

REVIEW ESSAY

THE WEST AND THE REST: REWRITING GLOBAL HISTORY

By Andrew F. Clark*

Curtin, Philip D. *The World and the West: The European Challenge and the Overseas Response in the Age of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Gran, Peter. *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

The field of global or world history has developed tremendously in the last two decades, progressing from a largely neglected sub-field to its current status as one of the most dynamic and productive areas for history research and teaching. Undergraduate students, both history and non-history majors, are now often required to take a course in global history, along with surveys in American history and Western Civilization. In many institutions, an introductory global history course has replaced the traditional Western Civilization survey. Enrollments in global history courses at all levels are growing annually. Many students will work overseas at some point in their careers, and even more will travel to regions of the non-Western world. At some universities, graduate students can specialize in a global history track. Many history graduate students who go into the teaching profession, at whatever level, will more likely be teaching global history surveys than Western Civilization courses. Several years ago, many textbooks

geared for use in global history courses still focused primarily on the West, with an occasional chapter on, for example, Africa, India, and China. These chapters were usually not integrated into the rest of the text and they received rather cursory treatment, especially when compared to the chapters on Western Europe. New textbooks and readers are published every year with increasing frequency and attention to parts of the world beyond Europe and the United States. Non-Western voices are being heard, often for the first time. Today comprehensive global history textbooks that incorporate the different regions of the world and give equal attention to the West and non-Western regions are widely available. Their coverage of the non-Western world has increased markedly, both in quantity and quality.

Despite the impressive and encouraging gains made in the study of global history, however, some methodological and pedagogical problems remain unresolved. Some scholars refer to the field as modern world history; others prefer world civilizations, whereas still others use the term global history, which is the most useful and descriptive term. The terminology of world history and world civilizations, while useful, convey the concept of separate and divergent societies and histories in different parts of the world. World history has previously been taught along the lines of a “If it is week three, it must be China week.” Each of the major world regions was treated separately and distinctly. The emphasis was generally on similarities and differences among the world’s major civilizations and societies. What was lacking was the integration of the different world regions. Global history is concerned with the interconnections and inter-relations of the human community over the centuries and around the globe. It is an inclusive history, unlike say, American or French history, which is exclusionary of anything not American or French history. Global history seeks to include the various parts of the world community and to

find comparisons and interconnections.

Global history takes its starting point in approximately the mid-fifteenth century with the encompassing of the globe by sea by West Europeans, primarily the Portuguese and Spanish, followed by the Dutch, English and French, as well as other Europeans. While there were major expansions prior to this period, notably the Mongol invasions and the Islamic conquests, none had the truly global and massive impacts of the Iberian phase of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The world was revolutionized by the so-called “Columbian Exchange,” including the transfer of plants, animals, people, diseases and ideas, which continues unabated to the present day. Every corner of the globe was affected by this expansion. Hence, global history can trace its origins to this age of European expansion and the resultant encompassment of the globe. The currently in vogue term “globalization” describes a process that had its start in the Iberian expansion of the late-fifteenth and early sixteenth-centuries. It should be no surprise that courses such as global history surveys are much in demand and that more works are being published every year in global history.

The two books under review in this essay both deal with global history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The authors’ approaches are very dissimilar, reflecting the diversity of perspectives in global history writing today. Both books recognize the importance of global history and of linking various parts of the Western and non-Western world. Both are works of comparative as well as global history, and both make important contributions to the field.

Philip Curtin has published extensively on African and global history. His new work focuses on the rise, impacts and decline of Western imperialism in the non-Western world. The Western world rose to prominence in the sixteenth century, and its dominance of the rest of the

world has, in different forms, continued ever since. Curtin emphasizes the changing relations between the West and the rest of the world through a series of case studies. His chapters ask a variety of questions about relations between the world and the West in recent centuries, particularly since the beginning of the industrial revolution and the period of empire building in the last two centuries. The industrial revolution was both a cause and a result of Western imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The two great developments in global history over the past two centuries, the industrial revolution and Western imperialism, are intricately connected, and each fueled the other. Curtin discusses the term “modernization,” as opposed to “Westernization,” and argues convincingly that modernization constitutes an attempt to achieve technological advancement, and not simply a process to copy or imitate the West.

