

FEATURES

PERFORMING THE WORLD: REALITY AND REPRESENTATION IN THE MAKING OF WORLD HISTOR(IES)

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Arif Dirlik
University of Oregon

I will take up a question here that has intruded insistently into my thinking in recent years as I have contemplated the writing and teaching of world history, a question that arises out of the contradictory demands on our conceptualizations of the world of a fluid global situation. This is the question of how best to conceive and organize the spatialities of the world in its historical formations so as to answer to the demands both of a critical historiography and the public-pedagogical functions of history.¹ The question is one that bears more heavily on the pedagogical functions of world history, I think, than on its historiographical premises and implications.

First, a caveat: I have never undertaken to write a history of the world, or thought of myself as a "world historian." What I have done is to write critically of the practice of world history: of the world conquest and ideological structures that produced the notion of "world history" in the first place; of the hegemonic implications of the idea when viewed from perspectives outside of Euroamerica; of the closely connected methodological and ideological problems presented by the spatial and temporal presuppositions that almost inevitably shape all world histories; and, lastly but perhaps most importantly from a personal standpoint, of the naive political and ideological hopes invested in world histories, motivated most recently by visions of a global multiculturalism, that perpetuate those presuppositions unreflectively and contribute to the very problems that they wish to overcome. These criticisms have been intended not to undermine the necessity of a global vision in historical analysis, or the practice of world history as such, but rather to challenge complacent acquiescence in its virtues and to provoke confrontation of the ideological implications of different ways of organizing (or "performing") the past, including the very idea of "the world" as an organizing principle of history. The ideological implications of practices that on the

surface appear to be merely historiographical are of the utmost importance in critical historical writing. They may be of even greater moment in the teaching of history, which is the issue that this paper is intended to address.

It seems to me that there are two major reasons for the practice of world history. One is historiographical. A world or global perspective makes for better history: first, because it enables the pursuit of historical phenomena and processes across boundaries of all kinds, vastly expanding the spaces available for inquiry and explanation; second, because it opens up historical vision to the proliferation of spatialities and therefore temporalities, and allows for a more complex understanding of the processes of history; and third, in the cognizance of totality that it enforces, it enables a more critical historical consciousness. World history, in other words, is not just a subject matter; it is also a methodology that at once complements and challenges other ways of doing history.

The second, equally important reason to practice world history is to foster among students and the general public (not to speak of many of our fellow historians) an appreciation of the political, economic, and cultural configurations of the world and of how they came to be—an appreciation that may be essential to living in a world where differences among humans have acquired unavoidable visibility in their very entanglement, which is the condition of what I have described elsewhere as Global Modernity. Such appreciation is a necessity not just of teaching in the narrow sense of schooling, but as public pedagogy. And it is profoundly political in its implications.

The contradictory demands presented by the historiographical and the public-pedagogical are most readily apparent in the ways in which we spatialize the past, which will be the focus of this discussion. It is my sense that there is a tendency in most world history writing to take as the point of departure for historical analysis modern conceptions of historical spaces, most prominently nations, civilizations, and on occasion even cultures. There are good historiographical reasons for doing so. After all, one of the fundamental tasks of history is to find in the past clues to the economic, social, political, and cultural formations of the present. Contrary to premature declarations of their impending demise, nations and civilizations still represent the fullest articulations of these formations. “Artifices” of history do not lose their historical significance—the power to shape history—simply because they are demonstrably artifices of history. Civilizations, nations, cultures, and continents may all be constructs of modernity; nevertheless, they have been essential in giving modernity its shape and meaning. The organization of the world around these spatialities is part of our consciousness, as should be apparent from the considerable effort it takes to imagine how the world might look other-

wise, which, ultimately, is the task of historical deconstruction.² These spatialities present a problem that needs to be investigated, not dismissed. The goal is to historicize them so as to reveal the spatialities (and the temporalities that go with them) that are suppressed when nations, cultures, civilizations, and continents are rendered into reified subjects of history.

Still, the most compelling reason for such “presentism,” if I may describe it as such, is the necessity of meeting the public obligations of history: education in the formation of the world as we know it, and as it is presently organized, which may enable us to better understand its workings and problems. In a recent paper, Jerry Bentley refers to this requirement as a “moral responsibility.”³ Whether we conceive of citizenship nationally or globally, the responsible conduct of citizenship requires some knowledge of where continents and nations are located, how different pasts have produced different social and political structures or the different value systems we call cultures, traditions, or civilizations, and how these continue to shape behavior in all its dimensions.

