

Much Ado about Something: The New Malaise of World History

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World history has lately come into vogue. The conference circuit in world history has witnessed rapid growth since the mid-1990s, job openings in this area have multiplied, and ambitious works in world history, such as Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997) and David Landes's *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (1998),¹ have garnered numerous accolades, as well as an unusually wide readership. At the University of California, a multicampus initiative in world history was launched several years ago, and among its first products is a series, published by the university's press, called "The California World History Library." The second volume in this series, *Maps of Time* (2004), describes itself as a work in "big history," and its author, David Christian, characterizes his enterprise as having originated from his feeling that scholarship has been enervated by the fragmented accounts of reality that have come into fashion over the last two decades, and his sense that historians can learn from scientists.² If scientists no longer find the idea of a "grand unified theory" absurd or preposterously vain, why should historians shun grand narratives? Christian argues that "large stories" can provide a "sense of meaning" and that intellectuals who disavow "grand narratives" do so at the risk of rendering themselves insignificant.³

California is a big state in an equally big nation-state, and it is perfectly apposite that "big history" should be grounded in a place that often imagines itself as the center of the world. One of the numerous, unthinking clichés that proliferates about

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Los Angeles, that very big metropolis of California, is that a hundred or more languages can be heard in its schools, though what is never mentioned in the same breath is that speakers of English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Hindi, Tagalog, Korean, Japanese, and Swahili alike shop at Wal-Mart and munch down burgers at McDonalds. Multiculturalism has a ravenous appetite; it has been America's way, from the late twentieth century onward, of eating up the world. But to return to the schools: if the world has come to Los Angeles, why at all bother with the world? That Californians cannot much be bothered with the world is nowhere better indicated than in the fact that they are self-obsessed by their own earthquakes, fires, mudslides—and highway chases. Indeed, one suspects that for all the difficulties that occasionally intrude on the lives of Californians, these are also welcomed as signs of the biblical scale of life in God's own land. Lest one should forget just how big California is, it is useful to recall that it is often spoken of as the world's seventh- or eighth-largest economy. Doubtless, purchasing parity power has not been factored into such calculations about the size of the economy, but one can nonetheless understand why California is accustomed to thinking of itself in lofty terms, both drawing the world to itself and having the world radiate outward from the Golden State.

Big history and world history thus have, in myriad ways, their own political economy. In big places one's pretensions are likely to be big as well, and it is inconceivable that world history would emanate from Khartoum, Tripoli, Dhaka, Kuala Lumpur, or Lima. From Oswald Spengler onward, world history has been a conversation in which colonized and now-underdeveloped subjects have had no place, except, of course, as the objects of the wise discourse of knowing subjects. Indians may have taken charge of their history, as have (to howsoever lesser an extent) Africans of African history, but "world history," generally represented as the playing field of more ecumenical minds, remains firmly within the provenance of the Western scholar. The paraphernalia of almost any kind of modern scholarship is vast, but much vaster still are the array of texts, in diverse languages, that a world historian might require and that seldom are available to those outside the Western academy. Though Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently argued that the subject of history is always Europe, even when the histories in question are transparently those of Latin America, Africa, or India,⁴ we might say that world history has not merely restored Europe as the hegemon of history—a restoration occurring in the midst of much anxiety about the loss of faith in grand narratives, the nefarious influence of those French diseases of the mind that go under the name of poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the demotion of scientific history, and the infusion of interpretive frameworks that steadfastly probe the nexus of knowledge and power—but rather returned history to its "proper" home.

Let us think, then, of a world history emanating from some place other than a metropolitan center in the West. Between 1930 and 1933, Jawaharlal Nehru

penned nearly two hundred letters to his daughter Indira that offered, to invoke the title of the subsequent collection, *Glimpses of World History*.⁵ It is apposite that those chained within prison walls should indulge in large canvases, and everywhere the sumptuous history of prison literature offers striking reminders of the often inverse relationship of the narrowness of one's lodgings to the catholicity of thought. Yet rarely has someone confined to a prison cell by the colonial regime been able to command as expansive a conception of the world as Nehru did in *Glimpses of World History*. Nehru worried that he might have lavished too much attention on India, China, Russia, and Europe: thus in one letter he reminds his teenage daughter that he last treated the history of Cambodia when it was under Hindu kings, but that is no reason to suppose that "exciting things" didn't take place there in the meantime. As a relentless advocate of India's cause, both before and subsequent to independence, Nehru was hardly a critic of the nation-state system; yet, as letters 129–34 unequivocally show—letters in which Nehru allowed himself extended discussions of revolutions, literature, science, democracy, socialism, Marxism, and the growth of workers's organizations—he had foreseen the shortcomings of a world history centered on nation-states. Like other colonized subjects, Nehru had been stirred by accounts of the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905; but, unusually for a nationalist of his time, he was determined that Japan's triumph should not be construed as a model for India to emulate. "Japan not only followed Europe in industrial methods," he commented, "but also in imperialist aggression. She was more than a faithful pupil of the European powers: she often improved on them."⁶ There are moments, to be sure, when Nehru is writing as an Indian, or as an advocate of Fabian socialism; and yet he advises Indira, apropos of all the "isms" in circulation—"feudalism, capitalism, socialism, communism"—that "behind them all stalks opportunism."⁷ This is in 1933: Germany was arming itself to the teeth, pogroms against Jews had intensified, but Europe was still far from being on the verge of war. Nehru nonetheless wrote, as he put it, in "The Shadow of the War."

