

## CHAPTER 1.

# Introduction: What is World History?

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The aim of the chapter is to introduce the student to the academic study of history, by presenting three core concepts which are part of the traditions in the field, before moving on to discuss the World History approach and its distinctive features.



## Introduction: What is History?

The study of history is the study of the human past. This sounds quite straightforward but becomes tricky when probed in more detail. What is the past? Are there logical starting and end points? Can we actually study the past when we have no records of that past? Is what I had for breakfast this morning not also part of the past and therefore history? Or does there need to be sufficient time between the present and the past for historians to be able to more distantly and objectively reflect on past events? The answer to these questions is mostly affirmative; there is a logical starting point, which is the emergence of the early hominids, around 7 million years ago.

We can study the past also in these very early years by using the tools of archaeology, geology and carbon dating, for example. Also, what happened this morning in your kitchen, is interesting for historians writing about human diets or dietary history. In short, historians are interested in studying humans in their broadest sense, in their natural environment, across time and across place.

Still, we can and should be more specific. When we study the past, we use certain parameters. We study the past usually by dividing it up into time frames (prehistoric) or narrowing it down in geographical scope (Africa) or by focusing on one feature (emergence of hominids). History is generally a story about change over time (the migration out of Africa), about major ruptures (the end of the last ice age 12,000 years ago) and causality (the spread of homo sapiens after the end of the last ice age) and often also about big exploits and momentous events (the development of tools to survive the icy conditions). So, history is in essence the study of change over time in the human past.



**Image 1.1** Early Hominids, *Australopithecus afarensis*, cast 'Lucy'



## 1.1 The Study of History

### History

*The study of change over time in the human past.*

When studying this human past, historians have developed an important tool set. One of the most important tools, already mentioned, is compartmentalizing time. We use the idea of chronology, the measurement of time, and identify logical cut-off points when these major changes or ruptures occurred and heralded a new time frame. At the end of the last ice age, a new geological epoch started, the Holocene. This is a geological term. Geologists study the planet's surface, oceans and atmosphere and 11,700 years ago the surface of the planet changed substantially and this signaled a transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene. Geological time is different from historical time. In 2000, Dutch Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen coined the term the 'Anthropocene', referencing the Greek word *Anthropos*, which means human. It suggests the emergence of a new phase in our planetary history, based on the human imprint on the surface of the Earth, which is a requirement for geological distinction. This imprint has been argued to be visible in the shape of radioactive fallout, microplastics and heavy metals. Presently, there is no agreement among scientists whether the Anthropocene has actually started.\* Distinguishing historical time does not require geological proof and there are many examples of time frames and epochs in circulation; prehistory is such a time frame to describe the period between the invention of basic tools and the emergence of script. Scripts or basic writing systems were first developed around 5,000 years ago and signaled the transition to history and history writing based on written sources. Prehistory itself can be subdivided into three phases of Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age related to the acquiring of control over metallurgy. This will be further discussed in chapter two.

The core feature of the past is that it is a period of time that is behind us. However, this history or the story of the past is subject of perennial change. This seems paradoxical. How can we explain this? This is where history as an academic subject starts to take shape. Not only do we use chronology as a sense making tool, but there are also other important concepts that historians use. For the purposes of this handbook, we introduce three: historicism, meta-history and historiography.

### Historicism\*\*

The study of the past is an exercise in interpretation. Even if we lived through the period of the past we investigate, there is subjectivity, partial view, partiality,

\* We will return to this issue in more detail in chapter 11.

\*\* In the English language historicism is used interchangeably with historism denoting the same phenomenon. We have opted to use historicism as it was the original term 'Historismus' as developed by the German school of historical science.

perception and perspective involved. How can we attain a fuller picture? Historicism is an approach or practice which invites the historian to engage in history writing by trying to step into the shoes of contemporaries. Each period in history has its own unique beliefs, norms and values and is best understood only in its own historical terms and contexts. These internal meanings of history need to be discovered by historians. This idea of historicism is the result of the nineteenth century Rankean Revolution, named after German researcher Leopold von Ranke, who was highly influential in the process of professionalizing history writing.