On the other hand, the very reaffirmation of the spaces of nations and civilizations not only serves to legitimate the spaces of contemporary configurations of power and their projections upon the past, but also, for the same reason, reverses the historical processes that produced those configurations. Spaces implied by nations and civilizations are products rather than subjects of complex historical interactions. Greater emphasis on these interactions and the proliferation of spaces it demands yields a far more complicated, albeit anarchic, conception of world history.

This perspective, too, is a necessity (if not actually a product) of a world dynamized by phenomena that are increasingly more difficult to contain within conventional political and cultural spaces. And it makes for better, as well as educationally more challenging, history. But it comes at the cost of relegating to the background—philosophically if not historiographically—the spatialities and temporalities that have been informed by the organization of the modern world, the historical consciousness they have fashioned, and the powerful part they have played in the formation of political and cultural identities. There is a “moral responsibility” here, too, but one that calls for a different kind of historical vision and is informed by a different kind of politics.

This may be one important reason why the practice of world history is presently haunted by questions that refuse to go away in spite of world history’s obvious historiographical and ethical/political promises. There is more than one way to think, write, and teach world history, with different historiographical and political premises and implications, and what makes the most sense from one perspective may seem threatening from another. I am most interested here in confronting the historiographi-

cal with the public/political consequences of one version of organizing the past: world history organized around nations and civilizations. This approach to world history also foregrounds a recognition that the problems of world history are problems of history in general at the present conjuncture. We are all quite familiar with the controversies over “national history standards” and their entanglement in the so-called “culture wars” in the United States. Not only are problems of world history akin to problems of national history, but the one is very much a part of the other. If world history may possibly have more profound implications, it is because it raises questions concerning the very viability, or possibility, of history as we have known it.

There are different modes of conceiving and approaching world history. One is simply an add-on mode, viewing world history simply as one mode of doing history that makes no claims on other modes, but simply provides another version of the world, coexisting with other modes in more or less mutual disregard. I may be corrected on this, but it is my sense that this is pretty much the situation with the practice of world history in the United States. Where the teaching of world history has found acceptance—as in my department at the University of Oregon, for example—it still coexists with so-called Western Civilization (and is taught most of the time as another globalized version of the latter). I may even be drawing too rosy a picture. Not many of us practice world history in research and writing, and not many of us want to teach it either. Having to teach world history probably provokes more complaint than any other task among university faculty in departments of history, at least in my experience.

A second mode of approaching world history is as a context for national and civilizational histories, indispensable to understanding their formations and dynamics. There is no denial here of the autonomy of either national or civilizational histories, or their claims to particularity, but only an insistence on “worlding” them: bringing them into the world, and bringing the world into them, so to speak. World-history-as-context and the better understanding of national or civilizational history it provides may be the most common legitimation offered in the promotion of world-history-as-practice. And this is what most world history textbooks seek to offer. World-history-as-context itself may be the most contested for the very same reason. World-history-as-context is not in and of itself inconsistent with claims to national or civilizational supremacy, as it may provide an occasion for rendering either nation or civilization into the central moment of world history. This, of course, is what presently invites the charge of Eurocentrism against many a world history text—and not necessarily only those texts published in the United States and Europe. It is also reminiscent to me personally of the world history textbooks we

were educated on in Turkey, in which Central Asia appeared as the geographical center (and source) of the world, and Turks as an ur-people.

An alternative deployment of world-history-as-context, a response to Eurocentrism, is one that seeks to de-center all nations and civilizations, including one's own. Jerry Bentley, who has been a foremost advocate of world history, describes this approach as "ecumenical" world history. The term "context" may not be entirely appropriate here, as world history becomes its own goal. On the other hand, this approach does not necessarily abandon spatialities of nations and civilizations as organizing principles of the past, and is unable to that extent to entirely abolish its own standpoint in a particular nation or civilization (in addition to being caught up in the vocabulary of the cultural, as in "cross-cultural," which presents its own problems of reification). Hence the calls in recent years for the substitution of "global" for world history, which do not seem to have provoked much response, probably because their assumption of the possibility of spatial transcendence is not very convincing, and may in fact serve to reintroduce Eurocentrism by the back door.

