

## THE COLORS OF WORLD HISTORY

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What is world history? Bruce Mazlish contends that "world" history, as opposed to "global" history, is the study of systemic processes of interaction among diverse peoples, best typified by the work of William H. McNeill. By contrast, "global" history is the history of globalization, a process that Mazlish argues did not begin to occur on a significant scale until at least the 1950s, and, more plausibly, the 1970s. Citing prominent economic historians, Nicholas Kristof asserts that globalization actually started in the second half of the 19th Century, when steamships, the telegraph, the railroad, and European, North American, and Japanese empire-builders brought humankind into a single densely interwoven community of trade, investment, culture, and political rivalry for the first time. One of the founders of world-system theory, Immanuel Wallerstein, traces the invention of capitalism and the beginnings of what he calls the "Modern World-System" to the late 15th and 16th Centuries. His co-founder and worthy competitor Andre Gunder Frank argues that capitalism originated some five thousand years ago and that at least the Afro-Eurasian ecumene has been in continuous interactive existence ever since. As that ancient forerunner of postmodernist relativism, the Roman playwright Terence, once said, *Quot homines, tot sententiae*: "as many men, so many opinions." [1]

All of these contentions make sense, given the definitions of terms and the frames of reference of each writer. They do not necessarily conflict, and they all make their contribution to our understanding of the dimensions of world and global history. But from my own perspective, there is no hard and fast distinction between world and global history. I accept the evidence of contemporary anthropology that the career of *Homo sapiens* commenced in Africa more than a hundred thousand years ago, that tribes of biologically human men and women swiftly spread northward and eastward from their African homeland, outbred their hominid rivals, and in due course populated the whole planet. To me, this is globalization, the global diffusion of humankind and human cultures. In only a few thousand generations, *Homo sapiens* was everywhere, and everywhere essentially the same, despite superficial differences such as skin color or width of nose or degree of hirsuteness. Globalization outran evolution. The sheer mobility and versatility of *Homo sapiens* precluded significant differentiation.

Accordingly, I would like to define world history as the history of all the doings of the species *Homo sapiens* on (and off) the planet Earth, the globe Earth, since its emergence in Africa more than 100,000 years ago. In all these millennia, humankind has swarmed over the whole planet and has exchanged ideas, institutions, technologies, and languages back and forth and every which way, often making it difficult if not impossible to ascertain which idea, institution, technology, or language first arose where or when. In short, we have been globalizing from the beginning, although I freely acknowledge that in certain periods, such as the middle of the 4th Millennium B.C., the 16th Century A.D., and the second halves of the 19th and 20th Centuries, we have seen significant upsurges in the tempo and scale of globalization.

All this means that the subject matter of world--or global--history is everything that every human being everywhere has ever done, said, thought, felt, and dreamt. One cannot write off any doing, saying, thinking, feeling, or dreaming of any human being as "irrelevant" or "unimportant." Everything that ever happened bears witness to the human condition. Some happenings may have had, surely did have, more influence than others, although influence is fiendishly difficult to measure objectively, but all of them bear witness.

The only problem with this point of view is that almost all human doings, sayings, thinkings, feelings, and dreamings have left no trace: no written records, no artifacts, no impact on the Earth's crust, nothing. Even the lives of relatively well-documented figures in history, such as Martin Luther or Mohandas Gandhi, are known to us only in bits and pieces. So what can historians do? They can connect the dots, the pitifully few dots, to make conjectural pictures of the past; they can assemble the surviving evidence into narratives, or stories, about the past, with liberal resort to their imaginations; but they will always do so in the light of certain

premises or theories or world-views that inform their labors, even if they have no coherent awareness of these premises, theories, or world-views. It would be advisable if historians could operate in an intellectual vacuum free of all presuppositions and all ideologies, but in fact none of us can. We are ineluctably the products of our times, our upbringing, our culture, just as limited and time-bound as the people whose lives we study.

Reflecting on all this deeply enough, one may feel paralyzed. If the historian's will is not completely or even mostly free, if the historian is the helpless creature of his or her historical milieu, why not stop writing and teaching history and just go fishing? Of course this is not an acceptable option, not for historians born to the trade. We must live within our limitations and get to work and write and teach history. In any event, people need our pictures and our stories. People are not animals. They cannot shuffle from day to day without at least some idea of where they came from. Nor can we ourselves!

