese, *botdabada* is more closely associated with culture rather than with religion. This is to say, *botdabada* is about certain traditional practices that one has learned from parents and grandparents, such as: organizing the ceremonies accompanying the ordination of boys, practicing charity, taking the precepts (abstaining from taking life, abstaining from taking what is not given, abstaining from sensuous misconduct, abstaining from false speech, abstaining from intoxicants) on specific holidays, listening to teachings of monks, visiting monasteries and pagodas, paying respect to monks, etc.\*\*\* In short, the term *bodtabada* is understood in terms of traditions, i.e. as sets of practices handed down over generations, and not in terms of (religious) beliefs.

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\* Frans Wijzen, ‘Popular Christianity in East Africa: inculturation or syncretism?’, *Exchange* Vol. 29, No.1 (2000), pp. 37–60.

\*\* Houtman, ‘How a Foreigner Invented “Buddhism” in Burmese’, p. 115–117.

\*\*\* Ibidem, p. 117–119.

## Conclusion

This historical overview has shed light on the process that led to the conceptualization of Buddhism as a world religion and of Burmese Buddhism as a local religion. Attention has been drawn to the conceptual framework within which this has been carried out. A fundamental aspect in this framework is the universality of religion, which has compelled Western observers and scholars alike to see and describe religions where in actuality there might be none. The conceptualization and study of Burmese religion was initiated in the early modern period by Western visitors to the region – merchants, sailors, military men, missionaries, civil servants. Because of their shared conceptual framework, which has demonstrable Christian theological roots, they took religion to be culturally universal, and were compelled to see religion even in those cultures where the actual concept of it was absent. Consequently, over the course of several centuries, various traditions or aspects thereof, came to be described as religions. A case in point is Buddhism, which received the status of world religion in the course of the twentieth century. As scholarship shifted its focus to local religions, the idea of a Burmese Buddhism emerged. The assumption of the universality of religion in particular raises doubts as to the accuracy of such accounts about religion in South and Southeast Asia. We can recognize similar scholarly patterns in the study of other non-Western societies and cultures.

## Guiding questions

1. What is a world religion and why is Buddhism considered one?
2. What is a local religion and why is Burmese Buddhism considered one?
3. What does it mean for religion to be culturally universal and what is the origin of this assumption?
4. What did the discovery, translation and analysis of Buddhism's sacred texts add to what was already known about this 'religion'?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Balagangadhara, S. N., *'The Heathen in His Blindness...' Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005). A thorough analysis of the conceptualization of Asian religion – in particular that of Hinduism – complemented with a theoretical framework for studying religion and culture.
- Brac de la Perrière, Bénédicte, *Champions of Buddhism: Weikza Cults in Contemporary Burma* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014). An excellent example of how Burmese Buddhism is currently being conceptualized and studied as a local religion.
- Houtman, Gustaaf, 'How a Foreigner Invented "Buddhendom" in Burmese: From Tha-tha-na to Bok-da'Ba-tha', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Oxford* Vol. 21, No. 2 (1990), pp. 113-128. One of the very few accounts that investigates the Burmese reception of the concept of Buddhism.
- Leopold, Anita, and Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004). A discussion of syncretism from several scholarly perspectives.
- Masuzawa, Tomoku. *The Invention of World Religions. Or, How European Universalism was preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). A major contribution to the critical approach towards the idea and study of world religions.
- Roover, Jakob De., 'Incurably Religious? Consensus Gentium and the Cultural Universality of Religion.' *Numen* Vol. 61, No. 1 (2014), pp. 5-32. A concise overview of how the assumption of the universality of religion underlies the study of non-Western cultures.



## INTRODUCTION PART II

# The Modern World (> 1800 CE)

GINA VAN LING & ANNE MARIEKE VAN DER WAL

“It is easy to cut down the tree of liberty, but not easy to restore it to life”  
—Toussaint L'Ouverture



**Image II. 1** Toussaint L'Ouverture on horseback



**Image II. 2** Napoleon on horseback



**Image II. 3** Simon Bolívar in Carabobo

The periodization of World History into pre-modern times and the modern era has a very obvious meta-historical and Eurocentric connotation. The concept of the modern state, i.e. the liberal democratic-state, being the pinnacle of human progress, neatly fits with the persistent teleological view of history moving towards a clear end goal. We can see these assumptions not only in historical scholarship but even more prominently in the social sciences, think for instance of publications like Seymour Lipset's *Some Social Requisites of Democracy*, Francis Fukuyama's *End of History and the Last Man* or Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*.<sup>\*</sup> This understanding of history as being finite and purposeful also has an obvious normative element, in that it

<sup>\*</sup> Seymour Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy; Economic Development and Legitimacy', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (1959), pp. 69-105; Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*.

assumes that the dominance of 'Western' civilization since the mid-nineteenth century is not random nor temporary but rather the logical result of progress and the universal standard to aspire to. In this light, other (non-Western) societies who were perceived to not yet have reached this state of modernity were consigned to, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, "the waiting room of history."<sup>\*</sup> Such a reading of 'modernity' and its perceived inevitability has received much criticism over the past decades, from among others post-modern and post-colonial theorists. Yet, to reject the concept of modernity all together, one ignores some very fundamental changes which occurred in the recent past that have certainly sped up progress, from for instance a technological perspective, as well as brought about considerable social changes. Indeed, the American historian Richard Wolin stated that "the evidence for modernity's obsolescence as an analytical concept for historical study is both overwhelming and overstated".<sup>\*\*</sup> Considering the weight scholars place on either advocating, criticizing or understanding the concept, 'modernity' remains an important idea, not an ideal, to consider when trying to understand historical change and the historiographical discussions on the interpretation of the past.

But what is modernity anyway? While the concept has already been introduced in the opening chapter, the term 'modern' can mean different things, depending on the context or discipline. In colloquial usage, 'modern' is used to denote something in the present or recent past. It thus first and foremost signifies a break with the past, more specifically a break with traditions and a past deemed static or cyclical and therefore unchanging. Yet, a linear perspective of time did already exist long before this supposed break with the unchanging traditional past and, moreover, existed in almost all literate societies both Western and non-Western, as it is a logical and 'intrinsic part of life histories'<sup>\*\*\*</sup> as the historian Jack Goody has shown. Instead historians today recognize a difference between a monotheistic linearity perspective and a 'liberal teleological' view of history. The 'modern era' or 'modernity' can therefore also refer to the historical period itself in which this break with 'tradition' or break with a monotheistic teleological perspective of history is believed to have occurred. In the Western scholarly tradition this is sub-divided into the 'early modern' period (ca. sixteenth to eighteenth century) and the 'late modern' period (ca. nineteenth to mid-twentieth century). This periodization is based on certain historical processes, all of which occurred in Europe, which are seen to have contributed to a set of qualities that are considered 'modern', i.e. technological innovation, rationality, secularization and democracy. These qualities were believed

<sup>\*</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2007) p. 8.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Richard Wolin, "'Modernity': The Peregrinations of a Contested Historiographical Concept", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 3 (2011), pp. 241-251, p. 241.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Goody, *The Theft of History*, 18.

to have found their origins in the Renaissance (ca. 1400-1600 CE), Enlightenment (1600-1800 CE), and Industrial Revolution (ca. 1700-1900 CE).

Within this context, modernity in the Western world was thus characterized by the qualities of progress, the progression away from an *ancien regime* with its traditional values, and the questioning of the supposed natural and eternal order in the world. Max Weber, the nineteenth century German historian and early sociologist remarked that the shift to the modern era was predominantly a shift in thinking, not per se a shift in modes of production (as for example Marxists would argue). As such, rationality was seen as an important characteristic: the idea that societies made choices based on scientific methods (that were predictable and replicable) and based on logic (think of for instance Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*, 1637). This process of rationalization did not lead immediately to a process of secularization but it certainly paved the way, as almost all forms of traditional power and their legitimacy were questioned. Consequently, the role of religion and that of the church changed fundamentally in modern societies from an all-encompassing force and institute of authority to a practice and organization with a particularly defined space within society. Traditional hierarchies, such as church and crown, were broken down and the individual now played a central role. Moreover, modern societies were self-aware of being modern and attached identities and principles to it such as for example 'peoples' sovereignty' and nationhood. Indeed, the historian Christopher Bayly has noted that the modern age was modern "precisely because a considerable number of thinkers, statesmen, and scientists who dominated the ordering of society believed it to be so".\*

A more Marxist, that is historical materialist understanding of modernity, rather sees the rapid changes in the economic system as the most profound break with the past. Several historians have argued that the rapid progress Europeans experienced from the late eighteenth and nineteenth century onwards was made possible only by their extractive business overseas, and that colonization was thus at the heart of the emergence of a 'global industrial order'.\*\* In this light, the process of modernization was fundamentally unequal, with a center (Europe) and its periphery (the non-Western world) and the perceived inability to modernize or 'develop' was explained, in the words of Gunter Frank "not due to the survival of archaic institutions and the existence of capital shortage in regions that remained isolated from the stream of world history" but seen as the consequence of "the same historical process which

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\* Christopher A. Bayly, *The Making of the Modern World, 1780-1914. Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) p. 10.

\*\* See for instance: J.M Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993) or Immanuel Wallerstein (ed.), *The Age of Transition. Trajectory of the World-System 1945-2025* (London: Zed Books/Pluto Press, 1996).



also generated economic development: the development of capitalism itself".\* Yet, such an understanding of the nature of the historical rupture we call modernization is nevertheless Eurocentric at heart, as it continues to see Europe as the source and motor of change.

Indeed, what is considered 'modern' is, as said, often fundamentally associated with nineteenth century Europe and the ideas and institutions and economic structures that were developed by Europeans in the early modern and modern period. This way of defining the modern dismisses the possibility of modernity existing in other parts of the world before it occurred in Europe as well as ignoring the global exchanges of ideas which enabled a process of modernization. For example, Samir Amin has convincingly argued the crucial role Islamic scholars played in the scientific revolution in his book *Eurocentrism*\*\*; Paul Gilroy famously demonstrated the pivotal role of the African diaspora on the emergence of modernity in the Atlantic World in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* and Francis Fukuyama has argued in his multiple volume work *The Origins of Political Order* that the Chinese bureaucratic system that was implemented in approximately the eleventh century shows many characteristics that, according to sociologists such as Max Weber, occur in modern bureaucracies.\*\*\* Although several scholars have criticized all Eurocentric views of modernity and argue for an approach that allows for multiple modernities,\*\*\*\* Carol Gluck points out that 'the modern possesses commonalities across time and space' that make it impossible for these modernities to be genuinely alternative. She identifies that the 'grammar of modernity' always includes the legal-rational state, urbanization, disrupted communal life, national political participation, 'subjection to the forces of capitalism and industrialization' and the 'incorporation into the reigning geopolitical world order.'\*\*\*\*\* These are therefore characteristics that cannot be ignored in discussions of the modern.

Where the first part of this book narrated the onset of the 'modern' world, this second part will focus on the historical processes which came to define the 'modern' era. Some of the key historical processes which have profoundly shaped this period were the democratic revolutions, imperialism, the ensuing World Wars and the Cold War. Traditionally, historians situate the turning point from the 'pre-modern' to the

\* Andre Gunter Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment", *Monthly Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1966), pp. 37-51. Cited in: Timmons Roberts & Amy Bellone (eds), *Globalization and Development Reader: Perspectives on Development and Global Change* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 80.

\*\* Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism: Modernity, Religion, and Democracy: A Critique of Eurocentrism and Culturalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

\*\*\* Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 21.

\*\*\*\* See for example: Dominic Sachsenmaier and S. N. Eisenstadt (eds) *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese, and Other Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) or Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, 'On Alternative Modernities', *Public Culture* Vol. 11, No. 1 (1999), pp. 1-18.

\*\*\*\*\* Carol Gluck, 'The End of Elsewhere: Writing Modernity Now', *The American Historical Review* Vol. 116, No. 3 (2011), pp. 676-687, p. 676-7.

‘modern era’ at the end of the eighteenth century, with the advent of the Democratic Revolutions, notably the American Revolution (1775-1783 CE), the French Revolution (1789-1799/1815 CE) and the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804 CE), which later inspired the Spanish American wars of independence (ca. 1808-1833). From the perspective of seeing the ensuing of the modern era as one of mostly ‘a revolution of the mind’\*, locating its commencement with the effective struggle over ideas of political order and representation indeed seems logical. Yet, it should also include the onset of this struggle over ideas, which was predominantly fought with the pen as opposed to the sword, beginning with the publications of certain ‘radical’ works by Enlightenment thinkers. Think for instance of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1689/90) which stressed toleration and the natural and inalienable rights of man; or Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *On the Social Contract. Principles of Political Right* (1762) which coined the concept of the ‘general will’; or Immanuel Kant’s *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) which outlined the universality principle.

But far from the actual ‘revolution’ itself, i.e. a forcible overthrow of a social order, being “the locomotive of history”, as Karl Marx famously argued, most of the above mentioned revolutions did not, in fact, lead to a complete change in power dynamics. Where the American revolutionaries sought to break with the control of the British aristocracy and protect their private property (from British taxation), they did not manage (nor aspire) to seek absolute social equality through, for instance, a redistribution of wealth. Likewise, the French Revolution made an awkward U-turn with the crowing of Napoleon to first consul (1799) and then Emperor (1804) thereby undoing the aspirations of the Third Estate, i.e. the common people, when they declared themselves in 1789 to be the only legitimate National Assembly. Indeed much of the social change which we today consider to have been truly emancipating in the short and long run, were often gradually enacted through, ironically, sometimes semi-democratic states.

As such, understanding the true legacy and revolutionary nature of the so-called ‘Democratic Revolutions’ continues to be hotly debated by scholars. Some see its main triumph in the conceptualization of certain political philosophies, like the opening of a political Pandora’s box, such as the concept of the people’s ‘general will’ as the only legitimate authority, and the brazen expression of this concept in the opening lines of the American constitution written in 1787 (“We the People”).\*\* Others consider the notion of the universality of human rights as outlined and articulated in the 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* as having the most enduring impact.\*\*\* Otherwise, the belief that “Equality cannot exist

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\* Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind. Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

\*\* See for instance: Shigeru Akita (ed.), *American Empire in Global History* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

\*\*\* See for instance: Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2008).

without liberty”\*, as proclaimed by the Haitian leader of the revolution Toussaint L'Ouverture, who fought for the complete abolition of slavery and all forms of human bondage, is seen to have been most ground-breaking.\*\* There are also those scholars who question the validity of a dialectics of ideas perspective of history, and reject the whole assumption of the democratic revolutions being a true turning point in world history. The historian Jürgen Osterhammel, for example, has noted that the impact of the French Revolution on the world in immediate terms was very small, as most people in Asia or Africa at the end of the eighteenth century had not heard nor were troubled by the beheading of Louis XVI. Instead he sees the true impact of the democratic revolutions in “expansion abroad by military means”\*\*\* and thus places Imperialism at the heart of the process of historical change.

It is indeed important to remember that while these changes in political and moral thinking were unfolding, the world became increasingly connected through innovations in communication technologies (telegraph) as well as by improved modes of transportation (steamships, railways, etc.), which allowed an ever faster dissemination of ideas. More importantly, large parts of the world were under direct political control or part of a sphere of influence of only a handful of new ‘super powers’, including Great Britain, France, Russia, the United States and Japan. The age of New Imperialism, or ‘Modern Imperialism’, which began roughly in the mid-nineteenth century and lasted until the mid-twentieth century, distinguished itself from earlier forms of colonialism in that it more rapidly and very forcibly brought non-Western peoples into the new industrial, capitalist ‘modern’ world order. Military innovations like the invention of machine guns (for instance the Gatling gun, 1876; Maxim gun, 1884) or steel armored steamships, as well as medicinal improvements (like quinine and antibiotics), allowed Europeans to venture much further away from the coastlines into the interior of Africa and Asia and sweep away any local resistance. It was this rapid ‘scramble for territory’ in the quest for glory and expansion of the empire, which profoundly shook-up and re-arranged the world order. The defeat, for those who were on the losing side, was made more bitter by the patronizing and injuring ‘civilizing missions’ which were part of the belief system of the modern imperialist, who often equated defeat with a lack of ‘modernity’. In the wake of this civilizing mission, the revolutionary ideals and ideas of equality, liberty and people’s sovereignty were also introduced, but of course used not to enable local subjected populations to gain political liberty, but rather paradoxically used as an excuse for colonization. Several counter-modern movements arose to fight not only

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\* Toussaint L'Ouverture, *Proclamation*, 29 August 1793, Camp Turel, Haïti.

\*\* See for instance: David P. Geggus, *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia SC.: University of South Carolina Press, 2020).

\*\*\* Jürgen Osterhammel, translated Patrick Camiller, *The Transformation of the World. A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 53.

imperial control but also the modernization fever which had swept across the world (see chapter 8).

Ironically, the fervent 'scramble for territory' and the fierce competition between European states over colonies, eventually brought destruction and loss to Europe itself. Many scholars consider the 'imperial paranoia' to have significantly contributed to the onset of the First World War.\* When the first modern World War then began in 1914, it brought about a level of destruction that had not been anticipated or ever imagined. The shock of the horrors of the trenches shook the confidence of Europeans, as well as put doubt into the minds of those who were trying to emulate European civilization. It gave some of the former 'losers' of imperialism new fervor to either cling on to and seek a place amongst the super powers (see chapter 9) or otherwise radically challenge the new world order completely. One such challenge to the dominant world order was the communist revolution of 1917 in Russia (see chapter 7). Other challenges came from fascist parties in among others Italy and Germany. Paradoxically, those totalitarian movements were fundamentally modern in their positivist outlook on societal change and the role of the state in achieving a paradisiacal 'end state of history'.\*\* International cooperation in the form of the League of Nations (established in 1920) hoped to prevent further conflict, yet external causes such as the stock exchange crash of 1929 and the ensuing inflation continued to feed social unrest and insecurity, and allowed a build up to yet another world war of total destruction.

Interestingly, the end of the Second World War did not lead to a deepening of cultural pessimism per se and rejection of **Modernity** which had so profoundly marked the interbellum period\*\*\*; instead, it can be seen as a period of advancement, characterized by a widely felt enthusiasm to rebuild. The rebuilding of a new world order certainly did not shy away from coming to terms with the extreme excesses of modernity, most obviously in the form of the Holocaust. War criminals were prosecuted and tried for committing crimes against humanity, and this 'old' ideal of universal human rights was laid down in the Universal Declaration of **Human Rights** in 1948 by the newly established United Nations (see chapter 10). Moreover, the imperialist project of the former modern powers, was globally rejected predominantly in the so-called Global South, but also in the imperialist heartlands itself. This triggered fundamental questions about **Identity** and positioning. There were two dominant ideological beliefs as to how best rebuild a stable and peaceful society: a liberal ideology dominant in the so-called 'first world' and a communist

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\* See for instance: Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

\*\* See among others: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951); Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and The Holocaust* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).

\*\*\* Think of for instance publications like: Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. And: Austen Freeman, *Social Decay and Regeneration* (New York: Read Books, 2013).

ideology, dominant in the 'second world'. This ideological discord, nicknamed the 'Cold War', frustrated and in several cases greatly delayed development and security; nevertheless, the world witnessed a 'Great Acceleration', the likes of which the world had never seen before.\* The world population rose from ca. three billion in 1960 to almost eight billion in 2022; made possible by great improvements in health care and agricultural production; the number of people living in cities rose dramatically, illiteracy rates dropped significantly, indeed almost on all aspects of our socio-economic lives the world population felt its effects. Yet, on the downside, the effects were also felt on the global **Environment** as for instance the emission of toxic gases or production of plastic increasing, leading, among others, to a prompt rise in CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere and clear changes in the world's climate (see chapter 11).

This global climate change might prove the largest and most profound challenge humanity faces, but new and completely unforeseen challenges and changes of course remain possible. As we deter a determinist perspective on the process of globalization, we remain attentive to developments which might signal profound divergences from the current world order. Indeed, several scholars have questioned whether our almost complete dependency on digitalization and information monopolies, the disconnect between the financial world and real economies, and growing disappointment with democracy, have in fact already enforced a break with the 'modern era' into a 'postmodern world'.\*\* Exploring what this postmodern era entails, is a tentative yet exciting enquiry which further unites the historical discipline with the social sciences as they seek to understand the present, as shaped by the past.

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\* J.R. McNeill, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

\*\* See for instance: Jean Baudrillard, translation Iain Hamilton, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 2017), originally published as: *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, 1976; Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World: and the Rise of the Rest* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Donette Murray and David Brown (eds) *Multipolarity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

## CHAPTER 7.

# War: Disordering and Ordering

ISAAC SCARBOROUGH



**Image 7.1** Catherine II of Russia, 1782, by Vigilius Eriksen



## Introduction

The Prussian Princess Sofia August Frederika moved to the Russian imperial capital of St. Petersburg in 1744 to marry the future tsar of Russia, Peter III. The daughter of a field marshal and successful military strategist, Sofia quickly felt at home in this expanding empire beginning to flex its military strength as a growing power in Europe. Emerging a century earlier from the early seventeenth century ‘Time of Troubles’ (*smutnoe vremia*), which had seen the nascent Muscovite state invaded, temporarily ruled by outsiders, and left ruptured, the imperial house of Romanov tsars had since built an increasingly solid edifice. Facing vast swaths of northern

permafrost, local resistance, and even imperial Chinese opposition, their armies and Cossack irregulars had pushed outwards, conquering Western Siberia and large portions of the Far East by the early eighteenth century. In the south, Russian soldiers and settlers alike were moving into the Caucasus mountains and the borders of what is now Kazakhstan. Wars fought by Peter the Great around the turn of the eighteenth century with Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, and other European powers had expanded Russia's influence and borders westward, as well as establishing the Russian Empire as a military force to be reckoned with. Further southwest, the Russian military had fought a series of inconclusive but increasingly aggressive territorial wars with the Ottoman Empire, demonstrating further its capacity to grow at the expense of its neighbors. Military expansion was accompanied by military and civilian reforms, from Peter's famous institution of European-style dress amongst the Russian nobility to the creation of European-style tables of ranks and military units.

For Sofia Frederika, St. Petersburg would have inarguably seemed the capital of a growing empire. By 1762, moreover, Sofia had converted to Orthodoxy, the official religion of the Russian Empire, taken the name Ekaterina Alekseevna, married the heir to the Romanov throne, Peter III, led a palace coup against her husband, and been crowned Empress Ekaterina II. The coup that had brought her the throne had also been partially the product of war. With time, she would also become Russia's longest ruling female leader, overseeing enormous territorial expansion: by the end of her reign, the Russian Empire stretched from present-day Poland to Alaska. At the same time, her rule was associated with domestic reform, modernization, and even ideas from the European Enlightenment, including the education of women. In many ways, Ekaterina's rule embodied the tension that many historians have identified between conflict as a force for destruction and conflict as a catalyst for change and development. In the case of the Russian Empire, however, conflict undeniably drove both imperial expansion and imperial development, and this chapter uses the case study of Russia to show the intimate links between imperial formation and war.

Ekaterina was an undoubtedly powerful imperial ruler, and one for whom gender norms seemed almost irrelevant: she sought territorial gain and military victory as strenuously as any of her male predecessors or successors and pursued personal (and love) affairs without regard for eighteenth century propriety. This has led to the temptation in popular Russian literature to see her as something of a proto-feminist, leading the way for future reforms in the twentieth century. Although understandable, this is essentially anachronistic\*: it applies the conceptual lens of the early-twenty-first century to Ekaterina's actions in the mid-eighteenth century, when feminism did not yet exist as such. While many of the reforms that Ekaterina pursued did have some positive impact on women's lives and livelihoods, Russia under her rule remained a highly patrimonial and patriarchal state, with government

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\* This concept has been introduced in chapter 4.



ministries, soldiers in battle, and peasant households all led by men. Ekaterina was the exception to the rule, not a forebear of changing rules.

The Russian Empire, like many states before and after, had been built through the application of violence and war, as its armies and colonists spread outwards from the centre of Muscovy, building roads and towns and the very fabric of statehood. Its collapse following the February and October revolutions of 1917 equally gave rise to numerous new states born in war, from those recognizable today, like independent Finland or Poland, to those more ephemeral and largely forgotten, such as the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic. Imperial rebirth in the guise of the Soviet Union during the years of civil war to follow (1918-1921) was just as much a process of war and the application of violence. The widespread destruction of the Civil War, along with its attendant massacres, uprisings, social upheavals and epidemics, took nearly five years to recede. By 1923, 15-20 million people had died since 1914, making the period, as Nikolai Kremmentsov has put it, a 'decade of death'.\*

This was in part no accident. In fact, the USSR made the use of state-driven violence central to its methods of state formation, applying apparently indiscriminate executions, forced grain acquisition, and 'red terror' across the territories the Red Army tenaciously regained from breakaway republics, 'White' Imperial formations, and Western interventionist forces. Except that this terror was anything but indiscriminate: it was planned, bureaucratically organized, and executed in an order overseen in detail by the architects of Soviet state power, Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin) and Yakov Sverdlov. During efforts to overcome a rebellion by Don Cossacks in southern Russia in January 1919, for example, Sverdlov issued an order for all Soviet soldiers 'to conduct mass terror against the rich Cossacks, exterminating them totally'.\*\* Lenin, Sverdlov, and their Bolshevik supporters made explicit the principle that had long underpinned Russian state development: violence and war bind states together.

This chapter uses the example of modern Russian statehood in the period since 1750 to consider how state development is often closely linked to war. From the nascent beginnings of the Russian Empire in the Grand Duchy of Muscovy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the modern Russian Federation's newly aggressive policy of military expansion into Ukraine, the Russian state has grown geographically and institutionally through the application of violent force. Focusing on the last 250 years, this chapter will consider how the Russian state has grown in size and capacity under the ongoing pressure of repeated and endemic conflict, along with the key moments of rupture that have seen the state expand. The increasingly bloody wars of the nineteenth century presaged the brutality of Russia's (and the

\* Nikolai Kremmentsov, 'Off with your heads: isolated organs in early Soviet science and fiction', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* Vol. 40, No. 2 (2009), pp. 87-100.

\*\* As cited in: Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 162.

USSR's) experience of the early twentieth century. Born in the trauma of the Civil War, the Soviet Union existed for decades under the perceived threat of invasion, a shroud that was used to justify and provide for the massive mobilization of state resources and expansion of state capacity. This further heavily influenced the mentality of the Soviet regime, which was ultimately tested by the Second World War. Victory in 1945 became the founding myth of the Soviet Union and modern Russia, where war memory, national identity and conflict remain intertwined.\*



## Historiography

The Soviet Union, like the Russian Empire before it, was an empire: a state organized not around a titular nationality or ethnicity (as with many modern nation states, as already discussed in chapter 4), but instead on the basis of centralized control over an extended territory and many different populations. Although disagreement remains among scholars about the exact definition of an empire, there are several common parameters within which this discussion takes place. Empires involve territory, i.e., a geographical dimension, a population, and a sense of collective (shared) identity.



### 7.a Concept Definition

#### Empire

*A large geographical space ruled by a single state with a population that shares a sense of common identity.*

This shared identity is often related to the idea of civilization, which was defined in this handbook's introductory chapter as a complex society bound together by common rule and sharing a common territory, identity, means of communication, and/or religion. Therefore, the concept of empire can be seen as an organizational feature of civilizations. These ideas echo closely the conceptualization of the state offered by the early twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber, who defined the state as a territory and the monopoly of violence on that territory: in other words, when someone or a group of people are in charge of a defined geographical space, they rule, at the most basic level, by exercising the exclusive right to use force.

The use of force is integral to imperial sovereignty\*\* in both its implementation and historical appearance. The emergence of empires, moreover, has long been a topic of investigation and debate among historians and has also been picked up by world historians. One notable theory which claims to explain the emergence of 'mega-empires' has been formulated by Peter Turchin and was introduced in

\* These topics will be further discussed in chapter 9.

\*\* This concept has already been introduced in chapter 4.

chapter 3.\* Theories of Imperiogenesis like Turchin's have the advantage of being nominally global: the process of confrontation it describes is built upon examples from around the world, and could, in theory, be applied to most contexts. At the same time, the majority of Turchin's 'mega-empires' are to be found in East Asia, with the Chinese empires seemingly the most perfect example of his theory. The largest land empire in history, the Mongol Empire, which controlled the majority of Asia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, also closely fits the bill. This empire originated in present day Mongolia and at its high point under Chinggis Khan's sons and grandsons stretched from the Sea of Japan all the way to Eastern Europe. At the same time, Imperiogenesis theory has been less applicable in the Americas, where confrontations between settled populations and nomadic groups have been less obvious in the development of large-scale imperial formations.

A similar causal process linking external threats to the development of internal cohesion has become prevalent in studies and theoretical works on the history of state building in Europe, as already outlined in chapter 4. The thesis proposed by Charles Tilly, the most prominent advocate of this view, is that 'War made the state and the state made war'.\*\* In fact, Tilly has argued, early state-building endeavors resembled organized crime, specifically protection rackets: those people commanding force convinced others to entrust their security to them in return for payments. This system of taxation allowed the ruler to offer protection and extend his or her control over other social goods, which reinforced claims to rule, authority, and legitimacy. The coercive machinery could eliminate domestic rivals and strengthen outward claims to authority. With time, this system became a self-reinforcing process, similar to the Imperiogenesis theory, and encouraged others to follow suit. If the level of organization remained weak, the territory and population could be usurped by stronger neighbors. In his work, Tilly identifies two parameters for judging state strength: coercion and capital – that is, armed forces and taxation. Nascent states could use both or either of these to establish and defend their sovereignty. In their modern form, states thus began to coalesce around centers of coercion and capital in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe.

While Tilly's theory of state formation focused largely on control over territory, other scholars have expanded the field of state control to population, emphasizing the ways that coercive power and financial might are built upon and linked to human bodies as much as the physical resource of land. In the 1970s, Michel Foucault persuasively argued that the formation of the *modern* state in the mid-to-late eighteenth century was connected to the development of large standing armies, and the subsequent need to organize and feed populations. As warfare shifted to

\* Turchin, 'A Theory for Formation of Large Empires'.

\*\* Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, 900-1900* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990). Charles Tilly, 'War-Making and State-Making as Organized Crime' in: Peter E. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (eds) *Bringing the State Back In*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

include mass armies and massive destruction, state's central concerns shifted from controlling borders to controlling people.\* More recently, a group of influential economic historians have also argued that from the beginning state formation was at least partially a process of controlling internal dissent through violence: that the conflict that led to state organization was not always an external one to be confronted on the steppe, but a question of internal population control through violence.\*\* As with Tilly's state formation theory and ideas of Imperiogenesis alike, these frameworks agree that violence and war-making have been an inherent part of the process of political power consolidation and state formation.



## 7.b Concept Definition

### War

*Violent engagement by at least two identifiable actors commanding force, claiming to represent a group of people to realize a political cause. It involves aggression, destruction and the use of lethal violence.*

Notwithstanding Turchin's focus on East Asian 'mega-empires', one of the challenges that continues to face theories of state and imperial development is their heavy emphasis on Western Europe. Tilly's work dealt with Western Europe in the early modern period; Foucault wrote about France; modern theoretical works continue to dwell on the establishment of state power in Europe, rather than elsewhere, while still purporting to a certain universalism. There is, in fact, very little informed theory about similar processes of state building in different geographic and temporal contexts. By the twentieth century, notably, state formation was very different: it took place, by and large, in an environment where territory was already divided, demarcated, and set – but where control over this territory was contested in the process of decolonization. State sovereignty over territory had been a given since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (see chapter four) and most recently confirmed in the Charter of the United Nations drafted at the end of the Second World War, but it has found its nominally insurmountable footing frequently challenged over the last eighty years.