The third and final mode of conceiving world history I would like to take up here is what I will describe as world-history-as-totality, in which the world or the globe becomes the ultimate frame of reference in the investigation and explanation of the forces shaping the past and the present. It is this radical option that in my view both necessitates the practice of world history and renders it highly problematic. Rather than organizing the world in terms of the spaces of nations and civilizations, this perspective calls for a view of nations and civilizations in their historicity, not only as possessing beginnings and endings of their own, but as being by their very nature more process than finished product. Unlike in the advocacy of global history, if I understand it correctly, the issue here is not to find a transcendent perspective that defies concrete grounding and supersedes spatial partiality. It is rather to confront the contingencies and ground-level processes of human activity with the structures that are at once the products and the conditions of that activity. The most obvious examples of this kind of world history would be those informed by a Marxist-inspired world-system analysis.

I would like to suggest here, however, that we need to go a step beyond world-system analysis in order to fulfill the promise of world-history-as-totality. In the sense that I am using it here, world-history-as-totality is intended to refer not just to abstract structural totalities, but even more importantly to a perspective that demands deconstruction—most importantly, historicization—of the spaces that conventionally have been rendered into containers of history; not just nations and civilizations, but such structural totalities as capital. World-system analysis has made seminal contributions to our understanding of the formation and

dynamics of civilizations and nations, but remains itself at an abstract level in its conceptualizations of space primarily in terms of the operations of markets and capital. What we need is greater attentiveness to human activity—from travel to social movements to the construction of social spaces implied by such concepts as class, gender, and ethnicity—in the construction of historical spaces.

World-history-as-totality ultimately is most radical in its theoretical and methodological implications because it calls for the proliferation of space in historical analysis (beyond those of economic, cultural, and political power) and for recognition of the historical interaction between many spaces that produce, but are also conditioned by, structural totalities of various kinds: from nations and empires to the world-systems of capital. Ethnic and diasporic spaces are prime examples in our day of such spaces that often are described, somewhat misleadingly in my opinion, as “transnational” spaces. Such spaces preceded in their existence the emergence of nations; they may not be of equal significance to all parts of the nation, in which case they may help undermine its unity and homogeneity, and they are quite likely to outlast the nation as we have known it. Translocal, I think, is a better (because both more grounded and more flexible) term to describe the motions that create these spaces. The move from the transnational to the translocal involves more than choice of vocabulary; it carries us from one conceptual realm, that of nations and civilizations, to another: that of places.

Historiographically speaking, what makes world histories based on conventional spatialities of nations or civilizations (or cultures, as they are sometimes described euphemistically), or even world systems, seem retrograde these days is that these spatialities have become increasingly questionable in the present, raising questions about their deployment in the past. This is by no means to state that they are irrelevant politically, intellectually, or historiographically. What is in question is whether they are autonomous subjects of history or subjects to history themselves, with all the temporal and spatial implications of such subjection. Let me illustrate by referring to some problems in the study of China, Asia, and Islam, corresponding respectively to issues of nation, continent, and civilization. I will take up issues of world-system analysis in the course of these illustrations. I choose these three because they have been of concern to me in my work, but also because they play a major part in contemporary geopolitics.

The “idea” of China has acquired considerable complexity in recent years, presenting unprecedented challenges in the writing and teaching of Chinese history. The complexity itself is not novel; I derive the term “idea of China” from the title of a book by Andrew March, published three decades ago.⁴ China as an imagined entity that has assumed dif-

ferent characteristics over time has been the subject of many a splendid study, from Raymond Dawson's *The Chinese Chameleon* to Harold Isaacs's *Scratches on Our Minds*.⁵ The fact that such studies are still called for and produced may also alert us to continued resistance among the general public (here or in China) as well as among scholars to viewing China historically.

The present poses its own challenges. The knowledge of changing images of China was not accompanied in the past by any radical questioning of the realities of China or of being Chinese. Until only a generation ago, the dominant historical paradigm identified China with the boundaries of so-called "Mainland China," saw in the unfolding of the past the formation—in its more culturalist guises, the articulation—of an identifiable "Chineseness," and viewed regions and regionalism as legacies to be overcome in the process of nation-building. China in this paradigm was not just a nation, it was a civilization, with a "great tradition" continuing from the earliest times to the present, possibly matched only by India: "five thousand years of civilization," as the common cliché would have it. It is fair to say that despite all their other differences, Chinese and non-Chinese historians shared this common paradigm.