Which brings me to my main theme, the "colors" of world history. Almost everything that ever happened has left no trace, but the evidence that does remain is nevertheless immense, far more than any single human being could ever hope to access and assimilate in any number of life-times. We think we have managed to condense it into textbooks only five hundred or a thousand pages long, but such books are little more than the tricks of a skilled magician: they supply an illusion of global history, but not the thing itself. Even if a single mind could take it all in, it would still be only a fragment of the total. Worse yet, everything that ever happened has, by definition, already happened--all the thoughts, all the actions are gone. The historian cannot see, touch, or feel any of them. The historian has only the surviving evidence, which is no more the real, living past than a skeleton lying in its tomb is a real, living human being. Such evidence does not speak to us. It is utterly silent. We have to "make sense" of it. When the great 19th-Century French historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, addressing his students, said "Do not applaud me. It is not I that speaks to you but history that speaks by my mouth," he was full of prunes. [2]

So how do we make sense of this plethora of dead, inert, silent evidence? We take out our palette full of colors and we paint. A palette full of colors is simply my metaphor for the ideologically conditioned screens or templates or paradigms that we consciously or unconsciously employ to determine what kinds of evidence are most worth accessing and how we go about converting them into explanations and narratives of the past. I say "consciously or unconsciously" because I recognize that many historians are not fully aware of their ideological underpinnings and the sources of their preconceptions. A further complication is that few of us in this chaotic postmodern world follow any single readily identifiable party line: we are almost always the product of several rival world-views, which can lead us into holding contradictory opinions. "Do I contradict myself?" asked Walt Whitman, "Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)." [3]

With this in mind, I like to think of historians as painters filling their canvasses with strokes in various, sometimes clashing colors, although many seem to prefer one color over the others, like Picasso during his "Blue" period. For example, it is possible to write global history that is predominantly Gray: the story of how, through science and technology and skillfully managed accumulation of capital, human beings acquired mastery of their environment, vastly increased their material wealth, and produced the globalized economy and civilization of the 21st Century. The chief ideological underpinnings of Gray global history are Enlightenment faith in reason and science and liberal political economy. Elsewhere I have dubbed this world-view "technoliberalism." [4] As of the year 2001, this is the reigning ideology throughout the so-called developed world, and its power in the so-called less developed world should never be underestimated.

Of course there are many other colors on our palette. The late Arnold J. Toynbee reached the conclusion that global history was essentially the history of the emergence and proliferation of what he termed the Higher Religions. We may call this Gold history, history as the evolution of human spirituality; most often Gold history takes the form of the comparative study of civilizations, viewed from the perspective of their allegedly religious cradles. Its ideological underpinnings range from Platonism to Christianity to Buddhism.

What else? The confluence of feminism and queer theory gives us Pink history, the history of gender and sexual orientation. The confluence of Hegelianism and Rankean "scientific" history gives us Blue history--Prussian Blue, if you please--, global history as the story of the vicissitudes of the state. My own specialty, the history of ideas, or intellectual history, might be described as Silver history; it also originated in 19th-Century German neo-idealism and should

properly be known by its German name, *Geistesgeschichte*. And of course it often happens that historians strongly inclined to one color trespass on the turf of historians strongly inclined to another color, as when, for example, a Blue historian seeks to explain Gray topics by pointing to the central importance of state policy in facilitating the rise of modern capitalism.

But the two colors I want to highlight in this essay are Green and Red. Both of these colors focus on exploitation: the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of underclasses. Either of them offers an agenda for global historiography: combined, they can supply an especially powerful and ultimately subversive way of doing and teaching global history.

First, consider Green history. Clive Ponting's pioneering overview, *A Green History of the World*, first published in 1991, has helped to establish this vital sort of history in our purview. Another useful summation is Neil Roberts, *The Holocene: An Environmental History*, first published in 1989, with a second, enlarged edition in 1998. The Holocene is the geological period in which we still live today, basically the time since the end of the Pleistocene period (or last Ice Age) some 10 to 12 thousand years ago. [5]

Does Green history have an ideological matrix? Typically it does: an ideology that I label "counterculturalism," [6] a complex of ideas and values flatly opposed to "technoliberalism," the chief inspiration of Gray history. Whereas technoliberalism is all in favor of science, technology, industry, commerce, and capitalism, in favor of headlong growth, expansion, and development, the typical counterculturalist believes in slowing down or otherwise limiting growth and creating societies in collegial equilibrium with the natural environment. In this reckoning development per se is not evil, but it must be sustainable development, development that conserves resources, encourages biodiversity, and works with nature, rather than against it. The roots of counterculturalism lie partly in the romantic world-view of the early 19th Century, partly in the utopian socialism of the same period, partly in various religious traditions, especially both Eastern and Western mysticism and gnosticism, and of course partly in the environmental activism of the last 40 or 50 years.

