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Conceptualizing World History

I have been striving in recent years to enhance the coherence of world history texts and courses: to better tie together our discussions of Aztecs, Mongols, and Phoenicians in the same course. It seems that we can pursue two broad types of coherence:

- Showing how the events and processes of one time and place build upon the earlier events and processes of other times and places, while setting the stage for later events and processes. We must, that is, not just provide compelling narratives of particular people or events, but show how these are connected.
- Less obviously, we can and should compare across time and place. We can achieve a great deal of coherence, for example, by showing how one emperor reacts to a particular challenge in a similar way to many previous emperors (or not). We should seek, then, to identify similarities and differences across time and place, and seek to understand these.

The purpose of this essay is to survey what we know (or at least can reasonably hypothesize) about these two types of coherence. The hope is that by doing so we can encourage our students to better appreciate why we address such diverse times and places in the same course.[1] We will close the essay, nevertheless, by both discussing contingency and recognizing that coherence is not the only important characteristic of world history.

The First Type of Coherence: Types of Historical Change

We should regularly remind our students of how the events or processes we are addressing in class today build upon events and processes we have discussed before.[2] It is then also useful to acquaint students with important ways in which the past does make possible the present.[3]

Historical Transformations

The most obvious way in which history matters is through what are commonly termed historical transformations. A dictionary definition of transformation refers to changes in form or structure. Historians have long debated the precise nature of historical

transformations. For our purposes, we can emphasize that a historical transformation creates new historical possibilities. With the development of agriculture, large cities and states become possible (but not inevitable; the people of the New Guinea highlands develop agriculture but not cities or states). We should want our students to appreciate that the world they live in is a result (among other things) of a cumulative series of transformations, each of which built on what had happened before and created new possibilities for the future. We should likely stress that the possibilities opened up may be both 'good' and 'bad': while it is hard to imagine most of world history without the development of agriculture, it is nevertheless true that early agriculture is generally associated with decreased health, increased war, increased social stratification, and an eventual decline in the status of women, among other things.[4]

We should seek then to explain at least the most important transformations. Why did they emerge when and where they did? One important lesson of world history is that all historical transformations (at least those of which I am aware) are cross-disciplinary in nature. That is, political transformations do not just have political causes or effects, nor do technological transformations have just technological roots or influences. Rather, phenomena studied in a handful of different disciplines are usually implicated in both the genesis and effects of any historical transformation.[5] Students can usefully reflect on why the academy consists of disciplines that each downplay the importance of cross-disciplinary linkages when such linkages are of crucial importance to understanding the course of world history. They might reasonably imagine that cross-disciplinary linkages will be as important in the future as they have been in the past, and thus that the academy should be geared toward comprehending these. Closer to home, they might query the tendency of historians to specialize in cultural, social, or economic history. One of the strengths of world history is that we necessarily confront cross-disciplinary linkages.

These strike me as the most important historical transformations:

- Several developments in early human history such as walking, language, fire making, and toolmaking. These are so basic that much of human history is unimaginable without them. I would add some key psychological developments: that humans are both competitive and capable of altruism, that we are capable of self-deception, and thus that we do not always know why we act as we do. (We might also add some preceding "Big History" transformations such as the emergence in turn of the universe, stars, planets, life, mammals, and hominids.)

- Agricultural revolution (also development of nomadism and fishing). This has, among other things, a big effect on the need for protection (since harvests and animal herds can be stolen) and thus generates potential for states and nomadic clans. Changes in gender roles, population, health, and social stratification are also observed (over time).

- Cities and states. These in turn encourage writing, formal education, laws, increased social differentiation, (increases in) disease, and (expansion of) war, among other things.
- Religions, modern religions (We should stress that the vast bulk of humanity in the 21st century adheres to religions formalized between 600 BCE and 650 CE, and that these borrowed from pre-existing religions.)
- Linking the hemispheres
- Scientific revolution. The effects are limited for centuries, though some posit an important link to technological innovation at the time – more due to a change in mindset than any direct influence of scientific discovery on technology.
- Industrial revolution (dramatic increases in technological innovation, and emergence of the modern factory; would encourage dramatic differences in economic growth rates across countries, among many other things) [6]
- Nation states and nationalism
- Decolonization; end of legalized slavery and serfdom

Others might proffer a slightly different list. Yet we can perhaps agree that there are some dozen(s) of major transformations with a dramatic impact on the course of history. To these can be added a much more extensive list of transformations that are not as dramatic but still important. The boundary between these two lists is necessarily somewhat arbitrary, and might change as we collectively explore the importance of different transformations (as astronomers decided to bump Pluto from planet to dwarf planet status a few years ago). We cannot cover all of these in class but should address some of them (and ideally signal awareness of the rest). Rather than even attempt to list these lesser transformations, we can instead limit ourselves to the main types of transformation:

- Most obviously, perhaps, each technological innovation allows humans to do some things that were not previously possible (or at least reduces the difficulty of doing so). Some of these, such as smelting iron, fermenting yeast,[7] or gunpowder weapons may well deserve to be on the list above.
- Developments in science and philosophy also open up new possibilities
- New institutions (laws, regulations, etc.) also change what humans can (easily) do or not. We might include here merchant networks and money, both of which dramatically expand trade. The rise of multi-ethnic empires is also of huge importance.

- New trade connections (such as the Silk Road, trans-Sahara trade) or the development of transport infrastructure
- New goods and services (which often but not always reflect changes in technology)
- Changes in culture. These are often harder to trace, but developments of new religious denominations are one example of important, visible, and enduring cultural changes.
- It seems harder, at least to me, to identify enduring transformations with respect to social structure, though we might include the facts that the status of women generally fell with agriculture and improved with industrialization (though not immediately or uniformly in either case).
- We might include here developments of new art styles, though we know little about how these might influence the wider society (Note here that some technologies enhance artistic achievement).

