

## Teaching Global History: Context, Not Chronicle; Passion, Not Pedantry

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SUMMER IS THAT HEAVENLY SEASON when teachers may play catch-up with their reading, be it light or heavy. My light reading impacts very little on this article and might destroy any attempted pose of sagacity. As I have done for several years, I finished the second half of our two-year world history sequence in June by devoting the last ten days to the Worldwatch Institute's annual overview of current global economic and environmental realities, *State of the World: 1999*.<sup>1</sup> This year's issue was a millennial edition. I then read Robert D. Kaplan's *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy*.<sup>2</sup> Because I had heard good things about both books, I moved on to, first, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, by Thomas L. Friedman<sup>3</sup>, and then, both because I am a Kaplan fan and because I wished to focus on America, I devoured his *An Empire Wilderness: Travels Into America's Future*.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, this set me up for a summer of looking at the "big picture," and of trying to put the teaching of world history to this generation with their future as the focus of my speculations.

Because I am well into my sixth decade, and have two grandchildren, I think more and more often of the contrast between, on the one hand, the *content and skills* which are debated endlessly by academicians as being necessary for young people today to lead marginally secure and reward-

ing lives in the future; and, on the other hand, the *content and skills* which might truly be pragmatic necessities not directly related to academics or schools. As the reader may infer from the italics, I am not at all persuaded of the utility of the overused and simplistic dichotomous cliché of content and skills. Similarly, my use of the adjective “marginally” correctly implies that I see the future decades as unusually dangerous, especially taxing, interesting, and quite possibly tragic. They will require of our youth, who will plan and design their education with the burden of our complicity, an extraordinary sense of the utilitarian. It will be a future offering few mercies or sympathies to antiquarians, escapists, or to the self-celebratory and self-absorbed. (Schools, colleges and universities are particularly prone to the last two.)

### **The Inadequate Justifications for Teaching World History**

The study of world history can never be manipulated to meet the standard “to-get-into-a-good-college-and-get-a-good-job,” the oft-heard but more felicitously phrased litany and favorite pragmatic slogan of students, parents, admissions recruitment brochures, college placement administrators and conventional bumper-sticker educational strategists. I suspect that it does have an extremely significant impact on how well one might *perform* in that job, once it is acquired, but I certainly can't demonstrate it, nor does it interest me a great deal.

Similarly, I do not wish to encourage my students to seek lives sheltered in some antiquarian cocoon in which one's titillated fascination with Celtic Druids or Latin sonnets, Rajput mystics or Ashikaga shogunal politics both parades one's intellectual accomplishments, and shuts out the common, bloody, day-to-day present of an agonized humanity. I do not wish my students to seek to be knowledgeable in order to feel superior to those millions for whom there have been no opportunities, nor do I wish them to wallow in guilt that this might be so.

I do not want them to study world history so that they “know what happened.” How could they, and who on earth does? While some students, for reasons that neither they nor I understand, may be inspired to choose a life of writing history, I do not fancy that most of them will major in the subject. One would certainly hope not. The world needs a relatively limited number of these.

While I am concerned that my students become literate, learn to write clearly and analytically, and “learn to think and to problem-solve,” I have no illusions that they must do this by studying history at all, and certainly not specifically world history. I do not wish to teach a subject which provides random excuses for writing, thinking, and analyses without

regard to hard, realistic choices about the relevance of material to a present fraught with complexity and a future fraught with danger. We have all heard the argument that as long as the teacher is excited and enthusiastic, it makes no difference whether the students take courses in World War I, or Renaissance Florence, the History of Medieval Ghana, the Bantu Migrations, Sixties Music, or any other area in which the teacher acquired a specialty in graduate school, or for which she or he has discovered a titillating new itch. There has always been far too much curricular emphasis on what is pleasant and convenient for the teacher, and far too little on what is necessary for the student and worthy of his or her time and energy. (I would argue that this is at least as true on the university and college level as it is in secondary schools, and that is truly unsettling.)

### **My Justifications for Teaching World History**

To describe the reasons for teaching world history, one must first define what it is. I know that this is a minefield right now, with genial-to-savage debates about Big History versus Global History versus World History versus Human History, and probably many variations. I will take that chance, admitting that neither I nor any others can claim special authority. I simply speak for myself. That will give me the freedom to be both direct and specific and, I hope, at least, clear.

