

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST GERMAN EDITION (2009)

All history inclines toward being world history. Sociological theories tell us that the world is the “environment of all environments,” the ultimate possible context for what happens in history and the account we give of it. The tendency to transcend the local becomes stronger in the *longue durée* of historical development. A history of the Neolithic age does not report intensive contacts over long distances, but a history of the twentieth century confronts the basic fact of a densely knit web of global connections—a “human web,” as John R. and William H. McNeill have called it, or better still, a multiplicity of such webs.¹

For historians, the writing of world history has particular legitimacy when it can link up with human consciousness in the past. Even today, in the age of the Internet and boundless telecommunications, billions of people live in narrowly local conditions from which they can escape neither in reality nor in their imagination. Only privileged minorities think and act “globally.” But contemporary historians on the lookout for early traces of “globalization” are not the first to have discovered transnational, transcontinental, or transcultural elements in the nineteenth century, often described as the century of nationalism and the nation-state. Many people living at the time already saw expanded horizons of thought and action as a distinguishing feature of their epoch, and dissatisfied members of the middle and lower strata of society in Europe and Asia turned their eyes and hopes toward distant lands. Many millions did not shrink from undertaking an actual journey into the unknown. Statesmen and military leaders learned to think in categories of “world politics.” The British Empire became the first in history to span the entire globe, while other empires ambitiously measured themselves by its model. More than in the early modern period, trade and finance condensed into integrated and interconnected worldwide webs, so that by 1910, economic vibrations in Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, or Tokyo were immediately registered in Hamburg, London, or New York, and vice versa. Scholars collected information and objects from all over the world; they studied the languages, customs, and religions of the remotest peoples. Critics of the prevailing order—workers, women, peace activists, anti-racists, opponents of colonialism—began

to organize internationally, often far beyond the confines of Europe. The nineteenth century reflected its own emergent globality.

As far as the nineteenth century is concerned, anything but a world-history approach is something of a makeshift solution. However, it is with the help of such makeshifts that history has developed into a science, gauged in terms of the methodological rationality of its procedures. This process of becoming a science, through the intensive and possibly exhaustive examination of sources, took place in the nineteenth century, so it is not surprising that the writing of world history receded into the background at that time. It appeared to be incompatible with the new professionalism that historians embraced. If this is beginning to change today, it certainly does not mean that all historians wish to, or should, take up the writing of world history.² Historical scholarship requires deep and careful study of clearly definable cases, the results of which form the material for broad syntheses that are indispensable for teaching and general orientation. The usual framework for such syntheses, at least in the modern age, is the history of one nation or nation-state, or perhaps of an individual continent such as Europe. World history remains a minority perspective, but no longer one that can be dismissed as esoteric or unserious. The fundamental questions are, of course, the same at every level of spatial scope or logical abstraction: “How does the historian, in interpreting a historical phenomenon, combine the individuality given by his sources with the general, abstract knowledge that makes it possible to interpret the individual in the first place? And how does the historian arrive at empirically secure statements about larger units and processes of history?”³

The professionalization of history, from which there is no going back, has entailed that history on a larger scale is now often left to the social sciences. Sociologists and political theorists who retain an interest in the depths of time and the vastness of space have assumed responsibility for engaging with major historical trends. Historians have an acquired predisposition to shy away from rash generalizations, monocausal explanations, and snappy all-embracing formulas. Under the influence of postmodern thinking, some consider it impossible and illegitimate to draw up “grand narratives” or interpretations of long-range processes. Nevertheless, the writing of world history involves an attempt to retrieve some interpretative competence and authority, visible in the public eye, from minutely detailed work in specialist fields. World history is one possible form of historiography—a register that should be tried out once in a while. The risk falls on the author’s shoulders, not on that of the reading public, which is protected from spuriousness and charlatanry through the alertness of professional criticism. But the question remains of why it should be the work of a single hand. Why should we not be content with multivolume collective products from the “academic factory” (Ernst Troeltsch)? The answer is simple. Only a centralized organization of issues and viewpoints, of material and interpretations, can hope to meet the constructive requirements of the writing of world history.

