

METAHISTORY: A REVIEW ESSAY

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Paul Costello. *World Historians and Their Goals: Twentieth-Century Answers to Modernism.* Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994. Paper, \$18.00; ISBN 0-87580-564-7.

Martin W. Lewis and Karen Wigen. *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Paper, \$19.95; ISBN 0-520-20743-2.

Fred Spier. *The Structure of Big History, From the Big Bang until Today.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996. Paper, \$19.95 (originally University of Michigan Press, 1996); ISBN 90-5356-220-6.

In most undergraduate classrooms, the phrase "world history" has a specific meaning: a valiant attempt to combine the histories of the entire world into a two-semester course. Once the instructor gets past the impossibility of this notion, she does her best to convey to the students what she believes are the most indispensable parts of that history, inevitably omitting what others might deem indispensable. This type of history falls at the opposite end of the spectrum from what many world historians see as their objective.

The field of world history has undergone great changes since becoming a classroom staple in the 1970s. The dominant theme in this area has become metahistory, or more colloquially "big history." Metahistory focuses more on the larger issues of the development of man and his world, less on the specifics. In fact, many world historians such as Fred Spier would question the need for specifics (individuals, nations, etc.) at all. Eliminating time-consuming (and for some, transitory and thus unimportant) "facts" allows the student and teacher to examine large amounts of time in order to see even larger patterns. This field, which might more accurately be called universal history, has gathered many adherents in higher education. (The logistics of accountability and standards make this type of study less feasible on the secondary level.)

The three works that follow in this review essay each examine a specific area of metahistory. In *World Historians and Their Goals*, Paul Costello describes the development of metahistory through great historians such as Arnold Toynbee and William McNeill. Fred Spier, a leader in this field, gives the reader perhaps the ultimate example of metahistory in *The Structure of Big History*. Finally, in *The Myth of Continents*, Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen take the concept a step further by discussing the pitfalls of our current framework of geographical designations. (I understand that this approach leaves out some historians and some "big history" studies

that others might want included. But these three studies provide a good place to start in understanding metahistory.)

World Historians and Their Goals by Paul Costello

Paul Costello defines metahistory with a quote from Christopher Dawson: "... metahistory is concerned with the nature of history, the meaning of history and the causes and significance of historical change."¹ Costello states that world historians are metahistorians "par excellence," defining them as "schematic students of the past who have attempted to specify the pattern of the past from earliest recorded time to the present."² Adhering to these principles requires the world historian as metahistorian to view global history as a process (or sometimes lack of process), relying more upon large, overreaching ideas of motion and connectivity than the individual timelines and major players of any given nation-state.

As Costello begins his work, the reader immediately senses some type of dread, or "overwhelming sense of crisis," which he states is held by most western world historians.³ While setting the tone for his book, Costello appears to voice his own belief in the coming crisis of world history as seen by many of his subjects. Even when addressing the guarded optimism of William McNeill, Costello seems to downplay or trivialize such a concept. This section (or at least the attitude of the section) might better have been left to the final chapter, rather than coloring the mindset of the reader at the beginning. However, it is important to note that the crisis of which he speaks, at least for two subjects of his book, H.G. Wells and Arnold Toynbee, is only part of a teleological process that should eventually produce a more unified and positive historical outcome. The issue of whether the motion of history is teleological or not is an underlying theme of this book.

H.G. Wells was not your typical historian. Mainly a novelist writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Wells wrote under the utopian (or anti-utopian) influences of his day. Seeing this disintegration of society in the future, Wells sought to find a solution through the creation of a better, nobler society. Wells looked to a unified body of thought and will for the salvation of future generations, as did other metahistorians of the day. "In his view, the full realization of humanity's progressive potential could only occur when individuals recognized that their private

¹ Paul Costello, *World Historians and Their Goals* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 1995), 4.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 3.

destinies were wedded to the destiny of the race as a whole."⁴ One aspect of this chapter (a similar section is in each chapter) that is of particular interest is the biographical material. Costello reads, rightly so, much into the experiences of the writers during their younger years. Wells, for example, took his quasi-religious views of God as part and parcel of human progress, not the instigator of it, from his mother's repressive notions and his early fear of God.