Perpetually caught between its European capitals and Asian territorial holdings, the Russian imperial states and modern Russia alike provide an important bridge between the Eurocentrism of many state formation theories and much of the rest of the world. Russians themselves have spent centuries asking to what degree the history of their state can be understood as a properly 'European' example, and to what degree it might be better categorized as 'Asian' or exclusively 'Russian'. From

\* Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), esp. p. 65.

\*\* Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

the beginning of the nineteenth century, these discussions formed the basis of an ongoing debate between ‘Slavophiles’, such as Sergei Uvarov, who argued that the Russian Empire’s path of Asian conquests set it apart from other European powers, and the ‘Westernizers’, who suggested that Eastern geography was immaterial to Russia’s underlying status as a European state. By the mid-1800s, these debates were becoming political, with intellectuals advocating Western reforms, whether of a romantic bent, like Ivan Turgenev, or a more radical socialist one, like Nikolai Chernyshevsky, not only looking to Europe, but living for decades in European countries and suggesting European changes for Russia. Their Slavophile opponents, however, found support in the final two Romanov Tsars, Aleksandr III and Nikolai II, both conservative figures who were skeptical of the West and promoted a return to Nikolai I’s slogan of ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality’. In this reading of history, Russia had been held together for centuries through the controlling application of force over vast territories – conditions different than seen in contemporary Europe.

With the fall of the Romanov Empire in 1917, however, Russia’s historical ‘peculiarity’ was undermined by Vladimir Lenin and the architects of Bolshevism, who argued that the Russian lands were part of the worldwide history of economic development, which in turn drove state growth and revolution. It was capital, not autocratic coercion, that had dictated Russian expansion: as everywhere else, capitalism had developed and expanded and was now, in the Bolshevik reading, being challenged by the working classes. Following the works of Karl Marx and Georgy Plekhanov, Lenin and the other Bolsheviks laid out a theory of state expansion that would remain dominant throughout the Soviet period, whereby the Russian state followed the same patterns of capitalist and economic-driven expansion seen across the world. Imperialism, as Lenin famously penned, was simply the highest stage of capitalism.\*



## 7.c Concept Definition

### Marxism

*Political philosophy developed by Karl Marx (1818-1883) in his book *Das Kapital* (1867). It sees the world as consisting of and being driven by structural and material factors that determine its development.*

Theories of war and state expansion that contradicted the Leninist paradigm and emphasis on capital tended to find little support in the USSR. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the Russian historian and ethnologist Lev Gumilev began publishing a series of works on the ‘ethnogenesis’ of the Russian people and the expansion of empires across the Russian steppe. Like Turchin’s more modern

\* See: Vladimir Lenin, *Imperializm, kak vysshaia stadiia kapitalizma* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1949).

work, Gumilev emphasized the role of geography and conflict between states as the driving force behind Russian state growth; he also suggested that Russia was much more an 'Asian' empire than a European state, having been born in the synthesis of Mongol, Turkic, and Russian peoples.\* Gumilev was heavily criticized and his works suppressed during the Soviet period, but in some ways they aligned with Western theories of Russian state development and expansion during the Cold War, which also frequently saw conflict with surrounding powers at the heart of Russian growth. Seemingly following George Kennan's famous 'long telegram' of 1948, many Cold War-era studies pointed to Russia's (and the USSR's) status as a largely land-locked empire surrounded by at times hostile neighbors.\*\* This made border security paramount, which in turn tended to drive expansionist visions of security and, frequently, war.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation has elicited a variety of approaches to its again malleable statehood. With violence accompanying the disintegration of the Soviet imperial state and, more recently, the new expansion of the Russian Federation into some parts of the former USSR, the relative importance of capital ('Western' models of state-building and/or conflict) and coercion (more imperial applications of violence) is again under discussion. In Russia and the West, some historians have emphasized the ways in which the USSR's and Russia's experiences of war and violence adhere to worldwide standards: Mark Harrison, for example, has shown how the Soviet Union was ultimately able to overcome Nazi Germany in the Second World War because of its embrace of technological standardization, which allowed it to produce more guns and bullets than its adversary.\*\*\* In a similar theoretical line, Vadim Volkov has written about Russia in the 1990s as a classic example of Tilly's ideas about states developing as protection rackets, representative, Volkov argues, of the violent chaos of the immediate post-Soviet years that has since coalesced around a strong Russian state.\*\*\* While Harrison, Volkov, and others have aligned contemporary Russian war-making and security with broader twentieth century processes of state development and modernization, other commentators have seen increased signs of Russian 'exceptionalism', especially in the post-2014 annexation of Crimea. In Russia, the theory of 'Eurasianism', which advocates Russia's domination over the former Soviet space, has found an increasing number of advocates; in the West, many historians have suggested that Russia's often violent expansionism places

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\* See, for example: Lev Gumilev, *Etnogenez i biosfera zemli* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1989).

\*\* The 'long telegram' has been electronically archived by the National Security Archive in Washington; online at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>. Last accessed 15 December 2021.

\*\*\* Mark Harrison, *Accounting for War: Soviet Production, Employment, and the Defence Burden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

\*\*\*\* Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

its model of statehood outside of the Western norm. The history of Russian state development since 1750, as this chapter outlines, holds much evidence supporting both sides of the ongoing debate. The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, moreover, put the country's expansionism into particularly sharp focus, while demonstrating both the state's engagement with broader processes of geopolitical change, such as NATO expansion, as well as its frequently exceptional level of response.

## The Eighteenth Century: Russia Emerges as an Empire

Ekaterina II, the adopted Russian Empress who had come to power through a *coup d'état*, would become known as 'the Great' not only because of her expansion of the Empire, but also through her introduction of modernizing policies throughout her rule (1762-1796). This brought Russian statecraft, military practices, and general societal organization further in line with European norms. She expanded and codified policies begun under her predecessors to nationalize the wealth and land holdings of the Orthodox church and legalized earlier practices that had aimed to professionalize the Russian officer corps. Before the mid-eighteenth century, Russian noble families had been obliged to serve the Empire in its armies; by the latter part of the century this was no longer the case. When noble sons did serve, they chose it as a calling, and were both more dedicated and more professionalized as a result. They also began to be outnumbered by professional soldiers and officers from the non-noble classes, including freed peasants and merchant families, a trend that would continue over the coming 150 years before the First World War. With the base of the Russian army and navy drawn from peasant levies and irregular Cossack divisions, this newly professionalized Russian officer corps solidified the Empire's army as one of the most national in Europe – it relied much less than many other states on hired foreign mercenaries.

The national character of the Russian armies was emphasized by Russia's Tsars who – like many late eighteenth century European states – saw the expansion of their territory and power as the outward movement of 'civilization'. In Russia's case, this was an Orthodox Christian civilization challenging the non-Christian rulers of the Far East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, or the Ottoman Empire. In the wars with the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century, Russia continuously emphasized the need to protect Orthodoxy and Orthodox believers, a struggle that culminated in the two late eighteenth century Russo-Turkish Wars (1768-1774 and 1787-1792). Initially drawn into a conflict over Poland's royal succession and conflict between Russian and Polish spheres of influence in Ukraine, Ekaterina and her generals, including the famous Peter Rumiantsev and Grigorii Potemkin, managed to use these wars to significantly expand Russian rule south and west into former Ottoman territory.



In 1771, Russian armies captured the Crimean Isthmus for the first time, and from there spent decades capturing Ottoman forts and removing the remaining traces of the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman's former client state. Over the same decades, the Russian state took advantage of its growing power, capacity for military expansion, and geopolitical weight to oversee three partitions of Poland, finally undermining any threat from the last vestiges of the non-Orthodox state that had overseen the pillage of Moscow in the time of troubles centuries before. By 1794, Russian troops under Aleksandr Suvorov had captured Warsaw; Poland itself was divided primarily between Russia and Prussia, removing the independent state from the map entirely and gifting the Russian empire with more than three million new subjects in Poland and modern Ukraine and vast territories in Eastern Europe.

During the Russian Empire's eighteenth century wars of southern and western expansion, Ekaterina also founded a new military order and medal that symbolized the national and civilizational nature of the Empire's expansion. On the saint day of St. George, November 26, 1769 (according to the Russian Empire's Julian calendar), Ekaterina issued an order establishing the 'Military order of the St. George the Victorious' for Russian officers. A gold square cross with expanded points with a small enameled portrait of St. George at its center, the medal accompanying election to the order was meant to be hung on a 'silk ribbon with three black and two yellow stripes'. With four levels of award, the Order of St. George was given only for exceptional military valor and victory, becoming the highest military order and medal given in the Russian Empire. From the first recipient of the Order of St. George, Peter Rumiantsev, to the collapse of the Romanov dynasty in 1917, a total of 23 first degree medals were rewarded. Over time, the shape and coloring of the medals and ribbons changed: in 1913, for example, the yellow stripes on the ribbon were replaced



**Images 7.2** Semyon Budyonnyi, Stalin and Georgii Zhukov, at Victory Parade, 24 June 1945

with orange, and a simpler medal, accompanied by the same ribbon, was instituted for rank-and-file soldiers in the early nineteenth century. Yet the medal and its ribbon remained symbols of victory throughout modern Russian history, even after the Order's formal dissolution by the Bolsheviks after 1917. In the Soviet period, recipients of the rank-and-file medal (as appropriately proletarian) were allowed to display it along with Soviet medals, and Soviet marshals including Georgii Zhukov and Semyon Budyonnyi were amongst those who wore it proudly. (Image 7.2).

During World War II, moreover, the Soviet military created a new 'Guards Ribbon', which co-opted the same three black and two orange stripes; this ribbon was also attached to the 'Order of Glory' instituted in 1943 and awarded during and after the war with Nazi Germany to soldiers displaying special bravery or valor in combat. As the Russian state continued to expand, the colors of war – the black of smoke and the yellow-orange flash of a rifle's firing – followed its soldiers.

The Order of St. George is the highest military order of the Russian Empire and the Russian Federation. It is awarded to those exhibiting exceptional bravery and is a symbol of Russian military might.



**Image 7.3** Medal Order of St. George



**Image 7.4** Georgii Zhukov (1896-1974), portrait 1960

## The Nineteenth Century: Russia as a 'Great Power'

In the history of geopolitical conflict and state development, the nineteenth century is often seen as a sort of dress rehearsal for the absolute destruction of the first half of the twentieth century. European states built increasingly large overseas colonial empires and competed for territory, subjects, and wealth, while wars were fought between increasingly large, mobilized, and explosively armed militaries. Casualties increased exponentially, as did states' need for new soldiers to fill the ranks of larger armies. State agencies multiplied, while state regulation over populations – whether in terms of control through police forces and border regimes, or through the provision of medical, educational, and social services – became a regular part of many states' social orders. The Russian Empire faced these challenges from the somewhat exceptional geographical position of an empire conterminous with its imperial and colonial holdings, but this did little to change the overall trajectory of its nineteenth century.

The Russian Empire entered the 1800s as an undenied 'great power' in Europe, a status it had built through centuries of war and conquest. With unparalleled territorial and population resources, moreover, it was at the peak of its power, able to muster armies and finances to match nearly any adversary. At the end of the eighteenth century, Ekaterina II had passed a series of late reforms that had streamlined the Russian civil administration and organized the increasingly vast Empire into more manageable 'governorships' (*gubernii*). With the Empire stretching by 1800 from Poland in the west to the Chinese border and Kamchatka in the east (and increasingly covering stretches of the Caucasus and Central Asia to the south), effective rule was a difficult when not fraught enterprise. In the years before the development of the railroad or the telegraph, moreover, simply coordinating messages between provinces – not to mention moving troops to one or another border – was a matter of weeks or months at best. In response, the Russian Empire developed a complex series of state practices meant to solidify its rule outside of the core European territories. In conquered regions, the Russian army and its Cossack divisions would build a series of outpost forts (*forposty*) along the border, which would house a mix of peasant colonists and Cossack soldiers. They would also develop relationships with local leaders, and encourage local agriculturalists to make their homes in the areas surrounding the border forts. As communities took hold, the forts and accompanying units would move further into non-Imperial territory. In this way, by the beginning of the nineteenth century the Russian Empire had managed to solidify control over large swaths of northern Kazakhstan.

Other peripheral areas proved more conflictual. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Russia was involved in a series of border conflicts with the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran, resulting in significant territorial gains. Most of what is today Azerbaijan was conquered from Iran by 1806, while Georgia formally joined

the Empire in 1801, having partially been a protectorate of its northern neighbor. Further warfare with both southern empires over the 1810s and 1820s resulted in a further series of victories for Russia, bringing control of the remaining Georgian and Abkhazian lands on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, most of modern Armenia, and the Western shore of the Caspian Sea. By 1830, the entire Caucasus was formally under Russian rule: a rider travelling roughly southeast from St. Petersburg could now reach the border with Iran without ever leaving imperial territory. In practice, however, matters were more complicated, as the North Caucasus – the mountainous area between Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in the south and the Russian lands along the Don River in the north – was inhabited by groups that had been neither consulted about this new imperial rule, nor, in fact, ever militarily conquered. For the next thirty years, a disparate coalition of Avar, Lezgin, Chechen, Ossetian, Ingush, Abkhaz, and other groups of mountain peoples continuously rebelled, harried, and raided Russian settlements north and south of the Caucasus mountains. Under the leadership of Imam Shamil, the instability was constant until the mid-1840s, when Mikhail Vorontsov became viceroy of the Caucasus and instituted a new and systematic approach to embedding Russian rule in the region. Auguring the later practices of colonial rule to be applied in Raj-era British India and across imperial holdings in the early twentieth century, Vorontsov eschewed chasing Shamil and his followers in favor of forcibly establishing Russian state power in the region. He levelled forests, built forts, encouraged Russian colonial settlements, deported hundreds of thousands of suspect individuals and entire villages, and co-opted local elites. By 1859 this policy of state-building had led to Shamil's defeat and capture.

At the same time as it expanded in the Caucasus, however, the Russian Empire was focusing the brunt of its attention – and armies – much further west. Like other European empires, the Russian Tsars and nobility were shocked by the regicide and excesses of the French Revolution and threatened by the expansionist campaigns of its nationalist armies under Napoleon Bonaparte. Beginning in 1799 under Tsar Pavel I, Russian forces fought against French revolutionary armies in Italy; from 1804 Aleksandr I, Pavel's son and successor, fought a decade-long battle against Napoleon himself, who had now declared himself Emperor of France. While between 1804-1811 Napoleon decisively won battles against Russia, Austria, Prussia, Britain, and their other allies, the 1812 invasion of Russia itself by Napoleon's massive force of 600,000 proved a turning point. Unable to defeat the Russian army under Mikhail Kutuzov or force it to surrender, Napoleon was ultimately left to withdraw after six months, having had his invasion force of 600,000 men harried by partisans, winnowed by desertion, lost to cold, and generally demoralized and disintegrated down to the 20,000 who returned to Paris.



**Image 7.5** Retreat of Napoleonic forces from Russia

Never able to fully recover his military might, Napoleon finally surrendered to a Russian-led coalition in 1814; his attempt at a *revanche* was put down in 1815. Triumphant and emboldened by his victory over Napoleon, Aleksandr I helped to establish the Congress of Vienna and the Concert of Europe that followed Napoleon's defeat, which was meant to provide a forum for the 'great powers' to balance their interests. Rather than considering the need for reform to avoid such bloodshed in the future, he aligned himself with most monarchs in Europe, who felt that the threats of nationalist fervor and social uprising needed to be dealt with harshly and conservatively.

This conservatism also characterized the final decade of Aleksandr's rule, in which he turned away from earlier civil and military reforms in favor of an emphasis on piety and traditionalism. When the succession of his brother, Nikolai I, was marred in 1825 by an unsuccessful coup attempt led by the so-called Decemberists, a group of young military officers advocating liberal reforms and even constitutionalism in Russia, this Tsarist conservatism was only heightened. Fearing the influence of Western and liberal ideas, Nikolai founded the Third Section (*tret'e otdelenie*), Russia's first secret police and predecessor to the later and more famous Okhrana, and broadly opposed the need for reform. As other great powers rapidly modernized, the Russian Empire began to fall behind technologically, most notably in the sphere of railroads. This brought home the double edge of Russia's imperial sword: while

the empire could call upon unparalleled human and territorial resources, it was often stretched to breaking point when it came to harnessing and mustering these resources. This was made unavoidably and painfully obvious in the Crimean War of 1853-1856, where early Russian advances against the Ottoman Empire were ultimately crushed by greater British and French mobility on land and at sea alike.

Coming to power upon his father's death in the midst of the Crimean debacle, Tsar Aleksandr II clearly saw the need for reform. Having negotiated a quick, if ignoble, end to the Crimean War, Aleksandr moved to modernize the Russian economy and military. In 1861, he famously freed the Russian peasants from their state of serfdom, which had previously legally bound them to local landowners. Now peasants were free to move and change places of employment, which in part allowed the state to institute universal army service: from the 1870s, all Russian men were nominally obligated to serve up to six years in the military, with another nine in the reserves. Dmitrii Miliutin, Aleksandr's long serving War Minister, also expanded the officer corps, introducing new training programs, institutes, and further expanding the number of non-noble born officers. Following the examples of France, Prussia, and other European armies, Miliutin also instituted literacy training for all soldiers, significantly improving military efficiency as well as the population's basic educational level.

Miliutin's reforms were meant to streamline the Russian military by removing unnecessary administrative staff while improving mobilization times; they were also intended to boost morale and *esprit de corps* by making military service both more prestigious and more patriotic. The results in the coming decades were mixed. The Russian Empire's ongoing territorial expansion into Central Asia was very successful in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with highly motivated Russian armies moving quickly to capture the Qoqand Khanate and defeat and subject the Khivan Khanate and Bukharan Emirate to protectorate status by the early 1870s (some local military leaders, such as General Mikhail Chernaiev, were so motivated that they violated orders to capture cities, such as Tashkent, victories that were accepted after the fact by St. Petersburg). By 1881, the last holdout of Central Asian resistance, Geok-Tepe in Turkmenistan, had fallen to Russian control, placing the entire region under Tsarist rule. The Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 also seemed to demonstrate the value of Miliutin's reforms, as Russian armies, emboldened by the call to 'protect fellow Slavs' in Serbia and the Balkans, soundly defeated the Ottoman military. When called to challenge Japan, a fellow rising power – and one that had much more consistently reformed and invested in modernizing its industry and military alike in the nineteenth century – Russia's armed forces fell short. The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) for control of Manchuria and northern China was a disastrous rout for the Russian Empire. Its armies and navies were outgunned and outmaneuvered, and Tsar Nikolai II nearly lost control of the empire in the 1905 Revolution that followed in the wake of the military defeat.



## The Twentieth Century: Violence and Consolidation

Having survived the military collapse of the Russo-Japanese War and the 1905 Revolution, Nikolai II began Russia's twentieth century with a characteristic mix of reform and conservatism. The revolution forced him to allow a parliament, the Duma, to meet and discuss laws, but he and his advisors quickly moved to restrict its powers and, when necessary, simply dismiss it entirely. At the same time, he embarked on a massive program of economic development, promoting Russia as a sphere of foreign investment, encouraging British, French, German, and other corporations to build factories in Russia and rapidly expanding both the state's transport infrastructure and manufacturing capacity. The Russian military also expanded, as the state borrowed heavily from French banks to bankroll naval development, army expansion, and the purchase of armaments. As many other European powers, the Russian Empire had reached the limits of its imperial expansion, with further territorial gains blocked either by existing empires (such as the British Empire's Indian holdings) or buffer states (such as Iran). The same pressures of colonial expansion and economic competition that were bringing the rest of Europe to the brink of war were just as equally felt in St. Petersburg.

When war finally came in 1914, it proved more destructive and destabilizing than even the miasma of nineteenth century conflicts could have predicted. Entering the conflict in July-August 1914 as part of a web of alliances triggered by the assassination of the Austrian Grand Duke Franz Ferdinand and the subsequent threat to Serbia by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire found itself consistently outgunned and outfought. Facing both Austrian and German divisions on the Eastern Front, the Russian military consistently lost ground and soldiers, while the war was from the beginning unpopular at home. By late 1916 the Tsar's armies were close to revolt and the economic situation was deteriorating across the country, which together led in late February 1917 (according to the Julian calendar; March elsewhere) to a popular protest that grew into a revolution. The Duma formed a Provisional Government, which asked the Tsar to abdicate. Now in control of the Russian Empire, the Provisional Government chose to adhere to its agreement with the allied powers and continued fighting the increasingly unpopular and unsuccessful war. Their political opponents, the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and other Social Democrats and Social Revolutionaries – all socialist parties – had no such commitments, and took advantage of growing resentment amongst soldiers and workers alike to overthrow the Provisional Government in October (November) 1917. In March 1918, now in control of central Russia, the Bolshevik government under Vladimir Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, removing Russia from the War at great territorial and economic cost.

This was hardly the end of fighting in Russia, however – in fact, violence was practically unending in one form or another for the next two decades. The Bolsheviks



spent the following three years (1918-1921) fighting a chaotic and constantly shifting civil war for control over the former imperial lands. Some territories, such as Poland and Finland, they lost to nascent nationalist movements; others, like Ukraine or the Caucasus, they recaptured through bloody fighting. Elsewhere across Eurasia they fought aristocratic officers, Tsarist loyalists, Allied interventionists and local power brokers and rebels for control, ultimately regaining the majority of territory once held by the Russian imperial crown. In some areas, such as southern Central Asia, however, fighting continued through the 1920s, as bands of anti-Soviet fighters known as 'basmachi' refused to give up. Having finally established control over the imperial lands by the end of the 1920s, the Soviet state under Joseph Stalin, who had emerged by 1927 as Lenin's successor, threw itself into an expansive plan for military preparation. Convinced that the Soviet Union, as the new Bolshevik state was now called, was surrounded by enemies waiting to attack the world's only socialist state, Stalin believed that the only choice was to become self-sufficient and militarily impregnable. To reach this goal, he pushed through centralized and forced industrialization: factories were built at any cost, workers were incentivized to move to cities, villages were 'collectivized' into state farms where costs could be kept low and surpluses could be directed to factories and factory workers. The military and security apparatuses were given priority access to goods and funding. Excesses were justified in this defensive industrial drive, from the massive use of prison labor in slavery-like conditions in the GULAG, to the deportations of millions of so-called 'kulaks' and potentially disloyal agriculturalists to distant empty plains in need of internal colonists, to the indiscriminate arrest, torture, and execution of hundreds of thousands of Bolshevik Party activists, workers, and officers in the 'Great Terror' of 1937-1938. Any and all acts were justified to prepare the state for the war that Stalin saw as coming.

When that war came, ironically, Stalin himself was ill prepared. Convinced by the late 1930s that the war would be fought with Nazi Germany, Stalin and his foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, signed a defensive agreement with Germany in 1939, the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Meant to provide the USSR a few more years of defensive preparation, this allowed the Soviet military to occupy parts of Poland and the Baltics – as well as engage in an inconclusive 'Winter War' with Finland – without worrying about German invasion. It also lulled Stalin into a false sense of security: he ignored warnings from his own spies about the invasion under preparation, and so on June 22, 1941 the USSR's military was completely overwhelmed by the mechanized German units that flooded over the border. The first months of the conflict were a catastrophe, as Stalin, having built an autocratic system that depended on his decision making, was lost for decisions, and city after city fell to the German forces. Only in November 1941 was a desperate stand for Moscow able to hold fast, but Leningrad was blockaded for years, and it took until 1943 for the Soviet military to stop the German advance in Stalingrad and begin a nearly two-

year push back to Berlin. In the end, it was at least in part Stalin's industrialization that guaranteed Soviet victory, along with the brilliance of military organizers like Dmitry Ustinov, who oversaw the evacuation of military factories to the Urals and Central Asia. The Soviet state also simply proved capable of producing more bullets over the long run. Like Napoleon's invasion a century before, the Nazi assault on the USSR brought forth patriotic fervor of almost unheard-of proportions, as the Soviet people fought for the survival of their state. If the fight against Napoleon had been the 'Patriotic War', then this was the 'Great Patriotic War' – a fight greater than any other.

It also carried losses greater than any other: more than 25 million total dead Soviet combatants and civilians, a loss that haunted the USSR for generations. Following victory over Nazi Germany in May 1945, moreover, the Soviet Union largely foreswore wars of territorial gain, instead opting for the proxy wars and border conflicts more characteristic of the later twentieth century. This was in line with the changing nature of world economies, including the USSR's: rather than direct control over territory or populations, what was now most valued was economic hegemony. Especially after the death of Stalin in 1954, his successors Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev saw the USSR's place as the promoter of socialism across the world, if necessary through the use of force – but most frequently the force of others. The USSR funded and supplied conflicts between anti-colonial or nationalist forces and the capitalist empires of the world, but its direct involvement in most of these conflicts remained secret or limited to the use of military advisors. This pattern was broken by the last, and longest, of Soviet conflicts, the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989) in support of the revolutionary communist government. An inconclusive quagmire, the USSR withdrew shortly before its collapse in 1991, leaving a final stain of defeat on a military that had long ridden high on the victory of 1945 and its status as one of the strongest and most feared in the world. This cloud continued to hang over the Russian military throughout the 1990s. The military of the Russian Federation, which had taken the place of the central Soviet power, proved ineffective at holding territory, losing to the Chechen separatists in 1996 and gaining a reputation for corruption and ineffectiveness, reflective of what many Russians felt about their state as a whole. One of the central provisions of the Russian Federation's state-building after 1999 under Vladimir Putin, perhaps unsurprisingly, has thus been the reclaiming of military power and prestige. Chechnya was recaptured at great destructive cost in the early 2000s, and as Russian economic clout has grown in the past decades, so has Russian military activity, from support for Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian Civil War (2011–) or the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched in February 2022. Military might has been accompanied by a resurgence of patriotic fervor, with the Order of St. George formally re-established in 2000 and the ribbon

accompanying it becoming an official symbol of victory over Nazi Germany – and thus Russian military power – in 2005.

## Conclusion

Much like the world's other imperial formations, the Russian state in its many iterations has been forged through violence and war. This can be most clearly seen in the years of destruction wrought between 1914 and 1945 – the thirty years of constant war, forced collectivization and industrialization, terror, and then again war, where actors like the Bolsheviks made explicit the place of violence and death in binding states together. Yet it is also visible from the eighteenth century onward in the ways that Russian legal and economic reforms were consistently linked to the state's ongoing push to expand into new territories, conquer new peoples, and somehow rule over more than one seventh of the world's surface. The Russian serfs only became free peasants and then literate workers in the nineteenth century because of Russian military defeats that led to a need for better educated and more mobile soldiers. Waves of industrialization and economic development occurred in large part because of military considerations and concerns – and because contact and conflict with surrounding powers forced the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and Russian Federation to consider the need for change.

## Guiding questions

1. What is the Imperigenesis theory and what does it claim to explain?
2. How are legal and economic reforms linked to military defeat or victory?
3. How representative is the Russian experience with war for the history of modern state development?
4. How can we explain the enduring relevance of the St George's ribbon in Russia?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Billington, James, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1970). A classic treatment of Russian history from its inception to the twentieth century, with important comment on both culture and military expansion.
- Hosking, Geoffrey, *A History of the Soviet Union, 1917–1991, Final Edition* (London: Fontana Press, 1992). One of the clearest and most succinct overviews of Soviet history, including comment on the USSR's military campaigns.
- Odom, William, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). A clear-eyed analysis of the impact of the Soviet collapse on the previously unified military of the USSR and the now scattered armies of its successor states.
- Sakwa, Richard, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2016). A prescient overview of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.
- Stone, David R., *A Military History of Russia: From Ivan the Terrible to the War in Chechnya* (London: Praeger Security International, 2006). The most comprehensive single-volume work available on imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian military action and campaigns.

## CHAPTER 8.

# Identity: From Traditional to Transnational

ARNOUT VAN REE



**Image 8.1** Major General Chris Donahue, commander of the U.S. Army 82nd Airborne Division, XVIII Airborne Corps, boards a C-17 cargo plane at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, 29 August 2021



## Introduction

The last US soldier left Afghanistan on 30 August 2021 after a 20-year occupation. It marked the second time in recent history that a superpower was forced to leave Afghanistan in defeat, after the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989. A US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan in 2001. This was a consequence of 9/11 when Al-Qaida terrorists hijacked several passenger planes and flew them into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon. The invasion was justified by the fact that Al-Qaida was based in Afghanistan. Al-Qaida, responsible for the first attacks on the United

States since Pearl Harbor in 1942, had justified the use of violence through the work of Sayyid Qutb, the so-called philosopher of terror. Qutb's thinking has been used to legitimize armed struggle against those who are defined as heretics and non-Muslims. Yet, this is a reduction or simplification of Qutb's thinking. Furthermore, it has been used to legitimize Western views of Muslims being driven by religious fanaticism and (international) actions.\* This ignores the fact that Qutb's thinking has been the result of historical processes and debates in the Islamic world on the role of religion in state and society. What are the links with nationalism and identity? In the Middle East, the period starting in the nineteenth century is defined as the *Nahda*, the Islamic Renaissance.\*\*

This chapter will deal with these historical debates in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. These occurred not only because of developments within this part of the world, such as the decline of the Ottoman Empire, but also resulted from the increasing presence of European imperialism in the region since the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798. It was, also, France which first colonized a North African country, Algeria, in 1830. While the Islamic world had played an important role in terms of power, science, and trade in the centuries following the death of the prophet Muhammad, it steadily lost power in relation to Europe in the modern era. The Industrial Revolution led to a rapid rise of economic and military predominance of Europe. This gave rise to questions and debates in the MENA region about how state and society should be organized. What would be the role of religion? And how could modernization and development be introduced?\*\*\*

These debates will be traced in this chapter by focusing on the various pan-movements in the MENA region. The main argument of this chapter will be that the different ingredients of identity formation in larger groups are very changeable over time. In particular, the pan-movements, Islamic modernism during the *Nahda* period, Pan-Arabism, and Islamism were attempts to address or resolve tensions between rising nationalism in the region and supranational identity or identities. Furthermore, these pan-movements attempted to help in the transition from a traditional to a modern society and negotiate identity in new political orders. The chapter echoes ideas about political order, offered in chapter four, as well as understandings of religion, discussed in chapter six.

We will first focus on Islamic modernism during the *Nahda* through the figure of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), the awakener of the East, and two of his disciples Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida.\*\*\*\* Afghani was a travelling revolutionary

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\* John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

\*\* Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins* (London: Picador 2013), p. 117-118.

\*\*\* A recent publication discussing this dialectical process is: Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019).

\*\*\*\* Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (London: Arrow Books, 2005) p. 229.



**Image 8.2** Battle of the Pyramids, 21 July 1798, by Antoine Jean Gros

surrounded by mysteries and rumors. He became one of the pioneers of the Nahda. His biography matches some of the important developments in the second half of the nineteenth century starting with the Indian Mutiny of 1857, which he witnessed first-hand. This would have a lasting impact on his political activism as he developed a lasting animosity towards the British and developed a drive to free the Muslim world from the burden of colonialism. In short, Afghani as an Islamic modernist argued for a profound rethinking of Islam in the face of the challenges posed by the West. A central part of his political thinking was that the Islamic world needed to unify behind a Muslim leader to resist increasing British and French colonialism. While, in the end Afghani failed in making this vision a reality, he did inspire other political ideologies with his thinking and rhetoric on colonialism, independence, the role of Islam and political activism.\* The next dominant ideology became *Pan-Arabism*, which will be examined through Gamal Abdel Nasser.

