

Architects of World History

Researching the Global Past

Edited by

Kenneth R. Curtis and
Jerry H. Bentley

WILEY Blackwell

Praise for *Architects of World History*

“This is a fascinating story of how nine distinguished historians, dissatisfied with the severe limits of nation-state history, found their way, often serendipitously, to one another and to larger networks of like-minded professionals. In the process they helped establish world history as a fertile field of research and teaching.”

Ross Dunn, San Diego State University

“This is a stimulating collection, at once presenting leading voices in the field and some of the key topical approaches within world history. The goal of attracting and guiding students toward a greater sense of how world history is done is particularly attractive.”

Peter Stearns, George Mason University

“This collection clearly frames the methodological and historiographical trajectories that give coherence to world history as a field. The contributions from a wide range of scholars humanize broad patterns of inquiry and provide a fresh, original approach. *Architects of World History* is essential reading for scholars and teachers at all levels who want to grasp the history and scope of this dynamic field.”

Laura J. Mitchell, University of California

“Each of the authors is a genuine architect and visionary in the field of world history. Collectively they provide a rich introduction to current approaches to teaching and research, while at the same time unfolding their own personal and often remarkable intellectual journeys that brought them to the forefront of world history.”

Craig Benjamin, President of the World History Association (2014/2015)

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Notes on Contributors

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Kenneth R. Curtis is Professor of History at California State University, Long Beach, where he teaches modern African and contemporary world history. His most recent publication, coauthored with Valerie Hansen, is the second edition of *Voyages in World History* (2013). His current project involves reassessing twentieth-century history through the lens of travelers’ accounts.

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Foundations, among others. She has also written a number of source books and textbooks for use in the college classroom, a book for young adults, and a book for general readers, *The Marvelous Hairy Girls: The Gonzales Sisters and Their Worlds* (Yale, 2009) – the story of a family of extremely hairy people who lived in Europe in the late sixteenth century. She currently serves as the editor in chief of the forthcoming nine-volume *Cambridge History of the World*.

Architects of World History

Kenneth R. Curtis

What is world history? Like many professors, I started thinking about that question less in theory than in practice. It was a dark, cold Wisconsin morning as I prepared for an 8:30 a.m. “modern world history” lecture. Still completing my Ph.D. dissertation on the political dynamics of coffee production and marketing in colonial Tanzania, how would I convince a roomful of young people that I was the person to whom they should turn to learn about the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire? Apart from reading a different textbook from my students, I *did* have some tools to help me. An experienced colleague had very kindly given me his lecture notes for the class (using the latest electronic storage technology of 1989: a set of “floppy disks”) that contained excellent scholarly and primary source quotations. More importantly, as an East Africanist, I had a firm grasp on the foundational beliefs and practices of Islam, without which my students would not be able to understand Ottoman history. Finally, I had been reading a good deal of comparative history,

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so I knew something about how to connect historical dots to reveal a larger picture. But then a note of panic: What was the correct Turkish pronunciation of “Süleyman?” Access to the internet was still years away; I had no way of checking. I simply resolved to do my best and learn from the experience.

I suspect many of my world history colleagues can see a bit of themselves in this story (e.g., Getz, 2012). In the Ph.D. programs of those days (and not too much has changed), we focused on research, on teasing out all the potential complexities of what, to others, might seem a straightforward story (such as Africans growing and selling coffee). We spent little time thinking about teaching, which requires a skill that is nearly the exact opposite: the ability to render the complex in a straightforward way for nonspecialists. The implicit assumption was that eventual employment at a major research institution would allow us to focus on our specializations and leave the broad brush strokes of introductory courses to others. (Never mind that the actually existing jobs were mostly at places where teaching was primary: liberal arts colleges, state universities with poor research funding, and community colleges.) We started teaching never having been taught how to teach.