So Green history is not environmental history, pure and simple: it is all about how human beings have been abusing the Earth for thousands of years and paying heavy prices for their folly, the heaviest of which may well have to be paid in the 21st Century. Be reminded that Ponting's *A Green History of the World* has a minatory sub-title, namely, *The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations*. Green history tends to be apocalyptic history.

But this is not to disparage Green history. In view of the looming ecological crises of the 21st Century, and in view of humanity's age-old dependence on the Earth, Green history should be an essential component of any attempt to study, write, or teach history today. Technoliberals, the writers of Gray history, offer an inspiring, heroic picture of how *Homo sapiens* has been able to impose its will on the face of the Earth and rack up all kinds of material progress: but their very anthropocentrism prevents them from seeing that humanity is not the only value in the equation: the Earth has always been and perhaps always will be the larger value. We human beings are simply the fleas on her back.

And what a back she has! If one construes global history as the history of human ecology, then the leading topics of a well-crafted text would include climate; topography; habitats, from river valleys to tropical islands to high plateaus; fresh water and mineral resources; all non-human species of life both animal and vegetable, including the pathogens that afflict us with infectious disease; the physical impact on the Earth of all human activity, from deforestation of woodlands to toxic pollution of groundwaters, lakes, rivers, and oceans; the size, density, and movements of human population; and even the ideologies that inform human use and abuse of the Earth. This is a full plate in and of itself; and although I am not recommending that anyone teach global history purely in ecological terms, you could do much worse.

One obvious thread worth exploring in global history is what Ponting calls the collapse of great civilizations. Scholarly opinion nowadays tends to attribute the initial rise and later collapse of many great civilizations chiefly to ecological overshoot: too much deforestation, too much grazing, too much erosion. Such practices may account for the fall of the Indus Valley civilization of pre-Aryan India, the Mayan civilization of pre-Columbian Central America and Mexico, and the civilizations of medieval Zimbabwe in southeast Africa and medieval Cambodia in southeast Asia.

But environmental studies can also help explain the predominance of certain cultures and states at one time and of other cultures and states at other times. Consider China. From the 3rd Century B.C. on down to the present, most of what we know as China has been--with occasional interregna--a single unified state. A few other great ancient empires originated

earlier, but none still in existence can boast a more or less continuous existence of almost 2300 years. During at least half of those years, and perhaps more, China was also the richest and most populous country on the planet. Andre Gunder Frank contends in his *ReOrient* that Chinese pre-eminence did not wane until the early 19th Century; and we all know how rapidly China has regained its status as a major economic power during the past quarter-century, partly due to the fact that it remains the world's most populous country.[7] A further ecological consideration, emphasized by William H. McNeill, is that imperial China may have amassed more wealth and enjoyed longer periods of political unity than imperial India simply because the climate of the Indian subcontinent is somewhat less healthful, with higher incidence of infectious disease, reducing the productivity of labor, than the lands occupied by the Chinese.[8]

But China was not simply the product of the Chinese. It is singularly favored by nature. The heartland of China consists of two fertile river valleys, the valley of the Yang-Tze and the valley of the Huang-Ho. This heartland is not divided into many isolated geographical regions by vast mountain ranges or interior seas, as is the case with Europe. It was relatively easy to unify once the necessary political ideas and military strategies and technologies coalesced, as they did in the 3rd Century B.C. For the next 2,000 years China was far and away the hegemonic power in East Asia: the center of high culture, the center of commerce, industry, and craftsmanship. China was self-sufficient and unsurpassable. Even the barbarian war-bands who sometimes conquered China were soon fully assimilated into Chinese civilization, becoming no less Chinese than the Chinese themselves.

Of course the very success of China undermined, at least temporarily, its ability to compete with the rising rival powers of Western Europe in the 19th Century. Look at Western Europe from the perspectives of Green history. Mediterranean Europe, along with North Africa and Southwest Asia, was relatively easy to unify, as the Romans discovered, thanks in part to the Mediterranean Sea itself. But once--in ancient times--you reach the Pyrenees and the Alps and the Carpathians and the Balkans, you enter quite a different world: a world of dense hardwood forests, steep mountain ranges, islands, rugged coasts, rough inland seas, glaciers, snow, and ice.

