

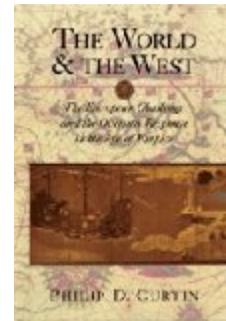
# H-Net Reviews

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Philip D. Curtin. *The World and the West: The European Challenge and the Overseas Response in the Age of Empire*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xiv + 294 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-77135-1.

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## Case Studies in Modern World History: A Method for World History Teachers?

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Now retired from teaching at Johns Hopkins, Philip D. Curtin continues to contribute to historical scholarship. He is a respected pioneer in world, comparative and Atlantic history, as well as the history of Africa and of the Caribbean, and has worked with methodologies as diverse as demography and the history of ideas. His graduate students, particularly those from his middle years at the University of Wisconsin, have earned prominence in the young field of world history. For instance, they include Ross E. Dunn, the editor of *The New World History: A Teacher's Companion* and several of the contributors to it. [Ross E. Dunn's book recently was reviewed for H-World by J.B. Owens.] The anthology features an article by Craig A. Lockard about Philip Curtin and the "Wisconsin School" of comparative world history.

As a world historian, Curtin is not identified with a single magnum opus but instead with several books that in different ways transcend conventional geographical limits. Typically they are collections of essays related to a theme and based mostly on secondary sources. This is the case for *Cross Cultural Trade in World History* (1984), *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex* (1990; 2nd ed., 1998), and the book under review. In books such as these Curtin does not develop an elaborate theory. His contributions are more subtle: attempts to reinterpret sometimes familiar data through new contexts. *The World and the West* (a highly traditional title) starts like the kind of

book that we have read many times and then begins to surprise and enlighten us.

When I was commissioned to review Curtin's book, I protested that I could claim no relevant research expertise. I was reassured: my charge was to evaluate the book for the classroom. This charge I interpret both as what teachers might borrow from Curtin's book and how students at various levels might respond to it as a required text. Currently it is available only in a relatively inexpensive hardback. Reading like a series of lectures, its fourteen chapters correspond approximately to the number of weeks in a semester. There is a sixteen-page index, and a short reading list follows each chapter. There are maps, photographs, and charts but, alas, not many.

Curtin organizes his book around case studies, many of them strikingly imaginative, some of them explicitly or implicitly comparative. He argues that "theory and broad generalizations often conceal so many exceptions that they are in danger of becoming only vague reflections of reality." Case studies, he contends, "can only be a partial reflection of the broader processes of history, but they make it possible to stay closer to the empirical data on which all good history must be based" (p. xi).

Curtin focuses on cultural change since the mid-1700s: the transformation of "a people's whole way of life" (p. xii). Risking a tainted and ambiguous term, some scholars call this a revolution of modernization. Curtin divides his book into four parts: the technological basis of European imperialism and the patterns of Euro-

pean empire; cultural change among non-European peoples whom Europeans ruled; cultural change among non-European peoples not under formal European control; and, finally, cultural change in the third quarter of the twentieth century, the time of the “liquidation” of European overseas empires (p. xiv).

Let me first offer a survey of Curtin’s book from my own perspective, that of a reasonably typical teacher of introductory, advanced undergraduate, and graduate courses in world history. Later I will provide a guess how students might react to the book.

Most teachers of world history will find the arguments in the first part of the book familiar, although they will encounter new examples and details in these three chapters. Chapter 1, “The Pattern of Empire,” distinguishes between true colonies, most of whose inhabitants were European, and territorial empire, few of whose inhabitants were European, and mixed or plural societies. For true colonies, Curtin emphasizes the importance of the demographic transition, when a normal sex ratio among overseas Europeans permitted their growth by natural increase and not by immigration alone. Curtin also stresses that claims of European sovereignty did not guarantee an expensive effort to provide governmental administration. “Published maps colored appropriately to show French, British, or Portuguese territory merely showed claims to legal sovereignty, not the reality of power exercised on the ground” (p. 17). Chapter 2, “Technology and Power,” centers on military weaponry, especially the gap between European and non-European armies starting in the mid-1800s and narrowing around 1900. Chapter 3, “The Politics of Imperialism,” sidesteps the debate over the economic interpretation of imperialism. It looks instead at “the actual policies various European governments said they were following at various times and the processes of decision making that lay behind them” (p. 38) Curtin spends several pages contrasting British policy in Burma and Malaya. He directs attention to the disagreement among policymakers, especially those on the spot and those in Europe.

