

PROPOSAL FOR A WORLD HISTORY BOOK

by

Walter L. Williams

Departments of History and Anthropology

University of Southern California

Los Angeles CA 90089-0034

If we define “history” as the story of the human past analyzed in chronological perspective, few historians are qualified to write a comprehensive history of the world. Professional historians are trained in the analysis of written documents, usually in only one or a few specific languages. In academia there is much pressure for historians to specialize in one specific time period, and usually in the history of one specific nation state. Those who do comparative history of different eras and places are often derided as unfocused generalists.

Historians’ analysis of written documents inherently leads to a distortion of the human past. Those who use only written documents to discover the past necessarily are limited to autocratic state-level societies that could employ scribes to develop writing for record-keeping purposes. In every society until the nineteenth century, literacy existed only among small elites. And in all of those societies, literacy was limited largely to men. Those women and men who were non-literate (the vast majority of the world’s human population) remain for most historians only shadowy figures, even in literate societies.

But for cultures that did not develop writing, historians have paid even less attention. Historians have justified their ignorance of such cultures by labeling them “prehistoric” and “uncivilized.” This ethnocentric view has resulted in ludicrous conceptions that “history” begins in the Western Hemisphere only with the coming of the Europeans after 1492, and in interior Africa only in the nineteenth century!

If we are going to have a genuine understanding of world history, it is necessary for readers to be educated in the story of the whole of humanity—both women and men—throughout our history, from the origins of the homo sapiens species to the present. Such a perspective is vitally needed today, as humanity enters of new global era where peoples from all continents are interacting as never before.

The most valuable purpose of a world history book is to help readers make sense of the world as it exists now. This purpose cannot be accomplished unless the whole of humanity is covered equally. For example, an incorporation of the findings of women's "herstory" needs to be much more emphasized, in order to highlight the past of this half of humanity. Another example is the fact that two-thirds of the world's population is Asian, and that three of the world's four largest nations (China, India, Indonesia) are in Asia. A balanced perspective requires that the majority of pages in a world history book should focus on Asia.

Yet, as we all know, most world history textbooks continue to focus on Europe. At a time when European imperialism made it so dominant in the world, and so little was known about many other culture areas, there was some justification for world history books to center their texts around Europe. But in recent decades anthropologists and archaeologists have discovered much more information about the pasts of non-Western peoples. And the overthrow of European colonialism has meant the emergence of many new nations in the last half century. We have to keep in mind that people of European descent constitute less than one-fifth of the world's population.

For all these reasons a Euro-centric approach no longer makes sense for a book that purports to cover the history of the world. Today, humanity is influenced by events occurring on all

continents, and it is necessary for readers to have an understanding of the histories of numerous peoples beyond Europe. The aim of this book is that it should be equally valuable for a reader from any continent to be able to read it and find a perspective on understanding the past. Whether that reader is from Pakistan, Tahiti, Nigeria, Mexico, Egypt, Russia, Argentina, Korea, the European Union, or the United States, this book aims to present a balanced perspective on the human past.

In order to avoid a Western cultural bias and understand the histories of all world culture areas, it is necessary to look beyond the limited source of written documents. This book will give much more attention to the findings of the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology about the human past. This book is different from other world history textbooks in that it combines the historians' documentary focus with the findings of anthropologists and archaeologists, to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the world. It rejects the notion that Europe is more important than other areas of the world, especially before 1492 and since 1945, and accords approximately equal space in the book to an analysis of the past of all world areas. For the purposes of this book, attention is equally divided into nine culture areas:

1. Sub-Saharan Africa
2. Southwest Asia and North Africa
3. South Asia
4. East Asia
5. Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands
6. Europe
7. Russia and North Asia
8. Central America, South America, and the Caribbean
9. North America.

During certain time periods a greater focus will be on one area more than others (for example, in the first part of the book Africa will be the main focus since that is where homo sapiens originated;

in the period of imperialism 1492-1945 Europe will be the main focus), but the goal of the book is to have an approximately equal total number of pages on each of the above culture areas.