The culturalism—and the clichés—persist, but they face new challenges, not by phenomena that are necessarily novel in themselves, but by older phenomena that have been given a new kind of recognition. Terms such as "Greater" or "Cultural" China that have become commonplaces of contemporary geopolitics implicitly repudiate the identification of the physical boundaries of "China" or "Chineseness" with the mainland. Greater China brings in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the populations of Chinese origin in Southeast Asia, while Cultural China is global in scope and, in its reference to a so-called Chinese diaspora that somehow retains a fundamental cultural Chineseness, withstands the very forces of history.⁶ Such a notion of Chineseness carries with it strong racial presuppositions. The new visions of China and Chineseness are at once imperial in spatial pretensions and deconstructive in their consequences. Spatial expansion of notions of Chineseness brings historical differences into the very interior of the idea of China, calling into question the idea of China as the articulation of a national or civilizational space marked either by a common destiny or a homogeneous culture. The "China Reconstructs" of an earlier day has been transformed in the title of a more recent study into "China Deconstructs," foregrounding the emergent importance of regional differences against pretensions to national unity.⁷ And this is not just the doing of non-Chinese scholars of China: The most important challenges to the idea of national or civilizational unity and homogeneity come from Taiwan and Hong Kong, bent on asserting their local identities

against Beijing's imperial ambitions over territories deemed to be "historically" Chinese.

Ideologically speaking, however, it seems to me that the more important effect of these new conceptualizations of Chinese spaces is in fact the questioning of the historical claim that the history of China may be grasped in terms of an expansion from the Central Plains outward. In fact, it may be that looking from the borderlands *in* is crucial to understanding the formation of so-called Chinese culture, which may be understood as a unified culture only in the sense of variations on common themes. There is an important recognition here that earlier textbook as well as popular notions of Chinese culture identified Chinese culture with a textual culture, and textual culture with a national identity as Chinese, meaning mostly the culture of the elite. Such identification has done much to disguise the complexity of Eastern Asian cultural formations that has persisted despite political colonization from imperial centers, which also suggests that the cultural formations of this region are best grasped in ecumenical terms rather than by extending to the past claims of recent origin, most importantly nationalism.

I do not need to belabor here that similar problems plague the very idea of Asia, which is even more obviously a creation of modern Europeans (even if the term itself goes back to the ancient Greeks or Mesopotamians). It was through Jesuit maps that Chinese of the Ming Dynasty found themselves in Asia, and even that did not matter much until the nineteenth century, when knowledge of geographical location appeared as a necessity of political survival for the Qing.⁸ Until the modern period, knowledge of what passed for Asia was knowledge of limited spaces produced by states but also by merchants and travelers. It is fair to say that Marco Polo's Asia was not Ibn Battuta's Asia was not Rabban Sauma's Asia or, going back a millennium in time, Faxian or Xuanzang's Asia.⁹ Whether we speak of premodern world systems or political states, Asia consisted of localized spaces—either for outsiders or for insiders. Notions of inside and outside are themselves products of modern delineation of spaces; accounts of human motions such as those cited above mark passage from one place to another (kingdoms, cities, Buddhist monasteries, etc.), but as far as I am aware, not one account speaks of the crossing of continental boundaries. These spaces were endowed with different significations, moreover, depending on the motives and activities that produced them, so that the same spaces carried multiple meanings—all of them contrasting with the reductionist homogeneity of modern "scientific" mapping.

The multiple "world-systems" Janet Abu-Lughod has identified for thirteenth-century Eurasia suggests some overarching order of world-systems and their interactions in the delineation of spaces stretching from

one end of Eurasia to the other, including large parts of Africa.¹⁰ It is important, however, not to allow the abstract structures suggested by motions of commodities to cover over and erase these other spaces that coexisted with, and created perturbations within and across, the boundaries of world-systems and contributed to their structuring. It is even more important to underline here that world-systems, conceived in terms of national or civilizational entities such as the Mongol, Arabic, Byzantine, and Ottoman Empires, or Song-Yuan-Ming China, or the kingdoms of the Indian subcontinent, not be allowed to cover over the immense differences within the territories designated by these political entities. Significantly, Abu-Lughod's preferred term is "circuits," referring to networks and their nodes rather than entire surfaces.¹¹ How these "networks" contributed to the formation of the political entities indicated by those terms is a fundamental question that has priority over the more common practice of describing the networks in terms of the political entities, which puts the formation of these entities before some of the crucial processes that went into their making.

