

Going Global: Thematic Explorations in World History

Candice Goucher

INTRODUCTION

A thematic approach to world history was my earliest strategy for confronting the vast and unfamiliar territory of a world history classroom.¹ After more than three decades, this hasn't changed. What *has* changed is the richness of available world historical research scholarship, the increasing relevance of world history to real world problems, and the dynamic character of periodization schemes I and others are better able to apply to the explication of those themes. All historians—especially world historians—must be selective in their methodological orientation, framing, and choice of what to include and what to exclude. The organization of a narrative into thematic chunks says loudly and clearly: here are the emphases I think are the keys to unlocking the global past.

More than ever before, world historians are willing to be thematic in their scholarly approaches to research and in their teaching and learning in the classroom. This hasn't always been the case. Many of the early world history textbooks used Western Civilization courses and textbooks

C. Goucher (✉)
Washington State University, Vancouver, WA, USA

as their models. Some of the best-selling textbooks (for example, Bentley et al.) maintained the ‘civilizational’ approach derived from Western Civilization in their narratives. The results were chronologically weighted towards periodization derived from European history and often used Eurocentric terms (such as Classical Era or Axial Age) or perspectives that effectively marginalized entire continents. In many early synthesizing works, the continental regions of Africa and the Americas were perceived to have been lacking the authenticity of written documentation and so their histories were placed into separate chapters. Unfortunately, many of the European-biased approaches have persisted in the majority of textbooks, despite significant changes in the national-level scope of standardized testing in the U.S. that embraced key themes applicable to all parts of the world. One resultant contradiction has been that the issue of Eurocentrism was never fully addressed by the field of world history.

These and other gradual reforms have systematically de-emphasized mandated content coverage in exchange for an emphasis on historical skills (such as the analysis of documents or material culture and the ability to use a variety of evidence to support arguments). Despite these obstacles, the focus on themes, patterns, and processes has resulted in a more inclusive past befitting a global society. Thematic approaches overall have invited higher order thinking, comparison and synthesis. The shift towards a more thematic spectrum has suited the generalizing trend by reshaping the field and by incorporating at least some components of world history into general education programs at the tertiary level.

There has been and remains a fairly substantial lack of agreement about what constitutes a ‘theme’. Is any subject a potential theme? Some texts have claimed to be thematic, while holding forth little in the way of synthesis or comparison, instead using topics as themes. Selectivity is at the heart of a thematic approach, but often at the cost of narrowing the content. Other scholars have taken singular subjects and made entire ‘thematic’ monographs of them by excluding everything else. Such approaches have used the theme to dictate the periodization and the content.

Somewhere in between these two strategies, Linda Walton and I have argued elsewhere for the utility of several mega-themes:

Two broad themes can be applied to view the people and events of world history: integration (how the processes of world history have drawn peoples of the world together) and difference (how the patterns of world history also reveal the diversity of the human experience).²

In our most recent iteration of a world history textbook, *World History: Journeys from Past to Present* (Routledge, 2013), we introduced the significance of each chapter's theme, elucidating how that theme answered specific questions about our shared human past. These chapter themes were then organized into six parts, each part provoking a broader thematic discussion and helping to build and integrate the larger chronological era. For example, the book's 'Part III: Connections' included three chapters: one on long-distance trade between c. 500 and 1600 CE, another on cultural memory (and transmitting traditions) from the Egyptian pyramids to the printing press and beyond, and another chapter on the commerce and change that created world systems in Afro-Eurasia in the thirteenth century and subsequently in the Atlantic. Chapter timelines introduced the chapter and helped ground the reader in the chronological sequencing of events and places mentioned. Regardless of how we define 'thematic' issues, the thematic approach has tended to invite opportunities for highly effective iterative learning, often through their periodization's overlapping chronologies. These chronologies spring from the needs of the thematic discussion and their relevance to broader concepts beyond the discipline of history. They also clearly rely on the reconstruction of the past using multiple sources of evidence, from paleontology to archaeology, genetics and linguistics to material culture and written documents.

In the sections below, I have identified some of the key themes, which I feel generally address questions of increasing complexity and scale in the unfolding of the human past. The themes include: cooking food (and sharing a common human past), the impact of agriculture (and other markers of 'civilization') on building world systems of inequality; how urbanization, beliefs, family, and economic exchanges have gone about shaping modernity through gradual and revolutionary change; and, finally, resistance and globalization. The periodization of each section's theme overlaps somewhat (perhaps inevitably) with one or more other sections, but generally moves chronologically from past to present through multiple world regions and the structure of a sweeping narrative of more than 40,000 years. It seems impossible to adequately account for human commonalities without extending the span of world history to include what once was called 'prehistory'. For the purposes of this essay, I also have consciously described selected themes using active verbs (cooking, constructing, trading, encountering, etc.) in order to promote the most significant advantages of the thematic approach: answering

what and how the past does come to mean something relevant to the present and identifying the processes (the ‘how’) of world history in service of the discovery of insights that connect the past and the present.

The most pressing of contemporary problems demand our attention as historians, including the growing gap between the haves and have-nots in the world and the planetary fragility wrought by global warming. These are problems about which world history has much to offer as a way to frame our understanding of the present in terms of the past. Perspectives on the past are driven by the selection of themes that are inclusive of both the broader, seemingly more distant societal and institutional issues of conflict and disorder, paired against the intimacy of the family’s daily life, complexity and inequality, injustice and resistance. This temporal and topical breadth thus moves us between the levels of individual and collective experience, between social history and political or economic history. Throughout the narrative essay, I remind the reader that the individual person experiences world history on a daily basis at the scale of family and household. Yet even the intimacy and familiarity of daily life cannot fully mask the impact of global forces and the mobility of individual and collective lives. Awareness of the pathways by which we have arrived at our twenty-first-century world seems not only profoundly interesting, but also necessarily critical to finding sustainable solutions to the problems we face as the current band of humans circling the sun.

