


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



World History
Clive Ponting

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About the Book

Conventional accounts of world history tend to focus on the rise of Western civilisation and concentrate on the story of ancient Greece, the Roman empire and the expansion of Europe. The histories of the great civilisations of China, India and Japan, and therefore the experience of the majority of the world's people, have been relegated to a minor place. *World History* adopts a radically different approach. Starting from the assumption that the human story has to be seen in the round, it examines the evolution of humans, their lives as hunters and gatherers and their eventual adoption of agriculture, before looking at the emergence of civilisation across the globe; in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, the Indus Valley, Mesoamerica and Peru. It goes on to tell the story of the earliest empires, emphasising not just their differences but also their similarities. It explains how contacts were established between them and how technologies, ideas and the world's great religions travelled from one to another. It describes the great empires of Islam, of China and of the Mongols. Only towards the end of the story does Europe come slowly to dominate the world, against the background of technical innovations and social and economic change.

About the Author

Clive Ponting is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wales, Swansea. He is the author of the bestselling *A Green History of the World*, the highly controversial revisionist biography *Churchill*, and *Armageddon: The Second World War*. His most recent book was *The Pimlico History of the Twentieth Century*.

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In memory of Bonnie Hunter Wilkinson (1926-1997)

WORLD HISTORY

A New Perspective



CLIVE PONTING



PIMLICO

INTRODUCTION

World History

What is world history? It is not simply a compilation of the histories of the individual states, empires and civilizations that have existed in the world. Such an approach cannot bring out the common themes within these units nor the way in which they have interacted. Neither can it trace the diffusion of knowledge and technologies between the different human communities. World history has to be constructed around common themes and developments. In doing so it needs to take account of the experience of all the different human communities without favouring that of any one group. The fundamental argument of this book is that our way of viewing the history of the world is deeply flawed and biased. Its faults stem from a profound Eurocentrism compounded with a belief in 'western civilization' as the main dynamic force in world history and the embodiment of all that is good and progressive in human societies and ways of thought. Such a view is bound to downplay or dismiss both the role and the importance of other traditions and societies; indeed the experience of the majority of the world's people. This book attempts to provide a more balanced account of human history.

One of the commonest ways of trying to write world history is to structure it around a series of 'civilizations'. One of the first to do so was Oswald Spengler whose major work was translated into English as *The Decline of the West* in 1932. It is mainly a comparison of the 'west' with

the Graeco-Roman world and has few other illustrations. Spengler sees civilizations as independent entities free of external influences and with their history largely consisting of artistic and philosophical developments. Each has, from the start, a 'soul' embedded in it which pervades and directs it. The best-known work using this approach is *A Study of History* by Arnold Toynbee, published in twelve volumes over almost thirty years after the early 1930s. Toynbee was very much a product of the European world in the early twentieth century. As a Social Darwinist he argues that civilizations are like organisms. They emerge from a 'challenge and response' in the natural environment and in a struggle for survival go through a common cycle of genesis, growth, breakdown and disintegration. As an elitist he believes that the crucial element in their histories is the 'creative minority'. Others since Toynbee have produced their own systems. Pitirim Sorokin argued in *Social and Cultural Dynamics* that civilizations were 'cultural supersystems' moving in a cyclical process from 'ideational' to 'sensate' and then 'idealistic'. Carroll Quigley writing in the early 1960s thought there were two different types of society - 'parasitic' and 'productive' - each with its own 'instrument of expansion'. More recently David Wilkinson has argued for a 'central civilization' which was created from the merger of Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations nearly four thousand years ago, and subsequently incorporated other civilizations until 1850 (when Japan was included) and a single world civilization came into existence. The best of all world histories - *The Rise of the West* by William McNeill - is also essentially 'civilizational' in approach, although it does stress the interactions between these units and the forces that have affected them all.

There are a number of problems in using this approach. Crucially, there is no agreement on what constitutes a civilization or how many there have been. Toynbee started

with a list of twenty-three but by the end of his work had accumulated a different list of twenty-eight. Quigley thought there were only sixteen civilizations. Others have suggested nineteen. Thus for some historians Japan is separate from a 'Far Eastern' or Chinese civilization, for others it is not, and in some systems China is differentiated from the rest of Asia. Some identify a separate 'Minoan' civilization on Crete, others see it merely as a precursor to that of ancient Greece. There is no agreement on the existence of a separate Orthodox Christian civilization or on whether there is an Islamic one separate from its heritage of pre-existing civilizations. How groups such as the Hittites and Jews should be treated has never been resolved. About the only area of agreement is that there was a separate 'Egyptian' civilization, although its starting dates vary by over two and a half millennia and its end date by almost a millennium.

An even more fundamental problem in studying world history on the basis of civilizations is that their identification is largely based on certain features of 'high culture' - literary works (especially 'great books'), philosophy, religion and art styles - which are almost entirely the responsibility of a small elite in society (until the last few decades a majority of the world's people were illiterate). Placing the emphasis in world history on 'civilizations' therefore gives far too great an importance to these elements in human history. Closer investigation also reveals that nearly all of these 'civilizations' are made up of very different 'cultures' and languages - as for example in China or western Europe. So although it is obvious that the way in which human societies have evolved in China and in western Europe has produced very different cultures they also contain within themselves almost equally great differences. The idea that civilizations contain 'essences' which are transmitted over time has an element of truth. However, it ignores the fact that, for example, both China

and western Europe in the nineteenth century were fundamentally different in almost every respect from their condition two thousand years earlier - only a small part of a 'civilization' is actually transmitted over long periods of time. The civilizational approach with its emphasis on essentially 'intellectual' features also neglects whole areas of human history, in particular the social, economic, technological, military and strategic, each of which has its own pattern of development. It is therefore not valid to compare a civilization with one which existed several thousand years earlier because of the intervening economic, technological and social developments.

