

Why Study History?

Peter N. Stearns

George Mason

People live in the present. They plan for and worry about the future. History, however, is the study of the past. Given all the demands that press in from living in the present and anticipating what is yet to come, why bother with what has been? Given all the desirable and available branches of knowledge, why insist-as most American educational programs do-on a good bit of history? And why urge many students to study even more history than they are required to?

Any subject of study needs justification: its advocates must explain why it is worth attention. Most widely accepted subjects-and history is certainly one of them-attract some people who simply like the information and modes of thought involved. But audiences less spontaneously drawn to the subject and more doubtful about why to bother need to know what the purpose is.

Historians do not perform heart transplants, improve highway design, or arrest criminals. In a society that quite correctly expects education to serve useful purposes, the functions of history can seem more difficult to define than those of engineering or medicine. History is in fact very useful, actually indispensable, but the products of historical study are less tangible, sometimes less immediate, than those that stem from some other disciplines.

In the past history has been justified for reasons we would no longer accept. For instance, one of the reasons history holds its place in current education is because earlier leaders believed that a knowledge of certain historical facts helped distinguish the educated from the uneducated; the person who could reel off the date of the Norman conquest of England (1066) or the name of the person who came up with the theory of evolution at about the same time that Darwin did (Wallace) was deemed superior-a better candidate for law school or even a business promotion. Knowledge of historical facts has been used as a screening device in many societies, from China to the United States, and the habit is still with us to some extent. Unfortunately, this use can encourage mindless memorization-a real but not very appealing aspect of the discipline.

History should be studied because it is essential to individuals and to society, and because it harbors beauty. There are many ways to discuss the real functions of the subject-as there are many different historical talents and many different paths to historical meaning. All definitions of history's utility, however, rely on two fundamental facts.

History Helps Us Understand People and Societies

In the first place, history offers a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave. Understanding the operations of people and societies is difficult, though a number of disciplines make the attempt. An exclusive reliance on current data would needlessly handicap our efforts. How can we evaluate war if the nation is at peace-unless we use historical materials? How can we understand genius, the influence of technological innovation, or the role that beliefs play in shaping family life, if we don't use what we know about experiences in the past? Some social scientists attempt to formulate laws or theories about human behavior. But even these recourses depend on historical information, except for in limited, often artificial cases in which experiments can be devised to determine how people act. Major aspects of a society's operation, like mass elections, missionary activities, or military alliances, cannot be set up as precise experiments. Consequently, history must serve, however imperfectly, as our laboratory, and data from the past must serve as our most vital evidence in the unavoidable quest to figure out why our complex species behaves as it does in societal settings. This, fundamentally, is why we cannot stay away from history: it offers the only extensive evidential

base for the contemplation and analysis of how societies function, and people need to have some sense of how societies function simply to run their own lives.

History Helps Us Understand Change and How the Society We Live in Came to Be

The second reason history is inescapable as a subject of serious study follows closely on the first. The past causes the present, and so the future. Any time we try to know why something happened-whether a shift in political party dominance in the American Congress, a major change in the teenage suicide rate, or a war in the Balkans or the Middle East-we have to look for factors that took shape earlier. Sometimes fairly recent history will suffice to explain a major development, but often we need to look further back to identify the causes of change. Only through studying history can we grasp how things change; only through history can we begin to comprehend the factors that cause change; and only through history can we understand what elements of an institution or a society persist despite change.

The importance of history in explaining and understanding change in human behavior is no mere abstraction. Take an important human phenomenon such as alcoholism. Through biological experiments scientists have identified specific genes that seem to cause a proclivity toward alcohol addiction in some individuals. This is a notable advance. But alcoholism, as a social reality, has a history: rates of alcoholism have risen and fallen, and they have varied from one group to the next. Attitudes and policies about alcoholism have also changed and varied. History is indispensable to understanding why such changes occur. And in many ways historical analysis is a more challenging kind of exploration than genetic experimentation. Historians have in fact greatly contributed in recent decades to our understanding of trends (or patterns of change) in alcoholism and to our grasp of the dimensions of addiction as an evolving social problem.

One of the leading concerns of contemporary American politics is low voter turnout, even for major elections. An historical analysis of changes in voter turnout can help us begin to understand the problem we face today. What were turnouts in the past? When did the decline set in? Once we determine when the trend began, we can try to identify which of the factors present at the time combined to set the trend in motion. Do the same factors sustain the trend still, or are there new ingredients that have contributed to it in more recent decades? A purely contemporary analysis may shed some light on the problem, but an historical assessment is clearly fundamental-and essential for anyone concerned about American political health today.

History, then, provides the only extensive materials available to study the human condition. It also focuses attention on the complex processes of social change, including the factors that are causing change around us today. Here, at base, are the two related reasons many people become enthralled with the examination of the past and why our society requires and encourages the study of history as a major subject in the schools.

