

# **Production, Destruction, and Connection from 1750 to the Present. Part II: Shared Transformations? On CWH volume VII,2**

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In a simplistic book titled *World History for Dummies*, Peter Haugen indicates ten crucial dates for the understanding of world history. The first date is 460 BCE, which corresponds to the birth of the democratic system in Athens; and the last is 1945, when the United States of America killed thousands of innocent Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This was the last act of the Second World War. All dates, from the first to the last, coincide with events all closely linked in one way or another to the history of the Western world, and its supremacy vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Just to be clear, Haugen's vulgarization of world history uses the same line of thought as Huntington and Fukuyama, according to whom the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are both characterized by an ever growing "Westernization" of the world. Huntington advanced the scenario of a history dominated by possible multiple conflicts of civilizations – between other civilizations and the Islamic world in particular; Fukuyama talks more reassuringly about a process of progressive extension of the democratic model, designed in Europe and North America, to the entire world. Reality is proving to be quite different from that envisaged by either of these academics.

After the collapse of the "communist" bloc in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the scenarios outlined by these "intellectuals" and many other social scientists did not in fact materialize. Two developments in particular need to be factored into any response from historians in their interpretation and analysis of world events: the growth of China and India, and the economic crisis that has engulfed the world since 2007 beginning in the USA, resulting from a social and

economic global restructuring. Given the above considerations, is it possible to imagine a global or world history that is not solely dependent on the history of the West? Is it possible today – in a world in which the crisis of socialist ideology has given way to the rise of ultra-capitalism on the one hand and religious extremism on the other, both to the detriment of labour globally – to discuss the idea of social progress in order to give a sense to world history?

## 1. World History of Societies since 1750

The questions above are at the core of volume VII, part 2, of the Cambridge World History (CWH, in reality, the ninth and last volume), and it deals with the question of worldwide “shared transformations”. The volume is edited by J. R. McNeill and Kenneth Pomeranz and covers the historical period from 1750 to the present, and is entitled: “Production, Destruction, and Connection”. This second part of the volume 7 deals with socio-cultural aspects, as well as economic aspects, of world history. The chapters are split into four sections: “Social Developments”, “Culture and Connections”, “Moments”, and “Ligaments of Globalization”. The chapters from the third section (“Moments”) are the only ones that directly deal with political aspects from the period running from 1750 to the present, with an analysis of some historical events or particularly crucial years, four specific years in particular. Before discussing these chapters further, let us first turn to the chapters on social, cultural, and economic aspects of world history according to the CWH.

In her general preface to the CWH, editor Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks writes:

*Volume 7 (Production, Destruction, and Connection, 1750–Present) examines the uneven transition to a world with fossil fuels and an exploding human population that has grown ever more interactive through processes of globalization. The first book [part 1] [...] discusses the material situations within which our crowded world has developed, including the environment, agriculture, technology, energy, and disease ... nationalism, imperialism, decolonization, and communism [...] The second book [part 2] [...] explores topics that have been considered in earlier volumes [...] along with [topics] that only emerge as global phenomena in this era, such as sports, music, and the automobile, as well as specific moments of transition, including the Cold War and 1989 (CWH vol I, p. xvii).*

According to the authors and editors of the volume, the main social developments that have characterized world history from 1750 to today, have occurred in the areas of migration (Dirk Hoerder), urbanization (Lynn H. Lees), family (Peter N. Stearns), sex (Julie Peakman), and the abolition of unfree labour (Alessandro Stanziani). Migration is a complex phenomenon and must be analysed on the basis of the premise that often instances of long-distance migration last many years because such migrants commonly rebuild their lives in the receiving country, and therefore to not return to live in their