When my own undergraduate alma mater – Lawrence University – offered me a short-term teaching contract, it was a godsend, not only helping to pay the bills while I finished writing my dissertation but also giving me experience to cite in the coming round of tenure-track job applications. At Lawrence, I was offered the option of sticking with African history; instead, I *volunteered* to teach a section of world history because I thought it would enhance my resume in a tight job market. Indeed, I doubt if I would have been considered at California State University Long Beach (CSULB) the next year had I not been able to convince them that I “could teach world history.”

Once permanently employed, I might have looked to avoid further world history teaching obligations. But in the early 1990s, globally relevant history seemed too important to ignore. The Tiananmen Massacre, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, the winding down of the Cold War, and the rhetoric

and reality of “globalization” all accompanied my transition from Wisconsin to California. I then began a more conscientious investigation of world history, having come belatedly (like others in this volume) to recognize it as a discrete and dynamic subfield in the historical discipline. (For the institutional development of world history, see Pomeranz and Segal, 2012; for world history in the context of contemporary globalization, see Bright and Geyer, 2012).

As I began to investigate world history more deeply, I came to recognize two “habits of mind” that characterized scholars in the field (to cite the original Advanced Placement World History (APWH) course description): “seeing global patterns and processes over time and space while connecting local developments to global ones” and “comparing within and among societies, including comparing societies’ reactions to global processes.” Like many other world historians, I was drawn to forms of historical writing that helped tie together the past and present, finding intellectual satisfaction in identifying transnational or global patterns and in making apt comparisons.

For example, as I gained experience with the modern world history survey, I began to see the later history of the Ottoman Empire as part of a broader pattern: the struggles faced by leaders of old land-based societies and empires (also including Qing China, Tokugawa Japan, and the Russian Empire) to adjust to the new economic and military realities of the industrial era. In every case, conservative and reforming factions fought for influence, with world changing outcomes. I found it both challenging and inspiring to explore such connections and comparisons.

Having come to world history through praxis, there still remained the question in theory: and there are in fact distinct and sometimes divergent opinions on what constitutes “world history.” Some of those divergences reflect national variations, as Dominic Sachsenmaier (2011) has demonstrated: German and Chinese historians, for example, bring different conceptual understandings to “world history” than their North American colleagues. Still, it has largely been US-based historians who have dominated definitional conversations.

Kenneth R. Curtis

As a starting point, Patrick Manning (2003) provided a broadly applicable definition for world history, identifying it with a focus on “the story of connections within the human community” that “portray the crossing of boundaries and the linking of systems in the human past.” Jerry Bentley gave a bit more precision (2002) when he referred to

historical scholarship that explicitly compares experiences across the boundary lines of societies, or that examines interactions between peoples of different societies, or that analyzes large-scale historical patterns and processes that transcend individual societies. This kind of world history deals with historical processes that have not respected national, political, geographical, or cultural boundary lines, but rather have influenced affairs on transregional, continental, hemispheric, and global scales (p. 393).

Bentley went on to list the historical processes most characteristic of world history as “climatic changes, biological diffusions, the spread of infectious and contagious diseases, mass migrations, transfers of technology, campaigns of imperial expansion, cross-cultural trade, the spread of ideas and ideals, and the expansion of religious faiths and cultural traditions.” It would be hard to imagine any historian who would not find something relevant on such an expansive list, but the point is that these topics in particular seem to call out for transregional or global investigation.

The opportunity to pursue such conversations with like-minded historians came when I attended a meeting of the World History Association (WHA) in Philadelphia in 1992. Now I found that my passion for global and comparative history was shared by fellow history educators from all across the United States and from several international locations as well. I immediately recognized that the culture of the WHA was inclusive of history educators from various types of institutions, including, uniquely, a strong presence of secondary school teachers.

WHA members, moreover, shared a sense of mission. In the early 1990s, world history was struggling for recognition within

the historical profession. Especially at more elite research universities, world history could still be thought of only as fodder for high school students or college freshmen, certainly not a subject for serious scholars (Weinstein, 2012). Even at the college survey level its role was still being challenged by traditionalist supporters of the well-established “western civilization” approach (Levine, 2000). On the political front, global thinking about the human past was decried by some US conservatives as “political correctness,” mired in a leveling cultural relativism that denigrated the unique achievements of “the west” (see Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, 2000). By sharp contrast, many of the high school and college teachers in the WHA were idealists who believed in linking global knowledge and global understanding with the potential for global peace and justice (Allardyce, 2000).

