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# THE TASK OF WORLD HISTORY

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JERRY H. BENTLEY

THE term *world history* has never been a clear signifier with a stable referent. It shares a semantic and analytical terrain with several alternative approaches, some of which boast long scholarly pedigrees, while others have only recently acquired distinct identities. The alternatives include universal history, comparative history, global history, big history, transnational history, connected history, entangled history, shared history, and others. World history overlaps to some greater or lesser extent with all of these alternative approaches.

World history and its companions have taken different forms and meant different things at different times to different peoples. From ancient times, many peoples—Hindus and Hebrews, Mesopotamians and Maya, Persians and Polynesians, and countless others—constructed myths of origin that located their own experiences in the larger context of world history. Taking their cues from the Bible, Christian scholars of medieval Europe traced a particular kind of universal history from Creation to their own day. Historians of the Mongol era viewed historical development in continental perspective and included most of Eurasia in their accounts. The philosopher Ibn Khaldun conceived a grand historical sociology of relations between settled and nomadic peoples. The Göttingen Enlightenment historians Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig von Schlözer worked to construct a new, professionally grounded *Universalgeschichte* that would illuminate the hidden connections of distant events. In the twentieth century, Oswald Spengler, Arnold J. Toynbee, Karl Jaspers, and others turned world history into a philosophical project to discover historical laws by distilling high-proof wisdom from the historical record. To many others throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, world history has meant foreign history—the history of peoples and societies other than one’s own. Meanwhile, in schools and universities, world history has commonly referred to a synoptic and comparative survey of all the world’s peoples and societies considered at a high level of abstraction.

Since the mid-twentieth century, a new kind of world history has emerged as a distinctive approach to professional historical scholarship. It is a straightforward matter to describe the general characteristics of this new world history. As it has developed since the 1960s and particularly since the 1980s, the new world history has focused attention on comparisons, connections, networks, and systems rather than the experiences of individual communities or discrete societies. World historians have systematically compared the experiences of different societies in the interests of identifying the dynamics that have been especially important for large-scale developments like the process of industrialization and the rise of the West. World historians have also analyzed processes of cross-cultural interaction and exchange that have influenced the experiences of individual societies while also shaping the development of the world as a whole. And world historians have focused attention on the many systems of networks that transgress the national, political, cultural, linguistic, geographical, and other boundaries that historians and other scholars have conventionally observed. World historians have not denied the significance of local, national, and regional histories, but they have insisted on the need to locate those histories in larger relevant contexts.<sup>1</sup>

This new world history emerged at a time of dramatic expansion in the thematic scope of historical analysis. To some extent it paralleled projects such as social history, women's history, gender analysis, environmental history, and area studies, not to mention the linguistic turn and the anthropological turn, which cumulatively over the past half-century have extended historians' gaze well beyond the political, diplomatic, military, and economic horizons that largely defined the limits of historical scholarship from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

Yet the new world history has conspicuously engaged two sets of deeper issues that do not loom so large in other fields. These deeper issues arise from two unintended ideological characteristics that historical scholarship acquired—almost as birthmarks—at the time of its emergence as a professional discipline of knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century: a legacy of Eurocentric assumptions and a fixation on the nation-state as the default and even natural category of historical analysis. The early professional historians reflected the influence of these values, which were common intellectual currency in nineteenth-century Europe, and to a remarkable degree, their successors have continued to view the past through the filters of distinctively nineteenth-century perspectives. Because world historians work by definition on large-scale transregional, cross-cultural, and global issues, they regularly confront these two characteristics of professional historical scholarship more directly than their colleagues in other fields. By working through the problems arising from Eurocentric assumptions and enchantment with the nation-state, world historians have created opportunities to open new windows onto the global past and to construct visions of the past from twenty-first rather than nineteenth-century perspectives.