The book will be divided into four main parts, each of about 100 manuscript pages. This book is different from other world history textbooks because it gives much more attention to the “prehistoric” human past before 5,000 years ago, as well as to the last fifty years. The period between 5,000 years ago to 1945 (the traditional focus of most world history books) will be greatly condensed, and much more evenly divided by geography. In each part the text will explain developments in all the world culture areas during a specified millennia or century. Each part will be designed to answer the most important questions on human development during that time period.

Part I: THE RISE OF HOMO SAPIENS

The 100 pages of this part covers the first 99% of human existence, when homo sapiens lived in small kin-based hunting-gathering societies. How did the human species originate in Africa after a number of primate forebears? What were the origins of language, art, music, and other forms of communication? How did the first wave of humans survive and expand in Africa, then spread from East Africa into Southwest Asia, and along the South Asia coast to India, Southeast Asia, and to Australia and Melanesia? How did another wave of homo sapiens spread into Europe, displacing Neanderthals? How did humans spread into East Asia, North Asia, Siberia, Alaska, and the Americas? What were the origins of domesticated animals, beginning with the dog, and how did horticulture begin? Lastly, how did humans perfect sewing techniques to create waterproof warm clothing to spread across the frigid Arctic lands from Alaska to Greenland? How did they perfect seafaring techniques to be able to spread to the isolated islands of the Pacific?

Part II: THE RISE OF KINGDOMS AND EMPIRES

(5,500 years ago to 500 years ago)

How did the domestication of plants and animals revolutionize life for humans in certain areas of the world, beginning in Southwest Asia and later in Egypt, the Indus Valley, and China? What were the origins of warfare and slavery? How did human life evolve from egalitarian hunter-gatherers to pastoral and horticultural lifestyles? Why did certain urbanizing areas evolve militaristic state-level societies, such as in the Mediterranean, Mesoamerica and West Africa? How did these kingdoms grow into empires? What was happening among pastoralist peoples who raided and often conquered various kingdoms to establish their own militaristic empires? What was happening among peoples who continued to follow hunting-gathering and horticultural ways of life?

For a total of 100 pages on this five millennia, write 20 mss pages on each thousand year period. In each millennia, write about 2 mss pages on the most important developments in each of the nine world culture areas, plus another 2 pages on worldwide trends during that millennia. Stress a comparative cultures approach.

Part III: THE ERA OF EUROPEAN DOMINANCE 1492-1945

Why did Europe, heretofore a cultural and economic backwater isolated on the edge of humanity, emerge as the dominant world force? What impact did European trade and expansion have on the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Asia-Pacific, and Africa?

For a total of 100 pages in this Part III, write 20 mss pages on each century (1492-1600, 1600-1700, 1700-1800, 1800-1900, 1900-1945). In each century, write about 2 mss pages on each of the nine world culture areas, plus another 2 pages for international trends during that century.

Part IV: THE EMERGENCE OF A GLOBAL WORLD, since 1945

How did the devastation of World War II lead to the declining power of Europe, and the emergence of the United States, the Soviet Union, and newly independent Third World nations as important world influences?

This Part IV will give equal attention to each of the nine world culture areas. For a total of 100 pages in this Part IV, write 20 mss pages on each decade (1945-1960, 1960-1970, 1970-1980, 1980-1990, 1990-2000). In each decade, write about 2 mss pages on each of the world culture areas, plus another 2 pages for international trends during that decade. Begin with the founding of the United Nations, and the Declaration of Human Freedoms, and come up to the present.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES:

Interspersed at appropriate points in the text will be mini-biographies about influential individuals of the times. But rather than focus on kings or military leaders, the emphasis will be upon those teachers and philosophers who through the quality of their ideas helped other people to have an improved life. These biographies should be inspiring personal stories that can help to enlighten readers to accomplish positive things in their own life. Though most early biographies may be men, since so little is known about individual ancient women, later biographies can focus more on notable women thinkers. Some potential individuals to include might be:

Changing Woman of the Navajo, Isis, Abraham or Moses, David or Solomon, Buddha, Sappho, Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Ashoka, Alexander the Great [emphasizing his spreading of democracy rather than simply his military exploits], Jesus, Mohammed, Taoists, Deganawidah of the Iroquois, Benjamin Franklin, George

Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Harvey Milk, Nelson Mandela, the Dali Lama, Daisaku Ikeda,
Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Mead, Betty Friedan, European feminists, Asian-African-Latina women.