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Why Teach World History?

World History is often considered one of the most daunting historical surveys to teach. Most of us working at the University level tend to hail from graduate programs focused on either national or area studies units of analysis. Thus, an academic with a research focus on Early Modern France might feel comfortable teaching a European or Western Civ survey. Similarly, a person trained in a Southeast Asian Studies Program, with a research focus on 19th Century Indonesia might feel comfortable teaching a survey of SE Asian History. But either individual might feel more than a bit outside of their "safe zone" of expertise if asked to teach a modern World History survey (much less a survey of ancient World History). Secondary teachers, whose experience and training is often heavily American and Euro-Centric, might feel similarly overwhelmed, though many have the advantage of not having been quite so steeped in hyper-focused graduate programs and cultures of highly-specialized research expertise.

And yet, as World History has grown to be the second largest teaching field in the US, and has become increasingly common elsewhere in the world, more and more teachers and scholars, especially those just kicking off their teaching careers, find themselves required to teach surveys of world history, often in addition to somewhat more narrowly defined historical topics. So, beyond the "I'll teach World History if it gets me or helps me keep a job" motivation, why else might we embrace the challenge of World History? What factors or objectives might actually foster enthusiasm for the endeavor? In the following essay, I'll explore a few of the things that have, at least, resonated for me in the course of my own journey from a specialist in Islam and Politics in Northern Nigeria during the mid-20th Century to a World Historian.

Reason the First: Teaching World History Might Just Make You a Better Historian and Teacher

Now, I'm NOT saying that remaining a career specialist in a tightly defined regional or thematic topic means you are a bad historian. Goodness knows that world historians

depend heavily on the highly focused and detailed works that are possible only by historians who have dedicated their careers to such topics. But that said, for some of us, certain fields or focuses of history come with methodologies, constructions of identity, and even values that can blind us to the diversity and complexity of history beyond our areas of specialization. Perhaps the greatest danger lies for those whose training was built around a national or ethnic unit to which that person ties a significant degree of their own political and cultural identity. Time or space here doesn't allow us the luxury of examining just how much of the historical writing of the 20th Century was focused on proving and celebrating just how much more wonderfully unique and exciting the history of one particular nation or group was than that of its neighbors. Let's just recognize that it was very much a thing. But even at a much broader level, Area Studies frameworks can "box us in" to thinking that certain parts of the world are simply cooler than others, or that, at least, those other parts of the world "aren't any of our business." It's a sort of "I'm a Latin Americanist, so I'll leave the Middle East to Middle Eastern Specialists" approach to divvying up the world.

By its very nature, teaching and studying World History demands that we break out of these particularisms (which is also delightfully annoying to those who are particularly invested in said particularisms). In so doing, we are inevitably confronted by historical questions, themes, issues, and scenarios that complicate our understandings not only of World History, but also complicate and inform what we thought we knew about our existing fields and specializations. By way of personal example, teaching World History not only helped make me a better African Historian, but it also helped make me a better Historian of Islam and Politics in Northern Nigeria during the mid-20th Century.

Similarly, the sheer vastness of World History helps ensure that those of us who teach it can't lay claim to a degree of command of the research and literature to which we might have aspired in our original fields of research and scholarship. Thus, teaching World History keeps us humble, and helps insure a steady stream of "Aha!" and "No Shit?" moments that not only enrich our own understandings of our diverse and shared humanity, but which we can also experience with our students in real classroom time. Frankly, I'm not sure there is ANY teaching methodology more powerful than showing students that even their teacher is constantly learning new things and often having to rethink what they thought they already knew.

Reason the Next: It's Profoundly Practical

Simply put, students (and pretty much everybody else) desperately needs a handle on World History. Why? Because unless you have some sense of how we got to where we are today, then it's pretty much impossible to make any sense of the world that we live in. I often tell my students that modern existence is analogous to walking into (or starting to stream) a movie or series well into the story. You don't know who the

characters are, you don't know their roles or motivations, and it doesn't make any sense why who is mad at or hooking up with who.