The first section, titled “Conquest,” addresses the technological sources of European power and the process of empire building in the non-Western world. In the nineteenth century, the emphasis was often on informal empire, or the imperialism of free trade, rather than outright conquest and colonization. The British in particular were not eager to spend money on overseas empires, but rather sought to make a profit through free trade, hence, the initial reluctance to conquer and colonize overseas. Once other European nations, however, began to threaten British financial hegemony, Western nations moved toward formal conquest and colonization. Curtin correctly notes that the reality of imperial rule varied over time and space, often being quite different from one part of an empire to another. In addition, much of the territorial expansion overseas took place because of events and individuals actually in the colonies, and not based on decisions and initiatives taken in European capitals.

The second part of the book deals with specific case studies of cultural change in Africa,

Asia and America under imperial rule. The author presents case studies to demonstrate that non-Western peoples reacted in a variety of ways to the imposition of colonial policies. He analyzes the development of plural societies in South Africa and Central Asia. Plural societies were a direct result of the age of Western empire building, and the ethnic problems arising from many of these regions can be directly attributed to colonial rule. Curtin then turns to Mexico, another plural society, that, owing to demography and timing, represents a considerably more integrated nation than that in South Africa or those in central Asia. In the last chapter in this section, the author examines colonial administrative decisions and their impacts in Bengal, Central Asia, Java and Malaya. These decisions were crucial to later developments, although the decisions often did not produce the intended outcome. Local people were instrumental in how colonial policies were implemented and their long-term impacts. The non-Western world was not simply acted upon by the West, but fundamentally shaped Western imperialism.

The third section, which deals with conversion, is especially effective. Curtin examines several diverse case studies where people overseas, threatened by the rise of Western power, chose to borrow from the West selectively and voluntarily. In much of Africa, including East Africa which is the focus of Chapter Seven, missionary penetration preceded colonial rule and missionaries were often primarily responsible for the annexation of a particular territory. Curtin then considers Meiji Japan and the Ottoman Empire, both of which avoided European conquest, but their modes of reaction were quite different.

In the fourth and final section, Curtin treats the end of European overseas empires, with particular attention to Indonesia and Ghana. Throughout the twentieth century, and especially after World War Two, people around the world successfully resisted colonial rule in a variety of

ways, accelerating European withdrawal from overseas empires. Curtin is accurate throughout the book to examine non-Westerners role in the process of colonialism and its ending. He avoids a Eurocentric approach by focusing on developments overseas, not in Europe as traditionally been the pattern when considering imperialism.

Peter Gran titles his book, “Beyond Eurocentrism” to emphasize the he, too, approaches global, or world history as he terms it, from an international perspective. Gran insists that his work is revisionist, applying social history to world history whereas he faults previous works for being the study of Western elites in non-Western areas of the globe. The author states that he focuses on the “people without history,” such as peasants, workers, and migrants, in both Western and non-Western regions. He correctly notes that Eurocentrism denies non-Western history as a valid field of study because of its assumption that only the West matters and that developments around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have resulted from Western initiatives and activities. Gran considers nine countries in depth, generally comparing and contrasting one European and one non-Western country. The chapters follow the same format throughout: a description of the nation’s political economy from the late nineteenth century to approximately 1990, then a look at the organization of culture as part of the nation’s political economy, and finally an analysis of the nation’s historiography.

His first case study deals with Russia and the Soviet Union from 1861 to 1990 which he then compares to modern Iraq. Next, Italy is compared to India and Mexico. Albania serves as the European state to be compared to the Belgian Congo/Zaire. Finally, he concludes with chapters on Great Britain and then the United States, from the 1880s to 1990. The comparisons do illuminate some features of the nations’ histories that may have been neglected in the past.

Yet the nations' histories are written in a fairly conventional way. Also, for a book whose title claims that it is "beyond Eurocentrism," five of the nine countries considered (Russia, Italy, Albania, Great Britain, and the United States) are overwhelmingly "Western" countries. The comparisons are often more interesting for what they say about the Western nations rather than the non-Western ones. While the author presents a detailed portrait of Iraq, his generalized discussions of India, Mexico, and Belgian Congo/Zaire will disappoint scholars familiar with those countries.

The most interesting part of each chapter, and it is always the shortest section, is the discussion of the nation's historiography. Gran's treatment of each country's historiography is perhaps more original and insightful than the discussion of the nations' political economies. He traces the changing nature and different trends of the various national historiographies from the late nineteenth century to approximately 1990. An extended comparison of the writing of history in each nation might have made for more compelling reading than the comparison of their political economies.

Both these books make a compelling case for the study and writing of global history. While Curtin's book could be used in an undergraduate course, Gran's book is geared exclusively to a scholarly audience. There are interesting comparisons and themes here, especially in Curtin's work. Neither attempts to be exhaustive but to open up avenues for further research in global history, and both are successful on that front.

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