

World History and Future Studies

This study will argue that it is both easy and beneficial to integrate some elements of Future Studies into (already crowded) courses in world history at any level. Doing so may be particularly useful in motivating those students who are unsure why they are required to take world history. I will also suggest that world historians are well placed to teach courses or modules about the future and offer some examples of course treatments and classroom exercises including a “Futures Wheel” which has already garnered favorable reviews from senior world historians.

The Connection between World History and Future Studies

There is a natural symmetry between world history and future studies. In the former, we look backward in time, and try to understand how and why humanity proceeded through a series of events and process to end up where we are today. In the latter, we gaze into the future, trying to ascertain how humanity might move toward desirable future outcomes while avoiding undesirable outcomes. In both cases we must grapple with the complexity of our world, and seek to understand how political, economic, cultural, technological, social, and many other factors have or will interact.

The present moment divides past from future. And now the next moment: we move in an instant from future to past. While you are reading this paragraph, future has become past (and no, you never get that second back, so I will try to make this worthwhile). The present is perhaps more of a mirage than the future, for the latter at least stretches out before us while the present vanishes as we try to grasp it.

The future is reflected in the past—and vice versa. Our best way of knowing the future is to look at our past. “[W]ithout the past there is no future; try as hard as you can and you will not be able to imagine a future without involuntarily invoking past occurrences”¹ What present trends will likely extend into the future, and which may accelerate? How have culture and economy and technology interacted in the past and how might they interact in future? How have societies interacted in the past and how might they interact

in future? How often was humanity surprised by historical events or processes in the past and how can we try to predict surprises that humanity might face in future?

The connections between history and future are strong. Yet while virtually every high school and college in the world teaches history, only very few teach formally about the future. The reason is obvious: the past has happened and has left behind diverse records of its passage, while the future may seem beyond our capabilities to study. Yet, the historian surely knows that this is a difference of degree rather than kind, for our understanding of the past is limited in many ways, and we can surely have much confidence in our ability to predict some aspects of the future: there will still be people, and languages, and elections, and inventions for decades if not centuries more.

Some of the arguments in the preceding paragraphs might be applied to any type of history. But world history brings important advantages to the study of the future. By extending its gaze globally, it is best suited to guide humanity in an age where global relations (political, economic, cultural, technological, health) are of critical importance—a point brought home cruelly by the COVID pandemic. By extending its gaze over hundreds or (ideally) thousands of years it is best able to avoid the myopia of presentism, the foolish pretense of many social scientists that we need only comprehend the last decades in order to guide our future. By generally blending an emphasis on cross-societal interactions with the careful study of thematic interactions, world history prepares us to grapple with the complexity that will inevitably characterize our future.

Integrating World History and Future Studies

How then can we integrate world history and future studies? The next part of this paper will outline one path. It will describe various ways in which teachers of world history can talk about the future in their world history courses. Such a strategy has an obvious advantage: Students—especially those taking world history to fulfil a requirement—sometimes wonder why they need to study the past, but they are all too well aware that they need to somehow navigate the future. If we can convince them that world history provides a useful lens through which to “see” the future, they will be inspired to pay greater heed to world history itself. This strategy will only work, of course, if we are teaching a world history that does not drown students in the memorization of names and dates but tries to explain the how and why of complex historical processes.

A later section of this study outlines how world historians might teach a course (or a module in some larger course) about the future. This is, of course, more of a stretch, and will indeed require the world historian to familiarize themselves with some non-historical material. Yet teaching about the future is an interdisciplinary endeavor that few scholars are well prepared for, and world historians may be better placed than any other to offer such a course. Students in both high school² and college will be attracted to such a course.

It may thus be of particular interest to world history instructors that are looking for additional courses that they would like to teach.

Both of these enterprises will naturally benefit from some familiarity with the field of future studies. This is briefly done here. Scholars of Future Studies have come to appreciate that humans cannot reliably predict our future. Yet we can reasonably identify a set of plausible futures. We can also identify a set of desired futures. The value of Future Studies lies in identifying how we might move from plausible futures to desirable futures. Its importance lies in the simple fact that we will be better able to do so if we plan ahead rather than allowing ourselves to be buffeted from one crisis to another. Scholars of Future Studies devote much effort to developing methods for identifying plausible futures. Many of these can be usefully employed in the classroom and will be described below. I provide many references to the Future Studies literature in what follows.