Wellsian theory describes the society that will save humanity—world unity and a World State—in *The Outline of History* (1923). Loosely called socialistic, members of this state would sublimate their own will for the good of the whole, with the final vision of progress and plenty firmly in their minds. The march of time, two world wars, and increased destruction of the planet caused Wells to become more pessimistic. His certainty of impending doom, unless a unified vision of the future was implemented, created a sense of desperation in his final writings. His view of the World State was criticized by many, including George Orwell, for its dehumanizing potential. His lack of historical method is also problematic for most. Wells certainly got much of his history "wrong." It is easy enough to state then that getting it "right" was not their goal (which would be correct), but as historians, the follow up question to that assertion is important: "How much do you have to misrepresent or misunderstand before it discredits your argument?" Costello does not gloss over this point. He emphasizes throughout the text that most people understood that the data might be wrong, but accepted that in the face of the new, innovated conceptual picture.

Costello also turns his attention to Arnold Toynbee. Toynbee, as opposed to Wells, had an extensive knowledge of history, which he used to write his mammoth, multi-volume work, *A Study of History* (1933-1961). This work is infused with a cyclical, yet essentially teleological, viewpoint of the history of man. Toynbee, as Costello points out, has been criticized most heavily for the religious element in his theory, which states that civilization will only be saved by a world body unified by a common religious belief. His emphasis on religion was partly based on his notion that the collapse of civilization would stem from a moral breakdown, fitting in nicely with his theory on the internal decay of past fallen empires such as Rome. It is just this view, however, that produced some of the most violent criticisms of Toynbee's work. Many attacked his notion of "history as redeemer," and his seeming "reduction of history to theology," going so far as to name his final religious solution "Toynbeeism."⁵ Costello ends this chapter (as he does them all) with some redeeming

⁴Ibid., 23.

⁵Ibid., 94.

words in the face of critics, generally referring not particularly to the inherent value of the work as some type of paradigm, but to the questions and debates it raises.

The final historian Costello examines is the most current, William McNeill. McNeill represents the most convincing argument in the book for the non-teleological viewpoint, coupled with a very interesting ecological component. McNeill's major concerns for the future of civilization deal with militarism and over-zealous nationalism, while his ecological argument emerges through "the increasing closure of a united disease pool."⁶ In response to these challenges, McNeill offers a world government. Using many sociological techniques, he concludes that such a union would be a "world historical fulfillment," synthesizing contributions from all past and current eras.

Despite his great historical knowledge, McNeill advocates what he termed "mythhistory," "where historians accept their role of providing a sense of the past."⁷ This interpretive sense of the past allows historians the freedom to make generalizations that logically flow from past events. Inherent in the theory of "mythhistory" is the irony that despite its obvious potential pitfalls, most historians practice it in some form each day in the classroom; generally such conclusions do indeed work.

Finally, Costello presents his summation. Even though his final chapter presents only a modicum of new ideology, it does provide a nice sense of closure and a review of some major writers not included in this text. He declares that "there is a crisis in the twentieth century, one of historical confidence, that acts as a psychological impetus in the projection of world historical theories."⁸ Even though his outlining of the tragic events of this century provide compelling evidence as to why metahistorians present many of their arguments, the question remains as to how convincing their arguments are. Have we really seen a break in the cultural continuity of western civilization? If so, why have the prognostications of many of these writers not come true—and does that fact dull or diminish their arguments? One main theme throughout the text is the importance of these theories in framing our view of world history and our discussion of the progression of culture. *World Historians and Their Goals* certainly provides a catalyst for discussion.

⁶Ibid., 183.

⁷Ibid., 185.

⁸Ibid., 218.

The Structure of Big History by Fred Spier

In this work, Fred Spier presents an interesting concept—the discussion of world history in terms of the development of the universe, with mankind kept to their accurately tiny place. Having never been presented in such a way (as the author points out numerous times), this framework for world history should seem new and innovative, which the scope, of course, is. However, readers might well find themselves acknowledging the familiarity of some of the arguments, rather than being astonished by them. To be sure, the innovation inherent in the book is its use as a vehicle to teach all of history. The concept of climatic change as a spur to the development of agriculture, on the other hand, seems quite commonplace.

As an introduction to his theory, Spier describes a word that he will use frequently, “regime.” He defines a regime as “a more or less regular but ultimately unstable pattern that has a certain temporal permanence.”⁹ Regime is a flexible word that can refer to micro and macro, organic and inorganic, social and individual, yet is not limited to these.

