

“No Longer From Pyramids to the Empire State Building”: Why Both Western Civilization and World Civilization Should be Part of the History Major: A Case Study

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IN 2005, Peter Stearns wrote, “The ongoing debate between partisans of Western civilization surveys and fans of world history continues with no signs of any abatement.”¹ That such a debate continues to blaze may come as a surprise to some historians, but not to Professor Stearns, an early cheerleader for world history. No one can deny that the rise of world history has been a phenomenon in American higher education over the past thirty years. Most high school students now take some version of a world history course. An advanced placement program has grown rapidly over the past five years. Colleges and universities widely, though not universally, have added world history courses as part of general education as well as the requirements for history majors. Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* as well as Peter Stearns’ own *A Brief History of the World* produced by the The Teaching Company indicates that world history attracts a general public as well. Yet Western civilization still has its advocates on campuses and remains appealing to the general public, again as witnessed by the offerings of The Teaching Company, PBS, the History Channel, and The Modern Scholar. While not intending to completely resolve anything once and for all, this brief article intends

to examine this debate as it practically unfolded in the Department of History and Government at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, and the long and tortuous path that held to the adoption of an interesting and intriguing option: the requirement that all history majors take *both* a Western civilization survey and a world history survey. This case study hopefully will stimulate further discussion about the relationship and educational purposes of not just Western civilization and world history, but general humanities surveys, and the globalization of the U.S. history survey as well, to create a new, thoughtful, and more relevant curriculum for the 21st century.

The Western civilization survey as we know it today was launched in the 1920s in the wake of World War I with the hope of establishing a Western set of core values and intellectual order out of the chaos and pessimism prevalent at the time. During the war itself, the U.S. government wanted its soldiers to have a basic understanding of the cultural values and background of European civilization so that they would know what they were fighting for (and, particularly, against). A very basic overview of “War issues”—not dissimilar from current crash courses on Arab history and culture or the Islamic faith for deploying U.S. military forces to the Middle East—aimed to create what *The History Teacher’s Magazine* called “thinking bayonets,” aware of the historic beastliness of the “Hun.”²² After the war ended, this course was developed by Columbia University into “Contemporary Civilization,” the precursor to all Western civilization classes. One Columbia dean predicted that students as well as the world would now be made safe for democracy, by learning about the new threat of Bolshevism, that most “destructive element in our society.”²³ For many intellectuals, Western civilization had simply opened its veins and bled to death from 1914-1918. The most influential expression of this pessimism was Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. The first volume was published in July 1918, as the war was ending, with the second volume appearing in 1922. Spengler viewed history as an assemblage of many different cultures that, like living organisms, experience birth, youth, maturity, and death. What disturbed his contemporaries the most was his insistence that Western civilization had entered its final stage and that its death could not be averted. More dramatically, William Butler Yeats in *The Second Coming* (1919) conveyed this sense of dark times ahead:

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The Ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand

 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?⁴

Bolshevism, Fascism, Nazism, Depression, World War II, and the Cold War all reinforced the notion that Western culture had to be preserved and taught. As the late Eugen Weber put it, “I know you all don’t come from that small appendage known as Europe,” but our ideals, institutions, and culture do, “therefore we have to go back to the old country.”⁵ Professor Robert Bucholz in the introduction to his course *Foundations of Western Civilization II: A History of the Modern Western World* produced by The Teaching Company states, “Wherever we come from, whatever we believe, however we make a living, Americans are all, to a greater or lesser extent, inhabitants of a land shaped by the last five centuries of Western history and culture . . . This course will explore the ideas, events, and character that molded Western political, social, religious, intellectual, cultural, scientific, technological, and economic history during the tumultuous period between the 16th and 20th centuries.”⁶ So while certainly not denying the importance of other cultures (Weber in his series actually states that “Western civilization is really an Asian civilization”⁷), the Western civilization survey seeks to forge connections between the United States and the older traditions of Europe. There exists a line of historical development that runs from ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt on to Greece and then Rome, then on to Western Europe, and then on to the North American continent—from pyramids to the Empire State Building, maybe on to California. In teaching practice as well, there has existed for many years a symbiosis between the two surveys with the contention that any U.S. historian can teach Western civilization because one could not grasp the fundamentals of U.S. history without first understanding from whence it came. Or as Peter Stearns puts it, Western civilization helps “provide additional legitimacy and heft for the still-brief American experience per se.”⁸ This most definitely does not mean that most U.S. historians actually want to teach the longer, more complicated Western civilization survey, preferring to specialize in the even more truncated U.S. History to 1865 or U.S. History since 1865. If even teaching the entire length of American history proves too much of a strain for some U.S. historians, then teaching Western civilization really seems beyond the pale, despite the tremendous emphasis Americans have long given to the Western tradition.

