

## Why Teach World History?

In this essay I will argue that having a world historical perspective, at the least in the background, helps the teaching of all historical content. I am framing the essay around the teaching of history as it has occurred over the past century or so in schools in the United States. Going back to the early decades of the twentieth century, I would identify as crucial to the shaping of systematic instruction of historical content in the United States the impact of the almost completely forgotten educator Thomas Jesse Jones on curricular development in American high schools. Jones was best known for his later efforts to promote “industrial education” as the way to convince people of color to not agitate for civil rights in America. Before he got to that stage of his career, Jones chaired the Committee on Social Studies – a term he invented – and advocated what Jones described as the “social studies” paradigm. This paradigm posited that the goal of history teaching (and the teaching of all the social sciences) should be “Civics,” that is, the training and preparation of citizens for their civic and patriotic responsibilities.<sup>1</sup>

As already suggested, Jones made a distinction between white and non-white Americans. Training for civics was to be for Americans of European descent, Jones’ hope being that the children of European immigrants would gain through education a proper appreciation of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant civilization in which they had been fortunate enough to have been born, and the obligation those children shared to maintain that civilization through the completion of their duties as citizens. Jones’ approach to teaching retained influence at least until the end of the Jim Crow era in the 1950s. A legacy of this approach that has lasted far longer has been the teaching of history in America, no matter what the topic, with an implicitly nationalistic agenda. And whether instructors have aimed to service the agenda or not, educational institutions and student clienteles have expected history courses to service it.

This agenda has become seriously out of whack with the global realities now facing Americans and American schools. History courses can no longer be based upon the nationalistic presumptions that underpinned teaching history following the social studies paradigm. Increasingly, one subset of the students taught at American

institutions of higher learning, primarily those native born, have voted with their feet by avoiding survey courses that do not acknowledge the diversity of their own lived experiences, while another subset of students, those not born in the United States, and who do not plan to live in the United States after their studies, search the internet for five to six week online courses to substitute for semester-long face-to-face courses promoting an American nationalist agenda. I will leave it to Americanists to debate whether in the past the myths of exceptionalism and the splendors of autarchic isolationism the nationalist agenda nurtured helped or hurt the American capacity to deal with the rest of the world. I think it can be observed, however, that here in the present, the agenda is simultaneously hindering the American capacity to comprehend the world and the place of Americans in it, while prompting international students to learn as little as possible about the history of their host country. I see teaching World History and teaching all history from a world history perspective as a way forward for historical instruction in the United States. I suggest that there is an opportunity here for history instruction in the United States to get out ahead of the curve, and embrace the idea that students trained to think of history in a post nationalist sense will be comparatively better able to function intellectually in the coming decades.

I teach my World History courses with the goal of preparing students to understand life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a moment in time when the racial and nationalistic constructs of previous centuries are being continuously challenged by the cosmopolitan lived experiences that are slowly but clearly coming to shape the mental horizons of educated peoples. To use an old expression, borrowed from Sir Herbert Butterfield's *Origins of Modern Science*,<sup>2</sup> I seek to equip students with new "thinking caps," that will permit students to operate in worlds where multiple definitions of diversity are in play, where the people with whom they will have to cooperate as well as compete will almost certainly not be the people with whom they went to high school or competed against in neighborhood sports leagues. I seek to equip students with new ways of thinking that will allow them to cooperate and compete with people from whom their parents and grandparents felt insulated. To students exposed to pundits declaring that the onset of diversity signals that we are living in the end of times, I want to illustrate that it is historically more accurate to say that the world in which we are living is resembling more and more the world in which humans lived before constructs of race and nation granted an ahistorical sense of security.

By way of background, I will mention that over the past decade or so, I have taught World History on the undergraduate level and on the graduate level. On the graduate level I have taught World History face to face to doctoral candidates and online to high school teachers in an online master's program. I am a reader for the World History Association best dissertation prize. I have read sample chapters for several World History survey texts. I have also "read" that is, graded World History essays for the College Board's AP World History examination. Lastly, I am presently engaged, as