The Glimpses of World History is sweeping, literary, nuanced, playful, philologically minded—the word *Fabian*, Indira is informed, derives from the Roman general Fabius, who was not keen on engaging Hannibal in open conflict and sought to wear him down through attrition—and ecumenical both in its conception of the world and history. This is the world history on which, growing up as children in India, we were nurtured. It filled me, when I was in my early teens, with a vague desire that I should, sometime during the stage of fatherhood, do for my children what Nehru had done so admirably for Indira. Many years later, I was heartened to discover that my adolescent affection for this book was shared by more mature readers. The British writer, journalist, and founder of the *Left Review*, Tom Wintringham (1898–1949), gave it as his opinion that one could learn better English *and* better history by turning to the *Glimpses* rather than to Thomas Macaulay.⁸ But I have

since also discovered that practitioners of world history in the academic establishment have received Nehru's work with studied indifference. These same practitioners, while aware of the myriad ways in which Nehru calls attention as a world historical figure—an inspirational figure of anticolonialism, the first prime minister of an independent India, a principled advocate of nonalignment—appear entirely oblivious to his writings, especially *Glimpses of World History*, and even critiques of the Eurocentrism of world history seem unaware of Nehru's unique foray into world history at a time when it was far from being institutionalized as a subject of disciplined study.⁹ World history only has place for the likes of Nehru as men of action, not as originators of ideas. Even Mohandas Gandhi, in many respects the most arresting and original figure of the twentieth century, has suffered the same fate: the world histories have room for a sanitized Gandhi, the “apostle” of nonviolence and liberator of India, but none for his brilliant and withering critique of modernity, or his prescient understanding that oppression will increasingly be exercised through categories of knowledge.¹⁰ One wonders, indeed, whether world history even at its best does not, particularly with reference to history in the five hundred years subsequent to the beginning of European expansion, implicitly endorse the crass supposition, which frequently receives succor from scholars and writers who purport to study the big ideas of our times, that the faculties of reason and reflection have been most developed in the West.

What conception of the world, then, does world history have? And, not less significant, who is world history for, and what is the cultural and political work of world history? In raising these questions, I only marginally mean to evoke certain predictable criticisms of world history that, for all their worth, leave the political and epistemological project of world history unscathed. Large narratives are always susceptible to charges of generalization, and most historians are barely equipped to write histories of the nation, much less of the world. One can certainly quibble with many world histories on the grounds that these largely constitute histories of the West, or of European expansion, or that they disproportionately focus on the modern world and the supposed scientific ingenuity of the moderns. More subtle critiques of the enterprise of world history point to the fact that world history still remains tethered to the nation-state, often centering on the nation-state of the historian, and that world history has no more been able to do without nation-states than the United Nations can be conceived outside the nation-state system. But even this objection has less force than commonly imagined, and at least a few practitioners of world history have structured their histories around global exchanges. One historian, Jerry Bentley, has proposed a world history around “three realities of global experience and the relationships among them”: “rising human population, expanding technological capacity, and increasing interaction between peoples of different societies.”¹¹ That such a history—for instance, the account of cross-cultural encoun-

ters—may still be excessively predicated on nations and certain nation-states is a criticism to which Bentley pays little attention. If world histories take the holocaust perpetrated on Jews as paradigmatic of genocide, if that holocaust is the Holocaust standing forth in singular and sinister isolation, then why should we not think that European encounters with the world will become the template for cross-cultural encounters around the world? We must suppose, following the immense pleasure taken by many in cross-cultural encounters, that since colonialism led the Europeans to “increasing interaction” with the world, it must have been a good thing—good at least for the Europeans, which is all that matters. When Bentley remarks that, “generally speaking, the intensity and range of cross-cultural interactions have increased throughout history, albeit at irregular and inconsistent rates,”¹² the inescapable conclusion is that these interactions have led the way to progress and a better and more integrated world.

From the vantage point of a historian of India, the history of what Bentley and many others describe as cross-cultural interactions looks very different to me. Recent studies have restored the Indian Ocean world to its rightful place as the site of great civilizations and fruitful economic, cultural, and social exchanges,¹³ but even then, no world history that I am aware of has accorded any substantive recognition to the Gujarati thalassocracy from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries.¹⁴ Gujarati merchants roamed the Indian Ocean for centuries, as early as the middle portion of the first Christian millennium, and were by the thirteenth century a permanent fixture in Malacca, Timor, Java, Sumatra, Kedah, Borneo, and the Moluccas, besides traveling to the east coast of Africa, Aden and the Gulf, and China. Though north India came under the rule of Afghan kings in the eleventh century, India’s interactions with Afghanistan, central Asia, and Iran were much older. One effect of European colonialism in India, the history of which has hitherto largely been written as European cosmopolitanism running over native provincialism and medievalism, was to excise the memory of India’s long history of encounters, generally more productive and less exploitative, with central and west Asia, Southeast Asia, East Africa, southern China, and the civilizations around the South China Sea and the Persian Gulf. In nineteenth-century Bengal, the world began to revolve around the twin poles of London and the middle-class society of Calcutta. To this day, the world to most educated Indians means little more than India (and perhaps Pakistan) and the “West” (increasingly the United States). The conception of the world, to put it bluntly, has narrowed very considerably for Indians. One suspects that this is nearly true of all formerly colonized peoples. Such a conception of the world and history has also informed what is called comparative history: thus when comparative history is evoked, it generally means that one studies India and the West, Africa and the West, the Middle East and the West, and so on. Rare is that historian who would do a comparative study of India and Africa, or Gujarat and the Indonesian archipelago,

