

## Setting the Starting Line of Global History: The Case for 1400

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*Abstract: Recent decades have seen a move away from traditional narratives of the “rise of the West” in History courses and publications, and toward a “Global History” paradigm. This paper provides an overview of this shift and the issues at stake before making the case for circa 1400 as a good chronological starting point for Global History courses and textbooks. Starting the narrative here provides a crucial fifteenth-century context of nomadic empires and crusading religious ecumenes, which not only enriches understanding of the more extensive global connections to follow, but also opens the narrative of globalization at a moment when it was by no means obvious or inevitable that Europe would come to dominate the globe.*

“The historical approach is intellectually humble,” wrote Sir Lewis Namier: “the aim is to comprehend situations, to study trends, to discover how things work.”<sup>1</sup> The task of teaching global history would seem to defy intellectual humility in the capaciousness of its subject. The trends it studies span continents, civilizations and centuries; the workings it seeks to discover are no less than the workings of the modern world. How does the historian describe and explain history on a global scale? Where should one begin? Perhaps an even trickier question: *when* should one begin?

The rise and fall of various candidates that have been suggested over the years as the logical starting point of a global history reveal the evolution of a historiography. Mid-twentieth century scholars such as David Landes, and more recent figures such as Samuel Huntington, developed a magisterial narrative of global history with clear starting points *circa* 1500 and 1750. The prelude of this global narrative began around the dawn of the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Fritz Stern, “The Goldhagen Controversy: One Nation, One People, One Theory?” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1996); 129.

sixteenth century with the voyages of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus. Portugal and Spain, soon followed by Britain, France, and the Netherlands, established trading networks which laid the foundations for the integration of Europe and Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Gunpowder and maritime technology, along with indigenous peoples' susceptibility to Old World diseases, allowed Europeans to reach distant shores and overwhelm their native inhabitants, then to transport African slaves to plantations in the Americas and West Indies.<sup>2</sup> Overseas empire expanded under the influence of political rivalry, Christian evangelical zeal, and an insatiable consumer demand for gold, spices, silks, tea, and tobacco.<sup>3</sup> While the European "Age of Discovery" established the first links in the global chain of commerce and culture, so this old story goes, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution around 1750 marked the onset of a truly global community. The origins of this second great acceleration of globalization were found in the unique cultural and political conditions of Western Europe. Early modern Europeans had supposedly proved far more willing than their contemporaries in the East to apply rational decision making to technical and philosophical problems—that is, the adaptation of means to ends to produce the best possible result, rejecting magic and superstition. This openness towards experimentation, empiricism and the scientific method was a result of what Max Weber termed the "Protestant work-ethic," the waning influence of religious dogmatism, and the Reformation's sectarianism and individualism. Puritanical asceticism and sober industry encouraged productivity and efficiency; pervasive curiosity and a will to mastery over nature was a fillip to innovation. Furthermore, because Europe was a hotbed of warring states, its sovereigns could not afford to exert overweening and counterproductive control over the men of commerce and industry that provided the

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<sup>2</sup> John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400-2000* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 8-11.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History*, trans. Dona Geyer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 46-47.

sinews of war, leading private enterprise to enjoy unique vitality and private property unique protection.<sup>4</sup>

Together, Landes and others have claimed, these advantages led to practices and institutions which laid the foundations of the Industrial Revolution: private property, capitalist free markets, and a bourgeoisie with the means and desire to seize political power from traditional landed elites. By the mid-eighteenth century, the rising demand for cotton as a fabric for rich and poor alike stimulated cumulative technological breakthroughs in textile production, and new methods of factory-based, mechanized labor. Similar cumulative advances in technology revolutionized metallurgy and machine-building, and revolved in particular around solving the problem of rapidly diminishing timberland. Coal became the substitute fuel, the need to pump water out of ever deeper mine shafts led to the development of steam engines, and so on. Production was no longer limited to the strength, energy and discipline of men and animals, relieving pressure on land. New World bullion and colonial markets provided capital for new industrial ventures, and the displacement of agriculture to distant plantations allowed Europeans to devote more of their energy to manufactures. The search for new markets and raw materials spurred a second wave of European imperialism, and with colonial rule came European goods, institutions, and ideas. In short, European ingenuity, superior technology, and military might knit the world into one global economy.<sup>5</sup>

Since the mid-twentieth century, many scholars have exposed this master narrative as Eurocentric, its tale of global development little more than the “rise of the West.” It attributes all the initiative in the establishment of global connections to European conquest and technology, both supposedly the fruit of a uniquely European cultural predisposition for curiosity and innovation. The rest of the world, and particularly the civilizations

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<sup>4</sup> David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 15-17.