Focusing attention on individual civilizations necessarily tends to treat them as autonomous units evolving according to their own unique dynamics. It therefore ignores two fundamental features of world history. The first is the common economic and technological background to human societies. From this perspective it is far more useful to identify the similarities between human societies rather than their differences in terms of some aspects of high culture. As [chapter 6](#) explains, many of the common rhythms in the histories of the early 'civilizations' identified by Toynbee are no more than the common features of all the early agricultural societies and empires. The second problem is the downplaying of the links between different societies together with the consequent transmission of ideas, religious beliefs and technologies. The only civilizations to develop entirely in isolation were those of the Americas. One of the central elements of world history is the way in which all the different societies have gradually been brought closer together.

Perhaps the commonest way of viewing the history of the world is to see it through the spectacles of 'western civilization'. It is a tradition deeply embedded in European culture and one that owes much to ideas of European supremacy generated in the nineteenth century. It accepts

that 'civilization' first emerged in Mesopotamia and Egypt but then rapidly moves on to the more congenial field of the true origins of 'western civilization'. This is believed to be Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece as the precursors of 'classical' Greece and Rome. They, particularly the former, are seen as the originators of 'western' ways of thinking, which are 'rational' and 'scientific', and 'western' political traditions, in particular democracy. These attributes were uniquely transmitted to Europe. Although Islam was briefly important, it is the 'rise of Europe' from about 800, at first under the empire of Charlemagne, that produces the driving force of world history. This unique, dynamic and enterprising culture was first demonstrated in the Crusades and, after 1500, in the 'age of exploration' with the associated bringing of the benefits of European civilization to the rest of the world. It is 'western civilization' that was able to produce the 'scientific revolution', the 'industrial revolution', technological progress, capitalism and the unique European political structure of rational, limited government and democracy. In this narrative China, India and the rest of the world have separate, detached histories of little wider importance until they are swept up by an advancing Europe into the 'world civilization' which it created. Europe is therefore seen as the privileged domain of world history, characterized by change and development. As the 'West' it is equivalent to the whole of the 'East' (the rest of Eurasia) which is characterized as being essentially irrational and authoritarian and static and stagnant (until the 'West' arrives). This book rejects such an approach entirely.

The problem of how to deal with western European civilization, in particular in the period after about 1500, is found not just in the 'western civilization' approach but in others also based on 'civilizations' as the key units in world history. Toynbee, having identified Western Christianity as a separate civilization, was then worried by the

implications – if it was subject to the ‘laws’ of history, which he believed he had discovered, then it was doomed to decline. He did not like this prospect and many of the later volumes of his work are little more than musings about how this might be avoided. The global expansion of the ‘civilization’ which emerged in western Europe undoubtedly changed the way in which the civilizations of the world interacted. Indeed it is at this point, in the middle of the nineteenth century, that William McNeill’s book draws to a somewhat unsatisfactory close. His message is, however, clear – history leads up to the ‘Rise of the West’ and its domination of the world.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is far less obvious than when McNeill was writing his book in the 1950s that this is in fact the case. In a remarkable piece of self-criticism written on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *The Rise of the West*, McNeill admitted that the major weakness of his great work was the discounting of the creation by western Europe after 1500 of an integrated world economy from which it (and its offspring in north America) was the primary beneficiary. In part this is an acceptance of the fact that any approach to world history based primarily on ‘civilizations’ is bound to downplay the role of economic and social history. It is also a recognition of the work of Immanuel Wallerstein since the early 1970s and his ‘world systems’ approach. This argues for a fundamental discontinuity in world history around 1500 with the creation by Europe of a world system of capitalism not directly related to any political empire (as previous systems of exploitation had been). In the process it restructured the world into a ‘core’ of wealthy, industrialized states, a ‘periphery’ of backward, dependent, agricultural states and a ‘semi-periphery’ of intermediate status. Some historians have attempted to apply the idea of different types of ‘world system’ to periods before 1500. They have some validity but have not been fully developed.

However, Wallerstein has rejected all of these attempts and insists that the situation after 1500 is unique in world history. The problem with this approach is that it too is deeply Eurocentric. It assumes that western Europe was the only dynamic element in the world and that as early as 1500 it was strong enough to carry out the remaking of the other long-established societies and economies. This book argues that western Europe did not have such power for some considerable time and that it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that it had even reached a situation of parity with the communities of Asia, in particular India and China.

The idea of western European uniqueness in economic and social terms is not restricted to Wallerstein or his intellectual opponents who argue for a 'European miracle' of property rights, individual enterprise, freedom, wealth creation and accumulation and all the benefits of free market capitalism, limited government and democracy. Marxism too reflects many of the views dominant in nineteenth-century Europe, especially the belief in progress as being at the root of human history. The Marxist view of history, with its fixed stages of primitive communism, slave society, feudalism and capitalism (to be followed by the inevitable triumph of communism), is based entirely on the European experience as understood by the knowledge available in the mid-nineteenth century. It too is irredeemably Eurocentric. To the extent that Marx considered (or knew about) the experience of other societies, it was usually to dismiss it as a form of 'oriental despotism'. Subsequently Marxist historians have attempted to shoehorn the development of all human societies into the model he developed from his view of the European past. Where Marx is important is in his emphasis on the fact that all human societies have been based on exploitation - dominant elites (and states) have appropriated the surpluses produced by the majority for