PERIODIZING WORLD HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Periodization is rooted in historical theory. It reflects our priorities, our values, and our understanding of the forces of continuity and change. Yet periodization is also subject to practical constraints. For pedagogical reasons, world historians must seek reasonable symmetry between major historical eras despite huge discrepancies in the availability of historical data for separate time periods and for different areas of the world.

Political issues arise in periodization. Should world history provide integrated treatment of the evolution of civilization, focusing upon the most developed societies (chiefly Eurasian)? Or should it provide equal time to cultures outside the evolutionary mainstream (sub-Saharan Africa and pre-Columbian America)? If integration is to be preferred—as this article advocates—it is incumbent upon integrationists to provide some overarching theory (or theories) of change to demonstrate how the destinies of the world's peoples have been linked through the millennia.

Although the article attempts to demonstrate how comprehensive theories of change can facilitate the formulation of world history periodization, it does not minimize the difficulty of developing a universally operative organic theory of change. It examines several theoretical orientations, but principal attention is given to world-systems analysis, the most fully refined and well articulated body of theory currently commended as a vehicle for structuring world history.

Acknowledging that no body of theory currently achieves a satisfactory universal integration of world history and that this situation may prevail in the future, the author recommends, for the present, an eclectic periodization of four epochs divided at roughly 1000 B.C.E., 400–600 C.E., and circa 1492.

Periodization is both the product and the begetter of theory. The organizing principles upon which we write history, the priorities we assign to various aspects of human endeavor, and the theories of change we adopt to explain the historical process: all are represented in periodization. Once firmly established, periodization exerts formidable, often subliminal, influence on the refinement and elaboration of theory.

The ancient/medieval/modern formula currently in use had its origins in Italian humanist thinking, but acceptance of this tripartite model did not become universal until the nineteenth century. Since then, tripartite periodization has gripped Western academe like a straitjacket, determining how we organize departments of history, train graduate students, form professional societies,
and publish many of our best professional journals. It pervades our habits of mind; it defines turf; it generates many of the abstractions that sustain professional discourse. It determines how we retain images and how we perceive the beginning, middle, and ending of things. It is insidious, and it is sustained by powerful vested interests as well as by sheer inertia.

Scholars who endeavor to formulate an acceptable periodization for world history confront far fewer practical obstacles than those who would seek to alter period frontiers in European history or in other established regional histories. World historians encounter neither an entrenched scheme of epochal divisions nor the dead weight of inertia. There is still a comparatively small professional literature self-consciously addressed to the global perspective. World history has only recently emerged as a field of concentration in a few Ph.D. programs. Consequently, there is not a large and well-established graduate faculty committed by training and tradition to a particular mode of periodization, nor are there commonly acknowledged chronological parameters—fields of preparation for comprehensive examinations—that have imposed a standard epochal division upon the field.

An important practical consideration in periodizing world history involves audience. Our primary audience is university students (usually first- or second-year undergraduates), and the chief vehicle for transmitting world history is the textbook. For practical pedagogical reasons, we are compelled to seek reasonable symmetry in our periodization, even though there are vast discrepancies in the availability of historical data for different eras and for different regions of the globe.

How we periodize world history will be influenced by our objectives in teaching the subject. World historians attempt to explain how human societies have been transformed from bands of hunters and gatherers to the types of people we are today. Even today, in an age of space exploration, hunters and gatherers survive in remote regions of the world. The organizational problems created by such diversity of human experience have occasioned different strategic approaches to writing world history.

One approach provides an integrated mainstream treatment of world history. Another emphasizes regional diversity. The integrated approach routinely focuses on the most developed and complex societies, their ups, their downs, their interactions with one another, and their troubled encounters with less complex peoples. This approach devotes paramount attention to Eurasia. Sub-Saharan Africa, pre-Columbian America, and Australasia are less heralded and, for long stretches of time, they pass largely unnoticed. Integrated mainstream world history enables historians to employ common engines of change to explain the historical process, thereby facilitating the identification of universal epochal frontiers.

