

The Mind in the Cave: The Paleolithic Era in the American World History Curriculum

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EUROPEANS HAD LONG KNOWN about the caves that have best preserved Upper Paleolithic images. However, it was not until the “time revolution” brought about by the work of Charles Darwin and his colleagues that they first came to understand what it was they were seeing when they explored such caves: evidence of human thought and culture that challenged their own narratives about the formation of the Earth.

Such narratives were long based upon biblical conceptions of a planet created by an eternal god over six days. Prior to Darwin and his colleagues, many educated Europeans thought Earth was only several thousand years old. Now, suddenly, Darwin provided a framework that would allow people to “see” cave images for the first time. The subsequent realization that there were humans inhabiting the Earth hundreds of thousands of years prior to what was previously believed gradually unfolded.¹

“Entering the Cave” with World History Students

World history teachers, too, have the opportunity to lead their students into these caves, thereby raising questions about the origins

of humanity, the peopling of the Earth, and the origins of art, music, and religion in the time before the Agricultural Revolution. To “enter the cave,” then, means striving to do justice to the beauty of the cave images created by the first anatomically modern humans, as well the many questions that are raised by a study of Paleolithic cultures, not the least of which is the meaning of the human being.

On the other hand, it is possible for world history teachers to either avoid “pre-history” altogether or to teach it only as an unfortunate prelude to the development of “civilization”—that is, to describe “prehistoric” cultures only in terms of what they could *not* do, such as build cities or create a permanent written record. This approach, however, is in stark contrast with the attention and excitement given to the period by historians, archeologists, cognitive scientists, and social theorists.

I write this paper as a social studies educator and a curriculum theorist. My purpose is to add to the existing body of research on the American world history curriculum, paying particular attention to the challenges of teaching about a historical era for which new knowledge emerges regularly and old paradigms are being questioned constantly. These challenges are compounded by the paucity of studies about the world history curriculum in general,² and the world history curriculum prior to 1500 C.E. in particular.³

Despite this lack of overall attention to the American world history curriculum, there is one consistent finding in the scholarship that deserves our attention: in general, world history standards in the American states do a poor job of translating the dynamic field of world history into school curriculum, particularly for their inability to break with Eurocentric frameworks.⁴ This is especially problematic in the case of the Paleolithic, where new findings disturb prior understandings at a breathtaking rate.

Ultimately, I believe that some of the most important issues that history educators might seek to address—What does it mean to be human? What makes for a successful human community? How is human life sustained and enriched?—might richly be addressed through a study of this era. However, for this to happen, the curriculum must be educative in its approach. That is, it must suggest to curriculum writers, teachers, and students interesting questions and topics for exploration. It is my hope that my own work can assist in this process.

This paper therefore seeks to add to the layers of possibility in the American world history curriculum. It will do so in four sections. First, I set the stage by turning to research done on the Upper Paleolithic and the “symbolic explosion” to lay out some of the possible issues that can be explored by attention to this time period. This is followed by a discussion of how such inquiry challenges modernist history projects. Next, I look at educational scholarship that explores how world history has been situated within the American school curriculum, noting various possible models for teaching world history and how such models remain entrenched in a modernist project of internal development. I conclude by describing how current American state world history standards treat the Paleolithic, focusing on both the opportunities and limitations that are built into these tools, and the possible ways they could shape what students and teachers might ask and seek to understand.

Why Study the Paleolithic?

Scholars of the Paleolithic Era (+3 million years to 10,000 years BP) have raised a fascinating array of questions with which students could engage in their world history courses. If one goal of historical inquiry is to ask what is possible for us as humans, study of this period is of rich significance. In what follows, I examine three Paleolithic inquiry topics that I feel deserve special attention.

The Lifeworld of the Neanderthal (Homo neanderthalensis)

Mention “Neanderthals,” and the image conjured up is often of the stereotypical “cave man”—brutal, inarticulate, and unintelligent. Research hardly confirms this image.⁵ There is a lively debate about whether or not Neanderthals had language and, by extension, the capacity for symbolic life.⁶ The capacity for symbolic life is, in turn, linked to the ability to form complex social groups that go beyond physical strength, as well as the capacities to create religion, art, and ideas about what happens after death.

Scholars disagree about the status of Neanderthals, but there is increasing evidence that symbolic behavior such as art-making is not the preserve of *Homo sapiens* alone. Recent discoveries in Spain suggest that Neanderthals were creating images in caves

prior to the arrival of *Homo sapiens*. This has led some researchers, such as João Zilhão, to question whether or not Neanderthals were a distinct species: “The conclusion has to be that Neanderthals were cognitively indistinguishable [from *Homo sapiens*], and the Neanderthal versus *sapiens* dichotomy is therefore invalid.”⁷

Another fascinating debate about Neanderthals revolves around their eventual fate. Around 45,000 years ago, anatomically modern humans reached Europe. There, they would have met pre-existing Neanderthal populations. The two groups would have overlapped for up to 5,000 years. What were their interactions like? Was there inter-group violence? Did anatomically modern humans “wage war” against Neanderthals, and is this the reason for their extinction? Or did anatomically modern humans have a competitive advantage (language, intelligence, etc.) when it came to hunting and the gathering of other food resources? Given that some amount of modern humans’ DNA has been traced back to the Neanderthals, what does this say about interbreeding and the possibility of inter-group cooperation?⁸

Students immediately face a number of questions about humanity itself. What was it like to stare into the eyes of a human who was of a different species? Is “humanity” unique to our species, or can we imagine “the human” as transcending *Homo sapiens*?