Our students are bombarded daily with scary visions of a future of climate disaster, social unrest, and political crisis. They need to know that better futures are still possible. We can do much good by encouraging them to work toward those better futures. Of course, extrapolating historical trends into the future is one of the key elements of Future Studies as a field. Some scholars of Future Studies use the term “macrohistory” to refer to the study of how social change occurs through time.³ Yet the field recognizes that both history and the future are complex: Trends interact and thus it is critical that these not be studied in isolation. Scholars of Future Studies commonly apply systems analysis, seeking to understand how interactions among diverse variables generate societal outcomes, and seeking to identify where it is possible to tweak those systems in order to generate better outcomes.⁴

Teaching Complexity

World historians may not often refer explicitly to systems analysis, but one can hardly teach a world history course without regularly recognizing interactions among political, cultural, economic, social, technological, and other forces.⁵ World historians are thus well placed to teach about complexity, for students will best appreciate the complexity of the future by being reminded of the complexity of the past. World historians must also grapple with both continuity and change. Students need to appreciate that the world of 2050 will likely be both different in many ways and similar in many ways to the world in 2021.⁶ And we can illustrate this fact powerfully by recognizing how the world of 2021 is similar in many ways but also different from the world of 1950 or 1900 or even 1900 CE.

Urbanization is a good example. Cities in almost every time and place have certain features: economic and social stratification, markets, entertainments, crime, and so on. Yet today’s cities are much more populous than ever before, huge cities emerged in the global south when these countries were much poorer than when urbanization had taken

off in the developed world, and advances in urban transport have allowed cities to sprawl much farther than ever before. We can trace through history how political centralization, disease, trade, industry, ethnic diversity and a host of other factors have influenced city development. We can then speculate on how zoom meetings and working from home (or electric driverless vehicles or a host of other factors) might change the nature of cities in the future.

Addressing Inequality

One trend of particular importance is economic inequality. Walter Scheidel has argued that there is a natural tendency for this to rise through human history: the rich reinvest their profits and grow richer, and curry favor with political authorities.⁷ Yet occasional “surprises”—some wars, pandemics, and natural disasters—have a dramatic equalizing effect. In at least some cases, rising inequality is implicated in societal collapse: the masses lost faith in the system and destroyed it. Inequality has been rising in most of the world for decades. Might it endanger democratic legitimacy? Can governments overcome the power of the rich to fight it (as happened in the 1950s and 1960s but only rarely in human history before that, despite the efforts of many emperors)? These are challenging questions, but history provides our best guide to answering them.

What does the future hold for democracy? Fukuyama’s famous claim that the future belongs to democracy now seems quaint.⁸ What lessons can we draw from history? The strongest democracies tended to develop slowly over a period of decades or centuries. Sudden transitions to democracy often disappoint. Voters often choose demagogues and charlatans. Constitutional limits on political power are thus critical. Independent judiciaries, press, and especially armies are also critical. The most important lesson may be the least obvious: that democracy depends on a shared sense of purpose and some capacity to respect those one disagrees with. It may be tempting to believe that successful democracy requires only a shrewd set of institutions but in reality a set of supportive values are essential also.⁹ Beyond sketching the requirements of democracy world historians may be able to accomplish even more by reviewing the excesses of autocracy. We can respect Churchill’s wise saying that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the rest. World history is littered with abuses of power, and modern technologies allow power to be wielded in ways that severely limit human freedoms. Moreover, autocrats in consolidating power almost always turn on one-time collaborators, so one is in danger even under an autocrat that seems to share one’s views. The world historian can accomplish much by honestly comparing democracy and autocracy, and then asking students what sort of future they want and how to achieve this.