\* Christopher de Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment: The Struggle Between Faith and Reason 1798 to Modern Times* (New York: Liveright, 2017), in particular Chapter 5: 'Nation'. Nikkie R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani" A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).





## 8.a Concept Definition

### Ideology

*A body of coherent thought which influences and justifies the thinking and repertoire of actions of individuals, groups and societies.*

This ideology emphasized that the Arab-speaking countries in the MENA region constitute one people as they share a common history, a linguistic bond, and a culture that was more important than religious or ethnic boundaries. Finally, we will focus on *Islamism* through the already mentioned figure of Sayyid Qutb. Islamism became a dominant response to the question of modernity following the collapse of political pan-Arabism in the 1960s. Islamism, in short, is the use of Islamic language and symbols to deal with these identity questions.

As will become clear in the chapter, these debates need to be placed within their historical context. It is, for example, not possible to explain the Nahda, pan-Arabism, Islamism or Qutb's thinking without tracing their global and regional connections. As Keith Watenpaugh argues in his book, modernity needs to be approached as a lived historical experience and engagement which gives rise to different but related responses.\* The intellectuals discussed in this chapter were struggling with questions of identity and asked why they were perceived to be losing to the "other". Today this is mirrored in the discussions about the rise of populist politics, such as embraced by the former US president Donald Trump and his slogan "Make America Great Again", the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, Brexit, and the wave of protests in 2019 in Iraq, Lebanon, Chile and elsewhere.



## Historiography

As Western European hegemony continued to extend over the world, European states came to control, directly or indirectly, more and more of the Islamic world. This led to increasing knowledge of the Orient especially following Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. The production of scholarly work was used to justify and legitimize colonialism as the colonizers were bringing 'civilization', as already discussed among others in chapter six. There is a complex intertwining of the production of knowledge and the growing European power. The modern world was understood by many European scholars as the inevitable, and some believed, final outcome of human progress. This movement was attributed to the increasing power of human reason, the growing technical control that it acquired over the natural

\* Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

and social world, to order social affairs.\* The idea of the *homo islamicus* became dominant in scholarship on the Orient, an essentialist idea that is still present in contemporary debates namely that the identity of Muslims is solely defined by their religion. For the colonial period, this meant that the region was seen through the lens of the written sources of Islam using a philological approach. This perspective can be seen in the works of, among others, Ernest Renan who debated with Afghani on this topic, George Lane, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, Max Weber but also Karl Marx arguing that the civilization of the *homo islamicus* was static and incapable of change due to its attachment to religion. This was the Orientalist approach dominant until approximately the end of the Second World War.\*\*



## 8.b Concept Definition

### Orientalism

*Essentialist approach to the Orient as constituting immutable and stereotyped characteristics of Arab and Asian culture and traditions.*

The Second World War was followed by a very productive period in Area Studies as the sharp dichotomy between tradition and modernity experienced a reworking with social scientists taking a leading role in defining views of the MENA-region. Advocates of Area Studies argued that regions of the world should not be approached within the narrow confines of a certain discipline but through the cooperation of various disciplines. Instead of the Orientalist approach grounded in philology where key principles of a civilization were deduced from its classical texts, Area Studies paid attention to the complex dynamics of political, social, and cultural change within societies. However, both approaches, that of Area Studies and Orientalism, are premised on drawing sharp distinctions but on different bases. The latter bases itself on civilizations while the former does so based on tradition and modernity, in other words a perceived stage of development. It, furthermore, argues that through the education of so-called “European or secular” values and the transfer of technology, these less advanced societies could achieve development informed by the perception that European history could predict this. This change from a traditional to modern society would be realized through outside assistance, in other words through economic, political, and cultural influence of the West. This approach is illustrated by the work of scholars like Daniel Lerner, Nadav Safran, and Samuel Huntington. Huntington, for example, is probably best known for his

\* Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) p. 1-4, 54.

\*\* Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp. 66-100.

*Clash of Civilizations* thesis, which will be revisited in the conclusion.\* He argued that, following the end of the Cold War, conflict would be determined by cultural and religious identities.



### 8.c Concept Definition

#### Clash of Civilizations thesis

*Theory developed by Samuel Huntington which distinguishes nine civilizations in the world (Western, Orthodox, Latin American, Islamic, African, Hindu, Buddhist, Sinic and Japanese) based on shared culture, identity and religion. It claims that future conflict will take place on the fault lines between these civilizations.*

This approach informed much of the political discourse during the War on Terror.\*\*

These two dominant approaches of Area Studies and Orientalism were the subject of critique by a new generation of scholars influenced by a linguistic and cultural turn in Humanities exemplified in Edward Said's bestseller *Orientalism* (1976). Said himself said that the idea of Orientalism came to him because of the shock in Western media when the Egyptian army crossed the Suez Canal. The media questioned how the Arab 'barbarian', i.e. less modern, could be capable of this?\*\*\*



**Image 8.3** The 1973 Yom Kippur War: Egyptian army crossing Suez Canal

\* Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1996).

\*\* Lockman, *Contending Visions*, pp. 66-100, 234-242.

\*\*\* Edward Said, "Edward Said on Orientalism" interview by Sut Jhally, *Media Education Foundation*, 1998. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd\\_Z\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd_Z_g) Last accessed 15 April 2022.

The central idea of *Orientalism* is that European knowledge of the Orient consists of imagined constructs defined by everything that the West is not. This body of thought is influenced by the work of amongst others Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, post-structuralists who studied the relationship between power and knowledge production, i.e. discourse.



#### 8.d Concept Definition

##### Post-Structuralism

*A philosophical and theoretical approach that focuses on interpretivist and discursive practices based on the role of language. Language creates and shapes what we perceive to be real but post-structuralists believe there is no reality beyond that.*

Using discourse analysis, Said noted that political, scholarly, and public narratives about the Orient were shaped by the changing power relations between the West and the MENA region, and as such represented a hegemonic perspective of reality.



#### 8.1 The Study of History

##### Discourse

*A coherent system of words, communications, meaning and practices that together construct our understanding of phenomena.*

Post-colonial theory defines knowledge as generated under specific relations between the powerful and the powerless or the dominant class and the subordinate class. Post-structuralists point out how this knowledge production is used repetitively to legitimize certain interests.



#### 8.e Concept Definition

##### Post-Colonial Theory

*Theory focused on the continuities and discontinuities in language, understanding, practices and organization between colonial and post-colonial societies. It is focused on power disparities in these domains.*

It should be noted that Said's critique was not necessarily new. Already in the 1960s Albert Hourani had critiqued the place of Islam in European historiography and its use in interpretations of history. Hourani and others argued that accurate knowledge, i.e. not knowledge produced in the interests of Western power over the region, could be produced through the analytical tools of political economy. Instead of the cultural essentialism of Orientalists or the teleology of modernization theory, "this meant giving explanatory primacy to such things as social structure, the local,

regional and global dynamics of capitalist development, and political and social struggles in their historical contexts.”\*

## The Nahda

Over the course of the nineteenth century, as mentioned above, the Islamic world was slowly but surely losing power in relation to Europe. This could be clearly seen in the territorial losses the Ottoman Empire suffered in the Balkans, the result of rising nationalism and ensuing struggles for independence, and North Africa with the colonization of Algeria and Tunisia by France.



### 8.f Concept Definition

#### Nationalism

*A political philosophy and political movement focused on an idea and practice of the nation, which is based on shared identity and solidarity.*

Furthermore, while the Islamic world had played an important role in terms of power, science, and trade, this was no longer the case. In this section we will focus on Jamal al-Din al-Afghani who, in the nineteenth century together with his followers Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, is commonly seen as one of the central figures in Islamic modernism. Islamic modernists argued for the selective incorporation of advances of European civilization. Islamic modernism came to Egypt from India through Afghani. While Afghani was born in Hamadan, Iran and educated in the religious madrassahs of Najaf, he went to India at age seventeen, in 1856, to learn, as he put it, ‘western sciences’ to supplement his religious education. India was at that time almost fully under direct control of the British Empire. India was where some of the earliest Islamic modernists lived such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898).\*\*

Afghani was initially not too concerned with the Indian population suffering under the yoke of colonialism, but this changed following the Indian Mutiny, an uprising against the British powerholders in 1857. He was horrified by the level of violence with which the British, who had preached the values of the Enlightenment and modernity, suppressed this revolution. These events would have a lasting impact on his political activism as he developed a lasting animosity of the British and a drive to free the Muslim world from the burden of colonialism.\*\*\* His thinking can be distilled in three main conclusions: imperialism threatened the Middle East,

\* Lockman, *Contending Visions*, pp. 183-215.

\*\* De Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment*, chapter 5: Nation.

\*\*\* Aslan, *No god*, p. 229-231; Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982) p. 65.

this onslaught by the West could only be prevented by adopting modern technology of the West, and, finally, that Islam was an effective creed for mobilizing the public against the imperialists, although he rarely discussed Islam in religious terms.



**Image 8.4** Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897)



**Image 8.5** Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905)



**Image 8.6** Rashid Rida (1865-1935)

Islamic modernism tends to be placed between traditionalism and secularism in terms of responses to the increased presence of the West and Western thinking. Traditionalism, briefly, represents the response whereby everything seen as non-Islamic or secular is rejected. It is argued that the community, the ummah, should instead return to the original society established by the Prophet at the beginning of Islam. The best-known example of this response is the rise of Wahhabism on the Arabian Peninsula in the nineteenth century. Islamic modernism also argues that Islam had to be profoundly rethought in the face of the challenges posed by the West but did not reject ‘Western’ ideas or advances out of hand. This rethinking was possible as Islam could be applied to all areas of life. It not only contains rules for the afterlife (*‘ibādāt*) but also contains rules for regulating social life and society (*mu‘āmalāt*). These rules together constitute *Shari‘ā*. They had come into existence through the interpretation of the *Sunna* and the *Qur‘ān* by clerics, a process called *ijtihād*, independent reasoning. However, over the course of history this process had increasingly been closed off as the principle of *taqlid* became dominant. This meant the sources were no longer interpreted and the already established rules should be followed.\* Islamic modernism argued that the practice of *taqlid* had suffocated creative thinking and led to rigidity. Thus, *ijtihād* had to be revived within Islam

\* For an introduction to the Islamic law, *Shari‘ā*, see: Wael B. Hallaq, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



as the only completely authoritative sources were the Qu'ran and the Sunna. These had to be re-interpreted in light of modern knowledge and practice. Thus, it would be through *ijtihad* that reform and progress within the Islamic world would be possible.\*

Thus, reason or rationality had an important role for Afghani. However, Afghani argued that the intellectual foundations of Western modernity with its ideals of social egalitarianism, popular sovereignty, and the preservation of knowledge originated with Islam and Muhammad's first community in Medina. According to Afghani, Islam was a religion where the use of an individual's reason or rationality had been promoted to come to the core of their religion.\*\* In the Western world this shift in the modern era eventually led to a break-down of traditional hierarchies, such a separation of church and state in society. This is an important point of difference with Afghani and Islamic modernism, since Islam was to play a central role in their approach to modernity and the reorganization of Islamic society from traditional to modern.

Afghani argued for a political role of Islam by arguing for religious-based nationalism as part of his thinking on how the state should be structured to be able to face the rising challenge of the West. Islam would be an important source for solidarity and the struggle against imperialism. Furthermore, Afghani argued that political reform was necessary to counter the decline and the backwardness. Despotism and the lack of freedom were seen as major reasons for "Muslim sicknesses."\*\*\* Afghani saw Islam as the means to protect the Islamic world against the complete domination by the colonizers like the British in India. Interestingly, an appeal for unity between Sunni and Shia runs through the works of Afghani, a unity that has never been achieved. Over time he increasingly argued for unity behind the Ottoman Sultan despite the fact that the Ottoman Empire did not give a say to its citizens in the running of the state.\*\*\*\* A main point in Afghani's political ideas was that the people should have a say in the running of their nation-state.

“For those governed by the republican government, it is a source of happiness and pride. Those governed by a republican form of government alone deserve to be called human; for a true human being is only subdued by a true law that is based on the foundations of justice and that is designed to govern man's moves,

\* William E. Shepard, *Introducing Islam: second edition* (London: Routledge, 2014) p. 229-255.

\*\* Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) p. 113-116.

\*\*\* Azzam Tamimi, 'Islam and Democracy from Tahtawi to Ghannouchi', *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol. 24, No. 2 (2007), pp. 39-58, p. 43-44.

\*\*\*\* Nikkie R. Keddie, "AFĠĀNĪ, JAMĀL-AL-DĪN," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, I/5, pp. 481-486, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/afgani-jamal-al-din%20> Last visited 19 December 2021.



actions, transactions and relations with others in a manner that elevates him to the pinnacle of true happiness.”\*

Afghani promoted a republican form of government since people would be able to assume their political and social role by participating in governing. This political reform would address the lack of freedom. However, this political reform should occur without abandoning religious principles; blindly copying the European civilization would endanger the sovereignty of the ummah, the community of believers, as the Islamic fundamentals would be abandoned. Afghani thus argued for a form of religious nationalism where the ummah would be united through Islam.\*\*

Afghani's views on the role of Islam, its relationship with rationality and its role or that of any religion in the progression from a traditional to modern society become clear in his public debate with Ernest Renan in the *Journal des Débats* on 18 May 1883. Afghani was responding to Renan's lecture "L'Islamisme et la science" (Islam and science), delivered in 1883. Renan argued that the Arabs were incapable of progress and intolerant.\*\*\* The Muslim is, Renan argued, not capable of reason, but is led by religious fervor with all the attached consequences. Afghani countered that "no nation at its origin is capable of letting itself be guided by pure reason."\*\*\*\* Moreover, he argued that religion had an important role to play in civilizational development. It is through religious education that every civilization, including the Christian one, has developed into modernity.

Afghani's writings and speeches showcase that knowledge does not belong to any one culture or is bound by borders. Yet, when making up the balance sheet of the impact of Afghani and Islamic modernism, it must be concluded this was negligible at the time. Islamic modernism promoted reform and not rebellion. Afghani had focused on the elite and overlooked the role of popular mobilization. He never succeeded in mobilizing these leaders to revolt and throw out the colonizing states. At the end of his life Afghani himself also wondered whether focusing on popular mobilization would not have been more effective.\*\*\*\*\* However, Afghani did continue to influence events after his death through his impact on Abduh and Rida who took his thinking further into two different directions. Abduh's contributions, on the one hand, focusing on the role of autocracy in bringing about modernity are reflected in the dictatorship of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Rashid Rida's work, on the

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\* Tamimi, "Islam and Democracy", p. 45.

\*\* Mishra, *From the Ruins*, p. 97-98.

\*\*\* Margaret Kohn, 'Afghānī on Empire, Islam, and Civilization', *Political Theory* Vol. 37, No. 3 (2009), pp. 398-428, p. 406.

\*\*\*\* Ibid.

\*\*\*\*\* Chalcraft, *Popular Politics*, p. 195-196; Abrahamian, *Iran*, p. 62-65.

other hand, increasingly gave dominance to the role of Islam as the blueprint for society and the state. It is this line of thinking that inspired Sayyid Qutb.\*

## Pan-Arabism

Abduh was a close collaborator of Afghani. He was a publisher of the journal *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa* together with Afghani when they lived in Paris from 1883 to 1885. Abduh later in life broke with one of the central ideas of Afghani. He became convinced that the Egyptian struggle for independence from colonization was premature and that Egypt needed European tutelage so that it could become developed and join the world community. This would be a period of national education that, if needed, could be under autocratic rule. The intellectuals Abduh influenced took his legacy into a secularist direction, into the direction of pan-Arabism. Pan-Arabism formed another potential answer to the challenge of negotiating identity and order in a modern world. The answer as to how to organize state and society is best exemplified in the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The discourse on identity and Pan-Arabism became dominant after the Second World War with the rise of authoritarian rule in the MENA region.

Nasser, just as Qutb who will be discussed below, was part of an anti-colonial generation, sharing concerns over cultural regeneration and national renaissance. President Nasser became the embodiment of the Arab world as assertive, independent, and as builder of a new society liberated from imperial legacies. He was a symbol of how political leadership in the Arab world changed in the 1950s from upper-class civilian politicians educated in European-style institutions, to young military officers with more humble backgrounds. He briefly studied law but then joined the army. He fought in the first Arab-Israeli war and saw it as his duty, just as many of his fellow Free Officers, to avenge this disaster, the *Nakba*. The *Nakba* and the question of Israel seemed to have been one of the reasons to overthrow the old regime, a regime installed by the British. Another reason was the increasing social and economic divide in Egypt.\*\*

Nasser's coup took place on 23 July 1952, as the Free Officers, a group of young officers in the Egyptian army, grabbed power and overthrew the Egyptian monarchy. The Free Officers transformed into the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) with a revolutionary program.\*\*\* The realization of the goals of the Revolutionary Command Council was a modernization of society through a revolution led from

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\* Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, p. 148-150; Chalcraft, *Popular Politics*, p. 287.

\*\* Fawaz A. Gerges, *Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash That Shaped the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 152-174.

\*\*\* Nasser outlined the goals of the revolution in his book: Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of The Revolution* (Buffalo, NY: Economica 1959).

above by a socialist state. The autocrat would educate the population, and this would lead to development and modernity as envisioned by Abduh. The Nasserist project as a social and political revolution was the building of a new nation based on industrialization and anti-colonial nationalism.\*

Pan-Arabism was an important part of this, although it predates Nasser, having been formulated during the Nahda.



## 8.g Concept Definition

### Pan-Arabism

*A movement and discourse that emphasized that the Arab-speaking countries in the MENA region constitute one people as they share a common history, a linguistic bond, and culture that was more important than religious or ethnic boundaries.*

It contrasts with Islamic modernism or Islamism in favoring a separation, or even subordination, of religion to politics. However, it was not until Nasser came to power that pan-Arabism came to dominate national and foreign policy in the 1950s and 60s. His Pan-Arabism resulted in several foreign policy triumphs that made Nasser the unquestioned leader of the Arab world until 1967. Pan-Arabism became equated with Nassarism. These triumphs were the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, his refusal to join the Baghdad Pact, his ability to play the competing superpowers to his benefit regarding loans for his Aswan Dam project and arms deals, the Non-Aligned Movement with the Bandung Conference\*\* (1955) and Cairo Conference (1957), and, finally, the United Arab Republic. Nasser, thus, pursued a twin project of national and transnational transformation where Egypt was moving in Arab, African, and Asian networks of anti-colonial resistance since “the national and the international were mutually reinforcing routes to liberation.”\*\*\*

The establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR, 1958-1961), the political union of Egypt and Syria, represents the high point of pan-Arabism and anti-colonial politics in the Arab world. The political union was born out of necessity for the Syrian Ba’ath party as they feared a communist take-over. For Nasser it presented an opportunity to balance his pan-Arabist rhetoric with pragmatic domestic and

\* Sara Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) p. 2; Reem Abou-El-Fadl, ‘Neutralism Made Positive: Egyptian Anti-colonialism on the Road to Bandung’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 42, No. 2 (2015), pp. 219-240, p. 222.

\*\* A recording of Nasser’s speech at the opening of the Asian African conference at Bandung, available at: <http://www.nasser.org/MediaViewer.aspx?VideoID=SPCH-AUD-23126-en> The text in Arabic: <http://www.nasser.org/TextViewer.aspx?TextID=SPCH-339-en> Last accessed 15 April 2022.

\*\*\* Reem Abou-El-Fadl, ‘Building Egypt’s Afro-Asian Hub: Infrastructures of Solidarity and the 1957 Cairo Conference’, *Journal of World History* Vol. 30, Nos. 1-2 (2019), pp. 157-192, p. 163-164, 170-171; Reem Abou-El-Fadl, ‘Early pan-Arabism in Egypt’s July revolution: the Free Officers’ political formation and policy-making, 1946-54’, *Nations and Nationalism* Vol. 21, No. 2 (2015), pp. 289-308.



**Image 8.7** Presidents Abdel Nasser and Shukri al-Quwatli Signing Unity Pact, Forming the United Arab Republic, February 1958



**Image 8.8** Nasser meeting with Che Guevara in 1965

foreign policy. It presented him with the opportunity to rid himself of a rival in Syria. Furthermore, it represented an attempt to overturn imperial legacies, in particular the contentious state borders resulting from the Sykes-Picot Agreement between France and Great Britain made during the First World War, and to put into practice the pan-Arabist idea of a unified regional state. However, reality quickly surpassed this dream as Nasser's draconian style of rule proved the undoing of the UAR. The breaking point was reached in 1961 when Syrian military officers staged a coup and dissolved the UAR. It failed because it had turned into a state completely dominated by Egypt.\*

## Pan-Islamism

The collapse of the UAR signaled the collapse of pan-Arabism and the regional popularity of Nasser as well. This process was also hastened by increasing regional political rivalries and the devastating loss of the Six-Day War of 1967 during which Israel inflicted heavy losses on the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian forces. These events and the failure of the different authoritarian regimes to deliver on their promises of development and modernization led to a resurgence of Islamic religious practices during the 1970s and the rise of Islamism. This represents the third “answer” to the challenge of identity and modernity. This strand of thinking

\* Dina Rezk. ‘Egypt’s revolutionary year: Regime consolidation at home, pragmatism abroad, and neutralism in the Cold War’, in: Jeffrey G. Karam (ed.) *The Middle East in 1958: Reimagining a Revolutionary Year* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 92–112.

will be discussed through the person of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb is popularly known as the ‘philosopher of terror’ as his thinking supposedly inspired the suicide attacks by jihadist terrorists perpetrating 9/11. However, as Omnia El Shakry argues, this interpretation has focused on Qutb’s thought without situating “him within a sufficiently complex and symbiotic local ideological landscape.”\*

Afghani’s disciple Rashid Rida can be seen as a bridge between Islamic modernism and Islamism. Unlike Afghani and Abduh, he witnessed the demise of the Caliphate and collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. This marked him deeply. It was the first time in the Islamic world that there was no Caliphate, a religious and political center for the ummah. Rida argued that only through a revived Caliphate, where religious law (sharia) would be applied, could the weakening of the Islamic world be reversed. Rida influenced Hasan al-Banna, who went on to establish the al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn, known as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Rida’s work enabled the elitist work of Abduh and Afghani to enter into the thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood. He rejected the gradual approach of Abduh, reform through education, for a more revolutionary and confrontational stance. The Muslim Brotherhood developed into the largest and probably most influential organization of modernist Islamic thought and action. They engaged in charity, education, and politics in the MENA-region over the course of the twentieth century.\*\* Qutb became the leading philosopher of the MB from the 1950s onwards for which he was imprisoned several times by Nasser’s regime. While the RCC had initially worked with the MB, following an assassination attempt against Nasser, the organization was outlawed and suppressed from 1954 onwards.

Qutb had belonged to a secular nationalist literary circle in Cairo before joining the MB in 1953. He, thus, belonged to the new educated class socialized into modernist and nationalist symbols that arose during British imperialism.\*\*\* Qutb’s gradual shift towards a progressive interpretation of religion as a solution to the issue of modernization and modernity was the result of several drivers. These include the failure of the regime to deliver on its promises of modernization and the resurgence of religiosity in the region. Also, his time studying in the United States played an important role.\*\*\*\*

\* Omnia El Shakry, ‘AHR Roundtable: ‘History without documents’: The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East’, *American Historical Review* Vol. 120, No. 3 (2015), pp. 920-934, p. 925-927.

\*\* Dietrich Jung and Ahmed el Zalaf, ‘Hasan Al-Banna and the Modern Muslim Self: Subjectivity Formation and the Search for an Islamic Order in Early 20th-Century Egypt’, *Numen* Vol. 66, No. 4 (2019), pp. 381-402, p. 382.

\*\*\* Patrizia Manduchi, ‘Arab Nationalism(s): Rise and Decline of an Ideology’, *Oriente Moderno* Vol. 97, No. 1 (2017), pp. 4-35, p. 16-17

\*\*\*\* Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, chapter 3.



**Image 8.9** Sayyid Qutb

Qutb went to the US in 1948 in service of the Egyptian ministry of Education to study western methods of education. He stayed at the Wilson's Teacher College until 1950. During his stay he became increasingly disillusioned, confronted with consumerism and a lack of morality and religion.\* As Qutb writes:

“The researcher of American life will stand at first puzzled before a wondrous phenomenon, a phenomenon that exists nowhere else on earth. It is the case of a people who have reached the peak of growth and elevation in the world of science and productivity, while remaining abysmally primitive in the world of the senses, feelings, and behavior.”\*\*

Qutb seems to echo Afghani's idea of European civilization and the lack of a moral center. He turned against the racism, the sexual permissiveness, liberal individualism, and pro-Zionism he perceived to be present in the US. Upon his return to Egypt, he rejected a job at the ministry of education and joined the Muslim Brotherhood.

Qutb has described his intellectual journey as his own *jahiliyya*. This idea of jahiliyya comes from his book *Milestones*, published in 1964.

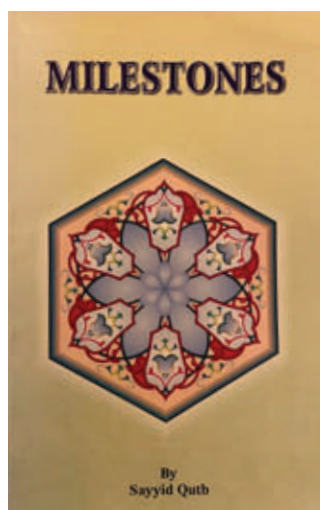
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\* Ibid., chapter 4.

\*\* Sayyid Qutb, “The America I Have Seen”: In the Scale of Human Values (1951), in: Kamal Abdel-Malek (ed.) *America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature: an Anthology 1895-1995* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) p. 11.



**Image 8.10** Qutb's book  
Milestones (Arabic version)



**Image 8.11** Qutb's book  
Milestones (English version)



It was written while he was imprisoned by Nasser's regime. Here he argues that not only non-Muslims but also Muslims are *jahili*, ignorant. This term references the period before the rise of Islam. The usage of this language justifies confrontation with Nasser and other regimes on religious and political grounds. These regimes were not only authoritarian (political) but also unbelievers (religious). Qutb argued that the contemporary Muslim regimes were not Islamic. He, furthermore, extended the responsibility to ordinary people to change this but also included those ordinary people who must be brought or coerced back into Islam. While Qutb did not explicitly advocate for the use of violence to overthrow these un-Islamic regimes or return people to the fold, this has been the conclusion drawn by his followers. Qutb's reasoning does, however, make it the duty of each individual Muslim to practice *jihād*, to bring about the Islamic state.\*



## 8.h Concept Definition

### Islamism

*The belief that Islam contains all the answers and solutions for dealing with the questions of modernity. This discourse, thus, makes use of Islamic language and symbols. It is also referred to as political Islam.*

Islamism continued its rise in popularity following Qutb's execution and another disastrous war, the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This climaxed in 1979 with three events that continue to have an impact today. While these events may not be directly linked

\* Geroges, *Making the Islamic World*, p. 139-140.



to Qutb, they are the result of the same historical processes. The first event was the occupation of the Grand Mosque of Mecca by a group that called for the overthrow of the House of Saud. The second event was the invasion by the Soviet Union of Afghanistan, an invasion that led to the support of Afghan resistance fighters, the mujahedeen, by the US and other countries. Furthermore, support was mobilized on an international level using Islamist language, presenting it as a jihad, that resulted in international Muslim fighters travelling to Afghanistan. In the end this resulted in the establishment of the Taliban and Al-Qaida.\* And, finally, in 1979 the shah of Iran was overthrown following the Iranian Revolution that was successful due to the coalition of reformers and ulama, the foundations for which were laid by Afghani's thinking.\*\* This resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini reinterpreting the role of Islam in politics and society with his theory of *velayat e-faqih*, the rule of the jurispudent.\*\*\*



**Image 8.12** Mujahedeen visit White House with President Reagan, 1983

\* Manduchi, 'Arab Nationalism(s)', p. 21-22.

\*\* Kohn, 'Afghānī', p. 400.

\*\*\* Abrahamian, *Iran*, p. 496-529.



**Image 8.13** Coffeehouse-style painting depicting the Islamic Revolution with the Shah's exile and Khomeini's return, circa 1979.

Description: Scenes from the Revolution are played out on a map of Iran. The Shah is shown leaving carrying two bags marked with the US and UK flags filled with gold and money, flanked by a dog and a demon from Hell. Ayatollah Khomeini emerges from the mist above the outline of Iran, holding the Koran in his right hand and with the green banner of the Prophet waving behind him.

## Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the historical debates in the Islamic world on how to navigate identity with political ordering and modernity. What is the role of religion

in the state and society, nationalism, and identity in the Middle East? We began at the end of the nineteenth century during the period in the MENA region defined as the Nahda, the Islamic renaissance. We saw the rise of Islamic modernism, a call to profoundly rethink the challenges posed by the West. This was possible as Islam was the truth of God revealed to the Prophet and it applied to all areas of life. However, it included the selective incorporation of certain Western ideas and technologies. The important figure was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. As Pankaj Mishra noted, 'Afghani is barely known in the West today, even though his influence ... at least in its longevity, almost matches Marx's.'\*

Two of Afghani's disciples, Abduh and Rida, in turn influenced pan-Arabism and Islamism respectively. Pan-Arabism argued for bonds based on language, history and culture and favoring, unlike Islamic modernism, a separation or even subordination of religion to politics and a focus beyond the narrow concept of the nation-state. It peaked under Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime, which indeed strictly controlled religion. It is the failure of the UAR and the failure of authoritarian regimes to deliver on its socio-economic promises of modernization that led to the rise of Islamism. This was reviewed through the thinking of Sayyid Qutb. Islamism rejects everything Western and calls for the return to 'authentic' Islam, which would bring about modernization and modernity. This does not mean that Islamism rejects modern technology, but it does reject modern Western values and culture. It would, furthermore, be a fallacy to approach pan-Arabism and Islamism as dichotomous. These two discourses are constructed through interaction with each other as should be clear from the biographies of Nasser and Qutb. Furthermore, both were philosophies of liberation from the legacies and continuing impact of colonialism and imperialism.

This chapter has shown that the outcomes were not pre-determined. The question of identity or, in other words, how state and society should be organized is not a linear process but rather a lived historical process. These cannot be reviewed without their respective historical, cultural, and political contexts as well as the regional and global connections. The pan-movements described in this chapter each attempted to address how to progress from a traditional to a modern society.

Each new approach to modernity was responding to the preceding one and the situation in the world. This is not unique to the MENA region but can also be seen in Asia in the figures of Rabinath Tagore, Muhammad Iqbal, and Liang Shuming.\*\* They also called for a reconsideration of Western claims to universal modernity. Importantly, they pointed to the loss of religious and spiritual values and rejected the unilinear conception of progress based on Western norms. In fact, there is no

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\* Mishra, *From the Ruins*, p. 50.

\*\* Adam Webb, 'The Countermodern Moment: A World-Historical Perspective on the Thought of Rabindranath Tagore, Muhammad Iqbal, and Liang Shuming', *Journal of World History* Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 189-212. We will return to this issue in the next chapter.

such thing as one universal modernity; it is more appropriate to speak of multiple modernities.

