

Historiographical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history*

Patrick O'Brien

Department of Economic History, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK
E-mail: p.o'brien@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

This essay has been written to serve as a prolegomenon for a new journal in Global History. It opens with a brief depiction of the two major approaches to the field (through connexions and comparisons) and moves on to survey first European and then other historiographical traditions in writing 'centric' histories up to the times of the Imperial Meridian 1783–1825, when Europe's geopolitical power over all other parts of the world became hegemonic. Thereafter, and for the past two centuries, all historiographical traditions converged either to celebrate or react to the rise of the 'West'. The case for the restoration of Global History rests upon its potential to construct negotiable meta-narratives, based upon serious scholarship that will become cosmopolitan in outlook and meet the needs of our globalizing world.

'We shall of course have to return to this comparative history of the world which is the only scale on which our problems can be solved or at any rate correctly posed', Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century, Vol. 2: The Wheels of Commerce*, London: William Collins, 1982, p. 137.

'Without the cumulative history of the whole Afro-Eurasian Oikoumene, of which the Occident had been an integral part, the Western Transmutation would be almost unthinkable', Marshall Hodgson, in Edmund Burke III, ed., *Rethinking World History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 68.

* I am honoured to have been asked by the Editors to write a prolegomenon for the first issue of this new journal in global history. I congratulate Cambridge University Press and the London School of Economics and Political Science for their courage in acting as its patrons. I thank the Editors and my colleagues, Kent Deng and Gareth Austin, for help with this essay, which, like so many academic publications, is virtually a collective endeavour.

Introduction to two styles of modern global history: connexions and comparisons

For reasons connected to the leitmotif of our times ('globalization') a rapidly expanding confederation of historians are deploying multiple perspectives, a range of concepts and plural methodologies to locate their research, reflexions and teaching under rubrics variously labelled as world, universal or global history. Hairs may be split in dealing with possible ambiguities, the confusions of conflation, or with potentially illuminating distinctions embodied in all three adjectives.¹ Nevertheless historians who have committed (albeit as conscripts or collaborators) to this cosmopolitan enterprise in teaching and writing, as well as professional volunteers, find themselves at an intellectual frontier unbounded by geographies, hemispheres and continents, let alone national borders and parish boundaries. Against the grain of research paradigms established by Von Ranke for their subject, they are opting to become as resolutely unfettered as modern archaeology by disciplinary boundaries, established chronologies and textual traditions for the construction of European, American, Indian, Japanese, Chinese or other national histories.² Their confidence to commit to a contemporary battle between 'ancients and moderns' may be reinforced by the existence of a venerable historiographical tradition in the writing of global history. They might also be reassured by flows of monographs and textbooks, as well as several professional journals, testifying to the revival of a classical genre that is now clearly underway, and set to continue in the humanities and social sciences. My prolegomenon attempts to meet the wishes of the Editors of this journal for some historiographical elaboration upon the traditions of an ostensibly, but far from, modern field of history, which is now expanding in two main directions to meet demands for educated perspectives on accelerating trends towards the globalization of polities, economies and cultures.

First, and long established for several areas of history and for archaeology, is the model of connexions as a traditional and (persistently) persuasive way of writing global history that can be exemplified with reference to the writings of William McNeill. His seminal work has inspired recent programmes of historical investigation into webs of *connexions* across continents, oceans and countries over very long spans of time. McNeill's assumption is that 'encounters', 'contacts' and above all 'connexions' with 'outsiders' can be represented as the origins and engine of most economic, social, political, military, cultural, religious, technological and other conceivable types of change studied by historians.³ Pursued with scholarly detachment, and a proper appreciation of the long chronologies required to construct histories that aim to select and analyse *major* forces at work in the evolution of humanity by following McNeill's recommendations to explore connexions across the gamut of political frontiers, spatial units and geographical boundaries of all kinds, historians will avoid the condescension of cultures, the restrictions of time and the arrogance of nations

1 Manfred Kossok, 'From universal history to global history', and Bruce Mazlish, 'An introduction to global history', in Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens, eds., *Conceptualising global history*, Boulder: Westview, 1993, pp. 1–24 and 96–111.

2 Andrew Sherratt, 'Reviving the grand narrative: archaeology and long term change', *Journal of European Archaeology*, 3, 1, 1995, pp. 139–53.

3 McNeill's credo is enunciated in William McNeill, 'The rise of the West after twenty-five years', *Journal of World History*, 1, 1, 1990, pp. 1–21, but see his latest book: John McNeill and William McNeill, *The human web. A bird's-eye view of world history*, New York: Norton, 2004.

built into currently dominant styles of history, as well as post-modern incredulities towards meta-narratives of all kinds.⁴ ‘Interactions’ could never be simply or even mainly benign. For example, the spread of plagues, diseases and parasites; waves of destructive invasions by nomads; wars of conquest, plunder and imperial expansion; forcible conversions to alien systems of religious belief; the subversion of indigenous cultures, societies and communities by strangers, were equally significant, but deplorable, as episodes in global histories of ‘connexions’.⁵

McNeill’s general approach has clearly been disaggregated into well-specified types of connexion, investigated over long periods of contact maturing into transformations. The taxonomical divisions embodied under that label include: trade, investment, warfare, religion, migrations, diffusions of useful knowledge, botanical exchanges, and the spread of diseases. Proper attention has been accorded to the means of transportation and modes of communication that secured, facilitated and cheapened contacts by rivers, seas, and land, and latterly by air. Once relevant webs of major connexions are traced, understood and their significance evaluated, global history will broaden our education. It will provide the spatial and chronological perspectives required for the appreciation of the histories of nations, peoples, localities, groups and other factors that the majority of scholars study in greater depth and sophistication, but alas too often detached from potentially illuminating contexts with universal appeal.

Defined concisely, the second approach to global history extends geographical catchment areas (from the local to more encompassing units) for comparative histories of topics that might be the subject of a study across parish, regional and national boundaries and well as continents, oceans and separable cultures. Although linguistic and scholarly credentials for research in this style of history are extremely difficult to acquire, and the skills needed to ‘make sense’ of contrasts discovered is formidable, the methodological problems involved are familiar and similar to those encountered for exercises in comparative history, conducted within continental, imperial, national or regional frameworks.⁶ Comparative history helps to surmount the complexity and tyranny of local detail, looks into at least two mirrors, and seeks to offer persuasive answers to the great variety of questions selected for investigation. The inferences derived from the method tend to be illuminating when historians concentrate upon well-defined artefacts, institutions, organizations, social practices, attitudes and beliefs, which are found in dispersed places, and which have already been studied in some depth for particular locations, and which exhibit comparable, but, more importantly, dissimilar geographical, economic, political and social features in other places. Then, as Marc Bloch anticipated, the ‘comparative method can elicit from the chaotic multiplicity of circumstances those contrasts which were generally effective’, or as Kären Wigen recently observed: ‘Only in a dialogue with

4 Jerry Bentley, ‘Myths, wagers and some moral implications of world history’, *Journal of World History*, 16, 1, 2005, pp. 51–82.

5 Alfred Crosby, *Ecological imperialism: the biological expansion of Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, and Patrick Manning, ‘The problem of interactions in world history’, *American Historical Review*, 101, 3, 1996, pp. 771–83.

6 Charles Ragin, *The comparative method: moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987; Charles Tilly, *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984; R. Bin Wong, *China transformed; historical change and the limits of European experience*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

historians of other places can we appreciate what was unusual about a given country's experience'.⁷

In order to emphasize and communicate *major* differences as well as resemblances global historians will tend to aggregate and average contrasts across more extended spaces and larger populations (continents, oceans, cultures, and civilizations) than their colleagues who have the time and sources to engage in exercises in comparative history for more confined geographies and time scales.⁸ The recent break out from the spatial parameters and established chronologies for national histories has already produced innovatory and illuminating perspectives for the interpretation of local, regional, national as well as other geographical and spatial units.⁹ For purposes of teaching, and as 'building blocks' for an ongoing research programme designed to produce meta-narratives that are global in scope and universal in appeal, the comparative method looks set to dominate the field for years to come. It has already generated a bibliography of global histories concerned with: economic development, gender, the family, youth, marriage, diet, housing, health, military organization, government, slavery, human rights, parliaments, nationalism, religions, fundamentalism, revolutions, and so forth.¹⁰

As exemplars of comparative histories in printed form multiply it seems difficult to conceive of any theme that currently attracts attention from scholars engaged in writing national and local histories that could not be repositioned within wider geographies and longer temporal periods. My claim requires no emphasis for historians confronting the variety of biospheres and ecologies around the globe, which form essential prefaces for any analysis of contrasts in the histories of political institutions, social arrangements, cultures, demographic change and material progress observed for the enlarged areas of the world now under investigation. Attention to environments is promoting a reunification of history with geography, simply because variations in ecological conditions often turn out to be such a fundamental part of any persuasive explanation for contrasts in ways and in standards of living, both between and within the West and the Rest.¹¹ Tendencies endemic to academic specialization to treat the natural world either as a mere preface, or of negligible significance for the political, social, economic and cultural histories of nations, now seem truncated and myopic. Fortunately, renewed concern with the evolution of human interactions with nature attracts biologists, geologists, botanists, climatologists, palaeontologists and epidemiologists into history. Their deeper comprehension and, latterly, the modern modes they have adopted for the lucid communication of scientific knowledge pertaining to these all-important connexions, are being fed back into history. This often

7 William Sewell, 'March Bloch and the logic of comparative history', *History and Theory*, 6, 2, 1967, pp. 208–18, and Kären Wigen, 'Japanese perspectives on the time/space of early modernity', in *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences*, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2000, pp. 26–7.

8 E.g. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

9 Systematic comparisons with reference to meta-narratives in history with claims to be global are hallmarks of the Wisconsin School of World History—vide Philip Curtin, 'Graduate teaching in world history', *Journal of World History*, 2, 1, 1991, pp. 81–9.

10 Patrick Manning, *Navigating world history. Historians create a global past*, New York: Palgrave, 2003. Annotated bibliographies and review articles are published by *World History Bulletin*. Newsletter of the World History Association, Honolulu: May and November annually. And see Peter Stearns, ed., *World History in brief: major patterns of change and continuity*, New York: Longmans, 2002.

11 John Richards, *The unending frontier: an environmental history of the early modern world*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

occurs through archaeology, a humanistic discipline that has long remained in close contact with the ‘hard’ sciences.¹² Science recognizes no borders and has always striven for universal understanding. That is why the integration of its empirically validated theories and insights into long-neglected connexions between human and natural histories has become widely accepted as a necessary basis for comparative history on global and more local scales.¹³

Comparisons and connexions have dominated the flow of publications that have marked the restoration of global history to university and school curricula in humanities and the social sciences. Pursued with sensitivity both styles should deepen understanding of difference and diversity; meet the demand for perspective from those trying to comprehend accelerated trends towards interdependence and integration on a global scale and above all, allow for less ethnocentric appreciations of the manifold achievements of more peoples, communities and cultures over long spans of human history.¹⁴ As this survey shows, that aspiration has some way to go, after centuries of Eurocentric, Sinocentric and Islamocentric traditions traced by historiographers.

Europe’s historiographical traditions

Global histories have been written since Herodotus (495–425 BCE), whose cosmopolitan concerns were commended by Cicero. However, Thucydides (471–400 BCE) thought Greeks had no business investigating alien mythologies, religions, customs and traditions. History writing, he suggested, should be modelled upon his own study of the Peloponnesian War—sharper in focus, shorter in time horizons, based upon verified facts and prescriptive rather than descriptive in its purposes.¹⁵ Fortunately Herodotus had ignored such ‘Eurocentric’ concerns, and had ranged widely beyond the Hellenic world to include Egypt, India, Babylonia, Arabia and Persia in his histories in order, as he put it, to ‘preserve the memory of the past by placing on record the astonishing achievements of both our own and of the Asiatic peoples’.¹⁶ Herodotus used oral testimony and archaeological remains, as well as written sources. He made serious attempts to impose some chronology and order on streams of events that had occurred on three continents over long spans of time. His (still popular) book ends in ‘European triumphalism’ and turns into a celebration of the victories of the Greek polis (led by Athens) over the Persian Empire, which Herodotus (with appropriate irony) represented as a conflict between Occident and Orient, freedom and despotism, civilization and barbarism.¹⁷ Global historians will applaud Herodotus for the scale, scope and empathy of his histories; his reflexive interest in barbarian virtues as well as Greek vices; and regret the long hiatus

12 Robert Denemark, ed., *World system history. The social science of long term change*, London: Routledge, 2000.

13 David Christian, *Maps of time. An introduction to big history*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, and Alfred Crosby, ‘The past and the present of environmental history’, *American Historical Review*, 100, 4, 1999, pp. 1177–89.

14 Charles Hedrick, ‘The ethics of world history’, *Journal of World History*, 16, 1, 2005, pp. 33–50.

15 Arnaldo Momigliano, *The classical foundations of modern historiography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, pp. 29–53.

16 Ernst Breisach, *Historiography. Ancient, médiéval and modern*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994, p. 18.