**Image 1.2** Leopold von Ranke

His invitation was to focus on how it really was at the time and get as close as possible to that lived experience. Historians need to attempt to look through the eyes of the contemporaries, award importance to context, place and culture to write history. When engaging in this exercise a careful approach to interpretation (this is called hermeneutics) needs to take place, which requires the historian to be aware of biases and limitations. These need to be spelled out as much as possible.



## 1.2 The Study of History

### Historicism

*The study of history in its unique context, time and place. It is the task of the historian to try to get as close as possible to the lived historical experience.*

An example of the application of a historicist approach would be the following: The Sumerians in Mesopotamia were the first known and recorded civilization in history. Around 6000 BCE, the first cities emerged in Ancient Sumer. The Sumerians are also noted for their development of written script, the cuneiform. These written sources could only be appreciated when combined with an understanding of the Sumerian civilization.



**Image 1.3** Sumerian Cuneiform (ca. 2500 BCE), six-column Sumerian economic tablet mentioning various quantities of barley, flour, bread and beer. Excavated at Shuruppak, Tell Fara, Iraq

An important Sumerian record and often (re)interpreted is the Gilgamesh epos (c. third millennium BCE), a mythical story of a Sumerian king, which was found on clay tablets and which displayed significant similarities to the Christian Bible written in the first century CE. Only the combination of sources allows us to claim some form of understanding of Ancient Sumer.

Based on a historicist approach, investigators refrain from universalist claims about history. Trying to study history by applying a present-day moral yardstick is anathema in this approach, as it fails in the exercise of understanding history as it was.

The use of sources is of paramount importance to the historicist approach. We can distinguish two categories of sources, which can be used by the academic: primary and secondary. Primary sources consist of material that is directly related to the historical events which are the subject of study. These sources are contemporary to the events and produced by those directly involved or with direct knowledge or experience of the events. These sources can be of varying nature: written texts (diaries, notes), drawings and paintings, autobiographies, video or audio recording, interviews etc. This material is a direct link to the events and is as little moderated as possible. Secondary sources are sources that are moderated and not directly produced at the time or linked to the events. They usually involve interpretation. For historians, the main secondary sources are the books and articles written over the course of time about the historical events that are subject of study. These books and articles engage in a direct and indirect debate with each other and build our knowledge base through combination, refinement and (re)-interpretation. This debate is also called historiography, which will be discussed shortly.



### 1.3 The Study of History

#### Primary sources

*Sources produced at the time of historical events, by contemporaries, unmediated by others in ex post facto interpretation.*

#### Secondary sources

*Sources produced after the historical events containing interpretation and assessments which are part of the debate of history.*

Thinking about primary and secondary sources in a concrete sense, we can look at the investigation of the emergence of hieroglyphs in Ancient Egypt around 2800 BCE. The historian is not only tasked with trying to understand the meaning of the script, but also needs to be aware and incorporate understandings of Egyptian society and culture. This has formed a large challenge because for most of the past two millennia the knowledge of the script had been lost. Only with the deciphering of the Rosetta stone in the 1820s have we been able to match meaning to context.



**Image 1.4** Rosetta Stone

Clay tablets containing hieroglyphs form the primary source, which could only be cracked by using the triple translation on the Rosetta stone, used here as a secondary source, containing identical texts in Greek, Demotic and Ancient Egyptian.

### **Meta-History**

Apart from historicism, a second important instrument of interpretation is the idea that there is meaning in history. In this perspective there is the possibility of an overarching logic to the course of history. This is in contrast to the idea of randomness. In some important respects, meta-history writing is the flipside of historicism because the former seeks to make universal claims about history. The task, according to the meta-history approach, is for the historian to discover patterns and regularities over the course of time.