## Guiding Questions

1. How have the challenges of identity been navigated in the MENA region since the nineteenth century?
2. What is Orientalism?
3. What is Islamism?
4. How is the thinking of Said Qutb linked to the terrorist attacks of 9/11?
5. Can you think of other Pan-movements? Have they fared better than Pan-Arabism?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Bayat, Asef, and Linda Herrera (eds), *Global Middle East: Into the Twentieth Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021). This edited volume shows the global interconnectedness through the prism of the Middle East and North Africa covering a wide range of topics from Rumi to social and political movements.
- Beinín, Joel, Bassam Haddad, and Sherene Seikaly (eds), *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021). This edited volume demonstrates challenges through critical political economy of the conventional wisdom on the origins and contemporary dynamics of capitalism in the region.
- Chalcraft, John, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). John Chalcraft examines in a comparative framework rooted in the dynamics of hegemonic contestation, protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa from 1798 onwards and ranging from Morocco to Iran.
- Gelvin, James L. (ed.), *The Contemporary Middle East in an Age of Upheaval* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021). This edited volume contains chapters written by scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds and engages with six broader themes in the Middle East and North Africa and individual country studies to make sense of the current disorder and possible future directions.

## CHAPTER 9.

# Modernity: Being Modern and Counter-Modernity

GINA I. VAN LING



## Introduction

Thursday 24 February 2022 was a memorable day. After a long period of peace, war returned to Europe. In the outrage and frustration that accompanied the Russian invasion of Ukraine, volunteers started to travel to the country to enlist and help repel the invasion. The emergence of foreign fighters in the context of war is by no means a new phenomenon. In recent years, foreign fighters in the Syrian civil war, fighting on behalf of the Islamic State received a lot of attention. Also, in the more distant past, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) the Republican government also hosted a number of fighters from other countries helping resist the Nationalists led by General Francisco Franco. Notable participants were Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell, who became literary greats, not least because of their experiences in the conflict. It appears as a minor detail, holding a passport as another national or colonial subject of the state on whose behalf you are fighting. Still, fighting the wars of others is a broader phenomenon. This type of participation could also be witnessed in the large number of colonial subjects fighting in the First World War on behalf of their colonial metropolises. Often overlooked, Senegal for example lost over 30,000 Senegalese Tirailleurs, who were killed in Europe fighting on behalf of the French, and over 45,000 Nigerian carriers died in the East African campaign and circa 75,000 Indian soldiers lost their lives during the First World War in service of the British forces. Also European settlers from colonial territories engaged in warfare overseas. From New Zealand, to South Africa and Canada, these settlers fought in 'national' corps, thereby stimulating their sense of 'national' identity. The sacrifices of these colonial troops sparked demands for independence in their respective homelands, but were mostly crushed during the Interbellum. An almost neglected contingent were Chinese participating in the First World War.

In 2014 the Chinese in Britain Forum, a coalition of Chinese organizations in the United Kingdom, launched the Ensuring We Remember campaign for a permanent memorial to commemorate the Chinese Labor Corps of the First World War.





**Image 9.1** Commemorative stele for the Chinese laborers at Jardin Baudricourt

Between 1916 and 1920 approximately 140,000 Chinese laborers served on the Western Front in Europe to aid the British and French troops as non-combatants in the war effort. The memorial, a so-called *huabiao* (a traditional ceremonial column), was originally scheduled to be unveiled in London on 11 November 2018, the hundred-year anniversary of the war's armistice. The unveiling was postponed due to installation costs and struggles to find a suitable location in the capital, where land is extremely costly. The *huabiao* is nearly ten meters high, has a square base of twelve meters, and requires additional space for visitors to walk around the marble column. After this setback, the organization of Ensuring We Remember hoped to unveil the monument on 4 May 2019, the hundred-year anniversary of the May Fourth Movement in China.\* However, at the time of writing this chapter, the memorial still has no home in London.

The difficulties faced by the campaign group illustrate a long-time struggle of less central actors in the First World War to gain recognition for their place in the

\* Hilary Clarke, 'Memorial to Chinese labourers who helped allies in World War I struggles to find a home in Britain', *South China Morning Post*, 14 August 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3022697/memorial-chinese-labourers-who-helped-allies-world-war-i>

war. Although various spaces of commemoration for the Chinese laborers have been created in Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom, they pale in comparison to the attention given to British, French, Russian, German or even American actors. For example, the commemorative stele for Chinese laborers erected in Paris in 1998 is hidden away in Jardin Baudricourt, a small park in the French capital's Chinatown. (Image 9.1) Descendants of laborers and Chinese overseas communities have made various efforts to give attention to the Chinese Labor Corps, but the reach of these efforts generally remain confined to their own groups.

The lack of attention on the role of China and the Chinese laborers in the First World War has multiple causes. The sheer destruction of the war affected the primary actors in much greater numbers, more directly, and during a longer time span than China. Discrimination and dismissal of the importance to commemorate Asian, African, and other marginal groups has left many casualties unnamed and forgotten. In 2021 a special committee of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) in the United Kingdom concluded that non-British personnel, including the Chinese laborers, have often been commemorated unequally.\*



**Image 9.2** Headstones for members of the Chinese Labor Corps at Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery in Poperinge, Belgium

\* George Hay and John Burke, *Report of the Special Committee to Review Historical Inequalities in Commemoration*, (Maidenhead: The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2021). Available at: <https://www.cwgc.org/media/noantj4i/report-of-the-special-committee-to-review-historical-inequalities-in-commemoration.pdf> Last accessed 15 April 2022.



Graves were unmarked – even when the identities of the victims were known – or the dead were implied to be included with general, nameless memorials. This practice goes against the principles of the CWGC that strives to name and recognize every casualty of war. It was only on Remembrance Day in 2017 that the first wreath was laid at the Cenotaph in Whitehall, in national recognition for the Chinese laborers' efforts.



## Historiography

The First World War has also been a neglected topic in Chinese historiography itself. Historian Xin Fan points out that scholars of the Republican era in China (1912-1949) disregarded the Chinese contribution because the conflict and major battles primarily took place on European soil.\* The First World War was referred to as the 'European War' and China's role in it was considered insignificant. During the Maoist Period of the People's Republic of China (1949-1976), historiography of the war became politicized and was heavily influenced by communist ideology. According to Chinese Marxist scholars, the war exposed the injustices of the capitalist world order. It was a war between 'imperial countries', therefore China had no place in it. As China headed into a new era after the death of Mao Zedong, scholars gradually let go of the communist interpretations of the First World War and today treat it as a historical event in world history. According to Fan, Chinese historians have been 'unable to develop a comprehensive perspective on China's involvement in the war' until recently.\*\*

The centennial of the First World War, which spanned from 2014 to 2018, has prompted a re-examination of the war and its actors. Historians are shifting toward a new approach that considers histories that are understudied or overlooked. By examining regions and peoples outside the well-established – mostly European-centric – narratives, it becomes clear that the First World War was a truly global conflict. The war shook up the entire world order and inspired peoples all over the world to re-examine their place in it. China's involvement in the First World War and the aftermath of the Paris Peace Conference is crucial for understanding China's modern development and its path to becoming an integrated member of the international community of nation-states.

This chapter discusses China's coming to terms with modernity from the nineteenth century by transitioning from a dynastic empire to a nation-state,

\* Xin Fan, 'Historiography 1918-Today (China)', in: Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (eds) *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014). Available at: [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/historiography\\_1918-today\\_china](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/historiography_1918-today_china) Last accessed 22 September 2021

\*\* Fan, 'Historiography'.

China's entry into the First World War, the role of the Chinese Labor Corps, and the impact of the Paris Peace Conference on China's national identity, both internally and externally. The main argument of this chapter is that the exchanges in the context of the First World War led to fundamental questions about the essence of modernity and what it means to be modern. It builds on the discussion about modernity highlighted in the introduction to Part II, as well as the debate about Identity addressed in chapter eight.

## China's Modern Experience

In 1793 George Macartney and his delegation undertook a diplomatic mission to China with the aim of opening new ports for trade, relaxing trade restrictions for British merchants in Canton (now Guangzhou), and requesting permanent diplomatic representation in the Chinese empire's capital, Beijing. The industrializing European states had attempted to persuade China to enter their trade system since the seventeenth century, but to no avail. In a letter to King George III, responding to the British envoy's demands, the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing explained that China had no interest in what the British had to offer. After all, the Chinese profited greatly from the trade conditions they had put into place. Moreover, the Emperor rejected allowing the establishment of an embassy because it implied placing the British on equal footing with the Emperor. Chinese international relations were dictated by the idea of *tianxia*, which is commonly translated as 'all under heaven'. In this system, China saw itself at the center of a hierarchically structured diplomatic system. The Chinese empire was the leading political power and a source of culture for the states along its borders.\* This system was incompatible with Western-style patterns of diplomacy as the British had hoped to establish with the Qing.

The Qing's resistance to Europe's determination to 'open up' trade with China became increasingly difficult. Western military power was superior to that of the Qing and within several decades the British had found a way into China through opium. The First Opium War (1839-1942) led to the cession of Hong Kong Island and the first in a series of 'unequal treaties' between the Chinese empire and Western powers. Other European countries and the United States soon followed, which led to more and more territory coming under foreign influence. The centuries-old idea of *tianxia* rapidly diminished in value and China was thrust into a new system of international affairs where diplomatic relations were conducted between sovereign nation-states. This new reality challenged the Chinese view of themselves as a highly developed civilization. The empire stood at a crossroads. Pro-traditionalists believed the best way to deal with foreign pressures was to remain steadfast:

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\* Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 346.

reject Western culture and reform China through a cultural revival that relied on reinterpreting traditional thought. Anti-traditionalists, on the other hand, believed Chinese culture could not be saved – it was corrupt and broken. The only way forward was to Westernize absolutely. Others sought to find a middle ground of “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning for application.”\*



### 9.a Concept Definition

#### Counter-Modernity

*Intellectual movement against modernity which places emphasis, in differing degrees, on the spiritual, nature, ethics and culture. The central idea is that Western modernity has lost all ethics and spirituality. For Islamic modernism, addressed in chapter 8, this meant for example that there should be a progression from a traditional to a (rational) modern society without the loss of religion or religious values as a necessary moral compass to guide society.*

After the Second Opium War (1856-1860) the Qing responded to the challenges it faced both internally and externally by industrializing, following the idea of moderate reformers to adopt Western technology and armaments, while maintaining the Confucian essence of Chinese civilization. This ‘self-strengthening’ movement faced multiple difficulties: continued foreign incursions, internal crises such as rebellions and natural disasters, and – on a more philosophical level – the Chinese emphasis of morality over technical expertise. The ‘self-strengthening’ endeavors were delivered a final blow by the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5. The Qing’s recently established navy was completely destroyed, China lost its influence over Korea, and Taiwan was ceded to Japan, making it the new imperial power’s first colony. The outcome of the conflict with Japan led China into an even greater crisis: not only were they defeated by Western imperial powers, but even by a former subordinate to the Chinese empire. Many Chinese recognized that adopting Western technology alone could not save the empire – there was something fundamentally wrong with the essence of China.

The political thinkers and reformers Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao convinced the Emperor in 1898 to implement far-reaching reforms that were heavily based on the Japanese model of modernization. These reforms went further than the previous ‘self-strengthening’ movement, calling for rigorous institutional and ideological reforms *in addition* to technological innovation. Unfortunately, internal strife at the imperial court, a politically and financially disastrous attempt at trying to expel the foreign powers from China’s territory, and a growing impatience of the Chinese

\* A phrase attributed to scholar-official Feng Guifen, who laid the ideological foundation for the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895).



**Image 9.3** Cartoon by W.A. Roberts illustrating how foreign powers restricted China's sovereignty

people with the Qing dynasty sealed the fate of the last dynasty. A final attempt at reviving Kang and Liang's reforms in the final years of the Qing had come too little too late. In 1911 rebellions and uprisings against the Qing spread throughout the empire, and in 1912 the Republic of China was declared. The Chinese people were no longer subjects of an empire, but citizens of a modern republic. The new status of China also forced the Chinese to reassess their identity both internally and internationally.

Modernity has highly politicized definitions in China. In the interpretations of twentieth-century progressive reformers and Chinese Maoist and Marxist historians, Chinese modern history begins with the First Opium War.\* In this narrative,

\* Frederic Wakeman, "Chinese Modernity," in: Dominic Sachsenmaier and S. N. Eisenstadt (eds) *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese, and Other Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 155.

Western (and later also Japanese) imperialism prevented the 'self-strengthening' movement in the nineteenth century from being successful. Furthermore, the Qing was seen as a corrupt society that was obstructed in its endeavor to modernize because of 'feudal' structures and 'backward' Confucian thought that had held China in its paralyzing grip for centuries. The establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 was a break with a static past and the beginning of China's 'true' path toward modernity. This categorical dichotomy in Chinese historiography between what is considered modern and premodern is problematic because it dismisses the efforts that were made toward modernity in the late Qing dynasty (and earlier periods, for that matter) that were able to further develop during the Republican years. The various modernizers throughout the twentieth century had different motives to create this dichotomy, but they all had one goal in common: creating a new Chinese national memory for the Chinese nation-state.\* According to Liang Qichao, the Chinese thinker who helped draft the reforms of the last decade of the Qing, China had no history, only dynastic 'histories' that were cyclical and did not give the Chinese people a sense of national identity.

With the establishment of the Republic of China, the new nation-state literally broke with old times: the first law that was passed by the national senate related to the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, which symbolized China's commitment to join the modern international world system. Western-style schools were established in order to 'transform Chinese attitudes and habits of thinking' so that they would be more aligned with the (Western) world.\*\* Chinese men cut off their queues – the long tail that characterized loyalty to Manchu (Qing) rule – and the long gowns and Mandarin jackets were replaced by modern Western attire.

Foreign powers were reluctant to recognize the new republic right away. China was by no means a stable, unified republic from one day to the next. Its future was unpredictable. Within three months of Sun Yat-sen's leadership, he yielded power to Yuan Shikai – a powerful military official during the Qing whose interest in upholding the modern values of the new republic only went as far as to further his own political career. At the same time, there was also a genuine enthusiasm among politicians and intellectuals to modernize China and become a full-fledged member of the international community. The Republic realized early on that establishing friendly relations with the foreign powers was crucial for China's development; they still held extensive influence over the country's domestic and foreign policy. Ultimately, the foreign powers in China were most concerned about protecting their investments, which totaled \$1.61 billion by 1914.\*\*\* They bargained to their advantage

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\* Wakeman, 'Chinese Modernity', p. 156.

\*\* Guoqi Xu, *China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 37.

\*\*\* Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton), p. 267.

in return for recognition. China's weakness as an independent state remained a point of frustration that would haunt the nation for many decades to come.

In order to understand what caused some of that frustration, we must take a closer look at China's perception of the international system. Although the Chinese understood that the concept of *tianxia* and the old dynastic style of foreign relations were not compatible with the realities of the new world order, they had an idealized view of the international system that they were drawn into by the Western powers. China believed that by developing a more open and welcoming attitude in their diplomatic endeavors, they would gain equal recognition in the international community, which would benefit China's sovereignty. When foreign relations worked out differently in practice, it led to a sense of betrayal. Additionally, the romanticized view of the international community meant the Chinese were not always cognizant of the complex relations that existed between Western nation-states. As Xu Guoqi points out, the Chinese talked about the international order in abstract terms and as a static condition, but the developments in the world in the early twentieth century show that this was far from reality. New emerging powers such as the United States, Germany, and Japan were about to challenge the status quo.\*

In Chinese communist historiography the Republic of China is often characterized as a failure of modernity. Indeed, the new nation-state faced many challenges; but viewing the Republic only through its failures mainly serves to legitimize the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 by the Communists and does not give credit to the new and innovative socio-cultural and political developments that occurred. The Republic was brimming with new ideas, the Chinese people experienced more freedoms than in any other period of China's history, and thanks to a rapidly growing media the country's (literate) public was more informed than ever before about domestic and foreign affairs.

## China Enters the Great War

When the First World War broke out in June 1914 Chinese intellectuals followed the war that was unfolding in Europe with great interest. As the Western powers shifted their attention away from China to focus on the conflict, these intellectuals saw an opportunity. Liang Qichao remarked that if China played its cards right, the young Republic could become a "completely qualified nation-state".\*\* This ambition was as much about joining the international community as it was about regaining China's sovereignty and building a strong, stable state. There was internal unrest in

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\* Xu, *China and the Great War*, p. 74-6.

\*\* Xu, *China and the Great War*, p. 83.



China, with warlords gaining more influence over certain territories, the Tibetans attempting to claim independence, and other uprisings. If the government showed its strength to the Chinese people, the hope was that it would help revive the nation. In August 1914 Yuan Shikai attempted to convince the British to help China recover Qingdao, Germany's concession in Shandong province, by offering 50,000 troops in the operation.\* However, the British dismissed the idea, and Yuan's government quickly declared the Republic's neutrality in the conflict. Aside from Germany and Great Britain, Russia, France, and Austria-Hungary also had concessions in China. The Chinese republic was therefore keen to avoid conflicts between opposing sides being fought out on its territory. It would almost certainly affect the relations between the foreign powers and the Chinese government. Furthermore, an armed conflict would weaken the already fragile republic.



**Image 9.4** A Chinese map depicting the alliances of the Great War

The European preoccupation with the war did not only present an opportunity for China. Japan realized that it could proceed with executing its expansionist plans in the north of China without too much resistance. On 23 August 1914, shortly after Yuan's covert discussions with the British, Japan declared war on Germany. Within

\* Guoqi Xu, *Strangers on the Western Front* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 13.



three months of fighting the German naval commander Alfred Meyer-Waldeck surrendered and the territory came into Japanese hands. Protests by Yuan's government against the Japanese warfare on Chinese territory fell on deaf ears. Besides, with the fighting already taking place, there was little to be done. To make matters worse, Japan presented China with 'Twenty-One Demands' in January 1915 that would extend Japanese control over Shandong and Manchuria, as well as a wide range of other far-reaching infringements of China's sovereignty. News of the demands led to nation-wide anti-Japanese protests, riots, and a boycott of Japanese goods. Despite the population's efforts, Yuan felt he had no choice but to accept most of the demands by May 1915.

The protests were unsuccessful in turning away the Japanese, but it was an important event for China, as it united the entire nation. It also stimulated popular support for the idea that China should challenge the Twenty-One Demands after the war at the negotiating table of the peace conference. Joining the war became an increasingly attractive idea and would soon become the main focus in China's foreign policy. The Chinese government now faced a dilemma: which side should China join? After extensive discussions with Chinese diplomats abroad, it became clear that China had a better chance by aligning with the Allied side, even if that meant they were siding with Japan. However, when Great Britain, France, and Russia requested the Japanese government to help bring China into the alliance, Japan categorically refused.\* China now faced a new problem in their endeavor to join the Allies.

Meanwhile, France and Great Britain were facing great losses on the frontlines in Europe. Human resources were at a constant shortage. The finance minister of China, Liang Shiyi soon devised a clever plan to send laborers-as-soldiers to Europe. The scheme would make it possible to be involved in the war and maintain close ties with the Allies. Sending laborers to the Western Front was a gesture of goodwill that would hopefully persuade France and Great Britain to involve the Republic in the peace conference and to accept China as an equal member of the international community. The plan also anticipated the effects on China of siding with the Allies by having France and Great Britain hire the laborers through "private" companies. In that way, Germany could not accuse China of violating its neutrality.\*\* France reacted positively to the plan right away. Great Britain initially refused China's help but eventually accepted China's offer of help in the summer of 1916. According to Xu Guoqi, France hired approximately 40,000 Chinese laborers between 1916 and 1918, while Great Britain recruited 100,000 laborers to aid their war effort in France and Belgium.

\* Lo, Huimin, *The Correspondence of G. E. Morrison*, vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978), p. 659. As quoted in: Frances Wood and Christopher Arnander, *Betrayed Ally: China in the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military 2016), p. 127.

\*\* Xu, *Strangers*, p. 15-6.

After Germany announced it would engage in unlimited submarine warfare, the United States – a neutral party in the war up to then – called upon all other neutral states to declare war on Germany. China finally had a direct entry into the conflict, which would guarantee their place at the peace conference and would solidify their international position. Additionally, China could now declare war without having to join the Allies; despite being committed to addressing Japan's Twenty-One Demands at the peace conference's negotiating table, being on the same side as their enemy remained a bitter pill to swallow. After a failed attempt by Yuan Shikai to restore the emperorship in China, followed by his sudden death in June 1916, China's territory became increasingly fragmented by warlords who gained ever more control. It was more important than ever for the new government to show strength and unity, however symbolic that may have been.

### The Chinese Labor Corps on the Western Front

The story of the Chinese laborers is not only important for gaining an insight into the diversity of globally connected actors during the First World War. The laborers also played an important role in China's search for national identity. Liang Shiyi's plan to send laborers-as-soldiers to Europe was met with great enthusiasm by Chinese intellectuals. The Chinese laborers would learn from the West and bring their new ideas back to China upon their return. The intellectuals were inspired by the New Culture Movement that emerged in 1915 as a response to the Republic's failure to address China's problems. It was an iconoclastic movement that rejected 'traditional' Chinese culture and Confucian values. Instead, the supporters of the movement embraced Western ideals such as science and democracy.



**Image 9.5** A parade of Chinese laborers at Boulogne, 12 August 1917

The men who were recruited to the Chinese labor corps were generally poor peasants in their 20s and 30s from the coastal regions in China. Many were illiterate, although some had learned a little English or French through missionary schools. They were recruited by Chinese agents who advertised through newspapers or public places like temples, teahouses, opium dens or fairs. Although the majority of men were hired as 'common' labor, there were also skilled workers. They worked ten hours per day, seven days a week, and were allowed time off for Chinese holidays. The conditions Chinese laborers had to work under varied widely. The French-recruited laborers were generally kept away from the frontlines, while those recruited by the British were often very close to the fighting. Either way, working on the Western Front was hard and often dangerous. Some laborers were killed by German shelling or unexploded mines while digging trenches or clearing battlefields. Many Chinese needed to adjust to a new diet – although some efforts were made to accommodate Chinese tastes – and to the different culture.

Overall, the French and British were very pleased with the work of the Chinese labor corps, but there were also frequent management problems. Cultural misunderstandings on both sides were a daily occurrence, in part caused by a shortage of interpreters. The laborers had diverse regional backgrounds, meaning they also spoke different languages and dialects. Finding sufficient interpreters who spoke the right languages was often a challenge. Aside from misunderstandings and general ignorance, the Chinese laborers also faced harsh discrimination. The diaries of British and French personnel, and military manuals provide an insight into how the Chinese were perceived. One example is Daryl Klein who described the Chinese as inferior in his writings and derogatively referred to them as “Chinks” in the title of his published diary.\* The laborers were often treated like small children who needed to be disciplined. They were perceived as unhygienic, irresponsible, and untrustworthy.

An important source of support for the Chinese laborers was the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Chinese members of the YMCA provided entertainment programs, social support programs, and education. The members of the YMCA were Western-educated Chinese who were inspired by their experience abroad and believed in the Chinese cause to rebuild a modern nation. Perhaps one of their most important contributions was raising the literacy rate among the laborers. Even though the vocabulary they learned was basic, the impact was significant. The association also published weekly journals and newsletters that discussed a wide range of topics including Chinese and world news, politics, culture, and editorials. The laborers proved to be engaged discussants and took great interest in matters that concerned the Chinese nation. The education programs for Chinese laborers on the Western Front inspired similar programs in China. One of the most prominent

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\* Daryl Klein, *With the Chinks*, (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1919).



**Image 9.6** Chinese actors entertaining an audience of British and American soldiers, local inhabitants and Chinese workers at their camp at Samer, 26 May 1918

examples is the National Association of Mass Education Movements that was started by former YMCA educator Yan Yangchu in the 1920s. His association aimed to “[e]liminate illiteracy and make new citizens”<sup>\*</sup> and within several years his mass education programs had spread across the nation. Such programs not only taught people to read and write, but they also instilled a sense of national pride and unity in China’s citizens during a time when the country was increasingly fragmented by warlordism.

By the time these men returned to China, they were transformed: literate and educated by their experience of being in Europe and coming into contact with different people, cultures, and ideas. Many laborers came home with a good amount of savings too. For many, imagining China as a nation held little meaning, but as Xu observes, their experience abroad made the concept tangible.<sup>\*\*</sup> They formed a community in a foreign place, which created a bond that extended to their homeland. Upon their return, these men had the potential “to play a new kind of active role in Chinese politics.”<sup>\*\*\*</sup> The laborers were sought-after guest speakers at political and intellectual gatherings, as they symbolized a new generation that was enlightened by Western ideals and culture. They were also pioneers of collective labor action in

<sup>\*</sup> Xu, *Strangers*, p. 210 note 67.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Xu, *Strangers*, p. 236-7.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Spence, *Modern China*, p. 277.

China, having learned to stand up and fight for their own causes in Europe. One of the first modern Chinese labor unions was the Returned Laborers Union, which had a significant impact on how people in China mobilized.

## Disillusionment of the Paris Peace Conference

Germany's surrender and the subsequent armistice of 11 November 1918 charged China with anticipation. The Chinese celebrated their victory with parades and the demolishing of a monument that the Qing government had been obliged to erect in honor of the Germans who were killed in the Boxer Rebellion. Between 1919 and 1920 formal meetings took place in Paris to negotiate the peace terms between Allies and the Central Powers. China was on the winning side, so they had high hopes for the peace conference at Versailles, where they expected to be an equal negotiating partner. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points gave the Chinese an extra sense of empowerment. China was inspired by Wilson's call for peace, the self-determination of nations, democracy, and the establishment of a "general association of nations" that would resolve international conflict through negotiation and diplomacy, instead of guns. China's immediate aim at the conference was to recover Qingdao and have the Sino-Japanese treaties based on the Twenty-One Demands annulled. In the long term, the republic wanted sovereignty over its entire territory (the return of all concessions signed away under unequal treaties) and economic freedom (tariff autonomy). China looked forward to becoming an equal member of the international community in a new world order. President Wilson was "the number one good man in the world" who would help China achieve its goals.\*

The Republic of China sent a delegation headed by five skilled diplomats to Paris who were supposed to realize the goals China had entered the war for in the first place. What these diplomats were unaware of was that Japan had made secret agreements with both the Allies and Duan Qirui, who resigned as president of China in October 1918. Duan had taken out secret loans with Japan to finance his army in exchange for Japan gaining the right to station its military in Shandong. Upon arrival at the conference, Japan announced that France, Great Britain, and Italy had signed a secret treaty in which each pledged their support for Japan's claims on Germany's concessions in Shandong as a reward for military assistance against the Germans. As a final blow, Japan and Great Britain concluded that China had not significantly contributed to the war effort of the Allies. By the time they entered the war in 1917, their military participation was limited to confiscating a few German ships along the Chinese coast. Talking about the Chinese labor contribution, the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs was quoted as saying that it had involved neither

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\* Xu, *China and the Great War*, p. 245.



“the expenditure of a single shilling nor the loss of a single life.”\* Approximately 3000 Chinese lives were lost on the Western Front.

Needless to say, China's demands were not met at the peace conference. Japan gained new territories in China and the unequal treaties of the Qing remained unchanged. When the news reached the Republic, the people of China were shocked and felt betrayed. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May people gathered in the streets of major cities and telegrams were sent to the Chinese delegates in Paris urging them not to sign the peace treaty. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May protests erupted in Beijing, with thousands of students taking to the streets to protest against the injustices inflicted upon the nation. Protests in other cities soon followed. Meanwhile, the pressure on the Chinese delegation in China not to sign increased by the day. The government was indecisive until the very last moment; on the day of the signing deadline, the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, the president finally sent instructions not to sign the treaty, but by then Chinese students and protesters had already ensured the delegates could not leave their hotel.



**Image 9.7** Tiananmen Square on 4 May 1919. Approximately 3,000 students from 13 universities in Beijing gathered to protest against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles

\* Balfour to Curzon, May 8 1919, in: E.L Woodard (ed.) *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939* (London: H.M Stationary Office, 1946), series 1, 6:565-66, cited in: Xu, *Strangers*, p. 101.

The May Fourth protests became a turning point in China's modern history. They triggered a new surge of Chinese nationalism that forced China to reassess its place in the world yet again. The events at the peace conference reaffirmed that China's traditional values had prevented the country from becoming an equal member in the international community. The movement marked a change in the scale of grassroots political action and other public movements that were aimed at a wider variety of groups within society. In the official Chinese Communist historiography, the May Fourth Movement marks the beginning of Chinese modernity. As this chapter has shown, however, modernity can be traced back to before the Republic. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) interpretation of modernity plays an important role in its ideology, because it makes a convenient distinction between the dark, backward, and shameful past of China before the founding of the party, and the hopeful future where the CCP would come to play a pivotal role in the nation's success and 'revival'.

Finally, it is important to note that the May Fourth *Movement* that was brought about by the protests was not just a national movement. It can also be placed in the broader context of anti-colonial movements that emerged around the world during that time. The First World War did not only force China to redefine its identity. The entire world had to readjust to the new realities that the war had created.

## Painted out of history

In 1914 French artists Pierre Carrier-Belleuse and Auguste François-Marie Gorguet undertook the challenge of coordinating the creation of one of the largest paintings in the world to celebrate France's anticipated victory in the Great War: the *Panthéon de la Guerre*. The painting was to depict France and its allies, and tell the story of its victorious heroes during the First World War. The painting was completed in 1918 and was displayed in a specially constructed building next to the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris. As the war continued, more nations and figures were represented, and the design of the painting changed numerous times. When China decided to launch its plan to assist the Allies by providing laborers for the Western Front, Chinese figures were soon included in the painting. On the postcard (Image 9.8), a Chinese laborer can be seen kneeling in the foreground of the painting. Once the US became involved in the war and took on a more prominent role, various sections of the painting needed to be redesigned to make space for the Americans. In the final version of the painting the Chinese laborer has disappeared. It is unclear why the Chinese were no longer depicted. Perhaps the artists felt there was no space, or they might have simply forgotten to repaint the figure elsewhere on the canvas. Whatever the reason, China was no longer included and no longer commemorated.

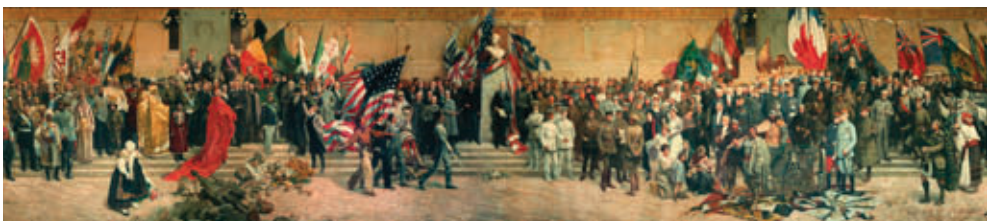
The disappearance of the Chinese laborer from the painting is a recurring topic of discussion among those seeking recognition for the Chinese Labor Corps' efforts





**Image 9.8** Postcard of Panthéon de la Guerre, depicting a kneeling Chinese laborer

during the war. For many, the painting illustrates how the Chinese laborers are forgotten in all forms of commemoration of the war. Among nationalist groups, the issue is placed in the context of China's so-called 'Century of Humiliation' – a politicized term that is used to characterize the period of foreign presence in China between the First Opium War in 1839 and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In these discussions, the disappearance of the Chinese figure embodies the treatment of China as an inferior country that was colonized and manipulated by Western countries during the Qing and the Republic.