17 John Evans, *Herodotus: explorer of the past*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

that occurred in the writing of *secular* world histories until Voltaire and his generation carried the project forward again during those brief decades of Enlightenment before the outbreak of the French Revolution.¹⁸

They might be puzzled to learn that, with the exception of a few historians like Diodorus, Polybius, and Dionysius and a handful of geographers and ethnographers (Strabo, Ptolemy, and Pliny), histories of known worlds did not attract more scholars writing during Graeco-Roman times.¹⁹ Although they lived in empires that maintained contacts and commerce with an array of cultures (African, Arabian, Persian, Indian, and even Chinese), historians of the classical era remained overwhelmingly concerned with Europe.²⁰ The histories of Suetonius, Livy and Tacitus deal mainly with the politics and scandals of Rome, or (pace Caesar and Sallust) with wars along the frontiers of the Empire.²¹ In China, even the most cosmopolitan of its ancient historians, Sima Qian, accorded less attention to the ethnographies of 'other peoples' than Herodotus.²² More generally, Chinese contemporaries of Graeco-Roman historians hardly mentioned the peoples and societies further to the west than India, or occasionally Bactria.²³

In Europe, steps in an ecumenical direction occurred when Christian and Jewish historians inaugurated a long tradition of providential narratives, beginning with the Creation. They set out to ensure that Greeks and Romans should not be left (in the words of Josephus) 'as the arrogant possessors of antiquity'.²⁴ That was why Orosius, a student of St. Augustine, insisted early in the fourth century CE that 'the Roman Empire arose in the West, and was nourished by the heritage of the East'.²⁵ Most Christian histories are chronicles about the evolution of mankind over stages of history, no longer bounded by the frontiers or cultures of the Graeco-Roman world. However, many Christian chroniclers considered that 'pagan' events mattered only because they hinted at something more meaningful in the future, so that events unconnected by earthly cause and effect were linked by God's plan in a kind of 'figural' history.²⁶ In 1158 Bishop Otto of Freising

18 Ken Pomeranz suggested that 'one can read Herodotus in a less triumphalist vein (which would make him even more the father of global history)'. That would be the view of François Hartog, *The mirror of Herodotus. The representation of the other in the writing of history*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

19 Nigel Sitwell, *Outside the empire. The world the Romans knew*, London: Paladin, 1986.

20 Jerry Bentley, *Old world encounters. Cross-cultural contacts and exchanges in pre-modern times*, New York: Oxford University Press, ch. 2. 'The era of ancient silk roads' and his article 'Cross-cultural periodization in world history', *American Historical Review*, 101, 2, 1996, pp. 751–6.

21 Donald Kelly, ed., *Versions of history from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 23–35 and 69–116.

22 David Morgan, 'The evolution of two Asian historiographical traditions', in M. Bentley, ed., *Companion to historiography*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 11–22.

23 I owe this observation to Ken Pomeranz, but vide Sima Qian, *Historical records* (tr. R. Dawson), Oxford: World Classics, 1994.

24 Flavius Josephus, *The wars of the Jews* (tr. William Whiston), London: Dent, 1906, preface, and Jean-Pierre Genet, *L'historiographie médiévale en Europe*, Paris: Presses du CRNS, 1991.

25 Kelley, *Versions of history*, p. 152.

26 Judith Herrin, *The formation of Christendom*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. Breisach entitles chapter 7 of *Historiography*, 'The Christian historiographical revolution'. See James Taylor, *The universal chronicle of Ranulf of Higden*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966. Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the drama of European literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

repeated that ‘all human power and learning had its origins in the East’.²⁷ Medieval histories included Asian and African civilizations right down to the Renaissance and Reformation, when Catholic and Protestant intellectuals began to look for useable pasts to help princes integrate populations and secure the frontiers required for the formation of nation states.²⁸ Despite this contraction of focus, the parties to Europe’s conflict over religion and national identity remained as aware as their medieval predecessors of places, peoples and cultures not merely outside the borders of their enclosed and ideologically encompassing polities, but well beyond the borders of Christendom itself.²⁹

Residing on an underdeveloped promontory on the western edge of the great Eurasian landmass, with ice to the north, uncharted oceans and an unexplored continent to the west, and facing the hostile power of Islamic communities to the south and east, Europeans did not secure their frontiers, religion and identity until the eighteenth century.³⁰ It took centuries to clear the Iberian peninsula of Arab power.³¹ Islamic warships preyed upon European shipping in the Mediterranean for over three centuries after the surrender of Grenada in 1492. Turkish armies crossed into the Balkans in 1350, took Constantinople in 1453 and menaced Vienna as late as 1683.³² For nearly a thousand years after the fall of Rome, Christendom braced its defences, imported useful knowledge and shaped its collective identity with help from historians, who composed ideologically charged narratives in contexts of conflicts (and encounters) with the powerful civilization of Islam on all its frontiers.³³ Memoirs, travelogues, diplomatic correspondence and investigations into Arabic medicine, astronomy and mathematics, together with commercial intelligence on societies under Ottoman dominion, flowed from east to west. Much of this information came through Genoa, Florence and Venice, along with spices, herbs, sugar, botanical drugs, jewels, chinaware, silks, cottons and elaborated metal goods, imported through the Middle East, from India, Southeast Asia and China.³⁴ However, the increasing knowledge of other places rarely entailed investigations into their histories.

For centuries before the symbolic date of 1492, the expense of procuring exotic and desirable luxuries, moving slowly overland and subject to tolls and extortionate charges for protection along the way, prompted Europeans to try to surmount the barriers to direct commerce with South Asia and the Far East maintained by their Islamic enemies. Following the Portuguese conquest of Ceuta in 1415, and subsequent expeditions in search of gold and slaves down the coast of Africa, came the voyages of discovery. Europeans at last broke out of their political, economic and mental encirclement by Islam, moving into the long-connected maritime world of Afro-Asian commerce across the Indian Ocean and into

27 Beryl Smalley, *Studies in medieval thought and learning*, London: Hambledon Press, 1981, p. 53, and Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles. The writing of history in medieval England*, London: Profile Books, 2004.

28 Eric Cochrane, *Historians and historiography in the Italian Renaissance*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981, and Geoffrey Dickens and John Tonkin, *The Reformation in historical thought*, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

29 John Phillips, *The medieval expansion of Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, and for the historiography see Kelley, *Versions*, pp. 229–82.

30 Patrick O’Brien, ed., *Atlas of world history*, London: Phillips, 1999, pp. 88–106.

31 David Abulafia, ‘Islam in the history of Europe’, *Itinerario*, 20, 3, 1996, pp. 9–23.

32 Malcolm Yapp, ‘Europe in the Turkish mirror’, *Past and Present*, 137, 1992, pp. 134–55.

33 Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the west*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, and Maxine Rodinson, *Europe and the mystique of Islam*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987.

34 Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim discovery of Europe*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982, pp. 1–57.

the China Seas.³⁵ Over the sixteenth century, flows of information into Europe about other parts of the world increased exponentially as a result of the establishment of regular and direct trade by sea round the Cape of Good Hope, and widened to include a new continent, the Americas.

Nevertheless, nearly two and a half centuries elapsed after the famous voyages of Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama before European reflections on an expanding new world led to the emergence of a secular and enlightened school of global historians. Its godfather was Voltaire, who composed a history concerned with 'only that which is worth knowing; the spirit, the customs, the practices of the principal nations based on facts which one cannot ignore'.³⁶ Voltaire, and his followers in France, the Netherlands, Scotland, Naples, Germany and other parts of Europe, deliberately constructed histories of their widening universe in ways that they conceived as a departure from the providential narratives of their clerical predecessors and the loyalties of historians writing for princes and their obedient subjects.³⁷ The aspiration of these Enlightenment thinkers was propitious. As a result of regular contacts and commerce, the trickle of information about peoples, geographies, technologies, politics, warfare, customs, manners, commodities and artefacts turned into a river of knowledge about societies and economies beyond Europe.³⁸ For radical intellectuals, China and Islam became alternative models favourably contrasted with the political systems, social arrangements, religious beliefs and economic policies of the West. European histories of the world became not only wider and deeper, but also more reflexive, as scholarship took over space from propaganda, sycophancy, fantasy, religion and dynastic ideologies.³⁹

For something like half a century before the French Revolution and the colonization of South and Southeast Asia, European historians published narratives of enlightenment that resituated Europe's and Christendom's place in world history by including ancient and classical Mediterranean civilizations, and by widening their gaze to take in China, India, Japan and Islamdom, as well as the recently rediscovered Americas. Europe's promising 'school' of world historians, which reached its apogee at Göttingen in the early years of the nineteenth century, also dealt with the natural histories, the religions and above all the ethnographies of most parts of an increasingly interrelated universe.⁴⁰

35 Kirti Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe. Economy and civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

36 John Brumfitt, *Voltaire historian*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 61, and Karen Kupperman, *America in European consciousness 1493–1750*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. Peter Burke has tracked Voltaire's predecessors' concerns with Islam and Asia. Peter Burke, 'European views of world history from Giovio to Voltaire', *History of European Ideas*, 6, 3, 1985, pp. 237–51.

37 Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of enlightenment. Cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

38 Donald Lach, *Asia in the making of Europe*, 3 vols, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965–93.

39 Gregory Blue, 'China and western social thought in the modern period', in Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue, eds., *China and historical capitalism. Genealogies of sinological knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 57–109.

40 Michael Harbsmeier, 'World histories before domestication. The writing of universal histories, histories of mankind and world histories in late eighteenth-century Germany', in *Culture and History*, 5, 1989, pp. 93–131. Göttingen's scholars depended for their evidence on 38 volumes of documents for universal history from the earliest account of time to the present compiled from the original authors, published in *Great Britain: 1736–65*—cited in Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende, eds., *British and German historiography 1750–1850*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 7.

Favourable interpretations of non-European polities, societies, cultures and religions by philosophers and physiocrats did not go unchallenged. Bernier, Montesquieu, Defoe, Winckelman and Hume, among others, remained resolutely unimpressed with Chinese civilization.⁴¹ Nevertheless historians of that era covered cultures, geographies and spans of time that their modern counterparts can only envy, confronted as they are with a much greater volume of professional knowledge and interpretation than anything included in earlier reports conveyed by missionaries, mariners and merchants.

Alas, the ironic reflexion and serious debate that historians of the Enlightenment period brought to the task of repositioning Europe in a secular history of the world came to be overshadowed by two centuries of Western triumphalism. In the aftermath of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1789–1815, Europeans acquired massive additions to the populations, territories and natural resources in Asia, the Pacific and Africa under their direct or informal control. During an ‘imperial meridian’ European naval and military superiority over the states and societies of other continents emerged as virtually irresistible.⁴² European settlers escaped from earlier metropolitan restraints upon the pursuit of wealth in new worlds, and were free to exploit natural resources and native workforces in other continents under rules of their own making, tempered only by religion and the paternalism of some colonial regimes.⁴³ Around the same time, Western Europe moved clearly onto a trajectory for sustained and accelerated economic growth, which led to widening divergences in levels of technology, productivity, living standards and military prowess between East and West, North and South.⁴⁴

At this juncture in world history a majority of European intellectuals returned to the introspective attitude of Rome. Those who looked beyond Europe either wrote imperial histories, or displayed versions of cultural arrogance exemplified by the views of Hegel. He maintained that only peoples who ‘form a state’ or have ‘reached a certain level of spiritual development have a history’, and that ‘the history of the world travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, and Asia the beginning’.⁴⁵ ‘Eurocentric’ traditions in the construction of global histories intersected with theories of social development that followed from the American, French and Industrial Revolutions. They clarified, and purported to explain, Europe’s geopolitical, technological and economic hegemony over the rest of the world.⁴⁶ Teleological conceptions of human progress and stages of history were venerable. They were latent in Christian concepts of time and change, and had been immanent in the writings of Montesquieu, Leibniz and Condorcet and others before Hegel. However, the history and social science that came on stream over

41 Alan Macfarlane, *The riddle of the modern world: of liberty, wealth and equality*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

42 Stuart Woolf, ‘The construction of a European world view in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars’, *Past and Present*, 137, November 1992, pp. 72–101, and Christopher Bayly, *The birth of the modern world*, part 1, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

43 David Abernethy, *The dynamics of global dominance. European overseas empires, 1415–1980*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

44 Pomeranz, *Great divergence*, and Michael Adas, *Machines as the measure of men: science, technology and ideologies of western dominance*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

45 Bruce Mazlish, *The riddle of history. The great speculators from Vico to Freud*, New York: Harper Row, 1966, pp. 132–63.

46 Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989.

the nineteenth century, representing Europe as the world's most advanced and culturally superior civilization, became increasingly overt and strident.⁴⁷

Hegelian presumptions that Europe maturing into the West represented the model for modernity and progress became present in the writings of most historians, who implicitly, and often explicitly, derived that assumption from a succession of canonical social scientists, including Malthus, Hegel, Tocqueville, Saint Simon, Comte, Mill, Spencer, Marx and Weber. Theories formulated by this famous line of intellectuals exemplify a tradition in the history of European thought that posits that social evolution is natural and immanent in a civilization, country, region, society or other unit under consideration, even when it may be punctuated by recognized interludes of stasis or regression.⁴⁸ History exhibits trends that are directional and necessary for the realization of some pre-selected overarching goal: equilibrium rates of population growth in the anxieties of Malthus; the spirit of universal freedom embraced by Hegel; democratic institutions seen (however ambivalently) as the wave of the future by Tocqueville; Saint Simon's technocracy; universal scientific knowledge in the vision of Comte; individual liberty as extolled by Mill; the classless society predicted by Marx; and the rationalities detected by Weber in his comparisons across civilizations.

All generalizations about the history of the Orient were, however, based on scanty information. Malthus had virtually no access to censuses of population from anywhere in the East.⁴⁹ Saint Simon knew as much about Chinese technology as Comte did about the empire's scientific traditions. For what they were worth, Hegel, Tocqueville and Mill probably took their cues about the origins and nature of oriental despotism from Jesuit missionaries, or second-hand from Montesquieu and Hume.⁵⁰ Marx and Engels invented an Asiatic mode of production.⁵¹ Spencer bowdlerized Darwin and unwittingly provided racists with that infamous pseudo-scientific label 'survival of the fittest'.⁵² Weber tried to analyse the *Geist* animating the evolution of European, Hindu and Chinese civilizations, a task that turned out to be way beyond the capacities of a single scholar, even a man with his awesome erudition.⁵³ All of them came up with reasons why interludes of progressive change outside the West degenerated into stasis.