Humans were on a pathway towards ‘going global’ from their earliest appearance on the planet perhaps six million years ago. Their global migrations eventually peopled every continent, from Africa to Eurasia and even across the Pacific to the Americas. The story of their movements constitutes an amazingly prominent place in world history. While we tend to think of an age of globalization beginning in 1492 CE, or perhaps later with the rise of technologies that enabled regular movements circumnavigating the globe and creating the worldwide web, the entire fabric of the human story was woven globally, one step at a time.

GOING GLOBAL: THEMATIC EXPLORATIONS IN WORLD HISTORY

Cooking a Shared Human Past

Based on molecular and fossil evidence, the divergence of the bipedal (walking upright on two feet) ancestors of humans from most other

mammals took place between five and seven million years ago. Called 'hominins', these ancestors adapted to tool use and other anatomical specializations that gave them great evolutionary advantages, whether walking across African savannas or living in that continent's forests. The seasonality of their movements and the selectivity of their individual and collective food choices (as plant and meat-eaters) helped create the contours of the human experience.

Among the most important achievements of early human history are those that center around the essential activity that made us human: cooking food. Cooking food likely led to changes in the human diet with huge evolutionary payback. Eventually the cooperative human groups who shared food, developed communication (that is, language), and improved their diets and thus perpetuated planetary dominance by this seemingly simple act. We now know that one of the single most defining characteristics of the human experience is the ability to control and use fire to shape the environment, including foods. Sometime around a million years ago, likely somewhere in southern Africa (perhaps at Wonderwerk Cave) our hominin ancestors first sat down to a home-cooked meal; between 125,000 years ago and about 40,000 years ago this became a key and widespread feature of human behavior. Cooking became a means by which humans were able to increase the adaptability and versatility of their diets and other primary aspects of their behavior. From their beginnings in Africa, the human project spread around the globe increasing in scale and degree of successful adaptability to every known environment.

Together with pounding and grinding foods, the specialized techniques of food preparation allowed humans to pre-process their foods and gain extra value (and more efficient energy use) from what they ate. In Chinese, the radical (or root) for 'fire' is the character for cooking, roasting, frying, steaming and so on. Cooking not only amounted to the chemical alteration of foods at their molecular level, making some foods and their nutrients more accessible, it allowed for the removal of unwanted toxins, thus expanding the repertoire of what could be consumed. Eventually this diversity could gain elaborate cultural expression. Amongst many sub-Saharan Africans, foodways presented unique markers of the distinctiveness of specific ethnic identities as well as the commonality of group social and environmental behavior and interactions. Yet, the cooking hearth was the universal symbol of cultural and social reproduction.

Richard Wrangham has argued that the controlled use of fire made us humans into “the creatures of the flame.”³ Cooked food gave humans the advantages of more nutrients, increased proteins, and resultant larger brains and bodies. The tool of fire created a home base in which food consumption could be delayed, food stored and shared. Food sharing likely led to language, social communication, and community-building, and, of course, the transmission of cultural memory across generations. The history of food explains the diversity and commonality of a signature feature of being human.⁴ Without home-cooked meals, there would be no world history.

Constructing a World with Agriculture

Foraging, fishing, and hunting lifestyles satisfied human needs for thousands of years from the Pleistocene to our own climatic era (termed the Holocene) beginning around 11,500 years ago. While these millennia of human history relied on the expansive mobility of hunter-gatherers, often in the patterned form of seasonal movements, along with a keen awareness of microenvironments, they shared a remarkably successful subsistence strategy of collecting, hunting, and foraging wild foods. The climatic changes of the Holocene have been marked by a period of dramatic and sometimes abrupt transformations in temperatures and rainfall. A few thousand years after the onset of the Holocene era, food production appeared among societies in Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas, leading some scholars to suggest a causal relationship. Food production included the genetic manipulation of plants and/or animals to make them more productive (and/or pleasing) and dependent on human intervention. This cultivation of crops and herding of animals forever altered the relationship (or ecology) between humans and their environments. Because the reliance on farming changed the populations and landscapes of the planet, its origin is sometimes called the most importance ‘event’ in world history.

Agriculture supported the expansion of human population from perhaps 6 million at the end of the Pleistocene era to more than 7 billion today. The rise and diffusion of agriculture also afforded opportunities to create settled (sedentary) societies, producing food surpluses with strategies of food sharing and food storage that enabled complex social systems to arise. These agricultural systems were often marked by great inequalities and differential access to food and power. The larger

and materially complex societies sometimes developed into small villages, larger urban centers, and states. The transition from hunting and gathering to farming was described as revolutionary and termed by the archaeologist Gordon Childe (in 1923) to be a “Neolithic Revolution,” assuming that the early origins identified in southwest Asia spread to other places, with a distinctive material culture package of traits, including domesticated plants and animals, polished stone tools, permanent village settlements of small houses, and eventually pottery. But agriculture also involved individual decision-making.

The early scholarly ideas about the origins of agriculture assumed that the first farmers held in common an appreciation for the advantages of an agricultural way of life at a time of severe climatic change (the onset of the Holocene). However, this motivation appears unlikely to have been the predominant model and the Holocene is now understood to be a period of overall wetter, not drier conditions, thus dampening the enthusiasm for the theory of environmental determinism. Ethnographic studies of the world’s remaining hunter-gatherers and extensive archaeological research in many world regions have complicated the understanding of agricultural origins. A large number of possible mechanisms for inducing humans to engage in agriculture now have been identified. Rather than an inevitable sequence of intensified experiments of management that ended in the glory of agriculture, the journeys of hunter-gatherers sometimes rejected or failed to adopt agriculture altogether and sometimes even reverted back to foraging and hunting. The picture of uneven and uncertain change also conveys the importance of a world historical perspective on human decision-making, experimentation, and adaptability.