For Stearns, “World history partisans are less concerned with forming identities, though some references to global citizenship may attach.”⁹ References to “global citizenship” aside (this would not be a good idea

for state legislators who see any history in terms of narrow American “patriotism” only), the justification for a world history approach rests with the logical notion that American students—whether in high school, college, or history major programs—learn something about the world as a whole, including how the West fits into larger world patterns, rather than learning just about the Western tradition. World history should not be an exercise in “West-bashing,” nor a rejection of the term “civilization” completely on the grounds that it is politically incorrect; rather it should move students away from a strictly Christian, Western-focused history and remind them that Americans now operate in a global environment. The choice of world history in a teaching program involves a different set of emphases from the Western civilization tradition. What has to be avoided is the “West and the rest” approach, or “Western civilization with a bit of hamburger helper,” as Stearns describes,¹⁰ where retreated Western civilization teachers with retreated Western civilization textbooks focus on the Western experience with brief mentions of other societies. Western civilization needs to be seen as one of a number of major civilizations—and not always the most important. But Carol Gluck has expressed a concern that “Teaching world history is both necessary and impossible. It is necessary because we know that the conventional boundaries of historical knowledge are too narrow for the world today. It is impossible because the expanse of world history across space and time is too broad for the classroom . . . what to choose and how to tell the story?”¹¹ International, transnational, interregional, comparative, and global approaches abound in the teaching of world history—who today would deny the importance of thinking across boundaries—yet the grand narrative of world history comes down to, in Stearns own words, “the study of how the world got to be what it is today.”¹² And is that so different from the straight-line approach of Western civilization? Gluck wonders if world history can really separate itself from that approach:

One may multiply the narratives and still face the fact that it is the winners who write history. This is why the Mongols appear as marauding hordes rather than a flourishing Eurasian empire. Because modern nations use their history in service of identity, they tend to usurp the entire past, imprisoning centuries and even millennia within recently established national boundaries. National history not only co-opts the long past but also drives out the present heterogeneity, so that other histories—of minorities, for example—disappear from the story. Add to these problems the dilemma of historical “correctness”. World history is nothing if not multicultural, but it is impossible to get everybody in, and the exclusion can be invidious. Africa almost always gets short shrift . . .¹³

Another concern about the teaching of world history, put forward by East Asian historians, is that the field cannot adequately convey the complexities of individual traditions, such as Chinese history that is so complex that it would inevitably be simplified in a survey. Also, European historians see world history as another product of American imperialism, where the Western historical and cultural experience is slighted, where all that matters is the U.S., with the entire world as its “backyard.” However, Stearns believes that most world historians in the United States make an effort to deal fairly with the experiences of various societies, including Europe.¹⁴ How to reconcile world history and Western civilization? Can world history adequately deal with the European tradition without being unduly influenced by it?

Against this debate, the History program in the Department of History and Government at Cameron University, a mid-level regional state university under the University of Oklahoma Board of Regents, struggled to reach a consensus on the relationship of the two surveys to the major and the general education mission. A brief history of the history curriculum at Cameron would be helpful. In the late 1970s, as part of the reform of the General Education program at Cameron University, the Department of History and Government, which was then called the Department of Social Sciences, later the Department of History and Humanities, introduced a series of interdisciplinary courses, including Humanities 2113: Humanities in Early Western Culture and Humanities 2123: Humanities in Modern Western Culture. These courses fulfilled the humanities general education requirement. Unfortunately, only those history majors who took this series received a thorough exposure to the basics of European history beyond what they receive at the secondary level. This was so because of other changes made in the history major offering that were judged to be necessary and were very much in tune with developments in the field of history. The main change involved a shift from teaching History 1113 and 1123 as Western Civilization (essentially a European history series) to teaching these same courses as a World History series.