Given this extensive list of transformations, it should be no surprise – but worth stressing to students – that some transformations first occurred in every corner of the world. They would each go on to have a global impact.

Trends

Though less dramatic than the transformations above, it is worth reminding our students of several important trends that can be observed through most/all of human history. Notably, these can generally, though not always, be observed simultaneously in all regions of the world. We can then discuss occasional interruptions in such trends. Students may be especially interested that many trends follow a slanted-S shaped pattern, with slow growth for millennia followed by more rapid growth in recent centuries and perhaps tapering off now or in the future:

- Human population has increased most of the time (reflecting geographical expansion, improved technology, and other factors), but this trend has occasionally been interrupted by epidemics, climate shocks, or wars. Rates of population growth are now falling after centuries of rapid growth, and global population may stabilize or even decline over the next decades.
- Technology has improved, though in some times and places more than others. There are a few examples in human history where people forgot technologies they had previously employed (Europeans for centuries marveled at Roman architectural accomplishments), but the general story is of a gradual accretion of technological understanding. New technologies are generally new combinations of preceding technologies. There has been a dramatic increase

in the rate of innovation in recent centuries. There has been concern for decades that this may trail off (because we have discovered most of the good stuff already). [There is a connection between these trends, as innovation tends to increase with population density.]

- Average incomes have tended to increase in most human societies, but can fall dramatically for many reasons.
- Economic inequality has also tended to increase most of the time (the economic well-being of the bulk of the population may go up or down depending on the contrasting effects of the last two trends).[8] This is perhaps the scariest trend in all of world history. The postwar decades were a historical anomaly in which inequality decreased in most countries without a major epidemic or war.[9] (We will see below that increased inequality likely decreases political stability.)
- Trade and information flows have expanded irregularly through history with occasional setbacks, with the result that goods and services have gained wider markets. Students can appreciate some examples of how the potato, or coffee, or the *Arabian Nights* spread across the globe (with changes as they went in how these were consumed). We can note that there are now global markets for almost everything.
- There has been a very irregular expansion in the size and activities of the state (though the most dramatic changes are limited to the last couple of centuries)
- There has been an increase in the average size of ethnic/linguistic/cultural groups through time. Empires and nation states both fostered this process (though empires often also practiced toleration), but trade expansion and the spread of literacy and printed books also played a role. Yuval Noah Harari wonders if there is a natural trend toward a global culture.
- There has been an irregular expansion in occupational differentiation as new goods and services were produced in amounts large enough to encourage specialization (This in turn reflected both trade expansion and technological innovation, among other things)
- We can often identify improvements in artistic (and especially architectural) quality over time within particular societies, but the frequent emergence of new artistic styles makes it hard to speak of a global trend in quality.
- We might also note a very irregular improvement in human capability itself as humans gained better nutrition and education. This trend is very uneven before the most recent centuries. We know very little about whether humans became happier or not through time.[10]

The sluggish early developments of these trends may seem somewhat dull relative to more recent and dramatic changes. Yet it is likely that those more recent changes were only possible because of the preceding millennia of gradual change (historical research could better establish this point).

Evolutionary Processes

While some historians have embraced evolutionary analysis,[11] others worry that evolutionary theorizing invites a crude sort of biological reductionism. This is ironic. Though evolutionary theory is commonly associated with biological evolution today, ideas of social evolution were posited long before Darwin and others outlined a process of biological evolution. We can apply evolutionary analysis to the course of world history without ever referencing biological evolution.[12] There are three key elements to evolutionary analysis. First, there must be some source of (fairly) random mutations. Then, there must be some mechanism through which some mutations are chosen while others are rejected. Finally, there must be a mechanism through which successful mutations are transmitted across time and place. In biological evolution we focus on genetic mutation, selection for genetic fitness (does a genetic mutation aid survival and reproduction) and transmission through genetic inheritance. In social evolution, we focus instead on the generation of "ideas" and need to grapple with diverse selection criteria and transmission possibilities. Though less "tidy" than biological evolution, social evolution shares an important implication; we are guided to look not primarily at how an idea was generated (for there may be many ideas floating around) but rather why it was selected and transmitted. Importantly for our present purposes, we are guided to appreciate that history is cumulative: the range of new ideas that will be generated at a particular time and place will be constrained by pre-existing ideas, and (even more importantly) selection and transmission will depend on the institutions and values of the society(s) in question.

Evolutionary analysis is useful for at least a handful of the topics or themes addressed in world history. The most obvious, perhaps, is technological innovation. Historians of technology have long moved past naïve ideas of 'isolated geniuses' to appreciate that we can generally identify many people working on developing the same technology in a particular time and place. James Watt was one of dozens trying to develop a better steam engine in late eighteenth century Britain. These innovators competed but also learned from each other. We are guided first to ask why many people turn their minds to a particular kind of innovation in a particular time and place. This will in part reflect the desirability of new technology (Britain needed to drain mines), but will also reflect technological possibilities (the Watt steam engine was only possible because of improved metallurgy and advances in boring technology). We can then ask why particular ideas were selected. In the case of technology, the obvious selection criteria is that the chosen technology actually works. Note, though, that it must not only work technically but also make sense economically – the earliest Watt steam engine was

only superior to cheaper but less efficient engines if coal was expensive. It was thus used in copper mines but not coal mines. Moreover, selection, even for technology, may reflect cultural values, aesthetic tastes, and political decision-making (many states in history prevented technological innovation out of fear for the social instability it might engender).

Science follows an evolutionary path much like technology, where ideas build on what has gone before. The selection environment is different, though. Whereas technological ideas are evaluated by the wider society, scientific ideas are through much of history evaluated primarily by a scientific community itself (with occasional political interference). Standards of evidence vary across time and place. Even today, there are concerns that scientists adopt ideas that they find congenial; there is then scope for ethnic, class, and gender biases to influence (mutation and) selection.