These complexities in the notion of Asia persist to this day, ultimately undermining confidence in the possibility of defining such an entity or delineating its boundaries. The appearance or reappearance of a discourse of Asian values since the 1980s in its identification of those values with values that are at best national or regional in origin only underlines the fragmented nature of the notion of Asia. The idea is to be understood at best as a utopian ideal and therefore as another mode of constructing Asia that has many hurdles to overcome before it is realized. On the other hand, the very effort is indicative of the historical reality and significance the idea of Asia has acquired, regardless of who initially constructed it and where and when it was constructed. I am not referring here only to the persistence of Orientalist notions of Asia in Euroamerica or the reification of Asia in elite and state ideologies in Asia itself, but to more radical efforts to find "Asian" alternatives to Euroamerican hegemony that acknowledge the fragmented nature of Asia and seek on that basis to produce a more dynamic conception that brings unity and difference together dialectically.¹²

The third case I would like to use by way of illustration is Islam. It is not just George W. Bush, Samuel Huntington, Benjamin Barber, evangelical Christians, or fundamentalist Moslems who reify Islam, taking it out of history as a civilization or a deviation from it. In the aftermath of September 11, a hue and cry went up all over U.S. campuses about the need to find out more about Islam. Those who led the demand were usually liberal scholars, including specialists on Islam, or various Islamic societies. In another example of identifying a "civilization" with a text, the University of North Carolina even made selections from the Koran a

required assignment for the orientation of incoming freshmen, and got sued in the process. Within my immediate circles, everyone wanted to bring an Islam specialist onto the faculty. Few thought or said anything about an Afghan, a Central Asian, or a Saudi historian who might have something to say about concrete circumstances that produce terrorists: struggles within Islamic societies over political, cultural, and social differences, the entanglement of those struggles within a history of imperialism, and resentments bred currently by U.S. colonialism and imperialism, including cultural imperialism, against a modernity dominated by the same powers that have colonized the many worlds of Islam for more than a century, and continue to do so with the complicity of native elites. Peter van der Veer has written of the importance of nationalism in the religious revival in India.¹³ The relationship between nationalism and a civilization conceived in religious terms is also very much at issue here. It is a contradictory relationship, a relationship of unity and opposition, that is further exacerbated by class, gender, and ethnic divisions that are as important in so-called Islamic societies as in others.¹⁴ And yet these problems are routinely ignored in the reification of Islam when it is clear that such reification no longer serves the purposes, as it might have a millennium earlier, of unifying either a divided world of Islamic societies or their historical "Other," the equally divided world of Christianity.

I do not need to remind readers of the historicity of Islam, in the sense both of its temporal transformations and its spatial diversity. Even in Samuel Huntington's delineation of civilizations, Islam stands out for the impossibility of locating it within identifiable boundaries.¹⁵ Aziz Al-Azmeh's *Islams and Modernities*, to cite one outstanding example, has made a cogent case for the diversity both of Islam and Islamic modernities.¹⁶ Where factionalism is not suppressed by the domination of one or another sect, Islam is divided into competing and conflicting factions, as is quite evident in the tragic case of Iraq, or in the competition among sects that has marked the recent Islamic resurgence in Turkey.¹⁷ The evidence of history, once again, seems unable to overcome the weight of established traditions: not traditions of Islam, but traditions of scholarship and popular imagination.

My rehearsal of the historicity, boundary instabilities, and internal differences—if not fragmentations—of nations, civilizations, and continents is intended to underline the historiographically problematic nature of world histories organized around such units. These entities are products of efforts to bring political or conceptual order to the world—political and conceptual strategies of containment, so to speak. This order is achieved only at the cost of suppressing alternative spatialities and temporalities, however, as well as covering over processes that went into

their making. A world history organized around these entities itself inevitably partakes of these same suppressions and cover-ups.

It may not be very surprising that as global forces, including forces of empire, produce economic and cultural processes and human actions that undermine modernity's strategies of containment, we have witnessed a proliferation of spaces, as well as of claims to different temporalities. Perhaps it is living in a state of flux that predisposes intellectuals presently to stress motion and process over stable containers; traveling theorists are given to traveling theories, as cultural critics from Edward Said to James Clifford have suggested by word or example.¹⁸ What is important is that we are called upon to face an obligation to view the past differently, to open up an awareness of what was suppressed in a historiography of order, and to take note of the importance of human activity, including intellectual and cultural activity, in creating the world. That is what I had in mind when I proposed "performing the world" as the title for this presentation—performing in the sense both of accomplishing the world and representing it, each one an indispensable condition of the other.