or Dubai and Malacca; in comparative history, one axis of the comparison is taken for granted, while the other is generally determined by the national origins of the historian, or by the historian's specialization in one kind of national history or another.

Articulate and well-meaning advocates of world history, such as Michael Adas,¹⁵ have deplored the narrative of American exceptionalism, and he argues that this narrative cannot be reconciled with the "visions of America," which Adas evidently shares, "as a model for the rest of humankind."¹⁶ That the United States—founded on slave labor, perpetrator of multiple genocides, and the best friend to countless despots—should rightfully serve as a model for anyone is itself a species of, rather than a contradiction to, American exceptionalism; but let such trivia pass. Other people at other times have thought of themselves as divinely ordained to free the world from oppression, but Adas concedes that Americans have unfortunately been more inclined than other people to view themselves as a people whose thoughts and deeds are guided by God. (But what if God intended mischief?) Considering that American provincialism is proverbial around the world, who would want to disagree with Adas's plea that world history can perhaps serve as the most useful antidote to the American inclination to be "out of step with time"? What place can there be for American exceptionalism in the era of globalization? The irony of calling for diversity, multiplicity of voices, and polyphonic histories in the United States, even while that country leads the world in stripping the world of diversity under the aegis of globalization, is only lost on those who issue calls for world history.

It is another form of American exceptionalism to believe that what is good for America is perforce good for every other nation. The United States doubtless requires many antidotes to its ferocious exceptionalism, but that can be no reason for involving everyone else in its distinct problems. World history will now be foisted on the rest of the world, and the world will most likely not be able to resist this development. Such is the imperialism of modern knowledge. Advocates of world history might be puzzled that smaller or relatively insignificant nations—relative to the United States, even India becomes insignificant, though the new forms of coolitude championed by Thomas Friedman and others are calculated to put India within the orbit of the United States and turn it into a visible member of what the United States likes to call the international community—are not grateful for entering into the horizon of world history, but one has only to remember the misfortunes of various nations when they fell under the gaze of colonizing powers.¹⁷ World history is also the apposite form of knowledge for our times, taking its place beside multiculturalism, globalization, multilateralism, and the new world order. It is thus one of the twenty-first century's preeminent forms of colonizing knowledge—and all the more insidious in that it appears to be as benign and ecumenical an enterprise as one can imagine. An integrated history of one world, our world, sounds appealing, but we

need to have a conception of many worlds, not one. There are many modes of comprehending the world outside history, and it is not sufficient to speak merely of diverse histories. But those are other stories, for other times.

Notes

1. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).
2. David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
4. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27–46.
5. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History: Being Further Letters to his Daughter, Written in Prison, and Containing a Rambling Account of History for Young People* (1934; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).
6. *Ibid.*, 457.
7. *Ibid.*, 947.
8. Tom Wintringham, “Better History and Better English,” in *Nehru Abhinandan Granth: A Birthday Book* (New Delhi: Nehru Abhinandan Granth Committee, 1949).
9. See, for example, J. M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians*, vol. 2 of *The Colonizer’s Model of the World* (London: Guilford, 2000). I am aware of only one academic study of *Glimpses* in relatively recent years: David Kopf, “A Look at Nehru’s *World History* from the Dark Side of Modernity,” *Journal of World History* 2 (1991): 47–63. For an earlier assessment of *Glimpses*, see Vinay Lal, “Nehru as a Writer,” *Indian Literature*, no. 135 (1990): 20–46.
10. For a more detailed exposition of this view, see Vinay Lal, *Empire of Knowledge: Culture and Plurality in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto, 2002).
11. Jerry Bentley, “World History and Grand Narrative,” in *Writing World History 1800–2000*, ed. Benedikt Stuchtey and Eckhardt Fuchs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51.
12. *Ibid.*, 59.
13. K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
14. See V. K. Jain, *Trade and Traders in Western India, AD 100–1300* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1990). One world history that is somewhat attentive to Indian maritime traditions is Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 337–42.
15. Michael Adas, “Out of Step with Time: United States Exceptionalism in an Age of Globalization,” in Stuchtey and Fuchs, *Writing World History*, 137–54.
16. *Ibid.*, 139.
17. Thomas L. Friedman, “The Great Indian Dream,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2004; Friedman “Small and Smaller,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2004.