The Origins of Art

Evidence suggests that anatomically modern humans had evolved in Africa by 200,000 years ago, and that migration from Africa to the rest of the Earth began about 100,000 years ago. These waves were preceded by earlier waves of human migration out of Africa, with evidence suggesting that *Homo erectus* was migrating from Africa over 2 million years ago.

This in itself is a fascinating story and speaks to the unitary origins of the human family. Equally as interesting is the parallel development of art. Cave paintings of great antiquity can be found on every continent. Until recently, it was the cave paintings of the European Upper Paleolithic that were thought to be the oldest. This Eurocentric view of cave art led to the idea that the symbolic explosion was, in the words of Chris Stringer, “special to Europe and did not develop in other parts of the world until much later.”⁹ This started to change in 2014, however, when cave paintings that

are at least 39,000 years old were found on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi.¹⁰ In this way, the idea that such breathtakingly beautiful art originated in Europe has started to come undone.

For many decades, researchers had assumed that the capacity to make art had developed in Africa as part of the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. Yet evidence for such a capacity was absent until relatively recently, as archeologists discovered engraved ochre, engraved bones, and stylistically elaborate tools in Blombos Cave, South Africa, thereby suggesting that anatomically modern humans were making art in Africa at least 70,000 years BP.¹¹ And as if to underline the speed with which old narratives are being challenged, a 2014 find of etched shells on the Indonesian island of Java suggested that *Homo erectus* was employing “modern” symbolic behavior over 500,000 years BP.¹²

This undoing of the standard narrative about symbolic behavior—who did it, when, and where—raises deep questions for study in the world history classroom. Are these “doodles” art? What is art? Why do humans make art? Are art and “civilization” tied together, or can we imagine art without “civilization”?

The Origins of Religion

Caves such as Lascaux in France, Altamira in Spain, and the Maros district of Indonesia are central to any study of the Paleolithic. Their images, while difficult to capture photographically, are nonetheless fascinating. Since much of the European cave art depicts animals of the hunt (and, more rarely, humans or beasts of prey), early interpretations of these images tended to view them as attempts to control the natural world through magic, particularly, attempts to control the hunt.¹³

More recent scholarship has tended to focus more carefully on the distribution of images throughout the caves, the spaces that were thus created, and even the caves’ acoustics. It has been suggested that these caves were part of early human religious systems, with shamans using them as sites of initiation.¹⁴ Caves such as Lascaux have great outer chambers where large groups of people could have gathered, as well as paintings located in small nooks and crannies where only one person would fit. It has been suggested that initiates would have inhabited these smaller spaces as they experienced

altered states of consciousness that put them in touch with the spirit world.¹⁵ Images and sounds would have guided the initiate through this spiritual journey.

Is this religion? Are art, language, and religion part of a “package” that indicates the achievement of fully modern humanity? Or can we imagine these things developing separately, in separate locations, at separate times? Are religion and “civilization” tied together, or can we imagine religion without “civilization”?

What does it mean to be “civilized,” anyway?

World History, Big History, and Deep History: Challenges to the Profession

Having situated why the Paleolithic might interest us as history educators, I now wish to situate research of this time period within the vibrant historiographical work of the past thirty years. My own interests in a more sustainable human relationship with the environment undergird much of this section, given that a study of the Upper Paleolithic provides us new ways to think about what was gained and what was lost during the Agricultural Revolution.¹⁶

Over the past thirty years, the discipline of history has undergone a major transformation as the primacy of the nation-state has come under increasing scrutiny.¹⁷ Nations are neither ancient nor inevitable. For the most part, they were built over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as part of a modernist project that sought to unify markets, cultures, and populations via an increasingly active state apparatus.¹⁸

Since the professionalization of the discipline in the latter half of the nineteenth century, historians had treated their work as a genealogical project that sought to uncover and clarify the birth and development of “nations,” which were understood as “cultural” subjects that were increasingly able to dominate and exploit the “natural” environments in which they found themselves:

The human story, in [the modernist] worldview, is centered on the conquest of nature and the birth of political society... The conquest of nature, in turn, was tightly linked to the origins of political society. In the social thought of the eighteenth century, the natural unit had been the family—or, for some, the solitary individual. Everything humans had built on top of this natural substrate, and especially the

newly insistent nation-states of nineteenth-century Europe, could be treated as historical artifices and therefore beyond nature. The history that came into being, and loudly proclaimed its own objectivity, was in many ways an apology for nationalism.¹⁹

That is, history became siloed into national frames, supposedly telling the “national” story of an internally coherent and self-sufficient narrative of growth and/or decay. “French history,” “American history,” “Chinese history,” and so on, were—and, to a large degree, still are—the result.

The Civil Rights Movement in the United States, along with a range of other anti-colonial projects around the world, helped to bring the primacy of national lenses on history into question. The story of India could not be told apart from the story of Britain, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—indeed, from the story of the rest of the world. Theories of hybridity and subalternity arose in such circumstances. In the United States, while the mainstream Civil Rights Movement sought to situate its work within an expanded national narrative of progress, other aspects of the movement rejected both the content and the form of the American national narrative, seeking instead to replace it with other frames. Black Power and Gay Pride are just two examples.

It is out of this social context, then, that the focus on social history and various frames of reference “below” the nation-state emerged: history with a focus on gender, race, sexual identity, social class, region, or locality. This is well known. What is perhaps less considered is the way in which these movements also led to the birth of a renewed interest in “world” or “global” history—a movement that took aim to work “above” the national frame of reference and gained considerable energy in the 1980s.²⁰ Scholars typically mentioned in this regard include Patrick Manning, Jared Diamond, and Alfred Crosby.

