

Introduction to the Forum on Why Teach World History

The articles in this Forum are inspired by a belief that it is useful to think about why we teach World History. We can better motivate students to learn if we first reflect deeply on what we are hoping to achieve. What role might world history understandings play in their lives? We may well find that we tweak how and what we teach after reflecting on why we do so. Even more pragmatically, we may be better able to convince administrators of the value of such courses if we reflect on their purpose. The community of world historians will be better able to perform this persuasive task if it can achieve some consensus around the purposes of World History.

This Forum had its genesis in a Roundtable at the World History Association conference in Bilbao, Spain in 2022. Jonathan Reynolds, Cynthia Ross, and Rick Szostak were at the conference while Andrew Barnes and Marc Jason Gilbert participated remotely (I have absorbed some of Marc's thoughts into my own essay). We thank the conference organizers for a great conference experience. And we thank the participants at the Roundtable for a very lively discussion.

All of the essays are personal reflections. Each author describes how they have reflected over time on the purposes of World History. Yet a few ideas come up more than once. World History can teach us about our common humanity. It can remind us that our lives are shaped by centuries of global interactions. It can urge us to respect and understand cultural differences.

The personal nature of each individual reflection makes it difficult to summarize each contribution. Each essay is multifaceted and best appreciated in its entirety. I will be brief here, just touching on some of the key points in each essay. But I am grateful to each contributor for sharing how they have thought about the purpose of world history.

Jonathan Reynolds suggests firstly that teaching world history can make teachers better historians: they place the topics they study in a broader context and are forced to think beyond the theories or methods, or attitudes common to particular historical

fields. Importantly, it also encourages humility for none of us can (should?) pretend to comprehend the full sweep of human history. Secondly, world history is critically important for our students in understanding our modern world: We cannot fully appreciate the present without knowing how we got here. Thirdly, world history guides us away from nationalist excess: We come to see how national histories are shaped by interactions with others. We come to appreciate both similarities and differences across countries.

Reynold's fourth main argument involves our ability to learn from world history. In particular, he stresses the importance of learning from humanity's mistakes. How, for example, did humanity stumble into the disaster that was World War One? There may be no single better path to avoiding similar mistakes in future than interrogating our past.

Cynthia Ross makes a critical point: that World History courses will differ depending on the nature and mission of the college or university. She describes her situation in a university that serves primarily a rural community, though with an increasingly diverse student population. Though her institution has adopted a mission of global education, she appreciated that her World History courses may be the main site through which her students gain knowledge of the wider world. Most of them have never left Texas. She thus tries to show her students how their lives are shaped by (past and present) global interactions.

Many of her students will go on to teach world history in Texas high schools. Here she tries to inspire them to move beyond the "Western Civ plus" perspective common in Texas high schools. This is a challenging task, given that their own previous experience of high school world history was precisely that.

Andrew Barnes sees an important role for World History in preparing students to live in a world characterized both by intense global interactions and important discussions about the relations between racial and ethnic groups within countries. Most of his students, he maintains, will need to interact with members of other groups from whom their parents or grandparents might have felt isolated. They should likewise be encouraged to appreciate that nations have always interacted. He challenges teachers of World History courses (and other History courses) to engage explicitly with issues of racial/ethnic and class conflicts in history, and also to critique nationalistic versions of history that ignore both international interactions and internal conflicts. The better we understand how groups and nations have interacted in the past, the better we will be able to navigate the present.

Barnes also stresses the need to tie different episodes in World History together. Students need to appreciate how the events and processes of one time and place build on what has happened before (and often elsewhere). He emphasizes here the importance of how technology has been developed through time, spread from one place to another, and exerted important effects on the wider society.

Rick Szostak, like Reynolds, structures his essay around a few key points. The first is to stress that there is one interlocking history of humanity: We cannot understand the history of any nation or group in isolation. The second, though, is to allow students to place their own, or their group's history within that bigger story. They should come to appreciate that all groups have made both positive and negative contributions to history. The field of world history naturally emphasized cross-societal interactions in its early decades, but has come over time to also stress thematic interactions between culture, politics, economy, and more. Szostak celebrates the role that world history can play in clarifying the nature of these interactions. One big lesson of world history is that every major historical transformation involves cross-disciplinary interactions.

Szostak's fourth goal is to inform our understanding of the future. We can best shape our future by understanding our past. A fifth and less obvious goal involves exposing students to how historical actors coped with complexity. Our students must each grapple with a complex reality and need to appreciate how others have done so. Szostak closes with a (Marc Gilbert inspired) discussion of the skills that a world history course can impart to students.

It is our hope that our reflections will resonate with those who teach World History. They may then be inspired to be more explicit about the goals they pursue in the course.

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