Culture may be an even more promising realm for evolutionary analysis. Cultures, anthropologists now appreciate, are always internally diverse and changing. At any point in time, members of a society may (consciously or not) suggest myriad changes to cultural beliefs and practices. How are some of these selected? We can hope and imagine that there is some tendency for selection of ideas that make the society better off in some way (better health, better incomes, or social stability). If so, then the economic, political, and social realities of a particular society will influence cultural selection. Changes in economic, political, or technological circumstances (among other things) will encourage cultural change, as will exposure to different cultures. We can hypothesize also that elites use their wealth and power to advertise mutations that support their position (States thus supported religions that provided justification for state power and social stratification) – but it is not always easy to push culture in a desired direction.

Institutions (the formal rules of a society, such as laws and regulations) may seem a less obvious site of (fairly) random mutations. Yet if we look at any period of institutional change (the French Revolution leaps to mind), we will find many ideas circulating. The best institutional structure is not often obvious. As with culture, we can hope that there is some selection over time for institutions that work: that allow a society to prosper (the selection may be in part internal and in part external if states with better institutions outcompete states with worse institutions). Note, though, that if circumstances are changing fast (technology or trade relations or the rise of other powers, say), institutions may not change fast enough to keep up. Even more so than with culture we can expect that those in positions of power will attempt to solidify their power institutionally, constrained only by not wishing to offend the masses into rebellion.

We can also speak of artistic evolution. Each artist seeks to innovate, generally by combining ideas from previous artists, but they will in general find that audiences will reject innovations that are too novel (the modern era is unusually open to deviations from past practice). This insight – that small innovations have a far greater chance of success than big innovations – is easy to see in the world of art but applies also to our

other types of evolution. The trials of indigenous groups suddenly brought into contact with more technologically complex societies is evidence that dramatic changes in culture are disorienting. Groups, when possible, will prefer gradual change. The unpredictability of (and frequent failure of) political revolutions suggests likewise that humans are better able to imagine and choose smallish improvements in institutions.[13]

I would close here with a few points. The essence of evolutionary analysis can be communicated in a few minutes and then applied repeatedly (it thus is itself an agent of coherence). It guides us to ask a set of questions about mutations, selection environment, and transmission. These tend to implicate a wide variety of themes (culture, economy, politics, etc.). Most importantly, perhaps, evolutionary analysis focuses our attention on a cumulative set of generally smallish changes.

The Second Type of Coherence: Recurring Patterns in History

Though we have seen that world history is a process of cumulative change, it is important to appreciate nevertheless that there are also important commonalities across time and place. Humans face similar challenges and often respond in similar ways. Less obviously, we can observe similarities in historical processes across quite different times and places. Students need to grapple with the twin facts that 'the past is a different country' in many ways but at the same time some processes and behaviors are recognizable today. Students can be better able to do so if we are explicit about this challenge.

Historical Regularities

We can organize our discussion here by the themes commonly addressed in world history.

Population (and Income). Robert Malthus posited two centuries ago that any increase in incomes (due, say, to trade expansion or technological innovation) would be temporary for humans would over time respond by having more children. Average incomes would then be pushed downward toward subsistence since more people had to be fed off the same amount of land. Malthus had the misfortune to write on the eve of both Industrial Revolution and demographic transition: His analysis proved a poor fit for the last couple of centuries in which incomes grew at unprecedented rates and people in most countries responded by reducing fertility. Yet arguably, the Malthusian analysis is a good fit for much of human history. Occasional productivity shocks, such as the development of iron smelting, had their biggest long-run impact on population. Malthus was a bit too pessimistic: incomes have crept upward through most of human history (see above) but the bulk of humanity did not get far above subsistence before the nineteenth century. (Why are average incomes not driven to subsistence by population growth? Occupational differentiation allows some artisans and merchants to earn more than peasants. Peasants obtain over time better pottery, textiles, roof tiles and other

goods and thus incomes rise even if food intake does not. Cultural expectations regarding acceptable incomes may change over time).

We should appreciate that migration is very common in history, including mass migrations. Migration can in turn be attributed to a handful of causes. People move where they imagine a better economic or political reality (with peasants often fleeing from 'civilization' to live with 'barbarians'). At various points in history, people migrate into unsettled lands (sometimes lands that are newly deforested or drained). Climate shocks and wars can induce mass migrations. It is worth noting that ethnic identities were more fungible through much of history and that once-distinct groups often merged over time.

What about human health itself? Human health depends largely on nutrition (which rises and falls in history with perhaps a slight upward trend until dramatic improvements in recent centuries in much of the world) and disease incidence (which increases with agriculture, trade, and urbanization, and decreases with public health measures and then in just the last century or so medical advances).

Natural Environment. There is considerable evidence that geography matters a great deal in human history. States with natural boundaries – like ancient Egypt, surrounded by desert – not only face less foreign threat but also need to worry less about peasants escaping the state's extractions. Locations with natural harbors tend not surprisingly to be sites of commercial activity; they are also more likely to have forms of communal government.[14] Tropical climates tend to have lower population densities through much of human history. Natural resources can also be important, though the most beneficial resources change through time.

Students who have lived through COVID and worry about climate change may find discussions of climate shocks and epidemics in history of particular interest. Note that these unpredictable events could disrupt the historical processes that we have described elsewhere in this essay. There are some commonalities to be communicated. In temperate areas especially, colder and drier weather tends to reduce agricultural output and thus population. States that depend mostly on taxing agriculture are weakened. Though each epidemic disease has its own transmission mechanism, these in general also decrease population and foment political instability.[15] In some cases, the negative population shock increased the bargaining power of peasants and workers and led to increases in incomes, but elsewhere elites managed to prevent such increases in the incomes of the poor.[16]

Social Structure. Social differentiation is ubiquitous in human societies, at least since the dawn of agriculture. As noted above, we can speak of a general tendency for the status of women to decline with agriculture and improve with industrialization – but there is huge diversity across societies due to differences in political institutions (laws governing inheritance and divorce in particular) and culture (especially religion).