Endeavouring to comprehend the motors and forces making for such change, most historians retained antipathies to over-generalized explanations, but at the same time they imported (some say internalized) vocabularies, taxonomies and theories from philosophy,

47 Robert Nisbet, *Social change and history. Aspects of the western theory of development*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 163–74 and 190–93, and Lars Magnusson *et al.*, eds., *The rise of the social sciences and the formation of modernity. Conceptual change in context 1750–1850*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998. For Christian origins see Vasilis Lambropoulos, *The rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of interpretation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

48 Robert Nisbet, *The history of the idea of progress*, New York: Basic Books, 1981.

49 Massimo Livy-Bacci, *The population of Europe*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

50 Gregory Blue, 'China and western thought', pp. 57–105.

51 Shlomo Avineri, ed., *Karl Marx on colonialism and modernism*, New York: Gordon City, 1968, and for its ramifications in Marxist thought, see Ivan Vujacic, 'Marx and Engels on development and underdevelopment', *History of Political Economy*, 20, 3, 1988, pp. 471–98.

52 John Burrow, 'Historicism and social evolution', in Stuchtey and Wende, eds., *British and German historiography*, pp. 251–64.

53 Wolfgang Schluchter, *Paradoxes of modernity: culture and conduct in the theory of Max Weber*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

sociology, economics and anthropology.⁵⁴ As history matured into a subject for professional teaching and research, with its own Rankean pretensions to be scientific, generations of historians preferred to remain safely bunkered in the security of national and (as time went on) local archives. They worked with varying degrees of detachment (most implicitly, but some formally employed) in the service of nation states.⁵⁵ By the late nineteenth century, European scholars (including Ranke, Lavis, Acton, and Beer) began to construct multi-volume histories of the world. Alas Acton's Cambridge modern history remained infused with the assumptions, metaphors, taxonomies and theories of European social science.⁵⁶ Ernest Lavis and Alfred Rambaud edited a twelve-volume *Histoire Générale* (1893–1901) that devoted only a tenth of its pages to the non-Western world.⁵⁷ Henry Buckle wrote a three-volume history of 'civilization' with reference to England and was entirely frank about his assumption that civilization could be 'broken into two vast divisions': the European division in which 'Man is more powerful than Nature and the non-European division, in which Nature is more powerful than Man'.⁵⁸

The controversy over Lamprecht's ambition to write less Eurocentric and more universal cultural histories shows that his programme aroused the kind of ire from his highly professional colleagues in Germany that Thucydides had directed at Herodotus many centuries before.⁵⁹ Apart from the exemplary endeavours of Lamprecht and Weber, aspirations to write cosmopolitan, secular and truly universal histories only survived among a handful of isolated and now forgotten European scholars who eschewed the condescensions embodied in Western science, technology, social science, liberalism, colonialism and religion. They continued to write outside the encompassing national and imperial frameworks associated with the geopolitical hegemony of Europe.⁶⁰

Most European historians left the detailed study of spaces, populations, polities and societies constituting most of the world to colonial administrators, missionaries, philologists, geographers and anthropologists, who, to their credit, produced volumes of useful evidence that is now being reconfigured into modern global history.⁶¹ Groups of eminent historians from the universities of imperial powers limited themselves to

54 Arif Dirlik, 'History without a center? Reflections on eurocentrism', in Eckhardt Fuchs and Benedikt Stuchtey, eds., *Across cultural borders. Historiography in global perspective*, Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002, pp. 247–84.

55 Ulrich Muhlock, 'Universal history and national history: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German historians and the scholarly community', in Stuchtey and Wende, eds., *British and German historiography 1750–1850*, pp. 25–48.

56 Michael Bentley, 'Approaches to modernity: western historiography since the Enlightenment', in Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to historiography*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 395–508.

57 Eckhardt Fuchs, 'Provincializing Europe. Historiography as a trans-cultural concept', in Fuchs and Stuchtey, eds., *Across cultural borders*, pp. 1–28, and Keith Nield, 'Liberalism and history: reflections on the writing of world histories', in Michael Harbsmeier and Magens Larson, eds., *Culture and history. The writing of world histories*, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1989, pp. 65–92.

58 Graeme Snooks, *The laws of history*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 109, Mazlish and Buultjens, *Global history*, and Nield, *Culture and history*, pp. 65–92.

59 Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Peoples without a history in British and German historical thought', in Stuchtey and Wende, eds., *British and German historiography*, pp. 266–87, and Roger Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht, a German academic life*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1993.

60 Citations to cosmopolitan world histories by Cesare Cantin, Joachim Lelevel, Friederich Schlosser, Isaac Isserlin, Nickolae Ionga, Eugeni Zhukov, Bratiann Gheorghe can be found in Lucian Boia, ed., *Great historians of the modern age: an international dictionary*, New York: Greenwood, 1989.

61 Eric Wolf, *Europe and the people without history*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

constructing and communicating inspiring and celebrated books to trace, explain and more or less explicitly lend ideological support to the maintenance and extension of Western colonial rule.⁶² Right from the start that mission aroused radical European enemies against an otherwise popular imperial project, and the religious, economic, cultural and Social Darwinist ideas that inspired colonialism.⁶³

After that other significant conjuncture in world history and historiography, the Great War of 1914–18, triumphalism was maintained by reconfiguring Europe to embrace European settlements overseas in North America, Australia and the ‘white’ countries of Latin America, within the conceptually fluid and ill-defined space of a ‘civilization’ referred to as ‘Western’ or simply ‘the West’.⁶⁴ As a heterogeneous, social, ethnic and culturally constructed entity, considered as an evolving collectivity of peoples within the frontiers of several competitive nation states, it is true that ‘the West’ has declined in power with decolonization and the economic rise of ‘the Rest’ after the Second World War.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, in geopolitical, technological and economic terms, the position of this constructed entity *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world has remained formidable enough to sustain Hegelian presumptions of superiority in histories and social sciences with pretensions to offer reliable explanations and assessments of observed (and measured!) conditions of civilizations, nations, cultures, regions, societies and communities on a world-wide scale right down to the present day.⁶⁶

Social science rarely engages seriously enough with history and prefers idealized facts, abstract and constructed data, conceptual categories and parsimonious theories to the ambiguities and complexities of the past, especially the inaccessible past of alien and impenetrable cultures beyond the boundaries of Europe and North America.⁶⁷ Furthermore the paucity of knowledge (especially historical evidence) available to European social scientists to analyse global processes in evolution until well into the twentieth century has made it easy for their critics to expose their attempts as ill-informed, under-specified and above all as Eurocentric.⁶⁸ Modern (i.e. Western) economic growth (as analysed by Kuznets and Rostow) has now matured into a major branch of economics concerned with universal theories of economic growth and development.⁶⁹ And yet, despite the

62 Benedikt Stuchtey, ‘World power in world history: writing the British empire, 1885–1945’, in Benedikt Stuchtey and Eckhardt Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history 1800–2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 213–54.

63 Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and empire: a study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999.

64 Christopher GoGuilt, ‘The changing idea of the West from the 1880s to the 1920s’, in Sylvia Federici, ed., *Enduring western civilization. The construction of the concept of western civilization and its others*, Westport: Praeger, 1995, pp. 37–63.

65 Alice Amsden, *The rise of ‘the rest’. Challenges to the West from late-industrializing economies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

66 James Blaut, *Eight eurocentric historians*, New York: Guilford Press, 2000; Robert Young, *White mythologies. Writing history and the West*, London: Routledge, 1990; Philip Pomper et al., eds., *World history: ideologies, structures, identities*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

67 Johan Galtung, ed., *Macro history and macro historians*, Westport: Praeger, 1997.

68 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, 1978, and James Blaut, *The colonizer’s model of the world*, New York: Guilford Press, 1993.

69 Simon Kuznets, *Modern economic growth: rate, structure and spread*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, and Walt Rostow, *How it all began*, London: Methuen, 1975, and as deconstructed by Arturo Escobar, *Encountering development: the making and unmaking of the third world*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

scholarship and prodigious energy put into the enterprise, the database assembled by Kuznets and his followers for the measurement of economic growth over time spans longer than the last half century hardly covers anywhere properly outside the affluent West—except Japan.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, over the twentieth century, information about the world matured from a river into a tidal wave, but syntheses of that knowledge into social science and validated historical generalizations hardly advanced between the narratives of Voltaire and the historical sociology of Weber.⁷¹ Western advocates for alien rule are now an eccentric minority, but the case for empires (informal rather than formal) continues to be made long after decolonization and the rise of American hegemony in the wake of the Second World War.⁷² Some historians still believe that for centuries history had proceeded through demarcated stages en route to the rise of modernity exemplified by the evolution of the West—until with the collapse of Communism in the 1980s, the world arrived at an ‘end of history’.⁷³

Other historiographical traditions

Until recently the premature challenge posed by a tiny cosmopolitan minority of Europeans to Eurocentric paradigms for the construction of global history received virtually no support from historians from other cultures and other continents.⁷⁴ Multicultural reinforcement did not emerge as Braudel assumed because ‘Europe invented historians and made better use of them.’⁷⁵ Venerable traditions in writing something about the histories of civilizations, cultures, religions, dynasties and empires and polities beyond their own spatial, ethnic and political boundaries can be traced and interrogated for China, Islam, Japan and Southeast Asia, but not it seems for Animist sub-Saharan Africa, Australasia and the Pacific, the pre-Columbian Americas and, surprisingly, for large parts of South Asia before colonization in the eighteenth century.

Although Africa’s varied contributions to world history are now recognized as profound, the production of written history emanating from that part of the world remained limited before the era of decolonization.⁷⁶ From the times of Herodotus and Pliny, the sources utilized largely by Arab and European visitors (soldiers, sailors, merchants, colonial administrators, missionaries, travellers) to record and chronicle geographical, ethnographic, social, political, cultural and economic as well as historical information about Africa remained dominated by archaeological remains, artefacts of all kinds and, above all,

70 Angus Maddison, *The world economy: a millennial perspective*, Paris: OECD, 2001, but see Robert Allen, *et al.*, ‘Wages, prices and living standards in China, Japan and Europe’, unpublished paper on <http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/factormarkets.php> (consulted June 2005).

71 Randall Collins, *Weberian sociological theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

72 Sharon Kormans, *The right of conquest: the acquisition of territory by force in international law and practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, and Niall Ferguson, *Empire. How Britain made the modern world*, London, Allen Lane, 2003.

73 Francis Fukuyama, ‘Reflections on the end of history, five years later’, in Pomper, *World history*, pp. 199–217.

74 Benedikt Stuchtey and Eckhardt Fuchs, ‘Problems of writing world history: western and non-western experiences, 1800–2000’, in Stuchtey and Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history*, pp. 1–44.

75 Braudel, *Wheels of commerce*, p. 134.

76 Maghan Keita, ‘Africans and Asians: historiography and the long view of global interaction’, *Journal of World History*, 16, 1, 2005, pp. 1–32, and Joseph Inikori, *Africans and the industrial revolution in England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

by oral testimonies conveyed in stylized form by Africans to temporary migrants from other places—curious, involved or self-interested enough to record impressions of a remembered legendary and mythologized past.⁷⁷ How Africans comprehended historical worlds beyond their own local and mental horizons is seldom referred to in this richly textured body of oral and artefactual evidence, which forms the basis for most of their pre-colonial history.⁷⁸

Before South Asia passed under British control, the flow of written histories emanating from Hindu civilization is deemed to have been slight. In his introduction to 'Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon', the editor did, however, single out four papers that 'dispose of the view that people of Ancient India had no sense of history'. He also drew attention 'to the remarkable dearth of historical writing in the period down to the first millennium A.D'.⁷⁹ Hindu kingdoms did, nevertheless, maintain elaborate records and genealogies. Moreover, annals and a wide range of Indo-Islamic historical writing, drawing upon Arab and Persian models, developed under the patronage of Mughal courts.⁸⁰ Despite their location at the centre of an ancient Afro-Asian trans-oceanic system of commerce and the locus of a universal religion (Buddhism) before the intrusion of Europeans, 'Indians, especially Hindus, never displayed a deep interest in writing historically, nor until it could be used as propaganda against their British imperial rulers did they find hard history to be a reliable, ethical or reasonable way of constructing the past'.⁸¹ Here Nandy neglects Persian and Islamic traditions in writing histories of the sub-continent. His statement may (as the Arab geographer, al-Biruni, suggested as long ago as the year 1000) reflect feelings among Indians that they had no need to refer to history (or to geography and travelogues) to retain possession of superior knowledge about themselves and the rest of an Asian universe that they knew so well.⁸² Perhaps they lacked curiosity about their origins and how their sophisticated civilization changed over time.⁸³ Yet even before the collapse of the Mughal Empire and its takeover by Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, Hindu and Muslim intellectuals had begun to historicize and explain the decadence of that Empire.⁸⁴

The observation by a Hindu poet in 1888 that 'no moon of history is to be seen in the pure sky of India' seems to be hyperbole.⁸⁵ Although that notion originated from

77 David Birmingham, 'History in Africa', in Bentley, *Companion to historiography*, pp. 692–708. Above all see Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization and barbarism. An authentic anthropology*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1981.