**Image 9.9** Panthéon de la Guerre. The Chinese laborer behind the American flag is missing

## Conclusion

The First World War was not merely a European conflict. The Chinese case demonstrates that the war was a truly global war that moved beyond and between borders. China's history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

is characterized by change and the need to modernize; but the way that China envisioned modernization was constantly changing as the empire transitioned to a republic. China was in search of its identity as a *Chinese* nation and as a nation-state in an international system where it was no longer the center of the world. The Great War presented an opportunity for China to enter the international community of nation-states and become an equal player on the international stage. By sending Chinese laborers to aid the British and French war effort, China could maintain an image of neutrality while gaining a seat at the negotiating table at the end of the war. The Chinese labor corps played a crucial role in fulfilling China's foreign policy objectives. At the same time, the laborers' experiences in Europe gave them an invaluable lesson in understanding and shaping their place in the Chinese nation. The Allies' dismissive reaction to China's efforts during the war, the betrayal of Japan, and the betrayal of China's own leaders led to a turning point in China's modern history. It accelerated the decline of traditional Chinese societal structures and the emergence of new social and political movements that still leave their mark on China today.

## Guiding Questions

1. How was China's worldview altered by the Western presence in China in the nineteenth century?
2. What is modernity and how can the characteristics of modernity be applied to China?
3. How was the contribution of the Chinese labor corps important for China?
4. Why did the Chinese feel betrayed by the Allies at the Paris Peace Conference?
5. What is the significance of the *Panthéon de la Guerre* for the Chinese in remembering the First World War?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Kuhn, Philip A., *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Kuhn's work provides a deeper understanding of the Chinese state's modernization process as it came into contact with foreign powers from the nineteenth century.
- Mitter, Rana, *A Bitter Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). A compelling analysis of the impact of China's May Fourth Movement that focuses on both the movement itself and its legacy.
- Spence, Jonathan D., *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 2013). A very accessible history of modern China that provides a broad understanding of key issues and events since the Ming Dynasty.
- Westad, Odd Arne, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750* (London: Bodley Head, 2012). A solid introduction to the history of China's foreign relations since the eighteenth century.
- Xu, Guoqi, *Strangers on the Western Front* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Xu's comprehensive research on the Chinese Labour Corps gives a detailed account of the lives of Chinese labourers in Europe during the First World War.
- Xu, Guoqi, *China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). This book addresses China's role and place in the First World War and connects it to the country's search for its identity in the modern world.
- Zarrow, Peter, *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005). Starting with the defeat of China in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, which throws the empire into an existential crisis, this book describes how various traumas and violent episodes have created the country's modern state.

## CHAPTER 10.

# Human Rights: Norms and Policy

WILLIAM MICHAEL SCHMIDLI



## Introduction

By the time they reached the ambush site, the men who killed Benjamin Linder had walked most of the night. Silently fanning out in a U-formation over a small knoll and on either side of a rugged trail leading to a small construction site, the unit was concealed and ready as the light of the sunrise began to pierce the dense foliage. A half a mile down the trail stood a lonely government outpost, and further on the residents of the village of El Cuá were starting the day. It was April 1987, and the dozen or so combatants were a small contingent of the 12,000-15,000 counterrevolutionaries – known as “contras” – backed by the United States government and waging a deadly war of attrition across northern Nicaragua against the leftist *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (the Sandinista National Liberation Front [FSLN]) government in Managua. Cradling AK-47 rifles the men watched the trail and waited.

The sun was high in the morning sky by the time a thin column appeared on the path. As the figures drew closer, the contras counted ten men clad in olive-drab uniforms. They carried rifles and wore pistol belts with extra magazine pouches. Walking single-file, the men kept their distance from one another and scanned the foliage for signs of danger.

The contra unit commander waited until the lead individual had nearly reached the construction site before shouting, “¡Alto! ¡Rindanse! [Halt! Surrender!]” When the men responded by opening fire, the contra ambush sprang into action. Caught in the crossfire, the first five men in the column were hit almost immediately, their bodies falling onto the trail or into the water of a narrow stream. Four others were wounded but managed to escape back down the trail from where they had come.

As the firing died down, the contras hurriedly collected the rifles from the fallen and searched the dead bodies for documents. They executed the wounded. Fearing a Sandinista counterattack, they then quickly withdrew. The entire encounter – one of the hundreds of small-scale contra attacks that rarely made the news outside of Nicaragua – had lasted less than a quarter-of-an-hour.\*

\* Department of State [DoS] Cable, US Embassy Honduras to DoS, June 1, 1987, Subject: “Request for Debriefing of FDN United in Linder Case,” Digital National Security Archive [DNSA], ID: N102999; DoS, Press Briefing, June 16,

Typed copy of Benjamin's letter dated April 10, 1987

March 14, 1987

Dear Family,

Greetings from Bocay. I've been here for the last three days. I'm at the last part of the most relaxed part of the job - walking around streams. I've spent the days climbing up and around a stream which runs into town. Climbing through pasture and cornfields. The sun beats down at midday. The sugar cane is sweet. The beans are being harvested. I took shelter from the midday sun in a little pool formed at the base of a two-meter fall.

But now it is time to start to put my ideas into action. I started to figure out a little dam to measure how much water there is in the stream. This is a scary part for me. Bit by bit I get the experience I need. But I'm always nervous before I start to build anything.

April 10

It's now a month later. I'm in Managua. It has been a hard, varied month.

The dominating (overwhelmingly so) parts have been Don's leaving and the war. To write about the war in a way that can be used in some form means a bit of a change in how I write. It is all me but it comes out a little different. Not so much less personal from my point of view, but less personal as I imagine who will read it. To make it easier I'll switch pieces of paper.

When I first started working in Cuá-Bocay I really didn't have a feel for the community. In some ways this isolated me from the war. I'd come into town for a week, then leave for a month as I was shifted from project to project. But only partially isolated. I remember "bad times" of 1984 and 1985, times when several people I sort of knew died. Coming into town, I heard of Mary Lou Reyes' death, a nurse killed in the contra attack of El Cedro (The Cedars), a cooperative between El Cuá and San Jose de Bocay - 1984. Two teachers returning to El Cuá after Christmas break, killed in an ambush - Jan. 3, 1985. Scattered incidents of terrorism.

In 1986 the contra changed tactics. With the increasing numbers of desertions from the contra forces they could no longer maintain battalions in the field. They switched to land mines, both pressure, to kill whatever goes over them, and wire remote controlled - only to kill what they considered targets. This included a public transportation truck with 34 people all killed on July 3, 1986, the day before millions of Americans celebrated the Fourth of July. "Bombs bursting in air" seems much less glamorous when it is your friends being killed. That was 1986.

The coffee harvest, Oct. 1986 - Feb. 1987, was relatively peaceful, only because of a well-executed campaign by the Nicaraguan people. I do say people and not army or the EPS - Ejército Popular Sandinista (Sandinista Popular Army). This is because of the very nature of the fight against the contra. Wilfredo Monte has a small store in town, two nights a week he goes out to a hill on the outskirts of town, really just behind my house, with his rifle and uniform. He is still Wilfredo Monte - father, husband, store-owner, and friend. He guards his community along with many other women and men from town.

**Image 10.1** Letter from Ben Linder

But by the time the contra detachment had linked up with its larger patrol group the following day, word had already spread that one of the five men they had killed was Benjamin Linder, a 28-year-old United States citizen living and working in solidarity with the leftist Nicaraguan government. A mechanical engineer from

1987, DNSA, ID: NI03006.

Portland, Oregon, Linder had overseen the construction of a small hydroelectric power plant that brought electricity to El Cuá. Hoping to eventually power machine shops, a lumber mill, and rice-processing plant, Linder's immediate concern was bringing electricity to the local health clinic and school. Nicaraguans in the region "know 1987 will be a very hard year. But they also know that they are winning the war," Linder wrote in a letter to his parents 18 days before his death. "Next week, for the first time high school classes will be taught in El Cuá."<sup>\*</sup>

A footnote in the decade of hostility between the United States and Nicaragua that spanned the 1980s, Ben Linder's death nonetheless illuminated competing visions of human rights and democracy. Entering the White House in January 1981, Ronald Reagan defined human rights as democracy promotion, the free market, and anti-communism – a framework that Reagan officials used to justify an aggressive effort to roll-back perceived communist gains in the Developing World. The leftist Nicaraguan government took center stage in Reagan's aggressive Cold War policy. By mid-decade, covert White House funding for counterrevolutionaries had developed into a sprawling operation that would claim tens of thousands of Nicaraguan lives.

Yet Reagan's war on Nicaragua met fierce opposition in the United States. Throughout the 1980s, a majority of Americans opposed a U.S. military intervention in the region, and as many as 100,000 U.S. citizens visited Nicaragua in support of the revolutionary government.<sup>\*\*</sup> Rejecting their own government's call to support the contras, American solidarity activists embraced the promise of the Nicaraguan revolution: self-determination, participatory democracy, and socio-economic transformation.

Human rights, in other words, had very different meanings for the Reagan administration and the U.S. solidarity activists. These divergent understandings of human rights raise difficult questions. Where do human rights come from? What are human rights? And how do human rights considerations shape policy and politics? Using Reagan's intervention against Nicaragua in the 1980s as the case study, this chapter grapples with these and related questions by examining the complex U.S. engagement with human rights in the second-half of the twentieth century. The main argument of this chapter is that the discussion of norms in international affairs, in particular the debate about human rights, shows rich diversity as well as a divergent practice over the course of the twentieth century.

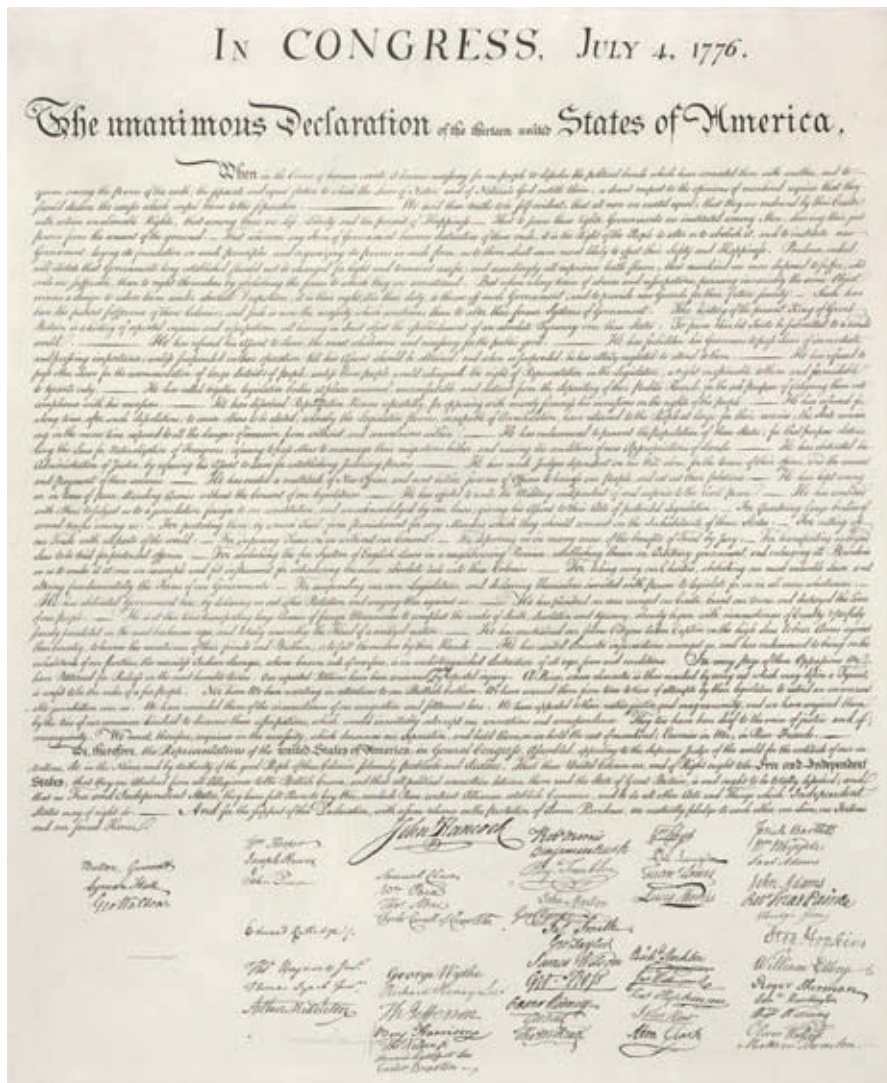
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<sup>\*</sup> Linder, quoted in Testimony of David Linder, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, May 13, 1987, DNSA, ID: N102993.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), p. 3.



Where do human rights come from? To be sure, modern human rights are connected to a long history of religious, philosophical and legal texts claiming certain rights for human beings, as well as activism on rights-related issues. Numerous and diverse religious traditions from across the globe can be interpreted as advancing conceptions of rights. Similarly, from the Code of Hammurabi's (in)famous "an eye for an eye" law of retribution nearly four thousand years ago to the powerful claim that "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" constitute "unalienable rights" in



**Image 10.2** US Declaration of Independence



the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, many philosophical and legal texts can be understood as precursors to modern articulations of human rights.

Finally, humanitarian movements such as British anti-slavery activism beginning in the late eighteenth century, and activism on rights-related issues such as demands for women's suffrage contributed to discussions of how to secure rights at home and abroad.



## 10.a Concept Definition

### Human Rights

*A set of norms and principles with universal application to guide behavior and interaction. Codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and translated in national, regional and international law.*

There are generally three generations of human rights: 1) civil and political rights 2) economic, social and cultural rights 3) solidarity and collective rights.

But if modern human rights are rooted in the past, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the concept itself took shape. This presents a challenge for historians who seek to understand the origins and evolution of human rights. First, there is the issue of historical accuracy: depicting human rights as a straight line from past to present obscures more than it illuminates. Describing Jesus, Buddha, or Confucius as human rights activists, for example, is misleading because it applies a presentist perspective to historical actors who understood the world and articulated their ideas in very different ways; as historian Kenneth Cmiel writes, “this kind of thing can get soggy fast.”\*



## 10.1 The Study of History

### Presentist perspective

*Idea that only the present matters and the experience of today is the standard to measure all things.*

Second, the limitations of language make it challenging to analyze human rights without falling into a semantic trap: simply using the phrase “human rights” runs the risk of reinforcing the notion that human rights are Universal Truths. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth: one hundred years ago, “human rights” was not even a commonly-used term. By contrast, today almost everyone in the world has at least a rudimentary understanding of the concept of human rights;

\* Kenneth Cmiel, ‘The Recent History of Human Rights’, *American Historical Review* Vol. 1, No. 1 (February 2004), pp. 117-135, p. 119.

indeed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) holds the Guinness World Record for the most translated text: 370 languages and dialects.\*



**Image 10.3** Eleanor Roosevelt holding a poster of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Lake Success, New York, November 1949.

The historian's task is thus to understand why the concept of human rights emerged as a powerful political language in the mid-twentieth century, and how ideas about human rights have since shaped – and, in turn, been shaped by – broader historical processes. In other words, historians try to avoid teleological thinking, already addressed in chapter 4 in the discussion about political order, that depicts human rights as objectively “good” – a milestone on the path of human progress. Instead, historians explore how the emergence of human rights ideas was contingent on specific historical developments, and analyze the ways in which human rights advocacy was (and is) embedded in political contestations – whether local, national, or international.

\* In 1900, for example, the term “human rights” appeared only 22 times in the *New York Times*; a century later, it appeared 847 times. (This was actually a decrease from the wave of human rights activism in the 1970s; in 1977 the *New York Times* mentioned human rights 1,718 times.) Data accessed in ProQuest Historical Newspapers. On the world record, see United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘A New World Record: Universal Declaration in 370 Languages’, 23 April 2010. Last accessed 18 February 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/aneeworldrecordudhr.aspx#:~:text=The%20Universal%20Declaration%20of%20Human,dialects%20from%20Abkhaz%20to%20Zulu>.

These concerns have guided the research of historians interested in explaining the wave of human rights activism in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. The immense hardship caused by the Great Depression in the 1930s challenged many Americans' traditional emphasis on *negative* rights – limits placed on the government's ability to coerce or abuse its citizens.



**Image 10.4** Florence Owens Thompson, Migrant Mother in the Great Depression, 1936, by Dorothea Lange

Instead, the New Deal – the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration's program of reforms and regulations aimed at curbing the economic crisis – increasingly emphasized *positive* rights, that is, the government's obligation to ensure that citizens are treated equally.



### 10.b Concept Definition

#### Negative Rights

*Rights that are conceptualized as preventing the subjection to a specific kind of action.*

#### Positive Rights

*Rights that are conceptualized as seeking subjection to a perceived just action.*

America's entry into the Second World War fueled more expansive discussions around rights. If what the United States was fighting *against* was obvious, the war sparked intense debates among lawyers and scholars over what the Allies were fighting *for*, resulting in new and expansive articulations of rights and justice that envisioned changing relationships between peoples and nations. As Mark Philip Bradley argues, “almost without exception, those engaged in wartime global rights talk advocated an elastic notion of sovereignty in which states would no longer be the sole arbiter for the protection of individual human rights.”<sup>\*</sup> Underscoring the rising visibility of these ideas, combined with widespread horror at accumulating evidence of Nazi atrocities, the term “human rights” was mentioned seven times in the founding charter of the United Nations, drafted in 1945 by 51 nations.<sup>\*\*</sup>

However, as the term “human rights” gained popularity, it raised a fundamental question: what are human rights? It was to this task that the newly-formed UN Commission on Human Rights turned its attention. Led by the indefatigable former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the Commission successfully drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was ratified by the UN General Assembly in 1948.

A remarkable achievement for a commission composed of men (and a few women) representing distinct political and economic systems as well as cultural traditions from across the globe (albeit largely excluding the colonized world), the UDHR is composed of 30 articles that include political and civil rights, and economic, social, and cultural rights. Intended to be aspirational, rather than legally-binding, the UDHR “proclaimed that all people everywhere possessed certain basic and identifiable rights,” Paul Gordon Lauren writes, “that universal standards existed for the world as a whole, and that human rights were matters of legitimate international concern and no longer within the exclusive domestic jurisdiction of nation-states of the past.”<sup>\*\*\*</sup> The UDHR's influence in subsequent decades is hard to overstate: it served as a model for national laws and constitutions in many countries; created a foundation for a multitude of subsequent human rights agreements, such as the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons; and provided a framework for non-state actors to articulate human rights claims.

The achievement of the Universal Declaration was all the more striking since it overlapped with the onset of the Cold War. By the end of the 1940s East-West tension had emerged as the defining feature of international relations, pushing human

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<sup>\*</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 63.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Charter of the United Nations, 1945. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 232. See also: Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2002).

rights concerns to the margins. In foreign policy, U.S. policymakers increasingly threw their support behind anticommunist allies – with little attention to domestic abuses.



### 10.c Concept Definition

#### Cold War

*Period between 1945 and 1989 where there was an active rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union based on different ideologies, capitalism versus communism. The confrontation remained 'cold' with the exception of a series of 'hot' wars in the developing world.*

Domestically, a loose alliance of Republicans (concerned that human rights threatened U.S. national sovereignty) and southern Democrats (seeking to maintain African American segregation) joined forces in opposition to human rights – hamstringing the U.S. engagement with human rights for the following quarter-century.



### 10.d Concept Definition

#### Criticism towards Human Rights

*Since 1948 several sets of criticism have been formulated against the emergent human rights discourse.*

- 1) They are a reflection of essentially Western norms*
- 2) Are they rights to be offered or can they be claimed?*
- 3) They have been formulated in an ambiguous manner*
- 4) They are unevenly enforced*
- 5) They are ineffective and have not improved universal well-being.*

Yet human rights experienced an extraordinary resurgence in the United States in the 1970s. Why? One arena of human rights activism was in the U.S. Congress, where elected officials from both sides of the U.S. political spectrum gravitated to human rights. On one hand, human rights appealed to opponents of U.S. support for repressive Cold War allies, such as the brutal Greek military junta that took power in 1967. Such support, they argued, reflected a failure to live up to America's moral traditions. Correspondingly, as the United States became increasingly mired in a costly conflict in Vietnam, opponents of the war denounced the intervention as epitomizing the misguided and destructive logic of the U.S. effort to prevent the expansion of communism, known as the Containment strategy.

On the other hand, human rights also served to advance the agenda of congressional Cold War hawks, who embraced human rights language to criticize the Soviet Union and its allies. Drawing on the UDHR, they worked to publicize the plight of prominent Soviet dissidents and championed Soviet citizens facing

emigration restrictions, particularly the thousands of Jewish “refuseniks” seeking exit visas to Israel. Despite fierce opposition from the Richard M. Nixon administration, this unwieldy alliance of congressional human rights advocates could claim considerable success; by late 1976 Congress had passed nearly a dozen pieces of legislation binding U.S. actions in the international arena to the promotion of human rights.

The 1970s also witnessed a surge of grassroots human rights activism in the 1970s. In an influential analysis, Samuel Moyn argues that human rights emerged as a “last utopia” after the failure of socialism and decolonization to realize their emancipatory potential in the 1960s.\* Other scholars focus on distinct political developments in the United States: in an era defined by the U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War and Nixon’s resignation amid the Watergate scandal, as well as revelations of U.S. support for repressive allies such as Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, human rights as a foreign policy concern appealed to many Americans. As a result, existing organizations like Amnesty International experienced unprecedented membership growth and new groups sprouted across the country, especially in Washington, D.C. where they coalesced into a powerful, albeit loosely-connected political lobby.

Significantly, U.S. human rights activism developed differently than in other parts of the world. First, the longstanding U.S. emphasis on liberty and the individual shaped Americans’ understanding of human rights. Whether championing anti-Soviet dissidents or condemning right-wing military regimes’ use of torture against perceived subversives, U.S. human rights activists focused their attention on the violation of political rights and civil liberties. In an era defined by privatization, deregulation, and economic liberalization, few American human rights activists advocated social and economic rights. Second, as historian Kenneth Cmiel has written, human rights organizations eschewed “thick descriptions” of local culture and context in favor of simple and direct “thin” messages.\*\* Although thin descriptions could both make human rights violations visible and drive human rights activism, they came at a cost, rendering less visible unique local conditions and structures that contributed to rights abuses. Finally, Americans who gravitated toward human rights activism typically did so out of a sense that human rights violations occurred overseas; underscoring an abiding belief in American exceptionalism in a movement that appealed primarily to white, middle-class activists, the far-reaching domestic challenges the United States faced in the 1970s were rarely perceived as human rights problems.

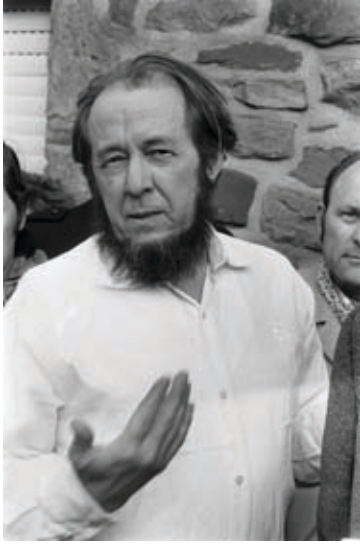
The 1970s thus witnessed a surge in human rights activism in the United States. Americans from the grassroots to the Oval Office sought to insert human rights onto the political landscape. Their motives ranged widely, from concern for Soviet

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\* Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (New York: Belknap Press, 2010).

\*\* Cmiel, ‘The Recent History of Human Rights’.





**Image 10.5** Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

dissidents like the Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, to support for Chilean mothers whose colorful *arpilleras* – hand-stitched patchwork quilts – depicted their children’s disappearance by state security personnel.



**Image 10.6** Quilt Showing the Torture on the Esmeralda Ship, by Espina Dorsal, Arpillera Museo de la Memoria Chile 2021

An unwieldy coalition, the human rights movement nonetheless demonstrated an ability to mobilize tens of thousands of ordinary people and boasted an effective political lobby in Washington. Underscoring the power of human rights as a political message, Jimmy Carter edged out the incumbent Gerald R. Ford in the 1976 presidential election. During the campaign, Carter emphasized the importance of human rights as a core U.S. foreign policy concern, and boldly proclaimed in



his inaugural address that “Our commitment to human rights must be absolute.” Yet amid a resurgence of Cold War tension, the administration struggled to operationalize such lofty rhetoric.

By the end of the 1970s, the question was not whether the U.S. should promote human rights in foreign policy, but how it should attempt to do so. And with Carter’s resounding defeat to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election, the answer to this question was far from clear.



**Image 10.7** Ronald Reagan

Entering the Oval Office in January 1981, Reagan was determined to roll back perceived communist gains in the developing world.

Nicaragua stood squarely in the cross-hairs. Top Reagan officials warned that the FSLN was closely aligned with communist Cuba and sought to export leftist revolution across the region, particularly neighboring El Salvador. Reagan also viewed Nicaragua as a test-case for beating the “Vietnam Syndrome” – public skepticism toward American global leadership that lingered in the aftermath of the U.S. defeat.



#### **10.e Concept Definition**

##### **Vietnam Syndrome**

*A perception held by US Cold War hawks in the aftermath of the defeat in the Vietnam War (1954-1973) that the US people had become overly wary of military interventions.*

Two months after taking office, the president authorized a secret program to train and equip counterrevolutionaries operating on Nicaragua’s borders. By mid-decade, the U.S.-backed contras had grown to a guerrilla force of more than 10,000 fighters, and were regularly hitting targets in northern Nicaragua, ranging attacks on FSLN

military patrols to the sabotage of bridges and the burning of government-run farms, clinics, and schools. Denouncing the Sandinistas as communist satraps, Reagan lauded the contras as “the moral equivalent of the founding fathers.”\*

Yet Reagan’s support for the contras ran into opposition in the United States. On Capitol Hill, in December 1982 congressional lawmakers prohibited the Department of Defense or the CIA from attempting to overthrow the FSLN with US funds. Congress subsequently tightened the legislation by prohibiting all lethal aid to the Contras.\*\* Congressional resistance to Reagan’s intervention in Central America was fueled by grassroots activism. Worried that U.S. soldiers would end up fighting on Nicaraguan soil and horrified by evidence of contra abuses against civilian targets, U.S.-based human rights organizations, churches, and Latin America-focused solidarity groups established a powerful voice in the Central America debate. As the human rights organization Americas Watch asserted in 1985 – in its eighth report on Nicaragua since 1982 – “we find that the most violent abuses of human rights today are being committed by the contras, and that the Reagan administration’s policy of support for the contras is, therefore, a policy clearly inimical to human rights.”\*\*\* Hundreds of Americans moved to Nicaragua to support the revolution in capacities that ranged from university teaching to reporting contra atrocities, while tens of thousands visited the embattled nation to witness the achievements of the revolution first-hand and engage in solidarity activities such as harvesting coffee.

Ben Linder was one of the Americans living and working in Nicaragua in solidarity with the Sandinista revolution. Twenty-three years old when he arrived in Managua in 1983, at the time of his death four years later Linder was working to bring hydroelectricity to the northern Nicaraguan village of El Cuá. Linder was not the only foreigner killed in the Contra War, but he was the first U.S. citizen to be killed, and his death reverberated through the close-knit community of American solidarity activists. As a close friend confided in her diary, “We feel a gut-wrenching sadness and loss.”\*\*\*\*

For opponents of the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua, Linder’s death was indisputable evidence that the White House was supporting an army of terrorists systematically engaged in human rights violations. It was a message that activists had been asserting since the early 1980s. The contras repeatedly engaged in “murder, kidnapping, various forms of brutal mistreatment, and a pattern of military conduct which deliberately endangers civilians,” Americas Watch reported two months

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\* Gerald M. Boyd, ‘Reagan Terms Nicaraguan Rebels ‘Moral Equal of Founding Fathers’’, *New York Times*, 2 March 1985, p. 1.

\*\* Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 296, 302.

\*\*\* Americas Watch Committee, ‘Human Rights in Nicaragua: Reagan, Rhetoric and Reality’ (New York: Americas Watch, July 1985), p. 16.

\*\*\*\* Jennifer Atlee-Loudon, *Red Thread: A Spiritual Journey of Accompaniment, Trauma and Healing* (Washington, D.C.: EPICA, 2001), p. 97.

before Ben Linder's death. The Reagan administration's support for the contras, the report concluded, "associates the U.S. government with a pattern of gross human rights abuses that ... the contras show no signs of curbing." Linder's murder further galvanized solidarity activists. Two weeks after his death, 70 Americans marched 30 war-torn miles from El Cuá to the village of El Cedro, where they helped rebuild a medical center that had been destroyed by the contras. "We hold the Reagan administration responsible for what might happen to us," a spokesperson for the group declared.<sup>\*\*</sup> Across the United States, too, Linder's death energized opponents of the Reagan administration's support for the contras. "This was an ambush, not a chance encounter. This is murder," Linder's father, David Linder, told members of Congress in hearings held less than a month after his son's death. Speaking for thousands of Americans in the 1980s who actively sought to end the U.S. intervention in Central America, David Linder concluded, "I consider the United States government and its effectors – the contras – guilty of this crime."<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

Yet opponents of the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua had no monopoly on the language of human rights. In fact, the Reagan administration deflected such criticism by using its own human rights talk to justify lethal support for the men who murdered Ben Linder. "We stand against totalitarianism, particularly imperialistic expansionist totalitarianism," Reagan declared in a radio address shortly after Linder's death. "We are for democracy and human rights, and we're for a worldwide prosperity that only free economies can give and the pursuit of human happiness that only political freedom allows."<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Indeed, after initially seeking to downgrade human rights as a U.S. foreign policy priority, by late 1981 the Reagan administration had pivoted, embracing a human rights policy that centered on democracy promotion, the free market, and anti-communism, while rejecting social and economic rights claims. In what Hal Brands favorably describes as a policy of "enlightened self-interest" the administration increasingly recognized the utility of human rights promotion as a mechanism of "promoting global well-being, and of strengthening U.S. security and influence in the process."<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Although critics complained that the Reagan administration failed "to address the root causes of many human rights abuses," the administration's narrow definition of

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\* Americas Watch, "Human Rights in Nicaragua 1986," (New York: Americans Watch, February 1987), p. 139.

\*\* 'Americans Protest Contra Aid, Cross Nicaraguan Battle Zone', *San Francisco Examiner*, 17 May 1987.

\*\*\* Testimony of David Linder.

\*\*\*\* Reagan, radio address to the nation, 'Soviet Union-United States Relations', 29 August 1987, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, 23 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 975.

\*\*\*\*\* Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 126.

human rights gained significant support in Congress by neatly tapping into notions of U.S. exceptionalism while remaining fully compatible with the U.S. Cold War containment strategy.\*

In the case of Nicaragua, Reagan's human rights policy provided a nimble inversion by positioning the United States as the defender of hemispheric democracy, rather than the aggressor seeking to orchestrate a regime change in Managua. As contra supporter Rep. Bob Dornan (R-CA) told Ben Linder's parents during congressional hearings on their son's death, if Linder had killed one of the contras in the ambush, "he would have killed a Nicaraguan on Nicaraguan soil who believed he was fighting for democracy and to retrieve his stolen revolution."\*\*\* Similarly, Representative Connie Mack (R-FL) argued that Linder was "not ... a victim of this nation's Central American policy" but of his own poor judgement. Echoing the president by describing the contras as "freedom fighters," Mack assailed liberals for pursuing a foreign policy of "appeasement." On the other hand, the conservative approach, he concluded, "seeks freedom."\*\*\*\*

The debate over the Reagan administration's intervention in Nicaragua thus illuminates the malleability of human rights talk. First, both supporters and opponents of the U.S.-backed Contra War used human rights language – albeit in decidedly different ways and to support radically different political objectives. Second, the confrontation revealed the extent to which human rights remained a defining feature on the American political landscape after the "boom" decade of the 1970s. Although Reagan had initially tried to downgrade human rights as a U.S. foreign policy priority, by the end of the 1980s the administration's narrow framing of human rights had gained bipartisan appeal. As the incoming Secretary of States James A. Baker III asserted during his 1989 confirmation hearings on Capitol Hill, human rights "is one of the very basic foundations of our foreign policy, and for that matter, our national security policy."\*\*\*\*\*

Third, the competing understandings of human rights left a lasting imprint on U.S. human rights promotion. The Reagan administration's human rights emphasis on democracy promotion and the free market provided a blueprint for Bill Clinton's support for "market democracies" in the 1990s. "Democracies don't attack each

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\* Human Rights Watch and Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 'The Reagan Administration's Record on Human Rights 1987', (New York: Human Rights Watch and Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1987), p. 1.