The Importance of History in Our Own Lives

These two fundamental reasons for studying history underlie more specific and quite diverse uses of history in our own lives. History well told is beautiful. Many of the historians who most appeal to the general reading public know the importance of dramatic and skillful writing-as well as of accuracy. Biography and military history appeal in part because of the tales they contain. History as art and entertainment serves a real purpose, on aesthetic grounds but also on the level of human understanding. Stories well done are stories that reveal how people and societies have actually functioned, and they prompt thoughts about the human experience in other times and places. The same aesthetic and humanistic goals inspire people to immerse themselves in efforts to reconstruct quite remote pasts, far removed from immediate, present-day utility. Exploring what historians sometimes call the "pastness of the past"-the ways people in

distant ages constructed their lives-involves a sense of beauty and excitement, and ultimately another perspective on human life and society.

History Contributes to Moral Understanding

History also provides a terrain for moral contemplation. Studying the stories of individuals and situations in the past allows a student of history to test his or her own moral sense, to hone it against some of the real complexities individuals have faced in difficult settings. People who have weathered adversity not just in some work of fiction, but in real, historical circumstances can provide inspiration. "History teaching by example" is one phrase that describes this use of a study of the past-a study not only of certifiable heroes, the great men and women of history who successfully worked through moral dilemmas, but also of more ordinary people who provide lessons in courage, diligence, or constructive protest.

History Provides Identity

History also helps provide identity, and this is unquestionably one of the reasons all modern nations encourage its teaching in some form. Historical data include evidence about how families, groups, institutions and whole countries were formed and about how they have evolved while retaining cohesion. For many Americans, studying the history of one's own family is the most obvious use of history, for it provides facts about genealogy and (at a slightly more complex level) a basis for understanding how the family has interacted with larger historical change. Family identity is established and confirmed. Many institutions, businesses, communities, and social units, such as ethnic groups in the United States, use history for similar identity purposes. Merely defining the group in the present pales against the possibility of forming an identity based on a rich past. And of course nations use identity history as well-and sometimes abuse it. Histories that tell the national story, emphasizing distinctive features of the national experience, are meant to drive home an understanding of national values and a commitment to national loyalty.

Studying History Is Essential for Good Citizenship

A study of history is essential for good citizenship. This is the most common justification for the place of history in school curricula. Sometimes advocates of citizenship history hope merely to promote national identity and loyalty through a history spiced by vivid stories and lessons in individual success and morality. But the importance of history for citizenship goes beyond this narrow goal and can even challenge it at some points.

History that lays the foundation for genuine citizenship returns, in one sense, to the essential uses of the study of the past. History provides data about the emergence of national institutions, problems, and values-it's the only significant storehouse of such data available. It offers evidence also about how nations have interacted with other societies, providing international and comparative perspectives essential for responsible citizenship. Further, studying history helps us understand how recent, current, and prospective changes that affect the lives of citizens are emerging or may emerge and what causes are involved. More important, studying history encourages habits of mind that are vital for responsible public behavior, whether as a national or community leader, an informed voter, a petitioner, or a simple observer.

What Skills Does a Student of History Develop?

What does a well-trained student of history, schooled to work on past materials and on case studies in social change, learn how to do? The list is manageable, but it contains several overlapping categories.

The Ability to Assess Evidence. The study of history builds experience in dealing with and assessing various kinds of evidence—the sorts of evidence historians use in shaping the most accurate pictures of the past that they can. Learning how to interpret the statements of past political leaders—one kind of evidence—helps form the capacity to distinguish between the objective and the self-serving among statements made by present-day political leaders. Learning how to combine different kinds of evidence—public statements, private records, numerical data, visual materials—develops the ability to make coherent arguments based on a variety of data. This skill can also be applied to information encountered in everyday life.

The Ability to Assess Conflicting Interpretations. Learning history means gaining some skill in sorting through diverse, often conflicting interpretations. Understanding how societies work—the central goal of historical study—is inherently imprecise, and the same certainly holds true for understanding what is going on in the present day. Learning how to identify and evaluate conflicting interpretations is an essential citizenship skill for which history, as an often-contested laboratory of human experience, provides training. This is one area in which the full benefits of historical study sometimes clash with the narrower uses of the past to construct identity. Experience in examining past situations provides a constructively critical sense that can be applied to partisan claims about the glories of national or group identity. The study of history in no sense undermines loyalty or commitment, but it does teach the need for assessing arguments, and it provides opportunities to engage in debate and achieve perspective.

Experience in Assessing Past Examples of Change. Experience in assessing past examples of change is vital to understanding change in society today—it's an essential skill in what we are regularly told is our "ever-changing world." Analysis of change means developing some capacity for determining the magnitude and significance of change, for some changes are more fundamental than others. Comparing particular changes to relevant examples from the past helps students of history develop this capacity. The ability to identify the continuities that always accompany even the most dramatic changes also comes from studying history, as does the skill to determine probable causes of change. Learning history helps one figure out, for example, if one main factor—such as a technological innovation or some deliberate new policy—accounts for a change or whether, as is more commonly the case, a number of factors combine to generate the actual change that occurs.