It was essential to make this shift for two reasons. First, the field of history is increasingly focused on comparisons and connections between different world regions. This is evidenced by the fact that the Educational Testing Services (ETS) Major Field Test (MFT) in History now has a section devoted to world history. Secondly, this change was crucial because teachers at the secondary level need to have some background in world history. Once this change was made, however, there was no mandatory preparatory course for history majors at Cameron University giving them background in European history. Results from the History MFT indicated that history students performed better in the world history section than in

the European section, although they had actually taken more upper-level European courses than world. The conclusion of the History Program Assessment Committee was that the differential between the European and world history scores had to be ascribed to the lack of a European history survey course. And since the professor who taught the world history sequence was of the strong opinion that it should be a “real” world history course, and not a “West and the rest” version, ideas about just “beefing up” Europe did not seem to be the answer. The department agreed with this assessment and in August of 2004 voted to institute a requirement that all history majors must take Early and Modern Western Civilization as well as World History. This decision also recommended a method to achieve this end, viz., converting Humanities 2113 and 2123 into History courses that would then become a traditional Western civilization series. The converted courses would remain 2000-level, but would no longer carry the “HUM” prefix but instead the “HIST” prefix. Further, the sense of the department was that history majors should not be required to take additional required courses to fulfill the major. Thus, it was decided that students would be required to take the new Western civilization series as part of their five-course, non-U.S. component. The new Western Civilization I and II would continue as a general education humanities course. Also, the course eventually would refocus from an interdisciplinary humanities course, i.e., art, music, philosophy, literature, religion, as well as history, to a traditional Western civilization survey with emphasis also on political and social history. The newly created online versions have already made that transition. After some delay, the changes were approved by the Cameron University Curriculum Committee, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and eventually the Regents for the University of Oklahoma. Currently, the World History series is part of the core curriculum for the major, and the Western Civilization I and II constitute 6 hours of the required 15 hours of non-U.S. history, with the remaining 9 hours coming from traditional upper-level classes.¹⁵

There existed a consensus between the two European historians—a since-1789 modernist and an early modernist specializing in the Atlantic world—that this move would enhance the major in several ways. First of all, the department lacks in upper-level courses in non-European history (Latin America being the only one currently taught), so the required world history sequence would guarantee exposure to non-western history. The course thus would remain a “true” world history, with less emphasis upon Europe. Since many of our majors will become teachers, it was felt that a basic Western civilization survey would not only prepare them for upper level European work, but also give every major a survey of all European history. This change became even more significant with the creation of

a new Social Science Education degree for secondary teachers separate from the specific history major. However, the parochialism of some of the American historians took on epic proportions. Just before the change was to go to the campus wide Curriculum Committee, “secret meetings” were set up to oppose the move to convert the humanities courses to Western civilization courses that would become part of the major. The arguments advanced point out the cultural politics and differences between U.S. historians and non-U.S. historians. Charges were made that this change would “Europeanize” the department because 12 hours of non-U.S. history surveys were required whereas only 6 hours of U.S. history—both halves of the U.S. survey—were required in the core. Arguments were also advanced that students in Oklahoma were interested in U.S. history, i.e., learning about the Civil War or seeing “the West” in terms of Cowboys and Indians rather than in the context of world or European history. (Anecdotally this can be refuted by a consistent request for courses in ancient history, specifically Greece and Rome.) For months, the department environment remained acrimonious until finally the “Americanists” acquiesced to the changes that have now become a permanent part of the major.

Most colleges and universities in the United States require either world civilization or Western civilization for history majors, but not both. From the perspective of the history program at Cameron University, a logical solution would be to require both for the major. World civilization remains in the core, Western civilization becomes part of the 15 hours of non-U.S. history required for the B.A. in History. In principle, everything belongs in world history, but in practice, much is omitted. World history does not replace either U.S. history or Western civilization. It is neither the history of the “West” nor the “non-West,” but of the whole, and the whole does not always divide along such lines. Nor should we stop at just requiring both world and Western civilization for history majors. This gets us beyond the either/or contest for one survey slot, but what about the sacrosanct U.S. survey? There seems to be no debate about its place in the history curriculum or the general education requirements. That non-majors have to take either U.S. History to 1865 or U.S. History since 1865, clearly leaving something out, while history majors, being history majors after all, have to take both surveys, seems set in stone at Cameron University as well as many other institutions. To that point, Peter Stearns makes the following proposal: “Why not consider, certainly at the college level and sometimes in 11th grade as well, a merger of U.S. and Western history, leaving a clear space for a world history course that would also deal appropriately with Western civilization from a different vantage point.”¹⁶ He writes that such a course would “virtually require explicit treatment of exceptionalism tested with the society—Western Europe—against which

it usually applied: the new combination would in fact directly address the current anomaly of highlighting Western traditions as foundational (the Western civilization approach) while talking about how the United States blissfully departs from the European model (as in most current U.S. surveys.)¹⁷ Discussion about “internationalizing” the U.S. survey abounds among scholars and even publishers of textbooks, but it might be open to the same criticism brought by European historians about world history that such an approach tends to view the rest of the world as America’s “backyard.” However, given that a report released in 2007 showed that when more than 14,000 seniors and freshmen at fifty American colleges and universities were tested on some basics of American history and civics, the average score was 52%, maybe it is time to think outside of the U.S. history survey box.¹⁸

