

REVITALIZING LIBERAL EDUCATION:  
A GLOBAL HISTORY APPROACH

by

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Some years ago a popular postcard appeared claiming to be "A Texan's Map of the United States." The "map" distorted the geography of the United States by exaggerating the size of Texas and diminishing the rest of the country. As satire on Texans' alleged penchant for inflated self-importance, the postcard made its point. Occasionally one can find a similar sort of map hanging on classroom walls. It also distorts spatial dimensions but, unlike the Texas postcard, it claims a serious purpose. It is called a Mercator world map, named after a Dutch cartographer who, over three centuries ago, drew a projection that laid out the earth on a flat surface, the longitudinal lines running parallel.

Early European sailors found Mercator's projection useful in navigating at sea. But the map's popularity, which endured long after the era of the sailing ship, is explained by more than its value in navigation. A comparison with a globe reveals why. The closer an area on the Mercator map is to the equator, the smaller its relative size. Greenland, lying near the North Pole, is enormous compared to the Indian subcontinent, lying near the equator. More importantly, however, the size of northwest Europe is exaggerated compared to the equatorial landmass. The map's geographical distortions conveniently coincided with a world-view that assumed an inherent superiority of Europe over the rest of the world.

That Europeans (and their settler descendants around the globe) had become chauvinistic should not be surprising. They had, after all, emerged at the center of a powerful dynamic global system, one they clearly dominated. Besides, human societies ranging from small lineage groups to vast civilizations have viewed their universe through an ethnocentric prism that assumes an innate superiority of "us" over "them."

A prized achievement of the "rise of the West" has been an institutional commitment to analytic truth and precise measurement. Inevitably perhaps, the distortions of a Mercator world map were to be superseded by more accurate representations of global geography. But an underlying cultural parochialism, which helped to justify relations of inequality during an imperial era, has persisted in subtle ways. In the University itself, an institution dedicated to the principles of rational inquiry and scientific understanding, the Mercator legacy lives on. The incongruity between the universalist ideals of the University and the residual cultural assumptions of an imperial era poses a challenge to those who share a vision of liberal education. Recent trends in the world outside of academia underscore the importance of keeping that vision alive.

Many Americans feel confronted by an unruly world no longer under control. A series of frustrations--Vietnam, OPEC, Iranian hostages, East Asian exports, turmoil in Central America, setbacks in the Middle East--have jolted the confidence of a generation of Americans accustomed to viewing their post-World War II supremacy and prosperity as natural features of the global landscape.

In a climate of increasing international tension, reasoned debate and decision-making are threatened by two powerful instinctive reactions. One is withdrawal, a desire to isolate oneself from the international arena and

let the world go its own way. "Let the natives kill each other off!" I heard one student exclaim, exasperated over the turmoil in Lebanon. The second tendency is aggression, the urge to lash out violently, more as an animalistic desire to release tension than as a realistic attempt to impose order. Both emotional impulses are attracted to simple explanations of unpleasant events and are easily exploited by cynical leaders. The history of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s should remind us how easily people can be persuaded to vote away their most precious values and freedoms.

In an authoritarian state where power is centralized within a small elite group, the attitudes and level of knowledge of the masses may be largely irrelevant to the affairs of state. But in a representative system where public opinion influences the choices of decision-makers, a neurotic vacillation between isolationism and interventionism creates a volatile factor in international affairs, one that is all the more dangerous in a nuclear age.

Unless we are ready to become an authoritarian state, what hope is there for the future other than to educate our citizens to understand the complex nature of the world. Needed more than ever are citizens who can analyze dispassionately a changing world system, who accept both the potentialities and limitations of their capacity to influence events, and who combine the uncertainties of analytical inquiry with a commitment to the principles of human dignity, individual freedom, and justice. Given that the stakes are immensely higher than ever before, that individuals can influence public policy, that the United States wields power on a global scale, and that the American people have access to the best information in the world, what excuse do we have for illiteracy in world affairs?