An example of a meta-historical approach is the Christian idea of history fulfilling the will of God. With the emergence of Christendom after the birth of Christ in the year zero and the adoption of Christianity by Roman Emperor



Constantine in the fourth century CE, the interpretation of events as forming part of God's will on Earth, towards redemption in the life after death, formed a powerful frame of understanding historical events throughout the European Middle Ages. Another example of meta-historical thinking is Marx's nineteenth century theory of historical materialism, which he published in *Das Kapital* and which was the foundation of the political philosophy of Marxism.\* The perspective he presented was that history of all hitherto existing societies is in fact the history of class struggles. The structure of capitalist society displays features that ineluctably lead to exploitation, which would be a cause for revolution. Echoes of this kind of thinking of history displaying development and an endpoint are also visible in interpretations of history as constituting progress towards ever larger degrees of liberty, freedom and democracy, as argued by Francis Fukuyama in his *End of History* thesis, to which we will return below.\*\*



## 1.4 The Study of History

### Meta-History

*The interpretation of history according to an overarching meaning or internal logic, leading towards an ultimate end point.*

Similar to historicism, this approach is not without problems; it runs the risk of teleological reasoning. This means that because we think that we know the endpoint of the course of history, everything is interpreted as functioning towards that goal. Thereby other alternative and valid interpretations are overlooked.

A last concept is based on historians engaging in a discussion with each other. Debate is an inherent feature of academic life and in essence a quality check. To paraphrase Dutch historian Peter Geyl, history is a debate without an end. This debate is also called historiography.



### Historiography

History is a perennial discussion and does not possess a logical end point. We will never fully 'know' history. The discussion which is history focuses on all the possible interpretations of the past. Historiography is pre-occupied with the tenability of evidence, arguments, theories and interpretations of the past. These all change over the course of time: new sources become available, new questions are asked, new methods and theories are developed, new interpretations take place. In this way, history becomes this never-ending discussion. When scholars intend to make a contribution to a debate with their own historical investigation, they have to

\* This concept will be further elaborated in chapter 7.

\*\* Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1991).



give proof of awareness of the pre-existing historiography in order to claim a place and also originality for their contribution.



## 1.5 The Study of History

### Historiography

*The pre-existing knowledge base including, importantly, debate about a particular historical subject. It is the existing recorded state of the understanding of history.*

Historiographic positioning within the field is an important exercise for historians. We see over the course of a debate, the emergence of schools of thought which bring scholars with a particular approach or interpretation together under the same label.

An example of a historiographical debate is the scholarly discussion about modernity. Modernity is defined as the product of the age of Enlightenment. It is marked by scientific discovery, personal liberty, religious tolerance and the idea that reason rather than beliefs guide human behavior.



### 1.a Concept Definition

#### Modernity

*A set of ideas focused on rationality, science, secularism, democracy and cosmopolitanism. It reflects both a time frame in which these ideas came about and gained traction, at the end of the eighteenth century, as well as an outlook on the world as either pre-modern and modern.\**



### 1.b Concept Definition

#### Enlightenment

*The Enlightenment is an intellectual and scientific movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in which scientists and philosophers aimed to establish dominance over natural phenomena. By using reason and rational deduction, increased insights could be gained into the workings of the natural world and humans living within it. The malleability of nature also resulted in policies aimed at 'enhancing' and 'purifying' the human race.*

One scholar who put forward an argument for an appreciation of modernity is Steven Pinker. In his 2019 book entitled *Enlightenment Now* he asked for the power of the

\* In the introduction to Part II we will elaborate further on this definition.

Enlightenment to be recognized as the reason for the spread of ideas of rationality, science, secularism, democracy and cosmopolitanism.\*



### 1.c Concept Definition

#### Democracy

*System of government by the people for the people.*

Critics have pointed out that the Enlightenment has not been a uniform experience. Instead, modernity as a product of the Enlightenment can mean different things to different people, notably it facilitated the further conquest of territories, colonization and repression. The fruits of modernity have been distributed unevenly and the question needs to be posed whether these fruits have been fruits at all when they caused racism, war and genocide.\*\* We will return to this debate at multiple occasions in the rest of this handbook, not least in the introduction to the second part of the volume.