Such was the congenial atmosphere of the WHA, where neophytes in world history (like me) could easily mix with and learn from leading lights in the field (like Jerry Bentley). The founding editor of the *Journal of World History* and organizer of the 1993 WHA conference on his home turf in Hawaii, Dr. Bentley was not only a pioneer in the theory and practice of what some were coming to call “the new world history” – an innovator in teaching, scholarly publication, as well as textbook authorship – but also a mentor to a very long list of historians who benefited from his advice, including everyone involved with this book. When he succumbed to cancer in the summer of 2012, he left a great void. Still, we have been able to include Jerry’s final essay, an opportunity for us to reflect upon his impact as one of the architects of the now globalizing field of world history.

“Architects” of World History

How does the metaphor of architecture relate to world history? Our title implies vision preceding construction. Let us think of building a brick edifice. One requirement is an adequate supply of solid bricks. If there is insufficient raw material, the building cannot be finished; if the bricks are of poor quality, the building will not stand.

In this analogy, bricks are equivalent to historical facts: no effective historical argument can be made unless the factual evidence is sufficient in quantity and quality. Yet piles of strong bricks do not assemble themselves into buildings. Similarly, mere data about the past does not constitute history.

In order to build a strong edifice, one also needs the skills of a mason, the technical expertise necessary to combine bricks into an enduring wall. Historians are also “masons” in this sense, trained to assemble historical evidence into walls of causality. As Bentley put it, “History is not a chest of miscellaneous details or a box of data from which historians simply pluck pieces of information and try to fashion them into some kind of story. Rather, history represents a creative effort by historians to gain insights into the dynamics of historical development” (p. 217). But a wall is still not a finished building, any more than an explanation of cause and effect constitutes a complete historical argument.

That is where the vision of the historian-as-architect comes in. Before choosing the bricks, before making a plan for assembling the materials, the architects have a vision of the final edifice. Of course, she must have a strong grounding in materials science and engineering to assure that the vision of her blueprint can be realized, but without her original vision nothing beautiful, strong, or enduring can be built.

Thus, historians combine all these skills. They are brick makers, searching out the raw materials of history, often working silently and diligently in archives and libraries in pursuit of evidence. Historians are also like masons, skilled in the assemblage of the raw material of evidence into the solid walls of intelligible narrative. And historians who really make an impact are also like architects, envisioning historical constructions in original ways and fashioning narratives that are acts of creative argumentation. In this book, you will encounter eight such historians. Chosen to highlight important nodes of world history research to which they have made signal contributions, they are all quick to point out the indispensability of collaboration: “I suspect that world history is not so much to be found in the houses any one of us has built,” writes Kenneth Pomeranz, “as in the neighborhood created by their juxtaposition” (p. 103).

The conversation that led to *Architects of World History* began with Tessa Harvey, an editor at Wiley-Blackwell (a well-respected publisher of academic texts.) Tessa's first priority was organizing the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World History* (Northrop, 2012, including essays by Pomeranz, Sachsenmaier, and Ward), an ideal supplemental resource for readers seeking to pursue lines of inquiry laid out in this book. Northrop's volume joins *The Oxford Handbook of World History* edited by Jerry Bentley (2011) and Ross Dunn's *The New World History: A Teacher's Companion* (2000) as essential reference works. For a sustained single-author analysis of the world history enterprise, Patrick Manning's *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (2003) remains unsurpassed.

One difference between the Northrop, Bentley, Dunn, and Manning titles and *Architects of World History* is the intended audience. Those books were written by historians for historians; here our main goal is to provide points of initial orientation in the field for undergraduate and graduate *students* of history (though we also hope the book will also be useful to other audiences, such as teachers given world history assignments without much prior training or background).