\*\* Quoted in: Branko Marcetic, 'The American that Reagan Killed', *Jacobin Magazine*, 2 May 2017. Available at: <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/05/reagan-ben-linder-nicaragua-contras-sandinistas>. Last accessed online 19 April 2021.

\*\*\* Connie Mack, 'Freedom and an American Death in Nicaragua', *New York Times*, 28 May 1987, p. A22.

\*\*\*\* Quoted in: Aryeh Neier, 'Human Rights in the Reagan Era: Acceptance in Principle', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 506 (November 1, 1989), pp. 30-41.

other,” Clinton declared in 1994, “they make better trading partners and partners in diplomacy.”\*\*



### 10.f Concept Definition

#### Democratic Peace Theory

*Theory based on the insight, originally suggested by Immanuel Kant, that democracies do not fight war against each other. Democratic peace has had a large influence on foreign policy; the promotion of democracy is believed to act as a deterrent against war.*

Following the 11 September 2001 terror attacks, the Reagan-era emphasis on anticommunism found a successor in the George W. Bush administration’s expansive War on Terror, which, along with democracy promotion, served as an important rationale for the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq two years later. “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture,” Bush asserted during his second inaugural address, “with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”\*\*\* Such lofty rhetoric was hard to square with the reality on the ground: between 2003 and 2019, conservative estimates placed the total number of direct war deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan at 465,000.\*\*\*

Yet if human rights talk underpinned American globalism in the post-Cold War era, it also continued to serve as a political language to mobilize grassroots activism on a wide range of struggles, from women’s rights to combatting poverty to movements for environmental justice.



### 10.g Concept Definition

#### Grassroots Activism

*Community-based collective action focused on a particular cause or theme, involving the population directly.*

Decades after the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, American activists continued to echo Eleanor Roosevelt’s vision of a world where, “our fellow human beings ... have rights and freedoms which give them dignity and which

\* Clinton, State of the Union Address, 25 January 1994. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-25-1994-state-union-address>. Last accessed 21 April 2022.

\*\* George W. Bush, second inaugural address, 20 January 2005. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-20-2005-second-inaugural-address-0#dp-expandable-text>. Last accessed 21 April 2022.

\*\*\* Neta C. Crawford and Catherine Lutz, ‘Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars’, 13 November 2019, *Costs of War Research Series*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University. Available at: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/Direct%20War%20Deaths%20COW%20Estimate%20November%2013%202019%20FINAL.pdf>. Last accessed 21 April 2022.

will give them a sense that they are human beings that can walk the earth with their heads high and look all men in the face.”\* It was a vision evident in a dusty celebration on May 21, 1995 in the remote Nicaraguan town of San José de Bocay, 25 miles north of El Cuá. The Cold War was over; the Contra War, too, had ended, and in northern Nicaragua former contras and Sandinistas eked out a hardscrabble living side-by-side. Yet amid the residual political tension and endemic poverty, hundreds of hopeful residents gathered to inaugurate a new hydroelectric plant funded by the North American donors to the Ben Linder Memorial Fund. Founded by Ben Linder’s parents shortly after their son’s death, the project was maintained by Nicaraguan members of the Association of Rural Development Workers–Benjamin Linder. Within weeks night classes were being held in the public school, the local health clinic was refrigerating vaccines, and an ice cream shop was open for business. “Children were everywhere, and those who were children when the project began, who had known Ben, are children no longer,” the Linders proudly recalled. “Soon the children will be those who don’t remember the time before the light.”\*\*

## Guiding Questions

1. Agree or disagree with the following assertion: human rights are rooted in Universal Truths, not political contestations.
2. Why did ideas about *rights* proliferate in the United States in the mid-twentieth century? What rights were included? Excluded?
3. What was the significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?
4. What were the causes and consequences of the human rights “boom” in the 1970s?
5. In what ways did the U.S. intervention against Nicaragua in the 1980s reveal the malleability of human rights talk?

\* Eleanor Roosevelt, transcript of speech on human rights, 1951. Available at: <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/Eleanor+Roosevelt+Transcript+of+Speech+on+Human+Rights+1951.pdf/7c4b27f5-0512-46f0-8119-8b57f201ca9#:~:text=We%2omust%2owant%20our%20fellow,all%2omen%20in%20the%20face>. Last accessed 21 April 2022.

\*\* Ben Linder Memorial Fund Newsletter, Winter 1994-1995, Box 7, Folder: Linder, Rita Clark Nicaragua Collection, Bucknell University Special Collections, Lewisburg, PA.

## Guide to Further Reading

- Borgwardt, Elizabeth, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Examines U.S. foreign relations during the Second World War and the rise of human rights during the mid-twentieth century.
- Bradley, Mark Philip, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Explores how human rights became believable to ordinary Americans in the 1940s and 1970s by analyzing developments in political and legal thought, photography, film, and fiction.
- Brands, Hal, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016). Analyzes U.S. foreign policy in a rapidly changing international system from the 1970s to the early 1990s.
- Eckel, Jan, *The Ambivalence of the Good: Human Rights in International Politics since the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). A global history of international human rights politics since the 1940s.
- Glendon, Mary Ann, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2002). Explores Roosevelt's leadership in the drafting of the modern human rights movement's founding document.
- Iriye, Akira, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (eds), *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). A wide-ranging collection of essays on human rights history since the 1940s.
- Keys, Barbara J., *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Analyzes the importance of the Vietnam War and its aftermath in the rise of human rights advocacy in the United States.
- Moyn, Samuel, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (New York: Belknap Press, 2010). Moyn argues that human rights achieved prominence in the late twentieth century on the ruins of earlier political utopias.
- Peace, Roger, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012). Examines grassroots U.S. opposition to the Ronald Reagan administration's intervention against Nicaragua in the 1980s.
- Snyder, Sarah B., *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). Highlighting the importance of non-state activism, Snyder examines U.S. human rights advocacy in the 1960s.



## CHAPTER 11.

# Ecology: Past and Present

ELISA DA VIÀ, JUDITH NAEFF AND ANNE MARIEKE VAN DER WAL



## Introduction

“[...] I want to tell you about that lagoon,  
that lucid, sleepy lagoon lounging against the sunrise  
men say that one day  
that lagoon will devour you  
[...] they say you, your daughter  
and your granddaughter, too  
will wander rootless  
with only a passport to call home” [...].\*

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, a Marshallese climate change activist and poet, opened the United Nations 2014 Climate Summit with these alarming and moving words.\*\* She compellingly drew the world’s attention to the precarious future most Pacific island nations face, due to climate change, in particular rising sea levels, as well as the consequences of nuclear waste pollution. Numerous reports and studies have been published in recent years, most notably the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment Report of 2022,\*\*\* indicating with scientific precision the dangers and consequences of rising global temperatures. It is through personal and artistic performances, from members of the communities most affected already by damage to their environment, that the message of environmental degradation truly hits home.\*\*\*\* From the lithographs and art installations of Ralph Hotere (1931–2013), to the poetry and short stories of Déwé Gorodé (*Utê Mûrûnû: petite fleur de cocotier*

\* Statement and poem by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, Climate Summit 2014 – Opening Ceremony. Available at: United Nations Youtube Channel. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mc\\_IgE7TBSY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mc_IgE7TBSY) Last accessed 21 April 2022.

\*\* See for instance: Michael Pearson (ed.) *Trade, Circulation and Flow in the Indian Ocean World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Edward A. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Gwyn Campbell, *Africa and the Indian Ocean World from Early Times to Circa 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

\*\*\* IPCC, 2022: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds)]. Cambridge University Press. In Press.

\*\*\*\* Laura Bleiberg, ‘Artists of ‘Water is Rising’ sing, dance against climate change’ *Boston Globe*, 13 November 2011.



**Image 11.1** Operation Crossroads “Baker Day” Underwater Atomic Bomb Test, Bikini Atoll, 25 July 1946

(1994), *L'Epave*, 2005), theatrical projects such as ‘Water is Rising’ (2011) or the novels of the Tao/Taiwanese writer Syaman Rapongan (*Black Wings*, 1999; *The Face of a Sea Voyager*, 2007) and the Samoan writer Albert Wendt (*Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, 1979; *Black Rainbow*, 1992), these voices from the Pacific have used art to reveal the splendor of the ocean, raise awareness of its pollution and remind their audience of the importance of understanding the sea, not as separate, but as integral to human history.

The sea has played a crucial role in connecting communities and civilizations. From the busy sea-lanes on the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, to the high seas on the Atlantic and the vast stretches of the Pacific Ocean, water has not been an obstacle but rather a connecting tissue allowing cross-cultural contacts and long distance trade. Whereas humans have long been aware of this, historical research in the past has tended to overlook the sea as a site of history. To be sure, maritime history is not a new field of historical research, but it has traditionally been more connected to the history of naval warfare and/or exploration from a state or empire perspective. Yet, with the growth of fields such as World History, oceans have gained a more central focus in historical research, rivaling historical studies on continental empires and nation-states, and placing these bodies of water center stage as main

research objects, as opposed to the distant shores or harbors from which mighty navies sailed.\*

The increasing popularity of fields such as Indian Ocean World studies, Pacific studies, Atlantic World studies, and more recently Arctic Ocean studies, confirm this trend.\*\* Smaller bodies of water have naturally also fascinated historians, like the connections of the Caribbean sea, or the Baltic sea, and the Mediterranean. Braudel's masterpiece *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Epoque de Philippe II* (1949) is a prime example of understanding the history of peoples by looking at their environment, and more specifically their connection to the sea. The *long durée* of human development is a history of "man [sic] in his relationship to his environment", according to Braudel.\*\*\*

Building on Braudel's insight, this chapter seeks to understand the recent history of Pacific island nations with regard to the dramatic changes in the maritime environment, caused by two prominent dangers: the effects of nuclear testing and climate change. Secondly, it aims to investigate local epistemologies of ecology in connection to the *long durée* of living with and on the ocean. This chapter will address theories and concepts relating to Environmental History, the Anthropocene and Nuclear Imperialism through the case study of nuclear bomb testing in Polynesia and the 'Nuclear Free Pacific' movement, with a specific focus on nuclear tests in French Polynesia, international campaigns as organized by Greenpeace, as well as actions and artistic works used to raise awareness of nuclear pollution of the Pacific Ocean and rising sea levels. As we shift our attention to the sea, we aim to make visible how human history cannot be separated from the history of the environment. As Braudel wrote, the sea itself is the best witness of the past, it "patiently recreates for us scenes from the past, breathing new life into them, locating them under a sky and in a landscape that we can see with our own eyes, a landscape and sky like those of long ago".\*\*\*\*

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\* See for instance: Pekka Korhonen, 'The Pacific Age in World History', *Journal of World History*, Vol.7, No. 1 (1996), pp. 41-70; Katrina Gulliver, 'Finding the Pacific World', *Journal of World History*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2011), pp. 83-100.

\*\* See for instance: Bernard Bailyn, 'The Idea of Atlantic History', *Itinerario* Vol. 20, No. 1 (1996), pp. 19-44; Toyin Falola and Kevin D. Roberts (eds), *The Atlantic World, 1450-2000* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Thomas Benjamin, *The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans, Indians and Their Shared History, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *The Atlantic in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Ferdinand Braudel, *The Mediterranean in the Ancient World* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 1.

\*\*\* Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, p. 20.

\*\*\*\* Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, p. 1.

The vast challenges posed by global warming have led to impatience with issues of representation. Debating nationalism or religion, the argument goes, is irresponsible if it does not also address the global catastrophe that is threatening all of us today. The question of the environment and its relation to human development has gained priority, not only in global politics, but also in the discipline of history. Environmental History is the field of history concerned with understanding the relationship between the environment and human societies, more specifically the impact of the environment on civilizational development, as well as the role of humans in changes to the environment.



### **11.a Concept Definition**

#### **Environmental History**

*A field of history concerned with understanding the impact of the environment on civilizational development, as well as the role of humans in changes to the environment.*

Early forms of environmental awareness are usually grouped in a 'first wave of environmentalism', or rather conservationism, which most scholars place around the first half of the nineteenth-century followed by a second wave of conservationism, which began roughly around the turn of the twentieth century until the Second World War. The first wave is considered part of the 'Romantic period', a cultural movement which emerged as a counter-modern response to rapid industrialization and urbanization in Europe. Nature was idealized, and the impact of modernity on nature became a cause for concern. George Perkins Marsh' *Man and Nature* (1864) is an example of this growing concern that complex civilizations, like for example the Roman Empire in Antiquity, would eventually bring about their own destruction by their thirst for expansion and tendency to deplete their surrounding natural resources. Typical for this first and more specifically for the second wave of conservationism, was the belief in the abilities of humans to control nature. In particular, with the conservationist efforts of the early twentieth century, during which for instance several national parks were created in emerging nation states around the world, this notion of protection of nature went hand in hand with the desire to manage it. These positivist approaches to 'taming the wild', evoked a critical reaction and some historians began questioning this power relation between humankind and nature, as well as criticizing ecological determinist beliefs. In particular the French historians, part of the 'Annales school' produced some groundbreaking works, like Lucien Febvre's *La Terre et l'évolution humaine: introduction géographique à l'histoire* (1922) and of course Braudel's *La Méditerranée* (1949).

## Early Environmentalism Movements

The period after 1945 witnessed a renewed interest in ecology and what some scholars call the “third wave of conservationism”.<sup>\*</sup> Acute awareness of the destructive forces modernity could unleash on humankind and nature came after the world witnessed the detonation of two atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945. Additionally, fears grew for disappearing ecosystems (as expressed in for instance Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949) and new public awareness emerged of the widespread use of toxic gasses and pesticides (Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, 1962).<sup>\*\*</sup> The undeniable air pollution due to increasing numbers of motorized vehicles in the world’s metropolises was recognized. Popular concerns with environmental pollution reached new heights.



**Image 11.2** Earth Rising, NASA, 1968

<sup>\*</sup> David Lowenthal, ‘Environmental History. From Genesis to Apocalypse’, *History Today*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2001), pp. 36-42, p. 40.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Riley E. Dunlap and Angela G. Mertig, *The Evolution of the U.S. Environmental Movement from 1970 to 1990* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 3



## 11.b Concept Definition

### Environmentalism

*The idea that the environment deserves protection and is in need of efforts of restoration and improvement for its general condition and status.*

A turning point in the popular modern imagination of the Earth as one living entity, of which the human population is dependent, came through the publication of a photograph (see image 11.2) taken by three astronauts on-board the Apollo 8 in 1968. In their orbit around the moon, looking back at Earth, they were the first humans in history who saw the Earth as a lone and fragile planet, floating in the cold darkness of empty space. Despite their mission's focus on the moon, the astronauts had the presence of mind to take a few pictures of this "beautiful blue marble". It was these images of Earth that would confront the world's population with a clear perception of their home.\* In the words of the poet Archibald Macleish, at that moment in time, we came "to see ourselves as riders on the Earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold – brothers who know now they are truly brothers".\*\*

The idea that the environment was in need of active protection was embraced by ecology movements across the world. Many of these movements coming out of the 1960s were awareness raising movements. They were trying to influence popular opinion as well as policy making. This culminated in mass participation of the first Earth Day on 22 April 1970 under the slogan 'we all breathe the same air'. From the 1970s onwards, there was also a clear increase in more hands-on, locally oriented and organized environmental movements seeking to protect local ecological habitats.\*\*\* With the publication of the report *The Limits of Growth* in 1972 by the so-called 'Club of Rome', the message of a broad and somewhat diffuse ecology movement was brought back to one simple notion, that the world's population needed to prepare "for a period of great transition, the transition from growth to global equilibrium"\*\*\*\* as the realization set in that 'exponential growth is impossible on a finite planet'.

\* A similar experience was felt in 1990 when the photograph of Earth as a 'pale blue dot' was sent home from the space probe Voyager 1, from a distance of around six billion kilometers. The astronomer Carl Sagan stated that it was this "perspective that [once more] underscores our responsibility to preserve and cherish that blue dot, the only home we have".

\*\* Archibald Macleish, 'Riders on Earth Together, Brothers in Eternal Cold', *The New York Times*, 25 December 1968.

\*\*\* Dunlap and Mertig, *The Evolution of the U.S. Environmental Movement*, p. 6.

\*\*\*\* Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth. A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), p. 24.

## The Ecological Paradigm Shift

The reception of this report was diverse. The responses ranged from outright rejection, e.g. among others the business community as well as certain academics, calling the report a 'Model of Doom'.<sup>\*</sup> Others strongly supported it, ranging from non-governmental organizations to governments, taking up the environment as a key policy issue. Within academia, the growing public attention for the environment resulted in an ecological turn or 'ecological paradigm shift'.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> It brought together scholars from the Humanities and Social Sciences to again consider ecology and the environment and the interplay between humans and nature. This time they focused on the connection between inequality and environmental change.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Some of these works on the human impact on ecological changes and the supposed consequences for the stability and survival of a civilization, leaned towards a form of 'environmental determinism'. For example, Jared Diamond's famous book *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997), in which the 'rise of the west' was explained by the favorable biological environments in which Western (or rather Old World) civilizations developed.



### 11.c Concept Definition

#### Environmental Determinism

*The idea that the pre-existing environmental conditions determine the subsequent development of society.*

Significantly, this paradigm shift also entailed a critique of mainstream environmentalism for its failure to ask deeper questions about the causes of ecological problems. Two positions can be identified here. First, proponents of deep (as opposed to shallow) ecology embraced a *biocentric* environmental ethics that challenged *anthropocentric* approaches to nature conservation, whereby the value of any part of nature is determined solely by its usefulness to humans.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Deep ecologists claimed that non-human life has intrinsic value and deserves moral consideration.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> For instance, Law professor Christopher Stone, argued in a paper

<sup>\*</sup> Cole, H. S. D., Christopher Freeman, Marie Jahoda, K.L.R. Pavitt, (eds), *Models of Doom: A Critique of the Limits to Growth* (Milford, Conn.: Universe Publishing, 1973).

<sup>\*\*</sup> J. Donald Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016) p. 11.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Some of the earlier examples of these scholarly works from the field of History are: Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972) or R.H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Arne Naess, "The shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," *Inquiry*, Vol. 16, No.1-4 (1973), pp. 95-100.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Nina Witoszek and Martin Lee Mueller, Special Journal Issue 'Deep Ecology', *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, Vol. 21 (2017), pp. 209-217.



in 1972 entitled “Should Trees Have Standing, Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects” that nature should have the same legal rights of protection as human lives.\*

Second, social ecology as a school of thought associated with Murray Bookchin, rejected any form of “centrism” (of humans or nature) and claimed that environmental problems and crises are rooted in hierarchical, state-controlled, and exploitative social structures predicated on domination of both people and nature. Rooted in the eco-anarchist analyses of Russian historian Peter Kropotkin, this approach connected environmentalism with emancipatory struggles against imperialism and oppression both at the local and global level.



### 11.d Concept Definition

#### Anthropocene

*A period in history, the most recent geological epoch, in which the presence of human beings has made an imprint on the surface of the Earth by way of radioactive fallout, microplastics and heavy metals and the influencing of the Earth's climate.*

The influence of deep ecology also influenced the development of fields like Big History, which has been described as “an origin story for the Anthropocene Epoch of human history”.\*\* Their main contribution to the field of history has been to remind us that significant change, be it cultural or social but also climatic, is something very recent and as such an abnormality in the otherwise very stable history of human development. The obsession with the progress of time and progress of history which defines the modern era was reinterpreted with regards to scale and intensity, leading to a realization that “matters that for millennia [had been] local concerns [now] became [truly] global [affairs]”\*\*\*

Growing concern about the magnitude of the environmental crisis has also fueled skepticism towards the exclusive and autonomous agency of humans. On the one hand, the global environmental crisis is largely human made. The human impact is so vast that, as described above, scholars increasingly accept our time as the “Anthropocene”, a term popularized by Dutch meteorologist and atmospheric chemist Nobel Prize winner Paul J. Crutzen in the early 2000s to describe a new geological epoch of planet Earth in which the impact of humans has led to irreversible change comparable to the climatic transformations of cosmic proportions, such as the Ice Age. On the other hand, what makes climate change precisely frightening is that it develops in ways that are largely beyond human intention and control. Despite

\* Christopher D. Stone, “Should Trees Have Standing?—Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects.” *Southern California Law Review* Vol. 45 (1972), pp. 450–501.

\*\* David Christian, “What is Big History?”, *Journal of Big History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2018), pp. 4–19, p. 17.

\*\*\* J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century World* (New York: Norton, 2000) p. 4.

the significance of human impact on the planet, a post-humanist perspective, a philosophical school which questions human autonomy and agency in driving change, propagates a humble understanding of humans as sharing agency with non-human elements in a complex assemblage. The character of non-human agency is subject to debate. Some point to the generative and self-organizing capacity of the atmosphere, bacteria and the cosmos.\* There is, for instance, evidence that some plants have memory.\*\* Some even controversially claim that matter is also capable of experience, desire and memory.\*\*\*

Since the 1990s, political ecologists have increasingly turned attention to local-level studies of environmental movements, symbolic politics, and the “institutional nexus of power, knowledge and practice,” drawing from post-structuralism’s engagement with discourse analysis and from post-modern approaches to development.\*\*\*\* Much work has explored the ways in which environments and environmental knowledges are discursively constructed, analyzing how and why particular forms of knowledge predominate, and underscoring the role of social norms and cultural practices in shaping the perceptions of scientists, policymakers and bureaucrats.\*\*\*\*\* In a similar vein, research in political ecology has focused on the relationship between symbolic struggles over meaning and day-to-day material struggles over control and access to resources; all this in an attempt to raise the emancipatory potential of environmental ideas, uncover discourses of resistance and put them into wider circulation.\*\*\*\*\*

In this respect, political ecology research has been increasingly associated with the rise to prominence of environmental justice as a social movement and a distinctive interpretive frame that foregrounds the political economy of environmental racism and unequal exposure to hazards, waste, and pollution, as

\* Manuel DeLanda, ‘Non-Organic Life’, in: Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds) *Incorporations* (New York: Urzone 1992), pp. 129-167.

\*\* Robert Krulwich, ‘Can a Plant Remember? This One Seems to, Here’s the Evidence’, *National Geographic* 15 December 2015. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/can-a-plant-remember-this-one-seems-to-heres-the-evidence> Last accessed 22 April 2022.

\*\*\* Karen Barad, ‘On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I am’, *Differences: Feminist Theory Out of Sciences*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2012), pp. 206-223.

\*\*\*\* Peter Walker, ‘Political Ecology: Where is the Ecology?’, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 29, No.1 (2005), pp. 73-82. See also: Richard Peet and Michael Watts, *Liberation Ecologies* (London: Routledge, 1996); Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, *Social Nature* (London: Blackwell, 2001). See for a discussion on post-structuralism chapter 8.

\*\*\*\*\* Tim Forsyth, *Critical Political Ecology* (London: Routledge, 2003); Brian Wynne, ‘Scientific Knowledge and the Global Environment’, in: Michael Redclift and Tim Benton (eds), *Social Theory and the Global Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 169-189.

\*\*\*\*\* Donald Moore, ‘Marxism, Culture, and Political Ecology: Environmental Struggles in Zimbabwe’s Eastern Highlands’, in: R. Peet, and M. Watts, (eds), *Liberation Ecologies* (London: Routledge, 1996); Arturo Escobar, ‘Whose Knowledge, Whose Nature? Biodiversity, Conservation, and the Political Ecology of Social Movements’, *Journal of Political Ecology* Vol. 5, No. 1 (1998), pp. 53-82.

well as the role of subaltern “vocabularies of protest,” and counter-discourses of nature and land use in the so-called “environmentalism of the poor”.\*



### 11.e Concept Definition

#### Environmental justice

*A form of justice involving developing and upholding of the rules and regulations on the protection of the environment for all people.*

Within this context, special emphasis is put on the mobilization of indigenous environmental knowledge or indigenous epistemologies in local idioms of struggles for territorial rights. Moving beyond a long-standing Western tradition of idealizing native peoples as “ecologically noble savages”, the focus of this line of analysis is the circulation of “indigeneity” as a means to politicize environmental concerns and articulate historically and geographically situated appeals to self-determination, decolonization, and self-representation. As described in the introduction to this chapter, numerous counter-discourses on nature and the use of land and sea from, for instance the Pacific, are becoming ever louder and are increasingly finding resonance in global institutions and NGO’s.

The key source for this chapter is an extract from the book *Black Rainbow* by Albert Wendt. Wendt is a writer of Samoan descent, living and working in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. *Black Rainbow* is a dystopian novel about an imaginary totalitarian New Zealand. His book is an example of the vocabularies of protests, which were created in response to the environmental threat to the Pacific, specifically the threat of nuclear pollution. We include a short excerpt of a scene set in Auckland. The protagonist and his wife do their daily exercise running to the One Tree Hill memorial. This time, his wife has brought along an art work, the lithograph *Black Rainbow*.

*[...] Maungakiekie [...] is an extinct volcano. The road up to the summit follows the ridge that is the eastern edge of the cone. The grass was still sparkling with dew. Our breath smoked. For once the smell of sheep shit was absent. As we climbed, the swirling clouds in the heavens dropped lower and seemed to anchor themselves to the tip of the Memorial. I gazed down at the bottom of the cone. A few sheep were grazing among the boulders. She continued to pull away from me, striding bravely. When I got to the carpark around the Memorial and the lone pine tree that grew a few meters away, she was already on the concrete platform that was the base of the Memorial. I hurried up the steps.*

\* Joan Martinez Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (London: Edward Elgar, 2003).

*We stood and looked at the city that spread out in all directions, at the other dead volcanoes, the harbours, bays, horizons and islands of the Gulf. The mattress of dark cloud cast its shifting silence over everything. The southerly stirred.*

*'It's getting cold', I said.*

*She unzipped her haversack. Out of it she took the Hotere lithograph. For a while she examined it. Her sweat dripped onto the glass. She wiped it dry with her sweatband. 'Once all this and that city was forest,' she said. She gripped the lithograph with both hands.*

*As she circled the Memorial, she held the lithograph out in front of her, like an icon. In it the sky and the full swing of the city were caught. Every shade, shape, light, twist, change and impermanency of them. Reflected there for a time and then lost as she circled.*

*Was she reinvesting everything with mana?\** Warding off evil spirits? Or what?

*The cloud cover in the east began to thin out. The morning sun became visible, a faint ball of orange. She stopped and, facing it, held the lithograph above her head, with the Black Rainbow pointed at the sun. As the sun rose the lithograph's clock of doom recorded its rising.*

*Then in an ancient language I'd not heard before, she sang to those who'd been there before us.*

*Later, on our way down, she started jogging. I hurried to catch up with her. Our shadows ran on ahead, separately. It started drizzling. The tiny raindrops were icy needles that pricked at our faces and arms.*

*'Was Hotere a descendant of the original tribe?' she asked, more to herself than to me.*

*'Don't know', I looked up. There was no rainbow in the swirling heavens. [...]*

*[...] "I have no history. She has no herstory. Our children's history began with us but that's all – there is no time before that. History is a curse, the Tribunal has ruled.*

*We must be free of it to be. I believe them. [...]"\*\**

In the novel, an all-powerful corporate state Tribunal requires all citizens to “confess”, so that the Tribunal can take over “the past, the guilt”. History is equated with the burden of guilt and “dehistorifying” is framed as liberation. The morning routine with which the novel opens, sets up a contrast between the protagonist and his wife. She always buys a lot of fruit; he consumes too much beer and has developed a paunch. She misses her children and community; he does not talk about the past. The protagonist is thus introduced as someone who has internalized a suburban lifestyle and has committed himself to the Tribunal’s project of historical

\* In Polynesian and Melanesian cultures, mana is the spiritual life force energy or healing power that permeates the universe.

\*\* Albert Wendt, *Black Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 18-19 and 21.



**Image 11.3** One Tree Hill Memorial Auckland



Description: The Hill was named after a single tree which was growing on the hill when Europeans arrived. The Maori name for the hill is Maungakiekie or hill of the kiekie. Kiekie (screw palm or weaving plant) refers to the epiphyte or vine which grows on other trees. This Maori description probably predates the contemporary greenery on the hill.

**Image 11.4** One Tree Hill Memorial Auckland (detail)

erasure. In the opening scenes, their children have already been relocated, and in the second chapter, the wife disappears too. The protagonist, upon acquiring his reference letter stating that he is a free citizen, is sent on a quest to find his relocated family. It is a quest scripted by the state Tribunal as a commercial real life game in which the protagonist needs to follow clues, receives monetary prizes for completed segments and is pushed along by hunters. The novel follows the

protagonist during this journey from urban to rural Aotearoa/New Zealand, during which he experiences “moments of environmental contact that arouse decolonized memories, which ultimately reconnect him to his genealogy, Indigeneity, and family.”<sup>\*</sup> Though there is a clear progression from ignorance to awareness through traversing the landscape, the novel eschews easy binaries, situating indigenous cultures right in the urban future.<sup>\*\*</sup> The excerpt above comes early in the novel, before his wife is relocated and the journey begins.

The title of the novel, *Black Rainbow*, refers to a series of lithographs of the same title, created by the Maori artist Ralph Hotere in protest of the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior (see next section). Hotere produced a new work in the series every time the French exploded a nuclear device in Moruroa.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> The lithograph that features in the novel shows a black arch surrounded by a countdown of numbers. The darkness of the image, and the countdown, simultaneously signify the retrieval of colonial history and memory in the course of the protagonist’s journey, the neocolonial nuclear countdown and ongoing anticolonial resistance.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>

The memorial on top of Maungakiekie that the couple passes daily is a large obelisk to commemorate the Maori people. When Sir Lord Logan Campbell died in 1912, his will bequeathed £5000 for the “uprearing heavenward of a towering obelisk in memoriam to the great Maori race”, as he thought the indigenous people were doomed to go extinct. When the obelisk was finally completed in 1940, however, it was very clear that the Maori were here to stay and activists have since contested the name “memorial”. Like the lithograph, the obelisk thus signifies colonial violence, as well as indigenous resilience and anticolonial resistance.

The ritual performed in the excerpt relates these memories of settler colonialism and nuclear imperialism to the suburban sprawl that has replaced the forests. This is not only because consumerism and urbanization have swallowed up parts of nature, but also because this history of urbanization is ridden with stories of forced displacement. Only nine years before publication of Wendt’s *Black Rainbow*, residents of Rongelap, one of the Marshall islands, were forced to evacuate due to excess levels of radiation.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> More broadly, the novel can be seen as a form of “oceanic storytelling” in which colonial violence, capitalist expansion and ecological degradation are intertwined.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>

\* Rebecca Hogue, ‘Decolonial Memory and Nuclear Migration in Albert Wendt’s *Black Rainbow*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (2020), pp. 325-348, p. 326.