How did professional historical scholarship acquire its ideological birthmarks? How did it happen that serious scholars—who were conscientiously seeking an accurate and precise reconstruction of the past—came to view the past through powerful ideological

filters that profoundly influenced professional historians' understanding of the past, their approach to their work, and the results of their studies?

Rigorous study of the past has deep historical roots. From classical antiquity to modern times, historians of many cultural traditions worked diligently to compile accurate and honest accounts of historical developments. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, historians in several lands were independently developing protocols for rigorous, critical, evidence-based analysis of the past.<sup>2</sup> Yet professional historical scholarship as we know it today—the highly disciplined study of the past centered principally in universities—acquired its identity and achieved institutional form only during the nineteenth century. Professional historical scholarship as we know it today derives from the efforts of Leopold von Ranke and others who worked to establish reliable foundations for historical knowledge and to enhance its credibility by insisting that historians refrain from telling colorful but fanciful stories and base their accounts instead on critically examined documentary evidence.

This essay will argue that professional historical scholarship has suffered from several serious problems from its beginnings to the present day. Let me emphasize that this argument is a critique of historical scholarship, not a rejection or condemnation. The critique does not imply that it is impossible for historians to deal responsibly with the past and still less that professional historical scholarship is a vain endeavor. In the absence of any alternative approach capable of achieving absolute objectivity or yielding perfect knowledge, professional historical scholarship, in spite of its problems, is in my opinion clearly the most reliable, most responsible, and most constructive mode of dealing with the past. It is by no means the only way or the most popular way by which the world's peoples have sought to come to terms with the past. The world's peoples have more commonly relied on myth, legend, memory, genealogy, song, dance, film, fiction, and other approaches as their principal and preferred guides to the past.<sup>3</sup> Granting that these alternative ways of accessing and dealing with the past wield enormous cultural power, it is clear also that they do not readily open themselves to critique, revision, or improvement. They stand on the foundations of unquestionable authority, long-standing tradition, emotional force, and rhetorical power. Professional historical scholarship by contrast approaches the past through systematic exploration, rigorous examination of evidence, and highly disciplined reasoning. Some practitioners have deployed their skills in such a way as to stoke the emotions or inspire a sense of absolute certainty, but as often as not, professional historical scholarship has corroded certainty, raised doubts about long-cherished convictions, and emphasized the complexities of issues that some might have preferred to view as simple. More importantly, it exposes itself to review and critique in the interests of identifying problems, correcting mistakes, and producing improved knowledge. It enjoys general intellectual credibility—properly so—and it has earned its reputation as the most reliable mode of dealing with the past. Even if they left a problematic legacy, Leopold von Ranke and his collaborators bequeathed to the world a powerful intellectual tool in the form of professional historical scholarship.

Yet the habit of critique that is a hallmark of professional historical scholarship requires historians to undertake a critical examination of professional historical scholarship itself. This critical examination might well begin by considering the conditions under which professional historical scholarship emerged. It was significant that professional historical scholarship as we know it emerged in nineteenth-century Europe. The early professional historians fashioned study of the past into a rigorous and respectable scholarly discipline just as two other momentous developments were underway. First, during an age of industrialization and imperialism, Europe realized more global power and influence than ever before in world history. Second, in both Europe and North America, political leaders transformed ramshackle kingdoms and federations into powerful national states. Both developments had profound implications for historical scholarship and for the conception of history itself as an intellectual project.

## PROFESSIONAL HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND THE PROBLEM OF EUROPE

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The twin processes of industrialization and imperialism created a context in which European peoples came to construe Europe as the site of genuine historical development. Michael Adas has pointed out that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European travelers found much to admire in the societies, economies, and cultural traditions of China, India, and other lands. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, after the Enlightenment and the development of modern science, followed by the tapping of new energy sources that fueled a massive technological transformation, Europeans increasingly viewed other peoples as intellectually and morally inferior while dismissing their societies as sinks of stagnation.<sup>4</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel articulated these views in stark and uncompromising terms. The Mediterranean basin was 'the centre of World-History,' he intoned, without which 'the History of the World could not be conceived.' By contrast, East Asia was 'severed from the process of general historical development, and has no share in it.' Sub-Saharan Africa was 'the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.' As a result, Africa was 'no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.' Turning his attention to the western hemisphere, Hegel declared that 'America has always shown itself physically and psychically powerless, and still shows itself so.' Like Africa, America had no history, properly speaking, although European peoples were working to introduce history there even as he wrote, so Hegel predicted that it would be 'the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself.'<sup>5</sup>