78 Andreas Eckert, 'Fitting Africa into world history: a historiographical exploration', in Stuchtey and Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history*, pp. 255–70, and Junzo Kawada, 'Epic and chronicle: voice and writing historical representations', in Solvi Sogner, ed., *Making sense of global history*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2001, pp. 255–64.

79 Cyril Philips, *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 2.

80 Harbans Mukhia, 'Time, chronology and history: the Indian case', in Sogner, ed., *Making sense of global history*, pp. 247–53.

81 Christopher Bayly, 'Modern Indian historiography', in Bentley, *Companion to historiography*, pp. 677–80, and Philips, ed., *Historians of India*, chs. 10–12, and Sally Wriggins, *A Buddhist pilgrim on the Silk Road*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1996.

82 Ashis Nandy, 'History's forgotten doubles', in Pomper, *World history*, pp. 159–78. Harbans Mukhia, 'Time, chronology and history, the Indian case', in Sogner, ed., *Making sense of global history*, pp. 247–51.

83 Vinay Lal, 'The perspective of Indian history', in Stuchtey and Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history*, pp. 271–90.

84 Bayly, *Modern Indian historiography*, pp. 677–80.

85 Lal, *The perspective of Indian history*, pp. 271–90.

historians and administrators in the service of the Raj, interestingly it has been taken up by post-colonial intellectuals who now enquire ‘why children all over the world today have to come to terms with a subject called history, when we know that this compulsion is neither natural nor ancient’.⁸⁶ Some prefer traditional Hindu (and other ways) of accessing the past through myths, legends, ballads and folk tales, to the constructed pasts of enlightenment histories linked to concepts of modernity ‘obliterating certain pasts and homogenizing the future’.⁸⁷

By contrast, Chinese and Japanese traditions in writing history are venerable and have remained integral components of both cultures right down to the present day.⁸⁸ Before these two polities confronted serious geopolitical challenges from the West (1839–53), the purposes, themes, methods and styles of their written histories look similar enough to be subsumed into a single East Asian tradition.⁸⁹ Although Japanese histories, which emerged several centuries later than China’s, displayed distinctive characteristics and reflected political changes on the islands, they derived from Chinese models, were written in Chinese characters, and were designed to serve comparable social and political purposes.⁹⁰

As a body of literature, East Asian history exemplifies themes, genres, styles, and methods that were familiar to students of Western history. Thus whole libraries of books, largely untranslated, include: chronicles, annals, genealogies, biographies of rulers, officials, scholars, military men, virtuous women and collections of statues, edicts, and other official documents, as well as a smaller range of scholarly monographs on such topics as calendars, astronomy, geography and economic life.⁹¹

Though history and biography were supposed to aid in making moral and political judgments, scholars writing Chinese and Japanese history could be punished by their rulers for the insertion of ‘politically incorrect’ assessments.⁹² Dynastic and other cycles, rather than anticipations of progress, dominated the ordering of time and chronologies in East Asian thought.⁹³ By the seventh century Chinese history had acquired an official status below the classics and above non-canonical philosophical texts and literature. Historians served the purposes of the empire in three ways. Firstly they provided precedents for policies promoted by emperors and shoguns. Secondly, the records and annals of governance that they edited contained lessons in statecraft (*jingshi*) for officials.⁹⁴ Thirdly, they compiled stylized biographies of the great, the good and the bad that inculcated morality (*baobian*) among the emperors, officials and, above all, their subjects, so that ‘the writing of history

86 Ibid. p. 277.

87 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 41, and Lal, ‘The perspective of Indian history’, pp. 271–90.

88 Edward Wang, ‘History, space and ethnicity. The Chinese world view’, *Journal of World History*, 10, 2, 1999, pp. 285–305.

89 William Beasley and Edward Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961, pp. 9–19 and 213–28.

90 George Robinson, ‘Early Japanese chronicles: the six national histories’, in Beasley and Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan*, pp. 213–28.

91 Ku Weiyang, ‘Baobian and Jingshi, on the rule of the traditional Chinese historian’, in Sogner, ed., *Making sense of global history*, pp. 338–49.

92 Denis Twitchett, *Writing of official history under the Tang*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

93 Wang, *History, space and ethnicity*, pp. 285–305.

94 Ku, *Baobian and Jingshi*, pp. 338–49.

in traditional China had the didactic purpose of guiding people how to behave in the way that its Confucian hierarchy expected'.⁹⁵

This expectation also governed the style that Chinese and Japanese historians adopted when they occasionally wrote about other places, societies and populations, whether across the sea from the islands of Japan, or beyond a Chinese empire extending its frontiers to include more and more ethnically diverse populations in Central Asia. How to incorporate these peoples into their sense of identity and history was among the early problems confronted by Han Chinese rulers. With difficulty, that was accomplished by redefining subjugated societies as Chinese, and also by affirming that nomadic dynasties from Mongolia and Manchuria that had conquered the empire had thereby secured mandates to become rulers of China. Provided that conquering aliens recognized Chinese culture and codes of behaviour as superior to their own indigenous, political, social, religious, and moral beliefs, they could be assimilated into the Celestial Empire. In short, China was constructed, extended, sustained and ruled for some centuries on the basis of a cultural and not an ethnic definition of its core identity.⁹⁶

That basic belief in acculturation gradually permeated the views of Chinese intellectuals who investigated and wrote about the geographies, ethnographies and histories of all other communities and polities located beyond the borders of the Empire.⁹⁷ In so far as Chinese historians considered states and societies outside China, until well into the nineteenth century they conceived of a world hierarchically ordered in sinocentric terms. They invariably assumed that, by virtue of its superior civilization, China stood at the centre and apex of the universe, and that its emperor enjoyed a mandate from heaven not only to rule the empire, but also to exact deference and tribute from all other peoples known and unknown to the Chinese.⁹⁸ Over the centuries, by way of military conquest, commerce and exploration, the Chinese maintained an extensive web of contacts and connexions initially with peoples located close to the frontiers of the empire (Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese, Mongols, Manchus, Turks and Tibetans), and, long before the establishment of regular trading links with Iberian merchants in the sixteenth century, with Indonesia, Thailand, India, Burma and societies as far away as East Africa and West Asia.⁹⁹ Along with their Greek, Roman, Christian and Islamic counterparts, Chinese ethnographers and historians classified populations outside their 'Middle Kingdom' as 'barbarians'. Nevertheless, their own imperial tradition of acculturation led to a politically expedient recognition that some peoples could be more civilized, or less barbaric, than others. Predictably that recognition was more readily accorded to an inner zone of neighbouring polities and peoples (Japan, Korea,

95 Ku, *Baobian and Jingshi*, p. 339.

96 Alastair Johnston, *Cultural realism, strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. Ken Pomeranz tells me that this generalization has been qualified by recent scholarship by Patricia Ebrey, in Melissa Brown, ed., *Negotiating ethnicities in China and Taiwan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. See also Hoyt Tilman, 'Proto-nationalism in twelfth century China? The case of Ch'en Liang', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 39, 2, 1979, pp. 403–28; Peter Perdue, *China marches west*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, pp. 476–86.

97 Julia Thomas, 'High anxiety: world history as Japanese self discovery', in Stuchtey and Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history*, pp. 309–15.

98 Ricardo Mak, 'The middle kingdom struggles to survive: the Chinese worldview in the nineteenth century', in Stuchtey and Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history*, pp. 291–93.

99 Samuel Adshead, *China in world history*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995, and Samuel Adshead, *Central Asia in world history*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1993.

Vietnam), who wrote in Chinese characters and deferred to the moral codes, cultural norms and geopolitical expectations of Confucian China.¹⁰⁰ Chinese historians and cartographers divided the world into zones according to their cultural and geographical proximity to China.¹⁰¹ As Chen Yang, the Tang scholar observed, ‘some people are born in barbarian lands but their actions are in harmony with rites and righteousness. In that case they have a Chinese heart and mind’.¹⁰² In Japan, an autonomous Asian kingdom with a sinicized culture, this sinocentric *Weltanschauung* continued to be accepted by most scholars until the late eighteenth century. Tokugawa historians then began to construct a mythical past and discover Japanese sages, in order to help Japan to effect the transformation from barbarian satellite to divine realm, replacing China at the apex of a hierarchy of Asian states. This status Japan eventually, albeit briefly, attained by invading China in 1937 and challenging the West to a disastrous military conflict.¹⁰³

The most significant other historiographical tradition to interrogate is Islamic. No statistician has added up the cumulating stock of pages devoted to history through time and across cultures before the era of Voltaire. However, the amount, range and depth of literature that could be represented as historical, written by Muslims for Muslims in Arabic, Persian and Ottoman, may well have exceeded the total amount available to Europeans in Latin and secular languages, or to East Asians in Chinese.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, it is *prima facie* surprising that Islam’s tradition in writing history did not evolve in more ecumenical directions, given the vast expanse of territory and the sheer scale and variety of populations conquered by Islamic armies. An extensive range of ethnic communities, traditional societies and political systems were converted to Islam’s religious and moral codes and living under its institutions. More than a millennium of connexions with other civilizations occurred, whether through commerce and warfare, or through the intermediation of Jewish, Christian and other minorities under Islamic rule.¹⁰⁵

Considered as a store of written records that continues to provide a great deal of reliable evidence and contemporary opinion, that tradition seems in form and scale as impressive as anything produced by European, Chinese or Japanese scholars. For example, it includes all the familiar genres styles and epistemologies: annals, court chronicles, accounts of battles, biographies of Caliphs and other rulers, and prosopographies of ulama, lawyers, teachers and other people. It also contains documents and records pertaining to the histories of separable provinces, cities and localities included within an expanding civilization defined by adherence (or deference) to a universal religion.¹⁰⁶

Although there is some history from below and a sprinkling of thematic monographs, Islamic historiography is dominated by narratives of its classical period, by the words and

100 Richard Smith, *Chinese maps: images of all under heaven*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

101 Masayuki Sato, ‘Imagined peripheries. The world and its peoples in Japanese cartographic imagination’, in *Diogenes*, 173, 44, 1996, pp. 119–45.

102 Cited by Thomas, *High anxiety*, p. 312.

103 Sebastian Conrad, ‘The opened and closed country: conflicting views of Japan’s position in the world’, in Stuchtey and Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history*, pp. 327–53, and Thomas, *World history*, p. 312.

104 Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic history. A framework for inquiry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

105 Tarif Khalidi, *Classical Arab Islam. The culture and heritage of the golden age*, Princeton: Darwin Press, 1985, and Richard Eaton, ‘Islamic history as global history’, in Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic and European expansion. The forging of a global order*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 1–36.

106 Bernard Lewis, ed., *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the capture of Constantinople*, 2 vols., Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974.

events surrounding the actions of Muhammad and his companions, who founded a universal religion, and by the elites who interpreted, preached, defended and above all, spread, by way of conquest and conversion, the word of God, as revealed to Muhammad and set down in the Qu'ran.¹⁰⁷ Once the initial phase of historical writing, based upon tribal legends and anecdotes transmitted orally, had passed, Muslim historians writing in Arabic (their sacred language) absorbed influences from Christian, Jewish and Persian models. They established critical methods to ascertain validity for the *hadith* (the deeds and sayings of the Prophet and his companions), and by extension, the plausibility of evidence required to reconstruct more secular and political pasts as accurately as possible, but always within the constraints allowed by religious and political orthodoxies of their times and locations.¹⁰⁸

For centuries, the writing of Islamic history for every part of the world fell under the control (or regulation) of ecclesiastical and political authorities. In the Dar al-Islam 'historiography and historians held a place within a cultural establishment designed by and for lawyers'.¹⁰⁹ Guardians of sacred texts and legal precedents, the *ulama* (jurists), as well as political authorities preferred histories that concentrated on the classical and glorious era of foundation, imperial expansion, and the Caliphates, providing cases for statecraft and drawing moral lessons (*adab*) from the lives of celebrated caliphs, warriors, clerics, lawyers and scholars.¹¹⁰ Except briefly under the first caliphs, Islam was neither a place nor a polity, but a widespread ecumenical community marked off from the rest of the world by a religion, by adherence to moral and legal codes and to similar frameworks of political, legal, social and economic institutions, inspired by principles set out in a sacred book.

For roughly a thousand years between the times of Muhammad and the siege of Vienna in 1683, Islamdom (which included Arab, Persian, Turkic and other empires) expanded its influence and power through conquest and conversion. Despite setbacks, vicissitudes and cycles of contraction, it extended its hold over territories, societies and populations in Africa, the Balkans, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. It even penetrated throughout China, although its military victories there were early, fleeting and peripheral.¹¹¹ While the Pyrenees stood for centuries as Islam's notional frontier with Western Europe, the location, direct connexions and contacts with the rest of the world maintained for centuries by Muslims placed their intellectuals (including converts from other cultures) in a unique position to acquire geographic, ethnographic, cultural, political, technological and economic knowledge about the rest of the known world, and to construct universal histories, long before Christians embarked on their voyages of discovery and process of imperial expansion.¹¹²

107 Chase Robinson, *Islamic historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

108 Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought in the classical period*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

109 Bernard Lewis, 'The use by Muslim historians of non-Muslim sources', in Bernard Lewis and Peter Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961, pp. 180–91.

110 Robinson, *Islamic historiography*, pp. 180–91.

111 Marshall Hodgson, *The venture of Islam: conscience and history in a world civilization*, 3 vols., Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974.