To know all there is to know is not the key qualification of the world historian or global historian. No one has sufficient knowledge to verify the correctness of every detail, to do equal justice to every region of the world, or to draw fully adequate conclusions from the existing body of research in countless different areas. Two other qualities are the truly important ones: first, to have a feel for proportions, contradictions, and connections as well as a sense of what may be typical and representative; and second, to maintain a humble attitude of deference toward professional research. The historian who temporarily slips into the role of global historian—she or he must remain an expert in one or more special areas—cannot do other than “encapsulate” in a few sentences the arduous, time-consuming work of others. At the same time, the labors of global historians will be worthless if they do not try to keep abreast of the best research, which is not always necessarily the most recent. A world history that unwittingly and uncritically reproduces long-refuted legends with a pontifical sweep of the hand is nothing short of ridiculous. As a synthesis of syntheses, as “the story of everything,”⁴ it would be crude and tiresome.

This book is the portrait of an epoch. Its modes of presentation may in principle be applied in the case of other historical periods. Without presuming to treat a century of world history in a complete and encyclopedic manner, it offers itself as an interpretative account rich in material. It shares this stance with Sir Christopher Bayly’s *The Birth of the Modern World*, a work published in English in 2004 and in German two years later, which has rightly been praised as one of the few successful syntheses of world history in the *late* modern period.⁵ The present volume is not an anti-Bayly but an alternative from a kindred spirit. Both books forgo a regional breakdown into nations, civilizations, or continents. Both regard colonialism and imperialism as a dimension so important that instead of dealing with it in a separate chapter, they keep it in view throughout. Both assume that there is no sharp distinction between what Bayly, in the subtitle of his book, calls “global connections” and “global comparisons”;⁶ these can and must be combined with each other, and not all comparisons need the protective backup of strict historical methodology. Controlled play with associations and analogies sometimes, though by no means always, yields more than comparisons overloaded with pedantry can do.

Our two books often place the emphasis differently: Professor Bayly’s background is India, mine China, and this shows. Bayly is especially interested in nationalism, religion, and “bodily practices,” which are the themes of superb sections of his work. In my book, migration, economics, the environment, international politics, and science are considered more broadly. I am perhaps a little more “Eurocentrically” inclined than Bayly: I see the nineteenth century even more sharply than he does as the “European century,” and I also cannot conceal a fascination for the history of the United States, a topic I discovered in the course of writing. As regards our theoretical references, my closeness to historical sociology will become apparent.

But the two most important differences between Christopher Bayly and myself lie elsewhere. First, my book is even more open than Bayly's to the chronological margins of the period. It is not a compartmentalized history of a certain number of years sealed off from what went before and what came after. This is why there are no framing dates in the title, and why a special chapter is devoted to issues of periodization and temporal structure. The book anchors the nineteenth century variously "in history," allowing itself to look back far beyond 1800 or even 1780 as well as ahead to today's world. In this way, the significance of the nineteenth century is triangulated in longer periods of time. Sometimes the century is remote from us, sometimes it is very close; often as the prehistory of the present, but on occasion as deeply buried as Atlantis. The determination must be made on a case-by-case basis. The nineteenth century is viewed in terms not so much of sharply defined hiatuses as of an inner focal point, stretching roughly from the 1860s to the 1880s, when innovations with a worldwide impact came thick and fast, and many processes running independently of one another seemed to converge. The First World War does not therefore appear as a sudden, unexpected falling of the curtain, as it does in Bayly's historical staging.

Second, the narrative strategy I have chosen is different from Bayly's. There is a kind of historiography that might be described as time-convergent; and it has allowed some historians—operating with fine judgment, huge experience, and a lot of common sense—to present whole eras of world history in the main and secondary lines of their dynamic momentum. John M. Roberts's global history of the twentieth century, which he offers as an account of "what is general, what pulls the story together,"⁷ is a perfect example of this. It is world history that seeks to identify what is important and characteristic in each age, shaping it into a continuous narrative without any preconceived schema or big guiding idea in the background. Eric Hobsbawm, with a pinch of Marxist rigor and therefore a compass that I cannot claim to possess, achieved something similar in his three-volume history of the nineteenth century, working his way back from each digression to the major trends of the age.⁸ Bayly takes a different road, which may be described as space-divergent; it is a decentering approach, not so uninhibited in allowing the current of time to carry it forward. It does not make such nimble headway as a Roberts type, drifting along with the flows of history, but goes into the detail of simultaneity and cross section, searches for parallels and analogies, draws comparisons, and ferrets out hidden interdependences. This means that its chronology is deliberately left open and vague: it manages with few framing dates and keeps the narrative on course without too much explicit organization into subperiods. Whereas someone like Roberts—and in this sense he may represent the mainstream of older world-history writing—thinks within a dialectic of major and minor and constantly asks what of significance, whether good or bad, each period produced, Bayly concentrates on individual phenomena and examines them within a global perspective.