Historical study, in sum, is crucial to the promotion of that elusive creature, the well-informed citizen. It provides basic factual information about the background of our political institutions and about the values and problems that affect our social well-being. It also contributes to our capacity to use evidence, assess interpretations, and analyze change and continuities. No one can ever quite deal with the present as the historian deals with the past—we lack the perspective for this feat; but we can move in this direction by applying historical habits of mind, and we will function as better citizens in the process.

History Is Useful in the World of Work

History is useful for work. Its study helps create good businesspeople, professionals, and political leaders. The number of explicit professional jobs for historians is considerable, but most people who study history do not become professional historians. Professional historians teach at various levels, work in museums and media centers, do historical research for businesses or public agencies, or participate in the growing number of historical consultancies. These categories are important—indeed vital—to keep the basic enterprise of history going, but most people who study history use their training for broader professional purposes.

Students of history find their experience directly relevant to jobs in a variety of careers as well as to further study in fields like law and public administration. Employers often deliberately seek students with the kinds of capacities historical study promotes. The reasons are not hard to identify: students of history acquire, by studying different phases

of the past and different societies in the past, a broad perspective that gives them the range and flexibility required in many work situations. They develop research skills, the ability to find and evaluate sources of information, and the means to identify and evaluate diverse interpretations. Work in history also improves basic writing and speaking skills and is directly relevant to many of the analytical requirements in the public and private sectors, where the capacity to identify, assess, and explain trends is essential. Historical study is unquestionably an asset for a variety of work and professional situations, even though it does not, for most students, lead as directly to a particular job slot, as do some technical fields. But history particularly prepares students for the long haul in their careers, its qualities helping adaptation and advancement beyond entry-level employment. There is no denying that in our society many people who are drawn to historical study worry about relevance. In our changing economy, there is concern about job futures in most fields. Historical training is not, however, an indulgence; it applies directly to many careers and can clearly help us in our working lives.

What Kind of History Should We Study?

The question of why we should study history entails several subsidiary issues about what kind of history should be studied. Historians and the general public alike can generate a lot of heat about what specific history courses should appear in what part of the curriculum. Many of the benefits of history derive from various kinds of history, whether local or national or focused on one culture or the world. Gripping instances of history as storytelling, as moral example, and as analysis come from all sorts of settings. The most intense debates about what history should cover occur in relation to identity history and the attempt to argue that knowledge of certain historical facts marks one as an educated person. Some people feel that in order to become good citizens students must learn to recite the preamble of the American constitution or be able to identify Thomas Edison-though many historians would dissent from an unduly long list of factual obligations. Correspondingly, some feminists, eager to use history as part of their struggle, want to make sure that students know the names of key past leaders such as Susan B. Anthony. The range of possible survey and memorization chores is considerable-one reason that history texts are often quite long.

There is a fundamental tension in teaching and learning history between covering facts and developing historical habits of mind. Because history provides an immediate background to our own life and age, it is highly desirable to learn about forces that arose in the past and continue to affect the modern world. This type of knowledge requires some attention to comprehending the development of national institutions and trends. It also demands some historical understanding of key forces in the wider world. The ongoing tension between Christianity and Islam, for instance, requires some knowledge of patterns that took shape over 12 centuries ago. Indeed, the pressing need to learn about issues of importance throughout the world is the basic reason that world history has been gaining ground in American curriculums. Historical habits of mind are enriched when we learn to compare different patterns of historical development, which means some study of other national traditions and civilizations.

The key to developing historical habits of mind, however, is having repeated experience in historical inquiry. Such experience should involve a variety of materials and a diversity of analytical problems. Facts are essential in this process, for historical analysis depends on data, but it does not matter whether these facts come from local, national, or world history-although it's most useful to study a range of settings. What matters is learning how to assess different magnitudes of historical change, different examples of conflicting interpretations, and multiple kinds of evidence. Developing the ability to repeat fundamental thinking habits through increasingly complex exercises is essential. Historical processes and institutions that are deemed especially important to specific curriculums can, of course, be used to teach historical inquiry. Appropriate balance is the obvious goal, with an insistence on factual knowledge not allowed to overshadow the need to develop historical habits of mind.

Exposure to certain essential historical episodes and experience in historical inquiry are crucial to any program of historical study, but they require supplement. No program can be fully functional if it does not allow for whimsy and individual taste. Pursuing particular stories or types of problems, simply because they tickle the fancy, contributes to a rounded intellectual life. Similarly, no program in history is complete unless it provides some understanding of the ongoing role of historical inquiry in expanding our knowledge of the past and, with it, of human and social behavior. The past two decades have seen a genuine explosion of historical information and analysis, as additional facets of human behavior have been subjected to research and interpretation. And there is every sign that historians are continuing to expand our understanding of the past. It's clear that the discipline of history is a source of innovation and not merely a framework for repeated renderings of established data and familiar stories.