112 Richard Eaton, 'Islamic history as global history', pp. 1–36.

In the event, there is a rather short list of books by Muslim authors who should appear in any historiographical survey of global history.¹¹³ That list would begin with a Persian historian, Tabari (839–923), whose *History of Prophets and Kings* starts with Adam, moves through thirteen volumes of annals, across several ancient civilizations, to the times of the Prophet.¹¹⁴ His contemporary Ya'qubi (an Armenian bureaucrat working for the ruler of Iran) commences his world history with 'Iraq because it is the centre of the world, the navel of the earth'.¹¹⁵ Ya'qubi's erudite combination of geographical and ethnographic detail recognized several great pre-Islamic civilizations (China, India, Black Africa, the Berbers, Byzantium and Persia), a diversity of God's peoples and regions interacting from biblical times to diffuse their particular contributions to civilization to produce, at the end of history, the Abbasid Caliphate.¹¹⁶

Six decades later the forerunner of the more famous Ibn Khaldun, Mas'udi, wrote his *Meadows of Gold* and other books of 'panoramic sweep', exemplifying a 'sustained interest in philosophy, theology, geography, medicine, astronomy, meteorology and zoology'. As a 'preamble to the study of history' (for which he makes precocious and heartwarming cosmopolitan claims), Mas'udi was 'the first Arab Muslim historian to apply principles of scientific methods and philosophic reasoning to the study of history'. He accorded serious attention to civilizations that preceded Islam and even recognized the virtues of Franks and Slavs. His reasons for the decline of kingdoms, nations and cultures were blind imitation, the neglect of research and inquiry, political fragmentation, and persistent relapses into errors and obscurantism that he feared might overtake his own religion and culture.¹¹⁷

Mas'udi did not inaugurate an intellectual tradition of world history, but his aspirations were certainly followed by two other great Muslim historians, Rashid ad Din (1247–1318) and Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). Rashid, a Jewish convert to Islam, wrote a history of the peoples conquered by or in contact with the Mongols (for the then Mongol ruler of Persia). He consulted Chinese scholars about their empire, a Buddhist hermit from Kashmir on India, and an Italian nuncio concerning the 'barbarians' of Western Europe. He also made good use of the extant bibliography in Persian and Arabic. Although his account of the West is regarded as 'flimsy and superficial' in scope and method, compared with the sections on Islam, India and China, this work, written for Mongol, Persian and Arab readers, deserves the degree of attention that has been accorded to Ibn Khaldun, whose *Muqaddima* explaining the long-term causes of social change has become classic in historical sociology.¹¹⁸ Ibn Khaldun included a geographical survey of Western Europe, and recognized that God had allowed the Franks to engage with science and learning as well as futile Crusades against Islam. His history, which hardly extends north of Spain or

113 David Morgan, 'The evolution of two Asian historiographical traditions', in Bentley, *Companion to historiography*, pp. 11–17.

114 Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought*, pp. 76–78.

115 Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought*, p. 116.

116 Morgan, *The evolution*, p. 14, and Robinson, *Islamic historiography*, p. 136.

117 Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought*, pp. 131–7.

118 Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim discovery of Europe*, London: Phoenix Press, 1982, pp. 150–2, and Morgan, *The evolution*, p. 15.

east of Persia, analyses the legacies of ancient civilizations (Babylon, Egypt, Israel, Greece, Rome and Persia) and culminates, as did all Muslim history, in Dar al-Islam.¹¹⁹

Teleology marks the writings of Muslim historians, even among the enlightened few whose chronologies did not begin with the Prophet and the classical age of conquest and expansion, but they recognized that peoples from several ancient civilizations had made contributions to what they regarded as the self-evident superiority of Islamic culture, and to the revealed truth of its religion, which inspired Muslims to aspire to universal empire.¹²⁰ That aspiration waxed and waned with the consolidation and fragmentation of Caliphates, the rise and decline of the Mongol successor states, and the seemingly irresistible extension of Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal power. Like their Christian foes, Muslim historians concentrated overwhelmingly on the construction of histories for and about the Islamic *umma* (community), and especially its ruling elites. Outside Islam they observed lands and peoples (infidels in the Dar al-Harb, the land of war) whose interest to them, their patrons and the faithful were in large part as settings for conquest and conversion.¹²¹ 'At the level of narrative, pre-Islamic history is recast in Islamic terms and Islamic history is patterned upon monotheistic history. What happened outside the Caliphate (and by extension the *umma*) might have been of some interest to the curious, but information was necessarily scarce. Besides, why should it have a sure place in the historiographical vision if God had not made it part of His order by sending successful armies to conquer it?'¹²²

It would be difficult to maintain that Muslim historians displayed any singular lack of curiosity about, or contempt for, the world outside Dar-al-Islam. For several centuries, Muslim intellectuals seem to have been understandably more interested in China, India, Persia, and Byzantium than in Western Europe, despite the range and strength of connexions with their Catholic foes. Their weak knowledge of European languages represented a barrier to understanding. They largely relied on indigenous minorities, renegades and converted slaves to act as intermediaries for commercial and diplomatic transactions. These people also translated the necessary military, technical and scientific knowledge, and supplied materials for the historical myths and distorted Christian theology that was deployed in diatribes across the divides between two virulently hostile and mutually antagonistic religions.¹²³

Exchanges of geographical, ethnographic, commercial, political and historical knowledge between Islam and Christendom improved after the fall of Constantinople, which led to the consolidation of Ottoman power on Europe's frontiers. According to Bernard Lewis, who has reviewed both literatures, the knowledge (including historical knowledge) about Muslim culture in general, and the Ottoman Empire in particular, that was available and accessible to initially anxious, and by the late seventeenth century more militant and self-interested, Europeans, became markedly superior to anything available to their Arab and Turkish rivals for religious, economic and geopolitical hegemony. Lewis finds it

119 Franz Rosenthal, 'Ibn Khaldun and Muslim historiography', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 23, 3, 1997, pp. 66–78 and Lewis, *The Muslim discovery*, pp. 149–50.

120 Lewis and Holt, *Historians of the Middle East*.

121 Lewis, ed., *Islam from the Prophet*.

122 Robinson, *Islamic historiography*, p. 138.

123 Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

‘remarkable that despite the long confrontation of Islam and Christendom across the Mediterranean from Spain through Sicily to the Levant, there should have been such a complete lack of interest about what went on beyond the Muslim frontiers in Europe’. That changed a little as the Ottomans advanced into Europe, somewhat more as European sea power threatened their Empire over the eighteenth century, but altered radically only as a response to the ‘new challenge presented to Islam by European secularism ...—a very different matter—far greater in scope, power and extent and by coming not from a conquered but a conquering world’.¹²⁴

The rise of the West and the emergence of universal history

My survey of historiographical traditions suggests that before the Imperial Meridian, European historians did not display any exceptional lack of interest or condescension towards other cultures and their histories. *Au contraire*, a case could be made for periods and examples of Western enlightenment that might be represented as less ‘centric’ than anything found in histories either from Islam or, less surprisingly, from China.

It was only after that profound conjuncture in world history from 1783–1825 that historiographies from all parts of the world, in interestingly different ways and degrees, became preoccupied with the geopolitical, technological and political rise of the West, and with occasionally using comparative studies to see how to escape from its all-powerful embrace.¹²⁵ This truly massive disturbance to what had been for millennia multi-polar balances of wealth, political power and claims to cultural superiority, came to maturity rather abruptly. It intensified decade after decade, and influenced not only the themes and problems selected for investigation by scholars engaged in writing histories from all parts of a globalizing world, but conditioned their methods and epistemological assumptions as well.¹²⁶

Paradoxically historians from Western Europe, entranced with a sense of modernity, progress and superiority over the rest of the world, became better informed, but at the same time more introverted and less curious about other cultures and traditions than they had been when Ottoman armies threatened the integrity of Christendom, and when European merchants lacked the naval power and competitive advantages required to shift the gains from commerce with the Middle East, Africa, India, Southeast Asia, China and Japan in their favour.¹²⁷ Of course, very few historians had ever detached their writings from the epistemes of their times. If anything, European positions became more situated during an age of progress when influential reflexions from prestigious intellectuals upon the contexts for the emergence and achievements of science, technology, philosophy, forms of governance, institutions, social science, law, art, architecture—even languages for communication and clarification—came to be represented as quintessentially Western.

124 Lewis, *Muslim discovery of Europe*, pp. 142 and 184.

125 Christopher Bayly, *The birth of the modern world*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

126 Fuchs and Stuchtey, eds., *Across cultural borders*.

127 Jürgen Osterhammel, ‘Peoples without history’, and Kirti Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe*.

Most made scant references to prior contributions from peoples living outside a hitherto unremarkable promontory on the edge of Eurasia.

For many fields of intellectual enquiry in the physical and social sciences which are 'a' (if not 'anti') historical, a provincial and foreshortened approach to the comprehension of nature and society is explicable, but for historians proclaiming it to be their distinctive mission to supply wider and longer perspectives, such myopia can be denigrated as Eurocentric.¹²⁸ Yet generations of otherwise erudite scholars failed to question the epistemic cultural assumptions of their age and concentrated upon investigations into the origins of their own 'constructed' civilization, supposedly unique and homogeneous. Despite an overwhelming flow of information and evidence about the rest of the world from colonial, diplomatic, commercial and academic sources (largely of an ethnographical, anthropological and archaeological kind), the spatial parameters for historical investigations into webs of connexions and for illumination derivable from cross-cultural or international comparisons, histories of the world continued to be contained within the boundaries of a premier league of European nations—evolving, under the umbrella of American hegemony and power, into the West.¹²⁹

Of course, the minority of historians who did engage with European expansion, empires overseas, and with area studies, could hardly avoid widening their spatial horizons and deepening the chronological time spans to include Islamdom, South and Southeast Asia and eventually Africa.¹³⁰ Western and imperial historians who wrote 'scientific' histories of Indian, Chinese, Arab, Ottoman, Japanese and African pasts, specified the questions, interrogated the sources, and offered interpretations in large measure predicated upon the theories, methods, taxonomies, vocabularies (even the vernacular and mathematical languages) established for European social sciences.¹³¹

They taught students from overseas—many native to metropolitan colonies—how to research and write histories about 'peoples without a history'.¹³² The education on offer suppressed indigenous ways of knowing the past and invariably included as *the* standard for reference a mythical construction of Europe's own evolution from the continent's Hellenistic origins, through Rome to Western Christendom, and on through Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment to the nineteenth century. By then, Europe had clearly achieved the range of military, political, organizational, scientific, technological, commercial, economic, and (by assertion) moral and cultural modernities exhibited on urban sites in every part of the world.¹³³

Christians had traditionally proclaimed their moral superiority over Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and other systems of thought for centuries, but a secularized Christianity, allied with advanced technologies and power, turned out to be impossible to

128 Amin, *Eurocentrism*, and Blaut, *Colonizer's model of the world*.

129 Michael Bentley, 'Approaches to modernity: western historiography since the Enlightenment', in Bentley, ed., *Companion to historiography*, pp. 395–508.

130 I am indebted to my colleague Gareth Austin for drawing John Phillips, *Writing African history*, Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2005, to my attention.

131 Stuchtey and Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history*.

132 Eric Wolf, *Europe and the people without history*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

133 Federici, 'The God that never failed: the origins and crises of Western civilization', in Federici, ed., *Enduring civilization*, pp. 63–91, and Linda Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies*, London: Zed Books, 1999.

disdain. Through encounters, contacts and colonization, the West intruded deeply into the autonomies of other cultures, and permeated the writing of their histories, which became, in large measure, dominated by responses, rejections, celebrations or subtle assimilations of its achievements. This occurred even for Animist African and Hindu societies, who took up and developed the writing of histories as ideological weapons against colonial rule.¹³⁴ Marshall Hodgson recognized that ‘once Western transmutation got underway it could neither be paralleled independently nor borrowed wholesale’.¹³⁵ Thus the writing of Islamic, Chinese, Indian, African and even Japanese history has continued to reflect well-documented tensions between traditions and universal desires for modernity with autonomy. Such tensions could only, moreover, remain more acute outside the West, where change could more easily be welcomed as indigenous and imminent, and as a felicitous congruence of tradition with progress.

Meanwhile the writing of histories emanating from non-Western cultures (including those of recent origin out of Africa and Hindu India) displayed diversities over time, but for the purposes of this simplified exposition can be located on a spectrum between historiographies that either embraced, rejected or, in varying ways, attempted to include and assimilate examples and methods from Europe into their own ways of writing history.¹³⁶

Perhaps nowhere else has the tension over the reconstruction of the past remained more acute than among Muslims. A minority explored pre-Islamic traditions, most notably in Egypt, Persia, and Turkey, and thereby served the interests of state formation, national identities and independence.¹³⁷ Confronted with a stance of triumphant arrogance, most Muslim intellectuals rejected Western claims to moral, cultural and spiritual superiority.¹³⁸ Ultra-conservative historians proceeded to reinforce myths of a lost golden age of Islamic civilization and power based (in their interpretations) upon the adherence of the *umma*, and above all Muslim elites, to eternal principles for all areas of personal, social and political life set out in the Qu’ran.¹³⁹ Reformers sought to acculturate Western modernities, particularly science, technology and economic organization, but also the reconstruction of history, to Islamic values and traditions. In rewriting the rich and complex histories of the Caliphate, and of the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman empires, Muslim historians have, however, confronted serious opposition from projects linked to alternative histories of Islamdom, written to sustain the authority of a sacred book.¹⁴⁰ Such histories implicitly denigrate the contributions made by Muslims to the accumulation of secular knowledge that modern global history seeks to commend.¹⁴¹

134 Philips, *Historians of India*.

135 Hodgson, *Rethinking world history*, p. 215.

136 Fuchs and Stuchtey, eds., *Across cultural borders*.

137 Gamal Din El Shayal, ‘Historiography of Egypt in the nineteenth century’, Firuz Kazemzadeh, ‘Iranian historiography’, and Ercument Kuran, ‘Ottoman historiography’, in Lewis and Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East*, pp. 405–37, and Brian Turner, *Orientalism, postmodernism and globalism*, London: Routledge, 1994.