Regional strategy embraces more of the world’s peoples for longer periods of time whether those peoples functioned within the evolutionary mainstream or at some distance from centers of civilization. Conceived as a congeries of
regional histories, this approach to world history emphasizes intercultural understanding and carries less risk of offending political sensitivities. Those who advocate a region-by-region approach are able to argue that for most of human history, really significant interaction between major world civilizations was limited and, for the most part, inconsequential. Because rates of change differ from one region to another, the regional approach discourages the use of overarching theories of change that would facilitate the adoption of universal epochal frontiers.

The burden of proof in these matters rests with the integrationists. They must demonstrate that, from an early time, the destinies of the world’s peoples (or at least some significant portion of the world’s peoples) have been linked. It must be shown that engines of change operating globally have been decisive in propelling both the rate and the direction of change across diverse and distant cultures. Unless integrationist theory is convincing on this question, a fragmented, region-by-region approach to writing (and to periodizing) world history might be the most expedient approach.

In this regard, America presents the integrationist with a significant problem. Major civilizations thrived in four regions of the Eastern Hemisphere several thousand years before the rise of an equally complex civilization in America. Lasting interactions between all the continents did not begin until after 1492. There may have been common experiences within each of the hemispheres; but, prior to 1492, history at its grandest level could only be hemispheric. A completely integrated world history is only possible after the hemispheres were in permanent contact. Unless one wishes to deny that pre-Columbian America constitutes a significant component of the human experience, some degree of fragmentation in writing and periodizing global history is inescapable.

Ideally, all periodizations should be rooted in disciplined concepts of continuity and change. Historical epochs should exhibit important long-term continuities, and moments of transition between epochs should involve the dissolution of old continuities and the forging of new ones. We must identify how powerful historical forces interacted to generate particular forms of change at particular velocities. To do this, we need a theory of change. A single general theory may suffice if we are confident that the paramount forces governing change in the social organism have been constant across the millennia. If the paramount forces of change have varied from region to region or from one age to another, no single theory will suffice. In that case, we must adjust our theory to accommodate the changes we perceive in historical circumstances. European history provides an example. A neo-Malthusian demographic model has been adopted by numerous historians to explain developments during Europe's medieval period. The utility of the model declines steeply for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when rapid expansion of commerce, technology, and industry raised per-capita productivity, thereby diminishing the menace of repeated positive checks.

We cannot hope to be value-free in our formulation of theory. Our theories reflect our priorities. Medieval writers assigned God a directing hand in history.
Their epochal divisions were drawn at dramatic moments of divine intervention. Marx disdained concepts of divine intervention, insisting that human action has always been driven by material forces. More than any other thinker, Marx established priorities for the twentieth century. Other writers have developed alternative theories of change (often in response to Marx), but all, or nearly all, have agreed on the central importance of material forces.

Until now, the identification of period frontiers has generally taken two forms. One focuses on a coincidence of forces, the other on a leading sector. The coincidental approach identifies the convergence of numerous important developments at a single moment in history. The circa 1500 C.E. watershed in Western tripartite periodization rests largely on this type of observation. In the decades around 1500 numerous important events converged: the Ptolemaic perception of the universe was challenged, printing and gunpowder achieved importance, Columbus reached America and DaGama sailed to India, Constantinople fell to the Turks, Luther launched the Protestant Reformation, and the monarchies of England, France, and Spain were consolidated. Taken together, these happenings, it has been argued, dissolved old continuities and gave rise to a new epoch in Western history.

The leading-sector approach concentrates on one overwhelming source of change that exercises decisive pulling power on all others. Proponents of the leading sector might argue that the discovery of the New World with its abundant natural resources and its effect upon Old World understandings of the cosmos was an event of such monumental proportions that it drew the whole of Western society from one set of norms to another.

Both concepts identify major happenings. Both demand the application of organic theories of change. Unless we adopt the view that significant historical forces like those operating in the fifteenth century coincide randomly, we are obliged to seek a theory of change that explains why and how such coincidences occur. Similarly, we need an organic theory to explain how a leading sector becomes leading and how it is related to the powerful forces that follow in its wake. With such a theory we are like a person who wants to bake a cake but lacks a recipe. This person might identify the ingredients of a cake and place them together on the kitchen counter, but until a recipe is in hand that explains what weight to give each ingredient, how and when to fold them together, and at what temperature and for what length of time to bake them, he or she will not have a cake.