the “faculty advisor,” in the development of the Crash Course “World History” to premiere on You Tube in 2024. Yet I can also say that during the earlier decades of my career, I was equally busy teaching in various formats what use to be called “Western Civilization” courses. These days those courses have been redesignated as “European” history or civilization. For five years I was on the development committee for the AP European History examination, a charge that mostly involved writing and vetting multiple choice and essay questions for the annual examination. For another five years I was on the development committee for the College Board’s two CLEP Western Civilization examinations, a charge that involved writing and vetting hundreds of multiple-choice questions. Before I began reading AP World History examinations, I spent about a decade reading AP European History examinations. Lastly, when I have not been teaching World or European history, I have (mostly) been teaching African history. In the early decades of my career, I framed my teaching of African history, a la David Northrup’s *Africa’s Discovery of Europe*, by reference to Africa’s historical interactions with Europe.<sup>3</sup> More recently I have framed my teaching of African history by reference to world historical developments, my two go-to texts being Eric Gilbert and Jonathan Reynolds, *Africa in World History*<sup>4</sup> and Robert Harms, *Africa in Global History*.<sup>5</sup>

I have gone into detail about my experiences to make two points. First is that for the past few decades I have been approaching teaching history from the perspective of knowledge production, that is, from the perspective of production of the content taught as history on several levels. From that perspective I have seen how the production of history for instructional purposes has come to resemble the battle in early modern Europe to retain the old geocentric model of the heavens, now with the nation state as opposed to the church as the institution that needs to be propped up no matter the intellectual cost. The second point is that, if a measure of an idea’s success is the degree to which it is taken for granted in all subsequent discussion, then heliocentrism, the opposite of geocentrism, has already won. Heliocentrism in this sense is the transcendence of nationalist constructions of history by an awareness of the economic, social and cultural connections between political entities that have determined and shaped the actions of those political entities. Economic market fluctuations, religious movements, social and behavioral trends have never been respecters of political boundaries, and the intellectual limitations associated with trying to force these types of historical developments into nationalistic constructs have become too obvious to ignore.

To be sure there remains a niche market for the old chauvinism, for the insistence that the sun rotates around the earth, but the justification of that chauvinism is no longer historical, but religious and political. “Manifest Destiny,” and “the Frontier thesis,” to mention two American examples of what use to pass for explanations that illuminated America’s historical past, can still be found in textbooks, but the schools

where such textbooks are used, for religious and/or political reasons consciously seek to set themselves off from mainstream education.

Below I am going to talk about the value added to all historical instruction by framing such instruction from the global perspective. But first, because they have become such a distraction from the needed debate about historical instruction, I want to say something about arguments regarding racialized curricular reform. Some commentators insist that white American students are being brow-beaten by any and every idea of history offered in replacement for the old Eurocentric notions taught in American schools. Such arguments take for granted that the old Eurocentric notions provided a nurturing environment for young white minds. Yet it has been my observation that white students have often been as brow-beaten by Eurocentric narratives as black and brown students. I am an African American historian who has taught history courses for more than four decades. A notion of European history as a reification to be approached as an artifact to be viewed in a museum is not something I came up with, but an idea that an older white colleague shared with me once long ago when I was lamenting the dreariness of treating yet another set of students as tourists making their way through the sights and delights of a Western Civilization survey. My colleague was trying to cheer me up by suggesting that we as teachers were curators, tasked with the charge of instilling in the minds of the students we taught an appreciation of the secular humanist march of civilization. (The conversation took place before the advent of post-modernism.) The conversation did not cheer me up, mostly because even then I was conscious of how much of what took place in the past could not be subsumed under the rubric of the secular humanist march of civilization. And to be honest, while I appreciated how well-meaning my colleague was, I also experienced a flash of resentment and alienation at the thought that if I ever got tenure, my reward would be to teach an essentially ahistorical, parochial, chauvinistic if not racist version of history.

I did get tenure, so I continued to teach Western Civilization courses. A few years later, however, I had another exchange that served as a caveat to the one just mentioned. I had just finished giving a lecture on Weimar culture in in-between-the-world wars Germany. I did not think Weimar culture deserved its' own lecture, but it was the age of *Cabaret* and the textbook I was using had given the topic so much attention, I thought I needed to cover the topic in class. In response to my request for student reactions to the lecture, a young man with a Germanic name and Germanic ancestry raised his hand, and after assuring me that Weimar culture was really interesting, politely asked the question "But when are we going to get to our history?" I do not normally blurt out "Huh?" in class, but on this occasion, I was caught so off guard as to be speechless. I wanted to say to the student, "but we are talking about your history." I am a better teacher than that, so I asked him to further explain what he was asking. This European stuff was all well and good, he clarified, but he wanted to know

what Americans were doing between the two world wars, not Europeans. So, I used the last few minutes of the class talking about Roosevelt and the WPA. My takeaway from that exchange, and it was a revelation to me, was that even people with European ancestry struggled to find themselves in the almost catechetical presentation of European history as the history of progress that occurred in Western Civilization courses.