138 Albert Hourani, *Arabic thought in the liberal age 1798–1939*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

139 Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Islam and science: religious orthodoxy and the battle for rationality*, London: Zed Books, 1990.

140 Ira Lapidus, ‘Islamic revivals and modernity: the contemporary movements and historical paradigms’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 40, 4, 1997, pp. 444–56, and Lewis, *Islam and the West*.

141 Albert Hourani, *A history of the Arab peoples*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Chinese intellectuals did not have to contend with traditions based upon a divinely inspired book as they too grappled for more than two centuries with the artefacts and knowledge on offer through commerce and geopolitical conflicts with the West and Japan on the one hand, and their own institutions and culture on the other.¹⁴² Rozman argues that, 'perhaps in no other society of comparable complexity and development did a single intellectual framework establish such an encompassing hold over thinking about social behaviour.'¹⁴³ Nevertheless, Confucian cultures never became as inflexible and dogmatic as their Islamic or Christian counterparts, and Confucianism continued as a vital intellectual tradition. Even so, it took Chinese savants several decades to extend, modify and reconstruct the writing of China's history in ways that might conceivably have helped the Qing and Republican regimes to deal with a serious sequence of challenges to the external security and internal order of an empire becoming increasingly vulnerable to disintegration and takeover.¹⁴⁴

For example, one immediate (no doubt practical) response to humiliating defeat by Britain in the First Opium War in 1839–42, was to investigate the technical scope, scale, strengths and weaknesses of the Royal Navy, as well as its history, in order to contain and fend off further penetration into the empire by maritime powers. The Chinese soon recognized that the West had over time acquired functional knowledge that their state could and should import to strengthen its defences. But, until compelled to do so, very few intellectuals considered that the empire's foundational knowledge (including established views of the past upon which the state and its institutions rested) also required serious reform. Instead historians produced consoling and potentially instructive histories of military successes by Qing armies.¹⁴⁵ Until late in the nineteenth century, they offered little to challenge the dominant genre of dynastic history that implicitly supported a complacent view that for millennia the governance of the empire had evolved (with occasional changes of regime) through cycles of chaos and instability, followed by difficult periods of 'restoration', which sooner or later reproduced the security, good order and equilibrium of their own superior civilization.¹⁴⁶

Elman's remark that 'it would be a historiographical mistake to underestimate Chinese efforts to master on their own terms what they called Western learning' is, however, well taken.¹⁴⁷ Modern historians have attempted to summarize and comprehend the voluminous literatures composed by Chinese historians (and other intellectuals) concerned with their country's visible loss of power, the disintegration of traditional values, and erosion of self-respect.¹⁴⁸ With sympathy, they have conveyed the laudable attempts made by a lineage of distinguished historians to acquire Europe's supposedly 'scientific' modes of writing

142 John Gregory, *The West and China since 1500*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003.

143 Gil Rozman, *The East Asian region. Confucian heritage and its modern adaptations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 162.

144 John Henderson, *Scripture, canon and commentary*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

145 Mak, 'The middle kingdom', pp. 291–308.

146 Mary Wright, *The last stand of Chinese conservatism 1862–74*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962.

147 Benjamin Elman, 'Jesuit scientia and natural studies in late imperial China, 1600–1800', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 6, 3, 2002, pp. 16–31.

148 Jack Gray, 'Historical writing in twentieth-century China', in Beasley and Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan*, pp. 186–212.

history in order to negotiate and accommodate a reconstruction of China's past to service the needs of a present—marked by crisis after crisis and unmistakable trends towards political and economic decline.¹⁴⁹

Living through times of threat to the security of the Empire from Britain, France, Russia, Germany and, most ignominiously of all, from Japan, as well as the awesome destruction that accompanied rebellions culminating in the overthrow of the Qing regime by a Republican revolution in 1911, China's historians persisted with a noble dream of attempting to discover guidance for the times from the study of history.¹⁵⁰ Predictably, a conservative majority continued to find the lessons and examples required for an era of crises from within the thematic parameters of established chronologies and epistemological conventions of China's own historiographical traditions. Many supported the 'back to basics' policies followed by the state in the wake of the highly destructive Taiping Rebellion, and repositied their faith in China's great traditions, as portrayed in Mary Wright's *Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism*.¹⁵¹ However this attitude lost steam after 1870.

Their opponents promoted modernization that eventually ran into the intellectual cage of Sovietized Marxism. Meanwhile they studied Western ways of writing history, as well as the example closer to home set by Japan's Meiji Restoration, and engaged with the complex task of reconfiguring China's heritage in ways that could reconcile tradition with modernity.¹⁵² They did so by subjecting canonical Confucian texts to rigorous criticism, rediscovering neglected sources, and above all selecting and emphasizing historical examples from the Empire's long complex and multiple traditions, in order to offer reinterpretations that could not be dismissed as attacks on China's past or the integrity of the nation's identity.¹⁵³ They deconstructed and historicized views of the past, became trans-national in their methods and epistemologies, and negotiated between tradition and present needs in order to revive pride and patriotism in a nation and polity that almost disappeared along with the Ottoman, Romanov and Habsburg empires during the upheavals of the twentieth century.¹⁵⁴ Ironically, they also constructed historical narratives that 'naturalized' Qing conquests in the far west of the Empire.

Unfortunately as Paul Ricoeur has observed, 'before the coherence of the text comes the coherence of history.' The turmoil of Japanese invasion and civil war produced conditions for the foundation of a Peoples' Republic, twenty-five years of isolation from external influences, and the oppression associated with an all-pervasive ideology of Sovietized Marxism, mutating into Maoism.¹⁵⁵ In a sense, decades of endeavours by several generations of Chinese historians before 1949 to reconfigure their national past paved the way for the acceptance of Marxism, particularly its teleological view of history,

149 Mak, 'The middle kingdom', pp. 291–308.

150 Edward Wang, *Inventing China through history*, Albany: State University of New York, 2001.

151 Wright, *The last stand of Chinese conservatism*.

152 Pamela Crossley, *A translucent mirror: history and identity in Qing imperial ideology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

153 Paul Cohen, *Between tradition and modernity: Wang Tao and reforms in late Ching China*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.

154 Wang, *Inventing China*. I owe the ironic comment on Qing conquests to Ken Pomeranz.

155 Tim Brook, 'Capitalism and the writing of modern history in China', in Blue and Brook, eds., *China and historical capitalism*, pp. 110–58.

explaining the rise and the fall of Western capitalism and imperialism, and predicting the convergence of communist China to even higher levels of scientific, technological and other secular modernities.¹⁵⁶

But even Chinese Marxists (convinced that history could be nothing more than ideology in the service of the people) soon became dissatisfied with writing China's history into Western or Soviet narratives, and insisted on their nation's own and potentially superior trajectory towards the present. They rejected orthodox views of stasis correlated with Asiatic modes of production, and linear connexions, posited by Stalinists, between peasant substructures and China's imperial superstructures of oriental despotism. They preferred to concentrate upon the revolutionary potential of Asia's agrarian masses and struggles against Western imperialism.¹⁵⁷ Marxism turned China's historians in universalizing directions. Even before the death of Mao and the opening to the West in the 1980s, they began to discover 'sprouts of capitalism' and autonomous trajectories towards modernity in their own history, as far back as the Sung dynasty.¹⁵⁸ Much of the impetus for this came from Japanese sinologists, many of them Marxists.

My reading of historiographical surveys suggests that over the last three decades China's historians have moved back onto a trend that virtually continues with the project (interrupted by an interlude of oppressive ideological orthodoxy from 1949–76) of reconciling their traditions with the changes required for their own specific transition to a successful industrial market economy. Recent reconfigurations leave almost no space for crude stage theories derived from Marx, let alone Stalin, or for modernization theories, pace Rostow or Black. They concentrate upon China's historical contributions to science, technology, urbanization, commercialization and the formation of markets. For example, historians now laud historical examples of Chinese entrepreneurship.¹⁵⁹ In the writings of Sun Yatsen, they find support for partnerships between the state and private enterprise, and positive views towards the import of foreign capital, expertise and enterprise.¹⁶⁰ Edward Wang observed: 'while every great culture has its perpetual value, this value is valuable not because it becomes a tradition but because people can reflect, rediscover and recreate it.'¹⁶¹ Chinese history has become trans-national in its epistemology, but is only just becoming global in scope and vision. Nevertheless, the century-long preoccupation of China's historians with the reconciliation of their tradition with Western modernity may serve better than any forays into micro-histories, biographies and other post-modern tropes to construct meta-narratives in world history to 'provincialize' the West. Furthermore, Chinese historians have resumed the programme marked by the publication

156 Dorothea Martin, 'The making of a Sino-Marxist world view: perceptions and interpretations of world history', in *The People's Republic of China*, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1991.

157 Lawrence Sullivan, 'The controversy over feudal despotism', in Jonathan Unger, *Using the past to serve the present. Historiography and politics in contemporary China*, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993, pp. 174–204.

158 Tim Wright, 'The spiritual heritage of Chinese capitalism', in Unger, *Using the past to serve the present*, pp. 205–38.

159 Brook, 'Capitalism and the writing of modern history'.

160 Michael Godley, 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', Unger, *Using the past to serve the present*, pp. 239–59.

161 Wang, *Inventing China through history*, p. 206.

of Zhou Gucheng's *General History of the World* in 1949 and have recently published six volumes of *Shijie Shi* (*World History*), as well as an academic journal.¹⁶²

For reasons that have never been satisfactorily explained, Japan's political and intellectual elites experienced less difficulty in assimilating the West than their Chinese counterparts.¹⁶³ For the Japanese the strength of Confucian beliefs had been diluted by Buddhism, to a lesser extent by Shintoism, and more profoundly by Ogyu Sorai and other thinkers dating back to the seventeenth century, who stressed the possibility of creative statesmen founding new traditions. Under the Tokugawa regime, and supported by historicized interpretations from the islands' own sages and savants, historical texts were in place which separated Japanese from Chinese traditions, legitimizing a succession of Shoguns ruling in the name of a quasi-divine line of Emperors going back to Japan's mythical age.¹⁶⁴

When the Meiji Restoration replaced the Bakufu (which had failed to protect Japan from encroachments and possible takeover by imperialist powers), the new regime also encountered less effective resistance than rulers of China to opening the country to imports of Western commodities, scientific and technical knowledge and even religious missionary activity.¹⁶⁵ Like their Tokugawa predecessors, the new aristocratic regime immediately instructed historians to produce textually validated justifications for their takeover of power, and strategies to restore traditional practices and expectations concerning relations between the emperor and his obedient subjects.¹⁶⁶ Its edict is worth paraphrasing: 'Historiography is forever an immortal state ritual. Now the evil of misrule . . . has been overcome and imperial rule restored . . . we wish that an office of historiography be established, that the good custom of our ancestors be resumed and that knowledge and education be spread throughout the land. . . . Let us set right relations between monarch and subject, distinguish clearly between alien and proper and implant virtue throughout our land.' As Margaret Mehl underlines, 'the wording . . . suggests the reinstatement and stabilization of a previous order which assigned everyone to their place in the state and Japan to its place in the world'.¹⁶⁷ 'Historians responded to the challenge and set about legitimising the restoration, elevating the quasi-divine and mythical status of imperial rule and elaborating on the duties and loyalties from subjects with reference to dynastic records and annals of a ruling house that could trace its ancestry back for more than two millennia; and in particular to models of the Nara and Heian period of imperial rule.'¹⁶⁸

In their endeavours to restore and reinvent tradition, they found no difficulty in embracing the philological methods, verification of sources, validation of interpretations,

162 I am indebted to my colleague Kent Deng for references in Chinese to Zhou Gucheng, *Shijie Tonshi*, Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1949, and to Wu Yugin and Qi Shirong, eds., *Shijie Shi*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1991–94. The journal (*Shijie Lishi*) is run by the Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

163 S. Eisenstadt, *Japanese civilization: a comparative view*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

164 Beasley and Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan*, pp. 9–23.

165 Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The transformation of Japan from the 17th to the 21st century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

166 William Beasley and Carmen Blacker, 'Japanese historical writing in the Tokugawa period 1603–1868', in Beasley and Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan*, pp. 245–63.

167 Margaret Mehl, *History and the state in nineteenth-century Japan*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998, pp. 1–2 and see pp. 3–15.