Together with historicism and meta-history narratives, historiographic discussions are importantly a product of the professionalization of history writing in the nineteenth century. After the emergence of states, as the dominant organizational form overtaking cities, civilizations and empires in the eighteenth century, the idea of the state as a nation changed the focus on history writers. The 'Age of Revolutions'\*\*\* at the end of the eighteenth century caused the nation-state to become dominant. Commensurately, this nation-state sought a common understanding of its history. Historians started to write about their great nations that once were amazing and that had always been distinct and unique. History became a tool in the service of the nation and a form of nationalism. An important shortcoming of this approach is that it is difficult to include storylines that end up not contributing to the creation or the greatness of the nation. When nationalism contributed to the outbreak of war, the First World War being a case in point, there was a sense that nationalist histories were in need of revision. In an attempt to overcome the notion that the

\* Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (New York: Penguin 2019).

\*\* Jeremy Lent, 'Steven Pinker's Ideas About Progress are Fatally Flawed: These Eight Graphs Show Why', 18 May 2018. Available at: <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2018-05-18/steven-pinkers-ideas-about-progress-are-fatally-flawed-these-eight-graphs-show-why/> Last accessed 15 April 2022. Ian Golding, 'The Limitations of Steven Pinker's Optimism', *Nature*, 16 February 2018. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-02148-1> Last accessed 15 April 2022. See also: Steven Pinker, 'Enlightenment Wars, Some Reflections on 'Enlightenment Now' One Year Later', *Quillette*, January 2019. Available at: <https://quillette.com/2019/01/14/enlightenment-wars-some-reflections-on-enlightenment-now-one-year-later/> Last accessed 15 April 2022.

\*\*\* Term coined by Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1962).

nation is the dominant factor in history, historians in the twentieth century offered broadly three new ways of ordering history.

First, they study topics smaller than nation states. An example of this is microhistory which started to focus on small units such as individual events, communities, or sometimes even one individual. What makes it different from a case study is that micro history attempts to answer large questions and tries to draw conclusions that are larger than the case itself. A second approach has been to study areas that encompass more than one nation and engage in thematic history writing. Examples of this approach include social history, economic history, women's history, gender history, cultural history, as well as local history, subaltern history, to move in more recent years to history of pets and disability history. A third option has been to study the Earth in its totality. This entailed a shift to ever larger units of investigation, rather than the focus on specificity or themes. The history of oceans, fire or the history of space started to become mature topics of investigation. Since Yuri Gagarin became the first human to enter space in 1961, space exploration has captivated human imagination and has in the twenty-first century led to the idea of space tourism with the launch of the Virgin Galactic space tourism company. Another example of history writing taking the whole of the Earth as a starting point, is World History. Together with the speeding up of globalization, the question was raised whether globalization should be the entry point to study history.

## What is World History?

World History has a long pedigree, not so much informed or triggered by globalization but rather the realization that large parts of the human experience had remained outside of the scope of professional history writing, as outlined above. World History sees as its main contribution the history writing of interconnectedness, or entanglement, of the history of the world. There are three important forms of connections that have been identified: The exchange of people, goods, and ideas. Not all of those interactions immediately happened on a global scale, but there would not be globalization today without some of those initial connections in these domains. That does not mean that it is a linear development, where the level of globalization is ever-increasing.

People moving from one place to another, migration, has happened as long as people have existed and is still occurring today. When humans migrated, they came into contact with other humans. These contacts brought both advantages and disadvantages. Migration could lead to conflicts and it facilitated the spread of pathogens between different groups. However, it also broadened the gene pool creating a more resilient population and people could learn from one another. Moreover, it allowed people to exchange goods, which they could trade for other

goods. In order to have trade, a population needed to have a consistent food surplus. Food surplus could be brought to markets, and it allowed for specialization once the entire population was no longer needed for food production. Although there are no written primary sources to corroborate this, one of the first forms of specialization was probably violence, closely followed by spiritual guidance. Religious beliefs were one of the first ideas that easily spread when people started interacting. Eventually the spread of ideas led to world religions, but ideas about racism also spread on a global scale. Ideas had consequences when they changed practices.