The fact is that the available resources in the field have to date been somewhat unbalanced, intended either for sophisticated academic audiences or for basic survey courses. At one end of the history continuum, research in the field has taken off, leading to the need for resources like the *Wiley Blackwell Companion* and the *Oxford Handbook of World History*. On the other, the survey course has now become a staple of the US university curriculum, leading to the availability of better-quality materials to support world history instruction. (I have contributed to that literature by coauthoring a textbook, *Voyages in World History*, 2013, and a document reader, *Discovering the Global Past: A Look at the Evidence*, 2011.) That strong presence in foundational history and emerging strength as a research field has, however, left world history with something like a "missing middle" where the upper-division undergraduate course and the beginning graduate experience are found. One principal purpose of *Architects of World History* is to help fill that

gap by helping advanced undergraduate students and beginning graduate students to understand the architecture of the field and by providing them with some guideposts toward areas of research they may wish to pursue.

The idea for this book fermented for some years while I was distracted by administrative responsibilities. Then I did what any sensible person with a world history concept would do: I consulted with Jerry Bentley. Jerry recalled with nostalgia *The Historian's Workshop*, a book similar to this one in format that he had read and appreciated as an undergraduate (Curtis, 1970), and when we met in London, as attendees of a conference hosted by the European Network in Universal and Global History, he agreed to serve as coeditor of *Architects of World History*. The “intellectual trajectories” of our authors would be the book’s leitmotif, with an emphasis on the varying paths they had taken toward world history research.

Paths to World History

My own path to world history was founded on outward expansion from my initial training as an Africanist and on involvement with teacher training. Those experiences led, in the spring of 2003, to an invitation to contribute to “Globalizing History at the University of Florida: A Workshop for the Teaching and Research of World History,” sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. My talk was entitled “Change from Below: World History and American Public Education.” Though well received, I do not think my explanation of the upward flow of global history perspectives from US secondary schools to universities made much of an impact. This was a traditional, research-oriented history department where only one of the graduate students in attendance expressed a focus on teaching. The apparent lack of connection between academic history and broader currents of history education did not surprise me, even as it differed greatly from my own experience at the California State University Long Beach (CSULB).

When I joined the history faculty at CSULB in 1990, the department already had a venerable tradition of engagement with K-12 teaching. It was home to the Society for History Education and its respected journal *The History Teacher*, which publishes articles on history pedagogy by school teachers and academics alike (Weber, 2012). That sense of common purpose and lack of hierarchy appealed to my democratic educational instincts (providing an antidote to the frequent obfuscations of French post-structuralism then ascendant in the academy). From a pragmatic standpoint, I knew that many of my students were thinking of pursuing credentials qualifying them to teach history in middle schools or high schools. Many CSULB students are the first in their families to attend college; many are children of immigrants. Since my spouse was herself a seventh grade world history teacher and since CSULB cultivated close relations with Long Beach Unified School District (and with Long Beach City College, as part of the Long Beach Education partnership), my path was clear: toward energetic engagement with public history education (Houck, 2004).

Working with teachers on African history was an obvious starting point. As Kerry Ward affirms, Africanists are perennially distressed by entrenched ignorance of African history and geography. I found that few local teachers had any prior academic exposure to African studies, raising the specter that inaccurate stereotypes would be passed to yet another generation. Fortunately, the implementation of new state standards for history/social science in the later 1990s gave scope (and funding) for intervention: student learning about Africa, in the context of world history, was now *required*. The new California standards were a mixed blessing, however. No world historians were consulted in their development, and the standards bore no relation to the richly connective and comparative study of the human past found, by later contrast, in the APWH program. In California's version of modern world history for tenth grade students, for example, American and Western European exceptionalism were still woven into the structure of the curriculum.

California's history standards were part of a broader national trend in the 1990s, when more rigorous standards were proposed as

a cure for persistent US educational underachievement. Under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a large and prestigious group of history educators from both secondary and higher education backgrounds coordinated a national conversation about setting National History Standards in US and world history. The results were fantastic from an educational and pedagogical standpoint, but disastrous politically. After the proposed standards came under attack by conservatives as “politically correct” distortions of traditional history, the U.S. Senate voted 99–1 to denounce them (Symcox, 2002).