And let's face it, we now live in a world that is profoundly connected. No matter where people live, their lives are impacted by international political, economic, and cultural tides that have ebbed and flowed for centuries. More so, as technologies continue to shrink our world and more people move faster and farther more often during their lives, the intensity of these global connections is ever more intense. Whether our students need to be able to work and collaborate in intensely internationalized career paths such as information technology, health professions, or business, or whether they simply need to better understand issues such as why so many people seem desperate to immigrate out of the Middle East or Central America right now, there are few fields better suited to provide the tools necessary to grasp and engage these realities. And in this vein, World History is uniquely able to provide students with the information and tools needed to fact-check the constant onslaught of deeply biased and oversimplified information with which we are all bombarded on a daily basis. Be it from biased political sources (is there any other kind of political source?), partisan media, or algorithm-driven social-media rumor mills, we are often inundated by people and sources who want us to think that history (and by extension the contemporary world) is really a simple place where we are faced with simple choices between good actors and bad actors, and between clear evil and clear good. History in general, and World History in particular, are here to help our students understand that things are actually pretty complicated… but not so much so as to be incomprehensible if we just invest some time and energy into understanding our world and our own place(s) in it.

Even beyond the present, I am a firm believer that nothing does more to help us understand the shared experience of being human than having some sense of the grand majesty and coherence of human history. For far too long and still far too often, students have been presented versions of history that have stressed the differences between themselves and others. Distinctions of nation, race, culture, class and yes, history, have served to reinforce existing identities and present other peoples as, well, downright FOREIGN. Since the 1980s, World History has increasingly sought to use humanity as its unit of analysis and in so doing help students see what people have always had, and continue to have, in common.

Reason the Penultimate: Word History Reduces Cognitive Distance

Humans are unique among the organisms on our planet in that we invest significant amounts of our energies in creating and nurturing complex and ever-changing systems of identity that are designed to divide us from, and help us more effectively compete against, other groups of humans who are working similarly hard to do the same dang thing. For much of human history, this dynamic has played out in no small part through our constructions and understandings of history. When religious notions of identity

dominated human affairs, it was not unusual for models of history to celebrate certain religious traditions and demonize others.

It should be no surprise to us, also, that the rise of nationalism as a dominant form of human identity came with the rise of fields of national history. As already mentioned above, pretty much every country's version of history is designed to make its people feel a loyalty to, and to take pride in, their own "unique" history and destiny. It's not only the United States where people have been taught history through an "exceptionalist" lens, or where the powers that be want researchers, instructors, and students to focus on what is positive and uplifting about their nation's history – and to avoid the unflattering bits whenever possible.

Civilizational histories, such as "Western Civ" take a somewhat larger construction of identity, often lumping certain nations or communities under a wider civilizational, cultural, or racial rubric. Yet these larger units of analysis share with national histories a similar objective of creating particular notions of identity and pride. From such a perspective, history, at least over the past 10 to 12 decades, if not even perhaps far longer, has been utilized largely to create and reinforce certain notions of identity.

Even in those cases where religious, national, and civilizational constructions of history did not actively seek to demonize other religions, nations, or cultural constructs, they often relegated them to the historical "background" – leaving students of history with only the dimmest awareness of what the inhabitants of these apparently distant lands and their lives might actually be like. Thus, by celebrating the unique goodness of themselves and emphasizing the failings and/or differences of others, most models of history and group socialization have served to help create (or at least leave unchallenged) significant amounts of "cognitive distance" between most people and their fellow humans. Simply put, history has all too often used to create divisions between "us" and "them." The result of this historical dynamic has been to make those off the historical radar seem unimaginably distant – at once foreign, inscrutable, and irrelevant.

Once again, I believe that World History is unique in its ability to challenge these constructions of historical and cultural distance. For example, when history teachers introduce a place, a state, or a setting to our students, we often start out by making sure that all our students knows where that region, society, or country can be found on a map. This may seem painfully obvious, but with the teaching of Geography in even more rapid decline than that of History itself, without World History there are precious few opportunities for students to learn even the basics of where peoples, things, and places are in the world. By way of personal experience, let me say that I have been giving global political, economic, cultural, and environmental map quizzes to students for over 25 years, and the vast majority of the students in my classes, whatever their background or countries of origin, have come into my classes with only the most rudimentary ideas

about what or who is where in the world. Most could place only a handful of large states such as the US, India, or China on a blank map. Beyond that, they could often do little more than take a guess about which continent might be home to a particular country, language, rain forest, or mountain range.

Similarly, American students are all too often shocked to find out that peoples outside of the "sort of familiar zone" of Western Civilization ever lived lives or did things that they might find, well, familiar. Most, for example, are flabbergasted to find out that crops such as tomatoes and potatoes had their origins in South America, or that Africans were major producers of textiles and iron prior to colonization. The same goes for discovering that England once got most of its cotton cloth and steel from India.