country of origin. Migration can, however, be short distance over a brief period of time, as is the case, for example, with migrants undertaking seasonal work or rural workers undertaking work in urban centres. Dirk Hoerder seems to consider that the world is only made up of migrants, in the sense that he does not recognize – and this is perhaps a valid point – any type of indigenous people. The discussion on migration is closely related to that on urbanization expounded upon by Lynn H. Lees. From the eighteenth century onwards, the world has seen a demographic explosion and this man-made environment has brought with it considerable changes in human behaviour. Human beings were often forced to migrate, for example as slaves and forced labourers between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under various imperial systems, or as workers between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who followed in the path of economic development, such as the construction of new communication routes in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. What is sometimes less clear in the chapter is an explanation as to how and why workers were “forced” to migrate – was it due to coercion or were they in search of economic opportunities? This migration trend has increased in number and constancy in the last two centuries of our world history, in large part as a result of new technologies.

This journey takes us to today’s migrants, who are partly the product of European imperialism and partly the product of political-economic and demographic imbalances. The issue of how economic nationalism pitted poor people against poor people is not discussed. Problems in terms of the definition and scope of migration occur in the piece by Lees on urbanization. There is no doubt that the demographic explosion of the last two centuries is directly related to the transformation of cities into megacities. The phenomenon is global but with crucial differences in the way in which urbanization has been managed: “planned” in those countries whose governments have access to public resources, and “uncontrolled” in those often ex-colonial countries, where urbanization had already taken hold before the government had the means to cope with the phenomenon. This explains why, today, megacities can be divided into those with good living conditions and those with less than tolerable ones, that is to say cities which have sanitization and pollution under control and those which do not (pp. 47–49). The numbers making up the migration and urbanization phenomenon are contained in various tables that provide a stark overview. There is little in terms of seeing the “positive”, if there is any, although the following chapters in the section on “Social Developments” seem a little less pessimistic.

Certainly, in terms of social development, the changes and continuity in the family structure, in sexual relations, and in the abolition of unfree labour have been defining elements in the last two and half centuries. They are thus, and for good reason, dealt with in this work. Peter Stearns describes a historical reality where, on the one hand, family represents the place where change can occur in terms of gender relations, between men and women, and in terms of generational relations, between the old and the young; on the other hand, family represents continuity between the present and the traditional past. Changes in the areas of sexual behaviour and work relations – particularly with the end of slavery – have been more radical in nature. In all of these categories, technology,

the industrial revolution, and new demands stemming from the capitalist world have created the need for new codes of behaviour and have signalled the end of others, for example the paternalistic model, which existed in the past when the rural and artisanal economy was dominant. There is a certain lack of clarity in how these developments are analysed in these chapters. The fact remains that the partial changes in family life or the more revolutionary changes in terms of sexual relations did not correspond to any radical demographic shift. This is apparent from the observation made by Stearns that, despite changes resulting from the industrial revolution and from imperialism, the idea of the family as the nucleus of the social life of human beings has remained steadfast. In the Global South, family life has only changed in recent times, too recently to ascertain the concrete ramifications vis-à-vis the survival of traditional family life.

The theme of labour, which deserved to be focused on as a key element in an in-depth and wholly new global history, is discussed in the same section on family and migration, by Alessandro Stanziani, in chapter 5. He is responsible for talking about one of the most truly significant revolutions in the last few centuries the capitalist revolution, and the resulting abolition of servitude and slavery. The triumph of “free” over “unfree” labour is closely linked to the history of the development of the capitalist system, which is characterized by a means of production based on wage labour. Wage labour creates greater wealth than slave or servile labour, and as a result, together with the increase in the productivity of labour, we have witnessed over the centuries (which this volume covers) unprecedented global economic growth and unprecedented global well-being.