Why study history? The answer is because we virtually must, to gain access to the laboratory of human experience. When we study it reasonably well, and so acquire some usable habits of mind, as well as some basic data about the forces that affect our own lives, we emerge with relevant skills and an enhanced capacity for informed citizenship, critical thinking, and simple awareness. The uses of history are varied. Studying history can help us develop some literally "salable" skills, but its study must not be pinned down to the narrowest utilitarianism. Some history—that confined to personal recollections about changes and continuities in the immediate environment—is essential to function beyond childhood. Some history depends on personal taste, where one finds beauty, the joy of discovery, or intellectual challenge. Between the inescapable minimum and the pleasure of deep commitment comes the history that, through cumulative skill in interpreting the unfolding human record, provides a real grasp of how the world works.

Further Reading

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Peter N. Stearns is Heinz Professor of History and dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University. He also serves as editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Social History*. He is author of numerous books on European, U.S. social, and world history and history teaching. Recent books include *Millennium III, Century XXI: A Retrospective on the Future* and *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West*.

Why Study World History?

Jerry H. Bentley
University of Hawai'i

Practicing world historians rarely address the question 'why study world history?' Partly that is because, generally speaking, workaday historians are poor philosophers. They tend not to think professionally about questions of values because they devote their attention to a highly technical analysis of past times on the basis of a highly technical consideration of the surviving evidence.¹

This is unfortunate because world history is one of the big intellectual issues of our times. It draws attention to the mind-boggling processes of change, development, and transformation that human beings have generated and driven through time. It brings focus to the remarkable geographical spread of missionary religions and the influence that ideas and ideals have exercised in human affairs. It offers the best vantage point for study of the great divergences that agriculture, science, and mechanized industry have introduced into human history. It forces us to confront the phenomenon of globalization and situate it in historical context by conceiving and explaining the largest patterns in the experience of human beings on planet earth. As the field of study that deals most directly with the whole record of human achievements, world history is essential as the enterprise that enables human beings to understand themselves and their place in the world. So world history is one of the big intellectual issues that compel thoughtful people to pay attention. In abstract terms, this point might serve as a response to the question 'why study world history?'

In practice, though, human beings think in particular as well as abstract terms, and they face pressures to choose what to do with their time, so more specific justifications are necessary for the study of world history. The abstract argument is not necessarily wrong, but by itself it is not a sufficient justification for a time-intensive activity. If scholars and teachers think world history ought to occupy a prominent place in the educational curriculum, it is incumbent upon them to justify its presence there. Are there more specific arguments for the study of world history? Are there any larger social benefits that flow from the study of world history that might justify its inclusion in the educational curriculum? Let me address these questions by advancing three claims about world history that, taken together, I hope will serve as justifications for its study.

My first claim has to do with world history as a form of historical knowledge. It holds that for many purposes, although admittedly not all, world history is the best scholarly approach for the analysis, understanding, and explanation of the world and its development through time. The fundamental missions of historical study are precisely to analyze, understand, and explain the world and its development through time. So my first claim is that for some purposes, although admittedly not for all purposes, world history is the best way to take up the most basic and important missions of historical study.

There are certainly some purposes that world history does not serve particularly well. There are, after all, many reasons for studying the past. For some purposes it is important or desirable to focus closely on the experiences of a particular nation or city or social group or institution, for example, in the interests of understanding its nature and identity in some depth. These are all social forms that have influenced or determined the environments in which most peoples have led their lives throughout most of world history. During the past two centuries or so, the national state in particular has emerged as an especially effective model for the organization of societies and the mobilization of human energies. It would be foolish to ignore the roles of national states in modern history, or to suggest that all national histories dissolve into world history, or to assume that world history by itself is sufficient for purposes of analyzing, understanding, and explaining the experiences of national communities. Even as educational curricula make space for the study of world history, there remain very good reasons for historians to focus attention also on more local, regional, and national histories.

Granting these concessions and qualifications, I stand by the claim that for many important purposes, world history is the best scholarly approach for the analysis, understanding, and explanation of the world and its development through time. The reason has to do with context, because it is impossible to understand or assess the significance of any historical event or process or development in isolation. Human beings understand the surrounding world only within larger contexts or frameworks—larger fields of vision that make it possible to understand relationships between and among events, processes, and developments. In the absence of larger contexts or frameworks, individuals would find themselves in the condition of William James's famous infant, who for lack of conceptual and discriminatory faculties experiences the world as "one great blooming, buzzing confusion."²

World history provides the best and most useful contexts for many historical purposes. Historical development takes place and historical processes unfold on many different registers: local, regional, and national, obviously, but also transregional, continental, hemispheric, oceanic, and global. Better than other approaches to the past, world history situates historical development and historical processes in appropriate larger contexts that enable historians to construct meaning out of the myriad bits and pieces of information that constitute past experience.

World history facilitates the recognition and construction of larger contexts in several ways: it brings focus to connections that help to explain historical developments, it encourages the framing of comparisons that help clarify the relationships between and among historical developments, and it prompts historians to recognize and analyze large-scale systems that condition historical development. During the past generation or so, world historians have generated a sizable body of scholarship exploring the connections, comparisons, and systems that help to situate historical development in larger appropriate contexts.³ An extended review or discussion of that scholarship would be out of place here, but brief attention to some recent analyses might be helpful for purposes of illustrating the fresh perspectives that can arise when historians place particular developments in larger contexts.