Historians stand at the opposite end of a similar process. For historians, the cake of history has already been made. The historian's task is to determine, as best he or she can, the ingredients from which it is composed, their relative weights, and the manner by which they were integrated. To make a cake, one needs a recipe. To divine why and how history has evolved as it has, the historian needs a theory of change. Theory does more than identify the ingredients of historical problems. It explains the process which gives those ingredients meaning.

Explicit theories of change were not used in the establishment of Western tripartite periodization. For its inventors the mere recognition that numerous im-
important events converged in time was considered sufficient. In redefining European periodization, organic theory would be essential. The principal models currently in use among Western scholars—market-driven division-of-labor models, neo-Malthusian demographic models, Marxian or world-systems models—are compatible with tripartite periodization and with its sixth- and sixteenth-century epochal divides. Nevertheless, as I have attempted to show elsewhere, those same models (except perhaps world systems) would commend the eleventh and the eighteenth centuries much more emphatically than the sixteenth century as decisive moments of transition in European history.¹

Can theories of change assist us in periodizing world history? Yes, if . . . Yes, if before the sixteenth century one (or both) of the hemispheres was functionally interrelated to the extent that some common engine (or engines) of change exerted an integrating and profoundly transforming influence upon leading civilizations and their hinterlands. If so, how did each civilization internalize and accommodate this common engine of change? How did this common engine influence both the rate and the direction of change? Finally, how did it affect the relative position of each of the major civilizations over time?

This is no small undertaking. Identifying shared experiences among the major civilizations is not a problem. Demonstrating that a shared experience was the paramount means by which the hemisphere and each civilization within it was transformed is a problem. It is one thing to apply organic models to regional civilizations where we have ongoing, well-documented interaction between major historical actors (groups, institutions, individuals). It is another to apply organic models where our knowledge of the interaction between historical actors (in this case, whole civilizations) is limited and where there are few reliable data on how different civilizations responded to and were affected by common stimuli (for example, trade, disease, invasion). For the early millennia of world history, available empirical evidence is insufficient to lend strong support to any general theory of change. The most we can hope for is reasonable plausibility. Reasonable plausibility is not an insignificant or insufficient goal. It is precisely what is being sought by scholars in other areas of historical enquiry where theory is critically important, such as psychohistory.

Where do world historians stand on periodization? What theoretical orientations have they employed? In the main, modern writers of world history texts have adopted progressive, evolutionary, materialist theories of change. Their theoretical orientation corresponds to that of the leading progressive and evolutionary theorists of the nineteenth century. Both have embraced human history from its origins to the present, trying to locate critical stages in humankind’s long transition from hunters and gatherers to modern world citizens. Both have assumed that there are common and universal qualities to human nature and that human nature inevitably generates social and cultural development. Both have considered change to be gradual and constant; both have identified the

¹ William A. Green, “Periodization in European and World History,” Journal of World History 3 (1992), 13–53.
direction of change as evolving from homogeneous to heterogeneous, from simple to complex; both have believed that, on balance, change has occasioned betterment in the quality of human life (nineteenth-century scholars were boldly confident of this; contemporary world historians make this case more subtly, sometimes even apologetically). Both have asked the same kinds of questions: how do people become civilized?

It is modern scholars’ methods, not their concept of the problem, that chiefly distinguishes contemporary world historians from Comte and Spencer. Nineteenth-century evolutionists placed highest priority on ethnographic evidence. Because humans were thought to have a uniform nature and because most change was considered to be immanent to society, all humans were thought to have evolved along a single upward gradient. Each culture studied by anthropologists from the most primitive to the most sophisticated was thought to represent a stage in the progressive evolution of the species. Modern world historians have redirected their emphasis from ethnographic to historical forms of evidence. We are less disposed to uniformitarianism. Yet we persist in assuming that human beings, by their common nature, respond to similar stimuli in similar ways. On this premise, world historians continue to seek the unifying laws and regularities that enable them to weave the histories of disparate civilizations together in coherent, integrated fashion.2