While events such as World War I had, of course, been studied before the rise of this new world history, they had been studied from particular national contexts—what could be called an “international history” that preserved the hegemony of the nation-state. What the new world history did was to put transnational processes—migration, trade, cultural diffusion—at the center of the inquiry. A new geographical scope was demanded to carry out such work, one that challenged the practices of regional and national specializations.

While world history is often identified with a change in the geographic scope of the work of historians, it is also equally true that standard temporal frames have been challenged as well. If history is more than the work of locating the origins of the nation-state in ancient or medieval “civilizations,” then new frames of time are necessary. For example, Jared Diamond famously argued that Spanish soldiers were able to overthrow the Incan state, neither because of Spanish culture nor Spanish technology, but because Europeans had long been living in close proximity to diseases that had first arisen among humans during the Agricultural Revolution—diseases to which the indigenous people of the Americas had little exposure.²¹ Such an argument can only be made when questions are posed and studied from long temporal sweeps.

For historians interested in asking questions that require extremely long historical temporal frames for an answer, problems remained. These included the divides between natural history and human history, biology and culture, animal and human, and, most stubbornly, pre-history and history. A movement calling itself “Big History” has attempted to overcome these divides by arguing for historical attention to the very largest spans of time. As David Christian has argued:

We cannot fully understand the past few millennia without understanding the far longer period of time in which all members of our own species lived as gatherers and hunters, and without understanding the changes that led to the emergence of the earliest agrarian communities and the first urban civilizations. Paleolithic society, in its turn, cannot be fully understood without some idea of the evolution of our own species over several million years. That however requires some grasp of the history of life on earth, and so on.²²

Ultimately referencing the Big Bang, Christian, a major proponent of the movement, continued: “If there is an absolute framework for the study of the past, this is it. If the past can be studied whole, this is the scale within which to do it.”²³

By contrast, advocates of Deep History have generally avoided the quest for the “whole of time” that is so striking in Big History. Instead, they turned their focus on the origins of the human species. In the work of Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail, for example, the issue is not just about extending the temporal scale at which we ask questions, but instead is about challenging the way in which that

temporal scale has remained artificially ruptured by the appearance of writing and the subsequent pre-history/history divide. Given that few historians would maintain the nineteenth-century belief that written documents are the only form of source material with which the historian can work, Shryock and Smail have argued, “at stake is a methodology based on written evidence, along with a commitment to a powerful set of narrative motifs, most of them grounded in notions of progress and human mastery over nature.”²⁴ Finding ways to integrate the very deep human past into different narrative devices becomes the new challenge.

Clearly, the work of Big Historians and Deep Historians represent only two trends—and not the predominant ones—in the broad field of world history. In this section, I have attempted to show how work inspired by these two trends relates to broader trends in historiography—that is, the movements away from the nation-state. The “time revolution” started by Darwin and his colleagues—the realization that the Earth and our species is much older than previously thought—calls for a new way of doing history: new questions, new scales of times, and new methodological tools that avoid emplotments of “progress” and “mastery” through interrogation of written documents.

The work of Deep Historians is important for history educators because most world history curriculum begins with the “pre-historical” origins of the human species—and therefore stand to benefit by the insights of this work. Having demonstrated the manner in which trends in the discipline of history support a serious consideration of the Paleolithic, I next turn to scholarship on the American world history curriculum.

Scholarship on the World History Curriculum in America

In this section, I examine what educational research has said about how the innovations in the field of world history have been translated into the American K-12 world history curriculum. On the one hand, world history might be viewed as an improvement over national histories, given that it expands what students might know and experience, both about their own home and the other places and peoples that shape it. On the other hand, if world history curriculum does not reflect the richness of the human experience

nor raise questions about the fate of the planet and the species that inhabit it, then it is just more of the same.

As we saw in the last section, world history is a relatively new field of study in the discipline of history, gaining particular ground in the 1980s. Prior research has demonstrated the strikingly fast adoption of world history into the American school curriculum—noting the key role played by the development of the Advanced Placement World History course, which first offered a test in the spring of 2002.²⁵

Robert Bain and Tamara Shreiner documented the explosive early growth of the Advanced Placement World History test. They noted how in the first year that the College Board offered the course, “20,995 students took the exam [which was] the largest student pool for any first time AP exam.”²⁶ In 2005, AP World History was in its third year, had seen a 127% increase over that first year, and was nearing the top ten in popularity for all AP tests. In 2016, AP World History was the seventh most-popular exam, with over 285,000 students sitting for the exam.²⁷

Given the explosive growth of AP World History, in addition to the fact that states have quickly brought world history into their required social studies curriculum, it would be reasonable to expect a corresponding growth in educational research that examines world history topics. Yet, by and large, this has not been the case. In her 2011 review of the field, Linda Levstik wrote that “to date the field lacks systematic investigation of student learning in the context of world history.”²⁸ By and large, this continues to be the case, particularly in the case of ancient or “pre-history.”²⁹

There has, however, been work in the field of world history curriculum.³⁰ In particular, studies on both world history state standards and textbooks by Michael Marino and his colleagues have shed considerable light on the state of the world history curriculum.³¹ As it relates to world history textbooks, Marino found evidence of the impact of world history scholarship on the American history curriculum. World historians’ emphases on the commonality of the human experience and the interdependence of the different regions of the globe as it relates to certain core economic, social, and technological processes were all evident in the texts he reviewed. On the other hand, Marino’s findings also closely aligned with prior work on the topic by Bain and Shreiner, who suggested that

a “Western Civilization Plus” model still dominated too much curriculum.³² As Marino noted:

[T]hese books have more work to do before they can truly call themselves world history texts. For one, the content coverage is heavily concentrated in European history; more than half of the texts’ narratives are committed to discussing key events from the history of Europe. This is evident when studying the chapter titles of the different texts and comparing the amount of page coverage dedicated to both European and non-Western history. Even though the texts are ostensibly devoted to the subject of “world history,” at minimum, 55 percent of the pages in these texts are given to discussion about European history. In terms of sheer volume alone, European history dominates the content.³³

In essence, Marino found that most textbooks focused on discreet civilizational strands prior to 1500 (including India, China, sub-Saharan Africa, the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, Greco-Roman Europe, and the Americas). Between 1500 and 1945, the story was one of European exploration, industrialization, and colonization. From 1945, the story was one of global conflicts and challenges, with Europe taking up only a fraction of the narrative. The question of how textbooks treated the time prior to ancient civilizations was not addressed.

In turning to state standards, Michael Marino and Jane Bolgatz found that writers of world history state standards did little better than textbook authors: “rather than helping students conceptualize global themes, many states’ world history standards emphasize a Eurocentric rather than global or thematic orientation in the period of history between 1500 and 1945.”³⁴ With Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Michigan as notable exceptions, most states simply did not enumerate enough non-European regional content to challenge the hegemony of the Western Civilization narrative—the supposed exceptionalism of the West as it discovers and brings “modernity” to the rest of the world.

These are surprising findings, given the rich work done by Ross Dunn and his colleagues at the National Center for History in the Schools and the AP World History course.³⁵ Both work hard to integrate global themes, balance European and other regional content, and avoid implying that Europe brought “progress” and “modernity” to the rest of the world.

Treatment of the Paleolithic in the American Social Studies Curriculum

Building upon the research discussed above, in this section, I aim to shed light not only on the current place of world history in the American curriculum, but also the degree to which the tropes of “progress” and “mastery” are being challenged through a serious treatment of “pre-history.” First, I explain the methods I used to determine how the Paleolithic is treated in the American world history curriculum. I then share data that examines the place of the Paleolithic in state world history standards. Finally, I make recommendations for what Paleolithic standards might entail.

The Paleolithic in State World History Standards

In examining this curriculum, my goal is to see to what advantage the authors of state world history standards have made of the dynamic field of world history, particularly as it relates to the movement for Deep History and Big History, as well as recent research on early human symbolic behavior. To do this work, I located and read the world history standards of the fifty states.³⁶ In each set of state standards, I noted whatever content related to the Paleolithic, along with the grade level at which this content was taught.³⁷

As I continued my analysis, I attempted to take note of the general pattern of world history offerings across the various states. I asked questions such as: In what grades is world history taught? Is the content organized chronologically or thematically (or both)? If world history is taught across multiple grades, how is the material divided? What narrative, if any, emerges from the standards? What approaches are used to convey and organize the material? How is the emerging story of the “modern human”—as well as the many gaps in that emerging story—represented? As I worked to group state standards that closely approximated each other, a set of relatively distinct approaches to organizing Paleolithic content became clear.

My findings are summarized in Figures 1 through 10. In Figure 1, I offer a categorization of how world history content is organized across the standards of the fifty states. Figure 2 contains information about which states mandate the teaching of the Paleolithic and which do not. Figures 3 through 10 give

States with Two or More Designated World History Courses	States with One Designated World History Course	States with No Designated World History Course
31 states	6 states	13 states
Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Hawaii, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia	Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas	Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, Wisconsin, Wyoming

Figure 1: World History Course Requirements in the Fifty States

examples of the range of language and approaches used to talk about the Paleolithic.

In **Figure 1**, we see that a majority of states mandate at least two years of world history course-taking. Many states follow a pattern whereby a student takes a pre-modern world history course in the middle grades and a modern world history course in the high school grades.³⁸ Three states—California, Massachusetts, and Washington—require three years of world history course-taking, following a pattern where students study ancient, medieval, and modern world history across three years. Six states have students take a single world history course that is expected to examine issues from ancient to modern times. Thirteen states do not require any course-taking in world history.

It is important to note, of course, that this does not mean that students in these states are not exposed to world history content: rather, it indicates that their standards are not organized around the

States that Start World History Course(s) with the Paleolithic and the Peopling of the Earth	States that Start World History Course(s) with the Agricultural Revolution, River Civilizations, and/or World Religions
25 states	12 states
Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia	Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington

Figure 2: Treatment of the Paleolithic in States with World History Requirements

traditional disciplines and/or that these standards specify thinking or inquiry skills rather than content. It is also important to note that since many students would only ever encounter a study of the Paleolithic in the sixth or seventh grade, any evaluation of the content of these standards must make some accommodation for the emergent status of historical thinking skills among middle school students.

Figure 2 provides information on the treatment of Paleolithic content in those states that require world history course-taking. While a majority of states start their narrative with the Paleolithic, nearly 30% do not. Teachers wishing to cover the Paleolithic therefore do so for their own reasons, understanding that this material is not mandated by the state and is not considered “official knowledge.” The implicit message sent to teachers and students in these states is that history only begins with writing and the development of civilization. Human evolution, a potentially controversial topics in some locations, is thereby avoided. Biblical narratives about the origins and age of the Earth and humans, of the sort common in the time of Darwin, in this way may be left unexamined.