Take the case of the American Civil War, a conflict that historians have conventionally considered exclusively in the context of U.S. national history. It is of course both possible and necessary to understand the Civil War as an episode in U.S. history—a unique experience that revealed in painful fashion some of the tensions and contradictions that plagued American society because the founding fathers were unable to bring about the abolition of slavery when they drew up a constitution for the new republic. Within the context of U.S. history, the Civil War serves as a prism that refracts in glaringly clear strands the differential political, social, economic, and cultural development of the nation's various regions, even as it also brings the evolution of national thought on moral and legal issues into historical focus.

While it is essential to analyze the American Civil War within the framework of U.S. national history, it is also enlightening to consider the conflict in the context of a larger world in which many societies were experiencing dire challenges and seeking effective models of organization and reorganization during the era of early industrialization.⁴ From this viewpoint, connections and comparisons enrich the understanding and deepen the explanation of a unique historical experience.

The United States certainly had a national history in the nineteenth century, but this U.S. national history was an entangled national history, and it is impossible to imagine it unfolding the way it did in the absence of the transregional and global connections that conditioned American historical development. Strong British demand for raw cotton, the institution of slavery, the early development of industrial production, and American expansion to the west were all features of the global historical landscape that profoundly influenced the American Civil War. In the absence of this web of ties linking the United States to other lands and peoples, the American Civil War is almost inconceivable. And just as conditions in other lands influenced the nature and the course of the conflict in the United States, the American Civil War in its turn had global implications of its own. It opened a space for France to seek opportunities for influence in Mexico, and it encouraged the expansion of cotton production in Egypt, Anatolia, and central Asian lands. High prices for raw cotton brought prosperity to all these lands and India as well during the Civil War, but the return of American cotton to the global market contributed to the collapse of prices and a severe global depression in the 1870s and 1880s.

Alongside the various connections linking the United States to a larger world, comparisons between American and other societies also help to locate the Civil War in global context. This was, after all, not the only conflict of global significance in the mid-nineteenth century. Conflicts also rocked Europe and Asia, where various parties embarked on efforts at social reorganization under conditions of early industrialization. These efforts had quite different results in different places. In Italy and Germany, like the United States, violent campaigns brought about the consolidation of powerful national states. Elsewhere in Europe, the revolutions of 1848 did not bring about the new political order that their leaders sought, but they launched an era of class-based political action, as newly emerging groups of workers sensed common interests. In China, the Taiping rebellion also ultimately failed, enabling a weakened Qing dynasty, hobbled further by unequal treaties, to hold onto power for another half-century. Yet it also prompted some Chinese leaders to undertake a Self-Strengthening Movement that laid the foundations of an industrial infrastructure in The Middle Kingdom. In Japan, events played out differently yet again: the visit of Commodore Perry sparked government crisis and a brief civil war, and the ensuing Meiji Restoration facilitated an industrialization process that made Japan both a powerful national state and a budding imperial power, albeit at the cost of tremendous domestic coercion and numerous small-scale conflicts.

Like wars of unification in Italy and Germany and the Meiji Restoration in Japan, the American Civil War addressed some of the fundamental tensions in American society, established a political and legal foundation for the emerging national state, and launched a process of rapid industrialization. It was a unique development, as were the other experiences mentioned here, but it deepens the understanding of them all to recognize that they each, to some extent, represented different responses to larger general challenges. In this case, the principal general challenge was to organize a viable society under conditions of early industrialization. Economic and political logic of the early industrial era pushed societies to consolidate political power, tighten the organizational bonds that held them together, mobilize national work forces, and build industrial plants. The national state was an institutional form that proved to be capable of accomplishing these organizational tasks. In this light it is perhaps not so surprising that during the later nineteenth century, many societies adopted the nation-state model for their own purposes or strengthened the institutions they had already put in place. They did so in different ways, through processes that were sometimes more and sometimes less violent, always reflecting the influence of local conditions, so all the processes were unique developments. It is helpful for historians to recognize, however, that the different experiences of nineteenth-century societies represented their different ways of responding to common challenges that were new to them all.

So my first claim holds that world history is essential as a mode of study because it deepens the understanding of individual societies' experiences by clarifying their relationships with other societies and by placing them in comparative perspective. This claim has to do with the generation of precise historical knowledge and the quest for deep historical understanding in appropriate contexts. The study of history can hardly have much value or benefit unless it stands on a solid foundation of accurate and reliable knowledge. So it is crucial for purposes of justifying the study of world history to recognize that for many purposes, world history yields better knowledge than alternative approaches to the past because of its capacity to situate historical development in appropriate larger contexts.

My second claim moves beyond the issue of historical knowledge as representation of past experience in general and into the realm of historical knowledge that is particularly appropriate in the educational curriculum because it has some larger social or public benefit in preparing students for responsible citizenship in the contemporary world. Over the years, educators and policy makers have suggested (or assumed) various reasons for studying world history. Most of their arguments have to do with practical considerations of national interests, including business, economic, diplomatic, geo-strategic, and security interests, to name the most prominent. There is some cogency to these arguments, and I concede that they have some force, even if they sometimes take a rather narcissistic approach by reducing the larger world to a set of American national interests.