If the University has been commissioned to help prepare students for life by enabling them to understand their world at the end of the twentieth century, then we should find disturbing the results of an Educational Testing Service survey of American college and university students conducted a few years ago. Three-thousand randomly selected students took a carefully designed examination aimed at measuring their understanding of world affairs.<sup>1</sup> The dismal scores confirmed what many educators had suspected--few college and university students possess more than a mediocre understanding of some of the most fundamental issues affecting their future. The chairman of the study task force called the findings an indication that our institutions of higher learning are in a "provincial rut" clinging "to a nineteenth-century view of the world."<sup>2</sup>

Not only was the level of knowledge about world affairs low, there was little difference between the scores of college seniors and those of college freshmen. Students felt generally that they had gained more exposure to world affairs in high school than in college.<sup>3</sup> That students enter the university with a weak understanding of global issues is deplorable enough. That they graduate in the same state of ignorance should lead us to examine the incongruity between promise and product in our profession.

There are numerous explanations for this mediocrity in preparing the next generation for the challenges it will face in tomorrow's world. A mind-numbing bombardment of information, lack of emphasis on reading, traditions of ethnocentrism and isolationism--these are certainly a few. But we should not overlook our failure as educators to define our common purpose. Whether a sense of purpose ever existed in higher education can be debated, but it seems clear that at present many teachers possess little confidence in their social utility. Their lack of professional self-confidence is

reinforced by an economic system that relegates the teaching profession to a lowly status. Together with a much-abused tenure system, this fosters a cynical attitude characterized by an exceedingly narrow definition of self-interest. It also generates a defensiveness that sees any tampering with the system as a grave threat. In such a setting, is it any wonder that students also become cynical about the purposes of higher education, defining their self-interest narrowly as well?

Various social and economic trends have conspired to place American higher education in a state of great ferment. Fluctuations in student demography and increased financial insecurity have created stress. In addition, the urge to make the American economy more competitive in the international marketplace has resulted in greater emphasis on engineering, computer science, and high technology in general. This must start, it is argued, in elementary school with more attention given to math and science and must continue through high school and college. To the extent that increased specialization in the "hard" sciences begins sooner than ever in the educational pipeline, the task of training informed generalists may become even more difficult than it already is.

Corresponding to a rising global tide of religious, ethnic, and national chauvinism is a movement in this country that advocates a return to "traditional values" in education. A closer look reveals an attempt to revive a pre-liberal past characterized by merger of church and state, dogmatic interpretation of a sacred text, and fear of scientific inquiry.

In a climate of increasing national and cultural arrogance, a disturbing number of voices have openly questioned values associated with liberal education, values such as wide-ranging knowledge and interests, rational self-examination, free exchange of ideas, a world-wide community of scholars, tolerance for ideological diversity, and individual responsibility in shaping one's destiny. However, at base I believe there is still a broad (though largely tacit) consensus in academia that these values are of fundamental importance in a democratic society and that their preservation is a central purpose of the University. When bigotry and aggressive chauvinism become fashionable, when restrictions are placed on the free exchange of information, when cultural exchange programs are threatened--to mention a few recent trends--who will protest these challenges to liberal values if not American institutions of higher learning? More than ever we need a revitalization of liberal values to take into account the changing circumstances of the contemporary world. We need to re-examine the institutional structures and policies in higher education so as to revive a fading vision of liberal education.

The turmoil of the past two decades has contributed to the present disarray in general education. Anti-establishment movements of the sixties, followed by "supermarket" approaches to core requirements, and the subsequent reactions to them have cleared the way for innovative approaches to the undergraduate intellectual experience. The economic hard times of the seventies and eighties, combined with a growing awareness that "success" in a highly technical society requires finely-tuned specialization, have forced rethinking of traditional approaches to general education.