Spier takes the reader through an outline of the time prior to human culture. Many intriguing theories emerge from this chapter, including the basis for the entire overview: a dominant astronomical regime influences the earthly climatic regime, which dominates the biological regime (including humans).¹⁰ The steps toward the evolution of early hominids seem logical. Beginning with the solar system, every configuration alteration affected the development of the planet. For example, changes in the biological regime could have been triggered by asteroids hitting the Earth, slight changes in the rotations of the other planets, and plate tectonics. He emphasizes the constant interaction and development of the various regimes through statements such as: “Regimes never rise from nothing. They always separate from already-existing regimes.”¹¹ Once complex organisms began to develop on Earth, natural selection (from competition and the struggle to survive) took over to guide the biological regime.

As a lead-in to the final and largest chapter, Spier provides a brief introduction to the human cultural regime. This smaller section starts with the emergence of human life and the socialization (including forms of communication) that necessarily followed. Following is the preparation the reader needs for the last chapter on the three major ecological regime transformations that structure human history. Spier introduces

⁹Fred, Spier, *The Structure of Big History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 14.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 28.

the three regimes—the domestication of fire, the domestication of planets and animals, and industrialization on the basis of fossil fuels, explains them in a general sense, and provides a model that underlies each process. This “simple and illuminating” tripartite model, devised by Spier’s colleague Johan Goudsblom, can be summarized as follows: “In all cases there was a stage in which no one had ‘it.’ Then a stage came in which some people had ‘it,’ while others did not. The last stage was reached when all people had acquired ‘it.’”¹² Spier then applies this principle to fire, agriculture, and industrialization.

The result of this last stage of industrialization has been that “the world was turned into a provider of natural resources for industry and into a market for its products.”¹³ Spier points out positives and negatives of this development before stating that a great “rearrangement” of the biological regime is occurring through the interconnectedness (or shrinkage) of the world. Concerns over this condition and the abuse of the planet have prompted Spier to create one new regime—the environmental regime—in which people are making a concerted effort to reverse some of the damage.

The partnership between Spier, Goudsblom, and others is unmistakable throughout the text. It seems evident that *The Structure of Big History* should have been co-authored, as Spier spends much of his space giving credit or reference to others. These constant referrals to other authors and their works at times become cumbersome, interfering with the flow of the book. Many of them could have been left to footnotes, or simply confined to the very thorough list of references in the back of the book.

The conceptual picture that is the crux of this work is also the cause for most concern. As an overview prior to a world history course, it would be a wonderful learning tool, creating connections that would stick with the students for life. As the world history course itself, I fear the implications. As students whiz through the course of humanity, they will have no concrete notions to associate with the more abstract theory. If they know that civilizations proceed from the transition to an agrarian regime, yet have no information on Mesopotamia, Egypt, or India, how profitable will their knowledge be? Granted, Spier mentions several societies by name, on one or two pages, but he gives no specific details—fine for the professor, perhaps, but certainly not for the novice. The framework is logical and enlightening, but it is insufficient on its own.

¹²Ibid., 40.

¹³Ibid., 78.

The Myth of Continents by Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen

The Myth of Continents turns old, traditional notions of geography on their head, replacing them with fresh ideas and many new, unanswered questions. Some of our most basic concepts about the world and our relationship to it are examined and unceremoniously thrown to the wolves, leaving behind new, hopefully "un-centric," frameworks in their stead.

Lewis and Wigen seek to reconstruct the globe along more objective lines, even as their anti-western stance seems to mimic the views they are trying to revise. (It is interesting that they accuse others of this very tactic, apparently not realizing their own guilt.) However, their points are well taken and any modern scholar will recognize the shortcomings of current geographical positioning.

The text is organized into six chapters, covering the problem of current geographical frameworks, the history of that problem, and possible alternatives to the old organization. The vast majority of the early portion describes why and how the old constructs are outdated and Eurocentric. This point is clear and should not be disputed. Their numerous examples point out problems that most people would recognize, but perhaps not to their full extent. Their stated goal is to conduct a long-overdue review of the frameworks of metageography, "the set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world."¹⁴ Some of the problems associated with our current geography involve the concepts of nation-states, continents, and "the West." Lewis and Wigen discount the notion that there is something inherently unique or distinguishing about "the West," and base much of their work on undoing the damage that such rhetoric has done. The power of what we traditionally call the West in creating the mapping and designations of the globe is clear. One interesting point to remember, however, and one that the authors allude to briefly, is that many other cultures ("Eastern" and others) have committed that same offense in their own mapping.