Hegel was a philosopher, not a historian, and I am well aware that his conception of history was more sophisticated than his uninformed speculations on the world beyond Europe might suggest. It is clear today that Hegel spoke from profound ignorance of the larger world, but his views were plausible enough in nineteenth-century Europe. Furthermore, as the dominant philosopher of his age, who placed historical development on the philosopher's agenda, Hegel deeply influenced both the conception of history and the understanding of its purpose precisely at the moment when it was winning recognition as a professional scholarly discipline capable of yielding accurate and reliable knowledge about the past.

Although the early professional historians bridled impatiently at Hegel's speculative pronouncements, their everyday practice resonated perfectly with his notion that history in the proper sense of the term was relevant almost exclusively for Europe, not for the larger world. The early professional historians faithfully reflected Hegel's views when they radically limited the geographical scope of proper historical scholarship to the Mediterranean basin and Europe, and to a lesser extent Europe's offshoots in the western hemisphere. These were the lands with formal states and literary traditions that were supposedly unique in exhibiting conscious, purposeful historical development. Hegel and the early professional historians alike regarded them as the drivers of world history—the proper focus of historians' attention. Hegel and the historians granted that complex societies with formal states and sophisticated cultural traditions like China, India, Persia, and Egypt had once possessed history. Because they had supposedly fallen into a state of stagnation, however, they did not merit the continuing attention of historians, whose professional responsibility was to study processes of conscious, purposeful historical development.

Accordingly, for a century and more, historians largely restricted their attention to the classical Mediterranean, Europe, and Euro-American lands in the western hemisphere. Study of other world regions was the province of scholars in different fields. Until the emergence of modern area studies after World War II, for example, orientalists and missionaries were the principal scholars of both past and contemporary experiences of Asian lands, which they sought to understand largely on the basis of canonical literary texts rather than historical research.<sup>6</sup> If the early professional historians excluded Asian lands from their purview, they certainly had no interest in sub-Saharan Africa, tropical Southeast Asia, the Americas, and Oceania. These lands without recognizable formal states or literary traditions were lands literally without history. As a result, these lands and their peoples, with their exotic and colorful but historically unimportant traditions—'the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe,' in the words of one latter-day Hegelian historian—fell to the tender mercies of the anthropologists.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that Leopold von Ranke echoed the language of broad-gauged Enlightenment scholars when he advocated a universal history that 'embraces the events of all times and nations.' He expansively envisioned this universal history not as a mere compilation of national histories but as an account from a larger perspective in which 'the general connection of things' would be the historian's principal interest. 'To

recognize this connection, to trace the sequence of those great events which link all nations together and control their destinies,' he declared, 'is the task which the science of Universal History undertakes.' Ranke freely acknowledged that 'the institutions of one or another of the Oriental nations, inherited from primeval times, have been regarded as the germ from which all civilization has sprung.' Yet in the very same breath, he also held that there was no place for these 'Oriental nations' in his work: 'the nations whose characteristic is eternal repose form a hopeless starting point for one who would understand the internal movement of Universal History.' As a result, the horizons of Ranke's own universal history (published between 1880 and 1888) did not extend beyond the Mediterranean basin and Europe.<sup>8</sup> Thus, universal history meant European history, and European history was the only history that really mattered.