The indefatigable Romans did manage to subdue part of this northern world, for a few centuries, but at least half of it remained wild and barbaric. When advances in metallurgy finally made possible the felling of the forests, much of the land proved to be fertile. Populations increased. The temperate climate of the lower-lying northern lands was relatively salubrious, especially after economic progress made warm clothing and snug dwellings easier to come by. But the geographical boundaries remained formidable. This transalpine Europe, although not vast in extent, did not lend itself to conquest by a single imperial power. From Charlemagne to Hitler, all the would-be Caesars ultimately failed.

The outcome was a dishevelled world of many independent and semi-independent kingdoms, principalities, duchies, and city-states, all in ruthless competition with one another, unwilling to submit to the rule of any would-be Rome, and dependent in varying degrees on the enterprise of their merchants and bankers for their revenues, their arms, and their glory. Late medieval Europe supplied the perfect launch-pad for the take-off of modern capitalism, a tireless machine for the unrelenting accumulation of capital. At first Venice, Genoa, Portugal, and Spain led the way; then the Netherlands; then England. Every effort on the part of one great power to rebuild the Roman Empire, from the Austro-Hispanic Habsburgs to Bourbon and Napoleonic France to Nazi Germany, fell fatally short. Eventually, in the 18th and 19th Centuries, this divided but exuberant Western Europe conquered most of the rest of the world. And make no mistake: today, as the 21st Century gets under way, for better or worse, the whole world lies in the thrall of Western European or European-descended technology, capital, culture, and systems of belief.

So, to what can we credit the "success" of Western Europe? White skin? Blue eyes? Christian piety? I think not! The best guess is that late medieval Western Europe's relative poverty, compared to the great powers of Asia, and its disunity--frustrating the emergence of an all-powerful, all-controlling, innovation-discouraging imperial bureaucracy--gave Western Europeans the hunger, the aggressiveness, the competitiveness, and the economic machinery to reach out, grab, exploit, and dominate the world, while at the same time, and by the same token, inventing the military and industrial technology necessary to maximize their edge.

In the second half of the 19th Century, to complete the picture, three peripheral countries located outside Western Europe moved rapidly to emulate Western Europe: the United States,

Japan, and Russia. Each of these was, in effect, an empire, with a strong central government. Each started out far behind Western Europe economically. The most successful, and also the most favored by geology, geography, and climate, was the United States, which had the additional cultural advantage, in the mid-19th Century, of consisting chiefly of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants from Western Europe, for whom the aping of Western European economies and technologies came easily. But Japan did not lag far behind; and Russia made strenuous efforts to catch up as well, although it never quite managed to join the core of economically super-advanced hegemonic nations.

But the breakthrough to modern capitalism and industrialism did not, and I suspect could not have, occurred in the United States, Japan, or Russia. That distinction belonged to Western Europe, and it was not a sudden breakthrough. It took centuries to happen, from its barest beginnings in Renaissance Italy to its climactic moments in the first half of the 19th Century in Great Britain and parts of northern France, the Lowlands, and western Germany. And it cannot be understood by the tools of Gray, Blue, Gold, or Silver history alone. Everything that took place was, to a considerable extent, predetermined by the hard facts of Green history. Green history is the bedrock. And if modern global capitalist industrial and postindustrial civilization manages to overshoot and exceed the carrying capacity of the environment--which seems all too possible--the hard facts of Green history will have the last word, too.

But I have one more color to discuss. If we are all fleas on the back of Mother Earth, some fleas have a better purchase on her back than others. This brings me to Red history, the history of the exploitation of some human beings by other human beings, the history of class struggle, which is rooted ideologically in 19th-Century utopian socialism and Marxism. The term "exploitation" is freighted with all kinds of pejorative connotations, but so it should be. Exploitation denotes the theft, or the undervaluing, of the labor of some to enhance the well-being of others. Without such exploitation, civilization--the process of creating urbanized societies through division of labor and the production of agricultural surplus--would never have emerged, and we would all still be living in Paleolithic communities. Nevertheless, theft is theft, and all of human history since Neolithic times is the history of theft. Theft gave us the Pyramids of Egypt and Mexico, theft gave us the palaces of Venice and Paris, theft gave us the paintings of Leonardo and the passions of Bach, the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, and the ovens of Auschwitz.