We can also credit multi-ethnic empires with generally encouraging some degree of cultural toleration (and religious toleration before the rise of monotheistic or deistic religions). Nation states have often celebrated instead one dominant ethnic/linguistic group.

Attitudes with respect to sexual orientation have varied a great deal in human history. This variance would seem to indicate that there is no strong correlation between types of polity or economy and attitudes toward sexual orientation through much of history. Religious doctrines play a more obvious role (with 'two spirit' individuals serving an important religious role in many societies, for example).

Politics. We cannot stress too much that all historical states have risen and then fallen. (Students can usefully reflect on whether the states we inhabit today can achieve a different fate.) This rise and fall is often reflected in geographic expansion and contraction. Empires in particular expand and contract geographically, partly because there is a limit at any time to how far they can govern effectively given existing transport and communication technology. The early geographical expansion of states is self-reinforcing for a while as soldiers are attracted to a winning cause and enemies are encouraged to surrender. The eventual fall of all states will often have external causes such as war, climate shock, or epidemic. Yet there seems also to be an internal process whereby elites and bureaucrats gradually chip away at central power (and especially financial capability). Some states likely struggle to develop steady tax revenues to replace the sudden windfalls in income associated with early conquests.

Partly because of the rise and fall of all states (and partly a cause), there are frequent changes in the relative power of states through history. These often in turn encourage conflict, as rising powers attack declining powers. It is worth stressing that wars usually serve the interests of elites and soldiers rather than the general population. Moreover, men receive most of the direct benefits while the women of defeated states are often mistreated. This may indeed be one of the main motives for war.

Political consolidation usually enhances trade, for merchants then only have to negotiate passage with one state rather than many (with each state seeking perhaps to extract most of the merchant's profits from the entire venture). Yet the result is not guaranteed. Political consolidation in Anatolia seems to have disrupted the longstanding trade between ancient Mesopotamia and Anatolia. Perhaps the new state was hostile to merchants: in such a case, political consolidation means that merchants have no alternative route via other states that they might pursue.

Revolutions become an important topic in world history from the eighteenth century. Not surprisingly, revolutions are most likely to occur when a set of conducive influences co-occur: economic discomfort (due often to harvest failures, but also concerns about taxation), signs of weakness among the existing rulers, ideas or values that encourage a shared sense of purpose among revolutionaries, and a shared sense of injustice. Cross-societal influences are very important: revolutions in one country, especially if successful, encourage revolutions elsewhere, and revolutionaries borrow

ideas and strategies from each other.[17] Though we can say much about when revolutions are most likely to occur, we can say less about when revolutions are likely to yield changes in government that are popular or enduring. One lesson might be that revolutionaries with some experience in government are more likely to create good and stable institutional structures. Another is that revolutions are more likely to fail the more complex the challenges they face.

Culture. Religion is the element of culture that we can best track through history since religions are both relatively well recorded and enduring. We can see that religions play new roles as urbanization and state expansion proceed: they encourage ethical interactions with strangers, a sense of belonging to a larger community, and acceptance of political power and social differentiation, among other things. We can reasonably hypothesize that elites encouraged supportive religious beliefs (but note that states generally did not create religions but rather fostered those they found congenial).

We can also trace the course of linguistic consolidation. Both political consolidation and trade expansion encouraged this as people adopted the language of the capital in order to trade and interact with bureaucrats. The advent of printed books encouraged further consolidation. Nation states often encouraged the adoption of the language of the capital, especially as they developed public education systems.

Economy. As noted above, trade expansion (itself largely driven by developments in transport, political consolidation, and network expansion), and technological innovation are major sources of economic growth (that is, growth in per capita incomes) in history. At times, institutional innovation is important. Numerous other factors play a role, especially in modern economic growth.

Increasing inequality in most historical societies was characterized/driven by the creation of large landholdings (and a body of landless peasants that were often legally bound to the land). Many historical states attempted land redistribution to decrease the power of landed elites, but these efforts were not generally successful in the long term. Increased inequality is self-sustaining in large part because the rich exert political pressure to maintain and enhance their privileges. Yet at some point, the growing wealth of the economic elite may weaken the state or encourage peasant rebellion.

We should close by making explicit a connection between the sort of regularities discussed just above and the trends identified in a previous section. Trends will often, though not necessarily, reflect a repeated regularity. If technological innovation often increases the amount of food that humans can grow, then we will see population growth through history. If there are mechanisms that prevent Malthusian forces from acting to full effect then we will also see economic growth (note that there are other influences on both population and economic growth).

How Humans Face Recurring Challenges

Along with the causal regularities surveyed above, we should be aware that humans often face similar challenges across different times and places, and often respond in similar ways. Rulers, for example, need to encourage their bureaucrats to work in the interests of the ruler/state rather than pursue their own narrow interests. The decline of many states in history likely reflects the ability of bureaucrats over time to divert an increased share of state revenues into their own pockets (with provincial governors often being the worst offenders). Rulers everywhere tend to select from a narrow menu of choices on how to incentivize bureaucrats. All rulers attempt to justify their rule and encourage bureaucrats to feel a sense of duty though the justifications take a variety of forms: different religious doctrines, bragging of military conquests or popular support or even public works. Most rulers spy on (audit) their bureaucrats, sometimes appointing dual bureaucracies to monitor each other. Many rulers punish bureaucrats suspected of malfeasance harshly, and often punish their family members (which may encourage families to hide stolen riches). Loyalty is also rewarded handsomely (with some rulers developing clear systems of promotion). Some rulers attempt to estimate what tax revenues should be – the ancient Egyptians would measure the Nile flood and predict agricultural output – and compare this with actual receipts to identify possible embezzlement – but such a strategy is often too expensive to implement. Sometimes, rulers employ enslaved peoples, foreigners, or eunuchs in senior roles in the hopes that such people are dependent on the ruler and do not have a local power base or large families to support. Sometimes, rulers rotated governors through provinces so that these could not develop a local power base – but then sacrificed the valuable local knowledge that a governor might obtain. Note that we can better appreciate differences in ruler behavior – such as differences in how they justify their rule – if we first appreciate the broad similarities.