Yet another argument for studying world history is moral, in that it has to do with the kinds of personal conduct and public policy that are appropriate for the contemporary world, and that is the one I would like to develop here. The concern that prompts it is the need for navigational aids in a world of difference. Both within and beyond our borders

we cross paths with different peoples, encounter different values, and seek ways to deal with different forms of social organization. How might we best conduct ourselves in a world of difference? My second claim addresses this question in holding that world history has unusual practical value because of its potential to acquaint students, citizens, and policy makers with cultural and social difference, and furthermore to facilitate constructive engagement with different peoples and societies.

Difference, after all, can be inconvenient. It can be disconcerting. It can be downright annoying. It has been known to fuel extreme behavior. For those who cannot abide difference, the temptation to elevate one particular allegiance above all others and strictly police its boundaries is powerful. That is the temptation that animates rabid nationalists, religious fundamentalists, xenophobic racists, and other ideological zealots who teach that the chosen group is the only acceptable source of identity and meaning, that it must be the only focus of allegiance, and that all members must surrender themselves to its needs and interests. Despite their ideological variety, these groups adopt common tactics in seeking to overcome the inconveniences and annoyances of difference by stamping it out within their own groups and seeking to control its influence, or in the most extreme cases by eliminating it from the world around them.

Can the study of world history stop this kind of destructive behavior? That would be nice, but I don't see any straight road leading from the study of world history to universal tolerance and world peace. What I do see is that the study of world history has good potential to encourage understanding and constructive engagement with difference. For one thing, it draws attention to the fact that the close-up presence of difference is not a new thing in human experience. The Roman Empire, Tang China, and the Ottoman Empire all were large multicultural societies in which peoples of different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic communities dealt with one another on a regular basis. The Mediterranean and Indian Ocean basins were the sites of massive communication and exchange networks that brought different peoples into systematic interaction. The Portuguese merchant Tomé Pires wrote that in the early sixteenth century, it was possible to hear eighty-four languages spoken in the streets of the Malay trading city Melaka. There are countless historical examples of multicultural societies in which different peoples managed to get along with one another, and frequently enough to thrive while doing so.

Furthermore, the study of world history goes beyond showing that human beings have been dealing successfully with difference for a very long time, and it goes beyond demonstrating that difference is not necessarily a frightful prospect. Indeed, the study of world history also offers the opportunity to engage difference in active study and to understand it as the product of development through time under specific historical conditions, rather than simply assuming that different peoples, different values, and different forms of social organization are suspect because they are unfamiliar.

The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has made a similar point in his recently published book entitled *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. There he argues "that we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another." This is actually a very modest goal. Appiah does not initially ask his readers to adopt or embrace different beliefs and values, or even to understand them, much less find them attractive, although he clearly hopes and expects that basic acquaintance will serve as a foundation for improved understanding. He approvingly quotes John von Neumann, one of the world's most brilliant mathematicians of the early twentieth century, who reportedly quipped once that "in set theory, you don't really understand things, you just get used to them." While he does not foresee a first acquaintance leading to deep understanding or appreciation of difference, Appiah does ask that his readers "get used to" difference and tolerate it, and he suggests that just as in John von Neumann's view of set theory, basic exposure to that which is unfamiliar is a first step toward this modest goal.⁵

In a similar way, my argument here is that acquaintance with the political, social, and cultural traditions of different peoples can help students and citizens realize that difference is not necessarily dangerous or distasteful. Even when it

is dangerous or distasteful, acquaintance with the political, social, and cultural traditions of different peoples can help students and citizens learn to understand the concerns of other peoples, to recognize their legitimate interests in the larger world, and to demand that their political leaders engage constructively with other peoples in the interests of resolving tensions, avoiding conflicts, and negotiating policies and practices that are generally fair in a world full of divergent interests.

Because the United States is so wealthy, powerful, and influential, I would argue further that American students and citizens have a particular moral responsibility to make conscientious efforts to pursue constructive engagement with peoples in the larger world, and to understand the effects of American national policies in that larger world.⁶ Constructive engagement with difference does not mean abandonment of national interests. All societies have legitimate interests in the larger world, including economic interests, security interests, and others. Yet the study of world history makes it clear that all societies depend on relations with their neighbors and that negotiations of their divergent interests have profoundly influenced the development of individual societies and the world as a whole.

If constructive engagement does not involve the sacrifice of self-interest, it does depend upon basic respect for those who are different. It is arguable that respect for others is an essential tool for the successful pursuit of national interests in the larger world, and it is certain that respect is possible only in the context of some minimal understanding of the historical experiences that have shaped the societies of other peoples. At various points over the past century, selected American political leaders and opinion makers saw fit to demonize Chinese, Japanese, Russian, German, Vietnamese, Iranian, and other peoples. It is clear that the main purpose of this tactic was often to mobilize domestic support by cultivating fear of external enemies who were unfamiliar to most American citizens. Yet it is salient to ask if these demonization campaigns improved American economic and security interests in the larger world. Would disrespectful scorn of others have been an effective tactic even for purposes of domestic politics if the American citizenry had enjoyed a deeper acquaintance with the world's peoples, the roles they have played in the larger world, and their historical experiences? Serious study of world history can help American students and citizens view the peoples of the larger world with clearer eyes, and the improved understanding that flows from the study of world history can then serve as a foundation for constructive engagement with difference in the larger world.