Figure 3 lists the twenty-six states that do not in any way treat the Paleolithic, either due to the fact that the state does not elaborate the

States that Do Not Suggest or Require Treatment of the Paleolithic	
Alaska	No content elaborated
Colorado	No content elaborated
Connecticut	No content elaborated
Delaware	No content elaborated
Georgia	Content starts with River Civilizations
Hawaii	Content starts with River Civilizations
Illinois	No content elaborated
Indiana	Content starts with River Civilizations
Iowa	No content elaborated
Kansas	Content starts with River Civilizations
Louisiana	Content starts with River Civilizations
Maine	No content elaborated
Missouri	Content starts with River Civilizations
Montana	No content elaborated
Nebraska*	No content elaborated
North Carolina	Content starts with Ancient Civilizations
Ohio	Content starts with Ancient Civilizations
Oklahoma	Content starts with Ancient Civilizations
Oregon	Content starts with World Religions
Pennsylvania	Content starts with Neolithic
Rhode Island	No content elaborated
Texas	Content starts with River Civilizations
Vermont	No content elaborated
Washington	Content starts with Ancient Civilizations
Wisconsin	No content elaborated
Wyoming	No content elaborated

Figure 3: States that Do Not Suggest or Require Treatment of the Paleolithic
 * Note: Though Nebraska lists a world history course designation with a definite chronology (“Beginning to 1000 CE”), it gives very bare elaboration on the content to be covered within that chronology.

States with “Technology and Environment” Standards	
Kentucky	Explain how early hunters and gatherers (Paleolithic and Neolithic) developed new technologies.
Minnesota	Environmental changes and human adaptation enabled human migration from Africa to other regions of the world.
New Mexico	Describe the characteristics of early societies, including the development of tools and adaptation to environments.
South Dakota	Analyze the development and cultural contributions that gave rise to the earliest human communities.

Figure 4: States with “Technology and Environment” Standards

content to be taught, or to the fact that they begin their study of world history after the Agricultural Revolution (with “Civilization,” “River Civilizations,” “Ancient Civilizations,” or “Classical Civilizations”).

Figure 4 lists four states, all of whose standards I have grouped under the category of “Technology and Environment.” These standards appear to be shaped by a geographical approach to the understanding of history, most particularly as it relates to Themes Three (Human/Environment Interaction) and Four (Movement) of the Association of American Geographer’s Five Themes of Geography.³⁹ These standards show little content elaboration. In this way, they spark little appreciation of what might make the Paleolithic worthy of study.⁴⁰ That said, they provide no narrative that dismisses the importance of “pre-history” either. There is a recognition of change over time in each standard, either through a vague reference to “development” or (in the case of Minnesota) a stark narrative of the peopling of the Earth. Such standards, while doing little intellectual good, also do not do much intellectual damage.

Figure 5 lists three states, all of whose standards I have grouped under the category of “Compare and Contrast.” These standards continue to use geographic themes, but supplement them with rudimentary anthropological insights related to the “lifestyles” of various social formations (presented as static categories: hunter-

States with “Compare and Contrast” Standards	
Arkansas	Compare hunter-gatherer and agrarian societies (e.g., tools, shelter, diet, use of fire, cave paintings, artifacts, clothing, rituals, daily life, gender roles).
Florida	Compare the lifestyles of hunter-gatherers with those of settlers of early agricultural communities.
Utah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Students will analyze the differences and interactions between sedentary farmers, pastoralists, and hunter-gatherers. b) Students will use geographic concepts to explain the factors that led to the development of civilization, and compare and contrast the environmental impact of civilizations, pastoralists, and hunter-gatherers.

Figure 5: States with “Compare and Contrast” Standards

gatherer, pastoralist, civilization). These standards do not use language of much historical precision, referencing no historical concepts nor any chronology. That said, these standards do afford some learning opportunities. Arkansas’ standards elaborate enough areas of social life that might cause students to evaluate the Agricultural Revolution in a more nuanced manner (gender, diet). Arkansas is also one of five states that specifically recommend cave paintings for study. However, as with the standards that I grouped under “Technology and Environment,” these standards ultimately lack much content elaboration and sophistication.

Figure 6 lists three states, all of whose standards I have grouped under the category of “Social Scientific.” These standards are noteworthy for their attempt to highlight the methods by which archeologists and anthropologists have been able to learn about those societies that existed prior to the development of writing. A helpful extension of such an approach is clear in the example of Virginia, which states that our knowledge of the past is never static, but instead constantly evolves—a helpful reminder, given that research on the time period has shifted so quickly over the past five years alone. Alabama takes the helpful approach of

States with “Social Scientific” Standards	
Alabama	Explain how artifacts and other archaeological findings provide evidence of the nature and movement of prehistoric groups of people. Examples: cave paintings, Ice Man, Lucy, fossils, pottery.
Idaho	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Describe types of evidence used by anthropologists, archaeologists, and other scholars to reconstruct early human and cultural development. b) Describe the characteristics of early hunter-gatherer communities.
Virginia	<p>The student will apply social science skills to understand the period from the Paleolithic Era to the agricultural revolution by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) explaining the impact of geographic environment on hunter-gatherer societies. b) describing characteristics of hunter-gatherer societies, including their use of tools and fire. c) analyzing how technological and social developments gave rise to sedentary communities. d) analyzing how archaeological discoveries are changing current understanding of early societies.

Figure 6: States with “Social Scientific” Standards

recommending particular case examples that would not only build substantive knowledge of the Paleolithic, but also demonstrate a range of methods used by social scientists to understand the deep past. Overall, these standards, while lacking in elaboration, provide essential information for the study of the Paleolithic.