The driving force of the spread of people, goods, and ideas were networks. Some networks were more formalized than others and organizations relied on intricate networks to function. A distinction between a network and an organization is not always clear-cut, but what they have in common is that they offer an opportunity to tell World History beyond the importance of the nation state, based on local, regional, national, transnational and international sources.



#### 1.d Concept Definition

##### World History

*The study of history from a world perspective focusing on the spread of people, goods and ideas and increased interconnectedness.*

To further unpack World History, we will use the three concepts introduced in the first part of this chapter – historiography, historicism and meta-history – to gain a deeper understanding of the field.



#### The Historiography of World History

There has been a long tradition of civilizational history writing with notable contributions from different parts of the world and different authors, such as Herodotus, Ssu-ma Chen, Polybius, Rashid al-Din, and Ibn Khaldoun. These studies form the core of the historiography in World History and recount the experiences of peoples in different civilizations in different parts of the world across time. Twentieth century examples of civilizational history writing are Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Spengler, in his *Untergang des Abendlandes* (Decline of the West) published in 1918, predicted the decline of the West, based on a cyclical and organic interpretation of the development of human history.\* Instead of looking at the development of human societies in the past from a linear or teleological perspective, a cyclical view is inspired by the life spans and seasonal changes which can be observed in nature. For example, the movements of the moon and the sun and the life cycles of flora and fauna, which all follow a cyclical pattern from birth

\* Oswald Spengler, *Der untergang des abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der weltgeschichte* (Muenchen: Taschenbuch, 1991).

to death and reproduction.\* Civilizations rise and decline in a similar pattern. A civilization could be best characterized by a shared culture. Spengler identified nine civilizations over the course of human history, each with a life span of around 1000 years. Western civilization, Spengler predicted, would also be inevitably heading for decline, hence the title. His ideas were very popular in the 1930s. It is a general argument against the Enlightenment and liberalism, and some of his arguments were picked up by Nazism. The book was heavily criticized also because of the absence of a proper academic standard. Arnold Toynbee also subscribed to the idea of civilizational history writing. His *A Study of History*, published between 1934 and 1961, focused on twenty-one civilizations in human history, which all rose and fell.\*\* The explanation he offered was that those civilizations which lasted the longest were best capable of warding off challenges by outsiders. Toynbee thus discarded Spengler's assumption of inevitability, yet still took a cyclical as well as dialectical approach. His challenge-response theory was very popular, but similar to Spengler criticized more recently for lacking academic standards.



### 1.e Concept Definition

#### Civilization

*A complex society bound together by common rule, sharing a common territory, identity, means of communication and religion.*

A second strand in the historiography of World History is big or universal history. This approach focuses on the writing of the history of the Earth, starting with the Big Bang and bringing the story all the way up till today. A proponent of this approach is, for example, David Christian. In his work he argues for an understanding of big history as an increase in complexity over the course of the Earth's 13.7-billion-year history.\*\*\* Apart from increasing complexity on Earth, he emphasizes collective learning and control over bio-spheric resources as the main driving forces explaining the visible pattern of development. In order to tell this story, universal history writing borrows heavily from other fields of expertise, such as geology, chemistry and physics and is therefore decidedly multi-disciplinary in its approach.

World History borrows and builds on these approaches. It focuses on the emergence and development of contacts and interactions between civilizations over the course of time. These civilizations interact and their encounters form the main drivers of change. The core concerns of World History are again the pre-occupation with the idea of increasing connectivity, mobility of people, goods and ideas, and exchange between people transcending borders and boundaries.

\* Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007).

\*\* Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

\*\*\* David Christian, *Origin Story. A Big History of Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2018).