Certainly, the world historian can usefully engage a wide range of trends across all realms of human activity: demography, health, culture, social divisions, technology,¹⁰

science, politics, natural environment. In all cases they can ask what lessons we might draw from the past for charting our future, and guide students to engage with how they can work toward desirable futures. In all cases, the world historian can guide students to reflect on how the trend in question has and will likely interact with other trends (the link between cultural toleration and political stability may be particularly worthy of attention at this point in human history). Where possible, we can look at past human attempts to grapple with particular challenges, and see what worked and what did not.¹¹

There are a few other general lessons that can be drawn from history, and are critical to future studies. Humans are fallible and have often set in motion processes that worked against the very goals they sought (think of the Nazis wanting to combat communism but starting a war that lost Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union). We should therefore be humble in our efforts to shape the future. Yet humans have nevertheless accomplished much in history, and we should embrace the possibility that we can again fashion better institutions, values, and technologies going forward. We can best combine courage and humility by carefully evaluating any policies we introduce, and tweaking or abandoning those that do not achieve our aims (a task made more difficult by the fact that even bad policies will gain a set of vocal supporters).¹² Humans are perhaps better at accomplishing small changes than at refashioning entire societies: Revolutions only rarely achieve the goals espoused by revolutionaries—though big changes may sometimes be required. Still, ideas matter, and humans are best able to fashion a better world when they have some idea of what to strive for and how to do so.

Addressing Scary Questions

Perhaps the scariest lesson of history is that societies that once seemed eternal have nevertheless collapsed. Indeed, world history is in large part a story of the rise and fall of empires. To be sure, we must be careful of equating the eclipse of empire with a wider societal collapse. Peasants may often have gone on living much as before. Yet in at least some cases imperial decline meant dramatic declines in trade, incomes, and security. Will modern democracies fare better than every empire in human history? We cannot know, but we do know that societies in decline are often seen by historians as complacent: They either did not see decline coming or decided it was too troublesome to address. We can reasonably draw a conclusion that complacency is dangerous.

We have advocated above a strategy of drawing lessons—and questions—from history by examining trends and interactions between different historical themes. Lessons are often also drawn in the form of analogies: leaders are urged to stand up to aggressive autocrats lest they be compared to Chamberlain appeasing Hitler in 1938. I think we need to be careful with analogies: Not all autocrats have Hitler's peculiar psychology, and the world has changed in many ways since 1938. Yet we can appreciate that analogies are very

powerful rhetorically. The best service that world historians may be able to provide here is to explicitly guide students on how to make (and recognize) good comparisons while avoiding bad comparisons. World history is inherently comparative: We naturally seek to understand both the similarities and differences in regional developments. We need to teach our students that societies are both similar and different in myriad ways. We need to model good comparative practice: making sure we are talking about the same aspect of different societies, avoiding bias and exaggeration, seeking explanations in terms of other differences between the societies in question. We are then well-placed to teach students to recognize when an analogy might be informative and when it may be misleading.

Going Farther: Teaching World History in a Future Studies Course

The field of Future Studies is small. Yet I would argue that every (largeish) high school and college could offer a popular course about the future (and smaller high schools could integrate Future Studies topics into social studies courses). Where will all the instructors for such courses come from? World historians are arguably better prepared than any other group of instructors to teach courses about the future.¹³

The Future Wheel

A key part of any course in Future Studies would involve projecting past trends into the future. We have discussed in the preceding section how this might be done. We can introduce here a key method employed within the field of future studies: the future wheel. Here one places in the middle of a piece of paper some event or process that may happen in the future (as just one example, we could speculate on further declines in faith in democracy). Then one identifies the likely effects of such a development (say, increased difficulty in governments addressing pressing problems such as racism or climate change) and places these in a surrounding circle. One can then discuss how these effects may interact. One can then look at second-order impacts: What effects do the effects identified in the first round have? Future wheel exercises generally proceed to a third level of effects, and should throughout seek to examine interactions among effects.¹⁴

As noted above, one skill set common to both world history and Future Studies is the ability to grapple with complexity. We recognize that history is a complex interaction of multiple forces, and carry that facility into our exploration of the future. Future wheel exercises can be pursued by groups of students, and can empower them to recognize that they each have insights into how the future might unfold. One pedagogical possibility is to have different groups generate future wheels around different events or trends, and then combine groups to see how two or three future wheels interact. The world historian as instructor can draw on their historical understandings to suggest effects or interactions that might not have occurred to students.¹⁵