One case in point is nationalism. Again and again, we read that it was a European “invention” that the rest of the world took on in a cruder form and with many misunderstandings. Bayly takes a closer look at this “rest of the world” and arrives at the plausible idea of a polygenesis of forms of nationalist solidarity: that is, *before* nationalist doctrines were imported from Europe, “patriotic” identities had already taken shape in many parts of the world, which could then be reinterpreted in a nationalist sense in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ Bayly’s historiography is primarily horizontal—or “lateral,” as he aptly calls it¹⁰—and spatially determined, whereas that of John Roberts or Eric Hobsbawm is more “vertical” and temporal in its emphasis. All three authors would insist that they combine the horizontal and vertical dimensions, and that is certainly correct. But the relationship between the two approaches seems to display a kind of unavoidable fuzziness, rather like that which is found in the well-known tension between narrative and structural accounts: no attempt to marry the two achieves complete harmony.

The design of the present volume leans more in Bayly’s direction, but it goes further than he does and may therefore be said to take a third road. I doubt that it is possible, with the historian’s cognitive tools, to fix the dynamic of an epoch in a single schema. World system theory, historical materialism, or evolutionary sociology may contradict. But since it is the business of history to *describe* change before it ventures explanations, it soon runs up against remnants that stubbornly resist integration. Bayly is well aware of this, of course, yet he overcomes such scruples when he tries to define the distinguishing feature of an age. His main thesis is that between 1780 and 1914 the world became more uniform but also more internally differentiated;¹¹ the “birth of the modern world” was a slow process that only came to completion with the “great acceleration” after 1890, a process that one hopes Bayly will analyze more comprehensively in future work.¹² Since Bayly eschews any more-or-less clear dividing line between areas of historical reality, he cannot be really interested in the independent logic governing each of them. Only industrialization, state building, and religious revival feature in his account as discrete processes. A general “master narrative” for the world of the nineteenth century rises out of a cosmos of particular observations and interpretations, which are always stimulating and mostly convincing.

I experiment with a solution in which “grand narratives” are even more resolutely defended. Postmodern critiques have not rendered such overarching constructions obsolete but made us more conscious of the narrative strategies their authors deploy. To be sure, a grand narrative may establish itself at various levels: even a history of worldwide industrialization or urbanization in the nineteenth century would be passably “grand.” This high level of generality, at which we are nevertheless still talking of *sub*systems of a scarcely discernible totality of communal life, gives the book its basic structure. It appears encyclopedic only at first sight but is actually made up of successive orbital paths. Fernand Braudel once described a similar procedure: “The historian first opens the door with which he

is most familiar. But if he seeks to see as far as possible, he must necessarily find himself knocking at another door, and then another. Each time a new or slightly different landscape will be under examination. . . . But history gathers them all together; it is the sum total of all these neighbors, of these joint ownerships, of this endless interaction.”¹³ In each subarea, therefore, I look for the distinctive “dynamics” or “logics” and the relationship between general developments and regional variants. Each subarea has its own temporal structure: a particular beginning, a particular end, specific tempos, rhythms, and subperiods.