Merchants must protect themselves against being robbed not just by thieves but also by other merchants that they contract with and by the states through which they trade. It is important to the course of world history that merchants address these challenges (well enough to make a profit) for trade enhances information flows of all kinds. The most common way in which merchants address these challenges is through merchant networks. A merchant that benefits from membership in a network will not wish to gain a reputation for mistreating other members of the network. That is, the benefits of continued trade within the network outweigh the benefits of cheating on any one trade. Networks can also better bargain with rulers: the benefits to a ruler of the ongoing tax revenues from an entire network may outweigh the benefits of robbing any one merchant. Merchant networks can also organize caravans to provide protection from thieves. Not surprisingly, merchant networks are ubiquitous in world history (at least before modern legal systems are developed). Interestingly, though networks rely on basic financial incentives – that one will not risk expulsion by cheating network members – networks everywhere tend to have a strong ethnic and/or religious basis.

Jews, Armenians, Buddhists, Muslims and a host of others (the Wangara south of the Sahara, the Wajorese in what is now Indonesia) play important roles in world trade at various times and places. Apparently, it is very useful to have some common cultural understandings (of, say, fairness) and a sense of cultural belonging to encourage the trust on which networks rely. The ubiquity of ethnic trade networks means that major trading centers in world history are always multi-ethnic – where merchants need to interact with merchants from other networks if they wish to trade beyond the area served by their own network. Religion-based trade networks often cover very wide geographic areas (thus reducing costs of trade since trading within a network is safer than trading across networks). Importantly, members of religion-based networks have a strong financial incentive to convert both merchants and rulers to their religion -- though they may in practice feel driven more by religious zeal than self-interest. In any case, merchants are major conduits for the spread of religion (conquest and missionaries are among the others).

We can identify many other similarities in the behaviors of not just rulers and merchants but many other types of agents.[18] Artisans and builders need to transmit technological understandings across generations and often develop some system of apprenticeship (sometimes family-based) to do so. Architectural achievement often improves in any society as technological understandings expand across generations.[19] Farmers need to protect harvests from theft: walls, weapons and states are among the possible responses (though it seems that the earliest farmers may have enjoyed peace). Nomads have to protect their very mobile herds from theft, but find walls and even geographically-defined states of little use. They thus develop clan and tribal organizations that can provide collective protection (such organizations are also useful in an offensive capacity, an important characteristic of the history of the Eastern Hemisphere). As noted above, artists need to innovate without offending the tastes of their audiences. Artists often then try to borrow ideas from multiple precursors (artistic ideas thus flow across societies but are melded with local traditions). Though we have seen above that history is characterized by increased occupational specialization, there are rulers and merchants and farmers (or fishers or nomads) and builders, artisans and artists in most/all human societies that face enduring challenges and usually respond in broadly similar ways – yet with important differences, nevertheless, such as advocating different religions.

We might also make some broad general observations about human psychology. Humans have displayed an amazing capacity through history for rationalizing horrific acts. Slavery was taken for granted, as was mistreating civilians during war. Rulers never seemed to have any trouble finding agents that would commit murder or torture in their name – though the precise rationalizations of these behaviors vary across time and place. Yet history is also replete with acts of sacrifice and altruism, when individuals rise above narrow self-interest in order to benefit others. We should remind our students that history highlights both the worst and the best elements of the human spirit.

Forces Driving Similarities and Differences across Societies

We want our students to appreciate that there is one inter-connected history of the world. Yet we also want them to be able to place the history of any ethnic group or state within that broader history.[20] We live in a world that at times seems like a global village: musicians, athletes and actors reach global audiences. Business suits are ubiquitous. One can find hamburgers, lemon chicken, and curry almost everywhere in the world. Yet at the same time, the world faces conflicts grounded in huge differences in political institutions, religions, or economic prosperity. It is thus particularly important that we attempt to identify both the forces causing similarities and the forces causing differences across groups or states.

We can begin with key forces driving similarities:

Trade. World historians lavish attention on trade because through most of history it is the main avenue through which ideas of all sorts spread. We have noted above, for example, that merchants were a major conduit for the spread of religion. Most obviously, merchants carry goods with them. It is because of trade that there is now a vast similarity in the goods that are available in any country in the world (whether locals can afford them is a different matter). There are still, to be sure, local goods for tourists to seek, but these can often also be found in stores thousands of kilometers away. Goods, it might be noted, are embodiments of culture. If foods are carried, then so also are recipes for cooking these. If musical instruments are sold, so also are ideas on how to play these. Silk carries with it ideas of luxury. Trade in textiles more generally encourage similar styles of clothing in different parts of the world. We should recognize, though, that cultural attitudes toward particular goods might vary: cocoa had religious meaning in the Americas and tea was a ceremonial drink in China but both became items of mass consumption in Europe.

Books and other Documents. One type of good that merchants may carry is the written word. This may not loom large in most merchants' inventory. Yet merchants that find an audience for foreign ideas will act to satisfy it. Therefore, we see in history that once trade exists the written word travels. Stories like *The Arabian Nights* (or 1001 nights) were soon known across Eurasia. Medical treatises in China include observations from Arabic scholars. Chinese scholars read about Plato while Europeans read Confucius.