In response to the widespread conclusion that the American educational system has been failing to live up to its promises, far-sighted institutions are starting to take up the challenge of graduating students who can not only sell their skills in the marketplace but who also assume their responsibilities as political decision-makers in a shrinking and fragile

world. In 1979 the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies presented recommendations ranging from increased foreign language requirements to the establishment of new foreign area studies programs. Experiments designed to enhance global understanding are under way in dozens of colleges and universities across the country.<sup>4</sup>

But, with government funding being slashed at all levels and virtually all colleges and universities experiencing painful budgetary constraints, it is unrealistic to expect expensive new programs. Moreover, since there is widespread agreement that the technical formation of students must be strengthened to remain competitive internationally, there is little hope for increased course requirements in the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, members of the "soft" disciplines are already fighting rear-guard battles to protect shrinking turfs. We must recognize that just when the need to internationalize the undergraduate learning experience is most urgent, the financial limitations on doing so have become most severe. It may be time for academic disciplines to rethink their programs in relation to the changing environment. In the case of history, I am advocating that universities develop carefully designed introductory courses in world history emphasizing significant themes common to the human experience on a global scale.

The study of history enables us to position ourselves and our society in time and space. As true stories of the human past, history provides an essential perspective for understanding the present and for envisioning alternative future scenarios. Most of the students surveyed by ETS identified history as the subject that had made the greatest contribution to their understanding of world issues. In addition, history majors scored best on the exam. At the same time, freshmen surveyed considered history second to last as a potential major.<sup>5</sup> In light of these facts, what should be the place of history within the university curriculum?

Like other liberal arts disciplines, history has been shaken by the rumblings in higher education in recent years. Students concerned about their marketability after graduation have discovered that employers rarely advertise for broad understanding of the world, but seek instead specialized technical skills. Although that is still probably the norm, some American political and business leaders are awakening to the importance of global long-term considerations in day-to-day decision-making and seem to be discovering the wisdom of employing imaginative and broadly-educated individuals. Perhaps we shall see a revival of interest in history. I have encountered more and more students who sense that a general understanding of world historical issues and trends is of great practical value in an increasingly interdependent world. Unfortunately, such students are sometimes frustrated by the regional and chronological fragmentation that they encounter within history departments, each professor buried in his own specialization and expressing little interest in or communication with other areas of study. Since rewards in higher education often go to those who publish the most in specialized journals, this tendency is understandable.

Students may also encounter a Western-centrism that seems out of tune with the actual world. Such an approach may once have been justified, but two recent developments have undermined the rationale for an exclusive emphasis on Western history. One is the decline of Europe from its dominant position in the geo-political power structure since World War II, and the other is an explosion of knowledge about the rest of the world.

The rapid demise of the European colonial empires after 1945 gave birth to nearly a hundred sovereign states, many of them hostile to European interests and impatient to redress the imbalances and injustices of an imperial past. Although still weak members of the global economic system, the nations of the "Third World" have become aware of the potential weight that three-quarters of the world's population carries. The United States and the Soviet Union have sought to fill the void left by the withdrawal of the European imperial powers after World War II. Both superpowers have continually attempted to assert control over events in their spheres of influence while, at the same time, taking advantage of situations where their adversary's control has weakened. Both have discovered how easy it is to overestimate their capacity to exert long-term control over the status quo in their respective camps. They are still learning--in Poland, in Central America, in Afghanistan, in the Middle East--that there are powerful forces at work independent of global strategic issues. These forces, which erupt in regional conflicts, religious revivals, class struggles, and movements of national assertion, often can be understood only within the context of long-term local and regional history.

In terms of economic clout, the world has been evolving into a multi-polar system with significant shifts of power to the energy-rich states of the Middle East and the technology-rich states of East Asia. A growing interdependence, based on uneven distributions of energy resources, mineral wealth, advanced technology, financial resources, and food grains, has combined with ecological crises and the threat of nuclear holocaust to convince more and more of the world's people that, as residents of a fragile planet, they are all in the same boat. In many respects it is a world fundamentally different from what it was in 1945, above all in the global scale of the costs of political miscalculations.