Historical Contingency

Yet of course the future will not simply reflect the unfolding of trends that are already visible. History would be far less exciting to teach if it were not filled with both inflection points (where trends decline or accelerate) and surprises (where novel developments occur, such as technological or institutional innovations, or new religions, or new trade relationships) with far-reaching impacts.¹⁶ In peering into the future, then, we must also try to grapple with surprises. In addition to their skills in grappling with complexity, world historians have related skills in grappling with contingency. Nevertheless, it is naturally difficult to predict surprises: they wouldn't be surprises if we could easily see them coming. Yet after we are surprised, we often react by thinking that we should indeed somehow have seen it coming. The COVID-19 pandemic is instructive: While the particular virus could not have been foreseen, we have surely known for a long time that a pandemic with substantial mortality was entirely possible. We should have seen it coming, and should not have found ourselves without stockpiles of masks and ventilators. The world historian can provide a useful service in identifying the sorts of surprises that have affected historical societies (pandemics, natural disasters, wars predicated on misjudgment, and many more). In the cases of human-induced surprises such as wars, the world historian can guide discussions of how such surprises can be reduced in future. The world historian can provide an even greater service in elucidating the sorts of effects that various surprises have had in the past. We can easily talk about the effects of surprises in general and of particular kinds of surprise. (You may have noticed that the media often sought out historians to talk about past pandemics during the last year.) We know from world history that surprises can topple empires. Yet we also know that surprises present opportunities for beneficial change (the Black Plague likely increased the bargaining power of peasants in many parts of the world). A world historian can then urge students to reflect on how we can best prepare to respond to surprises in beneficial ways.

The link between past and future can be strengthened if we engage in counterfactual history. Futurists wonder what effects certain policies might have. World historians can conjecture about what would have happened if different choices had been made in the past. Futurists wonder, for example, about the myriad effects of electrical vehicles. World historians know that electric vehicles competed for years with gasoline and steam vehicles as the automobile was first produced. Gasoline vehicles gained a slight edge, and the next century saw myriad improvements to gasoline automobiles and to gasoline refining and distribution itself. What would history have looked like if the electric vehicle had gained a slight advantage in 1900 and the twentieth century had seen multiple advances in electric vehicle and battery technology?¹⁷

Speaking of contingency, world historians have the important understanding that history has unfolded in quite different ways in different parts of the world. We may take this

understanding for granted but it can be crucial to the pursuit of Future Studies. As noted above, futurists do not attempt to predict one future but rather identify multiple plausible futures. Students will find it easier to grapple with multiple futures if acquainted with multiple pasts.¹⁸ (The fact that historians debate the nature and causes of certain historical transformations can also prepare both instructors and students to grapple with differences of opinion about how the future might unfold. Our successes in transcending historical controversies can give us hope that we can achieve greater consensus around plausible futures.)

Goals and Policies

We have seen two key elements of Future Studies for which world historians are well prepared: projecting trends into the future, and grappling with surprises. Yet we have now hinted at two other elements of Future Studies that will be a bit more of a stretch. The purpose of future studies, after all, is to guide us to build better futures. We need then to reflect on what sort of goals humanity should pursue. And then we need to reflect on what sorts of policies might guide us toward desirable futures.

We as world historians try to understand why human actors did what they did. Yet we have not reflected as deeply as we might on how humans identify goals for both themselves and their societies. Yet there are only a handful of ways in which humans might do so:

- We can examine consequences. We might then urge cultural toleration because it encourages both peace and trade.
- We might have certain guiding principles such as the Golden Rule or beliefs in certain rights. We might then urge cultural toleration because we want others to treat us well, or we think people have a right to live as they choose
- We might have certain guiding values. We might then urge cultural toleration because it is the compassionate or courageous or honorable thing to do.
- We might not reflect deeply but go on gut instinct or intuition. We might then urge cultural toleration because it makes us feel good (or not; sadly humans since hunter-gatherer times have had strong group identities and are thus easily tempted to disdain outsiders—though history is filled with examples of cultural toleration)
- We might simply follow peer pressure or the cultural expectations of our group. Our attitude to cultural toleration and any other societal goal will be determined at the group level. Human goals will change slowly in the absence of surprises.