\*\* Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Islands Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2009). In particular chapter 4: ‘Adrift and Unmoored: Globalization and Urban Indigeneity’.

\*\*\* Juniper Ellis, ‘The Techniques of Storytelling: An Interview with Albert Wendt’, *Review of International English Literature* Vol. 28, No. 3 (1997), pp. 79-94, p. 87.

\*\*\*\* Julia Boyd, ‘Black Rainbow, Blood-Earth: Speaking the Nuclearized Pacific in Albert Wendt’s *Black Rainbow*’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 52, No. 6 (2006), pp. 672-686, p. 677.

\*\*\*\*\* Hogue, ‘Decolonial Memory’, pp. 326-327.

\*\*\*\*\* See Hogue, ‘Decolonial Memory’.



The protagonist's initial puzzlement at his wife's ritual on the memorial stands for the larger process in which concerns for the environment, political repression and historical injustice have often been disconnected from each other, serving to relegate the experiences of Oceanic peoples to amnesia and disparagement. Albert Wendt sees his literary work as an attempt to counter "the stereotypes and fallacious myths about Samoa, Polynesia and the South Seas" produced by popular narratives and Western social sciences alike.\* His fiction should be seen as an attempt to decolonize our knowledge of the world by "reintroducing engaged modes of Oceanic ecological thinking", deserving the attention not only of literary scholars, but also of a historian.\*\*

## Nuclear Tests in French Polynesia and The Nuclear Free Pacific Movement

The story of the Pacific region is intimately tied up with ecology. The Pacific Ocean is a vast maritime space with a large diversity of islands, many of them remote and sparsely populated. They were locations of choice, among others for France, to test nuclear weapons arsenal. Until the signing of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1996, which prohibited the testing of nuclear devices in the air, on land, under sea or in outer space, nuclear testing was common.

The nuclear age had started with the invention of the nuclear bomb, based on the fission or fusing of atoms. Its destructive effect was proven beyond doubt on 6 August 1945, when the American B-29 bomber Enola Gay dropped a single atom bomb called 'Little Boy' on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. With this destruction, the United States and its allies hoped to force Japan to surrender, as Germany had done already. More than 70,000 people died instantly and it vaporized and incinerated parts of the city. Together with a second bomb used against Nagasaki three days later, over 200,000 people died in the attacks. Apart from being a deadly and traumatic experience for the people directly involved, following on from the blast, others would die of burns, radiation, cancers and over the next generations birth defects and deformities occurred. The devastation was enormous, with concrete collapsed and steel melted, the locality became a waste land.

While the horrific nature of the bomb was recognized everywhere, a race started for its further improvement, testing and development. This all powerful weapon would feature prominently in the arms race of the Cold War. Testing occurred in remote places, deserts but also islands, notably in the Pacific. Over the course of the past 75

\* Albert Wendt as cited in Paul Sharrad, 'Albert Wendt and the Problem of History', *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 37, no. 1 (2002), pp. 109-116, p. 109.

\*\* Dina El Dessouky, 'Activating Voice, Body and Place', in: Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (eds) *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 254-272, p. 270.



years, since the first test in New Mexico, 2000 nuclear detonations have occurred. The results of the nuclear fall-out and radiation are visible on the planet and form one of the arguments for geologists to recognize the new geological epoch of the Anthropocene.

While the United States was the first nuclear power, others quickly followed. In particular the Soviet Union caught up and started developing its own arsenal. As a corollary, a new imperialism developed as control was sought over the supply of essential materials to develop nuclear capability, especially uranium.



### 11.f Concept Definition

#### Nuclear imperialism

*Imperialist activities to establish and maintain control over nuclear production and output (including weapons production) at the cost of communities in the developing world. Think for instance of the mining of uranium, as a core ingredient for nuclear fuel.*

The testing regimes of the United States, Britain, France and later also China in the Pacific have led to large-scale ecological damage to humans and eco-systems. Pacific Islanders who were directly impacted by the dangers of radioactive fallouts, instantly organized a series of formal protests. Traditional leaders and politicians of the Marshall Island communities for instance lodged a petition submitted to the UN in 1954, demanding an immediate end to nuclear bomb testing in the Pacific, and expressing their fears of becoming a homeless nation.\* Their petition read:

The Marshallese people [...] are also concerned for the increasing number of people removed from their land.... Land means a great deal to the Marshallese. It means more than just a place where you can plant your food crops and build your houses or a place where you can bury your dead. It is the very life of the people. Take away their land and their spirits go also.\*\*

Similarly, government officials from other states in the South Pacific expressed anger over the casual attitudes of nuclear powers with regards to the health and safety of inhabitants of Oceania. For example, the New South Wales Premier J.B. Renshaw ironically asked in 1964 “If this ‘quaint little bomb’ is so harmless, why aren’t the French letting it off in the Bay of Biscay or in a paddock on the South of France?”\*\*\*

\* Nic Maclellan, ‘Grappling with the Bomb: Opposition to Pacific Nuclear Testing in the 1950s’, in: Phillip Deery and Julie Kimber (eds), *Issues on War and Peace: Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Biennial Labour History* (Melbourne: Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 2015) p. 23.

\*\* Petition from the Marshallese People Concerning the Pacific Islands: “Complaints regarding explosions of lethal weapons without our home islands to United Nations Trusteeship Council, 20 April 1954, circulated as UN Trusteeship Council document T/PET.10/28, 6 May 1954. Cited in: Maclellan, ‘Grappling with the Bomb’, p. 23.

\*\*\* New Zealand Press Association, *N.S.W. May Protest About Bomb*, 9 December 1964. New Zealand National Library Archives, Press, Volume CIII, Issue 30619, page 21.

New Zealand also saw a large number of nuclear disarmament committees emerging across the nation in the 1960s and '70s, organizing vigils and picketing marches. These committees directly addressed the French government, as their concrete plans for nuclear testing in French Polynesia were seen as the closest threat to New Zealand and the Cook Islands. In a letter to the French Ambassador in New Zealand, campaigners pleaded with the French to reconsider as “the plans for French nuclear testing will quicken the arms race, encourage other nations to extend nuclear testing to an area previously free of tests, and increase the possibility of danger from nuclear fall-out in the Southern hemisphere”.\* The New Zealand government eventually saw no other option but to bring the matter before the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 1973, pleading that the continuing atmospheric nuclear tests conducted by France violated the rights of New Zealand under international law. The court ruled that the French government should cease all nuclear tests which could cause radioactive fallout endangering the populations of New Zealand, the Cook Islands and Tokelau islands.\*\* France responded by continuing their tests underground. Moreover, those island communities of French Polynesia most affected, had no such judicial means of opposition to protect the sovereignty and integrity of their nation, as they were still subjected to the French state.



**Image 11.5** Button Anti-Nuclear Protest

\* Second Protest at French Plans, New Zealand National Library Archives, Press, Volume CII, Issue 30027, 11 January 1963, p. 10.

\*\* Don MacKay, 'Nuclear Testing: New Zealand and France in the International Court of Justice', *Fordham International Law Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (1996), pp. 1857-1887, p. 1864.

From both the public responses as well secret deliberations by nuclear powers, about the possible damage their tests could cause, it becomes apparent that concerns for the wellbeing of local populations were practically non-existent. They were deemed insignificant next to the 'global importance' of the nuclear tests which were seen as the surest way to safeguard humanity against another world war. British government officials, for instance, wrote about the health dangers to Pacific islanders, expecting that "only very slight health hazard to people would arise, and that only to primitive peoples".\* Indeed, not only the remoteness of the Pacific Islands but more importantly their marginality in global politics, and their perceived 'primitiveness' "was the resource that drew their imperial occupiers to focus on their lands and their seas".\*\* They became completely subjugated to the will of nuclear powers. Historian Gabrielle Hecht has argued that this period of nuclear testing, should in fact be regarded as the age of Nuclear Imperialism, as it followed the same patterns and logic of nineteenth century imperial conquest: "Once the weapons were built, the imperial cycle began anew, with atomic bombing – more palatably referred to as 'nuclear testing' – of the Marshall Islands, the Sahara, the Navajo Nation, Maralinga, Moruroa, and other colonized spaces".\*\*\* Indeed, imperial politics were the driving force behind France's decision to select several atolls in French Polynesia as the main site for their nuclear tests. The first French nuclear test had been conducted in Algeria in 1960, but with the independence of the country in 1962, the possibility of quelling opposition or even gaining access to the site evaporated. The remoteness of French Polynesian islands, but more importantly, the colonial control over local independence movements, made the island nation the best candidate in the eyes of the French government.\*\*\*\*

Despite close control over local politics, resistance did mount and preceded the actual testing.\*\*\*\*\* As soon as it became clear nuclear tests were going to be carried out in French Polynesia, local politicians in the Territorial Assembly united in condemning the plans. For instance, Felix Tefaatau, of the RDPT (Rassemblement démocratique des populations Tahitiennes) a political party seeking autonomy from France, remarked that "since there is really no danger at all, why does not the French government make these tests in the Marseilles harbour or in the centre of Paris?" Similarly, the local representative of the Gaullist party, Ellie Salmon, stated: "Like

\* Minutes of meeting on 27 November 1956 marked "Top Secret-UK Eyes Only," xy/181/024. Cited in: Nic Maclellan, 'The Nuclear Age in the Pacific Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2005), pp. 363-372, p. 363.

\*\* Robert Jacobs, 'Nuclear Conquistadors: Military Colonialism in Nuclear Test Site Selection during the Cold War', *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, Vol.1, No. 2 (2013), pp. 157-177, p. 160.

\*\*\* Gabrielle Hecht, *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 4-5.

\*\*\*\* Jean-Marc Regnault, 'France's Search for Nuclear Test Sites, 1957-1963', *Journal of Military History* Vol. 67, No. 4 (2003), pp. 1223-1248.

\*\*\*\*\* Jean-Marc Regnault, *La Bombe française dans le Pacifique: L'Implantation 1957-1964* (Paris: Scoop, 1993). Cited in: Maclellan, 'The Nuclear Age in the Pacific', p. 364.

all metropolitan Frenchmen, we say no to the bomb”.\* The RDPT, furthermore, feared that the arrival of many French military personnel and their families was a new way of increasing the number of French settlers on the islands and tipping the political balance in their favor. “We people born in the islands”, said Tefaatau, “must be on our guard against all these outsiders, who settle here with the sole purpose of making money”.\*\* Representatives of French Polynesia in the National Assembly in Paris equally tried to change the government’s plans. On 7 September 1966, two months after the first nuclear test had been conducted by the French in Mururoa, the Polynesian deputy John Teariki addressed president De Gaulle stating “I cannot help but speak to you, Mr President, on behalf of the inhabitants of this territory, all the bitterness, all the sadness that we feel to see France, [...] [having become part of] the “Atomic Gang””\*\*\* and by doing so disrespecting “the contract that binds us to France and the rights that are recognized to us by the Charter of the United Nations”\*\*\*\*.

Concerns also mounted in Europe and North America, initially first among Pacifist movements who feared the nuclear arms race would lead to the total destruction of humankind but later included also the growing ecology movements in the West. Large-scale popular protests against nuclear weapons started in the 1970s, in particular after a partial meltdown of a nuclear reactor in the United States at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania. Environmental organizations from the US and Europe started concerted actions to create public pressure. Focused on environmental change, deforestation, and anti-nuclear protests, they became a powerful voice in the debate.

More radical activist environmentalist movements like Greenpeace were also part of what Vassos Argyrou has called a societal paradigm shift from seeing nature as separate from humankind and dangerous, to sacralizing the Earth and nature and seeing humankind as inherently part of it.\*\*\*\*\* As such they took more ‘aggressive’ steps in ensuring nature’s protection by, for instance, placing activists as human shields between whaling vessels and ocean wildlife or between forests and lumber companies. Additionally, these movements recognized those communities who had managed to maintain a better equilibrium between their society and nature, not as ‘pre-modern’ but as guardians of a truer understanding of a human’s relationship to nature.\*\*\*\*\* Acting upon this belief, the originally Canadian organization Greenpeace

\* Bengt Danielsson and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, *Poisoned Reign, French Nuclear Colonialism in the Pacific* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 60.

\*\* Danielsson and Danielsson, *Poisoned Reign*, p. 60.

\*\*\* John Teariki, député, Discours d’accueil au général de Gaulle, Papeete, 7 septembre 1966. Cited in: Bengt Danielsson and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, *Moruroa Mon Amour* (Paris: Stock, 1974), p. 176-185.

\*\*\*\* Teariki, Discours. Cited in: Danielsson, *Moruroa*, p. 176-185.

\*\*\*\*\* Vassos Argyrou, *The Logic of Environmentalism: Anthropology, Ecology and Postcoloniality* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

\*\*\*\*\* Argyrou, *The Logic of Environmentalism*.

became active in the struggle to keep the Pacific nuclear free. With a fleet of ships, they patrolled Pacific islands, moved people from islands which had suffered from contamination by nuclear fallout, put people on islands to monitor the activities and tests, while asking for the world's attention to these actions. For example, with their operation 'Exodus' in 1985, the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior aided around 350 Marshallese nuclear refugees from fleeing the heavily contaminated atolls. Following this campaign, the Rainbow Warrior stopped over in Auckland, New Zealand, to refuel and prepare for their campaign in French Polynesia. The ship never made it to Mururoa.

Greenpeace's flagship was moored in the harbor of Auckland in preparation for the protest. In the evening of 10 July, a mine went off which blew a large hole in the ship. Instead of quickly evacuating, the crew decided on a closer inspection. The planners of the attack had not accounted for this response and their second mine went off, which killed one of the Greenpeace photographers.

The public outcry was large and suspicion fell on France immediately. After initial denials, the French government was forced to admit that the Foreign Intelligence Agency was responsible, which had received orders approved by president François Mitterrand personally. The French agents were apprehended and brought to court. In the aftermath of the attack, France paid Greenpeace damages, with which the organization bought a new ship to continue their campaigns in the South Pacific. In complete contrast to the aims of the French state to reduce attention to their nuclear test plans by disabling Greenpeace, their action ignited a global resurgence of condemnation of nuclear weapons and nuclear tests. Also as a result of the attack, New Zealand, on whose territory the attack took place, renewed its ties with the



**Image 11.6** The Rainbow Warrior in Marsden Wharf in Auckland Harbor after the bombing by French secret service agents

Pacific nations. Together they declared a nuclear free zone ranging from the Equator to Antarctica and from Papua New Guinea to Easter Island.\* Ironically, despite years of informal and formal protests from local communities of Pacific islands, the attack on a Western non-governmental organization was the trigger for global support for the Nuclear Free Pacific movement.

With the end of the Cold War and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1996, the threat of a nuclear war and nuclear pollution seemed to diminish, at least in popular perception. Yet, with the emergence of a new generation of climate activists, the topic of nuclear power has again gained attention. Paradoxically, nuclear power can also be used for energy generation and features in discussions about the energy transition and a green future. Nuclear energy is controversial because of the nuclear waste that is produced. It is stored mostly underground and can continue to emit nuclear particles for tens of thousands of years. In the recent discussion about the Green Deal, nuclear energy was given a green label by the European Commission because of the absence of pollution in the atmosphere, at least in comparison to common carbon sources.\*\* Moreover, the holy grail of renewable energy is the nuclear fusion process, which mimics the energy production of the sun and in contrast to nuclear fission leaves no waste products.\*\*\* In the meantime, energy diplomacy has emerged as a field of interest whereby the sources of energy have become of interest in international affairs and in relations between states. In particular, renewable energy diplomacy and energy security have increased in importance. The overreliance on one supplier has been in sharp focus in the confrontation with the Russian Federation over Ukraine.

## Conclusion

The damage to the Polynesian ecosystem has already been done and the results of the nuclear testing regime are still with us. The storage of nuclear waste after the testing has left many islands with facilities that are now at risk because of climate change. Rising sea levels will lead to dangerous situations whereby nuclear waste could spill into the ocean. A study from 2019 showed that radiation in some

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\* Matt K. Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds, A History of Seas, Peoples and Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) p. 321.

\*\* 'European Commission Declares Nuclear and Gas to be Green', Deutsche Welle, 2 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/european-commission-declares-nuclear-and-gas-to-be-green/a-60614990#:~:text=Nuclear%20power%20plants%20would%20be,has%20gone%20into%20operation%20though>. Last consulted 20 April 2022.

\*\*\* Haley Zaremba, 'Why Nuclear Fusion is Still the Holy Grail of Clean Energy', OilPrice.com, 24 August 2021. Available at: <https://oilprice.com/Alternative-Energy/Nuclear-Power/Why-Nuclear-Fusion-Is-Still-The-Holy-Grail-Of-Clean-Energy.html#:~:text=Over%20the%20last%20century%2C%20scientists,holy%20grail%20of%20clean%20energy>. Last consulted 20 April 2022.

Marshall islands is currently higher than the radioactive radiation in Chernobyl or Fukushima, the two most notable locations of prior nuclear accidents, and is thus still the most radioactive landscape in the world.\* We are hearing the voices of the Pacific Islanders, such as in the United Nations Climate Summit sessions. However, it is only recently that these voices are being heard and taken seriously.

## Guiding Questions

1. What is the ecological paradigm shift?
2. In the dystopian picture of a fictional future of New Zealand, written by the Samoan author Albert Wendt, history has become a barrier to 'liberty'. What could be the symbolic message of the author with regards to New Zealand's engagement with their settler history?
3. How does the indigenous perspective of the environment feature in this extract?
4. How can a novel be used as a historical source?
5. How is nuclear imperialism the same or different from previous imperialism(s)?

## Guide to Further Reading

- Argyrou, Vassos, *The Logic of Environmentalism: Anthropology, Ecology and Postcoloniality* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005). Have recent environmentalism movements managed to adopt a postmodernist view of the relation between humans and nature? Argyrou is of the opinion that most contemporary efforts for conservationism and environmentalism remain thoroughly modernist, as they all seek in one way or another a form of 'stewardship' as the ideal and only role for humankind. This drive for stewardship comes from an underlying and persistent notion of nature as either 'sacred' or otherwise idealized; or the notion of humanity being part of nature, thus saving nature is saving humanity.
- Clark, N., *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Volatile Planet* (London: Sage, 2011). This important publication engages with social theory and focuses on the role of humans and their habitation of the Earth and the interaction with Earth processes. Not only climate change but also disruptive events, such as hurricanes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions remind us that we inhabit a fragile Earth.
- Crosby, Alfred, *Ecological Imperialism. The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). The rapid colonization and permanent settlement of Europeans in the 'New Worlds', from North and South America to Australia and New Zealand, was not the

\* Maveric K. I. L. Abellaa, Monica Rouco Molinaa, Ivana Nikolic-Hughes Emlyn W. Hughes and Malvin A. Ruderman, 'Background gamma radiation and soil activity measurements in the northern Marshall Islands', *PNAS*, Vol. 116, No. 31 (2019) pp. 15425-15434.



result of military superiority or brute force, but mainly due to ecological imperialism. This refers to the introduction of Eurasian plants, animals and pathogens to these colonies, and the subsequent replacement of certain indigenous plants, animals and peoples.

- Crutzen, Paul J. and Eugene F. Stoermer, 'The "Anthropocene"', *Global Change Newsletter* Vol. 41 (2000), pp. 17-18. As the vice-chair of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Program, launched by the International Science Council in 1987, Crutzen and his colleagues studied the changes in the global geo- and biospheres. The rapid and dramatic changes, becoming dramatically visible in the later decades of the twentieth century, led Crutzen to propose in this article that humanity had entered a new geological epoch, called the Anthropocene, revealing the destructive force of modernity. This epoch, he argued, started with the industrialization in North-Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, which led to increased depletion of natural resources and emissions of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.
- McNeill, J.R., *Environmental History in the Pacific World. The Pacific World Lands Peoples and History of the Pacific, 1500-1900*, Vol. II (New York: Routledge, 2001). This edited volume provides a thorough overview of the important historical developments with regards to environmental changes in the Pacific world. Moreover, it opens up the field of Pacific World Studies to include a much larger area, moving beyond the traditional understanding of Pacific Studies centered around the Polynesian world, and focusing on all coastal nations bordering the Pacific Ocean, from South West Chile to North West Canada, and North East Japan to South East New Zealand.
- Poray-Wybranowska, Justyna. *Climate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2020). This scholarly publication looks at fiction, from a postcolonial angle. It engages with discussions about effects of colonialism and environmental disasters and how these topics have been linked and treated in literary fiction.

# Conclusions: World History Today

ISABELLE DUYVESTEYN AND HELEN STEELE



## Introduction

With giant strides this handbook has walked the reader through the last millennium. It has attempted to link major themes in World History to the most significant developments that explain the increasing complexity of human co-habitation over this one thousand year period. We have seen different ways and intensities of connecting, as well as different modes of contact, interaction, imitation, emulation, and expansion, as well as crisis, conflict, disengagement and war. In the introduction to this handbook we have argued for a World History approach that engages with the study of history from the local and place specific, while linking it to macro and global perspectives. Moreover, World History has been argued to be distinct thanks to its interdisciplinary approach, which uses insights from different strands of history writing with national, regional, micro, thematic, transnational and Earth-centered lenses.

World History as a field has most certainly matured in recent years. A renewed appreciation for World History overlapped with the rise of neoliberalism and the view that globalization should be seen as a beneficial development. It coincided with a new popular interest in historical works. Books such as Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*, as well as Peter Frankopan's *Silk Roads*, ended up at airport newsstands and made it to popular bestseller lists. History became notably relevant and had something to contribute in discussions infused with buzzwords such as networks and connections. While neoliberalism has been the subject of increasing criticism, the World History agenda has also not been immune from detractors. We will offer some reflection on this discussion below.

In the chapters of this volume, we have attempted to paint a picture of increased connectivity through the lens of a series of common themes. These themes have allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the role of communication to create greater connection between human groups. These exchanges focused on the spread of ideas, techniques, and world views but also on conflict and diseases. Moreover, the spread of exchange led to the creation of networks of trade and the emergence of capitalism. Antagonistic encounters between different groups provided the trigger for political ordering, in the shape of empires and states. These political orders faced questions of identity and belonging, which were resolved in different ways. Warfare

proved to be an important ingredient, as well as the idea of religion, for legitimating practices and social coherence.

An important caesura which we identified was the distinction between pre-modern and modern societies. The emergence of modernity as a result of the 'Age of Revolutions' and the questioning of the world based on reason and scientific investigation, is a reality which is still with us today. Importantly, it is placed center stage in political discussions and general reflections regarding the justness of the present order. Has our conception of progress really led to a fairer world in which human rights and human dignity are optimally respected? Has the prevalent idea of progress not contributed to the ecological crisis we face today? Only by understanding our past trajectories, can we reflect and think through our current predicament.

In this conclusion, we will try to answer the question of where we now stand in our sense-making exercise and we aim to arrive at an assessment of the World History approach itself. What has it brought us, what shortcomings can we identify, and where are we heading? We will discuss these questions using the concepts that were introduced in the opening chapter; the historians toolkit invites us to consider ordering using chronology, space and concepts.

## Ordering

### Chronology

Previously we have defined history as the study of change over time in the human past. In order to make sense of change, historians like to understand events and developments by organizing them. Even when they appear as messy and chaotic while living through them, labels, categorization and compartmentalization are tools that are frequently used in history writing. Even today we attempt to apply compartmentalization when living through events which we recognize as momentous. We can think of recent compartmentalizing efforts based on watershed moments: the end of the Cold War, 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, the 2014 rise of ISIS, the 2016 election of Trump, the Covid pandemic, the August 2021 fall of Kabul and notably the 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. They all indicate the end of something and also the emergence and definition of something new, as not seen before. Only time will tell whether they hold up to scrutiny.

We have seen chronology playing a role in the divisions of the sections of this book, as well as in the chapters where words have been used such as pre-history, the Bronze Age and the Cold War, all denoting specific phases or timeframes. We should not see these labels and categorizations as absolute. Just like any aspect of history writing, they are subject to reconsideration and rewriting.

We have used many of these conventions without substantially questioning them. We should be aware, however, that alternative chronologies can be found. We

have societies and cultures, for example, subscribing to other systems of counting time. The Jewish calendar is based upon what is believed to be the start of the Earth in the year 3761 BCE. In North Korea, the calendar is based upon the birth year of the founder of the republic Kim Il-Sung and revolves around the Juche ideology. The Juche calendar starts in the year 1912, which is Juche 1.



**Image 12.1** Eise Eisinga Planetarium Franeker

Even in our conventional calendar, we have shifted from using the designation a.d. (anno domini) denoting the birth of Jesus Christ in the year zero to using CE (common era) without shifting the Christian benchmark.

While calendars are tools to appreciate the passing of time by days, months and years, clocks are used to measure the passing of time by minutes and hours. In ancient Egypt there are the first indications of time keeping based on sun dials based around daylight hours. In the nineteenth century standardization was introduced founded on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and all other designations of time around the world are based on zero hour, being midnight in Greenwich in the south of London.

This type of counting of time suggests a linear approach and the passing of it as a linear progression. This idea fits in with the dominant World History approach of a linear historical narrative and bears clear witness to its core meta-narrative. The overarching logic is geared towards ever increasing connectivity and complexity in human society. This ever-increasing human interaction leads to progress, based





**Image 12.2** Sundial, Chariot Wheel Sun Dial at Konark Sun Temple, India

on ideas of rationality, secularization, science, industrialization and globalization. Seeing history from this angle is arguably a form of teleology, as discussed in chapter 4. Teleology can be problematic if the evidence is unsubstantiated.

This is aptly illustrated by the End of History thesis which is based on a linear perspective on history. Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the victory of liberal democracy when witnessing the collapse of the Soviet Union at the start of the 1990s.



## 12.a Concept Definition

### The End of History thesis

*Thesis which sees the end of human ideological development in the attainment of liberal democracy. The thesis has a longer pedigree but was popular at the end of the Cold War and during the demise of Soviet communism.*

However, the rise of democracy has been very uneven.\* Democracy emerged in three waves after the Age of Revolutions\*\*; first in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century, followed by the era of decolonization in the aftermath of the Second World War. The third wave of democratization occurred from the mid-1970s onwards starting with the Carnation Revolution in Portugal and spreading to Spain and Latin America, Asia and Africa. The victory of liberal democracy at the end of the Cold War formed the inauguration of an era in which Western states actively strove to promote democracy as the superior system of political order. With enough money and stamina including military means, it was believed that democracy could be introduced regardless of the prior or existing political context. This idea was practiced in different places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is clear that democracy is in retreat. Alternatives such as political Islam and capitalist authoritarianism have proven attractive to significant numbers of people.

The alternative to this dominant linear view of history, is seeing history as a cyclical process. There are cycles visible in history of populations growing and contracting, economies expanding and going bust and cultures thriving and going under. A major example of this cyclical view on history with a long pedigree is the rise and decline of empires. In recent years, the discussion about power transitions between a declining power and an ascending power has received a lot of attention. The re-emergence of China specifically has been the subject of much scholarly interest. In a theory called the *Thucydides Trap*, Graham T. Allison has built on the ideas of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, who found that when a rising power challenges a dominant power pressures in the system create a tendency for violence.\*\*\*

\* Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005).

\*\* Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

\*\*\* Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can China and the United States Escape Thucydides Trap?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2017).



**Image 12.3** Thucydides



### 12.b Concept Definition

#### The Thucydides Trap

*A theory developed by Graham Allison, based on ideas offered by Greek historian Thucydides, that a rising power will challenge a dominant one and this challenge will end in armed conflict.*

*Examples are among others the rivalry between Athens and the emergent Sparta and the emergence of a unified Germany at the end of the nineteenth century challenging British dominance.*

The re-emergence of China, in this perspective, comes at the expense of the United States. Based on historical precursors of power transitions the likelihood of violence, according to Allison, is difficult to escape.

The theory has been criticized for lacking a causal explanation. As an alternative it is proposed that it is not so much ascendancy which leads to violent challenge, rather exploiting a post-ascendancy last opportunity.\* What present-day China has in common with Athens in its confrontation with Sparta and Germany before the First World War and Japan at the start of the Second World War is a declining demographic, a maximum extension of their economies and a recognition that the window of opportunity to improve on its situation is closing. A period of rapid growth in these cases is followed by a slowing down, domestic audiences become restless and this mixture creates a pressure cooker effect.

\* Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Norton, 2022)



Another perspective on this cyclical approach to history has been offered by quantitative research. The field of cliodynamics has collected huge amounts of data on a series of indicators from different societies across time and place.



## 12.c Concept Definition

### Cliodynamics

*Field of study based on quantification of historical phenomena and processes. An important exponent of this field is Peter Turchin. The term derives from Clio, the Greek muse of history.*

Based on this large dataset, Peter Turchin and others have claimed the existence of macro-historical trends and longitudinal patterns, in particular fifty year cycles of social unrest. Their indicators have now predicted the ‘turbulent twenties’\* marked by social and political turmoil. Intra-elite rivalries, among the political and social elites which have grown during the good times, are driven by frustrated aspirations of those wanting to join, or those who do not feel represented.\*\* This forms a recurring pattern of social polarization consisting of fifty year cycles since 1780.

While historians like to order in time, time frames and the passing of time, the other major parameter used is space. The conventional systems of counting time with which we as scholars are familiar today are decidedly Western inventions.\*\*\* Historians like to use spatial divisions in their efforts of sense making. Moreover, another major ordering mechanism can be found in a thematic approach, which we have adopted in this book. Also here, alternative orderings can, of course, be imagined.

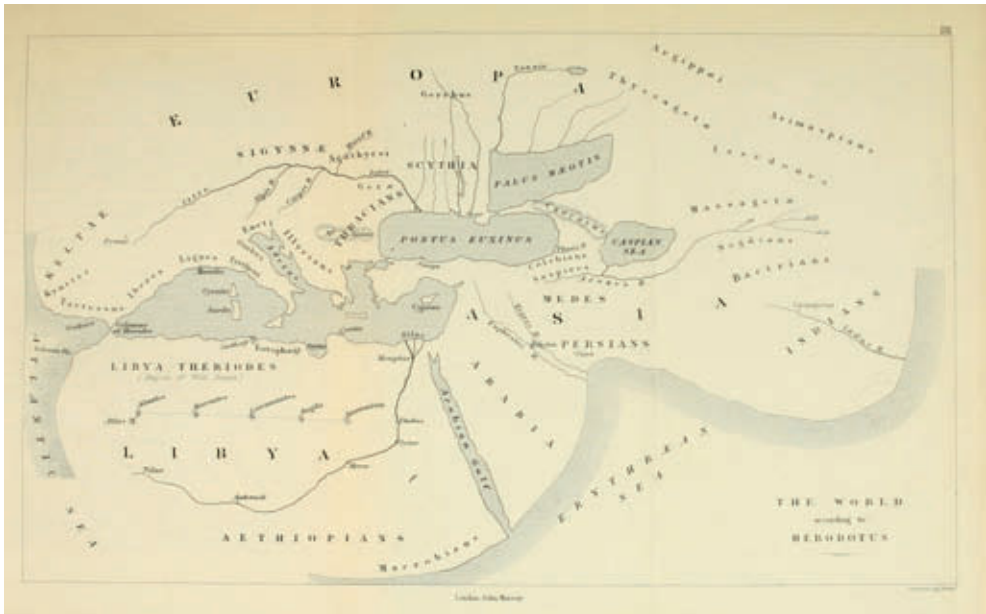
## Space

The division of the world based on maps with a northern and southern hemisphere and a grid pattern of latitude and longitude is a product of a certain time and place, with a comparable trajectory to thinking about time. While the earliest known map makers, such as Herodotus in the fifth century BCE, believed the world consisted of Europe, Africa and Asia, increased information and awareness led to ever more sophisticated map making exercises.