168 Jiro Numatu, 'Shigeno Yasutsugu and the modern Tokyo tradition of historical writing', in Beasley and Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan*, pp. 264–87.

and prescriptions for detachment and impartiality of Rankean epistemology imported from the West. Adapted scientific methods reinforced Japanese traditions and matured into an enduring canon for academic history.¹⁶⁹ Although 'the passion' for accuracy was not matched by any attempts to analyse, explain and interpret the nation's past, popular histories from the pens of Fukuzawa Yukichi, Tajuchi Ukrichi, and Yamaji Gizan (influenced by Western social science and narratives of progress) satisfied the hunger for more popular histories locating Japan's place in the world.¹⁷⁰

Within a quarter of a century of the Restoration, the Japanese state developed into a successful maritime and imperial power, and Japan's status in the hierarchy of world powers began to be represented by intellectuals, (impatient with Western, including Marxist, teleologies of stages) in modified vocabularies drawn from Social Darwinism.¹⁷¹ Coupled with claims that they had to lead other Asian powers (including China) to resist Western imperialism, these arguments encountered virtually no resistance from academic historians immersed in the details of scientific research, whose scholarly texts had contributed to solidify obedience and loyalty to the emperor system into the hallmarks of Japan's national identity.¹⁷²

That particular mission for a land of the Gods with a divine emperor was shattered by defeat and the terrible destruction of the Pacific War. Under American occupation Japanese intellectuals rediscovered a place for their own past within universal trajectories, mapped out by Western social science that could be derived either from Modernization theory¹⁷³ or Marxism. The latter had remained as a powerful current of thought among Japanese historians of the 1920s and 1930s, even if it had been progressively forced underground. When the economy converged rapidly towards the high standards of material welfare achieved by the West, most historians passively accepted a representation of their nation's success as an island of European modernity off the coast of Asia. Latterly a younger generation (but without chauvinism) are beginning to reconfigure Japan's trajectory into yet another example of multiple modernities, promoted by its own traditions, and (what is more significant for the construction of meta-narratives in global history) they have relocated it within the contexts that illuminate Asian contributions to global development.¹⁷⁴

In a sense the weakness of indigenous historiographical traditions, epistemological conventions and institutionalized frameworks for the writing of history released Indian (particularly Hindu) intellectuals to construct a past that could support the formation of a modern nation state, and at the same time reposition the profound contributions made by the peoples of South Asia to world history.¹⁷⁵ The first task required inordinate attention

169 Julia Thomas, 'High anxiety: world history', pp. 309–26.

170 Stefan Tanaka, 'Alternative national histories in Japan: Yamaji Aizan and academic historiography', in Fuchs and Stuchtey, eds., *Across cultural borders*, pp. 119–40.

171 Thomas, 'High anxiety: world history', pp. 309–26.

172 Stefan Tanaka, 'Alternative national histories', pp. 119–40.

173 Sebastian Conrad, 'The opened and closed country: conflicting views of Japan's position in the world', in Stuchtey and Fuchs, eds., *Writing world history*, pp. 327–52.

174 Yoshino Kosaku, *Cultural nationalism in contemporary Japan*, London: Routledge, 1992, and Kaoru Sugihara, 'The East Asian path of economic development: a long-term perspective', in Arrighi *et al.*, eds., *The resurgence of East Asia*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 78–123.

175 Michael Gottlieb, 'India's connection to history: the discipline and the relation between center and periphery', in Fuchs and Stuchtey, eds., *Across cultural borders*, pp. 75–98.

because for more than two centuries Indian historians (Hindu and Muslim alike) had researched, written and taught history in the context of colonial and post-colonial rule.¹⁷⁶ Beginning in 1765, first the East India Company and later the Raj promoted the diffusion of histories that provided ideological justifications for the takeover of India, and support for the reconstruction of its political, economic and social institutions along metropolitan lines. For that mission the British found willing collaborators among the Indian middle class for their projects to bring Western technologies, education, property rights and other institutions to the sub-continent. Indians recognized the cultural and political purposes of writing history in ‘scientific ways’, but there was, declaimed Ranajit Guha, ‘one Indian battle that Britain never won. It was a battle for appropriation of an Indian past.’¹⁷⁷ Within decades of the takeover of Bengal by the East India Company, in schools and colleges established by the imperial power, Indians began to write histories modelled along European lines in English, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Urdu.¹⁷⁸ Their histories, maturing in scope and scale to lend valuable ideological support to nationalist movements for self-government, independence and unity contested all misrepresentations of ‘their’ past by foreigners, claimed a distinct and distinguished position in world history for their ancient civilization and entered into controversies with rival English interpretations over seminal episodes in the history of European colonization, including the tyranny and decadence of the Mughal empire, the conquest of Bengal, the highly sensitive ‘mutiny’ of 1857, and the Amritsar massacre of 1919.¹⁷⁹

The long and sustained struggle against British occupation generated a large and sophisticated volume of scholarship on both sides of the argument. India’s historiographical tradition is marked by libraries of books that are situated, contextualized and analysed as responses and reactions to colonial rule. From the standpoint of modern global history, South Asian history looks unbalanced by a truncated concentration upon the last three centuries, and by a restriction of focus to the public sphere.¹⁸⁰ However, post-independence scholarship is now productively engaged in reclaiming major areas of history from the preoccupation with politics and state formation. Once that has been accomplished, the specificities of Indian private and communal life, the long-term growth of the economy, cultural developments, gender, caste, the peasantry and the fraught histories of relations between Hindus and Muslims can be properly historicized and resituated into global contexts and concerns where, at present, China and the West loom large compared to India and Africa.¹⁸¹

To sum up: conditions for the rise of universal history embracing every region and society of the Afro-Eurasian Oikumene emerged as celebrations, reactions and responses

176 Ranajit Guha, *An Indian historiography of India*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Co., 1988.

177 Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony. History and power in colonial India*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 1.

178 Philips, *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*.

179 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: a derivative discourse*, London: Zed Books, 1986, and Ranjit Majumda, ‘Nationalist historians’, in Philips, *Historians of India*, pp. 417–26.

180 Vinay Lal, ‘Subaltern studies and its critics. Debates over Indian history’, *History and Theory*, 40, X, 2001, pp. 1325–48.

181 Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: colonial and post-colonial histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, and Maghan Keita, ‘Africans and Asians: historiography and the long view of global interaction’, *Journal of World History*, 16, 1, 2005, pp. 1–33.

to the rise of the geopolitical, economic and technical power of Europe. In contrast to Japan, Islamdom appears to have experienced severe difficulties in reordering its culture (including the reconstruction of histories) to assimilate a package of modernities on offer through connexions, commerce and conflicts with an intrusive West. South Asian intellectuals, after the British takeover of Bengal, had no choice but to take up the challenge posed by the attempts of their new rulers and mentors to appropriate their neglected history, in the interests of securing compliance with colonial governance. Telescoped into resistance, with some loss of scope and depth, South Asian history matured into a formidable ideological weapon for the formation of Hindu, Muslim and secular nationalist consciousness required to support the long struggle for the independence of India and Pakistan.¹⁸² Finally, China's Confucian cosmology and epistemological conventions for the construction of history turned out to be plastic enough to help an ancient empire survive formidable external and internal threats to its integrity and to reorder the nation's culture in order to reconcile tradition with modernity.

Imperatives and prospects for global history

As an outcome of some three centuries of sustained and latterly intensified connexions across the Afro-Asian Oikumene, flows of information (including historical scholarship dealing with every corner of the modern world) have cumulated and diffused on an unprecedented scale. Histories are also now filtered, classified and fed into more useable and universal theories of economic, social and cultural change than anything available to canonical traditions in social science from Montesquieu to Weber. After centuries of conflict and controversy over religion and national identities, which have conditioned the writing of history since the Reformation, prospects for the construction of cosmopolitan meta-narratives in global history (recognized as disciplined and accepted everywhere as heuristic for scholarly debate) look better than at any time since Voltaire.

Unless retrogressions towards fundamentalisms resurge, meta-narratives for the twenty-first century will, hopefully, leave behind more than two millennia of historical writing designed to proclaim and validate the spiritual, moral and cultural superiorities of Egyptian, Hellenistic, Christian, Byzantine, Islamic, Confucian, Hindu, African and other civilizations.¹⁸³ Alas, it will take more time and scholarly debate to move on from celebrations and repudiations of a tradition of chronologically foreshortened and spatially confined narratives preoccupied with praising, adapting (and denigrating) Western achievements in science, technology, economic organization and warfare that have pervaded and continue to inform two centuries of historical writing from all quarters of the world.¹⁸⁴

Meanwhile two strands of current historiographical debates over the future of global history seem subject to decreasing intellectual returns. I refer with appreciation to the recent wave of eloquent scholarship, laudably concerned with a necessary endeavour to

182 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 29–44, and Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, pp. 36–41 and 95–97.

183 Bentley, *Myths, wagers*, pp. 51–82.

184 Peter Gran, *Beyond eurocentrism: a new view of modern history*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

‘deconstruct’, ‘provincialize’, ‘fragment’, ‘proliferate’, ‘destabilize’ and ‘treat with incredulity’ any meta-narratives purporting to be global, on the grounds that they will be contaminated by Eurocentric exclusions, or based upon ways of representing the past derived from Western social science.¹⁸⁵

But the answer to this dated antipathy is that a generation of historians has now accepted the so-called postmodern view that all histories are unavoidably and (in some definable senses) ‘constructed’.¹⁸⁶ Most have also become acutely aware that they can be situated in traditions of writing Western (and non-Western) histories that became: myopically Eurocentric in their exclusions; oppressively selective in their assumptions, styles and categories of analysis; and guilty on some counts of Orientalism, degenerating, for a few decades, into examples of racism.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore the residues of that decadent tradition cannot be removed simply by exposure. Historians need to craft new, more inclusive and persuasive general narratives that might hold together without the fishy glue of Eurocentrism.

From the time of the Reformation onwards, Anglo-, Franco-, Hispano-, Germano- and other ‘centric’ histories became and have remained dominant in the historiography of every European nation.¹⁸⁸ Claims to cultural, moral, spiritual, even ethnic superiority are it seems endemic to nationalisms of all kinds, and are not a monopoly of the West. How many intellectuals writing after 1789 proclaimed that the possession of scientific, technical, economic and military knowledge carried moral power?¹⁸⁹ After all, narratives of enlightenment, as constructed by Voltaire and his generation, did at least try to break out of the cosmological constraints, nationalistic ideologies and mercantilist assumptions of the Ancien Régime.¹⁹⁰ And more than a century later, in a climate of pessimism and breakdown of the liberal consensus that followed from the awesome destruction of the Great European Civil War of 1914 to 1918, another small group of erudite scholars (Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin, Mumford, Wells and Dawson) wrote universal histories of mankind to help us comprehend the ‘decline of the West’.¹⁹¹ Their scholarship and aspiration to explain the demise of Christianity and rationality (anticipated by Nietzsche) are inspiring. Yet their search for cultural essences and spiritual meanings at the heart of those rather amorphous and fluid entities called ‘civilizations’ never matured into a satisfactory paradigm or framework for the reconstruction of meta-narratives or curricula for global history.¹⁹²

185 Pomper, ed., *World history*; Lal, ‘Provincializing the West,’ pp. 271–91; and Dirlik, ‘Confounding metaphors,’ pp. 91–135.

186 Patrick O’Brien, ‘An engagement with postmodern foes, literary theorists and friends on the borders with history,’ *Reviews in History*, Fall, 2000, pp. 1–32.

187 Michael Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American thought 1860–1945*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, and Ashish Nandy and William Davies, *Barbaric others: a manifesto of Western racism*, London: Pluto Books, 1993.

188 Beverly Southgate, *History: what and why? Ancient, modern and postmodern perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 28–54.

189 Dirlik, ‘History without a center,’ pp. 247–85.

190 Jyoti Mohan, ‘Voltaire’s images of India,’ *Journal of World History*, 16, 2, 2005, pp. 173–86.

191 Paul Costello, *World historians and their goals. Twentieth-century answers to modernism*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993.

192 Edmund Burke III, ‘Marshall G.S. Hodgson and the hemispheric approach to world history,’ *Journal of World History*, 6, 2, 1995, pp. 237–50.

Although most historians preferred the securities and vistas obtainable from research in national or local archives, isolated redoubts of Voltaire's mission survived, notably at two universities in Chicago.¹⁹³ Eventually, in the wake of the Second World War and in the closing decades of cold war and decolonization, state-funded programmes for research and teaching in area studies, histories of relinquished empires, analyses of commerce and connexions that transcended the boundaries of nation states as well as those 'centric' survey courses in Western civilization, proliferated across higher education systems in North America, Europe and Japan.¹⁹⁴ This research and teaching, designed to diversify, supplement and complement education in national and local history in universities and schools, provided the scholarship and scholars required to meet calls for more global forms of history, which intensified over the last quarter of the twentieth century, alongside the acceleration in that complex, evolving but entirely ancient historical process, now proceeding under the label of 'globalization'.¹⁹⁵

Unsurprisingly, the implications of this ubiquitous phenomenon for hitherto separated societies, bounded spaces, imperfectly connected local economies, nominally sovereign states and discrete cultures remains under close analysis by natural and social scientists.¹⁹⁶ Demands inevitably followed for historians to supply perspectives on trends that appear as novel and profound discontinuities in the ways that technological economic and cultural forces are reshaping our modern world.¹⁹⁷ National governments have also become uneasily aware of these forces because they erode 'sovereign' powers to control populations, assets and ideologies nominally under their rule. They are right to be apprehensive. Cultures are being more visibly re-ordered by advertising, fashion, and the popular arts, especially music. The means and media of modern transportation and communications (now cheaper and more accessible than ever to the masses) are opening up discourses (usually in English) that are reshaping national identities and personal behaviour around the world, especially among younger generations.¹⁹⁸ In the West anxieties (exaggerated by 'official' intellectuals) have, moreover, been compounded by the technological and economic achievements of several Asian societies—first, Japan and the 'Tigers', and latterly China and India.¹⁹⁹ As the rest, as they have for millennia of recorded history, proceed to converge on the front runners, modern 'mercantilists', who conceive of the world in terms of winners and losers, worry how best to deal with a rather gradual decline of European and American hegemony.²⁰⁰ Pressures to construct, write and to teach histories that might

193 Gilbert Allardyce, 'Towards world history. American historians and the coming of the world history course', *Journal of World History*, 1, 1, 1990, pp. 26–40.

194 Jerry Bentley, 'Shapes of world history in twentieth century scholarship', in Michael Adas, ed., *Essays on global and comparative history*, Washington: American Historical Association, 1996, pp. 1–33.