Given the current conservative mood of the country as regards to education, and the long-entrenched U.S. history survey, a “United States and the Western Tradition” class, while intriguing, seems highly improbable. While European history results have improved for the History MFT, it is too soon to see any trend, but the experience in the Department of History and Government at Cameron University reveals that putting a history major together consists of more than a set of assessable skills and measurable outcomes. If requiring both Western civilization and world civilization for history majors provoked intense turf protection and incivility, one could only imagine the explosion if U.S. history were combined with Western civilization. The history “survey cake” begs to be resliced, with new combinations that would take historians beyond the rigid confines of the current debate. Or as Carol Gluck concludes, “It might excite the imagination and incite action, perhaps even rising to the challenge of James Joyce’s evocation of ‘History, thy rill be run unhemmed as it is uneven.’”¹⁹ The attempt to develop a holistic history curriculum in terms of the relationship between introductory courses; mid-level thematic U.S., European, non-western, and methodological courses; and upper-division work remains a vexing, ongoing project. Like many history programs, my department is scheduled for yet another revisiting of the requirements for the history major as we continually reevaluate our curriculum. But one thing is sure, worries about citizenship, core moral values, education’s public purpose, identity formation, current global issues, and what skills and perspectives history students actually learn need to be resolved by individual institutions and history faculties. To not do so would mean that potentially any debate about the relative value of world history, Western civilization, and U.S. history surveys would be rendered moot as the need for *any* history requirements at all will be questioned by those in authority, whether they be members of state legislatures or boards of regents.

Notes

1. Peter Stearns, "A Modest Proposal," *Perspectives* 45, no. 5 (May 2005): 1, <<http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2005/0505/0505viel.cfm?pv=y>>. For a thorough introduction to the evolution of world history, see Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). For a brief discussion of the relationship between "Western civilization" and world history, see Peter N. Stearns, *Western Civilization in World History* (London, U.K.: Routledge, 2003). For a practical sense of the development of the world history course, see Kevin Reilly, ed., *World History: Selected Reading Lists and Course Outlines from American Colleges and Universities* (New York: Marcus Wiener Publishing, Inc., 1986).
2. Robert Hughes, *The Culture of Complaint: The Fraying Of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 61.
3. Ibid.
4. Roy T. Matthews and F. Dewitt Platt, *Readings in the Western Humanities, Volume II: The Renaissance to the Present*, sixth ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 279.
5. *The Western Tradition* (1989), "Program 1: The Dawn of History," by Eugen Weber, produced by WGBH Boston, 30 min., the Annenberg/CPB Collection, 1989, videocassette.
6. Robert Bucholz, *Foundations of Western Civilization II: A History of the Modern Western World, Part I, Transcript* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2006), 1.
7. *The Western Tradition* (1989), "Program 4: From Bronze to Iron," by Eugen Weber, produced by WGBH Boston, 30 min., the Annenberg/CPB Collection, 1989, videocassette.
8. Stearns, "A Modest Proposal," 1.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Carol Gluck, "World History and Its Pitfalls," *History Matters! Ideas, Notes and News About History Education* 12, no. 5 (January 2000): 1.
12. Ibid., 7.
13. Ibid.
14. Peter N. Stearns, *A Brief History of the World, Transcript* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2007), 6.
15. Material from internal Department of History and Government Memos dated 5 March 2004 and 27 March 2006.
16. Stearns, "A Modest Proposal," 1. See especially, Peter N. Stearns and Noralee Frankel, *Globalizing America History: The AHA Guide to Re-Imagining the U.S. Survey Course* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 2008) and "Teaching History: Some New World Perspectives" *Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (April 2008). Also see Gabrielle Hecht and Paul N. Edwards, *The Technopolitics of Cold War: Toward a Transregional Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 2007) and Michael J. Galgano, *Liberal Learning and the History Major* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 2007). There are also some fourteen essays in the AHA's Essays on Global and Comparative History series. For an older but still useful and interesting description of the history survey course, see Kevin Reilly, ed., *The Introductory History Course: Six Models* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1984).
17. Stearns, "A Modest Proposal," 2.
18. Kenneth C. Davis, "Why Don't We Know Much About History," *USA Weekend*, 11-13 April 2008, p. 20.
19. Gluck, 7.

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