The second significant trend of recent decades has been an expanding awareness of Western history in relation to world history. During the age of European imperialism, Western military and technological supremacy was widely believed to reflect an underlying cultural or racial superiority. Non-Western peoples and their past came to be seen as irrelevant to the modern world. The achievements of civilizations in China, India, the Middle East, to name a few, could be ignored or dismissed as insignificant. In other words, a nineteenth-century imperial relationship of inequality on a global scale was translated into assumptions of cultural inequality that were then projected back several millenia in time.<sup>6</sup>

This slanted view of the past is well illustrated by the place of Africa in modern historical consciousness. Hegel's view that Africa "is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit" reflected the cultural arrogance of an imperial age. That a noted British historian could echo these sentiments only two decades ago, characterizing the African past as "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe" demonstrates how long this world-view endured and how recent the "discovery" of African history has been. Systematic analysis of Arabic sources, ingenious use of oral traditions, and painstaking archeological investigation over the past several decades have revealed that, even according to standards of "civilization" established by European historians, Africa can claim a rich and complex history. What is more, the study of African societies over the long-term has compelled historians to think critically about assumptions utilized to divide peoples into the "civilized" and the "barbaric."

Just as the spatial distortions of a Mercator world map eventually collided with the rules of analytical consistency and precise measurement, so have the distortions of a Mercator historical view collided with the demands of systematic historical analysis. But the weight of tradition is heavy. How long can textbooks entitled "A History of Civilization" continue to exclude China and India? How long can general education curricula, which claim to prepare students for the twenty-first century, continue to exclude three-quarters of the world's population?

Inevitably, educating for a global historical perspective transcends narrow disciplinary lines. Yet those lines are crossed only with great difficulty. Success in this venture, because it does go to the heart of the educational enterprise, requires a realistic assessment of disciplinary obstacles and opportunities. History should use its perch between the humanities and the social sciences to launch initiatives designed to implement the goals of liberal education. By nature general and multi-disciplinary, history should take the lead in formulating strategies aimed at cultivating a capacity to take in the entire globe in its historical and contemporary dimensions.

One step could be the development of a thematic and chronological survey of world history for beginning college students. Students should gain spatial, chronological, and cultural perspectives in the broadest possible sense. Of utmost importance is a clearly defined set of themes to act as a standard of relevance. Too often students assume that there is one agreed-upon history. They should come to see that there are numerous ways to compose a true story of the human past, and they should understand why they are utilizing a particular approach.

Two broad themes around which a truly global history course can be organized are cultural interaction and ecological adaptation. They focus attention on peoples' ever-changing relationships with each other and with their physical environment. Both themes have universal applicability across time and space, and both draw attention to fundamental issues in the contemporary world.<sup>8</sup> Together they provide a global comparative perspective on the human past.

A singular emphasis on cultural interaction can focus too much attention on the Eurasian landmass to the neglect of sub-Saharan Africa and pre-Columbian America. One can also get carried away in attending to the cultural artifacts (art, architecture, literature) of the "great civilizations." Here the theme of ecological adaptation adds an important dimension by demonstrating that small-scale societies were no less "complete" than large empires and that, in certain respects, they enjoyed a more harmonious relationship with their environment.<sup>9</sup> This probes into the nature of economic systems and the meaning of technological change, essential concepts in understanding the contemporary world.

For meaningful learning it is crucial to see the connections between what students are studying and the world to which they relate. The challenge is not to bombard them with current events but rather to enable them to see the interconnectedness of the human adventure in time and space. There is no subject that cannot be connected with the day-to-day experience of the average student. In my course entitled "Approaches to World History" I ask the students to begin by assuming the role of future historians assigned to write a chapter on the 1980s. This requires them to consider the important forces, actors, issues, trends, and turning points of the contemporary world and to reflect on the meaning of historical significance

and the various way to reconstruct a true story of the past. It also is designed to cultivate a curiosity about the origins of the contemporary world. Students read an ethnography of a hunting-and-gathering society that depicts life as it may have appeared before the transition to dependence on agriculture. The course then traces important themes through time, utilizing a comparative analytical method; one of the values of a global approach is that it offers a rich field for comparative analysis. Students are enlightened to discover that a portion of their own scientific vocabulary comes from Arabic, that China underwent an industrial revolution and an oceanic expansion before Europe, that an expanding frontier eastward across Asia was comparable to the great westward expansion in America.