195 David Held et al., eds., *Global transformations. Politics, economics and culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

196 Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in question*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

197 Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels Petersson, *Globalization: a short history*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, is an excellent response to demands for perspective, and Peer Vries insists that the discontinuities with the past were sharper in the nineteenth century than they have been since 1950.

198 Martin Albrow, *The global age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

199 Alice Amsden, *The rise of the rest*.

200 Samuel Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of the world order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. The argument for conceiving of the past millennium in terms of convergence has been persuasively expressed by David Northrup, 'Globalization and the great convergence: rethinking world history in the long term', *Journal of World History*, 16, 3, 2005, pp. 249–68.

be more relevant to our times have already encouraged a conservative discipline to become less intellectually, politically, spatially and chronologically confined. This looks set to continue and should be welcomed as a return to the ecumenical missions of Herodotus, Sima Qian, Mas'udi, Ibn Khaldun, Vico, Voltaire, Leibniz, Lamprecht, Weber, Toynbee, Spengler, Wells, Nehru and DuBois, as well as responses to eloquent calls from the Mid-West from our modern Godfathers, Stavrianos, McNeill and Hodgson.²⁰¹

Venerable and contemporary arguments for resituating local and national histories into conceptual frameworks that might address the problems of a new millennium have been persuasively restored and rehearsed by proselytizers for global history since Marshall Hodgson published his seminal essays in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁰² Nevertheless it is the rejection of the whole project, and recommendations that historians concentrate attention upon micro-histories of difference, diversity, locality, biography, adopting a stance of epistemological humility towards the complex histories of unknowable and hitherto excluded 'others', that seems to have produced some of the best and most provocative historiographical writing in recent years.²⁰³

One eminent Indian philosopher, Ashish Nandy, has called for 'the abandonment of history' as 'maybe the only heresy left to us', while the dangers of reviving long-forgotten histories have been eloquently elaborated by Vinay Lal.²⁰⁴ His rejection of secular history based upon epistemological categories and concepts derived from the Enlightenment and Western social science is treated seriously by many post-modern historians.²⁰⁵ Arif Dirlik has reminded us that 'Euro-Americans conquered the world; renamed places; rearranged economies, societies and polities; erased or drove to the margins pre-modern ways of knowing space, time and many other things'.²⁰⁶ Similarly Linda Smith rejects European ways of knowing and representing the past because 'colonialism meant not only the imposition of Western authority over indigenous lands, modes of production and indigenous laws and government, but the imposition of Western authority over all aspects of indigenous knowledge, languages and cultures'.²⁰⁷ Following Foucault, this version of the 'linguistic turn' asserts that 'real power lies with those who design the tools', and anticipates that emancipation from the malign cultural impact of the West involves a repudiation of its foundational categories, including a conscious intellectual endeavour to reclaim indigenous ways of comprehending and representing the past.²⁰⁸

201 William McNeill, 'The rise of the West after twenty five years', *Journal of World History*, 1, 1, 1990, pp. 1–20.

202 Marshall Hodgson, *Rethinking history*; Pomper *et al.*, *World History*, and see the articles published by Allardyce, Brooks, Christian, Curtin, Frank and Green in the *Journal of World History* referenced in the bibliography of Manning's *Navigating world history*.

203 Well-referenced surveys of the case against global history by Arif Dirlik and Vinay Lal are included in two collections edited by Fuchs and Stuchtey, *Across cultural borders* and Stuchtey and Fuchs, *Writing world history*.

204 Ashish Nandy, 'History's forgotten doubles', *History and Theory*, 34, 2, 1995, p. 46, and Vinay Lal, *The history of history; politics and scholarship in modern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

205 Amartya Sen, 'The threats to secular India', *New York Review of Books*, 8 April 1993.

206 Dirlik, 'Reflections on eurocentrism', p. 260.

207 Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies*, p. 64.

208 Gyan Prakash, 'Writing post-orientalist histories of the third world. Perspectives from Indian historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 2, 1990, pp. 383–408, and Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies*, p. 38.

Yet there is a vanishing point here. Yes, Europeans claimed, and continue to claim, exclusive property rights over ways of comprehending the world including its history. Europeans posed the questions, specified codes for the practice of 'scientific' styles of research, established rules for validation and debate, and marshalled theories, taxonomies, and categories derived from Western social science, to facilitate the selection, arrangement and chains of inferences drawn from historical evidence.²⁰⁹ Under colonial or neo-colonial conditions, which operated to exclude, ridicule or silence alternative ways of recording and using a more inclusive past, history could become repressive and promote imperial dominion and domination.²¹⁰ Equally, as any survey of historiographies from India, China, Japan, South Asia and Islamdom reveals, histories could also be written to preserve indigenous traditions and to resist assimilation.²¹¹ Furthermore our colleagues have not made it clear how the reclamation of traditional ways of knowing and representing Islamic, Hindu, Christian, Confucian, Amerindian, African or any versions of the past would serve the needs of the present any better than the portfolio of methods and approaches that are now the hallmarks of modern history.²¹² Their programmes might just regress into deplorable varieties of myths supporting chauvinism and ancient 'centrism'.²¹³

Anxieties about agendas for the revival of global history remain, and scholars are understandably concerned that any restoration of the genre will continue to celebrate triumphs of the West. Alas, they are not misconceived, because recent publications offering overviews of world history, mainly by journalists, but too often by professional historians, seem truncated in chronology, confined in space, devoid of references to environments and selective in areas of human endeavour that qualify for recognition as universal achievements.²¹⁴

As serious humanistic scholarship, global history aims to mature into a renaissance, leaving behind the arrogance of Rome, aspirations for a universal Caliphate, the moral pretensions of doctrinal Confucianism, claims for spiritual superiority associated with Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, as well as the scientific and technological triumphalism of the West.²¹⁵ After all, history today is nothing if not a capaciously catholic subject. Admission into world history is no longer a problem. The subject clearly takes all kinds of hitherto myopic exclusions into its narratives. It repositions validated knowledge of the past into relevant geographies, a plurality of chronologies, and an evolving body of theory drawn from both natural and social sciences. It includes global histories of commodities (sugar, tea, coffee, silver, opium, cotton, silk, etc.); economic activities (such as banking, mining and transportation); socially gendered and interpersonal relations; as well as topics of universal concern like politics, warfare and science. Everything has its history, and nearly

209 Young, *White mythologies*.

210 Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*.

211 For a telling example see David Kopf, 'A look at Nehru's world history from the dark side of modernity', *Journal of World History*, 2, 1, 1991, pp. 47–63, and Philip Curtin, *The world and the West. The European challenge and the overseas response in the age of empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

212 Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, 'After orientalism: culture, criticism and politics in the third world', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34, 1, 1992, pp. 141–67.

213 A possibility not given sufficient attention by those writing to subvert Western knowledge systems—Vinay Lal, 'The globalization of modern knowledge systems: governance, ecology and future epistemology', *Emergencies*, 9, 1, 1999, pp. 79–103.

214 For an eloquent but rhetorical polemic against recent publications celebrating the West, see John Hobson, *The Eastern origins of Western civilisation*: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

215 Sogner, ed., *Making sense of global history*.

everything has a global history as well.²¹⁶ Historians of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East may well, however, encounter ignorance about the parts of the world that they study. They must expect to debate their valid claims for more space, but will rarely confront resistance to endeavours to locate their scholarship within reconfigured narratives in global history. On the contrary, the publications of master narratives by Chinese, Japanese, Indian, African and Middle Eastern historians is overdue, and would be a welcome addition to what is recognized as too much of a Western enterprise.

Furthermore, the status of Western categories, taxonomies, concepts, theories and other ways for understanding and writing history have become far less constricting. Modern social science written outside the West is often related to alternative epistemological traditions of classifying and knowing the past. Today, when historians are offered such a plethora of competing approaches and models to work with, exhortations to reject repressions embodied in Western foundational categories become difficult to comprehend. To some degree, Foucault's insights should remain in our minds. Yes, canonical social science from Smith through Marx to Weber created images, privileged vocabularies, reified statistics, and imposed teleological views of the past that could be repressive for those resisting the political, economic and ideological power of the West.²¹⁷ Nevertheless, as many Indian, Chinese, Japanese, African and Muslim intellectuals confronted the challenge, they soon realized Western knowledge could also be liberating and adapted for local purposes. Today when the range of categories, concepts, methods and theories on offer from the social sciences is heterodox and the property of many cultures, it seems like an abnegation of intellectual responsibility to pretend that enlightenment and emancipation could emerge by retreating into micro-histories, local vocabularies, provincializing the West, and deconstructing the multiplicity of theories and categories now available for the writing of meta-narratives in history. The latter could help societies everywhere with urgent tasks of reconciling their traditions with a proliferating variety of modernities, as well as reconciling local or national aspirations with those that are truly global, such as environmental degradation, malnutrition, human rights and other problems of universal concern.²¹⁸

Of course, historians taking the risk of writing global histories should remain aware of the origins, provenance and relevance of the categories and theories that they use to reconstruct the past, and respond to the challenge to invent fresh vocabularies, categories and theories to incorporate not only new evidence, but also alternative perspectives on the past.²¹⁹ Nevertheless, there must be something more than an ambition to research and teach histories that offer what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls, 'a loving grasp of detail in search of the diversity of human life worlds'.²²⁰

Unless such stoical engagements with the recovery of personal meanings through biographies concentrated upon private lives, upon subalterns and other examples of

216 O'Brien, 'An engagement with post-modern foes', pp. 1–32. I owe the epigram to Peer Vries.

217 Vinay Lal, 'Subaltern studies and its critics', *History and Theory*, 40, 1, 2001, pp. 135–48.

218 Lal, *The history of history*.

219 Manning, *Navigating world history*, Part IV.

220 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 18, and see Roxann Prazniak, *Sketches in world history from the Chinese and European experiences*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1996—a poetic realization of this approach to history.

micro-history, make pretentious claims for their superior humanistic status, history professions that accommodate due proportions of such concerns can only be enriched by their inclusion. Indeed, a biography of, for example, an African slave or a Chinese concubine complements global histories of slavery and sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, without categories, concepts, theories, aggregation and quantification, there is little prospect for changing a status quo, and every chance that meta-narratives for world (and also for national) histories will be constructed along 'centric' lines. They will be conveyed to audiences and readerships around the world by patriotic gatekeepers, with privileged access to media of mass communication, and will continue to serve the interests of the wealthy, the powerful and the 'West'.

Today more people than ever before, living in every part of an increasingly interrelated world, need education from history and the social sciences to help them comprehend the environmental, human and cultural diversities of their times. Such education might teach us all how to avoid derogatory chauvinism, simplistic assimilations and romanticized perceptions, as we interact with ever increasing intensity with people from other traditions and places.²²¹

History as memory has always been a vital part of our personal identities and remains, in the form of narratives, a powerful component of everyone's local and national consciousness. How such narratives are best constructed has been a source of persistent controversy among historians since Thucydides.²²² Our profession continues to be preoccupied not, as postmodernists assert, with truth, but with an aspiration to objectivity and a measure of ironic detachment from the intractable evidence at its disposal. Most would agree, however, with Nietzsche's claim that painfully acquired 'knowledge of the past has at all times been desired in the service of the future and the present.'²²³

As I read them, the commitments and agendas of modern global history are not to spurious claims to scientific objectivity and personal impartiality, but to moral purposes, connected to the needs of a globalizing world. Those needs require a reordering of classical and established historiographies from all cultures to make space for histories that are attempting to disengage from national, regional, ethnic and religious traditions. Such histories would become involved with the construction of meta-narratives that might, at one and the same time, deepen our understanding of diversities and scale up our consciousness of a human condition that has for millennia included global influences, and intermingled with local elements in all its essential dimensions.²²⁴

If they succeed, global history promises to be useful by identifying, selecting and laying out an unfolding past of large-scale compelling happenings in contexts that might raise awareness of the lives, achievements and sufferings of humanity as a whole. As publicly funded custodians of the past, historians are well placed to construct disciplined,

221 Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating humanity. A classical defence of reform in liberal education*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

222 Beverley Southgate, *History: what and why? Ancient, modern and postmodern perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2001.

223 Cited by Beverley Southgate, *Why bother with history?* London: Longman, 2000, p. 59.

224 Hodgson, *Rethinking world history*, p. 275, and see Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The myth of continents: a critique of metageography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

cosmopolitan and trustworthy narratives of our universal heritage. Synoptic views, embodying perspectives from across ancient divides of nationalism, religions and cultures, will not be easy to compose. They will be recognized, however, by the interrelated range of questions they raise, and not by their prior commitments to evidence that is unavoidably provisional, or to constricted chronologies and confined spatial parameters. They will also become known for the plurality of theories and categories deployed to select, arrange and represent the past in ways that will continue to constrain the form and structures of all historical narratives.

The launch of this journal is surely timely. It will succeed because the articles published over years to come will be selected to help historians willing to take the epistemological and professional risks involved in writing or addressing meta-narratives for global history to forge improved foundational categories and theories, to select trustworthy scholarship, and to represent the past in ways that might promote cross-cultural conversations recognized as useful for the future of mankind. A mission offering anything less would be folly. And 'folly', as Bolingbroke anticipated during his times of Enlightenment, will be 'remedied by historical study which should serve to purge the mind of these national partialities and prejudices. For a wise man after all looks upon himself as a citizen of the world'.²²⁵

*Patrick O'Brien is Centennial Professor of Economic History,
London School of Economics and Political Science.*

225 Cited along with many pages of sense by Southgate, *Why bother with history?* p. 163.