History is a study of the present. Italian history is a study of Italian artifacts and documents existing in the present. Chinese history is a study of Chinese artifacts and documents existing in the present. History is not the memorization of a chronology of things which exist “in the past,” or a chronology of things which can be “proven” to have happened in the past. Any chronology exists in the present and is arguable. Arguments are based on evidence existing in the present, and they are persuasive or unpersuasive. None are conclusive. They are all speculative, which is why history so taxes the imagination and requires careful creative discipline. History *is* an imaginative enterprise, and the past which is imagined changes radically and swiftly. That is one of the reasons that newly published textbooks can produce great profits, and why every ambitious historian doing research hopes to come up with a “new and revised” version of what *really* happened. The text I inherited when I began teaching American History in 1958 seemed ridiculously fanciful at the time. The “proven facts” change dramatically from decade to decade, which suggests that “proven facts” are, indeed, very temporary hypotheses.<sup>5</sup>

Students must be alert to, observant of, and curious about, many things which surround them in their present. Some of these things are electrical,

or biological, or linguistic. Many are historical. Any form of history involves a specialized perspective, and equally specialized—and therefore distorted—perceptions. Just as French history or Chinese History or American history have special biases for which one must remain alert, so does world history. World history is no less specialized than all of the others. (If God, indeed, sits in Heaven and scrutinizes the affairs of humans, His must be the most unique and specialized perspective of all, and hardly consensual nor representative.)

One teaches world history not because it carries more authority, or because it includes everything, or because it is unbiased. One teaches it from the subjective conviction that the student must be able to place subsequent specialized visions within the context of a universal overview. When I was in ninth grade (1947) we were required to take the history of Pennsylvania for a year before we were able to take United States history. Many states did that at the time; few do that now. One today tends to specialize in regional American histories only after one has an overview within which to place them. Similarly, United States history is not taught as “everything that ever happened in the United States”; neither is it taught as a series of sequential state histories.

A student must have her thinking, her perceptions, and her strategies oriented to two different scales; two great organizational templates which humans seem to have used consistently. One is temporal, the other geographic.<sup>6</sup> Space and time are, for better or for worse, the two grids within which we imagine history having taken place. I am not particularly concerned if a student can not place Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania on a map, or tell me Grover Cleveland’s birth year. If, on the other hand, as is sometimes the case, she places the Amazon River in Australia, or is unaware of there having been something termed a Medieval period of history, I feel she is as yet untrained in thinking about human affairs as she must be able to in order to navigate her life. Just as I want her to subsequently take the history of the United States for a context in which to place her city, so I wish her to have a synthetic overview of human history. That overview can not be seen—it must be imagined, using quite often only the most limited amount of evidence and a good deal of suspension of critical skills, a good deal of tentative faith. If I wish her to be able to imagine a Classical world history with precision, to show her finely constructed time lines, and alleged reproductions of paintings, and published reproductions of alleged first-hand accounts, I must persuade her to suspend what is a perfectly admirable critical judgment which would insist upon traveling to India, China or Brazil. One must edit with immense precision so that, within those two grids are captured the great intellectual creations, the spiritual themes and the cultural sensitivities

which alone provide options of ongoing, creative meaning to support the individual in a world of danger, of geometrically increasing change and the devastating and increasing sense of loss, confusion, depression and anger produced by forces otherwise unexplainable.

I believe passionately, but do not even pretend or care to “prove,” that a student will live a truly dangerous life (I do not mean *academic* life) unless she can *imagine* (not memorize or prove) a human history which seems relevant to, and reasonably explanatory of, the present in which she will forever be living. Her mind, her resources, her discipline, her conviction of her relevance as part of a grand, organic tapestry within our minds—this is the only really valid reason, to me, to teach world history. I have faith that it is crucial, that it is of vital importance, and I feel that it supersedes in importance all other histories.