Similarities in People and Circumstances. Before we get too far in our list we should appreciate that an observed similarity need not reflect the transmission of ideas. Rather, it may reflect the fact that humans will often respond in similar ways to similar challenges. Marriage of some form is known in almost all human societies for the

simple reason that children need to be cared for, and marriage is a simple institutional solution to this challenge.

The Roman and Han Chinese Empires are similar in a wide variety of ways. They have bureaucracies, currencies, road networks, taxes on both agriculture and trade, and huge social disparities. If they had been in contact, we might well imagine that they borrowed ideas from each other. Yet they were not in direct contact with each other. The many similarities then reflect the fact that empires everywhere face similar challenges. They need to have bureaucracies, though they might select bureaucrats in different ways. They need to justify their rule so that bureaucrats and citizens fall in line, though they may choose different sorts of justification.

Conquest. Multi-ethnic empires often preached a toleration of cultural difference. As long as people were loyal to the empire, they were free to speak different languages and partake in different cultural practices. Yet empires nevertheless had an incentive to encourage some similarities: they promulgated laws, for example, that enhanced both trade and bureaucratic capability. They then naturally frowned on cultural attitudes that did not accord with such laws. Conquered peoples – and especially elites within conquered communities – might see advantages in adopting the language and customs of conquerors. (Nation states would later pursue linguistic and cultural homogeneity with greater zeal).

Porous Ethnic Identity. It appears that before the rise of nation states people were often less self-conscious of ethnic identity than they tend to be today. We thus often see the merging of groups in history (as when different groups migrate into Western Europe from central Asia over the millennia).[21]

Deliberate Efforts to Borrow. For many centuries, Japanese elites purposely imitated Chinese practices. They learned to speak and write in Chinese, valued Chinese literature, and engaged in practices such as tea ceremonies. Centuries later in Europe, aristocrats across the continent pursued French language and cultural practices. In such instances, cultural borrowing may be a marker of sophistication. Yet the wider population may gradually imitate these borrowed cultural practices.

We should stress that similarities are more easily achieved for some phenomena than others. Technologies are generally borrowed if they are found to be useful (though governments sometimes try to limit this process to maintain social stability). Goods find new markets fairly easily (though sometimes with different cultural understandings of their use). Missionary religions spread rapidly in lands of polytheistic religion (excepting Hinduism) but more slowly or not at all when confronted with another missionary religion. Languages have spread less rapidly than religion; there are thus many more languages in widespread use than there are religions.

We can identify a few key forces that encourage societal differences:

Geography matters. We have seen above that the availability of good harbors encourages both commerce and communal decision-making. We can expect the development of cultural attitudes supportive of these activities. We have also noted that natural boundaries have an important impact on political development. These may also encourage a society to see itself as distinct from others (China being an obvious example). Hill peoples often maintain distinct languages and cultural practices from those on the plains (in part, because they are harder to conquer). The availability of local crops and animals influences cuisine (the contemporary era of global cuisines reflects the global availability of foodstuffs).[22]

Path Dependence. We noted when discussing evolutionary processes above that a small difference between societies may set them on quite different evolutionary paths. Early Chinese emperors justified their rule in part through the idea of the Mandate of Heaven. Later emperors also found the idea congenial. This one idea arguably played an important role in encouraging both political unity and ethnic homogeneity across China through much of history.

Different Occupational Profiles. We have seen that farmers will often act in similar ways, and merchants will often act in similar ways. A society dominated by merchants will be different in many ways from a society dominated by landowners.[23]

Deliberate Efforts to be Different. Though Japanese elites for centuries mimicked Chinese behavior, they in later centuries would seek rather to celebrate Japanese differences. Many states – especially but not exclusively with the rise of nation states – have sought to justify their existence (and especially their conquests) by consciously differentiating themselves from others. They laud their own language, religion or cultural practices and seek to stress how these differ from others.

Historical Contingency

We have developed quite an extensive list above of our two sorts of coherence: types of historical change and recurring patterns. We now have another challenge for our students. We want them to appreciate that these various ideas allow us to bring a great deal of both coherence and understanding (they go together) to world history. Yet at the same time, we want students to appreciate that world history is complicated, and that at any time and place we witness the interactions of a variety of these forces. Despite our best efforts to identify similarities, every historical episode is unique both because the combination of forces is unique and because the decisions of human actors are far from perfectly predictable. As with other conundrums in world history, it is best to be explicit

with our students that we want them to appreciate that world history is both understandable and unpredictable.

We would do our students a serious disservice if we showered them with historical regularities but neglected to expose them to historical contingency. And what better way to do so than with another list? While we may all value the importance of historical contingency in principle, it is not always easy in practice to identify historical developments that might easily have turned out differently. Here are some major types of historical contingency:

- Decisive battles. To be decisive, a battle must first determine who wins the war. If we think that American superiority in air power would inevitably triumph over the Japanese in World War Two, then none of the battles of the Pacific War can be decisive. Even if a battle decides a war, we must ask how much the war matters. A war between two empires that are similar in many ways may have little impact on the grand course of world history. Though the standard for a decisive battle is high, some battles nevertheless seem to fit our definition. The earliest victories of Islamic forces against the Persian Empire may qualify here. Those early victories attracted many soldiers to the Islamic cause and sowed fear in the Persian army. Islamic Empires would behave differently in important ways. (The victory at Hastings of William the Conqueror in 1066 is another candidate, for it was a close battle, he governed quite differently, and Britain would much later play a huge role in world history.)[24]

- When evolutionary selection is weak. All of the world's major religions encourage a similar set of ethical values, encourage political stability and an acceptance of social differences, and encourage group solidarity. Yet they do so with a quite different set of religious doctrines. It would seem that the religious needs of large urban societies could be served in a variety of ways. Different societies might then select quite different religious doctrines– but these might then have myriad effects on historical development (not least the hostility that would arise between believers in different doctrines). The same may be true for many cultural values, and especially for cultural expressions; it may be important that a group dances together but not very important how they dance – yet people may nevertheless identify strongly with dances or other aspects of a particular culture.