About a decade or so after this last conversation, after I had changed universities, I was teaching an upper-level survey course on Early Modern Europe. Robin Leach's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* was then a popular television show, so I got the bright idea that as a prelude to teaching Moliere's *Tartuffe*, I would have the students read the *Letters of Madame de Sevigne* to give them a sense of how the life lived by the nobility in seventeenth century France contrasted with the life lived by celebrities in twentieth century America. I was not prepared for the alienation and resentment the use of that text triggered. The students in that class were all white Americans, yet I could not prompt them to embrace any aspect of the world described in the book. When I asked them what was going on, the response was to query me about my intentions in assigning the text. What was interesting was that several thought I was making fun of their backgrounds and education by having them read about a lifestyle foreign from not just their own experiences, but the experiences of their ancestors.

My takeaway from this experience has been to not presume as a given that the contrived histories rationalized as offering a haven to the minds of white students realize their intended objective. Remembering the point made above about patriotism as the heuristic goal behind history education in the United States and recognizing the unfortunate fact that some history textbooks to this day conflate white racism with patriotism, one problem with which white, as well as students of color have struggled has been the historical connection between patriotism and race to be posited as at the base of America's story. Was white racism ever the true basis to American patriotism? If so, when did it cease to be? In not, why was it taught to be so? And the most important question of all, what is the history of American patriotism, stripped of all its racist baggage? Those pundits who insist that white students should remain blissfully ignorant of discussions such as these, continue to do white students a disservice because even the most sheltered of the latter will live in a world where they will be confronted with these questions, primarily from other Americans.

Equally obfuscating has been the tendency in American treatments of European history to project American ideas of whiteness as a form of classless, inclusivist consciousness across the Atlantic to Europe. European societies were divided into social classes and one dimension of European history is the history of class conflict. This fact is elided in texts that celebrate the great treasures of European civilization about which all peoples should know. The texts would convince you that these great treasures were shared across the social classes of European states, when in fact they were primarily the

preserve of a tiny elite. The intellectual stretch that would have these treasures embraced as attributes of a common culture generically shared by all Europeans is beyond the capacity of a good many students, white students included. Even more problematic, and this is a critique that goes back to Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*,<sup>6</sup> the texts would convince you that these treasures are the fruits of whiteness, that is, the bonafides of the civilizing capacity of some broadly constructed European genome. Few students of any race can wrap their minds around such notions. And for the most part few schools now force them to do so. Beyond European History survey courses, new Western Civilization courses, perhaps no set of courses taught as part of the general studies curriculum in American institutions of higher learning have been more regularly condensed to talking points and more pedagogically repackaged to demand less intellectual engagement. Another older white colleague, when counseling me how to deal with students struggling with the tedium of survey courses, would sardonically suggest that I should just tell students that staying awake through the long weeks of such courses, in and for itself, would make them better persons. Ironically, I think this has become the de facto approach of the Academy. I very much doubt that the process is making any group of students better people, however.

I appreciate that for many of the historians concerned with freeing historical instruction from nationalist blinders, survey texts are a source of the problem, the narratives that survey texts impose upon the past being inherently biased towards some parochial point of view. The teacher in me counters this problem with an insistence upon the recognition of the greater problems caused by teaching without a survey text, the idiosyncratic choices of events and historical developments instructors chose to highlight when left to their own devices only compounding the issue from which survey texts suffer. From the end-user perspective, survey texts have comparative value as a means towards the end of giving students some sort of narrative backbone to what they hopefully will remember as a set of connected stories of how human history has changed over time. I use a survey text as the platform upon which I build the lessons I teach in my 100 level courses, and two survey texts for comparative purposes in my graduate level courses.

Teaching through world history survey texts has too much pedagogical value to be discarded. What needs to be discarded is the approach to the generation of the content surveyed in such texts. The nation state is not the end of history, and globalization is not the end of the nation-state. World history texts need to stop presuming these things. That is a first step. A second, more demanding step is to come up with multi-local, multi-causal approaches to explain how we got from the past to the present, accepting that as a consequence of the new approaches, the past will not consist of the line-up of "usual suspects" about which survey texts now almost invariably write. No one wants to admit that world history survey texts still implicitly pursue the "triumph of the West" narrative line, though dodging, once they get to the twenty-first

century, the question of whether we are witnessing “the fall of the West.” The texts do this because, following the nationalist agenda talked about earlier, the people picking and choosing textbooks for adoption are presumed to want this. My assessment of the market is that the people picking and choosing are open to fresh alternatives. Maybe it is not up to historians to declare where the world is at in terms of giving a name to the epoch in which we are presently living, but historians can read the room, and recognize that their audiences want to better understand the economic, social, and cultural integration taking place in the world around us. There is a market for world history surveys that take us past the nationalist agenda.