As a rule, they differentiate past societies hierarchically on the basis of their technologies and by the degree to which invention and innovation permitted division of labor and social stratification. They perceive diffusion as the principal mechanism by which technological progress was realized. It is a process by which distinct civilizations dispersed their special skills, products, organization, and culture outward into adjacent regions, just as pebbles tossed into still water generate a concentric outward movement of ripples. The diffusion of advanced products and modes of behavior compromised and seduced barbaric peoples on the periphery of civilized regions. Converging cultural ripples emanating from various distinct civilizations produced action and reaction, borrowing, change, and adjustment between civilizations. War was one means of diffusion, but trade was its principal vehicle.

Trade-driven division of labor theory, a modern derivative of the work of Adam Smith, has consistently been used as a guide to explain the rate and direction of change within civilizations. This “commercial” theory aids in delineating interactions between civilized peoples and “barbarians,” and it provides insight into the manner in which contacts, great or small, among leading civilizations promoted interregional borrowings and thereby stimulated social transformation across cultural frontiers. Though widely employed, this theory has not, in its classic form, been used to embrace all the peoples of a region or all the

civilizations of a hemisphere within a single integrated historical process. An elaboration upon it—namely, world-systems theory—attempts to do that.

Commercial theory has provided material groundwork for a periodization based on spiritual and intellectual breakthroughs. Having noted the rapid growth of commerce in the first millennium B.C.E., Karl Jaspers determined that vigorous material development generated intellectual breakthroughs in four regions of high civilization. Jaspers called this the axial age, defining the breakthroughs as transcendental, a search for immortality and salvation. The four breakthroughs were monotheism among Jews, rational philosophy in Greece, Confucianism and Taoism in China, Buddhism and Jainism in India.3

Marshall G. S. Hodgson adopted Jaspers's formulation, advocating a periodization that divided world history into two unequal compartments: an agrarian age, 7000 B.C.E. to about 1800 C.E., and a technical age since 1800. The late agrarian age was subdivided into three epochs: preaxial (3000–800 B.C.E.), axial (800 B.C.E.–200 B.C.E.), and postaxial (200 B.C.E.–1800 C.E.). Rising prosperity, accelerated by interregional commerce, provided a fertile intellectual climate for these breakthroughs, Hodgson contended. In the amalgam of Judaic monotheism and Greco-Roman philosophy, Christianity took root. From this triad emerged Islam. Apart from these two “secondary-stage revolutions,” few profound religious and philosophical revolutions have arisen since the first millennium B.C.E.4

These axial age “breakthroughs” provoke questions about the relationship between material forces and cultural values. Did one promote the other, either directly or indirectly? Were the four transcendental breakthroughs linked in any discernible way? Do they provide evidence of interregional integration across the hemisphere? Or, were these breakthroughs distinct phenomena, connected only to the extent that they emerged in societies that possessed a literary tradition and some measure of material comfort and social stratification?

These questions were addressed by two separate groups of scholars. Both concluded that transcendental breakthroughs were not the product of direct diffusion of ideas from one civilization to another.5 Chinese civilization was quite insulated; transformations in India were a derivative of local conditions and culture. Both Greeks and Jews were influenced by Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures, but the different nature of their societies and the distinct character of their breakthroughs precludes the likelihood that they had a linked experience. Two great civilizations of the age did not have transcendental breakthroughs: Egypt and Assyria. The scholars who participated in these studies

4. Hodgson observed that spiritual and intellectual advances since the axial age have, in the main, arisen inside the cultural traditions laid down in that period. See Marshall G. S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1974), I, 48–53, 105–120.
agreed that high material development was a necessary, if not sufficient, requisite for a breakthrough, but the only shared impulse of all axial age movements was “the strain toward transcendence.” Hodgson died in 1968, leaving unfinished a world history that may have adopted the axial age as a pivot of world periodization. Subsequent world historians have not pursued his insight.