- Personality diversity. Sometimes one or a small number of persons really matter. The obvious case is with rulers: a weak ruler may destroy a state that would otherwise survive (for a while), while a strong leader may lead to great success. Care must be taken here. Given the natural tendency of states to grow and then decline, we may tend to heap undue praise on the early rulers in a dynasty and too much blame on the later leaders. The last sultans of the

Ottoman Empire may not have been the best, but there may be little they could have done to stem Ottoman decline (moreover the late Ottoman practice of raising sultans in seclusion in the harem might explain much of the weakness in Ottoman rulers).

We could also highlight here merchants identifying new trade routes, innovators developing new technologies, or philosophers developing new ideas. We have stressed above that these are each collective endeavors. Merchants act in networks, innovators learn from each other, and philosophies are developed communally. Yet there is still much scope for individual initiative. The collective and the individual can be hard to disentangle. To what extent was Aristotle a brilliant mind, and to what extent did he get credit for ideas that were common in the agoras and academies of ancient Athens?[25]

- Glitches in inheritance. We noted above that unfit rulers might sometimes inherit power, with severely negative effects on a state. We should also note that sometimes rulers die without an heir. This also can induce political instability if there are multiple claimants to a throne. We should also recognize that in many states male relatives were expected to compete for the crown, and periodic battles over inheritance could be destabilizing. (We can in such a case blame instability in general on the idea that there should be competition for the crown, while appreciating that the number and nature of the competitors could affect how bad a particular succession crisis proved to be). Finally yet importantly, we should recognize that family dynamics among rulers and elite families could often have political repercussions. Students may readily appreciate that the sorts of story lines that populate television soap operas are more than matched by historical reality where torture, murder, and incest can often be observed among leading families.[26]

- Close elections. Sometimes elections matter. One leader would pursue quite different policies from another, and these have enduring consequences (any policy, once introduced, has beneficiaries who will fight for its maintenance). Chance occurrences during a campaign may determine the winner. We should also appreciate glitches in decision-making when there is no clear winner: both Mussolini and Hitler became leaders despite at the time heading minority parties. The points made here about elections can be applied more broadly to any type of communal decision-making.

- Path dependence. The idea here is that once an evolutionary process is underway, some paths become possible while others become unlikely. There may have been little to choose between gasoline and electric automobiles in the 1890s, but once gasoline gained an edge, the world was launched upon over a century of developing technology and infrastructure for gasoline-powered automobiles. We are witnessing today an unusual and challenging change in paths. How much would have had to change in 1890 for electric

motors to have gained an edge from the start? There may be many cases in history where small initial differences had massive historical repercussions. Sometimes, different societies develop in different ways. Or, as with automobiles, the whole world may follow the same path.

- Unforeseen Consequences. We will stretch the definition of contingency here so that it includes unforeseen consequences. Humans may make decisions that make sense at the time, but turn out later to have had deleterious effects for their interests. Empires hire 'barbarians' to patrol their borders. This is cheaper than fighting them, and might buy their loyalty. Yet the Romans, various Chinese Empires, the Abbasids, and several other empires would later be conquered by their barbarian troops: these became better acquainted with the empires they served, and the riches they contained. Feudal lords sensibly agreed to translate in-kind payments from serfs into monetary payments, but these lost value over time due to inflation, and encouraged trade, which in turn weakened feudalism. Such unforeseen consequences often loom large when we see changes in power relations. Those who are in positions of power make decisions that seem sensible, but set in train a process that over time reduces or eliminates their power.
- Natural disasters and climate shocks. We have noted above that these unpredictable (until today at least) events can have important impacts. Historians now speculate that many states fell in history due to such external shocks.[27] Changes in trade, social structure, and cultural attitudes might also be traced to such shocks. In other words, natural disasters or climate shocks often disrupted the trends and regularities we have identified above.

Coherence Isn't Everything

Of course, coherence isn't everything. The ideas outlined above help us address most but not all of the goals I outlined in "Why Teach World History?".[28] I would stress the word 'help'; there is still much value in making our goals explicit as well as our means for achieving these. In particular, they do not directly aid us much in addressing how individuals or societies manage complex realities. As noted above, though, we can better prepare students to appreciate and understand narratives about particular complex historical processes if they appreciate that some elements of these stories can be traced to developments in earlier times, and/or be compared to developments in other times and places. Moreover – importantly – they can see how some elements of each narrative we tell are connected to some elements of other narratives we have and will tell. There may also be elements of a particular narrative that are peculiar to a particular time and place – but we can only be sure of this if we have first investigated commonalities and continuities.

Concluding Remarks

World history is a glorious mess. There is so much going on that instructors and students can easily be overwhelmed. If we give students an understanding of the sort of ideas outlined in this essay then they will be better able to dive into the complexity of any time and place and topic. These ideas provide a skeletal structure onto which instructors can hang meaty discussions of particular events or processes. Students can be guided to think about what is similar to other times and places and what is different. Students will be more likely to remember what we teach them if they are constantly drawing connections across time and place, for humans can more readily access memories of any type if these are connected to other memories.

Instructors can usefully devote some time at the start of the course to outlining the various types of coherence (or perhaps start by emphasizing transformations, and work in the other types of coherence over time). They can then reinforce this material as different transformations, trends, or regularities are engaged later in the course. It is likely useful to highlight in the course outline which types of coherence are stressed for different topics. Student assignments and exam questions can be structured around coherence (or contingency): compare different empires, discuss the unforeseen consequences of particular actions, or examine how one transformation made a later transformation possible.