Teachers will discover that they need to take more notes when they reach the second part of the book, which begins with Chapter 4, “Cultural Change in Plural Societies: South Africa and Central Asia.” Curtin compares the policies, the successes, and the failures of the Europeans in South Africa with that of the Europeans (Tsarist and Soviet) in Central Asia. He briefly sketches demography, education, religion, economic development, and non-European nationalism. At the time of the writing of

his book, “ethnic nationalism had triumphed in Central Asia, whereas it failed in South Africa” (p. 72). Chapter 15, “Culture Change in Mexico,” was, for me, almost entirely new. It looks at the Yaqui in northern Mexico (the Chichimec frontier) and the Maya, with emphasis on the so-called second conquest that began shortly before independence from Spain and continued into the 1900s. Today “at least three quarters of the [Mexican] people are neither culturally Indian nor culturally European, but simply Mexican” (p. 90). The culture might be called mestizo or, Curtin’s preference, Ladino. Chapter 6, “Administrative Choices and their Consequences: Examples from Bengal, Central Asia, Java, and Malaya,” turns to Asia. Curtin describes governmental administration as a form of technology, “the technology of management” (p. 92). In his discussion of land tenure policies in Bengal and central Asia and administrative modernization in Java and Malaya, he emphasized that the outcome of European policies was “not the one the Europeans had intended or predicted.” (p. 107)

Curtin calls the third part of his book, “Conversion.” It looks at “culture change by intent” (p. 109). He argues that leaders who favored modernization (high productivity and high per capita consumption) could choose from “a number of possible roads.” There were options (p. 110). Chapter 7, “Christian Missions in East Africa,” delineates the complex “interaction of the Ganda political order [including client-chiefs and military leaders] with European missions” (p. 126). Chapter 8, “Varieties of Defensive Modernization,” begins with a discussion of the original diffusion of agriculture to raise general questions about diffusion and independent invention. Curtin has an interesting section on nondiffusion or nonborrowing such as the Chinese decision not to adopt an alphabet or phonetic syllabary. “A Chinese dictionary is very hard to use, arranged as it is first according to a number of brush strokes in a character, then, secondarily, according to a set order of radicals, or basic forms for a character? more than two hundred of them” (p. 135). In this chapter Curtin also illustrates defensive modernization with examples from before the mid-1770s: the sixteenth-century neo-Inca resistance to Spanish rule, a resistance that included acquiring European weaponry and the Roman Catholic religion, and the better known case of the Russia of Peter the Great. For the late 1800s, Curtin provides several examples, Buganda, Hawaii, Ime-rina (on Madagascar), and Siam. It had never occurred to me to study Hawaii’s monarchy and I am doubtful that I ever recognized the existence of the monarchy of Ime-rina. Photographs show westernized palace architecture

and royal uniforms. Chapter 9, “Meiji Japan: Revolutionary Modernization,” is a much more familiar case study of defensive modernization. Chapter 10, “Ottoman Reactions to the West,” is almost as familiar to most teachers of world history, although rarely taught as systematically as is the story of Japanese modernization, presumably because the Ottomans didn’t lay the foundations for an economic superpower. Curtin points out that the Ottomans had to grapple with a nationalities problem, while the Meiji reformers did not. More implicitly than explicitly, he also contrasts the problem of creating a modern secular state in a Muslim country with the situation in Japan with its intertwined traditions of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