At the same time, in a world that seems to be caught up in a maelstrom created by forces that simultaneously produce homogenization and heterogenization, history seems to be receding rapidly into the past, even as the past returns to make claims on the present in a "resurgence of history," as the French writer Jean-Marie Guehenno puts it in his study of the decline of the authority of the nation-state under the assault of forces of globalization and the resurgence in response of a consciousness of the local.¹⁹ In the world of global modernity, we witness a return of civilizational claims, bolstered, ironically, by the same destabilizing forces of transborder ethnicities and diasporas, and calling for alternative epistemologies and alternative claims to historical consciousness. This is the case not just with the so-called "clashes between civilizations." Different epistemological claims mark struggles over the future of the same civilization, as in the resurgence of biblical attacks in the United States on science and history, which draw upon works that predate—and, obviously, have survived—the Enlightenment. One such work is the biblical history of the world written by Bishop James Ussher in the seventeenth century, which has been recently reissued. This work, *Annals of the World*, is apparently quite popular among evangelicals, who have used it for inspiration in the construction of the proliferating Creation museums and theme parks across the United States.²⁰

One historian of China has written cogently if somewhat simplistically of "rescuing history from the nation"—cogent because the "nationalization" of history has indeed been of primary significance in shaping understanding of the spaces of history, if not the denial of history as

such.²¹ A political idea to which the legitimation of history is crucial, the nation has sought to disguise its historicity by projecting itself across the knowable past, a kind of colonization of history that corresponds to nation formation itself as a colonizing process. From a historiographical perspective, a national perspective on the past, including the national past, is woefully inadequate, as some of the most important forces in the shaping of the past transcend national boundaries. The same may be said of a world history that is conceived in terms of nations and civilizations.

The denial of the nation is also simplistic, however, because it does not recognize that while the nation itself is historical, which may make the national space into an "artifice of history," it nevertheless carries all the force of a historical reality. We may dismiss nations, civilizations, continents, and much else besides as constructs of one sort or another, but there is no denying that despite all the criticism, they refuse to go away. This is partly because of their continued importance in the realities of culture and politics, and partly because of the important place they hold in the political and cultural unconscious, including the unconscious of scholars, who still seem to think nothing of terms like "uniting East and West," or "Asian perspectives," to cite two recent examples from my own campus. Besides, the space of the nation is not the only space that history needs to be rescued from, and not all phenomena can be easily understood outside the context of the nation. Some may even suffer a distortion when forced into transnational or translocal frameworks: issues of democracy, citizenship, and civil society readily come to mind. This qualification may be especially important when we consider the public-pedagogical functions of history.

The issue here is not merely national against transnational or world history, but the proliferation of space that attends the deprivileging of conventional modes of conceiving of historical spaces. The very deconstruction of national or civilizational spaces, in other words, raises the question of how to reconstruct history spatially and temporally, if that is indeed a desirable goal. Why put Humpty Dumpty back together again, especially after seeing how much mischief he has done? In many ways, this is a fundamental question facing the practice of world history, which simply respatializes the past, not through a radical reconsideration of the spaces of history, but simply by rearranging existing spaces from a perspective that supposedly transcends them all. An anarchist (rather than a Marxist, as Jerry Bentley would have it) would see right away the consolidation of hegemony that may be at work in such a rearrangement.

The answer throws us back to the pedagogical functions of history, including world history. While we need to insist on a critical appreciation of the past that views nations and civilizations in their historicity, it seems to me that if world history is to achieve its pedagogical functions, we

cannot cavalierly dispense with nations and civilizations in its organization any more than we can do away with national histories in the name of world history, or continents in the name of oceans, localized spatialities, or networks.

Is there any way to bring these critical perspectives into history—in this case, world history—without falling into some kind of postmodern and postcolonial cynicism about past ways of doing history? Here, by way of conclusion, I would like to put forth three considerations.

First, a distinction is necessary, I think, between world history understood as transnational history and world history as a history of the world.²² The confusion of these two understandings of world history disguises the full significance of challenging national histories. The transnational is not the same as the worldwide. More importantly, perhaps, the other side of challenging national history from supranational perspectives is to bring to the surface subnational histories of various kinds. The radical challenge of transnational history lies in its conjoining of the supra- and the sub- or intranational, which calls forth an understanding of transnational as translocal, with all its subversive historiographical and political implications. If national history serves as an ideological “strategy of containment,” the containment of the translocal (as distinct from the worldwide) as process or structure is of immediate and strategic importance, as it bears directly on the determination and consolidation of national boundaries. The translocal presents challenges that are quite distinct from the multicultural, which has been attached to world history as one of its political and cultural goals. The difference may be between abolishing national history (or at least cutting it down to size among other histories) and placing it within the perspective of the world.