Note that by discussing both historical regularities and types of historical change we can give students an appreciation of the deep historical roots of many characteristics of the contemporary world. They can better appreciate how we have inherited advanced technology and scientific understanding, high incomes in many countries, inequality (within and across countries), large populations, global trade and global consumption, diverse occupational choices, a handful of large religions, a much larger but declining number of languages, and large governments.[29]

A textbook in world history should ideally address each of the ideas discussed above.[30] An instructor can of course choose which transformations or trends or relationships to emphasize. I will not pretend that I have identified every important source of coherence in this essay, but hope to have identified many/most of the most important types of historical change or recurring patterns in history. I hope to have encouraged a discussion that will identify even more.[31]

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Notes

[1] I thank Scott Auriat and two anonymous referees for very helpful comments. The ideas here were first presented at the World History Association conference in Pittsburgh in June 2023. I thank the conference organizers and the attendees at my session.

[2] I started each chapter in *Making Sense of World History* (New York: Routledge, 2021) with a discussion of how the chapter built on what went before and would set the stage for later developments.

[3] I also, in that book, inserted dozens of brief "Postscripts" which drew connections between past and present, such as how Denmark governs Greenland today because of Viking settlements there centuries ago.

[4] We should also appreciate that many societies pursued a mixed strategy that combined agriculture with hunting and gathering.

[5] I drew flowcharts of influences on and effects of a couple dozen transformations in my *Making Sense of World History* (New York: Routledge, 2021) that illustrate this point. The value of such flowcharts is discussed in my "Innocuous Organizing Devices for World History," this journal, February 2018.

[6] Many would argue that European military superiority only came with the ability to mass produce weapons.

[7] Edward Slingerland, *Drunk: How We Sipped, Danced, and Stumbled Our Way to Civilization* (New York: Hachette, 2021) argues that the production and consumption of alcohol has played a major role in world history. It may, for example, have been an important motive for the development of agriculture.

[8] Poverty levels have decreased dramatically in many countries, especially China, in recent decades because incomes have increased much faster than inequality.

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

[10] Happiness surveys in the contemporary world indicate that higher incomes, improved health, and political freedom all encourage greater happiness. Yet we must be careful of extrapolating back in time. A strong sense of community may have encouraged happiness in many past societies.

[11] Evolutionary processes might be viewed as a subset of historical transformations, since every successful mutation opens up new possibilities.

[12] I think it is a good idea to begin a world history at the start if possible. I thus had chapters on the Big History prelude (Big Bang to hominids) and another on human evolution in *Making Sense of World History*. Those chapters did apply theories of biological evolution. Yet thereafter social evolution was discussed on its own.

[13] Historians of technology now appreciate that the cumulative effect of innumerable small innovations was far greater than the handful of great innovations that garner the majority of historical attention. Moreover, the big innovations are themselves the combination of myriad smaller innovation: the development of agriculture, for example, required a host of developments of tools, crops, cooking techniques, storage vessels, and more.

[14] John Gerring, Brendan Apfeld, Tore Wig, and Andreas Forø Tollefsen, *The Deep Roots of Modern Democracy: Geography and the Diffusion of Political Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[15] Kyle Harper, *Plagues upon the Earth: Disease and the Course of Human History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), provides a masterful survey of different types of disease and the effects these have had. Jonathan Kennedy, *Pathogenesis: A History of the World in Eight Plagues* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2023) implicates pandemics in many key historical events: the disappearance of Neanderthals, the displacement of European hunter-gatherers by agriculturalists, the decline of Rome, the success of Islam against a weakened Byzantium and Persia, and the rise of the Atlantic slave trade (the earliest slave ships carried malaria and yellow fever to the Americas, after which both native Americans and Europeans lacked immunity to these diseases).

[16] There is intense debate about the degree to which humans have destroyed local environments in history. It appears that some cases in which humans are thought to have done so – such as Easter Island – were not in fact cases of environmental disaster. Elsewhere, though, it seems likely that, for example, irrigation systems did increase soil salinity over time.

[17] Jack Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[18] In *Making Sense of World History*, I identify the key challenges facing a couple dozen types of human agent, and then from time to time discussed similarities and differences in how they reacted to these.

[19] This accumulated knowledge may be lost when a society collapses. Builders rely on the state and organized religions to pay for the most expensive buildings in most societies, and disruptions of these may then in turn disrupt building programs for generations. New states or religions will generally prefer different architectural styles, and a process of learning will begin again.

[20] See Szostak, R. (2023). Why Teach World History?. *World History Connected*, *20*(3). https://doi.org/10.13021/whc.v20i3.3772.

[21] Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[22] Though geography continues to matter in the world (nations without access to the sea are still on average poorer), the precise mechanisms may change. Climate change will likely flood many coastal areas. Air conditioning is already increasing the possibilities of tropical areas, though climate change is increasing the challenges.

[23] This point is stressed by John Gerring, Brendan Apfeld, Tore Wig, and Andreas Forø Tollefsen, *The Deep Roots of Modern Democracy: Geography and the Diffusion of Political Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[24] I am indebted to Douglas Streusand for first acquainting me with the idea of decisive battles, and these examples.

[25] Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[26] Simon Sebag Montefiore, *The World: A Family History* (New York: Knopf, 2022) surveys millennia of family intrigues on all populated continents, though he rarely connects these to broader issues in world history.

[27] Bas van Bavel, Daniel R. Curtis, Jessica Dijkman, Matthew Hannaford, Maïka de Keyzer, Eline van Onacker, and Tim Soens, *Disasters and History: The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[28] Szostak, R. (2023). Why Teach World History?. *World History Connected*, *20*(3). https://doi.org/10.13021/whc.v20i3.3772.

[29] Most research in the human sciences focuses on the last couple of decades. There is an implicit assumption that we do not need historical perspective to comprehend contemporary developments. World history can provide an antidote to this erroneous assumption.

[30] Even mine misses a few that I have only become aware of recently! Nor had I organized the discussion as I have here.

[31] Likewise, I would hope to encourage a collective effort to identify the most important transformations, trends, and evolutionary developments of every era.