Lewis and Wigen begin by denouncing the continent and the nation-state as true entities. The idea of the continent as some sort of unified system of thought and behavior is indeed flawed. But the concept of the nation-state is one that they take too lightly. Certainly, their examples of Nigeria and India are good for illustrating that national borders sometimes mean nothing (consider Yugoslavia); however, they are too quick to denounce all nation-states as false. It seems that other national borders, such as those of England and Japan, fit rather well with their culture and heritage. For the authors, unless a nation can match their notion of perfect "national-statehood" in the

¹⁴ Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), ix.

strict sense of the term, which has existed throughout all time and all situations, then they must be discounted as a fixed entity. No such nation exists and looking for that kind of precision is fruitless. We can only imagine the dismay that many (if not most) countries would feel in reading this assessment of their own "political-geographical units."

Lewis and Wigen spend a great deal of time on the East-West fallacy. They believe that this division, which has predominated for much of history, is extremely detrimental to the East. By its use, "western scholars were able to reinforce the notion of a cultural dichotomy between these two areas—a dichotomy that was essential to modern Europe's identity as a civilization."¹⁵ Some of their best arguments come in the exploration of Asia and Europe as continents, as they point out the total inequality of comparing the two. Europe, they rightly assert, is better suited to comparison with a region of Asia, like southeast Asia, for example, rather than putting the small area on par with the vast expanse and variety of the whole of Asia. Two chapters are devoted to exploring the East-West myth.

The comparison of Europe with Asia presents several difficulties, including the shifting boundaries of each area, the introduction of terms such as "Middle East," "Far East," and "Near East," and, most disturbing, the cultural constructs of each area. The authors point to environmental determinism—"the belief that social and cultural differences between human groups can ultimately be traced to differences in their physical environments"¹⁶—as the most insidious aspect of the comparison. Here Lewis and Wigen point out what they believe to be the traditional "hallmarks" of western culture, then debunk them. However, they devote themselves to abstract concepts such as rationality and democracy (the love-hate relationship with the Enlightenment is interesting), which clearly are myths, while ignoring the idea that some basic environmental influences, such as climate and agriculture, can indeed affect how a society develops, thus their culture. The need to obliterate all overt differences between the two areas is cold and sterile, leaving the door wide open for offense to East and West.

The final chapters of *The Myth of Continents* look at practical matters, such as Afrocentrism (which the authors see as being based on the same faulty logic as Eurocentrism), world history texts, and, finally, a regional geographic solution that might provide some answers to persistent dilemmas. The world regions framework is one "serviceable alternative" to our received metageographical categories. While these groupings have shared culture and history, as did previous divisions, they are compact enough to prevent "cultural bleeding" from one area to another, perhaps inappropriate

¹⁵Ibid., 36.

¹⁶Ibid., 42.

ones. Their scheme purports to create zones that are based on historical processes (rather than diagnostic traits), give primacy to spatial contours of assemblages of ideas, practices, and social institutions (rather than political and ecological boundaries), and conceptualize world regions in terms of their relations with one another.¹⁷ Such a theory is logical, in most respects, setting up a new and possibly better way to think of the world. The difficulties arise in the implications of the work.

One basic problem is implementation. If we believe that teaching geography is crucial, why create a system that is not only different, but also more convoluted? Our children currently cannot identify India on a map. How much better will it be if they cannot even call it India anymore? On a different level, what would the people of India say? One disturbing facet of this text is its self-serving nature. Lewis and Wigen never consider how any nation or region might react to these changes. Of course, certain names and designations are centric and based on old ideas of imperialism. But they only make up a framework, not a political imperative.

This idea of objectification applies to the notion of history in general. An inherent notion is that geography should be free of loaded terms, entailing the removal of objectionable titles, names, etc. A similar scheme of stripping concepts down to their bare essence is present in Spier's *The Structure of Big History*. If we, as historians, take it down to the bare essentials, we are in danger of removing the lifeblood from our work. A distressing concept is that big history is sufficient—students do not need the details. But, what then is left for us and our students? How do we judge the value of what we do—does it have value? History cannot be objectified. We try our best to present the material with as little bias as possible. All we can do is our best, lest we reduce it so far that it slips away altogether. These three works will generate much discussion among your students, even if they do not provide the perfect solution for the teaching of world history.¹⁸

¹⁷Ibid., 188.

¹⁸Suggestions for further reading: Jerry Bentley, *Shapes of World History in Twentieth-Century Scholarship* (Washington: AHA, 1996); Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (Cambridge UP, 1993); Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge UP, 1984); Marshall Hodgson, *Rethinking World History* (Cambridge UP, 1993); Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens, eds., *Conceptualizing Global History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993); Philip Pomper, Richard Elphick, and Richard T. Vann, *World History: Ideologies, Structures and Identities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984).