Marking World Regions of Change

Archaeological, genetic, and linguistic research provides the primary evidence for understanding the origins of agriculture in a variety of world regions. These regions are delineated from the distribution of the wild cultigens, the crops and animals that humans first sought to domesticate. Not only river valleys (of the Nile, Huang-He, Niger, Mississippi, or Tigris-Euphrates, for example) were homes to early efforts at food production, although rivers and floodplains often afforded the best opportunities for successful strategies by novice farmers. These environments were just as friendly for the activities of fishing, foraging, and hunting. We now know that the beginnings of agriculture were appearing in

various environments, both tropical and temperate, highlands and lowlands, and involved a diversity of crops native to those regions, from bananas, sugarcane, taro and yams in New Guinea to enset in Ethiopia, rice in Asia, potatoes in the Andes, and maize in the Valley of Mexico. Childe had noted the typical pattern of mixed agriculture (farming and herding), with animal husbandry and herding of animals following the domestication of plants. Much more unusual in world history, the first adoption of livestock-raising strategies in the Nilo-Saharan region of northeast Africa preceded crop cultivation around 9500 BCE. By about 8000 BCE, agricultural villages had emerged in SW Asia. Semi-sedentary sites appeared in the Americas between 7500 and 6000 BCE. By about 500 CE, nearly every world region had found the path to agriculture.

The genetic manipulation of plant and animal populations began to shape the world's many hunters, fishers, and foragers into prolific food producers. Climate change, population pressure, social competition, and shifts in ideology may have played roles in pulling or pushing populations to adopt or reject food production strategies at various times. Recent research has focused on the processes of intensification and transformation on the food strategies of early peoples on every continent, where agriculture eventually enabled increasingly larger and more complex societies to emerge. Agriculture also permanently changed the world's physical environments as farmers deforested fields, moved soils by terracing, damming, and plowing activities, and genetically altered species. World historical perspectives have utilized both global and local research strategies to reveal the patterns supported by archaeological, genetic, and linguistic evidence.⁵

Digging up Agricultural Origins⁶

Three specific case studies of agricultural origins explore the dynamic state of current research and suggest something of the range of responses to the theme's question: What was the origin and impact of agriculture? These relate to Brześć Kujawski (Europe), Tichitt (Mauretania), and Kuk (New Guinea). Excavated by Peter Bogucki and Ryszard Grygiel, the site of Brześć Kujawski (in Poland) reveals how pioneer farmers struggled in everyday life. Alasdair Whittle's extraordinarily rich and imaginative work integrating this and other sites in Europe provides a surprising trajectory that suggests that the narrative of the Neolithic is not a steady development of a world with agriculture.⁷ Agriculture is introduced to Europe from the

7th millennium BCE on, and DNA evidence favors a model that emphasizes the role that outsiders played in introducing the cultivation of cereals and husbandry of cattle, sheep, and goats. The consequences are varied in this transitional period and include intensive, small gardens, increasing signs of community life, and worldviews marked by a preoccupation with investment in the future. Yet there seems to be no signs of control over the means of production by a few and no marked increase in social inequality, unlike the patterns from almost every other part of the world.

The site of Dhar Tichitt in the West African Sahel is one of the continent's earliest complex societies.⁸ Evidence from the pearl millet grain impressions on the bottoms of local potsherds allowed archaeologists to follow the trail of mobile herders and hunter-gatherers to sedentary farmers across the centuries between 1900 and 100 BCE. Again, major socioeconomic changes were not instantaneous. Yet eventually, the Tichitt farming diaspora appears to have persisted, creating in the Middle Niger the foundations for urbanism and empire building at Ghana and Mali. The paucity of archaeological work here compared to the Nile suggests that critical historical gaps (including the chronological gap of more than seven millennia between Nilo-Saharan and Cushitic farmers and the Tichitt settlements) will be slow in being back-filled.

Finally, the swamps of New Guinea provide equally surprising evidence of the independent development of agriculture in a place that qualifies for least likely to produce the stereotypical 'rise of civilization'. At the site of Kuk, early farmers manipulated and cleared the local wetlands for their farms, probably before 7000 BCE and possibly as early as 10,000 BCE, although the earliest interpretations of the transition between the Pleistocene and Holocene are still tenuous and ambiguous.⁹ This was vegetative propagation not seed dispersal and it was small-scale farming which is usually impossible to identify in the archaeological record. Using mounds and ditches, Kuk farmers cultivated bananas, taro, and yams and created new environments through their management of the landscape. Eventually they added the sweet potato and the pig to their food production strategies, emphasizing the interregional connections that have been at play for millennia.

Finding Food, Power and Inequality

Occasionally agriculture did not seem to result in accentuated differences in access to food or power, as in the reconstructed village life of

relative equality at the site of Brześć Kujawski described above. Among the more disturbing world patterns related to the adoption of agriculture is the nearly universal propensity for the new food-producing societies to generate social inequality amidst the dramatic environmental changes they wrought. The common changes involved larger populations achieving greater cultural and social complexity. Food producers relied heavily on new forms of technology for lifting water, moving soil, and clearing forests. This began a long history of interrelated forces for innovation, destruction, and expansion.