This issue is key and it interrelates with various other themes discussed in sections II (“Cultures and Connections”) and III (“Moments”) of the volume. The chapter “Atlantic Revolutions” by Jaime Rodríguez talks about a series of revolutionary moments or “wars” in history, from the Spanish and European royalist wars to the American revolution/war of independence, which created new elites, with the question of slavery initially left to one side, “despite the universalistic pronouncements of the Declaration of Independence” (p. 281). The French revolution and the interconnected revolution in Haiti were also focused on, obtaining freedom from servitude and slavery and aiming to establish “freedom” as the legitimate fundament of human existence. But the freedom of wage labourers was limited to the choice of who to work for. The freedom was therefore much constrained. The Americas and Europe have been at the revolutionary core of world developments and, not by chance, these continents have also been the cradle of capitalism. The first and second world wars are analysed as a single historical moment by Richard Overly, in chapter 13, who coins them the “global wars”. The decision to combine the two wars in one analysis is an interesting one. These global wars, like the revolutions, are the result of conflicting political systems and opposing powers. The political systems are constituted by empire versus democracy; the powers are constituted by economic power versus the labour force – wage or slave – which rebels against the system, and which, in countries such as the Soviet Union and its allies, finds political support and legitimization. These systems and powers found themselves in direct opposition during the Cold War.

Daniel Sargent asks whether the Cold War was a “geopolitical struggle between two military blocs” or “an ideological competition, a war of ideas”. This is certainly an important question to ask. But, as the author of chapter 14 notes, while, on the one hand, there was capitalism, with the USA and Great Britain its leading exponents, on the other hand, there was a vision or “project that took Marx’s theory of history and transformed it into a tryst with history itself” (p. 323). This transformation has in some ways distorted the fundamental idea of Marx and has contributed to the aberrations that have occurred over a broad Euro-Asiatic geographical area, from Eastern Germany to North Korea and from Siberia to Afghanistan. Revisionism and post-revisionism are discussed in the chapter, but what is notably missing in Sargent’s handling of the subject is any analysis of the universal aspect. This is all the more striking because the work is on world history. As pointed out by Eric Hobsbawm, the Cold War was not just a war opposing the USA and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and their proxies. It was a global confrontation between advocates of two extremist systems, with both systems based on a distorted view of liberal-capitalist ideology, on the one hand, and Marxist ideology, on the other. Each group of advocates represented an intellectually impoverished political class, concerned principally with the pursuit of the private interests of a national elite.

The Cold War also represented, for the first time in the history of the world, the opposition between two universal systems, reflected in the opposition between individuals, families, classes, and other groups. The working classes living in both the Eastern and Western blocs achieved the highest levels of state protection and welfare during the Cold War. Yet, in the last twenty years, the governing elite around the world has been steadfastly dismantling the positive outcomes that were achieved during those years when there were two concrete opposing forces, each with a diametrically opposite vision of how the world should be run. The Cold War, with its armies and military proliferation, created social expectations for the common people, which the governing class of both sides could not ignore – because a protest movement could potentially be assimilated into an international political alignment.

In chapters 15 and 16 on the Cold War, two other key time periods are discussed: 1956 (in ch. 15) and 1989 (in ch. 16). 1956 is described by Carole Fink as the year that “encompass[ed] the complex political, social, economic, cultural, and intellectual transformations [... The year of] the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution and the abortive Anglo-French-Israeli campaign in Suez” (p. 347). Indeed, from a world history point of view, 1956 is a crucial year. From that moment onwards, several political, global transformations took place within the Marxist world, with the Sino-Soviet split, as well as within the West, with the USA becoming the major power within this bloc and the European countries its vassals. Things changed a little in 1989. This is the year of “great significance” according to Nicole Rebec and Jeffrey Wasserstrom. Why so? Because of two images “a lone man standing up to tanks in Beijing in June [and ...] crowds cheering and lending their hands to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in November” (p. 376). The authors try to identify events that took place in the year and around that year. They analyse the processes that led to the various revolts in the Eastern bloc and in China as