Away from the glare of national politics, however, a group of forward-thinking world historians were lobbying the College Board for inclusion of their subject in the prestigious and rapidly growing Advanced Placement (AP) program. (Through AP courses and examinations, high school students are able to learn at the college level and potentially to earn college placement and credit.) That lobbying was successful, and in 2002 the College Board unveiled its new AP World History curriculum, one that did indeed reflect the “architecture” of the “new world history” by emphasizing themes of connection, comparison, and global context. (Disclosure: I was involved in the course’s design and implementation, and still have an oversight role as a member of the College Board’s History Academic Advisory Committee.) The program is robust not only in terms of academic content but also in terms of numbers. Of the 1 million high school students who took an AP exam in 2013 (mostly in the United States, but an increasing number internationally) over 220,000 attempted the APWH test, with roughly half doing well enough to qualify for college credit. It has been through the AP program that the alliance of secondary and university history educators fostered by the WHA has had its broadest public impact.

These struggles to establish world history learning standards in the schools – with mixed results at the state level, grave disappointment at the national level, and significant achievement in AP – point to an important observation: that the space occupied by world history in American education was substantially the result not of a top-down process of “outreach” from the scholarly nobility

to workaday classroom plebs, but from the “upreach” of classroom teachers (at all levels) looking for scholarly guidance in their attempt to globalize history education. The fact that David Christian has been so proactive and enthusiastic in adapting his “big history” project for broader use in the schools is a direct consequence – I hope he would agree – of world history’s now well-established tradition of working fluidly across and between educational strata; another notable example is the online *World History For Us All* program, conceived by Ross Dunn at San Diego State University.

As with teaching, so with area studies: my institutional position at CSULB made a virtue of broadening my expertise beyond my original training. In fact, faculty members at universities without well-resourced area studies programs routinely find themselves teaching outside their original areas, especially those whose expertise lies in what was once called “third world” regions. For many, world history becomes a principal means of navigating the trajectory from what Philip Curtin (2005) called the “fringes” toward the “center” of the historical discipline. Though decades of area studies advocacy has led to significantly greater geographic diversity to the curriculum of most history departments in the United States, the residual effects of traditional Eurocentrism often remain, with histories of societies outside the United States and Europe still sometimes lumped together in a residual “other” or “nonwestern” category. World history, with its more balanced incorporation of global regions, offers an escape from that curricular impasse.

Though committed to Africa, I remember looking at the history department offerings before my arrival in Madison and imagining all the fascinating courses I might take in Brazilian, Turkish, or South Asian history. Instead, my studies were focused firmly on Africa: I had a continent’s worth of knowledge to catch up with (beyond a lifetime of study!) and, needing to make a fast start on the Swahili language, it did not make sense to dally, nor would my professors allow me to do so. Meanwhile, the African Studies Program had the great advantage of interdisciplinarity, fostering interactions between faculty and students from such fields as sociology, political science,

anthropology, as well as African languages and literatures. Though I still regret all the other great history classes I might have taken, it is still a standard of graduate training that one needs to be thoroughly grounded in a particular place, time, and language (in my case: East Africa, British colonial era, and Swahili) before even thinking of moving on to broader comparative research (Streets-Salter, 2012).

African studies and other area studies programs first took institutional form in the United States in the context of the Cold War. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 provided funding for language training in less commonly taught languages (including Russian and Chinese) and laid the foundations for interdisciplinary learning centers around the country each focused on a different global region. With waves of newly sovereign states knocking at the door of the United Nations and new embassies and consulates about to be opened, the United States needed its own cadre of regional experts. Over half a century later, the legacy and continued productivity of those area studies programs has been fundamental to world history, for without the academic work of three generations of area studies scholars the raw material for much global and comparative historical work simply would not exist, nor would appropriate language training be available. As a recipient of federal funding for the study of Swahili, and of Fulbright awards for research in Tanzania and international education work in Germany, I can well attest to the importance of public sector support for area studies research.