The mechanics of food production also paralleled the rise of urbanism, social complexity, and increasing inequality. The capacity to feed larger groups of people provided the means to lubricate and nurture political and social control. These increasingly hierarchical structures began to build intertwined state and food systems through networks of appropriation. Expansive trade allowed individuals and groups to control resources via mechanisms that included enhanced food preservation and storage and the enactment of laws and regulations. The complex social structures were everywhere constructed on the foundational control over food supplies. Cultural interactions relied on shared rituals of drinking and feasting, as well as ideologies of power and control over the redistribution of food. Around the world, farmers and herders built many versions of the complex systems that ultimately created competing, but enduring categories: the political and religious elites and the ordinary laborers, the haves and the have-nots.

Living in a Material World: Urbanization

While the world historical narrative recounted above suggests the trajectory of increasing population and community size—from Jericho to Tenochtitlan, this story of the past and its emphasis on urban life can be misleading. Until the twenty-first century, most of the world's peoples did not live in cities. Cities have captured the attention of historians, in part because cities served as centers for the accumulation of material culture. It may be more useful to think about cities as nodes in urban systems. Cities could not and did not exist without the surrounding countryside with which they traded. Following the patterned networks of interconnections, it is possible to identify some characteristics of ancient world cities. These traits were what early historians considered to have been the characteristics of 'civilization', a word that comes

from the Latin *civitas* (city). Cities had complex systems of social and political hierarchies (often highly gendered), rituals of public order, governance, taxation or tribute, symbolic communication (often writing or record-keeping), and the market connections to a wider orbit of crafts and industries, including food production and public services. Common beliefs (religion and cultural expression) and common needs (such as defense) brought about the appearance of interdependence and exchange systems, which in turn expanded the scope and importance of the city dwellers. The requirements of urbanization drove the economy and politics of management and control over the larger region belonging to an urban system.

The crowded daily lives of cities resulted from increasing population density. In turn, the management of food and water, not to mention parasites and infectious diseases often meant that most people's lives were unpleasant and short. Cultural elaboration was one response to the environmental and technological changes that accompanied complex urban development. Among the most important of cultural events was the appearance of metallurgy—particularly the smelting of copper and iron and the casting of their alloys to produce the Age of Metals around the world. At the same time, the metal-using cultures were adaptations to their own dynamic environments. Deforested hillsides were the result of expanding extractive industries, including the mining of ores, pottery production, and charcoal making, as well as smelting and blacksmithing activities. Thus the “advance of civilization” should rather be seen through the eyes of the Chinese writer Wang Taiyue, who wrote his “Lament for the Copper-bearing Hills” in response to the human and ecological dimensions of exploitation.¹⁰ Urban life may not have been ubiquitous, but it was influential.

While some urban communities such as Jericho (which grew into a city between 9000 and 6500 BCE) began as smaller, temporary and commercially focused settlements attracting diverse peoples and goods, other cities, such as Thebes in Upper Egypt (2200 BCE) or Teotihuacán in the Valley of Mexico (100 BCE–750 CE), were ceremonial centers, whose temples and tombs supported artisans and elite cultures. The earliest cities in East Asia were also ceremonial centers directly related to the formation of a dynastic state, the Shang (c. 1600–1045 BCE). The ruler's residence became a sacred city and its palace and storage pits reflected the highly stratified society over which he ruled.

Cities sometimes developed into larger state structures that historians have called city-states. City-states were groups of urban communities that banded together for the purposes of trade and defense. They were often united by a common ideology or set of beliefs. Prominent early city-states included the Greek states of Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and others, beginning around the eighth century BCE. The city-states along the East African coast similarly engaged in trade shaped by their coastal geography. They shared a common urban culture and language, Kiswahili, which emerged from cultural interactions between 100 CE and the tenth century CE.

Not all early cities had monumental architecture, such as the Egyptian or Mayan pyramids or temples of ancient Athens and Rome. Called “a city without a citadel” by its excavators, the urban center at Jenne-Jeno (450–1100 CE in Mali, West Africa) was situated at the intersection of major trade routes and varied environmental niches that could be exploited year round.¹¹ Eventually the mud-walled city attracted the attention of Muslim traders, who sought gold and brought a variety of goods in exchange, as well as a new religion. Living in a material world enabled the past to be communicated across time and space. Despite the continuities afforded by successful cultural adaptations to environment, cities not only flourished, but also declined and disappeared. Among the many reasons for their ebb and flow were the shifting winds of trade, climate, religion and ideas, and conflict.

Trading and Encountering Beliefs: Between State and Family

Not only modern world historians have attempted to explain the past. Ancient beliefs in goddesses and gods, spirits, and ancestors were important ways that people tried to make sense of their worldly experience and the larger cosmos. Shared beliefs created the basis for a common identity of community and could sanction political authority. The veneration of urban deities in North Africa (Egypt), East Asia (China), and in Mesoamerica (Teotihuacan and Maya), spread across cultural and geographic boundaries. In Uruk, one of the early urban centers of West Asia, the priest-king was the consort of the city’s goddess Inanna in the late 4th millennium BCE.

Other city-states held their own gods or goddesses that could merge and transform over time. The Babylonian ruler Hammurabi (c. 1792–1750 BCE) claimed that the power of the god Marduk commanded him

to bring justice through his laws known as the Code of Hammurabi. In the Indus Valley (c. 2500–1500 BCE), shared beliefs blended with Indo-European religious culture in the Vedas ('knowledge'), a collection of ritual hymns transmitted orally. Eventually written down, these texts formed the basis for the cosmic sanction of social castes in South Asia. Later texts called the Upanishads were compiled between the seventh and third centuries BCE and questioned the inherited traditions and meaning of human existence. Reformulated, these ideas contributed to the religious traditions later known as Hinduism. In West Asia, the roots of Judaism emerged among semi-pastoral peoples of Mesopotamia moving westward in the 2nd millennium BCE. Known as the Hebrews, their beliefs became a religion based on the idea of one god, a creator and lawgiver.