This line of reasoning implies that there are some ways of dealing with the larger world that are wise, and some that are not so wise. My third claim pursues this point in holding that the study of world history contributes in special ways to the development of good judgment and even wisdom. This sounds good. It sounds like just the qualities that would be desirable in conscientious students and citizens, not to mention political leaders and policy makers. History, of course, does not offer simple or specific answers to the questions that citizens and policy makers must address, nor does it provide a stockpile of ready-made model solutions to problems in the larger world. Indeed, good judgment founded on experience in the world recognizes precisely that the world rarely presents situations in which the simple reapplication of historical precedent would be wise procedure.

Wisdom is an elusive quality. Philosophers and more recently psychologists have devoted a great deal of discussion to the analysis of wisdom, and thus far the holy grail of wisdom has eluded most efforts to bring it under intellectual control.⁷ For purposes of the kind of wisdom I have in mind—which might be called a public, civic, or political wisdom rather than personal, private, or emotional wisdom—there are three qualities that strike me as particularly important. One is cognitive skill: the ability to assess complex situations, understand the dynamics that produced them, and evaluate them on the basis of clear-eyed understanding of human nature, both general and particular. In other words, wisdom depends on the ability to understand complex situations realistically, without subjecting them to the artificial distortion of preconceived ideas, assumptions, or ideological preferences. Another quality has to do with intellectual flexibility: the ability to get outside of oneself, entertain different points of view, and understand complex situations from multiple perspectives. In other words, public, civic, or political wisdom depends on the ability of individuals to recognize and understand the divergent interests of different peoples and different societies as a prerequisite to constructive engagement. The third quality involves judgment and its uses: the ability to form evaluations and make good decisions in spite of the ambiguities and uncertainties that are inherent features of complex human situations. In other words, wisdom requires individuals to learn how to deploy good judgment even when they recognize that they are working with imperfect information about complex situations.

If there is any program of study that has the potential to help students and citizens cultivate these three qualities, world history must be it. Isaiah Berlin never commented on world history as a field of study, so far as I am aware, but he considered political wisdom and historical understanding to be closely related qualities. "What is called wisdom in statesmen," he wrote, "is understanding rather than knowledge—some kind of acquaintance with relevant facts of such a kind that it enables those who have it to tell what fits with what: what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far, without necessarily being able to explain how they know this or even what they know." This kind of "political skill" (as he called it), which he explicitly associated with the close understanding of humanity found in the best historians and novelists, arises from insight based on experience in the analysis of human affairs, and it is not reducible to any set of laws such as those observed in the natural sciences, still less to any preconceived social or ideological preferences. Ideologues came in for Berlin's special condemnation as "foolish and doctrinaire and Utopian" theorists. The remedy for their malady was attention to "the questions which are proper to historians, namely: What do men do and suffer, and why and how?" There is no general or abstract or scientific answer to these questions, but rather insight gleaned from the close study of human affairs.⁸

Even if the study of world history does not suggest specific courses of action to follow when challenging problems arise, much less a blueprint for the future of humanity, it certainly has outstanding potential to offer at least useful general guidance on issues that are prominent in the world today. Let me briefly state two very different arguments that indicate different kinds of general guidance that students, citizens, political leaders, and policy makers might draw from the conscientious study of world history.

First argument: Beyond a general ethical obligation to develop and pursue policies that promote good stewardship of the earth and basic fairness toward its inhabitants, neither the USA nor any other nation, society, group, or people has any special mission in world history.⁹ Americans like to consider themselves a gift to the world, and there is no denying the fact that Americans have made remarkable contributions to the larger world. The concept of political freedom and modern constitutional government are only two among the more notable of these contributions. Does that mean that the USA has a duty or responsibility or mission to make sure that all the other peoples of the world see things the way Americans do and organize their affairs accordingly? My answer is no. As an individual, I subscribe to American political values on moral grounds. As a professional historian, however, who has devoted a considerable measure of attention to the formation and collapse of different political and social orders, I cannot agree that American ways of doing things are necessarily the best ways for all peoples in the world. Even if they were, I have the strong sense from abundant historical examples that it is an extremely difficult matter for one people or one society to persuade others to make wholesale transformations, and I think it is close to being a fundamental lesson of history that when one people tries to impose its ways forcibly on another that is unwilling to accept them, it runs the serious risk of dissipating its strength, squandering its resources, and bankrupting itself in the process.