I would make a few key points about these five ways of identifying societal goals. They can each be justified: there is simply no objective way to determine that one approach

is best. They interact: we may choose to follow rules or values because we do not have time to do detailed consequential analysis of every decision we need to make. Crucially, intuition may guide us toward selfless acts (to avoid feeling guilty) where rational reflection might encourage selfishness—but only if we have internalized values or principles that will make us feel guilty. Most humans have recourse to all five when setting personal goals (doing rational calculations about taking world history, but being guided by gut feelings when deciding who to date)—but there are big interpersonal and intercultural differences in the relative importance attached to each. Most importantly for the world historian, examples of each of these five ways of setting goals and guiding behavior can be found across the world’s religions and philosophical traditions. Religions rely heavily on instilling a tradition that believers should adhere to closely, but also make arguments about the good consequences of believing and seek to instill key principles and values. The very idea of “a religious experience” speaks to the importance of developing an emotional connection with religious belief. We could do more as a field of world history to identify the different emphases of different religions or philosophies.¹⁹

World historians at least potentially have some basis from which to proceed to discuss societal goals. We should seek goals that can be justified in each of the five ways: Since different individuals prioritize different ways of identifying goals, we can only hope for broad societal support for goals that can be justified in each of the five ways. This turns out to be relatively straightforward.²⁰ And the world historian can take solace in the fact that no academic is well prepared to engage in this particular exercise. The first three types of analysis are studied by philosophers (and generally called consequentialism, deontology, and virtue theory): While philosophers recognize in principle that each is valid, individual philosophers tend to argue for the superiority of one of them—and philosophers show little respect for appeals to intuition or tradition. Psychologists investigate in isolation the nature of human intuition, while sociologists and anthropologists grapple with peer pressure and traditions (but world historians can usefully note that important values such as honesty, responsibility, compassion, and self-knowledge have been advocated across diverse traditions). World historians may not be as well prepared as we could be to speak about how humans have and should set goals, but we are as well prepared for the task as anyone.

What about the task of outlining policies that might take us toward these goals? Here the economist or political scientist may have an advantage in articulating certain policies to achieve certain goals. But recall that Future Studies embraces complexity. We will wish to articulate a broad set of goals, and will talk about how economic, political, cultural, social, technological, and other factors interact in generating our shared future. Future studies, then, is an inherently interdisciplinary enterprise, and anyone teaching the course needs to be ready to speak about a wide range of policies. No scholar from any discipline can claim expertise in all of these. It is now widely appreciated that world history is an inherently

interdisciplinary exercise,²¹ and so world historians need not shrink from the task of discussing a range of public policies.

World historians can usefully draw on the vast sweep of history in suggesting policies. There is a small but growing group of scholars that would like to resuscitate the practice of ancient Greece (and many other early democracies) of selecting some public officials by lottery. This is attractive due to a widespread sense in the contemporary world that elected politicians are not truly representative of the people they supposedly serve. The world historian can usefully compare modern and early democracies: Selection by lottery may work more easily in a small state where everyone knows everyone, but alternatively may work even better in a modern state where an official selected by lottery can rely on a professional bureaucracy (or maybe be duped by bureaucrats?)²²

I would reiterate here a point made in passing above: Future Studies courses should rely heavily on class discussions. Students can still be expected to master certain trends and surprises, but inherently the answer to “What happened in 1914?” is more concrete than “What will happen in 2050?” This can be scary to instructors but also opens up instructional freedom to invite students to reflect on what they want and fear about the future and what they might do about it. In other words, instructors can relax a bit about lacking relevant expertise because Future Studies is an exploratory and open-ended endeavor. (They can also appreciate that there is much debate about how best to teach about the future, and thus they are free to experiment).²³

The Backcasting Wheel and Scenario Writing

As noted above, class discussions—and student assignments—can be facilitated by a handful of methods employed in the field of future studies:

- We mentioned the Futures Wheel above. This can be reversed in a Backcasting Wheel. We start with some element of a desirable future and work backwards. What factors would encourage this desirable outcome. How can they in turn be encouraged?²⁴
- The Delphi method for integrating expert advice was developed in the field of future studies. Experts are asked to make some predictions about some aspect of the future, and to justify their prediction. The results are shared, and experts are asked to revise their predictions in light of what others say. The experts generally move toward a nuanced consensus as they reflect on the points made by others. Students can play the role of experts, and come to appreciate the value of integrating diverse insights.
- Futurists talk a lot about Scenario Planning. This involves describing plausible futures in some detail. This can be done with flowcharts, showing how different trends and surprises might interact. But there is usually a narrative

element. Students might be asked to draft a short story or newspaper article set in the future. Or they might collectively act out a short play about life in the future.²⁵

- Students can be asked to develop action plans for how a group could usefully advocate for desirable social change.

Concluding Remarks

This study has focused on how world historians can teach about the future, both in world history courses and Future Studies courses. It has been argued that there are important synergies between world history and future studies. It is worth stressing in closing that grappling with the future can strengthen our teaching of world history itself. It provides a way to excite students that do not already grasp the value of world history. It guides us as instructors to ask questions of the past: under what conditions does democracy prosper; how and when can inequality be reduced; how do pandemics affect societies; and many more that will resonate with our students. Note that these questions lend coherence to our courses by forcing us to compare across a wide variety of historical societies and historical processes.

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NOTES

¹ Roy Bendor, Elina Eriksson, and Daniel Pargman, “Looking backward to the future: On past-facing approaches to futuring” *Futures*. 128 (January 2021): 1.

² Arthur B. Shostak, “School-Wide Foresight education: All together now!,” *World Futures Review* 10, no. 3 (September 2018): 219–30, argues that the future should be taught throughout the K–12 curriculum. He notes in passing that historians have a particular contribution to make. It may be easier in at least some schools to introduce Future Studies as topics within the social studies curriculum than to create a stand-alone Future Studies course.

³ Bendor, Eriksson, and Pargman, “Looking backward,” 2.

⁴ Donella H. Meadows and Diana Wright’s *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (London: EarthScan 2009) provides a very accessible introduction to systems analysis.. It is a very good read, and filled

with practical advice. You do not have to agree with every bit of policy advice they provide in order to appreciate their analytical approach. The book is available online at <https://wtf.tw/ref/meadows.pdf>.

⁵ I worry that texts that follow just a handful of key themes through history miss out on many important interactions. In *Making Sense of World History* (Routledge, 2021, both Open Access and print), I try to embrace all of the main forces in human history. I also draw dozens of flowcharts that illustrate how diverse phenomena interact in generating major historical events or processes. See <https://www.routledge.com/Making-Sense-of-World-History/Szostak/p/book/9780367820886>.

⁶ This point is stressed by David N. Bengston, “Principles for Thinking about the Future and Foresight Education” (*World Futures Review* 10, no. 3 (September 2018): 193–202). He identifies ten principles that should guide educating about the future, all of which should be congenial to the world historian.

⁷ Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992).

⁹ We might draw a more general rule from history: that all human societies have made greater efforts than our own to instill a sense of community and a set of shared values (which generally included honesty and responsibility and compassion). I would argue that the ethical challenge of our times is to embrace both diversity and a set of core values.

¹⁰ David J. Staley, “Teaching the Future of Technology in the History Classroom: A Case Study” (*World Futures Review* 10, no. 4 (December 2018): 253–62) argues that the history classroom, and especially a senior history seminar, is a logical place to teach about the future. He then describes how after teaching about the history of technology he asks students a series of questions about the future of technology. He argues that students need to apply similar types of analysis to answer questions about both past and future.

¹¹ I attempt such a broad survey in the concluding chapter of *Making Sense of World History* (London: Routledge, 2021), but recognize that I had more to say about some trends than others. I had throughout the book compared and contrasted how various types of agent (farmers, rulers, merchants, parents, and a dozen others) addressed a set of common challenges in different times and places. I then in the concluding chapter discuss how the challenges faced by each type of agent are best addressed going forward.

¹² I use a very innocuous type of evolutionary analysis in *Making Sense of World History*. I also draw a lesson that the key to human progress may lie more in selection than innovation. It is important to develop good policies, but even more important to carefully evaluate these in practice, and revise or eliminate those that don’t work.