Three later religions stand out as influential world religions, meaning that they were carried around the globe by proselytizing or teaching the messages of their beliefs in a variety of cultural settings. Followers of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam transmitted the teachings of their founders across cultural and geographic boundaries. The man later known as Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was born around the sixth century BCE into the Himalayan kingdom's ruling family. Rejecting this wealth, the Buddha ('awakened one') embarked on a personal journey to enlightenment. Emerging in a period of Roman rule in the eastern Mediterranean, Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth (c. 4 BCE–30 CE) was the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Old Testament. His teachings were carried by personally chosen disciples and later by missionaries. In the seventh century CE, the Prophet Muhammad received revelations from God. These teachings were remembered and recorded in the Qur'an and formed the basis of Islam. In all three religions, missionaries were instrumental in spreading the faith along the trade routes traveled by merchants and pilgrims alike. Islam had no ordained priesthood, leaving it to scholars and judges to invoke religious authority.

The three world religions became intertwined with the rise of political states. After his conversion to Buddhism, the Mauryan ruler Ashoka (304–232 BCE) renounced war and helped spread the doctrines and further political unity in Southeast Asia. The Roman emperor Constantine (272–337 CE) claimed conversion to Christianity and ushered in an era of tolerance for the faith. Within a century after the Prophet Muhammad, an Islamic empire extended from the Iberian Peninsula to northern India. Arab traders moved along the Gold Roads of Africa,

down the east African coast, sailed across the Indian Ocean, traveling the Silk Roads through Asia via commerce and conquest. In cities as diverse as Córdoba, in Al-Andalus, Cairo, in Egypt, and Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Empire, followers of multiple faiths interacted daily and transcended the worlds into which they were born. The three world religions were well suited for adapting to and assimilating indigenous belief systems, even as they altered the ideals and values of the local communities. Yet the largest contiguous land-based empire in world history, the Mongols (1206–1368 CE) drew on the sanction of the sky god, a principal deity of the Central Asian steppe.

Empires were the largest polities and resulted from the expansion of one state at the expense of another. These largest states became influential catalysts for furthering the inequality within and the integration of vast territories on land and on water. The unequal distribution of resources and power intensified with the scale of complexity and size. The maritime and mainland empires of Srivijaya (c. 170–1025 CE) and Khmer (802–1432 CE) gathered wealth and created expressions of collective identity, such as temples and other religious monuments, knitting together local villages and their kin groups. The Incan Empire covered an equally diverse area of more than 2000 miles of South American mountains, basins, and plains to the Pacific Ocean. Using conquest and cultural memory systems, the Incans made the Sapa Inca a descendant of the sun god. The mummified bodies of dead kings became tangible links between the living and their pantheon. Again, material wealth gained through conquest, trade, and tribute fed the Incan system of differences.

Regardless of the social or political scale of a given society, the social organization of family and household played a key role in constructing systems of difference, yielding experiences of both cooperation and inequality. Indeed it seems impossible to understand the building blocks of difference and inequality without considering gender. While definitions of family differed across cultural landscapes and through time, everywhere they comprised the most basic levels of social interactions usually connected by kinship or marriage. In contrast, households were shared residences and sometimes served as economic units.

Family and state sometimes have been closely linked. In China, Confucianism provided the ideology for patriarchy that reached inside the extended family, shaping its ideals. The twelfth-century writer Yuan Cai (c. 1140–95 CE) wrote a book about how to manage a family and household, admonishing that “women should not take part in affairs

outside the home.” It seems as if most world historians may have read that book. Typically the interests of world histories have veered towards the political and the powerful, writing women (especially non-elites) out of the picture. Focusing on kinship at least provides an option for the inclusion of women, if only as placeholders in both matrilineal and patrilineal systems in the past and present. The Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 CE) described the lineage as the primary source of identity and group cohesion, concluding that even the rise and fall of states were dependent on the interplay of lineage and other social factors that constituted increasingly hierarchical societies. In South Asia, where caste distinctions became a hereditary distinction based on occupation and sanctioned by ritual beliefs, the very order of society reinforced political authority and power relations more generally. Kinship bonds, gender identities, caste affiliations, and patronage existed within the context of economic systems and they helped create and maintain the structures of inequalities.

Ushering in the Modern World

The expanding trade and exchange networks of the 2nd millennium CE carried much more than goods. Ideas, beliefs, diseases, and other silent travelers were transported globally. The era of enhanced mobility benefited from technological innovations—from maritime tools to land-based manufacturing. In turn, these transformations ushered in revolution after revolution and created what historians have termed ‘modernity’. There were world travelers before 1492. Merchants along the Silk Roads connected China and the Roman Empire from the time of the Han (fourth to first centuries BCE). Countless Mayans carried turquoise and parrot feathers between the Anasazi in the southwest corner of North America and the Valley of Mexico beginning in the eighth century CE. Ibn Battuta (1304–1377), who was born in North Africa, traveled even farther than the legendary Marco Polo, clocking about 75,000 miles along the gold roads of West Africa and far beyond. The expeditions of the Chinese admiral Zheng He (1371–c. 1433) reached Southeast Asia, Arabia, and East Africa. It should not be surprising that the cultural, commercial, scientific, industrial, and political revolutions of the following centuries were global in nature, as were their significant outcomes.