There is no way to predict the new paradigm that will eventually replace the one now found lacking. I find this fact to be a source of encouragement since the search for a new paradigm should keep at least a few generations of future historians employed. In the meantime, what can be done is the above suggested exploration of new approaches. In my own teaching, over the five years or so, I have found much utility in an old approach that has been around for a couple of generations. Marshall Hodgson is an underappreciated genius of our profession. I have mined his magnum opus, *The Venture of Islam*, for materials for lectures numerous times, and notions of his, like “the Gunpowder Empires” have entered mainstream historical parlance. The piece of his work that has had the greatest impact on my thinking, and shaped the rest of what I will argue in this essay is, “The Interrelations of Societies in History,” a published version of a lecture he gave at the University of Chicago.<sup>7</sup> Those who know this piece will easily recognize my debt in this essay to his insights.

Of the many arguments Hodgson made in the lecture, I will highlight three. First is his characterization of Africa, Europe, and Asia, “Afro-Eurasia,” as at the least a connected geographic space, but, more largely, as he illustrates, as an economically, socially, and ultimately culturally connected entity or world. Literate people in Africa, Europe and Asia were conscious of each other, if only dimly. Humans, especially humans living in cities, in all three regions participated in the same economy. Cultural notions that arose in one part of this space could and did find positive (and negative) reception across this world.

Second is the argument that the dynamic that provides history with whatever linearity it possesses is technological innovation, technology understood not with its narrow American meaning as the better mousetrap, but as encompassing all the attributes of the lived human experience subject to change and perceived improvement. It seems fair to say that Hodgson always had Islam in mind when formulating concepts, so technology for him was, to use one of his terms, “the toolkit” of mutually reinforcing scientific, economic, social and cultural practices that made Islamic societies powerful enough in the military sense to conquer empires, elevated enough in a cultural sense to attract new adherents, and inclusive enough in the economic sense as to offer a space for all those who did convert. Broadening the notion beyond Islam, it can be said that

Hodgson thought of technological innovation on two levels; a more mundane level of ever improving tools and implements, like the harness, the windmill and the cannon, but also mathematics and medicine, that spread across Afro-Eurasia making life better for the peoples who adopted them; a more spiritual level, associated in his mind with the great religions—Hodgson was a fan of Karl Jasper’s idea of an “Axial Age,” where tools and implements become components of a toolkit promoted and reinforced by a spiritually grounded world view.

The third notion is that the two levels did not necessarily move in tandem, but when they did, they could bring about the type of change scholars identify as historic, as when a state embraced Islam or Christianity. Whatever the case, both levels of technological innovation were always happening at some place in Afro-Eurasia and were always diffusing from their points of origin to other places where they became part of the ferment, the critical mass for new technological innovations. Historical study, as Hodgson presented it, involved the tracking of technological innovations as they were assimilated and transformed by peoples across space and time. Historical instruction, he suggested, should involve providing students with an introduction to this dynamic understanding of history.

What attracts me to Hodgson’s ideas is their open-endedness, which to my mind frees historians from any curatorial obligations. As Hodgson constructed it, world history is about the process of exchange over time, which makes the task of the historian the narration of the movement of peoples, technologies, ideas and commodities across time and space. No more historical instruction as guided tours of artifact collections! Rather, the challenge of teaching world history becomes narrating how peoples, technologies, ideas and commodities have survived in new articulations, in new contexts.

Hodgson was not sympathetic to teaching history bounded by nationalistic constructs, or constructs tied to geo-centric/racial parameters like American/European/whiteness. But no necessary antipathy exists between his vision and its framing from a nationalist or even geo-centric perspective. The global is experienced as the local, and so a path exist towards building a comprehension of both the local and the global based upon a conceptualization of an ever-expanding interaction between the local and the global. Concretely, what is being suggested here is that while the history of the United States cannot be taught as a stand-alone without the present intellectual narrow-mindedness, it can be taught as the starting point of a program of study that treats it like the inner most Russian doll with the outer most doll being a global history of the world. Assuming a five doll set, the second inner most doll could be the history of European civilization—the direction that most instruction now takes. My argument, however, is that a better second doll would be the history of the Americas, which would allow for the generation of a comparative understanding and contextualization of U.S. history. A third doll could be the Americas and Atlantic facing Afro-Eurasia, while a fourth could be the