<sup>5</sup> Landes, *Unbound Prometheus*, 1-14.

of Asia and the Middle East, are, in contrast, inwardly focused, despotic, decadent, and passive. They retained hegemonic religious or supernatural philosophies that discouraged the critical thinking necessary for innovation, narrowed intellectual horizons, and tended to regard the products of other civilizations as mere curiosities out of a false sense of superiority.<sup>6</sup> A younger generation of scholars, led by Edward Said, has exposed this arrogant narrative of “the West and the rest” as fundamentally distorted, a product of Europeans’ condescending gaze at Eastern societies they willfully misunderstood in order to flatter their own egotism.<sup>7</sup> Beginning global history in 1500 or 1750, with Columbus or the Newcomen engine, can easily serve to perpetuate this arrogant assumption of western superiority.

Thus, the periodization of global history has become entangled with the endeavor to move away from a Eurocentric historiography. One approach to the problem of avoiding a Eurocentric global history has been to push its starting point as far back as possible, when Europe was not in a position of obvious superiority. Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels Petersson, for example, have argued that the medieval period represents a “prehistory of globalization” with significant, if transitory, moments of long-distance connection, most notably the eighth-century expansion of Islam, the consolidation of vast empires in China and Russia, and the fourteenth-century “Pax Mongolica” of Genghis Khan.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, A. G. Hopkins has edited an anthology of articles which collectively argue for the existence of three distinct eras of “archaic,” “modern,” and “post-modern globalization.” In this schema, “archaic globalization” corresponds to the medieval and pre-modern claims to universalism of religious ecumenes, and a broadly similar concept of “cosmic kingship” which drove Chinese, Ottoman, Safavid,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 16-18.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 11-12.

<sup>8</sup> Osterhammel and Petersson, *Globalization*, 35-38.

Mughal and Iberian rulers alike to acquire exotic goods as a symbol of their reach and influence.<sup>9</sup>

The problem with this approach is that by pushing global history so far back in time, it becomes less and less obvious what is distinctively “global” about it. As Joyce Appleby, Bruce Mazlish, and others have noted, if we define globalization and global history as simply the history of long-distance communications and trade, we will end up defining even the Roman Empire as a nascent “world system.”<sup>10</sup> While it is important to recognize that connections between cultures have long been a part of human history, it is also surely necessary to distinguish what makes the modern, globalized world different from the age of Caesar or Genghis Khan. Furthermore, as Christopher Bayly, John Darwin, Niall Ferguson and others have noted, even as they avoid a simplistic narrative of the “rise of the West,” global historians must still explain why the modern world wears a western guise.<sup>11</sup> Spread by British imperialism, and later by American pop culture and international media, western institutions, styles of dress, languages, and consumer products have taken root across the continents. Scholars of globalization must account for this unprecedented degree of global homogeneity: if the West has no inherent cultural superiority, how has it managed in the past two hundred years to make its stamp on every corner of the world? Meeting this challenge requires more than simply setting the clock of global history back.

In contrast to the impulse to archaize global history, other historians, most notably Kenneth Pomeranz and John Darwin,

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<sup>9</sup> C.A. Bayly, "'Archaic' and 'Modern' Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, c. 1750-1850," in Hopkins, A.G., ed., *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 47-73.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 2010), 54; Bruce Mazlish, “Comparing Global History to World History,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 3 (Winter 1998), 385-395.