well as in South Africa and Latin America. They candidly admit that, historically speaking, it is too early to decide if 1989 will be remembered, celebrated, or despised in one or two hundred years' time. Having said this, while their analysis is acute and sophisticated, they seem to miss the main, obvious reason why 1989 constitutes an important year, and indeed it is an important moment of passage: the victory of capitalism against the rest, whatever the "rest" is. From that year onwards, all socialist forces – from moderate social-democrats to Marxist-Leninist – collapsed and disappeared from history. With them, ideas of social justice and the welfare state were also weakened. Therefore, politically the year is extremely important as the revolts that took place were indeed conservative by nature: religiously motivated (like in Iran and in Poland with the Solidarity movement) or calling for freedom, both political and economic, which translated into privatization of public goods. The capitalist mode of production and free market neoliberalism conquered the world. Some social classes or one social class, the rich, which derived its wealth from profit, benefitted from this capitalist mode, and – as Thomas Piketty and others revealed – wealth moved en masse from income to profit in the last two or three hundred years. Disparities increased, even more so in the former communist bloc, which was not prepared to deal with the aggressiveness of a liberalized economy.

## 2. Connections and Linkages in Globalization

Sections II and IV are insightful and enlightening. Section II, "Culture and Connections", looks at how consumerism commodified culture and contributed to the commodification of life beyond national boundaries. This occurred via a new way of trading, via the anonymous market, where seller and buyer do not interact directly, with the birth of the department store as well as through a transformation of religion. Scientific progress is at the core of the connected culture that the authors analyse in this section. Transformations in music, sport, and cinema are the results of this process. The department store is the precursor of the malls and shopping districts of today. These are the places where the commodification of culture took place, from the East to the West. According to Antonia Finnane, this denotes "the shift of culture products from the realms of ritual and relationships to the market place" (p. 138). The central theme of the chapter and the entire section is culture and its commodification and not commodities, their production, or their economic value. This methodology could perhaps be open to the criticism as to what culture really is in history, its relationship to power, which preceded the eighteenth century, and its capitalist commodification that the authors in this section try to explain. It could be argued that culture in itself has always been an ingredient of political power – see Guy Debord and his seminal work *La société du spectacle*. It is also debatable if sport is culture, but perhaps commodified sport could indeed be considered culture in the consumeristic sense of the term.

Music and cinema are more traditionally cultural sectors. However, Timothy Taylor treats commodification of music from a critical and economic point of view, looking,

for example, at the complex and thorny issue of copyright, which represents “the entry of musical work into the capitalist marketplace”. In this context “composers attempt to differentiate themselves from others in a capitalist market of works” (p. 206). What the author is describing is simply the transformation of the artist into a capitalist. It therefore follows that the historical change in the production and distribution of music-as-commodity is based on market logic. The chapter also discusses the ways in which music-as-commodity is acquired and consumed, from the concert to the Walkman to Internet downloading, with a personalization of music consumption. Contaminations between genres and different world music is also discussed in the chapter but the feeling is that the West represents the magnet of all connections. It would have been interesting if the author could have explained how music can be an instrument of protest too, as, for example, in the case of Woodstock’s concert or Mahler’s symphonic “world revolution”. The chapters on religion and science are also insightful although they leave some gaps in terms of their interrelation. They are extremely diverse in their approach to how religion and science are shaped by society and how they shape society. The main point made by Peter van der Veer in chapter 7 is that religion, from the eighteenth century onwards, is characterized by its relationship with nationalism, which is a secular force. In other words, we have witnessed in the last few centuries a process of secularization of religion. The author uses examples that go from Indian Hinduism to Islam in Iran, from Confucianism to Christianity. Chapter 8 on science by James McClellan III is extremely cerebral in its approach. The chapter starts with a series of questions and seeks to explain how difficult it is to define science. Only halfway into the chapter do we understand the extent to which science and its developments have penetrated all aspects of human history, from military to administration as well as from transport to everyday life, and the distinction to be made between “science” and “technology”. The author, very penetratingly and convincingly, explains that “science and applied science are probably better thought of as part of the coming into being of technological systems, rather than as science somehow, almost mechanically, turned into technology” (p. 197). Technology is the application of science into human life. It is the commodification of science. This is reflected in the spread of the research and development (R&D) as an industry (in the Western, capitalist sense). It is even possible to make a “ranking of nations in science and technology” (p. 199) in competition and based on material interests of the few against the many.