Cultural encounters were often at the heart of the dramatic changes in social and economic spheres. The scientific revolution (after c. 1500)

was based on the revitalization of intellectual traditions from the Mediterranean, the interaction and synthesis of Arab, Asian, and European knowledge, and the challenging of authority and questioning of inherited concepts for understanding the natural world and the larger cosmos. European and Muslim scholars synthesized mathematics and scientific ideas. Ming China, Tokugawa Japan, Islamic Southeast Asia and Enlightenment Europe were four places where reformations and revitalization occurred, altering the values and functioning of all levels of society, from religion to commerce. Traditions and their transformations characterized the encounters that swept every continent. In the Americas, the Quechua nobleman and world historian Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (c. 1535–1615) chronicled the conquest of Peru, simultaneously denouncing the ill treatment of his people by the Spanish colonizers and reworking their history into an Incan-centered Biblical historical calendar. Similarly, the seventeenth-century Akan weavers of the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) systematically unraveled the threads of imported silk and rewove them into the traditional patterns known as *kente*, selectively giving them local meaning.

No world history of modernity would be complete without a discussion of the rise of capitalism. The integration of a global economy was also the intersection or critical juncture of very different economic systems. One component developed historically from the China-centered thirteenth century world system and the other was European-dominated (what scholars once called the 'rise of the West') commercial growth and maritime expansion of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Europe's shared political culture had emerged between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries in commercial cities. In China, an earlier commercial revolution resulted in expanded trade and the knitting together of extensive networks of cultural and economic significance using a monetized system, banking and credit institutions, and metal and paper currency. European maritime expansion converged with an ability to meet China's demand for silver bullion from ores mined in Mexico and South America. Thus the global connections after 1492 (especially those forged from the gold trade and silver trade) became the foundation of a world economy that saw the rise of mercantilism and a commercial revolution that left Europe in the driver's seat. The dramatic shifts in power resulted in an era dominated by Europe, with repercussions for colonizing nearly every part of the globe.

The industrial revolutions (after about 1760) also occurred on every continent. Again, China had succeeded first in creating mining and manufacturing systems that relied on entrepreneurial investments across a broad range of enterprises as early as the twelfth century CE. Later European industrialization relied on the investment of profits gleaned from a worldwide trade in enslaved labor and the extraction of key resources from tropical regions, eventually from the rubber plantations of Brazil, Vietnam, and the Congo to the palm oil farms of West Africa and Indonesia. Not only were the inputs to the industrial revolutions global, but also the technological innovations further globalized the networks of transportation, communication, and exchange. Steam power and railroads, telegraph, refrigeration, and steamships quickened the pace of change. In particular, the use of fossil fuels harnessed energy from coal and began to irrevocably alter the planet's environment and peoples. Manufacturing industries changed the nature of gender, class, and other social experiences, literally transforming the patterns of interaction and increasing the frenzy of urban migration. Production relied on delivery to global markets of consumption, further intertwining the destinies of disparate parts of the world and fostering even greater inequities.

Many of the technological innovations were used as tools of empire and nation building. They served to integrate the economies of the state into a global network of enterprise and profit. The seventeenth-century trading companies such as the East India Company were early versions of multinational corporations. Their successful exploitation of capital and labor depended on access to resources on a global scale. European military power was reinforced by technological advantages, especially gunpowder weaponry. The acceleration of the processes of transformation extended the tentacles of progress and power to every corner of the globe. In this way, both the distribution of costs and the exclusive control over profits further exacerbated global economic inequalities.

Political revolutions ushered in the emergence of the modern nation state, first in the Atlantic world, in North America, France, and Haiti, and eventually across other parts of Afro-Eurasia and the Americas. Not only technologies were enlisted to enhance the imperial gains; ideas also became driving forces for the dramatic political changes beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Eventually the new imperialism was accompanied by new nationalisms based on ideas of popular political sovereignty and inalienable rights, with democratic movements appearing on every continent. These were not the only influential ideas to travel

around the world. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, social Darwinism and pseudoscientific concepts justified the rampant global racism and exploitation inherent in the creation of colonial victories and regimes of European hegemony.

Colonialism meant the subjugation of one people to another by occupying territory and imposing laws, culture, political order, and economic controls. The etymology of the word comes from the Latin *colonus*, meaning 'farmer'. This reminds us of the importance of settlements in implementing colonial rule. The transfer of settlers to new territories furthered the integration of world peoples, uniting their modes of production and even their diets. Colonial empires also operated by maintaining differences and fundamental inequalities. The impact of colonialism was mutual, changing both the colonizer and the colonized. Between the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) and the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), Europeans envisioned the possibility of hegemonic control and they divided the world's territories among themselves, using the tools of empire to initiate and maintain colonies.

The European domination of world economy, people, and land (by 1914, roughly 88% of the planet) had created a confidence and unwarranted faith in 'progress and reason', but its structure of imperial controls was relatively short lived. At its heart were concepts of ecological imperialism, limited only by the fragility of the planet's flora and fauna, air and light. Mapping the world may have created the myth of control, as did the tendency to rewrite the past of peoples considered 'without history'. Despite some collaboration and alliance with the colonizers, the colonized mounted armed resistance in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Resistance on multiple scales, including family, village, and pan- and cross-continental movements, eventually led to the decolonization of continents and the creation of newly independent nation-states. The entanglements of social, cultural, and economic webs seemed next to impossible to erase. The new states often inherited local systems of violence, corruption, ties of dependency, exploitative systems that continued to rape and pillage peoples and lands. Europeans were not the only world peoples to colonize parts of the globe. Japan, the United States, and the Ottomans furthered their imperial missions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The global competition for empire created both economic and military ambitions that eventually erupted in world wars. In the post-war era, the empires were dismantled and the processes of decolonization exacerbated new nationalisms within old spheres of

influence. The former colonies were left to manage massive debts, with little hope of education or health care receiving adequate state support. Yet the growing gaps in the world economy in other ways seemed not to recognize the new national boundaries.

