

Part 9 ⑥ On the Cusp of a New Millennium

Even in a fractious world, most people agree on some things—e.g., that the 21st century will be different from the 20th century and that it is, to a large extent, unpredictable. The speed of change, the multiplication of options, and the diversity of models make the achievement of a stable sense of self more difficult and make community based on a shared sense of values more problematical. These are challenges for the writing of history.

Because the world was bound more closely together in the latter part of the 20th century than it had been formerly, the attention of some academic historians turned more to the subject of world history. In some universities, courses in European Civilization gave way to courses in World History. For nearly 30 years I taught world history, at first focusing on world cities and on legal history; later, on the post-1945 world. For some 25 years I was also active in the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, which had a frame of reference encompassing the world from the time of human origins to the future. In the 1990s some historians talked about “big history.” I also joined the World History Association, belonged for a while to the American Asian Studies Association, and went regularly to the conferences of the European Studies Association. My travels and conferences abroad took me not only to Europe and Asia but also to Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. The object of my quest—holistic history—still eluded me. The problem was that there were no truly satisfactory paradigms for world history.

At the root of the problem was the relationship between history and personal identities. One of the themes of the fourth international conference of the World History Association, which I attended, held in a villa-like hotel on the outskirts of Florence, Italy in June, 1995 was “The Construction of Identities in World History.” Professor Kate Jackson of Australia, writing about the 19th- and early 20th-century British propensity for world travel, said: “Travel has been conceptualized as a phenomenon intimately connected with identity. It has variously symbolized

education and experience, free expression and self-discovery, the reinvention of self, and ‘the realization of otherwise thwarted potential’. . . . Imperialist literature [was] an ideologically-loaded imaginative expression of national identity.” Professor Brian H. Fletcher, also of Australia, spoke of his country’s growing interest in “national history not subordinated to the history of Britain and Europe.” European historians addressed the question of how to reconcile their respective national identities (which entailed national histories) with the need to bolster European economic and political unification with an enlarged sense of European identity. The problem of identity was also urgent in other parts of the globe. According to American professor Alan LeBaron, many ethnic groups in the world denied that their modern identities had been altered or constructed as a result of Western influence. About Africa, American professor Kenneth R. Curtis wrote: “The constant ‘invention’, not just of ‘Africa’ but of ‘Africans’, is an endlessly complex and dynamic process, both for peasant farmers and university academics [in Africa].” Professor Roger Hescocock of Birzeit University wrote that repeated rejection had helped produce a new self-definition and national history for Palestinians.

Globalization seems to require that more histories be written from a world perspective, but historians are still imbedded in national contexts. The reality of the world requires the acknowledgement of multiple perspectives. Clearly, one of the questions of the new millennium is how to write histories, about peoples in various parts of the world, that have global perspective and yet include the appropriately local, without engaging in imperialistic universalizing or in the demonizing of others. Holism cannot and should not mean monism. How, then, to write history that depicts the totality with accuracy, wisdom, and insight? The problems of personal identity and of holistic history are sure to continue in the 21st century.