In section IV, “Ligaments of Globalization”, the last section of the volume, the editors try to explain how the phenomenon that today we call globalization is key to world history and can be explained by reference to the analysis of case studies represented by selected commodities: transport (ch. 17), automobiles (ch. 20), rubber (ch. 18), and also – less conventionally – drugs (ch. 19). The final chapter of this section is a critique of globalization and its Anglo-American interpretation. The chapter on transport describes how the industrialization of transportation took place worldwide. Transportation advanced with the progression of technology and, according to Daniel Headrick, had a big push that he calls a “revolution” between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the expansion



of electrical technology. Interestingly, the author puts together transport with communication, and in the “age of globalization, 1945–2000” communication allowed an even greater expansion of transport capacity. The chapter on automobiles, which might more logically have followed the one on transport, but is placed here because the automobile is being analysed as a commodity rather than as an industry for the movement of people. The chapter is divided into two parts: “regimes of production” and “regimes of consumption”. From the analysis of regimes, Bernhard Rieger writes a history of global networks, which includes the extraction of primary material for the construction of cars, metals, as well as for their circulation, oil. Cars can be found in every corner of the planet, and it is only normal or even obvious that such a commodity and such an industry is present in the section on “Ligaments of Globalization”.

The chapter on rubber is a different story. Rubber is indeed a commodity that could serve well a historian’s aim to explain how world or global history works. The choice of rubber is, of course, arbitrary: Sven Beckert in *Empire of Cotton* explains how cotton could serve as another good example. Equally good examples are cocoa, diamonds, coffee, copper, etc., with historical commodity chains that are global by nature. However, the choice of rubber fits one purpose well: it connected the colonized world with that of the colonizers. As explained by Richard Tucker, from Amazonia to Southeast Asia, Western companies moved around the world in search of profitable production and at same time promoted colonial regimes. The latter took place with ruthless vigour in Africa, “when Britain, Germany, France, Belgium and Portugal carved the map of Africa into zone of colonial control” (p. 430) and rubber production flourished “in the Congo River basin, the second greatest rain forest on earth” (p. 431). Nationalism and wars in the Third World derived from or affected the rubber industry, showing quite clearly the intricate connection that exists between national and world politics with economic production. With ups and downs in the production, mainly due to new discoveries such as synthetic products or change in the demand from industries, including the military, today rubber is still a key global commodity. The global commodity chains related to rubber represents “the global ecological links of the automotive age and provide a horizon beyond which consumers saw no need to look” (p. 442).

### 3. Remarks on World History

One positive characteristic of this volume is that it analyses world history from a multi-disciplinary perspective. It is perhaps axiomatic that, by its very nature, the topic of world history lends itself to an interdisciplinary approach. The historical overview presented in volume VII, part 2, of the CWH stands in contrast to the idea of a micro-history, with its focus on specialization, which can run counter to an all-encompassing synthesis. Despite there being some room for criticism, the wide-ranging analysis provided in this volume makes it a valuable piece of work. It evokes the Fernand Braudel-style tradition of incorporating great historiographical theories and historical events over a long period



of time. In this sense, the volume brings back a global – multidisciplinary – vision of historical processes.

A second positive characteristic of this volume is that world history takes precedence over an Arnold Toynbee–style comparative analysis. This global history puts to one side any premise that history can be isolated into parts. Immanuel Wallerstein had already taught us that the “world economy rooted in a capitalist economy” was not just a phenomenon that affected the West. Perhaps, there is even no historical basis for Max Weber’s idea – now considered mainstream – that a specific relationship exists between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. This is not to say that it is time to dust off Bernal’s *Black Athena* or Said’s *Orientalism*, but rather that the time has come to identify a philosophy of history. While such a quest might today be considered beset with difficulties, perhaps a renewed dialogue on the matter is timely.