A world historical survey can be viewed as a building block, a keystone perhaps, within both the general education curriculum and the history program. It offers excellent opportunities to experiment with cross-disciplinary ventures. For example, readings in world history can be synchronized with courses in world literature, composition, and foreign languages, to suggest a few. Within the history department a thematic survey provides a substantive base on which to build upper-level courses in distinct areas of the world and periods of time, thereby lending a coherence to history programs that has too often been lacking.

There are obstacles to implementing such a program. Traditions take on a life of their own and territorial imperatives run deep. Faculty commitment and training are crucial, for it is faculty preparation and enthusiasm that will in large measure determine a program's value for students. Teachers, already overloaded with a multitude of demands and the ever-burgeoning literature in their specialties, may resist the challenge of enlarging their areas of inquiry. Administrative support and faculty development programs would contribute to the success of any such venture.

For years William H. McNeill and other prominent historians have been advocating a rethinking of history in relation to undergraduate general education. Up until recently the responses to this challenge have largely been isolated. However, current budgetary crises are making demands for change less of a luxury and more of a necessity. Within the past several years a number of colleges and universities have instituted imaginative new programs aimed at instilling a world-historical perspective. An important threshold was crossed recently with the formation of the World History Association, an organization devoted to the propagation and coordination of efforts to expand the teaching of world history in higher education.<sup>10</sup>

Colleges and universities, along with history departments, face an uncertain future. They can view the current ferment in higher education as an opportunity for change and growth or as a threat to tradition. Historians, if they are to earn a niche in the emerging general education of the 1980s, may need to enlarge some cherished self-images; it might be time to see ourselves as more than conveyors of Western culture, producers of specialized graduate students, or promoters of antiquarianism.

Choices made by history departments and university administrators over the next years may well determine leaders in higher education over the next decades. We should not lose sight of the fact that students will be the ultimate measure of success. Most students, when they can see the relationship between the time spent in the classroom and the world they face as they head into the twenty-first century, respond to the opportunity to broaden their cultural and historical horizons. It is up to us as educators to provide that opportunity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a description of the survey and its results see What College Students Know and Believe About Their World, Volume V in the series entitled "Education and the World View," published by Change Magazine Press, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in The Washington Post, April 16, 1981.

<sup>3</sup>See Note 1 above, 27-28, 39.

<sup>4</sup>For a description of sixty-two leading campus programs in international concerns, see Handbook of Successful Campus Programs, Volume III in the series "Education and the World View," published by Change Magazine Press, 1981.

<sup>5</sup>See Note 1 above, 13, 28, 33, 39.

<sup>6</sup>Westerners sometimes find it hard to accept, for example, that Aristotle "belongs" as much to Islamic culture as he does to the culture of France, Great Britain, or the United States.

<sup>7</sup>Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe," The Listener, 70 (1963), 971.

<sup>8</sup>William H. McNeill has pioneered in developing teaching approaches and materials built around the theme of cultural interaction. Among McNeill's numerous publications are his one-volume textbook, A World History (3rd edition, 1979), and his multi-volume edited series, "Readings in World History," all published by Oxford University Press. An early plea for a global approach to cultural interaction is found in Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "The Interrelations of Societies in History," Comparative Studies in Society and History, 5, 2 (1963), 227-250.

<sup>9</sup>A fruitful merging of history and the social sciences has resulted in a number of recent works appropriate for courses in world history. A few samples--Eric Wolf, Europe and the People Without History (University of California Press, 1982); Marvin Harris, Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures (Random House, 1977); L. S. Stavrianos, Global Rift: The Third World Comes of Age (Morrow, 1981); and Alfred W. Crosby, Ecological Imperialism: Europe Overseas, 900-1900 (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press). William H. McNeill has drawn attention to neglected themes in global history in Plagues and Peoples (Doubleday, 1977), The Human Condition: An Ecological and Historical View (Princeton University Press, 1980), and The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society Since A.D. 1000 (University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup>The World History Association publishes a newsletter World History Bulletin. See also Donald M. Bishop and Thomas McGann (eds.), World History in Liberal Military Education (Department of History, U.S. Air Force Academy, 1980). A number of institutions have found texts by L. S. Stavrianos useful for courses in world history. His most recent one-volume university text, A Global History: The Human Heritage was published in 1983 by Prentice-Hall.