Figure 7 lists two states, both of whose standards I have grouped under the category of “Non-Critical Evaluation of the Agricultural Revolution.” These standards only reference the Paleolithic in terms of what comes after it—the Agricultural Revolution. In this way, both states identify the emergence of agriculture as a key turning point in human history, though New Jersey’s standards do so with much more precise disciplinary language. This referencing of the Agricultural Revolution means that a before/after

States with “Non-Critical Evaluation of the Agricultural Revolution” Standards	
New Jersey	<p>The Beginnings of Human Society: Paleolithic and Neolithic Ages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Hunter/gatherers adapted to their physical environments using resources, the natural world, and technological advancements. b) The agricultural revolution led to an increase in population, specialization of labor, new forms of social organization, and the beginning of societies. c) Archaeology provides historical and scientific explanations for how ancient people lived.
South Carolina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Explain the characteristics of hunter-gatherer groups and their relationship to the natural environment. b) Explain the emergence of agriculture and its effect on early human communities, including the domestication of plants and animals, the impact of irrigation techniques, and subsequent food surpluses.

Figure 7: States with “Non-Critical Evaluation of the Agricultural Revolution” Standards

dichotomy is set up—one that could be used to great intellectual advantage. However, the opportunity is largely missed, as both states’ standards essentially put forward a celebratory narrative whereby the Agricultural Revolution led to straight-forward human progress through mastery of nature via technological means. These standards—particularly New Jersey’s—can be praised for their elaboration. However, the implicit narrative here has the potential to do much intellectual damage. It is clearly a missed learning opportunity, instead reinforcing that “civilized” peoples are “more advanced” than “savages” and “barbarians.”

Figure 8 lists five states, all of whose standards I have grouped under the category of “Pre-Civilization.” There is a fairly large degree of elaboration present in these standards, as well as themes common to other categories presented above—such as Arizona’s invitation to compare different lifestyles or Tennessee’s referencing

States with “Pre-Civilization” Standards	
Arizona	<p>Early Civilizations:</p> <p>a) Describe the lifestyles of humans in the Paleolithic and Neolithic Ages.</p> <p>b) Determine how the following factors influenced groups of people to develop into civilizations in Egypt, India, Mesopotamia, and China.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. farming methods 2. domestication of animals 3. division of labor 4. geographic factors
Maryland	<p>Analyze how the rise of the earliest communities led to the emergence of agricultural societies:</p> <p>a) Describe characteristics and innovations of hunting and gathering societies, such as nomadic lifestyles, inventors of tools, adaptation to animal migration and vegetation cycles and the shift from food gathering to food-producing activities.</p>
Nevada	<p>Pre-Civilization:</p> <p>a) Identify and describe the characteristics of pre-agricultural societies.</p> <p>b) Identify and describe the technological innovations of early agrarian societies.</p> <p>c) Identify the characteristics of pre-Columbian civilizations in South America that became part of American culture.</p> <p>d) Evaluate factors that contributed to the fall of pre-Columbian civilizations.</p>
Tennessee	<p>Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, and social structures of early Africa through the Neolithic Age which led to the development of civilizations:</p> <p>a) Identify sites in Africa where archaeologists and historians have found evidence of the origins of modern human beings and describe what the archaeologists found.</p> <p>b) Provide textual evidence that characterizes the nomadic hunter-gatherer societies of the Paleolithic Age (their use of tools and fire, basic hunting weapons, beads and other jewelry).</p> <p>c) Explain the importance of the discovery of metallurgy and agriculture.</p>
West Virginia	<p>a) Demonstrate an understanding of pre-history, the concept of change over time and the emergence of civilizations.</p> <p>b) Analyze the interaction of early humans with the environment and evaluate their decisions (e.g., hunting, migration, shelter, food and clothing).</p> <p>c) Detail and predict the causes and consequences of the Agricultural Revolution.</p>

Figure 8: States with “Pre-Civilization” Standards

States with “Critical Evaluation of the Agricultural Revolution” Standards	
New Hampshire	Analyze the impact of the agricultural revolution on humans using examples, e.g., the role of women, specialization of labor, or population density.
New York	The Paleolithic Era was characterized by non-sedentary hunting and gathering lifestyles, whereas the Neolithic Era was characterized by a turn to agriculture, herding, and semi-sedentary lifestyles: a) Students will analyze the political, social, and economic differences in human lives before and after the Neolithic Revolution, including the shift in roles of men and women.

Figure 9: States with “Critical Evaluation of the Agricultural Revolution” Standards

of the social scientific approach. But what makes these states standards occupy a single category is their clear acceptance of the pre-history/history divide and the inevitability of human advancement through agriculture—the “development” or “emergence” of civilization being the operative phrase in each standard. In some ways, these five states can be grouped with the twelve others that omitted the Paleolithic and began their history standards with the “rise of civilization.” Both groups suggest that pre-history is the unimportant or uninteresting backdrop for the rise of urban societies. In the rather extreme case of Nevada, Paleolithic society and history is referenced almost exclusively as a foil, as a time period in which there was no change to speak of, involving people and societies that are notable for what they could *not* do.