Still, area studies scholars can become trapped in regional bubbles. The fact that I had little consciousness of “world history” as an intellectual option while attending the University of Wisconsin was ironic, given that a decade earlier the history department at Madison had been especially identified for its strength in comparative history (Lockard, 2000). That was largely the work of Dr. Philip Curtin, a Caribbean specialist turned Africanist turned world historian who was on the faculty in Madison from 1956 to 1975 (before moving to Johns Hopkins and influencing many more intellectual trajectories, including those of Lauren Benton and J.R. McNeill). The gulf between comparative history and area studies had once again widened after Curtin’s departure and before my arrival (though I did experience

a reverberation of that program's strength in an excellent comparative seminar in the history of slavery led by Dr. Steven Stern, attended by an equal number of Africanists and Latin Americanists).

So like many others from area studies backgrounds it was teaching responsibilities rather than a research agenda that led me to take world history seriously. My pathway was far from unique in coming to world history from "the bottom up" – beginning with classroom teaching – and "from the fringes to the center" – from a background in what used to be called "third world" studies. My own story is one in which, as Merry Wiesner-Hanks puts it elsewhere in this volume, "contingency, chance, and luck play as large a role as reason, planning, and preparation" (p. 61).

Still, in spite of the role played by serendipity in pushing myself and others onto the world history track, there are those "habits of mind" we all seem to share, such as aspiring to the parachutist's view of the past. That analogy was advanced by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, who contrasted historians that, from a high altitude, survey the broad plains of the past with the "truffle sniffers" that delve deeply into very specific (locally or nationally bounded) aspects of history. All the historians in this volume – whether their interest was initially sparked by curricular reform and innovation; intellectual curiosity sparking a scholarly research agenda; or even international travel experiences – have all risen above the plain to view the broader patterns of transregional or global history.

Location can also matter in determining paths to world history. From Honolulu, Jerry Bentley shared my experience of gazing out at the Pacific Ocean every day. As Karen Jolly explains, Bentley's intellectual adjustment to his new island home was very much part of the transition he made as a young professor from Renaissance history to world history. In my case, working at a university located at the US crossroads between Latin America and Asia (about 35% of CSULB students have family roots in the former; nearly 25% in the latter), the story of "our" shared history is necessarily "world history." The mobility of populations around the world is making and will continue to make global and transregional history more relevant to more of the world's people than ever before.

Foundational Texts

Those new to world history now have a number of guides to the field, including this one. Like other *Architects* contributors, however, my own beginning acquaintance with the field's foundational texts was haphazard. One day as when I wandered through the library's open stacks a title jumped out at me: Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* (1982). Wolf was an anthropologist who specialized in Mesoamerican peoples and whose classic book on Aztec history *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (1959) I had read as an undergraduate. The victims of modern Western imperialism, Wolf explained, had been doubly marginalized: not only had they been stripped of political sovereignty and economic resources, they had in a sense been stripped of their own histories. As a novice Africanist, I saw how Wolf's global point reinforced that of Walter Rodney, whose *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1974) had been required reading for students of modern Africa since its first publication in 1972. I vividly remember the original cover image of Rodney's book: a pair of giant white hands ripping the African continent in two. The thesis was clear, and as with Eric Wolf's book, the connection between history and contemporary issues of social justice unmistakable. Like most historians I have subsequently come to see these two works as limited by their didactic purposes and lack of analytical subtlety. But they remain on my bookshelf as signposts on my path toward African and world history.

Other authors in this volume have their own stories of being influenced by "just the right book at just the right time." Having all been educated between the 1970s and the 1990s, it is not surprising to find that there were certain benchmark texts, and certain benchmark concepts of historical analysis, that we share in common. While it is not within the scope of *Architects of World History* to provide a comprehensive bibliographic guide, it may be useful here to cite some of those foundational scholarly works that had such broad influence.

The terms "underdevelopment," "dependency theory," and "core-periphery relations" were starting points toward global historical analysis of the kind embedded in those books by Wolf and Rodney.