In 1978 Geoffrey Barraclough observed that “Marxism is the only coherent theory of the evolution of man in society, and in that sense the only philosophy of history, which exercises a demonstrable influence over the minds of historians today.” The appeal of Marxism has declined precipitously in recent years. World-systems theory has usurped its influence. The most noted practitioner of world-systems theory, Immanuel Wallerstein, has used it to achieve a tightly integrated analysis of the Atlantic basin over the last five centuries. World systems theory, while neo-Marxist in origin, is a complex elaboration upon trade-driven division of labor theory. It is progressive, evolutionary, and materialist. Although Wallerstein himself questions the utility of the model for pre-1460 world history, others strongly advocate its adoption as a means of integrating regional histories of the Eastern hemisphere in a single historical process. Janet Abu-Lughod has described a world system centered in the Middle East during the thirteenth century. William McNeill encourages use of the world system as an overarching ecumenical process as early as 1700 B.C.E. André Gunder Frank and Barry Gills recommend world-systems analysis as the framework for Afro-Eurasian history beginning at least as early as 2700 B.C.E.

Frank is the most explicit, if most extreme, theoretician for premodern application of the world-systems approach. He discards traditional categories of analysis, challenges standard notions of periodization, and presents a new paradigm for the study of world history. For the last 5000 years—possibly more, writes Frank—a world system has operated across Afro-Eurasia based upon the transfer of economic surplus between regions. Those transfers integrated regional modes of exploitation and accumulation into an overarching, interpenetrating, competitive order. A universal drive for capital accumulation was the primary motor of change across the hemisphere. Each region possessed a hegemonic center connected to a dependent periphery and to a distant hinterland with which it interacted. The consistent outward reach of these regional systems generated increased interregional economic exchange and competition.

technological advantage, among other forces, enabled first one, then another, of the great regional civilizations to exert superhegemony over others.

Frank and Gills offer a simple model to demonstrate how exchanges of surplus linked not just the elites of separate regions, but the whole economic, political, social, and ideological character of their societies. When the elite of B acquired surplus extracted by the elite of A (whatever the mode of extraction may have been), that surplus linked the two societies’ “processes of surplus management, their structures of exploitation and oppression by class and gender, and their institutions of the state and the economy.” If B subsequently exchanged part of that surplus to C, then not only were B and C systemically linked in the same “over-arching system of accumulation,” but so too were A and C. For Frank, modes of accumulation, not modes of production, are central. His readers (particularly the Marxists among them) are implored to abandon notions of feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and the transitions between them as being useless impediments to a correct world vision.

The Afro-Eurasian world system described by Frank and Gills experienced alternating cycles of expanding and contracting accumulation. These cycles, hemispheric in scope, were generally four to five centuries long; each had an up A phase (expanding accumulation) followed by a down B phase (contracting accumulation), and each of these phases usually occupied about two centuries. The establishment of regional hegemonies occurred during A phases, sometimes producing a system-wide superhegemon. Periods of contraction (weakening and instability) were often punctuated by invasions from the hinterland, as, for example, the Barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire or the Mongol invasions across Asia. The concept of tying B phases to barbarian implosions seems reasonable, and in some times and in some places it is confirmed by evidence. For some scholars, however, accepting the idea of A phases and B phases operating across a whole hemisphere two thousand years B.C.E. requires a leap of faith. In any case, it can be demonstrated that major implosions from the hinterland between 1700 B.C.E. and 1300 C.E. have not always synchronized tightly with Frank’s B phases.

Since Frank believes an integrated world system was in place several millennia before Europeans expanded to the New World, for him the rise of the West was just one of many hegemonic shifts within the world system. He is therefore loath to focus undue weight on 1492 or to commend Wallerstein’s association of Europe’s discovery and exploitation of America with the breakthrough to capitalism. Whether European capitalism originated with the exploitation of the New World—which Frank questions—is not a decisive issue.

Will world-systems theory provide manageable and coherent periodization for world history? It is too early to know. No one has written a comprehensive world history using world-systems theory as the integrating concept. Skeptics

would argue, with good reason, that the overarching theoretical work of scholars like Frank exceeds our current capacity to synthesize critical information from various regional histories. We simply do not know how universal world-systems history will play out, what continuities and discontinuities will command highest attention. Although world-systems theory and related approaches include several distinguished adherents, debate on the matter is just beginning. This is a time for asking questions that will inform the debate.