### Teaching World History

While I am in the relatively unusual, and fortunate, position of teaching world history as a two year sequence to high school freshmen and sophomores, I wish to speak more generally to the important considerations for teaching world history to any one, at any level, and under whatever time constraints. Whether secondary school or college, whether a semester course or a two year sequence will naturally change tactics radically; for that reason I am speaking in broader, more strategic terms.<sup>7</sup> The following practices have proven useful to me:

1. Maximize student discussion, and focus attention on relevance to the present. Design and distribute a short topic for discussion with the reading assignment, and force yourself to stay as silent as possible, to take notes, and to encourage them again and again to *discuss* and not to debate. They are exploring the possibility of a synthesis of various points of view and a tentative consensus. Background lectures or presentations will always be necessary, but minimize. Fight like the very devil the pedagogical temptation to be a star, to be the center of attention, to be an entertainer.
2. Use graphics such as time lines, charts, film clips and prints sparingly but precisely when needed, and have a specific reason for their creation and a clear idea to give the students of what you intend to do with these, or what you wish them to do.
3. Require a good historical atlas which has rich textual analyses, and give frequent assignments in it.
4. Allow perhaps a quarter of a students work to be individually designed and approved by you—book reviews, research papers, analytical essays, videotapes, web pages, or any other reasonable exploitation of a student’s particular passion, provided you feel it will be relevant to, any enriching of, the period you are doing.

5. Be constantly looking at periods or trends or developments *globally*. Do not do a unit on Europe followed by one on India followed by one on China, etc. That is precisely like trying to teach United States History by taking first Massachusetts, then Connecticut, and on and on until Alaska at the end of the year.

6. Move back and forth a great deal, both in time and space. While a general overall chronological movement from earliest time to the present certainly makes the most sense to trace development, exploit every opportunity to jump to the present to establish relevance or to jump backward to review or connect with earlier materials. The course should be playing constantly, bouncing back and forth on a time line, and not merely trudging blindly and ceaselessly from 40,000 years ago to the present.

7. A truly difficult but important discipline to adopt, one which I still have a great deal of trouble with, is the anthropomorphization of nations, institutions, societies, and similar utilitarian inventions. England is a concept; it does not think, or decide to invade, or choose a position. Specific people do those things. The Dutch East India Company is a concept; it does not move like a mythic deity through some grand epic.

### Conclusion

I believe that the discipline of history, always under assault, has only begun to experience the degree of pressure for it to be foreshortened and then dropped in the coming decade. Already, some college divisions have been reduced to teaching world history in a single semester. Many schools and colleges do not teach it, and my own school is striking because, while it moved from a four to a three year requirement, we have held the line at three. My friends say that I am alarmist, but I truly feel that, in order to make way for increasing numbers of technical and managerial oriented disciplines there is a real danger of the entire discipline of history going the way of classics and a host of other subjects once thought relevant but which were crowded out by increasing math and science expectations, by economics, by computer courses, and others. I have become a passionate advocate of world history because, taught correctly, it can be honestly argued as one of the most relevant subjects a student can take in order to understand her future when it arrives. I believe that that will be particularly true as the number of required years of history dwindle and, quite possibly, disappear.

I may be an alarmist, but I am not a defeatist. History has enriched my life, not as antiquarianism, or ill-disguised nationalistic chauvinism, or as a silly rite of passage. It has enriched it just as had biology, which explains the realities of human health, and nutrition, and aging, and disease, and death itself in a way which has equipped me to live from one present to the next without the fear of the unexplained. The point of that

science is not chronological—it is analytical; it is not ornamental, but pragmatic; it is not encyclopedic, but universal. The same is true of world history.

## Notes

1. Brown, Lester R. et. al., Eds. *State of the World 1999: Toward A Sustainable Society*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).
2. Kaplan, Robert D. *The Ends of the Earth: From Togo to Turkmenistan, From Iran to Cambodia—A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy*. (N.Y., Vintage Books, 1996).
3. Friedman, Thomas L. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).
4. Kaplan, Robert D. *An American Wilderness: Travels Into America's Future*. (New York: Random House, 1998).
5. I have been told recently that this position, probably first discovered well before either Herodotus or Han Yu, is now called “postmodernism,” and is considered both novel and shocking in many quarters.
6. Most cultures seem as well to have added a cosmological template.
7. I can only say that if the actual size of classes or sections exceeds fifteen or twenty and instead requires large lecture halls and little opportunity for frequent small sections meetings, I would not envision a great deal of success. If one protests that it is better than nothing, one would probably be correct, but it would convey a very distorted view of the discipline