Over time, with accumulation of knowledge about the world beyond Europe, it is conceivable that historians might have corrected this kind of Eurocentric thinking by gradually broadening the geographical and cultural horizons of historical scholarship so as to include societies beyond Europe. But Hegel and the early professional historians were active at precisely the moment when European commentators were realizing the enormous power that mechanized industrial production lent European peoples in their dealings with the larger world. The intellectual environment that nurtured theories of pejorative orientalism, scientific racism, social Darwinism, and civilizing mission made no place for relativistic notions that Europe was one society among others. Contemporary experience seemed to demonstrate European superiority and suggested that weaker societies would benefit from European tutelage to raise them to higher levels of development.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Hegel and the early professional historians reinforced their Eurocentric perspectives with the assumption that Europe was the *de facto* standard of historical development and indeed of civilization itself.

In this intellectual atmosphere, the early professional historians universalized European categories of analysis, thereby ensuring, perhaps unintentionally, that societies in the larger world would look deficient when viewed in the light of analytical standards derived from European experience. Many critics have pointed out the distinctly European valence of terms like state and nation, culture and civilization, tradition and modernity, trade, labor, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and others that have become workhorses of professional historical scholarship.<sup>10</sup> When professional historians began to broaden their geographical horizons after the mid-twentieth century and extend historical recognition to lands beyond Europe, they continued to employ these inherited concepts and thus viewed societies in the larger world through the lenses of European categories of analysis. The effect of this practice was to deepen and consolidate Eurocentric assumptions by producing a body of historical knowledge that evaluated the world's societies against standards manufactured in Europe.

In an influential article of 1992, Dipesh Chakrabarty offered a darkly pessimistic view of the resulting historiography and its potential to deal responsibly with the world beyond Europe. He argued that Europe had become the reference point of professional historical scholarship. 'There is a peculiar way,' he observed, 'in which all . . . other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called "the



history of Europe”.’ Further, ‘so long as one operates within the discourse of “history” produced at the institutional site of the university, it is not possible simply to walk out of the deep collusion between “history” and the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation state.’ Thus, professional historical scholarship as an intellectual project fell inevitably and completely within the orbit of European modernity. As of 1992, Chakrabarty regarded its value as a form of knowledge as dubious and possibly nil.<sup>11</sup>

It is not necessary to accept all the dire implications drawn by Chakrabarty and some other postcolonial critics to recognize that it is indeed problematic procedure to universalize categories of analysis that originated as culturally specific concepts in one society and then apply them broadly in studies of societies throughout the world, and to acknowledge further that capitalism, imperialism, and other elements of European modernity have profoundly influenced both the conception and the practice of professional historical scholarship.<sup>12</sup> Rather than throwing up hands and jumping to the conclusion that historical scholarship is a vain pursuit, however, a more constructive approach might be to entertain the possibility that professional historians are capable of transcending the original limitations of their discipline. Before exploring that possibility, though, a second problem of professional historical scholarship calls for attention.

## PROFESSIONAL HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND THE PROBLEM OF THE NATION

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Alongside a cluster of Eurocentric assumptions, professional historical scholarship acquired a second ideological birthmark in the form of a fixation on the nation-state as the default and even natural focus of historical analysis. This was not inevitable. From ancient times to the present, many historians sought ways to understand the experiences of their own societies in larger context. This was true of Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and Sima Qian in the second century BCE.<sup>13</sup> It was true in the thirteenth century CE of the Persian historians of the Mongols, Juvaini and Rashid al-Din. In the Enlightenment era, it was true of amateur historians like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and the authors of the English *Universal History* who managed to compile some sixty-five volumes on the histories of all world regions (1736–65), as well as the professional historians Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig von Schlözer at the University of Göttingen. Even throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a tradition of popular interest in world history persisted stubbornly in the face of university-based professional historical scholarship. Obscure individuals like Robert Benjamin Lewis and William Wells Brown published world histories from African perspectives, while prominent figures like H. G. Wells and Jawaharlal Nehru essayed comprehensive surveys of the global past.<sup>14</sup>