Figure 9 lists two states, both of whose standards I have grouped under the category of “Critical Evaluation of the Agricultural Revolution.” These standards are noteworthy for their lack of elaboration, particularly as it relates to Paleolithic content. In some ways, these standards are very similar to those presented in **Figure 7**—except that in these two sets of standards, the treatment is more critical. It appears that the Paleolithic is again viewed as a backdrop to the development of “real” history, but in this case, there are explicit questions raised about the lasting impact and significance of the Agricultural Revolution. A tone of historical

States with “Elaborate, Critical, and Educative” Standards	
California	<p>Students describe what is known through archaeological studies of the early physical and cultural development of humankind from the Paleolithic era to the agricultural revolution:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the hunter-gatherer societies, including the development of tools and the use of fire. Identify the locations of human communities that populated the major regions of the world and describe how humans adapted to a variety of environments. Discuss the climatic changes and human modifications of the physical environment that gave rise to the domestication of plants and animals and new sources of clothing and shelter.
Massachusetts	<p>Human Origins in Africa through the Neolithic Age:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the great climatic and environmental changes that shaped the earth and eventually permitted the growth of human life. Identify sites in Africa where archaeologists have found evidence of the origins of modern human beings and describe what the archaeologists found. Describe the characteristics of the hunter-gatherer societies of the Paleolithic Age (their use of tools and fire, basic hunting weapons, beads and other jewelry). Explain the importance of the invention of metallurgy and agriculture (the growing of crops and the domestication of animals). Describe how the invention of agriculture related to settlement, population growth, and the emergence of civilization.
Michigan	<p>In the first era of human history, people spread throughout the world. As communities of hunters, foragers, or fishers, they adapted creatively and continually to a variety of contrasting, changing environments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Explain how and when human communities populated major regions of the world and adapted to a variety of environments. Explain what archaeologists have learned about Paleolithic and Neolithic societies.
Mississippi	<p>Understand the biological and cultural processes that shaped the earliest human communities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Examine a variety of scientific methods used by archaeologists, geologists, and anthropologists to determine the dates of early human communities. Investigate the approximate chronology and sequence of early hominid evolution in Africa from the Australopithecines to Homo erectus. Identify current and past theories regarding the processes by which human groups populated the major world regions. Discuss possible social, cultural, and/or religious meanings inferred from late Paleolithic cave paintings.
North Dakota	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate and explain scientific evidence and discoveries related to early hominid development (e.g., evidence about daily life, major anthropological discoveries and their locations, key people associated with major anthropological discoveries). Identify the features and accomplishments (e.g., development of tools, use of fire, adaptation to the natural environment, location in continental regions) of hunter-gatherer communities. Trace the emergence of agriculture and its effect (e.g., climate changes, the impact of irrigation techniques, the domestication of plants and animals) on early human communities.

Figure 10: States with “Elaborate, Critical, and Educative” Standards

or cultural relativism is present. It is suggested to students that gender roles might have changed for the worse with the adoption of agriculture. While other specific examples are not given, it is possible that students might be encouraged to examine the rise of class stratification and slavery; the onset of private property; the development of war and organized large-scale violence; as well as decreases in human health and an increase in environmental degradation—all processes that could be linked to the rise of sedentary, urban living in the wake of the Agricultural Revolution. These standards clearly miss the opportunity to discuss content related to the peopling of the Earth and the rise of symbolic behavior. On the other hand, in terms of what they do cover, it is very likely that higher-order, critical thinking might be encouraged.

Figure 10 lists five states, all of whose standards I have grouped under the category of “Elaborate, Critical, and Educative.” These standards represent the highest level of quality related to Paleolithic content within current world history standards. These standards elaborate “pre-historical” content as worthy of historical study in its own right—integrating the best of the previous approaches while acknowledging that Paleolithic people were historical actors who experienced change over time as cultural, technological, social, and environmental systems interacted and evolved. These standards are educative in that they raise questions that are likely to be of interest to teachers and students: How and over what time scale did humans evolve and populate the Earth? What were the meanings of cave paintings? What were the varied impacts of the Agricultural Revolution? However, no standards raise all of these points to equally compelling degrees. In this regard, Mississippi probably represents the high point of Paleolithic curriculum writing.

Summary and Recommendations

As we review state world history standards relating to the Paleolithic period and the Agricultural Revolution, it is clear that there are not any regional patterns. Their variance is what is striking—a variance that is quite unimaginable for many other topics, such as those that would be taught in an American history course.

The standards vary quite a bit in the degree of content elaboration provided. Surely, usable standards should be concise for ease of consultation—though some elaboration is surely preferable to very

Suggested State Standards Incorporating the Paleolithic Era
<p>In the first era of human history, people spread throughout the world. As communities of hunters, foragers, or fishers, they adapted creatively and continually to a variety of contrasting, changing environments: (Michigan)</p> <p>a) Describe the great climatic and environmental changes that shaped the earth and eventually permitted the growth of human life. (Massachusetts)</p> <p>b) Analyze how archaeological discoveries are changing current understanding of early societies. (Virginia)</p> <p>c) <u>Analyze and evaluate different theories addressing the fate of the Neanderthals.</u></p> <p>d) <u>Analyze the rise of symbolic behavior, including evidence for art and abstract thought in species pre-dating and concurrent with <i>Homo sapiens</i>.</u></p> <p>e) Discuss possible social, cultural, and/or religious meanings inferred from <u>early and middle Paleolithic etchings</u> and late Paleolithic cave paintings <u>and mobiliary art.</u> (Mississippi)</p> <p>f) Analyze the political, social, and economic differences in human lives before and after the Neolithic Revolution, including <u>the shift in roles of men and women; diet, property rights, religious and social rituals, daily life, the role of art in society, warfare and violence, as well as gender and social class roles. Evaluate the sustainability of the processes inaugurated by the Neolithic Revolution.</u> (New York)</p>

Figure 11: Suggested State Standards Incorporating the Paleolithic Era. These suggested standards draw from the best writing across the fifty states, with my own additions underlined. Certainly, I have not included all the content that I might, but my goal here was to remain true to the spirit of most state history standards, which seek to elaborate key content worthy of historical study.

little or none. The standards also vary quite a bit in the degree to which they are educative: that is, the degree to which teachers are guided toward asking compelling and critical questions about the Paleolithic and the impact of the Agricultural Revolution.⁴¹

Standards might serve the goals of content elaboration and educative support differently. That being said, in order to assist future writer of standards, I have assembled a concise set of standards that might guide future curriculum work. These can be found in **Figure 11**. These suggested standards start with the very formation of the Earth, move to the rise of hominid species and the peopling of the

Earth, proceed to raise questions about symbolic behavior and the meaning of cave paintings, and end with a critical evaluation of the legacy and sustainability of the Agricultural Revolution. History standards, while speaking to the past, must ultimately help us ask questions about our collective future.