<sup>11</sup> Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 15; Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xvii-xxiii; C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (London: Blackwell, 2003), 13.

have taken the alternative approach of redefining 1500 and 1750 as moments of relative parity among European, Middle Eastern and Asian cultures. They have noted, for example, that the Iberian empire in the New World was only one of several Eurasian empires in the “Age of Discovery.” In Southeast Asia, Akbhar established in 1555 the Mughal Empire that would soon rule almost the entire Indian subcontinent, presiding over a cosmopolitan, religiously diverse society. Decades before the Spanish and Portuguese established their small trading outposts on the islands and coasts of the Indies, the Ottomans ruled from Constantinople to Bagdad, the Ming dynasty had conquered China, and the princely state of Muscovy had become the “gatherer of Russian lands.” In short, west Europeans around 1500 could claim no originality in the game of global empire, and if they enjoyed any advantage at this stage, it was their marginally superior grasp of maritime technology and fortuitous position on the Atlantic coast. Otherwise, European political, cultural, and intellectual achievements, though impressive, were equaled or surpassed elsewhere in Eurasia.<sup>12</sup> So much for a uniquely European will to mastery propelling them on the road to empire.

Britain’s largely indisputable claim to the title of trailblazer of Industrial Revolution might seem to suggest that European superiority emerged in the eighteenth century or nineteenth century, if not the sixteenth; but here again, Pomeranz and other scholars have complicated the picture. Pomeranz argues that as late as 1800 not only natality and life expectancy, but even technological sophistication and economic productivity, in Europe and Asia were roughly comparable. Chinese laborers typically faced fewer legal and linguistic barriers to migration in search of work than their European counterparts. The Chinese state also actively encouraged peasant women to increase the economic stability of their households by engaging in crafts such as textile production and selling their products in competitive markets, raising production and teaching important skills. Though similar “putting out systems” existed in Europe, guilds often hampered their development before 1789. Both Europe and China

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<sup>12</sup> Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 50-97.

experienced what Jan DeVries has termed “industrious revolutions” through the eighteenth century, their economies fueled by an increasing and thus expanding output as households increasingly produced goods for the market in addition to their own domestic needs.<sup>13</sup> While Europeans had established colonial trading connections in the Americas, the Indies, and the coasts of Africa, China had a network of diaspora trading communities scattered throughout Southern Asia.<sup>14</sup> Populations expanded while arable land and wood fuel remained stable or declined, threatening to have the same Malthusian consequences in both Asia and Europe in 1750: thus, Pomeranz concludes, “Europe could have been a China.”<sup>15</sup> Only Europe’s fortuitous possession of large coal deposits, and the exploitation of the abundant arable land of the New World, allowed them to overcome the limitations on development once imposed by the land.

This new perspective has transformed the historiography of globalization from a narrative of western domination and exploitation into a process in which non-western cultures, particularly in the Middle East, India, and China, played a crucial and pioneering role. While western states have dominated the latest phase of this process (that is, from about 1800 onward) as a result of their superiority in mobilizing resources, goods, and people, their path to the present was only one of many evolving “modernities,” and by no means the most natural or inevitable one. This view of global history replaces a linear, progressive model of historical change with one in which conjunctures, or the contingent coincidence of various environmental, socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions, determine long-term trends.

Drawing on these scholars’ latest contributions to the historiography of global history, it now appears that it is not

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6-17.

<sup>14</sup> Hans van de Ven, “The Onrush of Modern Globalization in China,” in *Globalization in World History*, ed. A.G. Hopkins (London: Pimlico, 2002), 167-193.

<sup>15</sup> Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 9.

necessary to drastically lengthen the timeline in order to escape the trap of Eurocentrism. Specifically, *circa* 1400 can serve as an excellent entry point into global history for several reasons. First, as John Darwin has noted, it represents the point of transition between an older form of empire and the new colonialism of the “Age of Discovery.” Tamerlane was the last of the Eurasian warlords to attempt to create a “world-empire,” an attempt which ultimately failed because nomadic tribes could no longer maintain political control over settled states. His campaigns also represented the last significant challenge against the partition of Eurasia into West, Middle East and East, and coincided with changes in trade that would make the oceans, and not the land routes which met in the heart of Eurasia, the vital highways of empire.<sup>16</sup> The early 1400s also marked the apotheosis of the Chinese maritime expeditions that had begun three centuries earlier, laying the foundation for a trading network of diaspora communities throughout Southeastern Asia. The end of Tamerlane’s conquests and the decline of China’s trading missions thus provide a helpful context for sixteenth century empires, Iberian as well as Mughal, Ottoman, and Safavid, at once indicating the antiquity of imperial aspirations, the novelty of sixteenth-century imperial methods, and the dynamic exploits of early-modern non-European cultures.