Second, it is necessary to reconceive nations and civilizations not as homogeneous units but as historical ecumenes.²³ This is readily evident in the case of civilizations conceived in terms of religions, from which the term derives. The volume edited by Michael Adas, *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, provides a good example.²⁴ Jerry Bentley suggests that an ecumenical approach is necessary to overcoming the Eurocentrism of world history. His intention is most importantly ethical. The concept of “ecumene,” however, may also be translated into a way to grasp spatialities. I would like to suggest here that the idea of the ecumenical may be applied productively to regions, civilizations, and continents, among other large entities, as well as to nations, the important issue being the foregrounding of commonalities as well as differences, and recognizing a multiplicity of spatialities within a common space marked not by firm boundaries but by the intensity and concentration of interactions, which themselves are subject to historical fluctuations. Such an understanding of ecumene accords with the term’s etymological ori-

gins, meaning the inhabited or inhabitable world, which is how peoples from the Greeks to Europeans to the Chinese conceived of the world, which did not encompass the world as we understand it, but referred only to the world that mattered. It was modernity that invented one world out of the many worlds of earlier peoples, and even that has been thrown into doubt by so-called globalization that unifies the known globe, but also fragments it along fractures old and new.

If I may illustrate by an example from the part of the world I study, there has been much talk in recent years of a Confucian or Neo-Confucian Eastern Asia, and, of course, Confucianism long has been held to be a hallmark of a Chinese civilization that holds the central place of hegemony in Eastern Asia. It is interesting to contemplate when Confucius became Chinese; when he was rendered from a Zhou Dynasty sage into one of the points of departure for a civilization conceived in national terms. When the Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese adopted Confucianism for their own purposes, all the time claiming their own separate identity, did they do so to become part of the Sung or Yuan or Ming, whom they resisted strenuously, or because they perceived in Confucianism values of statecraft and social organization that were lodged in the texts of a tradition that was more a classical than a Chinese tradition, and which unfolded differently in these different states?²⁵ This is what I have in mind when I refer to commonality as well as difference, even radical difference. It could be complicated further by extending the argument to the entanglement of societies in a multiplicity of ecumenes. What we call China itself did not simply grow from the inside out, radiating out from a Yellow River plains core, but was equally a product in the end of forces that poured from the outside in, from different directions, producing translocal spaces. These interactions of the inside and the outside produced the China we have come to know that, once formed, would contain them and push their memories to the margins. Their recovery toward the center of historical inquiry recasts the history of China in more ways than one, as I noted above.

In underlining the overdetermination of parts that resist dissolution into homogenized wholes, my goal is not to do away with history by rendering it into a conglomeration of microhistories. I merely wish to illustrate what a radical and thoroughgoing historicism might lead to. The paradigm (or metaphor, if you like) is one that may be used productively in many cases. One of its advantages is that it also allows for different parts of the ecumene to react differently—and autonomously—with parts of different ecumenes. Regions may in some instances serve similar functions, but an ecumene conceived not in terms of physical proximity but of social and cultural constructions may also be deployed

across vast distances, as, for example, with contemporary migrant populations spread across the globe.

The third consideration involves the “worlding” of world history—its relationship to living in a world that is as much about difference as it is about sameness or commonality. It may be that a day will come when everyone around the world will conceive of the world and its history in identical ways. Until that day arrives, however, we need to be attentive at all times to the limited standpoints and visions from which we think and write history, regardless of how global or universalistic we may wish to be. Societies around the world past and present have thought about the world and its history differently, which must enter as a fundamental consideration into any practice of world history. This requires, I think, that world history can be written ultimately only as historiography, as an account not just of different conceptualizations of the world, but also of different ways of conceiving the past. This needs to be undergirded by a consciousness of our own place in time, a self-reflectiveness that serves as a reminder that we are not at the end but somewhere along the course of history, and that the very next generation may demand a different kind of history than the one(s) that our imagination allows. Awareness of spatial and temporal restrictions is crucial, I think, to any critical practice of world history.

These are merely some thoughts regarding different modes of thinking and writing world history that seek to account for processes of commonality and difference, unity and fragmentation, and patterns in motion of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Most important in this consideration is to fulfill the pedagogical goals of world history—the obligation at the most basic level to acquaint students and the public with the whos, wheres, and whens of other societies—while also providing them with the critical perspectives demanded by contemporary global transformations, as well as visions of humanity that promise something beyond contemporary ideologies of order. How this may be achieved is secondary to the recognition of complexity—even chaos—in the first place. We need to remind ourselves that thinking, writing, and teaching world history—indeed, all history—is not merely an exercise in description but also a performance in the double sense I described it above; as accomplishing and representing the world, not just what it has been, but what it has suppressed in the process of becoming what it is, and what it might yet become by recovering what has been suppressed.