Finding Crucibles of Modernity: The Caribbean Example

It is possible to find the crucibles of modernity in all corners of the globe, from Amsterdam to Zanzibar, from Singapore to Potosi. The Caribbean region serves this essay as merely one example of the processes of global transformation outlined here. Indigenous peoples in the Americas became the Caribbean region's first migrants, peopling most of the islands at least 5000 years before the Europeans. They brought foodways and foods from the Americas and exploited local resources with sophisticated and sustainable cultural systems. However, the arrival of Columbus in 1492 and subsequent European voyages set in motion a process of genocide and destruction that decimated these First Peoples and much of the local environment. Relatively few people survived and those who did interacted with enslaved Africans, sharing indigenous knowledge of local agriculture, aquaculture, hunting, and foraging. Enslaved and coerced labor (including European indentured labor and prisoners of war, but mostly from sub-Saharan Africa and South and East Asia) supported plantation systems developed under colonial regimes. Sugar, mining, and ranching were the most profitable.

The historian Walter Rodney called this process of intertwined labor and exploitation "how Europe underdeveloped Africa" and other parts of the world. On a typical eighteenth-century Caribbean island, enslaved Africans and African-Caribbean descendants outnumbered white Europeans by a ratio of 13 to 1. Thus, the crucible of modernity began as the set of cultural encounters created by Europe's maritime expansion, mercantilism, and imperial ambition. The crucible's ingredients came from an intersection of peoples from Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. European settlers included voluntary and involuntary laborers, prisoners of war, and indentured servants. Indentured Asians from South Asia and China replaced enslaved African labor after the abolition of slavery. Violence and oppression, racism and resistance, extensive global trade, and profound inequality all tempered the contents of this crucible.

The demographic changes wrought by migration to and from the Caribbean characterized the post-Columbian era. Plantations were nodes

in a global exchange of labor, raw products, manufactured goods, and cultural strategies for exploitation and survival. Perhaps not surprisingly, the viability of African values, languages, foodways, knowledge, beliefs, and skills endured as adaptations and syncretic survivals. The flavors of African cooks and the rhythms of African drums won out over European counterparts. Even early attempts at local industrialization relied on the technology of African metallurgists, until the imperial masters imposed restrictions on local production in order to create markets for imported goods from their metropole. Resistance rang out as maroons (the escaped Africans) won wars and made treaties, and Rastafarians and Hindus, vodunists and others reinvented and asserted their religions far from their homelands. The commonalities of experiencing migration, slavery, and colonialism helped created a Caribbean cultural and even economic region. Webs of relationships among the colonies were just as influential as the relationships between the colonies and their metropolises. The Caribbean was seemingly fractured by the multiplicity of national identities, yet its cultures remained influential on a global scale. In this way, the interdependencies and identities of this and other world regions were solidified during the colonial era and long afterwards. Today, China makes inroads into reaches of the former colonized world, from Guyana to Ghana. The neo-colonial experiences have suggested to some scholars that the decolonization of the mind and the unraveling of the era's economic patterns of interaction would long outlive the structural reality of any single imperial project.

Contributing to Uncertain Futures

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the forces of industrialization, migration, and population growth finally resulted in the majority of humans in the world living as residents inside cities. Urban centers increasingly shared common cultural elements, including the expectation of commercial abundance (plus basic shelter, food, and water), improved sanitation, available transportation hubs, sophisticated global cultural performances, and functioning communication networks. Yet between 1900 and 2000, global warfare, genocide, disease, pollution, nuclear weapons, and global warming also contributed to the disillusionment and destabilization of these highly urbanized world societies. The common elements were not always in alignment and poverty and suffering increased during the twentieth century.

Both world wars began in Europe but quickly engulfed the global community, including European colonies and other countries in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. They were industrial wars revealing how extensively military production could command the resources of the state. Conflict and disorder didn't end with the post-war treaties or the redistribution of territorial claims among victors and losers. Whether facing a Cold War era of competition between the United States and Soviet Union or terrorism in the post-9/11 era, societies were forced to accept conflict and violence as inevitable consequences of globalization, as evidenced in the ways that they permeated the global economy, increased the flow of refugees, created crises of national security and global human values, and exacerbated poverty and instability on a global scale.

Colonization, wars, and injustice also fostered international networks of resistance and inspired revolutionary struggles, including a number of social movements in which participants fought for and exercised their democratic rights. Pacifists opposed the barbaric nature of warfare that also integrated the world in the twentieth century. The League of Nations and later United Nations were formed to guarantee peace and "make the world safe for democracy." The solidarity of labor activists played a role in creating improvements in working conditions and limiting the power of large multinational cartels, as well as occasionally providing support for political activities, such as in the Spanish Civil War that reached across the Atlantic to Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition, women suffragettes around the world fought for the right to vote. Decolonization in the twentieth century similarly took place amidst struggles for "better conditions, peace, and liberty."¹² The Civil Rights Movement (1954–1971) sought racial equality in the United States, where another half a century have not erased the disparities of a once-flourishing slave society. The recognition of pan-African connections inspired Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, and Nelson Mandela in South Africa in their own struggles for independence and justice, although continents apart.

Globalization has led to economic gain for some and increased global poverty and inequality for others. The widening gap between the wealthy and the poor has resulted in 1% of the world's population owning more wealth than the remaining 99%. Not surprisingly, globalization's circle of discontent has also widened. Globalization is blamed for rampant environmental crises and their intractability. Demonstrations against powerful institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) express

popular outrage over policy deliberations in which the global poor have no voice.

Modern globalization has also meant the continuing reduction in the distances that separate people and places, thanks to super jets and digital innovations. Despite the fears of homogenization of world cultures, the modern world also has accentuated differences. Transportation and communication technologies have allowed more and faster connections between parts of the globe, resulting in pathways of integration and difference undreamed of two centuries ago. Population movements between the 1840s and 1940s constituted multiple flows of migrants to world regions that together witnessed the largest era of migration in world history. Families and identity, religious, ethnic, and racial categories, as well as globally shared cultural norms have shifted in response to the enhanced global connections.