As long as the world's peoples take the national state as the institution responsible for political organization, the national state must serve as the principal mechanism for the formulation of policies and the resolution of differences within individual societies. Brief foreign interventions are certainly conceivable and appropriate for purposes of dealing with emergencies, putting an end to atrocities, forestalling clear and imminent threats, and the like. In a world organized into national states, however, it is impractical and unacceptable for any one people to pretend to determine how others organize their affairs and seek to force others to adopt its preferred set of organizational standards. Civilizing missions are out of order in a postimperial, postcolonial world.¹⁰ Besides that, any attentive student of the past knows well that the resort to force, even when it places enormous resources in the service of ostensibly noble ends, is a highly risky undertaking. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. made this point eloquently at a celebration in his honor in December 2006, a few weeks before his death, when he spoke briefly on the relevance of history. There he warned that it is dangerous to ignore history, and especially so for a society with imperial appetites. "History is the best antidote to delusions of omnipotence and omniscience," he said, because it forces us "to a recognition of the fact, so often and so sadly displayed, that the future outwits all our certitudes and that the possibilities of the future are more various than the human intellect is designed to conceive."¹¹

Second argument: The most serious challenges confronting the contemporary world have less to do with political, ideological, social, economic, or cultural issues than with the strains that the world's human population is placing on the natural environment. Human beings have been stupendously inventive, not only in the past century but for thousands of years. Their remarkable creativity has enabled the human species to flourish in mind-boggling ways. We know now, however, that human achievements have not come free. There has been a price, which has taken different forms, and part of that price is serious harm to the natural environment.

There are many signs of environmental stress.¹² We all know about the pressures that humans have placed on the supplies of petroleum and fresh water. With the aid of advanced technology, commercial fishermen have even pulled so many fish out of the sea that more than a few species now face the possibility of extinction. How long can human beings continue to exploit the natural environment before they do such great harm that they bring on large-scale environmental collapse and experience unimaginable suffering? Nobody knows, obviously, but we do have good indications from historical experiences that human beings are capable of bringing destruction on their societies because of human-caused environmental damage—and we know also that human beings have on some occasions taken successful steps to reverse environmental damage, as in the case of reforestation in Japan.¹³ Does world history tell us exactly what policies we should pursue in the interests of improving the world's natural environment? No, but does it tell us that we should be mustering the political will, both individually and collectively, to make attention to the natural environment a priority for our times? It sure does!

So why study world history? Of all the fields of scholarship, world history offers the deepest and richest understanding of the world and its development through time, it has excellent potential to promote constructive engagement with that which is different, and it has strong potential as well to foster the development of good judgment, with the possibility that good judgment will transmute in some cases into genuine wisdom about the fundamental issues confronting the contemporary world.

Biographical Note: Jerry Bentley is a professor of World and Early Modern European History at the University of Hawaii. He is also the Director of the Center for World History and editor of the *Journal of World History*. He is the author of numerous publications in the field of World History, including *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York, 1993); *Shapes of World History in Twentieth-Century Scholarship* (Washington, DC, 1996); and (with Herbert F. Ziegler) *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (Boston, 1999, 2003).

Endotes

¹ For a spirited recent essay that does indeed address issues of values, see Peter Stearns, "American Students and Global Issues," *World History Connected* 4:2 (February 2007). There is of course a great deal of discussion about the study of history more generally as opposed to world history in particular. For some especially useful and cogent formulations, see Paul Gagnon, ed., *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

² William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 3 vols., ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1: 462.

³ On the historiography of world history see Jerry H. Bentley, *Shapes of World History in Twentieth-Century Scholarship* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1996); and "The New World History," in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza, eds., *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 393-416.

⁴ For two recent studies that insightfully locate the American Civil War in larger global contexts, see C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 125-69; and Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York:

Hill and Wang, 2006), 116-81.

⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), 69-85, quote from p. 78.

⁶ For further considerations on this line see Jerry H. Bentley, "Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History," *Journal of World History* 16 (2005): 51-82.

⁷ For a study of political judgment that follows a different analytical path but in many ways complements the discussion here, see Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁸ Isaiah Berlin, "The Sense of Reality," in Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. by Henry Hardy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), especially 28-39, quotations from pp. 32, 39. See also Berlin's essay on "Political Judgement" in the same volume, 40-53.

⁹ For a recent, powerful, and indeed devastating critique of the narcissistic and dangerous notion that the USA has a special mission in world history, see William Pfaff, "Manifest Destiny: A New Direction for America," *New York Review of Books* 54:2 (15 February 2007): 54-59.

¹⁰ For the rueful reflections of one who has come belatedly to understand this point in connection with the war in Iraq, see Michael Ignatieff, "Getting Iraq Wrong: What the War Has Taught Me about Political Judgment," *New York Times Magazine* (5 August 2007): 26-29.

¹¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Folly's Antidote," *New York Times* (1 January 2007): A19.

¹² The essential guide to this issue is J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: Norton, 2000).

¹³ On this cluster of issues see William Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 17 (1993): 1-22; Richard C. Foltz, "Does Nature Have Historical Agency? World History, Environmental History, and How Historians Can Help Save the Planet," *The History Teacher* 37 (2003): 9-28; and Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Norton, 2004).