One can concede the logic of Frank’s point that exchanges of surplus between A, B, and C may have linked the three parties in one overarching system of accumulation. What needs answering is how important, in relation to all other forces at work in archaic and ancient societies, such exchanges were. What was the relative value of foreign as opposed to domestic exchange in these societies? What proportion of aggregate annual income was represented by interregional exchange? To what extent were interregional exchanges conducted in strategic supplies, raw materials, or other goods that may have affected the defense capabilities of hegemonic elites, whether those supplies were used to facilitate the maintenance of order at home or to protect territorial frontiers? What evidence do we have that the interregional exchange of surplus altered cultural habits, value systems, and religious orientations in significant ways? It may be remembered that scholars who explored relationships between material development and axial age transcendental breakthroughs found no consistent correlation between the scale of interregional commercial contacts and the achievement of transcendental religious or intellectual breakthroughs.

We know that people living in different cultures often respond differently to economic stimuli and that people of the same culture respond differently at different times. Max Weber demonstrated in his Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904–1905) how, over time, economic orientations changed significantly within Europe. The strong materialist bias of our time often prompts us to ascribe powerful economic motives to historical actors whose chief incentives were not materialist. This is true of two giant figures of European overseas expansion. The contemporary biographer of Prince Henry the Navigator, Zurara, was explicit on the matter. Although Henry was not immune to material interests, his obsession with discovery was overwhelmingly driven by religious motives. Pauline Moffitt Watts makes a similar point in evaluating the cosmological orientation of Christopher Columbus.

13. For example, in his Economic Theory of the Feudal System (1962) Witold Kula demonstrated that early modern Polish aristocrats were poor representatives of “economic man,” at least as defined by classical economists. They did not relentlessly pursue profits; they sought steady, if comfortable, income. When grain prices fell, they squeezed the peasants; when prices rose, they relaxed the squeeze. Similar examples abound among subsistence or near-subsistence peoples in precolonial Africa.


Whatever reservations one might have about the capacity of the center-periphery-hinterland model to provide an integrated explanation of historical development, we are well advised to study world-systems theory for suggestions on the timing of important transitions—the ebb and flow of A and B phases and the rise of particular hegemons or superhegemons. Although Frank identifies A and B phases, his work is not helpful to those who seek a pragmatically manageable periodization. Unless I misconstrue his arguments, Frank sees five thousand years of world-system history as a comprehensive whole. Even though hegemonic power shifted from one locus to another, there have been no rents in the historical fabric, no wrenching transitions. In the twentieth century, he argues, hegemony has shifted from Europe to America to Japan. To presume that a date like 1492 should represent a global watershed is, for Frank, an unacceptably Eurocentric notion.

William McNeill does not fully endorse world-systems theory, although he finds its aspirations praiseworthy. He sees a Middle Eastern world system developing around 1700 B.C.E. After 1000 B.C.E., he would merge Greek, Middle Eastern, and Indian societies into one expansive Middle Eastern “great society.” China would join this world system around 100 B.C.E. with the opening of caravan trade to Syria. Lethal diseases spread along the expanded trade routes producing severe demographic decline in both the Mediterranean and Chinese spheres in the third century C.E. The recovery that began in the sixth century was accelerated by the rise of Islam. Superhegemony passed from the Islamic regions to China around 1000 A.D. and to Europe after 1500.16 I am not certain how these observations translate into formal periodization, if indeed that is McNeill’s intention. One might presume something like the following: segment one, to 1700 B.C.E.; segment two, from 1700 B.C.E. to circa 300/600 C.E.; segment three, circa 300/600 to 1500; segment four, since 1500.

McNeill has shown us that epidemic disease has had a powerful impact on world history, notably in the demographic declines of Chinese and Mediterranean civilizations after the second century A.D., in the formation of a single hemispheric disease pool by about 1000 A.D., in the eruptions of bubonic plague in the sixth and fourteenth centuries, and in the devastation of native Americans after 1492. Still, it is hard to see how one could employ disease as the central driving force in human affairs, although disease must serve as a major factor in any episodic construction of period frontiers.