What this volume seems to be missing – without wishing to detract from its undoubted usefulness for historians and for all those wishing to gain a closer understanding of world history – is a focus on today’s world view compared to the prism through which the world was viewed in the last two or three centuries. At the start of the twenty-first century, we seem to be increasingly in need of a broad theoretical framework in order to interpret events and developments, ranging from the attack on the Twin Towers to the Arab Spring; from the repositioning of the Russian Federation to the boom period in China and India; and from the economic growth of South America to the unexpected flourishing of various regions of Africa. Can the theory of randomness explain today’s events? In the negative, this begs the question as to whether a new philosophy of history can be identified.

Pietro Rossi, in *Il senso della storia. Dal Settecento al Duemila*, comments that global history, by its nature, encompasses a non-Eurocentric history. Europe has certainly played an important role in modern developments, and, up to the end of the 1800s, dominated on the global stage (a level of influence that, from the 1900s onwards, has been wielded by the United States of America), but, as William H. McNeill highlights in his classic *The Rise of the West*, it is essential to always keep in mind the growth of various forms of civilization. Civilizations and cultures with roots dating back thousands of years did not suddenly come to an end in 1750. These various strands of an age-old history have continued to develop and intertwine up to the current day, in the context of the development of a global capitalist system. Global civilizations underpin the potency of historical diversity in the world and the interaction between different eras and places, with all their variety and diversity. Oppositely, contemporary capitalism, based on the production and consumption of goods at a global level – the globalization of consumerism – from the eighteenth century to today, has become a force for uniformity and conformity, advocating one standardized mindset, often called democratic or liberal, but which, in reality, admits little in the way of cultural exceptions or criticisms of its models of production and exploitation of resources and labour.

One criticism that could be levelled at the volume concerns the type of reading that is put forward, namely, a reading of history that remains somewhat static. In some chap-

ters, in particular in Parts I and IV of the volume, it is evident that capitalism is the key theme of the two or three centuries that the volume covers. Capitalism, as David Harvey recalls, can be defined only in relation to its dynamic effects, in terms of the social relations it creates and the economic activities that flow from those relations. The CWH gives a structural analysis but not a social one. This may well be due to the fact that the CWH is organized through a system of separate entries.

A near total lack of class-based analysis is noticeable, however. From the field of sport to that of industry, from the Cold War to the history of the rubber industry, and from family to urban realities, there will always be winners and losers, and the former will often have triumphed by exploiting the latter. For example, how can one not highlight the fact that the really significant revolution to have taken place in the last two or three centuries, with dramatic and anthropological consequences, has been the creation of global worker-consumers, as referred to by Pier Paolo Pasolini. And how can one not highlight capitalism's process of immaterialism, which occurs through its financing procedures, which creates a powerful group that does not possess anything tangible but rather controls the financial structures that indirectly govern the economy. We have seen the advent of a new global, financial aristocracy that finds its own legitimization and source of wealth from a logarithmic calculation, that is to say from an immaterial source of power, equivalent to the various god-like figures that are present in the diverse systems of power existing in all human civilizations.

Another limitation in the global history exhibited in this volume is one already identified by Sebastian Conrad in *What is Global History?* The worldwide point of view in history – regardless of the approach, from the old universal history to subaltern studies, from transnational to world history, etc. – is in itself problematic. Combining the variety of sources with the need to avoid a finalistic interpretation of the historical phenomena seems an almost impossible task. A world history approach is powerful because it is capable of shedding some light from different geographical perspectives on labour, the environment, migration, empires, etc. Global history seems to be able to transcend “methodological nationalism”, as Marcel van der Linden suggests. However, getting rid of Eurocentrism is another issue. It is a huge endeavour for world historians, especially if culturally and physically based in the West. World history is undoubtedly the historical discipline that could help reach this goal, and in this sense the Cambridge World History, vol. VII, part 2, is a valuable reference work.