Starting in 1400 is also advantageous because it provides a convenient place to examine what are arguably the first ideological “global systems:” universal religious ecumenes, belief systems which were global in aspiration and self-identity. The Islamic civilization, for example, was the inheritor of classical intellectual culture, which at the dawn of the fifteenth century was only beginning to reach its fullest impact in Europe.<sup>17</sup> It also benefited from rich agriculture in the Nile-Euphrates region and

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<sup>16</sup> John Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> The languishing of classical scholarship in Europe, and the significance of its rediscovery for the birth of the modern world, is entertainingly told in Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: Norton, 2011), though Greenblatt remarkably takes no note of the uninterrupted classical tradition in the Islamic world.

the wealth that came from being situated at the crossroads of Eurasian trade routes, though by this time their importance was beginning to decline. The Persian Safavid Empire continued to expand; the Ottomans captured Constantinople in 1453, dealing a massive symbolic blow to European Christendom, and their co-religionists were only driven out of the Iberian peninsula after almost a millennium of warfare in 1492.<sup>18</sup> The impressive reach of fifteenth-century Islam testifies to how well it served in the early modern period to unite diverse peoples living in a vast swath of the globe under one universalizing religious ideology, in which shared reading knowledge of Arabic and international Sharia law continued to create lasting social, political, cultural, and economic links.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, 1400 is an excellent point at which to take stock of Christianity, which had by now firmly established itself throughout Europe and had yet to dissolve into ever more denominations in the Protestant Reformation. John Bossy has argued that Christianity in Europe of 1400 was characterized above all by the firm belief that religion was understood and experienced through “the extension of social relations beyond the frontiers of merely human society,” linking the patriarchal family with the Holy Family, the Holy Father in Rome and the paternal guidance of the monarch in an all-encompassing Catholic community, Christendom.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth century the spread of devotional literature, improved training for clergy, new monastic movements, and more frequent sermons more actively engaged Christians in a common (albeit locally inflected) religious culture than ever before. Furthermore, the fifteenth century saw the last crusades against the Hussites and Ottomans, with their narrower ties to Hapsburg imperialism, lukewarm European response, and marginal results. This last gasp

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 32-39.

<sup>19</sup> Amira K. Bennison, “Muslim Universalism and Western Globalization,” in Hopkins, A.G., ed., *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 74-98.

<sup>20</sup> John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 13.

of the crusades provides a significant backstory and point of contrast with the subsequent energetic efforts of European missionaries in the New World.<sup>21</sup>

Providing this crucial fifteenth-century context of nomadic empires and crusading religious ecumenes enriches understanding of the more extensive global connections to follow. It also opens the narrative of globalization at a moment when it was by no means obvious or inevitable that Europe, still reeling from the devastating effects of the Plague, would come to dominate the globe. With this knowledge, the striking juxtaposition of Europe's "Age of Discovery" with the sixteenth-century imperial aggrandizement of Mughal India, Safavid Iran, Ottoman Turkey and Qing China is no longer surprising; nor is the continued importance of international Islamic organizations or Chinese diaspora trading networks in the twenty-first century.<sup>22</sup> With such a foundation, a course in global history can continue on towards Europe's scientific and industrial revolutions, the high noon of British Empire and the postwar "McWorld" without falling into the trap of Eurocentrism. Namier defined "the crowning attainment" of the "intellectually humble" historian not as an all-encompassing explanatory narrative, but rather "a historical sense—an intuitive understanding of how things do not happen."<sup>23</sup> As Pomeranz has argued, understanding "how things do not happen" for the global historian means asking not only "Why was China not Europe?," but also "Why was Europe not China?"<sup>24</sup> A good way to take Pomeranz's as well as Namier's advice is to shift the chronology of global history back ever so slightly, to around 1400. The view from 1400 is messy, the trends it encompasses multidirectional, and comprehension of the situation at this

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Lock, *The Routledge Companion to the Crusades* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 202-206; Norman Housley, *Contesting the Crusades* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 122-143.

<sup>22</sup> For an compendium of the "archaic" elements which continue to operate in the modern globalized world, see Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World that Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Stern, "Goldhagen Controversy," 129.

<sup>24</sup> Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 9.

moment of history requires an abandonment of any simplistic narrative of the “rise of the West.”

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