

World History Connected Turns Twenty

I want to join in celebrating *World History Connected* on its twentieth anniversary. I congratulate Heidi Roupp for seeing through her vision of the journal, Heather Streets-Salter for realizing that vision in its first years, and, especially, Cynthia Ross for her recent appointment as our next editor-in-chief.

Particular gratitude is due to Marc Jason Gilbert for his fifteen years of editorial leadership. What makes a great editor? I think the test comes when an author sends in work that's deeply flawed but contains within it the seed of something special. A lesser editor would reject the work out of hand. When Marc sees a piece like that, he'll send it back with reader suggestions, not just once, but sometimes two, three, or four times, working with an author to get it right. Marc's understanding of the field—and there's no field quite as broad as world history—has given him a keen sense for how a particular essay, its focus seemingly narrow, fits into the entire sweep of world history's concerns. What's more, he's an absolute delight to work with: blessed with graciousness, a sardonic but gentle sense of humor and, most importantly, a deep passion for helping both scholars and teachers get their ideas out to the larger audience. Thank you, Marc, for all you have done for *World History Connected*.

Darkening my otherwise celebratory mood today is anxiety, not about the future of the journal itself, but about the larger project to which the journal is dedicated. Over the past decade and more, we've seen humanities enrollments plummet, full time positions contract, and thoughtful scholars pummeled by populist media. One recent straw in the wind: Marymount University in northern Virginia has eliminated both its History and its English Departments. While comparable proposals at several other institutions have been nixed, the future of the humanities is very much at risk.

Meanwhile, political attacks on humanities curricula have rapidly escalated. Though Florida will come to mind, as will a number of other U.S. states, the trend is international, and examples can be found from Alberta to Queensland, from Brazil to

Hungary, to say nothing of authoritarian states whose history programs do little more than accessorize bland personality cults.

AP World History is at particular risk, targeted by the right wing National Association of Scholars as “disfigured history.” AP World is not a perfect curriculum. Still, it’s the canary in the coal mine: current threats to abolish AP World are aimed at all world history scholarship and instruction. So far, AP World has not suffered the withering political fire aimed directly at AP African-American History and AP Psychology. But these are early days. Meanwhile, conservative educational activists are developing, promoting, and sometimes adopting history curricula of their own, built around ideas of Christian civilizational supremacy, Thomist natural law, and Euro-American destiny.

In this context, what is the role of *World History Connected*? Much of what we must do is already being done. First, thanks in very large part to Marc’s efforts, we have a secure institutional home at George Mason University, which in the near term is unlikely to kneel to ideological diktats.

Second, *World History Connected* has not compromised its integrity. An important forum in the issue that just appeared, “Teaching History in Contentious Times,” is evidence of that. In it, a number of teachers, some on the front lines of the so-called “history wars,” discuss why it’s important that students have the chance to experience the full range of historical stories, even those that are discomfiting.

Third, as per Heidi’s vision, *World History Connected* remains free to all users anywhere in the world. Our readers do not have to worry that their department or library can’t—or won’t—pay for the subscription. In short, we are institutionally protected, financially secure, clear about our values and, barring state censorship, universally available. All of this will be essential as we continue our work.

What more can be done? First, we must serve teachers who work in less than ideal situations. Given recent events, I expect that world history courses will vanish in some of the colleges and high schools where it now thrives. *World History Connected* can offer content that supplements the narrower national curricula that is likely to replace world history courses. The recent issue of *World History Connected*, with its forum on “The American West in World History” is an example of work that will serve teachers and students alike.

Second, it’s important to engage some of the issues that drive conservatism itself. If there’s a blind spot in world history narratives, it may be the fact that we like talking about global encounters more than regional traditions. We don’t generally say much about France’s anti-revolutionary Vendée, Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion, India’s Hindutva movement, or South American mid-20th century Integralism, all of which really do matter regionally and globally. In the history of ideas, we do not do enough dot-connecting between modernization and, say, China’s recent Confucian revivalism, Euro-American libertarianism, and the effusion of fundamentalist, evangelical, and

traditionalist religious movements. Conservatism is not—or is not merely—an electoral pose or a method of voter manipulation. It is not ephemeral, and didn't show up just yesterday. It needs a coherent treatment in a world history classroom.

Third, we should reflect on the messages that world history classrooms send to students about their own historical agency. Our grand world-historical narratives often imply that the modern world exists as it is because, two hundred thousand years ago, our ancestors touched Kubrick's monolith or ate the Fruit of Knowledge or cut forests for our campfires until we ran out of forests and started digging for coal and drilling for oil. In any case, it's been downhill ever since, will get worse, and no Swedish teenager berating the assembled Somebodies at the United Nations will change any of it.

Big history, the *longue durée*, world systems theory, and other grand interpretations are thrilling, but in a classroom, their subtext can become darkly Margaret Thatcher-esque: There Is No Alternative. Narratives built around what Charles Tilly characterized as “big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons” often leave students feeling numb, apathetic, and even despondent. As a student once said to me after reading an ambitious essay on the sweep of global history: “So what it's basically saying is we can't change anything.”

World History Connected could usefully devote greater attention to curricula focused on individuals and small groups who leveraged their skills, their social networks, their arguments, and their political moxie to make change. We don't know, not yet, anyway, how much of a difference Sweden's Greta Thunberg, or Kenya's Elizabeth Wathuti, or Brazil's Paloma Costa will ultimately make. We choose to believe, and I hope we choose to tell students, that human affairs are more malleable than our sweeping historical theories suggest.

Finally, as the humanities are increasingly besieged, *World History Connected* can help build community. Teachers who shepherd students forward against fierce cultural and political headwinds, can feel that they're doing so alone. Annual meetings like the World History Association Conference give us the chance to touch base with one another. Maybe we could go further. What would this mean? Perhaps we could begin by sponsoring in-person meetups and online reading groups on recently published articles or themes, promoting and sharing these discussions at *WHC*. Others, more familiar with current opportunities in social media will have even more expansive ideas.

World History Connected has built a very strong foundation, skillfully avoiding many of the pitfalls that entrap and destroy young journals, while taking advantage of new media to reach audiences far wider than anyone imagined possible twenty years ago. Its service to world history teaching and to students is just beginning.

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