This, again, takes us back to the idea that World History is more than a bit unique in that it, alone, aspires to take humanity as a whole as its unit of analysis. By so doing, we can hope to begin to reduce the "distance" that our students perceive to separate themselves from not only other populations and parts of the world, but also from the past itself. I often joke with my students that after decades of studying history, I think of a thousand (or even several thousand) years ago as "recent history.' That is in part because my decades of near-constant immersion in World History have helped created a cognitive map of the human past which, while perhaps not exactly high-res, does at least do a passable job of creating an unbroken perspective of the grand sweep of human endeavor, success, and failure (note that this is a cunning bit of foreshadowing on my part). A good World History survey, I believe, can lay the foundation for students to work towards building a similar cognitive map of both our contemporary world and the process by which we got here.

Reason the Final: Navigating Difficult and Divisive Histories

In the very particular historical moment that I happen to be writing this brief (but hopefully thought-provoking) essay, quite a lot of time and energy is being put into a US debate over the teaching of "divisive" historical theories, topics, or issues. This is certainly not surprising, as the past is always political, and did I already mention that one of the things that makes humans unique is our ongoing quest to create complex and ever-changing systems of identity. Yes, yes I did. As such, it is perhaps apropos for historians to think about the role that we ourselves continue to play in seeking to form certain kinds of political identities. World History can certainly lend itself to breaking history (or at least recent history) up into "bad actors" and "good actors." And I'll speak from personal experience once again and say that as a historian who has invested no small time in studying and teaching the histories of slavery and colonialism over the past 500-odd years, there is no shortage of people to point out and labels as "bad actors." Indeed, I think it's important to identify them as bad, or perhaps even evil. For those who escape the judgement of their present, such as the perpetrators and beneficiaries of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the global wave of colonialism and

imperialism of the 19th and 20th centuries, then the judgement of history is perhaps our last available court of justice. It's not our job to let 'em get away scot-free with theft, mass murder, and a host of other evils.

Yet there is another, and perhaps parallel, way to evaluate and represent humanity's past, and that might be in looking at these events through the lenses of historical failures and victories. From this perspective we don't simply study something like the Atlantic Slave Trade, the Taiping Revolt, or the Holocaust as a quest to identify the bad actors (though, again, I think that doing so is a valid part of our job). But, if we are to seriously take humanity as our unit of analysis, then we're not getting as far as we might by identifying one particular group of humans as the "bad guys" at one particular point in time. Rather, we might also benefit from thinking of catastrophic outbreaks of human conflict, injustice, and evil as shared human failures, and the efforts to resist those wrongs and insure they do not repeat themselves as instances of shared human success. Indeed, these critiques can be simultaneous. Take WWI, for example. The human failures that led to WWI went far beyond the actions of just the Serbs, Germans, or British or whomever one historian or another might have sought to pin the blame on. Rather the war was also a mass failure of all of those who embraced the extremes of Nationalism, Militarism, Social Darwinism, and Imperialism that made such a senseless conflict so seemingly inevitable. But in counterpoint, the successes of WWI can be found in those few who rejected the conflict from the beginning, and those individuals and states who refused to take part, as were the efforts (however incomplete) to try and prevent a similar war from taking place again. Even the "trench art" created by soldiers who were themselves both the victims and perpetrators of a host of brutalities, offers insight into how human beings strive to create beauty and meaning even in the midst of horror.

Put another way, World History provides us and our students with a unique opportunity to examine humanity in all our capacities for good and evil. To shirk from honestly examining our potential for either goodness or evil would be to shirk our responsibilities as historians. And perhaps there can be no greater conundrum in human history than that of how we can manage to be so good and so very bad at the same time.

Conclusions

These brief ruminations about why to teach world history are, of course, only a few among a host of reasons why we should study and teach world history. I often point out to my students that even a single event in local history is neigh to infinite in its complexity. And since World History represents the totality of human endeavor, folly, triumph, and banality, it is even more infinite than other fields of history, and perhaps even more infinite than any and all fields of human knowledge. As such, there are probably an infinite number of reasons to study World History. Or maybe there are at

least as many reasons to study human history as there have been humans. Whatever the case, there is perhaps no better way for us to understand ourselves than to gain and share ever-deeper insights into the vast variety of ways we have managed, for good or ill, to be humans.

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