World history aims to surmount “Eurocentrism” and all other forms of naive cultural self-reference. It shuns the illusory neutrality of an omniscient narrator or a “global” observation point, and it plays consciously on the relativity of ways of seeing. This means that it must not be forgotten who is writing for whom. The fact that a European (German) author originally addressed European (German) readers cannot fail to have left its mark on the text, whatever the cosmopolitan intentions behind it; expectations, prior knowledge, and cultural assumptions are never location neutral. This relativity also leads to the conclusion that the centering of perception cannot be detached from core/periphery structures in historical reality. This has a methodological and an empirical side. Methodologically, a lack of adequate sources, and of historiography based on them, hampers many a well-intentioned effort to do historical justice to the voiceless, the marginal, and the victimized. Empirically, proportions between the various parts of the world shift with the long waves of historical development. Power, economic performance and cultural creativity are distributed differently from epoch to epoch. It would therefore be capricious to sketch a history of the nineteenth century, of all periods, that disregarded the centrality of Europe. No other century was even nearly as much Europe’s century. It was an “age of overwhelming, and overwhelmingly European, initiatives,” as the philosopher and sociologist Karl Acham aptly put it.¹⁴ Never before had the western peninsula of Eurasia ruled and exploited larger areas of the globe. Never had changes originating in Europe achieved such impact on the rest of the world. And never had European culture been so eagerly soaked up by others, far beyond the sphere of colonial rule. The nineteenth century was a European one also in the sense that other continents took Europe as their yardstick. Europe’s hold over them was threefold: it had power, which it often deployed with ruthlessness and violence; it had influence, which it knew how to spread through the countless channels of capitalist expansion; and it had the force of example, against which even many of its victims did not balk. This multiple superiority had not existed in the early modern phase of European expansion. Neither Portugal nor Spain nor the Netherlands nor England (before approximately 1760) had projected their power to the farthest corner of the earth and had such a powerful cultural impact on “the Others” as Britain and France did in the nineteenth century. The history of the nineteenth century was made in and by Europe, to an extent that cannot be said of either the eighteenth or twentieth century, not to speak of earlier periods. Never has

Europe released a comparable burst of innovativeness and initiative—or of conquering might and arrogance.

Nevertheless, “Why Europe?” is not the big question posed in this book, as it has been for so many authors, from the Enlightenment to Max Weber down to David S. Landes, Michael Mitterauer, and Kenneth Pomeranz. Two or three decades ago, a history of the modern world could still blithely proceed on the assumption of “Europe’s special path.” Today, historians are trying to break with European (or “Western”) smugness and to remove the sting of “special path” notions by means of generalization and relativization. The nineteenth century deserves to be looked at again in the context of this debate, because a strong current among comparative historians now considers that socioeconomic differences between Europe and other parts of the world in the early modern period were less dramatic than previous generations used to think. The problem of the “great divergence” between rich and poor regions has thus been shifted forward to the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Yet this is not the central issue of the book, and no novel interpretation will be added to the many that already try to account for Europe’s ephemeral primacy. To approach the historical material through the lenses of exceptionalism would be to focus from the start more on what distinguishes Europe from other civilizations than on what civilizations and societies have in common with each other. There are dangers in both possible kinds of a priori assumption: namely, an a priori contrastive option that privileges difference in all possible ways but also, at the opposite extreme, an equally one-sided a priori ecumenism that rarely lowers its sight below the human condition in general. It makes more sense to find a way out from the well-worn “West against the rest” dichotomy and to measure again, on a case-by-case basis, the gap between “Europe” (whatever that may have been at the time) and other parts of the world. This can best be done in relation to particular areas of historical reality.

The book is divided into three parts. The three chapters of Part One (“Approaches”) outline the presuppositions or general parameters for all that follows: self-reflection, time, and space. The equal treatment of time and space will counter the impression that the writing of world history is necessarily bound up with temporal dedifferentiation and a “spatial turn.” The eight chapters of Part Two then unfurl a “panorama” of eight spheres of reality. The term “panorama” refers to the fact that although no pedantic claim is made to represent all parts of the world equally, an attempt is made to avoid major gaps in the field of vision. In the seven chapters of Part Three (“Themes”), this panoramic survey gives way to a more narrowly focused, essay-style discussion of discrete aspects, which deliberately refrains from trying to include everything and uses examples mainly to illustrate general arguments. If these themes had been developed in a “panoramic” scope, the requisite scale of the book would have made excessive demands on the reader’s patience as much as on the author’s stamina. Moving on from “panoramas” to “themes,” the book shifts the

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weight from synthesis to analysis—two modes of investigation and presentation that do not stand in sharp opposition to each other. The chapters of the book are meant to hang together as a coherent whole, but they may also be read separately. Once readers have entered the book, they should not worry: they will easily find an emergency exit.