An example to illustrate the approach to connectivity is the age of colonialism. In a recent study, two scholars have identified a distinct ecological effect of colonialism.\* They have taken a close look at the geological effect of the colonizers travelling across the Atlantic, who brought with them germs for smallpox, measles, flu, and typhoid. These diseases killed more than fifty million indigenous Americans, almost 90% of the total indigenous population, within a few decades after their introduction. This is also known as the 'Great Dying'. This caused societal collapse and an end to the prevailing subsistence farming. The ecological effect was that forests re-emerged. This perspective subscribes to the idea of the Anthropocene, introduced above. The traces of human presence on the Earth's surface became visible through the (temporary) cessation of agriculture.

World History shares the same precursors, the ambition to provide grand narratives. Historians working in this tradition operate with long time frames, and both emphasize macro and micro processes, and they engage in a de-centering exercise by not putting Western experiences center stage. The main differences are that big history specifically includes other academic disciplines (chemistry, physics) as partners instead of simply borrowing from them. World History aims to investigate the connections between the process, interactions and interconnectedness at the center of enquiry.



### Historicism and World History

The historian practicing World History cannot possibly be an expert in all the different times and places that are of relevance to tell the story of increased connections and connectivity. Therefore, the World Historian relies heavily on the work conducted by other expert historians of different specializations. The starting point is the application of scientific methods, as outlined above. What makes World History distinct is its interdisciplinarity approach, using the insights from national, and regional history writing, as well as micro, thematic, transnational and Earth-centered approaches.

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\* Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2018). Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Santa Barbara Calif.: ABC-Clío, 1971). Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). William McNeill 'How the Potato Changed World History', *Social Research* Vol. 66, No. 1 (1999), pp. 67-83.



## 1.6 The Study of History

### Interdisciplinarity

*Several distinct academic disciplines are used to create a synergetic effect towards a common understanding.*

World Historians use these pre-existing research findings and the existing materials and do several things with them: they devise comparative research designs whereby they can compare and contrast between different places and time frames. Moreover, they use the material to discover similarities and differences, patterns and trends that are not visible when limited to one particular time frame, location or even theme.



## 1.7 The Study of History

### Comparative Research Design

*An approach to conducting research through comparison. This comparison can focus on different groups of people, time frames, locations, themes but also definitions, concepts and theories.*

When practicing World History, the historian uses primary and secondary sources. These sources are judged by the same standard applicable to every historian's work. An example of how sources are used and combined, and to illustrate the kind of inquiry that brings together these elements, is the discovery of an image of a cockatoo. This exotic bird has been found in a thirteenth century manuscript unearthed in the Vatican library among the books belonging to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. A cockatoo is a bird found originally exclusively in Australasia.



**Image 1.5** Cockatoo  
in Manuscript Emperor  
Frederick II, Vatican Library



The image dates from around 1241-1248 and is believed to be the oldest image of the bird in Europe. This in itself is an interesting find and adds to the discussion about flora and fauna present in Europe. Moreover, the image has triggered new questions about trading routes through which the Emperor managed to get hold of the bird. The specific species of yellow-crested cockatoo comes from New Guinea and the most northern part of Australia. These parts of the world, as this image proves, were part of the existing trading routes much earlier than was hitherto assumed.\*

## World History as Meta-History

What is the aim of World History writing? The focus is on telling the story of the multiplicity, but also commonality, of the human experience across time. Apart from this ambition, it is important to note that World History also subscribes to a core meta narrative. The idea that human history is a story of ever-increasing connections and connectivity to create an interconnected world is in essence a meta-history exercise. While the occasional set-back occurred, a retreat from globalization in the interbellum as well as possibly today with the rise of geopolitical rivalry, the story of World History is one of the emergence of ever tighter networks spanning the globe.

As part of this larger objective of highlighting connections, World History also exhibits a normative strand. It subscribes to the ideal of helping to create a 'global citizenship'. It is founded on a normative agenda that scholarship should be geared towards creating, especially among the younger generations, an ideal of cosmopolitanism, of global citizenship.