Prior research on the world history curriculum has mostly found that state world history standards tend to be quite similar in their broad outlines, especially in how they privilege European content at the expense of other actors and locations.⁴² This will be true of the Paleolithic as well, unless recent findings on hominid symbolic behavior in Africa and Asia are given much more attention. Curriculum writers can point the way in this regard, both by including recent archeological findings as standards are revised and updated, and by insisting that students understand the dynamic and quickly-changing nature of archeological research on this time period.

Erasing the Eurocentric narrative around cave painting will be one important step. But there is another narrative at play in these standards as well, one quite clear in a majority of the fifty state's world history standards. For either by excluding the Paleolithic altogether, or by treating it as the changeless and savage pre-history that preceded the growth of civilizations, we propagate a mis-educative narrative about what it means to be human.

That is too bad.

Conclusion

One of the initial motivations to undertake this study came as I listened to an interview with the French scientist and social activist, Xavier Le Pichon.⁴³ The interview referenced an essay Le Pichon had written, entitled “Ecce Homo (Behold Humanity).”⁴⁴ In the interview, Le Pichon talked about Shanidar, a Neanderthal site that was first found in a region in present-day Iraq in the 1950s. Subsequent research on the site challenged some of what the scientific community had previously understood about early humans and their ancestors—including work on the differences between Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*.

One key find was the remains of a severely disabled Neanderthal man. This man lived well beyond the time of his initial injuries. It

is logically assumed that he only survived through the consistent support of his community. When this man died, he was then buried—a practice that was not universal among Neanderthal communities. In “*Ecce Homo*,” Le Pichon asks us to consider the following:

What was this community?...It would have consisted of perhaps twenty or thirty people living by hunting and gathering, without a permanent camp. Every day the community would have moved on in search of new resources. We can only imagine the considerable effort, which this group had to make for many years in order to transport this person from camp to camp, in order to feed him and in order to simply allow him to live. Why did a small group of nomads, having each day to look for their food through hunting and plant gathering decide to radically reorganize their life so that a severely handicapped man would become the center of their efforts and attention?...What did they discover about their own humanity through this long and arduous process of sharing their life with a severely disabled man? Was this their way of facing death and suffering? Why did this person become the new focus of society?⁴⁵

Why, indeed?

While most mammal species organize their life around their vulnerable young, it is perhaps something altogether different to organize a society around care for the vulnerable adult: the ill, the disabled, and the elderly. Le Pichon suggested that putting such vulnerability at the very heart of the community is the mark of the truly human(e).

In this paper, I have argued that such questions and such stories are essential for recovering our sense of what public school history might truly be for. Since the time of Plato, “the cave” has represented a life lived in darkness and falsehood. But the Platonic view implies that the being of humans is already fully known and determined—that there is a static essence to the human, to be sought and pursued, in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Study of the Paleolithic, on the other hand, takes historical relativism seriously. It assumes that the meaning of the human is always at stake and is always—within cultural, technological, and environmental limits—open to change. Study of the Paleolithic invites us to enter deeper into the cave, and in that way, through a consideration of history, myth, art, and religion, confront what is possible for us as a species. Indeed, study of the Paleolithic

should equally focus on humanity's future—increasing prosperity, global disaster, extraterrestrial colonization, or cyborgization—as well as its past.

The discipline of history now embraces a study of our deep past and what it might mean for our tenuous present. The findings presented here about the place of the Paleolithic in world history standards have hopefully helped illuminate these possibilities, all the while assisting teachers, curriculum writers, and educational researchers in making this period come alive in ways that might assist in the project of a richly human(e) social education.

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36. This happened over the summer of 2017. It should be noted that standards are updated and revised at fairly consistent intervals, so these findings must of course be situated in a particular moment in time.

37. Some states do not organize their standards by disciplines and take a more integrative approach. When this was the case, I looked for inquiry or thematic strands related to the Upper Paleolithic.

38. Many upper elementary and middle school courses are not given a disciplinary title, instead being called only, for example, "Sixth Grade Social Studies." It therefore required some degree of judgment on my part whether or not to designate a particular course as a "World History course." New York is an example that both confirms the general trend while pointing out the complexities in trying to categorize curricula. In the fifth grade, New York students study the history of the Western Hemisphere from the peopling of the land through the Columbian encounter. They also study western hemispheric geography. In the sixth grade, students do the same thing with the Eastern Hemisphere, ending their historical study with the Mongols. In the ninth and tenth grades, students take two

courses in world history, with the standard pre-modern and modern periodization used. It could therefore be argued that New York has students take four world history courses, depending on how we count the middle grades offerings.

39. The “Five Themes of Geography” were put forward by the Association of American Geographers in 1984 and are heavily used in American social studies classrooms.

40. In this and all subsequent tables, cited standards on the Paleolithic are quoted verbatim, though I have regularized punctuation and formatting for the convenience of the reader.

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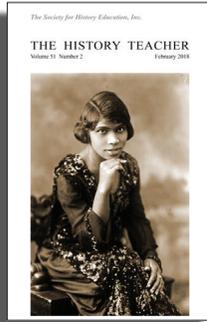
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