So it is perfectly possible to construct a history of the world that stresses the epic of human exploitation, the epic of what McNeill calls "macroparasitism,"[9] the ways in which certain people have taken unfair advantage of other people, have sucked the blood of other people, whether you call them slaves, serfs, natives, indentured servants, tenant farmers, proletarians, the working class, or even the bottom four quintiles of any contemporary population as measured by net worth or income. The "bottom four quintiles" may work best for present-day economically advanced countries because in such countries technological progress has transformed the nature of the working class, giving it relatively higher family incomes than in the 19th Century, more education and skills, and a change in the preponderant types of work required, from manual labor to brain labor. But although this has in some segments of the working class diminished the theft of value, it has not eliminated theft; and in any case, the past quarter-century has seen a sharp reversal of the trend toward proportionately rising incomes for people whose income is derived primarily from work, as opposed to the ownership and investment of capital.

Over the long haul of global history, Red themes have much the same heuristic power as Green themes. State and empire formation cannot be imagined without the theft of surplus value; the glorious and inglorious shenanigans of elites and the misery of the masses cannot be imagined without the theft of surplus value; the immiseration of various subdued races and of women cannot be imagined without the theft of surplus value; the uprisings of underdogs that punctuate the pages of all global history cannot be imagined without the theft of surplus value; the struggles between elites, as for example of merchants and entrepreneurs against aristocrats and emperors, as in Ming China or Bourbon France or Civil War America, cannot be imagined without considering who gets to be the greatest thieves of surplus value; the rise to near global mastery of the great multinational corporations of our own time cannot be imagined without the theft of surplus value. And it is not stretching matters too far to imagine that the history of the 21st Century will turn on whether or not the exploitative capitalist world-system self-destructs in an orgy of greed, comparable in many ways and closely related in many ways, to humankind's ruthless exploitation of Mother Nature.

Now when you put Green and Red global history together, you have a powerful one-two punch. You have a vision of global history that is eminently subversive: subversive of unfettered capitalism, subversive of the sovereign nation-state system which has made and continues to make such capitalism possible, subversive of Western European civilization, subversive of sexism, racism, and imperialism, but also--please note--subversive of all civilizations founded, as all have been, and until recently necessarily have been, on the exploitation of Mother Nature and the theft of surplus value. Green history and Red history give no license to Hindu nationalism, or pan-Islamic evangelism, or nativist insurgency in any of its manifold forms. Green history and Red history, to use Benjamin Barber's terms, do not favor "Jihad" over "McWorld," or vice versa.[10] To my way of thinking, the only conceivable future that Green history and Red history can endorse is the supersession of the modern capitalist world-system by a democratic ecologically wise global commonwealth, a Green and Red world state.

But I do not argue that Green and Red history are the one, exclusive, "scientific" way to do global history. They are certainly not the only way to do global history. In the arena of competing ideologies, all the players stake their claims to truth, and their claims to overarching rationality and/or spiritual pre-eminence. In the final analysis, it is not heuristic power, explanatory power, that wins the battle, but the innermost convictions of the players. Here I relapse into my role as a Silver historian, as a relativizing historicist. I am profoundly skeptical about the possibility of a true social science on the model of physics or biology. Human beings are somehow more than molecules or ants.

But come what may, I do believe that Green and Red history will, if the human race survives, inherit the future, becoming, together, the dominant paradigm in historical study in the course of the 21st Century. And rest assured: historians are the custodians of the collective memory of humankind. When presidents and prime ministers wonder how they will "go down" in history, they mean how we, and all those like us, will read their performance 20, 50, or a hundred years from now. For it is not history that speaks: it is we, we poor, fallible, blinkered, incomplete human beings who have chosen to help create, help report, and help preserve the memory of our species.

So I would contend that the sacrality of our function requires us to be true to our knowledge and our convictions. If our knowledge and our convictions incline us to use more of the greens and reds on our palettes than other colors, so be it!

## ENDNOTES

[1] Bruce Mazlish, "Crossing Boundaries: Ecumenical, World, and Global History," in Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick, and Richard T. Vann, eds., *World History: Ideologies, Structures, and Identities* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 41-52; Nicholas D. Kristof, "The World: A Better System in the 19th Century? At This Rate, We'll Be Global in Another Hundred Years," *New York Times* (May 23, 1999), Section 4, p. 5; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); and Andre Gunder Frank and Barry B. Gills, eds., *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

[2] N.D. Fustel de Coulanges, cited in G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century, 2nd ed.* (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1952), p. 202.

[3] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Collected Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), p. 246.

[4] W. Warren Wagar, *The Next Three Futures: Paradigms of Things To Come* (New York: Praeger, 1991), pp. 35-38.

[5] Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991); and Neil Roberts, *The Holocene: An Environmental History, 2nd ed.* (Malden, MA, and Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

[6] Wagar, *The Next Three Futures*, pp. 40-44.

[7] Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[8] William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 80-85.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[10] Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

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