\* Jack Goldsmith and Peter Turchin, ‘Welcome to the Turbulent Twenties’, *Noema Magazine*, 10 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.noemamag.com/welcome-to-the-turbulent-twenties/> Last accessed: 20 April 2022.

\*\* Peter Turchin, ‘Dynamics of Political Instability in the United States 1780–2010’, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2012), pp. 577–591.

\*\*\* Goody, *The Theft of History*.



**Image 12.4** Herodotus Map

The current dominant projection of the world puts the north pole on top with the equator as the central focal point. This is called the Mercator projection. Alternative projections, for example, put the south pole on the top or project the Pacific as a focal point rather than the Atlantic.



**Image 12.5** World Map with Pacific center stage

Moving beyond space as defined by geography alone, population density can also be projected spatially and the picture that emerges is completely different from conventional geographical projections. Those countries with large or rising populations suddenly gain prominence at the expense of those with contracting demographics. These different projections invite us not only to look differently at our world but also to think differently.

## Concepts

Apart from alternative maps, alternative ordering can also be achieved by looking at conceptual lenses. In this volume, we have taken on board many of the conventions that are commonly used for ordering our world. When discussing communication, trade, race, religion, war, identity, and modernity, we have liberally used the concepts of power, state, civilization, and empire. However, power is in itself a contentious concept and theme for ordering.



### 12.d Concept Definition

#### Power

*The ability to make others do what you want them to do and which they were not inclined to do in the first place.*

#### Hard Power

*Coercive instruments in the shape of military and economic capabilities to influence the behavior of an opponent.*

#### Soft Power

*Instruments of attraction and co-option to influence the behavior of an opponent.*

We should distinguish hard power, in the shape of coercion or war, from soft power as exercised by for example, legitimation and emulation.\* Both have been prevalent. Power tends to become, sooner or later, questioned or disputed. Moreover, other actors apart from the Westphalian state such as non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, transnational terrorist organizations, wield power and are powerful enough to affect order.

Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, states have been the most important building blocks of international order.\*\* Membership of the United Nations depends on the recognition of statehood. States have in different constellations shaped the international order. Labels such as unipolar, bipolar and multipolar have been used

\* Joseph S. Nye jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (London: Hachette 2009).

\*\* See also discussion in chapter 4.

to describe the international order adopted over the past two hundred years. In the nineteenth century multipolarity dominated; during the Cold War bipolarity and since the 1990s unipolarity or a unipolar moment occurred. The expectation is that multipolarity will determine the shape of international affairs in the years to come. The re-emergence of China will form a defining feature.



## 12.e Concept Definition

### Unipolarity

*An international order with one dominant power, such as the dominance of the United States immediately after the end of the Cold War.*

### Bipolarity

*An international order with two dominant powers, such as during the period of the Cold War with the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.*

### Multipolarity

*An international order with multiple strong powers, such as after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century in Europe. This was also called the 'Concert of Europe' or a system of the balance of power, with strong powers balancing against each other and against one dominant state.*

However, where we like to see order, others claim no such thing has been visible. 'No truly global "world order" has ever existed. What passes for order in our time was devised in Western Europe nearly four centuries ago, at (...) Westphalia (...) the sole generally recognized basis of what exists of a world order.'\* Henry Kissinger, former American Secretary of State and long standing scholar of international relations, here claims that the order was by no means global. Moreover, he argues that '[the] very international order must sooner or later face the impact of two tendencies challenging its cohesion: either a redefinition of legitimacy or a significant shift in the balance of power'. \*\* Therefore, order, as with the other themes, is subject to perennial change.

\* Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), pp. 2-3

\*\* Kissinger, *World Order*, 365.



**Image 12.6** President Reagan and Soviet Secretary General Michael Gorbachev signing the INF Treaty 1987

While we have tried to justify the thematic choices we have made for this handbook in the first few pages, there are still many other concepts that can, have been, and should be explored. Studying change over time in the human past knows many different and unexplored entry points. It is true that the selected themes can reveal and tell a major story. At the same time, they obscure and disguise simply because of the prominence of the chosen concept.

There are two most obvious and notable omissions in the narrative here that deserve an explicit mention. First, the counter-forces or retreats from globalization need to be pointed out. While overall linear progress dominates the picture, this is by no means a reflection of the historical detail. The progress of increased human connectivity over the course of the past millennium has gone in stops and starts. As noted, rises and declines have occurred, as well as retreats and re-emergence. However, the dominance in the picture has been squarely on connection rather than disconnection. The process of withdrawal, of disconnecting and disordering, have not been substantially treated here. Nor have they received prominent attention in the wider World History debate. We have witnessed significant retreats from globalization, for instance during the interbellum when the ideological and economic diversity increased, and communism and fascism gained a foothold. Before the outbreak of the Second World War, the connections had decreased, not

least from the economic crisis which erupted with the stock market crash in 1929, in comparison with say three decades before.

There have been voices in the debate drawing attention to the counter-forces or the push back against globalization. One example is the 'clash of civilizations' thesis offered by Samuel Huntington in the 1990s and introduced in chapter eight.\* His vision remains popular, also among politicians, despite the criticism that scientists have raised against the argument.\*\* There is little empirical evidence, for instance, to substantiate the claims of the theory. While civilizations might be said to exist, the definition on which he bases them is open for interpretation. Is there such a thing as an African civilization? Moreover, when looking at clashes, the largest number of victims in conflict have fallen not when civilizations clash but within civilizations themselves, i.e. the conflicts within the Islamic civilization have caused more deaths than the clashes on its fault lines.

With the election of American president Donald Trump in 2016, counter-voices to globalization have become more prominent and attained a more mainstream position. Preceding his election, the 2008 financial crisis gave an indication of what was to come. While Trump claimed to represent the white working class, who had suffered due to loss of jobs and social misery as a result, among others, of unfair global trading practices, he gave impetus to a wider movement on the right of the political spectrum. It demanded attention for the negative effects of globalization, which became visibly evident during the Covid-pandemic with problematic economic dependencies coming to light and the storming of Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021. These right wing counter-voices to globalization were far from alone.

The climate crisis has also raised concerns about the logic and necessity of ever increasing globalization. Movements like Extinction Rebellion question the logic of present farming and fishing techniques, the prevalence of air travel and carbon reliance. Their civil disobedience campaigns have also attracted a lot of attention and similar to the right-wing social movement draw on longer running discussions about social justice and the shape of the global commons.\*\*\* In the case of environmental activism, the activists draw on prior campaigns and examples of activism against acid rain, greenhouse gasses and ozone depletion, which have attained notable effects in the past.

Seeing both the right-wing and climate activists as counter-voices under-sells their global connectivity. Both could be seen as social movements enjoying the benefits of globalization and both are truly global phenomena. As has been pointed out by several scholars, 'Anti-globalization is itself a phenomenon of globalization,

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\* Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1996).

\*\* Jonathan Fox, 'Ethnic Minorities and the Clash of Civilizations: A Quantitative Analysis of Huntington's thesis', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2002), pp. 415-434.

\*\*\* Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).





**Image 12.7** Sydney Climate Change Protest, 2019

and usually seeks to reconstitute the nation's place in the world rather than to retreat into a disconnected autarky'.\* In telling the story of increased interaction and connectivity, indeed, the world has witnessed many times over retreats from interaction, and disconnection. The puzzle is: to what extent do they undermine globalization and can we really imagine a reversal?

Apart from those providing active push back against globalization, the second omission in the World History debate is the lack of attention of and recognition for those unable to participate in this process. It is not only the willful or knowing disengagement with globalization that deserves attention but also those people who are not able to opt into globalization because of circumstance that should be part of the narrative.\*\* How representative are the globetrotting liberal cosmopolitans and whose story do they tell? We tend to take for granted the access to information, the open attitude towards the world around us and the ability to engage with it. There are, however, many citizens in the world who lack access because of ability or circumstances, who do not possess the means and the skills necessary for the

\* Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1-21, p. 2.

\*\* See for exceptions: Amy Stanley, 'Maid servants' Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia 1600-1900', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 121, No. 2 (2016), pp 437-460. Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the world: Essay toward a global labor history* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Minu Haschemi Yekani, *Koloniale Arbeit: Rassismus, Migration und Herrschaft in Tansania (1885-1914)* (Cologne: Campus, 2018).



interaction. We only have to imagine the illiterate, the poor, and the child laborers as a substantial group left out of this globalizing narrative.

## Questions for World History

History invites us to study change over time in the human past by appreciating its unique context, time and place and by trying to get as close as possible to the lived historical experience. It is fair to say that the multidisciplinary ambitions of World History have, so far, paid off. The sources and research from subject matter experts have enriched the perspectives and debates. The work of researchers that have conducted archival investigation, looked in detail at primary and secondary sources, and reached informed opinions, has led to the vibrancy of the World History debate. However, there is an increasing recognition that many things are being left out of the discussion. Several critical observations about the current state of the art within World History can and should be made.

It is not an uncommon problem in meta-history history writing to emphasize one idea at the cost of others. Initially, a dominant factor tends to be identified that holds strong cards to explain the drivers of historical developments, in particular progress. We have seen this with Marxist history writing in which class structure held all explanatory power. The Marxist dialectical materialism sees history developing as a consequence of material and structural forces, capitalism. This has shown itself to be problematic because it exclusively focused on one part of the picture. Similarly, the idea of connectivity and progress as modernity, undergirding the World History narrative, is powerful for what it tells but falls short in what it excludes. In particular, the awarding of great importance to structures, at the cost of agency and the individual, can be marked as a shortcoming and an area for improvement.\* These are just two examples of traditions of history writing where the over-reliance on one particular element has started to show shortcomings over the course of time.

This is not the only set of problems with the World History enterprise. The endeavor had the notable ambition of making history writing more inclusive and moving beyond Western dominance, both in subject matter as well as expertise. This de-centering exercise, has been, among others, a response to the invitation to 'provincialize' the West.\*\* While the movement to provincialize the 'West' has been successful in highlighting problems with conventional historical investigation, it is far from complete; first, based on quantitative evidence, the shift to the global

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\* David A. Bell, 'Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution'. *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (2014), pp. 1-24.

\*\* Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*. Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*.

has not substantially materialized. Historians are today still largely interested in Western history and history writing. A recent survey has found that in the United Kingdom and the United States things are very slow to change and over 75% of historical research is devoted to Europe, the US and Canada.\* Second, in the process of provincializing Europe, the continent has moved from a 'knowing subject' to 'an object of global history', with the result of shifting from Eurocentrism to 'a Eurasian centrism'.\*\* In other words, it has shifted from inside out perspectives to outside in but is still preoccupied with itself. When tackling one challenge, a new one has thus emerged.

We can identify two prominent epistemological challenges for World History\*\*\*. Most prominent is the issue of language. The promise of World History as disruption of the conventional and Western centric narrative has not fully materialized because the core debate remains a largely Anglo-Saxon affair. Publications are mostly in English, the dissemination, the key journals and publishers are firmly rooted in the Anglosphere. We have arrived at a situation with entrenched scholars in established positions, who publish in key journals where the debate takes place, such as the *Journal of World History* and the *Journal of Global History*. Rather than opening things up, centrifugal tendencies have played out; this 'drive to overcome Eurocentrism contributed to the Anglicizing of intellectual lives around the world'.\*\*\*\* The route to academic recognition is to publish in English. It leads one scholar to the conclusion that it 'is another Anglospheric invention to integrate the Other into a cosmopolitan narrative on our terms, in our tongues'.\*\*\*\*\* This leaves out, despite its original promise, the local and specific in other languages than English. It is a clear invitation for future scholarship and one in which International Studies as a field and as a specific academic program can make distinct contributions.

Apart from being linguistically narrow, World History faces an epistemological challenge when looking at approaches to investigation. Dominant academic practices and existing hierarchies promote methodologies that are familiar and recognizable. Cultures and societies, for example, that have not left any written traces are treated

\* Luke Clossey and Nicholas Guyatt, 'It's a Small World After All: The Wider World in the Historian's Peripheral Vision', *Perspectives on History*, 1 May 2013. Available online: <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2013/its-a-small-world-after-all> Last accessed 20 April 2022.

\*\* Maxine Berg, 'Global History: Approaches and New Directions', in: Maxine Berg (ed.), *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Published for The British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-18, p. 5. See also: Daniela Tenger, 'Analysis of the Journal of Global History 2006-2010'. Available at: <https://www.rug.nl/let/studeren-bij-ons/master/rema/mhir/journal-global-history-tenger.pdf>

\*\*\* See also discussion in: EUI Global History Seminar Group, 'For A Fair(er) Global History', *Cyber Review of Modern Historiography*. Available at: <https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/cromohs/FairHist> Last accessed 20 April 2022. See also chapter 2 which discusses epistemology.

\*\*\*\* Jeremy Adelman, 'What is Global History Now?', *Aeon Essays*, 2 March 2017. Available at: <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment> Last accessed 20 April 2022.

\*\*\*\*\* Adelman, 'What is Global History Now?'.

differently because conventional research standards cannot be applied.\* History writing in non-written traditions, apart from archaeology approaches, puts us on the road to storytelling and fiction as part of understanding and explaining the occurrence of change over the course of human existence. Some scholars have taken this up and presented arguments for an incorporation of these strands of thinking. For example, myth complexes and sense-making narratives about origins and predecessors are important in many societies in the process of identity formation and societal grounding.\*\* Oral history, therefore, deserves a more prominent place in the World History discussion.

In an overall appraisal of the World History field, the normative ideal of global citizenship also warrants some reflection. The field operates in the belief that the study of the process of ever-increasing connections can be instrumental in the formation and education of future generations and can create responsible and informed global citizens. This forms the cosmopolitan core of the field. World History and Global History courses, where they are taught, tend to attract large audiences. The offering of these types of courses beyond history departments, such as in political science and liberal arts programs, bears testament to the importance and spread of the appeal of World History. The promotion of responsible citizenship is laudable in and of itself. While history writing in the nineteenth century aimed to serve the ideal of nation building, the present day ambition of history writing to create global citizens demonstrates continuity in its social function. In a polarizing political landscape, informed citizens are crucial.\*\*\* Many of the challenges the world faces can only be tackled based on a sense of shared pasts, shared understandings and an idea of a shared future. History has a lot to contribute. What is on the horizon? Will we see a return to national history writing? Or will we witness a new type of history writing that is more inclusive? Or will the field grow into a plurality of a series of *World Histories*?

Whatever the road ahead will look like, wider developments in society and by academics hold exciting promise. The rapid development of artificial intelligence has prompted scholars to start reflecting on widened opportunities for inductive science: a situation with overwhelming data, pointing to hitherto undiscovered patterns in human behavior, begging for explanation.\*\*\*\* Still, some caution is necessary, even at this point. Not only is the data worth as much as the person

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\* See also the discussion in chapter 2 on Communication.

\*\* Berit Blieseman de Guevara, *Myth and Narrative in International Politics: Interpretive Approaches in the Study of IR* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

\*\*\* Drayton and Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', p. 15.

\*\*\*\* Laura Spinney, 'Are we witnessing the dawn of post-theory science?', *The Guardian*, 9 January 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jan/09/are-we-witnessing-the-dawn-of-post-theory-science> Last accessed 20 April 2022.

devising the selection criteria and the algorithms, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as psychologists have pointed out, we are extremely bad at assessing our own individual past, and even worse at gauging our own future.\* This should be cause for a large measure of humility.

One thing is certain, the historical record of human experiences of changes over time offers us a rich panoply of human choices made in specific circumstances. It is on this record that we can draw when we want to make sense of our past, our current predicament and possible futures. We learn most likely not literally from history but by looking at what other people did in other timeframes and other places, which can help us think through our own choices. Reading, seeing and listening about this past can enrich our present. If history teaches us anything, it is that change is perennial. Being aware of this invites again humility and can make us wiser. Wise people might just be a little bit better prepared for that unknowable future.

## Guiding Questions

1. Give some examples of alternative ordering principles for history writing. Discuss.
2. What are the two most important epistemological challenges for World History?
3. What can World History contribute to global citizenship?
4. What limitations does the World History approach present? What gets left out?

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\* Eugene M. Caruso, Daniel T. Gilbert and Timothy D. Wilson, 'A Wrinkle in Time: Asymmetric Valuation of Past and Future Events', *Psychological Science*, Vol. 19, No. 8 (2008), pp. 796-801. Available at: [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/danielgilbert/files/caruso\\_et\\_al.\\_wrinkle\\_in\\_time.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/danielgilbert/files/caruso_et_al._wrinkle_in_time.pdf) Last accessed 20 April 2022.

## Guide to Further Reading

- Antunes, Catia, and Karwan Fatah-Black, *Explorations in History and Globalization* (London: Routledge 2018). Another example of the Leiden University approach to world history by a group of excellent scholars.
- Bayley, C.A., *Remaking the Modern World 1900-2015: Global Connections and Comparisons* (London: Wiley Blackwell 2018). A wonderfully concise overview of the most recent period, based on a global history approach.
- Bently, Jeremy, 'Myths, Wagers and Some Moral Implications of World History', *Journal of World History*, 16, 1 (2005), 51-82. This contribution makes the case for the wider importance of the study of World History.
- Berg, Maxine (ed.). *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Published for The British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2013). This book offers both an overview of the past as well as an outline for the future of the field.
- Edgerton, David. *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (London: Profile 2008). A nice overview of the most recent history through a thematic approach with an emphasis on the role of technology.

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## 1. Introduction

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## Introduction Part I

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## 2. Communication

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## 3. Trade

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## 6. Religion

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## **Introduction Part II**

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## 8. Identity

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### **8.7 Presidents Abdel Nasser and Shukri al-Quwatli Signing Unity Pact, Forming the United Arab Republic, February 1958**

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### **8.8 Nasser meeting with Che Guevara in 1965**

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### **8.9 Sayyid Qutb**

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### **8.10 Qutb's book Milestones (Arabic version)**

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### **8.12 Mujahideen Visit White House with President Reagan, 1983**

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### **8.13 Coffeehouse-style painting depicting the Islamic Revolution with the Shah's exile and Khomeini's return, circa 1979.**

Retrieved from <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/graphics-revolution-and-war-iranian-poster-arts/exhibition-catalog-essay-and-didactics/>

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**9.8 Postcard of Panthéon de la Guerre, depicting a kneeling Chinese laborer**

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**9.9 Panthéon de la Guerre: The Chinese laborer behind the American flag is missing**

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**10.1 Letter from Ben Lindner**

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**10.2 US Declaration of Independence**

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**10.3 Eleanor Roosevelt holding a poster of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Lake Success, New York, November 1949**

Retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eleanor\\_Roosevelt\\_UDHR.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eleanor_Roosevelt_UDHR.jpg)

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**10.4 Florence Owens Thompson, Migrant Mother in the Great Depression, 1936, by Dorothea Lange**

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**10.5 Alexander Solzhenitsyn**

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**10.6 Quilt Showing the Torture on the Esmeralda Ship, by Espina Dorsal, Arpillera Museo de la Memoria Chile 2021**

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**10.7 Ronald Reagan**

Retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Official\\_Portrait\\_of\\_President\\_Reagan\\_1981.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Official_Portrait_of_President_Reagan_1981.jpg)

Photographer unknown, 1981, provided by Executive Office of the President of the United States, reprinted under creative commons license CCo

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**11.2 Earth Rising, NASA, 1968**

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Made by Bill Anders, 24 December 1968, provided by NASA, reprinted under creative commons license CCo

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#### **11.5 Button Anti-nuclear Protest**

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#### **12.2 Sundial, Chariot Wheel Sun Dial at Konark Sun Temple, India**

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Made by unknown, 400-350 BCE, held at Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, photographed by  
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Retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A\\_Sydney\\_Climate\\_Change\\_protest.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Sydney_Climate_Change_protest.jpg)

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# Glossary

- Age of Discovery* – The period in history from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century when the European seafaring powers commanded the sea and ‘discovered’ other parts of the globe.
- Anachronism* – An error of chronological logic or misplacement of chronology.
- Anthropocene* – A period in history, the most recent geological epoch, in which the presence of human beings has made an imprint on the surface of the Earth by way of radioactive fallout, microplastics and heavy metals and influencing the Earth's climate.
- Bias* – A prejudice against someone or something that leads to unfair attention or representation in research.
- Bipolarity* – An international order with two dominant powers, such as during the period of the Cold War with the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.
- Capitalism* – An economic system in which the means of production are privately owned (instead of by the state) and used to generate and maximize profit.
- City-state* – Territorial unit based on a city and its immediate surroundings.
- Civilization* – A complex society bound together by common rule, sharing a common territory, identity, means of communication and religion.
- Clash of Civilizations thesis* – Theory developed by Samuel Huntington which distinguishes nine civilizations in the world (Western, Orthodox, Latin American, Islamic, African, Hindu, Buddhist, Sinic and Japanese) based on shared culture, identity and religion. It claims that future conflict will take place on the fault lines between these civilizations.
- Clodynamics* – Field of study based on quantification of historical phenomena and processes. An important exponent of this field is Peter Turchin. The term derives from Clio, the Greek muse of history.
- Cold War* – Period between 1945 and 1989 where there was an active rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union based on different ideologies, capitalism versus communism. The confrontation remained ‘cold’ with the exception of a series of ‘hot’ wars in the developing world.
- Comparative Research Design* – An approach to conducting research through comparison. This comparison can focus on different groups of people, time frames, locations, themes but also definition, concepts and theories.
- Constitutional Order* – A political order based on a constitution. Usually based on a written foundational document to specify rights and obligations and also to inform norms, expectations and behaviors.
- Counter-Modernity* – Intellectual movement against modernity which places emphasis, in differing degrees, on the spiritual, nature, ethics and culture. The central idea is that Western modernity has lost all ethics and spirituality.
- Culture* – The ideas and practices that award meaning to activities in human societies.
- Democracy* – System of government by the people for the people.
- Democratic Peace Theory* – Theory based on the insight, originally suggested by Immanuel Kant, that democracies do not fight war against each other. Democratic peace has had a large influence on foreign policy; the promotion of democracy is believed to act as a deterrent against war.

- Despotism* – Repressive rule based on the exercise of dictatorial power, usually by one individual sometimes also by a group.
- Discourse* – A coherent system of words, communications, meaning and practices that together construct our understanding of phenomena.
- Economy* – Social arrangements or aspects of social relations that concern the provisioning of (im)material needs and wants, in different forms and social scales (households, local, national and world). Economies share several key features, including social actors (e.g., individuals, firms, and states), institutions (i.e., formal and informal rules), as well as technologies and organizational techniques.
- Empire* – A large geographical space ruled by a single state with a population that shares a sense of common identity.
- End of History Thesis* – Thesis which sees the end of the human ideological development in the attainment of liberal democracy. The thesis has a longer pedigree but was popular at the end of the Cold War and during the demise of Soviet communism.
- Enlightenment* – The Enlightenment is an intellectual and scientific movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in which scientists and philosophers aimed to establish dominance over natural phenomena. By using reason and rational deduction, increased insights could be gained into the workings of the natural world and humans living within it. The malleability of nature also resulted in policies aimed at ‘enhancing’ and ‘purifying’ the human race.
- Environmental Determinism* – The idea that the pre-existing environmental conditions determine the subsequent development of society.
- Environmental History* – A field of history concerned with understanding the impact of the environment on civilizational development, as well as the role of humans in changes to the environment.
- Environmental justice* – A form of justice involving developing and upholding of the rules and regulations on the protection of the environment for all people.
- Environmentalism* – The idea that the environment deserves protection and is in need of efforts of restoration and improvement for its general condition and status.
- Epistemology* – The approach to knowledge and how to arrive at it, taking into account its foundations, methods, and validity.
- Feudalism* – Type of rule based on a hierarchy of patrons who are tied to clients, who in their turn can act as patrons to others. In this hierarchical system goods, labor and favors flow up and down this system, to substantiate claims to authority, legitimacy and rule. This was the dominant system of rule in Medieval Europe until the ‘Age of Revolutions’ and is still in existence in many other parts of the world.
- Geopolitics* – Approach to international affairs which focuses on the interplay between geography, power and politics.
- Global Citizenship* – The field of World History operates in the belief that the study of the process of ever-increasing connections can help in the formation and education of future generations of responsible and informed global citizens. This is the cosmopolitan ideal of the field.
- Grassroots Activism* – Community based collective action focused on a particular cause or theme, involving the population directly.
- Great Divergence* – Historians use the term ‘The Great Divergence’ to describe the process where Europe’s GDP per capita grew much faster than the GDP per capita of the rest of the world. While before roughly 1800 all places in the world were equally prosperous, and perhaps China was the wealthiest part of the world, Europe – in particular Britain – diverged from the rest of the world after 1800.
- Great Game* – Concept used to describe the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires in the nineteenth century over control of the central Asian landmass.

*Hard Power* – Coercive instruments in the shape of military and economic capabilities to influence the behavior of an opponent.

*Historicism* – The study of history in its unique context, time and place. It is the task of the historian to try to get as close as possible to the lived historical experience.

*Historiography* – The pre-existing knowledge base including, importantly, debate about a particular historical subject. It is the existing recorded state of understanding history.

*History* – The study of change over time in the human past.

*Humanism* – Intellectual movement focused on the human in its natural environment.

*Human Rights* – A set of norms and principles with universal application to guide behavior and interaction. Codified in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and translated in national, regional and international law.

*Ideology* – a body of coherent thought which influences and justifies the thinking and repertoire of actions of individuals, groups and societies.

*Imperiogenesis theory* – An explanation for the development of mega-empires through the confrontation between nomadic and sedentary populations, triggering a mutual reinforcing cycle of organization and confrontation.

*Interdisciplinarity* – Several distinct academic disciplines are used to create a synergetic effect towards a common understanding.

*Islamism* – The belief that Islam contains all the answers and solutions for dealing with the questions of modernity. This discourse, thus, makes use of Islamic language and symbols. It is also referred to as political Islam.

*Kingdom* – Territorial unit ruled by a hereditary monarch, i.e. a king or queen

*Liberalism* – Political philosophy focused on the individual, bestowed with individual rights, liberties and equality before the law.

*Marxism* – Political philosophy developed by Karl Marx (1818-1883) in his book *Das Kapital* (1867). It sees the world as consisting of and being driven by structural and material factors that determine its development.

*Meaningful Communication* – The deliberate act of transferring information through a verbal (speech or writing) or non-verbal (such as drawing, movement, objects) medium.

*Meta-History* – The interpretation of history according to an overarching meaning or internal logic, leading towards an ultimate end point.

*Modernity* – A set of ideas focused on rationality, science, secularism, democracy and cosmopolitanism. It reflects both on a time frame in which these ideas came about and gained traction, at the end of the eighteenth century, as well as to an outlook on the world as either pre-modern and modern.

*Multipolarity* – An international order with multiple strong powers, such as after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century in Europe. This was also called the 'Concert of Europe' or a system of the balance of power, with strong powers balancing against each other and against one dominant state.

*Nationalism* – A political philosophy and political movement focused on an idea and practice of the nation, which is based on shared identity and solidarity.

*Negative Rights* – Rights that are conceptualized as preventing the subjection to a specific kind of action.

*Nuclear imperialism* – Imperialist activities to establish and maintain control over nuclear production and output (including weapons production) at the cost of communities in the developing world. Think for instance of the mining of uranium, as a core ingredient for nuclear fuel.

*Oligarchy* – Rule by a small group, often sharing a distinct identity of ethnicity, social-class, military standing or religion.

*Oral History* - The study of history through orally transmitted sources. Historians distinguish between sources which are part of an oral tradition and the field of Oral Literature, such as epic poetry or folklore, and oral sources which recount only a one generational/individual memory of certain historical events. Such life stories and interviews are recorded after the historical events have occurred, and as such provide a testimony of both the past and the present. At the same time, they offer historians evidence on otherwise undocumented events or perspectives.

*Orientalism* - Essentialist approach to the Orient as constituting immutable and stereotyped characteristics of Arab and Asian culture and traditions.

*Pan-Arabism* - A movement and discourse that emphasized that the Arab-speaking countries in the MENA region constitute one people as they share a common history, a linguistic bond, and culture that was more important than religious or ethnic boundaries

*Politics* - The ability to decide who gets what, where, when and how.

*Positive Rights* - Rights that are conceptualized as seeking subjection to a perceived just action.

*Post-Colonial Theory* - Theory focused on the continuities and discontinuities in language, understanding, practices and organization between colonial and post-colonial societies. It is focused on power disparities in these domains.

*Post-Structuralism* - A philosophical and theoretical approach that focuses on interpretivist and discursive practices based on the role of language. Language creates and shapes what we perceive to be real but post-structuralists believe there is no reality beyond that.

*Power* - The ability to make others do what you want them to do and which they were not inclined to do in the first place

*Presentist perspective* - Idea that only the present matters and the experience of today is the standard to measure all things.

*Primary sources* - Sources produced at the time of historical events, by contemporaries, unmediated by others in ex post facto interpretation.

*Racism* - The belief that the human population can be biologically categorized in clear and distinct groups, i.e. 'races', which have inherited and essential characteristics that define their behavior and abilities, and that these differences mark a 'natural' and inevitable inferiority or superiority.

*Religion* - A set of beliefs inherent to humankind focused on the divine which inform a set of practices which are carried out individually as well as communally.

*Religious Syncretism* - A combination of different, usually opposing, religious beliefs and practices.

*Republic* - Form of government in which authority is held by the people through elective representation.

*Secondary sources* - Sources produced after the historical events containing interpretation and assessments which are part of the debate of history.

*Silk Roads* - Concept used to describe the trade routes connecting, via land and sea, Asia, Europe and Africa.

*Soft Power* - Instruments of attraction and co-option to influence the behavior of an opponent.

*Sovereignty* - Supreme or ultimate authority and freedom of action. There is no internal or external higher source of authority.

*State* - A territorial unit with a monopoly of force within that territory. Usually with a bureaucracy entailing a legal, fiscal and social order.

*Teleology* - Reasoning based on the perceived outcome. Evidence is interpreted in such a way that it confirms the supposed outcome of events.

*Theocracy* - A system of rule based on ultimate power resting with God. God's representatives on Earth rule on his behalf.



*Thucydides Trap* - A theory developed by Graham Allison, based on ideas offered by Greek historian Thucydides, that a rising power will challenge a dominant one and this challenge will end in armed conflict. Examples are among others the rivalry between Athens and the emergent Sparta and the emergence of a unified Germany at the end of the nineteenth century challenging British dominance.

*Unipolarity* - An international order with one dominant power, such as the dominance of the United States immediately after the end of the Cold War.

*Vietnam Syndrome* - A perception held by US Cold War hawks in the aftermath of the defeat in the Vietnam War (1954-1973) that the US people had become overly wary of military interventions.

*War* - Violent engagement by at least two identifiable actors commanding force, claiming to represent a group of people to realize a political cause. It involves aggression, destruction and the use of lethal violence.

*World History* - The study of history from a world perspective focusing on the spread of people, goods and ideas and increased interconnectedness.

*World System Theory* - The world is divided into three sets of states depending on the role they play in economic production: Core-countries, semi-periphery and periphery countries. Core countries rely on capital intensive production and a skilled labor force, whereas periphery countries have production processes focused on labor intensive production with low-skilled workers.

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