Among the more powerful signs of global cultural transformations are shared technologies in the digital age, the embrace of common sports, and world arts, including literature and music. Digital media and information now function in multiple cultural contexts. Global changes in social networking and knowledge and information transfers include the speed, scale, and cost of connections worldwide. In the case of soccer, the most widely viewed televised sport, the global game has undergone changes that reflect the growth of nationalism and increasing commercialization. From villagers kicking a pig's bladder around to the first soccer clubs of the nineteenth century, soccer flourished as a way to express the conflict and rivalry of the wider world. International games, which relied on international agreements over codes and rules, sometimes pitted colonizer against the colonized. More than one billion people watched the FIFA World Cup 2014 tournament's final match on television.

Books, art, and music have also traveled the world's trading and exchange networks. Manuscripts and books were the most valuable items of exchange in the trans-Saharan trade of the fifteenth century, reaching the libraries of Timbuktu's elite collectors and scholars after long and dusty journeys from Cairo and more distant reaches of Eurasia. Garden arts symbolize the movements of plants and designers in cultivated landscapes both urban and rural. The gardens of Al-Andalus (tenth–fifteenth centuries CE) brought multiple traditions together, as did the Chinese royal and scholarly styles of gardens. Global gardens, such as those at Kew, England, or the Imperial Summer Palace gardens in Beijing, were

collecting points for the ostentatious display of knowledge and power acquired from afar and exerted over the natural world after 1500 CE.

Over the same centuries, music also traveled with people, merchants and missionaries, settlers and the enslaved. African immigrants brought their traditional instruments and rhythms to the Americas, ultimately creating the art form known as ‘jazz’. In the nineteenth century, German immigrants brought musical traditions and the powerful influence of the symphony to other parts of the world, including the Americas. Since the electrification of music, live and recorded songs of protest and songs of celebration have joined the global age in expressing the characteristics of shared modernity that abound. In this way, the technology and cultures of globalization combine and re-combine to preserve heritage and encourage innovation in order to keep cultures dynamic and alive.

CONCLUSION

Themes in world history have demonstrated that both continuity and transformation are unique to the human experience and its consequences for a livable planet. From the moment that hominins stepped onto the evolutionary pathway of becoming anatomically modern humans, their cultural adaptations began to alter their surroundings through the dynamic relationships with planet Earth’s environments. Through key ‘events’ such as cooking and producing food (controlling and using fire and embarking on agriculture), our technological innovations have exerted ever-more powerful changes over the environment and in other species.

Exploring the key themes in human history provides us with understandings that can shape our future. While supporting tremendous population growth, transformations in scale have also served to challenge the range of human responses. Thus far, the cultural, social, and political solutions have wrought ever-increasing levels of complexity and greater inequality. From our position in the twenty-first century, world historians may question how we might measure the ultimate success or failure of these responses. Human mobility and adaptability have characterized the planet’s history for hundreds of thousands of years. From the hominin journeys within and out of Africa to the multiple diaspora of refugees of the twenty-first century, the ultimate meanings of movement and mobility have remained unaltered. Shaping both the dangers and opportunities and encompassing both the differences and commonalities of the human

experience, the shared human journeys comprise a narrative of the past that world historians owe to future generations.

NOTES

1. See Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1998); the multi-media project, including 26 videos and interactive website: Candice Goucher and Linda Walton (co-lead scholars), *Bridging World History* (Annenberg and Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2004) at <https://www.learner.org/courses/worldhistory/>; and more recently, Candice Goucher and Linda Walton, *World History: Journeys from Past to Present 2 vols* (London and New York: Routledge, [2008] 2013).
2. Candice Goucher and Linda Walton, “What is World History,” *Bridging World History* website (Annenberg/Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2004). Accessed 7/24/2015: <https://www.learner.org/courses/worldhistory/whatis.html>.
3. Richard Wrangham, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), and quoted in Dwight Garner, “Why Are Humans Different From All Other Apes? It’s the Cooking, Stupid,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2009. Accessed 7/17/2015: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/books/27garn.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>
4. See Kristen J. Gremillion, *Ancestral Appetites: Food in Prehistory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
5. See more about the regions and their case studies in Graeme Barker and Candice Goucher, *The Cambridge World History (Volume II): A World With Agriculture, 12,000 BCE–500 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
6. The following section first appeared in an article by the author “The World on a Plate: A guide to consuming food in world history,” in *World History Connected*, 2015.
7. Alasdair Whittle, “Early Agricultural Society in Europe,” in Graeme Barker and Candice Goucher, *The Cambridge World History (Volume II): A World With Agriculture, 12,000 BCE–500 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 555–588.
8. Kevin C. MacDonald, “The Tichitt Tradition in the West African Sahel,” in Graeme Barker and Candice Goucher, *The Cambridge World History (Volume II): A World With Agriculture, 12,000 BCE–500 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 499–513.
9. Tim Denham, “Swamp cultivators at Kuk, New Guinea: Early agriculture in the highlands of New Guinea,” in Graeme Barker and Candice Goucher, *The Cambridge World History (Volume II): A World With*

- Agriculture, 12,000 BCE–500 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 445–471.
10. Quoted in Candice Goucher and Linda Walton, *World History: Journeys from Past to Present* vol. 1, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).
 11. Susan Keech McIntosh and R.J. McIntosh, “Cities without Citadels: Understanding West African urbanism,” in T. Shaw et al. (eds.), *The Archaeology of Africa: Foods Metals and Towns* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1993), pp. 622–641.
 12. Black activist Elma Francois was tried for sedition in Trinidad (1937) for these words; quoted in Goucher and Walton *World History: Journeys* (2014), p. 607.