¹³ Joseph Voros, “Big History as a Scaffold for Futures Education” (*World Futures Review* 10, no. 4 (December 2018): 263–78) argues that big history prepares students (and instructors) to grapple with the future. It guides them to place themselves within the long sweep of history. It guides them to grapple with contingency. He notes that some people just have a hard time grappling with the future and then big history prepares them to do so. Most of the points he makes apply equally well to world history.

¹⁴ Phillip Daffara, “Applying the Futures Wheel and Macrohistory to the Covid19 Global Pandemic,” *Journal of Future Studies* 25, no. 2, (2020): 35–48, provides a futures wheel for the COVID pandemic, and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the futures wheel approach.

¹⁵ One might even consider developing a future wheel for the past. What might a future wheel have looked like regarding the Black Death (Plague) and how does this compare to a future wheel for COVID-19?

¹⁶ Nassim Nicholas Taleb's 2007 bestseller *The Black Swan* (Random House) is quite popular among futurists, and argues that surprises are far more important than we think. He suggests that we fool ourselves by attempting to explain events after they occur, and thus see history as more comprehensible than it actually is. Having spent the last several years drafting a world history text I respectfully disagree.

¹⁷ This example is drawn from Bendor, Eriksson, and Pargman, "Looking backward," 8–9.

¹⁸ This point is made by Bendor, Eriksson, and Pargman, "Looking backward," 4.

¹⁹ I am guilty here myself. I do, in *Making Sense of World History* discuss the five types of decision-making, and note that each can be found across diverse human societies, but only rarely thereafter talk about which societies relied most heavily on which type of decision-making.

²⁰ I perform such an exercise in *Making Sense of the Future*, chapter 2, *passim*, <https://www.routledge.com/Making-Sense-of-the-Future/Szostak/p/book/9781032033488>.

²¹ See for example the special issue on interdisciplinarity in the *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 3 (November 2019): 325–475.

²² See Rick Szostak, *Making Sense of the Future* (Routledge, 2022), chapter 3, *passim*.

²³ I was inspired by Peter C. Bishop and Andy Hines, *Teaching about the Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). It describes an entire degree program, but makes a lot of good points about how to teach about the future. They urged the creation of a textbook for a course on the future. I drafted *Making Sense of the Future* (Routledge, 2022) in response. Jennifer Gidley's *The Future: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2017) surveys the history of the idea of the future, and the field of future studies, before addressing a couple of the topics covered in this paper. Jenny Anderson, in *The Future of the World* (Oxford University Press, 2018) describes the history of futurism in terms of ideological conflict. Alessandro Fergnani's "Mapping futures studies scholarship from 1968 to present: A bibliometric review of thematic clusters, research trends, and research gaps" (*Futures* Vol. 105, January 2019) provides an extremely useful overview of the field. The World Future Studies Federation provides a list of recommended readings on its website at <https://wfsf.org/> though some of the books it lists are extremely speculative. There are a handful of journals in the field of which the most venerable is *Futures*. I have also found much of interest in *World Futures Review*, *World Futures*, *European Journal of Futures Research*, *Foresight*, and *Journal of Future Studies*.

²⁴ See David N. Bengston; Lynne M. Westphal, Michael J. Dockry, "Back from the Future: The Backcasting Wheel for Mapping a Pathway to a Preferred Future," *World Futures Review* 12, no.3, (2000): 270–278.

²⁵ Theodore J. Gordon and Mariana Todorova, in *Future Studies and counterfactual analysis: Seeds of the future* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2019) identify two broad types of scenarios: One follows a cause/effect chain forward; the other describes life in a plausible future. The book then describes a set of (brief) scenarios engaging issues such as truth (special attention is paid to our ability to fake videos and pictures), nuclear proliferation, population growth, religion (a very open-ended discussion), immortality (real and avatar), human decision-making capabilities, bio-terrorism (with hundreds of thousands or millions of deaths), supercomputers as human masters, the nature of progress, our need to identify with groups, and genetic engineering. In each case, they start with a bit of history of how the issue has developed to this point. They recognize that many of their scenarios are very unlikely.