The issue of disease does provoke some doubt about the extent to which interregional exchange via the world system had integrated the Eastern hemisphere before the second century B.C.E. If the spread of lethal disease across trade routes from the Pacific to the Mediterranean at the end of the second century occasioned significant demographic decline at both ends of the system, why, it must be asked, were these catastrophic effects so long delayed? If an “overarching” and truly “interpenetrating” world system had existed for a mil-

lennium or two, is it not probable that these destructive biological effects, occasioned as they were by interregional contacts, would have been experienced earlier?

Beside world-systems theory, there are several avenues of approach that might, in time, provide an overarching theoretical foundation for world history. One, perhaps the most compelling of them all, is ecological. It would involve interpreting human experience in the context of a universal ecosystem in which people have been involved in complex patterns of interdependence with all other forms of life, animal and vegetable. Some scholars have suggested gender relations as a basis for the organization of world history courses, if not for the structuring of comprehensive texts. Neither of these orientations currently commands the attention given to world systems. In fact, no general theory of change being employed by world historians today is as fully refined or as well articulated as world-systems theory. It is a powerful explanatory tool. Nevertheless, numerous problems have to be resolved in the theory; numerous questions must be answered. The jury remains out.

In the meantime, we must go on writing and teaching world history, updating texts and reorganizing syllabi. We have to make choices about coverage and about periodization. There is a strong possibility that neither world-systems theory, nor ecological theory, nor any other theory will provide a satisfactory framework for all of world history. If, in the end, we are obliged to accept some degree of fragmentation in our presentation of world history, should we not go a further step and concede to a decidedly regional approach, giving roughly equal attention to all regions of the globe? This would gratify cultural relativists and those who resent the minimal attention usually given to sub-Saharan Africa and pre-Columbian America. Here, the response should be a practical and purely sensible one. It makes no more sense endlessly to disassemble our subject than it does to erect unities where they may not exist. Some people, some places, some institutions, and some belief systems are more enduring, more significant, more universal, and more influential to the whole human experience than others. They demand primary attention. The balance being struck by most writers of world history seems to me a correct one. Peoples who functioned at great distance from the mainstream should not be ignored; neither should they serve as major elements in the presentation or periodization of world history.

Although we may lack an overarching and integrating theoretical framework for periodizing world history, we still have the practical need, as authors and teachers, to separate six millennia of human experience in chronological compartments having some measure of coherence. For the moment, we are compelled to exercise arbitrary eclectic judgments on global periodization, not unlike the writers and teachers whose judgments about European history gradually produced Western tripartite periodization. This would be regretable. It is not

disastrous. It involves our seeking a practical solution to an inescapable pedagogical problem. Most world historians have personal preferences on periodization. Few of these preferences are lodged in systematic theory, yet many of them are highly similar even though similarities may arise for different reasons.

I too have a preferred formulation which, I readily admit, is highly eclectic and not the product of an overarching and systematic theory of change. It has four parts, and I proffer it humbly. Like Hodgson, I would have a long early sweep, from 3000 B.C.E. to roughly 1000/800 B.C.E. My second period, 1000/800 B.C.E to 400/600 C.E., would extend through the several regional efflorescences of this era to the demographic crises and the barbarian implosions that disturbed both the East and West, roughly 400/600 A.D. The third age, emphasizing exceptional Islamic and Chinese achievement, would taper toward 1492.

To me, 1492 is a commanding moment of global transition for many material and cosmological reasons, none being more compelling than the biological and ecological ones studied by Alfred Crosby. Charges of Eurocentrism do not trouble me. There is no necessary connection between Eurocentrism and the adoption of a world history watershed at 1492. Had the Pacific been less formidable and had the Chinese managed to discover America in 1492, we would be just as likely to advance that date as a major global watershed. In any case, too many contemporary Western scholars are obsessed about Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism takes many forms. It is ironic that some of the most dedicated historical materialists, scholars like André Gunder Frank, are quick to condemn Eurocentrism in others. Barraclough considered such sturdy materialism to be a decidedly Western (one might say, European) orientation to the past. He wondered whether world history written from an Asian perspective would not be substantially less materialist. I do as well.

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