### 1.f Concept Definition

#### Global Citizenship

*The field of World History operates in the belief that the study of the process of ever-increasing connections can help in the formation and education of future generations of responsible and informed global citizens. This is the cosmopolitan ideal of the field.*

It is not the ambition of this book to tell the history of everything that happened in the world in the past two millennia. Instead, this book seeks to approach World History from an 'area focus'. Such an approach can seem outdated, from a by-gone era of Toynbee and Spengler. They understood World History as made up of separate and distinct cultural spheres and civilizations, while neglecting the patterns of globalization which had shaped these separate cultures and states. Since the end

\* Heather Dalton, Jukka Salo, Pekka Niemela, and Simo Orma, 'Frederick II of Hohenstaufen's Australasian cockatoo: Symbol of detente between East and West and evidence of the Ayyubids' global reach', *Parergon*, Vol. 35 No. 1 (2018), pp. 35-60.

of the Cold War, area-specific knowledge has been deemed to be less urgent in contrast to the scholarly pursuit of universal disciplinary knowledge and a deeper understanding of the historical patterns of globalization.

The approach to World History chosen for this volume is based on the understanding that the different regions of the world should not be seen as separate and essentially different from one another. This handbook seeks a more complex and comprehensive approach by trying to avoid generalizations which universal theories can produce, to understand historical patterns in different regions of the world in their locality but also in their connectivity. In this endeavor, this handbook does not argue against the existence of universal themes and global exchanges, and rejects any essentialist approach to history which suggests that there are natural and unchanging or even insurmountable differences between peoples and their cultures. Yet, universal themes and concepts, such as communication, religion, trade and identity, did not all evolve following a similar universal pattern, but rather followed local trajectories in different parts of the world and were shaped by those local conditions and developments.

There are ten thematic chapters in this volume and each take a different theme as a starting point to discuss the development of these historical phenomena. The discussions respect the locality of each region, while at the same time also showing awareness of the interaction between that region and the rest of the world. The chapters will be presented more or less chronologically. That does not mean that the relationship between that area and the world is unique for that area or for that time. Similar mechanisms and processes occurred in other times and at multiple places. The argument is that developments occurred as a result of the local context as well as the interactions with the rest of the world. Hence, the history of the world has subsequently been shaped by diverging developments in these areas. Each chapter is specifically aimed at offering a window to interpret the ordering of the world. Ultimately, it aims to tell a story of experiences of change over time in the human past.

## Guiding Questions

1. What is history?
2. What is historicism?
3. What is meta-history?
4. What is historiography?
5. What is World History?
6. What is modernity?
7. What is a civilization?

## Guide to Further Reading

### The Study of History

- Carr, E.H., *What is History?* (New York: Vintage: 1961). A classic text based on a series of public lectures at Cambridge University in which the basic skills are very eloquently discussed.
- Gaddis, John Lewis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002). Written by one of the most notable historians of the twentieth century, this book discusses important questions about the study of history, such as its practices and status within academia.
- Lowenthal, David, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). What is the role of history in our contemporary lives, how does this role change and how does history shape the present? These are just some of the questions this notable book reflects on.
- Tosh, John, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History* (London: Routledge 2015). One of the most used handbooks to introduce students to the study of history: practical and useful.

### World History

- Diamond, Jared, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton: 1997). A classic, hotly debated and controversial text about the trajectories of the development of human society based on a structural lens.
- Eaton, David, *World History Through Case Studies: Historical Skills in Practice* (London: Bloomsbury 2020). A refreshing approach to world history via case studies and based on diverse research practices.
- McNeill, J.R. and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of Human History* (London: Norton 2003). An overview of the development of human webs covering the world over the course of the past millennia.
- McNeill, William H., 'The Changing Shape of World History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 34/2 (1995), pp. 8-26. This article introduces the reader to the historiography of the field.
- Tignor, Robert, et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World From the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present* (New York: Norton 2013). A very accessible and detailed handbook with an overview of world history till today.