New Paradigms in World History

World history, as a sub-field of history, started out as the study of seven or eight civilizations which were always considered the highpoint of human achievement. But recently, an ambitious new breed of world historians has greatly expanded the scope of what is covered and forged groundbreaking new ways of conceptualizing the larger scheme of things. Driven by the need to write a history for the global world we’re in, and the urgency to explain how humans have affected the environment, they are leaving familiar explanations behind in favor of synthesizing knowledge from other disciplines. The challenge of how to frame our world histories and what to include and what to leave out has become the subject of lively debate and raging controversy.

Up until the 1960’s most professional historians detailed a particular dynasty, era, nation, or event. They wrote from the standpoint of their own culture and beliefs. From treatises about war, to books about leaders, to studies of inventions, they focused on contained topics and weren’t inclined to write about the past on large scales. In fact, until very recently, there has been no established precedent in the field of history to survey phenomena which have affected humanity as a whole. HG Wells’ Outline of History (1920) and Arnold Toynbee’s Study of History (1934-1954) were rare exceptions.

When world history officially became a sub-field of history in the 1960’s, the first texts acknowledged our primate heritage and the emergence of Homo Sapiens Sapiens as a species, but only briefly covered the Hunter/Gatherer and Neolithic eras which comprise 98 percent of human history. Well-written by founders of the field such as L.S. Stavrianos, Kevin Reilly, and Jeremy Bentley, they emphasized the rise of civilization as the major development of history. Civilizations were compared and contrasted, and major characteristics of civilizations – cities, empires, warfare, patriarchy, social classes, and monumental architecture – were explored. Early texts described encounters between peoples of different cultures and covered the agricultural and industrial revolutions as crucial turning points.

About 30 years ago, world historians moved away from the rigid boundaries of civilizations and focused on regional networks between peoples. Fernand Braudel described the Mediterranean region, Philip Curtin, Patrick Manning, and Alfred Crosby surveyed trade, migration, and disease across the Atlantic basin, and Tara Sethia and John Richards described networks in the Indian Ocean.

During this time sociologist Emanuel Wallerstein also became influential with his “world systems” theory. He showed how peripheral, semi-peripheral, and core segments of empires interacted and how networks in one region affected and were affected by networks in other regions. He elaborated on trade within states and across state and civilizational lines after 1500 CE. His “world systems” theory has been elaborated on by many world historians.

Recently, in the last 15 years, the importance of civilizations and regions has been eclipsed by even more holistic conceptualizations. New texts go far beyond what has previously been written and are highly controversial. They cover history on the largest scales, starting with the deep past and incorporating all of empirically known time and
space. They combine the findings of astronomy, physics, geology, and biology and engage readers with riveting perspectives.

A scientific world history, incorporating the largest time and space scales, became possible once astrophysicists dated the Big Bang to 13.7 billion years ago, the Milky Way galaxy to about 13.69 billion years ago, and our solar system to 4.8 billion years ago. Historians then had a chronology and compelling events which could be documented. There was enough material to construct a coherent narrative with a setting, characters, and plot. Homo Sapiens Sapiens are creatures of the universe, located in the Milky Way galaxy, in a typical solar system, on a planet with a complex history.

Efforts to write a history, uniting natural history and human history, began at the University of Amsterdam with two Dutch professors, Dr. Johan Goudsblom and Dr. Fred Spier. In the 1980’s they organized an interdisciplinary, team-taught course presenting a survey from the Big Bang to the present. Simultaneously, Dr. David Christian, at Macquarie University in Sidney, Australia pioneered a similar course. Comments by participating professors and students led to revisions and refinements. As a result of these efforts, two histories were written.

The first titled The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang until Today, by Fred Spier, came out in 1996. According to Dr. Spier, one of the book’s main aims is “to formulate a conceptual framework, that is, a structuring scheme, for all of known history.” Spier explains “We need a controlling principle to facilitate ordering our knowledge when we try to understand all of history.” (p. 2). His controlling principle is “regimes” which are defined as “interrelated, ordered systems.” Atoms are regimes, for example, consisting of atomic nuclei and electrons, molecules are regimes of interrelated chemical bonds, and all regimes operate according to the meta-regime of four forces: gravity, electro-magnetism, and strong and weak nuclear forces. Fred Spier’s book goes on to describe interactions between regimes – organic and inorganic, plant and animal, agrarian and urban.

The second comprehensive history is Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History by David Christian, now a professor at San Diego State. This masterpiece of synthesis and scholarship moves between the largest scales and the smallest details to engagingly explain how things happened. It begins with the creation of the universe and ends with possible scenarios for the future.

In the first chapter Christian writes “When we attempt to explain the beginning of things, to ask how something came from nothing, language itself threatens to break down. The words we reach for, from God to gravity, seem inadequate to the task.” (p. 18). But the chapter goes on to describe tribal origin myths along with a description of the Big Bang in passages which read like poetry. “As we look back in time, the past seems to fade away into what modern Aboriginal myths call a ‘Dreamtime’. It is as if the past turned a corner beyond which we can’t see it anymore, however hard we try.” (p. 20).

Instead of borrowing Fred Spier’s “regimes” as controlling principles, Christian uses “equilibrium systems”. He asserts that “of all the patterns that occur at many different scales, the most fundamental is the existence of the pattern itself.” (p. 505). Patterns arrange and rearrange at all scales when temperature fluctuations, gradients, and differentials interact with atoms, molecules and organisms and, in turn, then cause
changes in physical, chemical, and biological patterns. “The expansion of the universe is the ultimate source of temperature and pressure differentials and, therefore, of the free energy needed to create order.” (p. 508).

In a bold departure from historical convention, because technically “historians’ business is to know the past, not the future,” (p. 469), Christian titles his last chapter “Futures” and asserts “Living creatures make predictions all the time, whether it’s an eagle making a kill or investors buying shares.” … “It is worth thinking hard about the next century. If we act intelligently, in light of predictions, we will steer the world toward a sustainable relationship with the environment and create a global economy that raises the living conditions of the poor.” (p. 470).

In summary, if we ask how world historians have created new paradigms, we realize it has been through the aggressive use of information from many academic disciplines, the placing of human history in the context of the natural world, the tracing of long-term patterns and trends, and the extending of definitions and categories to wider meanings.

The major benefit of a large scale history is that it emphasizes the unity of humankind whereas national and tribal accounts arouse nationalism and tribalism. “Instead of enhancing conflict, as parochial historiography inevitably does, an intelligible world history cultivates identification with the triumphs and struggles of humanity as a whole,” said William McNeill, a founder of the field, in Mythistory and Other Essays, (p. 16).

Other benefits include: increasing our grasp of the larger context within which we live; opening up of cognitive processes, expanding the imagination, and affirming respect for the truth since an accurate world history would present as truthful a history as possible.

Lively debates over themes and interpretations of world history will enrich our intellectual lives for decades to come. But not until the perspectives of all the peoples of the earth are fairly incorporated will we have a truly accurate story of the human venture.

For Further Reading:

Christian, David, Maps of Time, University of California Press, 2004
Spier, Fred, The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang until Today, University of Amsterdam Press, 1996.

Hope Harmeling-Benne, History Department

Salem State has been at the forefront of the development of the discipline of world history with the first course having been taught in 1941. Mainly because of the foresight shown by faculty members in the history department through the years, Salem State College now has the honor of hosting the annual meeting of the World History Association in summer 2009.