The past is not just a legacy: It is also a project. That such an approach to the past opens it up to the possibility of appropriation for diverse political and social causes is a predicament that may or may not be undesirable. An awareness of how the world appears from different social contexts and perspectives, for example, would enrich our own lim-

ited conceptions of the world, which to me appears as a definite advance even if it complicates our tasks as historians, perhaps even makes them impossible. Then there is the biblical rewriting of history, with its own totalistic claims based on blind faith, which is as pernicious in its consequences for history as creationism is for understanding human evolution and development. All we can do is to acknowledge the presence of such alternatives as answering to different social and political needs over which the historian does not, and probably should not, have control. The best we can do is to ask of ourselves what *our* project might be, while we remain as true as possible to the evidence of the past in all its prolific variation—including variation over the meaning of the world, and of history.

Endnotes

¹ I use “public-pedagogical” several times in the course of this discussion. I do so to indicate that the implications of teaching world history go beyond formal schooling, especially in these days of the proliferation of public media.

² The difficulty is quite apparent in a book such as Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997) which, after deconstructing “metageography” for one hundred fifty pages, ends up with the same configuration of continents and regions.

³ Jerry Bentley, “Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History,” 18. I am grateful to Jerry Bentley for sharing this soon-to-be-published paper with me.

⁴ Andrew L. March, *The Idea of China: Myth and Theory in Geographic Thought* (New York, 1974).

⁵ Raymond S. Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization* (London, 1967) and Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (White Plains, NY, 1980).

⁶ Work of this kind has proliferated in recent years. For outstanding examples, see Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford, CA, 1991), and Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore, 1992). For “greater China,” see the special issue of *China Quarterly* 136 (December 1993).

⁷ David S.G. Goodman and Gerald Segal, *China Deconstructs: Politics, Trade and Regionalism* (London, 1994).

⁸ For further discussion, see Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (December 1996): 96–118. It was the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci who introduced “Asia” to Ming thinkers. It is equally interesting that the “idea of Asia” was largely forgotten until it was revived again in the nineteenth century, this time as a serious geopolitical problem.

⁹ Christopher Dawson, *Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York, 1955); Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354* (Columbia, MO, 1986); Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century* (Berkeley, 2004); Fa-hsien, *Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms* (Whitefish, MT, 2004); Morris Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu: Rabban Sauma and the First Journey from China to the West* (Tokyo, 1992). For a Song-Yuan geography, see Chau Ju-kua: *His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, trans. Friedrich Hirth and W.W. Rockhill (Taipei, 1970). For the modern, scientific erasure

of alternative mappings, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu, HI, 1994). These mappings, needless to say, are very much entangled in questions of national, class, gender, and ethnic power relations.

¹⁰ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World-System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York, 1989).

¹¹ Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, chap. 11.

¹² Editorial, "Problematizing Asia," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (April 2000): 5–6. See also Young-seo Baik, "Conceptualizing 'Asia' in [the] Modern Chinese Mind: A Korean Perspective," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (2002): 277–286.

¹³ Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, CA, 1994).

¹⁴ I have discussed these complications at length in "Modernity in Question? Culture and Religion in an Age of Global Modernity," *Diaspora* (in press).

¹⁵ I am referring to Samuel P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1997).

¹⁶ Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London, 1993).

¹⁷ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (New York, 2003).

¹⁸ Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," in Edward Said, *The World, The Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, 1983), 226–247; James Clifford and Vivek Dhareshwar (eds.), *Traveling Theories, Traveling Theorists*. Special issue of *Inscriptions* 5 (1989).

¹⁹ Jean-Marie Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, trans. Victoria Elliott (Minneapolis, MN, 1995).

²⁰ James Ussher, *The Annals of the World*, revised and updated by Larry and Marion Pierce (Green Forest, AR, 2003). First published in Latin in 1658.

²¹ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago, 1995).

²² For examples of transnationality, by no means bound to projects of "world history," see Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Lincoln, NE, 1980); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism* (Princeton, 1997); John F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, CA, 2003); and John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650–1900* (Montreal, 2003). For a more regionally oriented work, see Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2002). Most works viewed as world history should, less misleadingly, be described as transnational or translocal histories. The confusion points to the hold on the historical imagination of "world history" of past legacies.

²³ "Ecumene" is understood as "areas of intense and sustained cultural interaction." This definition is offered by John and Jean Comaroff on the basis of works by Ulf Hannerz and Igor Kopytoff. See Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," special issue of *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 291–343, 294.

²⁴ Michael Adas (ed.), *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia, PA, 1993).

²⁵ For the most up-to-date, comprehensive, and illuminating discussions of these issues, see Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (eds.), *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam* (Los Angeles, CA, 2002).