Americas and Pacific facing Afro-Eurasia. As already suggested, one completion of the set could be a doll that folds together in one entity the Americas and Afro-Eurasia. The most important point I am promoting with this suggestion is the idea that there is no necessary loss of either historical information or insight by abandoning nationalism as a vehicle for historical instruction. Americans can still take interest and pride in the history of the United States, but that interest and pride would not be impaired by some false sense of exceptionalism. Rather, that interest and pride would be informed by what makes the United States unique among other states that emerged in the Americas as an outcome of trans-Atlantic/trans-Pacific human settlement.

The New World is obviously the big hole in Hodgson's argument. All the civilizations and states that emerged in the Old World can be argued to have been the product of the historical dynamic Hodgson posits. The civilizations and states that emerged in the New World cannot. This fact does not invalidate Hodgson's argument. It just shows the intellectual and historical limitations of the era in which his argument was formulated. We today are under no obligation to take for granted, as the Western mind did during the middle of the twentieth century, that the dynamic that shaped the history of Afro-Eurasia was the only historical dynamic out there. We are free to recognize that further research is required on the dynamics that shaped the history of human societies in the Americas and the human societies that evolved on the islands of the Pacific. We can even begin to contemplate what the study of world history will look like once these last two types of research have yielded their first fruits, and then are blended with the scholarship on Afro-Eurasia.

In conclusion, I see the adoption by historians of the approach to studying and teaching world history advocated in this essay as an act of self-liberation. Following this approach, as researchers, historians could see themselves as trailblazers, looking for pathways and destinations in a new, post-nationalist intellectual universe, while as teachers, they could train all students to recognize the common history they share as products of the same historical dynamics. Curricula cannot and perhaps should not be changed overnight. With that thought in mind, my one practical suggestion as to how to jump start the proposed initiative would be to require that all high school and undergraduate courses dedicate say, twenty percent of their content to coverage of world historical events and developments that parallel the rest of the course content. I would not delineate the requirement any further than that. It should be left open-ended to invite teachers to innovate in both the events and developments they identify and the ways in which they then seek to relate the global with the local. After a few years it should be possible to recognize best practices and invite other teachers to build upon them. Research in this scenario would follow teaching, the holes in narratives as they progress from the local to the global drawing the greatest attention and investment in further research.

To sum up, globalization as a common experience shared by the peoples of the world has already occurred. Historical scholarship and pedagogy have struggled to accommodate this development, with the outcome that lay audience have turned to historians less and less in search of ideas to make sense of the world in which they live. As I have suggested, a new thinking cap is what historians need. Making the sun the center of the solar system did not get rid of all the observable anomalies in the peregrinations of heavenly bodies. It took Newton to come up with a theory that laid all the doubt to rest. By the same token, making the world, not the nation state the unit of historical measure may not get rid of all the anomalies, though it will get rid of a good many of them. And while historians are waiting, if not for our own version of Newton, then at least for a new historical paradigm, embracing the world as the unit of historical measure will allow us to see more clearly the paths towards the world history narratives future teachers and students of history will demand.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Murry R. Nelson (ed.), *The Social Studies in Secondary Education: A Reprint of the Seminal 1916 Report, with Annotations and Commentaries*, ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies (1994). The best biographical treatment of Jones is provided in Stephen Taylor Correia, “For their own good”: An Historical Analysis of the Educational Thought of Thomas Jesse Jones’ Ph.D diss., Pennsylvania State University 1993. See also, Donald Johnson, “W. E. B. Dubois, Thomas Jesse Jones and the Struggle for Social Education, 1900-1930,” *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 85, no. 3 (2000) 71-95, and Andrew E. Barnes, “Thomas Jesse Jones, the Phelps Stokes Education Commissions and Education for Social Welfare in Colonial Africa,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2020)

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science: 1300-1800*. [Rev. ed.], Macmillan, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> David Northrup, *Africa’s Discovery of Europe, 1450-1850*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Erik T. Gilbert and Jonathan T. Reynolds, *Africa in World History*, Pearson, 2011

<sup>5</sup> Robert Harms, *Africa in Global History with Sources*, Norton, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, Rutgers University Press, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, “The Interrelations of Societies in History,” *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, vol. 5. no. 2 (1963), 227-250