

WORLD HISTORY: WHAT, WHY, AND HOW? (Outline)
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“Every generation writes its own history.” Carl Becker

What is World History? Definitions

“World history seeks a global perspective on the past . . . and integrates the historical experiences of all of the world's people. Only by examining humanity's shared past is it possible to view today's world in meaningful historical context. Like all historians, world historians create narratives of the past from records of individual and collective experiences, and they interpret the past in response to questions shaped by the world they live in” (Goucher & Walton).

Big Picture. Macro-history.

As with all historians, world historians: identify common phenomena, analyze trans-regional exchanges; develop comparisons; link local events to global change; test historical hypotheses from multiple points of view.

World History (e.g., William McNeill etc.; World History Association);

Global History (e.g., Bruce Mazlish, i.e., single versus multiple vantage points, latter more interested in pursuing a genealogy (or history) of globalization)

Big History (David Christian);

World Systems theory (I. Wallerstein, etc.).

History of World History in the US

Pre-World War I (mostly Western history);

Post-World War I (emergence of US);

Post-World War II (US role in world, Western civilization; rising interest in area studies; rise of national histories, ethnic and cultural diversity of Euro-American societies)

Why World History?

Approaches

De-centered: perspective of an observer “perched on the moon” rather than Seattle, Tokyo, London, Mexico City;

Offers a particular perspective on history: provides overview of the entire history of humanity from a consistent global viewpoint.

No single master narrative.

Not a survey of the whole human experience but a selective investigation of particular themes and topics; differs from national and regional history.

Highlights connections (i.e. interactions), comparisons, and differences/similarities.

We share the world with people who are the same and different; development of various cultures and civilizations part of larger process of historical development.

Assumes that societies are comparable, and that study of similarities and differences facilitates broad generalizations that make it possible to organize descriptive accounts. Emphasizes big processes, especially direct contacts among societies and civilizations, thus key comparison involves how different societies participate in and react to large processes and contacts.

Why World History? Pros and Cons

Pros: Strategic argument; Significance; Universalism—important “to understand what it means to be human,” i.e., “our” shared heritage

Cons: Pragmatic problems; Multiculturalism argument to dismantle the US; Leads to elision of knowledge of West; Danger of “linear and unitary” view of world

How to do World History

Theoretical and Thematic Frameworks

World systems theory; core/periphery argument; world organized as a unit with a single division of labor and multiple cultural and political systems

Timing of this development—Wallerstein and others

Modifications to World Systems Theory—Janet Abu-Lughod , Andre Gunder Frank

Modernization Theory

“Total” History—Annales schools

Connections, Comparisons

Differences and Similarities

Units of Analyses

Finding the right aggregate to use to analyze world history. Hemispheric interregional history; Afro-Eurasia (Hodgson)

Societies and Cultures but as much more dynamic units (Eric Wolf)

Comparative Approach centered on specific topics—migrations, trade, disease

New conception of civilization—only four major civilizations--European and the Mediterranean, the Middle East, India and China “communications nets” that lead to exchanges involving different kinds of people and things (McNeill)

Periodization

Importance of periodization: world history can be organized into key time periods that reveal changes and continuities in international framework (Peter Stearns)

Compare various periodization schemes and fit with Japanese history.