The fourth and final part of Curtin’s book focuses on the years from the 1950s through the 1970s but also pays notice to much earlier years. Chapter 11, “Non-European Resistance and the European Withdrawal,” discusses primary and colonial resistance, protest, state building, and nativist reaction. For instance, Curtin briefly mentions abortive state building in western Algeria by the Sufi order of the Qadiriyya in the 1830s and 1840s and in the Rif mountains of Morocco by the Berbers in the 1920s. In Chapter 12, “Personal and Utopian Responses,” Curtin emphasizes once again that “the reaction to the Western presence was rarely a bipolar choice between local tradition on one hand and the West on the other” (p. 213). Alternative forms of innovation were available. This chapter describes various kinds of millennialism such as the Xhosa cattle killing in South Africa during the mid-1850s and the Ghost Dance religion among North American Indians in the 1870s and from the mid-1880s into the 1890s. It also describes something about which I was totally ignorant, the Africanized version of the Watchtower movement (Jehovah’s Witnesses), sometimes known as Kitawala. Finally, the chapter has several pages on cargo cults in Melanesia. Chapter 13, “The Search for Viable Independence: Indonesia,” provides a solid, fairly detailed account of the search for national identity in what today is the world’s most populous Muslim country. The indifference to Indonesia shown by nearly all world history textbooks has long puzzled and frustrated me. Curtin examines the cultural and ecological divisions in the archipelago (for instance, by explaining that most of the population lived in a few wet-rice islands), diversity within Islam and the Chinese and Dutch minorities, language and education, and peasant discontents, as well as providing the more predictable sketch of political history, especially since the World War II occupation by the Japanese. Chapter 14, a parallel chap-

ter on nationalism and nation building in West Africa, deals with the making of Ghana, earlier known as the Gold Coast. People who are Akan in culture and language make up Ghana’s ethnic core. Curtin emphasizes that the dominant export staple, cocoa, brought to Ghana in the 1890s, “spread...almost entirely on the initiative of African farmers” (p. 267). Comparing Indonesia and Ghana, Curtin argues that “what happened within the framework of the colonial state was not entirely, or even mostly, what the European directed.” Instead, “much of the initiative belonged to the local people” (p. 273).

In an “Afterword,” Curtin identifies common themes in his book: “the gap between the intentions of the major actors and the actual outcomes,” “the degree to which the European empires was actually run by non-Europeans,” and “that” cultural borrowing from the West was rarely a matter of whole imitation, “but instead” “the borrowed cultural items were fitted into an existing cultural matrix” (p. 276).

I look forward to drawing ideas and information from Curtin’s *The World and the West* and think that other world history teachers will find much in it for use in their classrooms. Some chapters can be the basis for lectures, all of them provide details and anecdotes with the potential to make existing lectures more effective. I also have no doubt that graduate students should read this book. I have adopted it as a required text for a graduate colloquium that samples approaches to world history.

I am more conflicted about adopting *The World and the West* for undergraduate courses. Perhaps the absence of a paperback edition suggests that the publisher lacks confidence in the book’s potential as an undergraduate textbook. At North American colleges and universities advanced world history courses typically are courses in recent history, as is demonstrated by the existence of a fair number of textbooks for twentieth-century world history and a few for the world since 1945. Obviously, Curtin’s book starts too early for these courses. Although there are other advanced courses, they tend to be the brain-children of a single faculty member taught at a single campus. In other words, there does not seem to be a large market for Curtin’s book at the advanced undergraduate level.

The bread-and-butter course in world history is the year-long introductory survey in which lecturing is the principal method of instruction. *The World and the West* is a good fit for the final term in a three-quarter calendar and a tolerable fit for the second term in a semester calendar. I don’t recommend simply adding it as a sup-

plementary text that gets a look in a single week. Too condensed for easy comprehension, the book needs extensive class time. Most undergraduates will need help with it. I am considering something different for my big post-1500 survey that enrolls several hundred undergraduates: a radical restructuring that would eliminate encyclopedic textbooks and make time available for books like Curtin's. In making my decision, I shall see what books I can package with his for crucial topics and parts of the world that don't figure prominently in *The World and the West* (mostly obviously, women and China). I am hopeful that this short but thoughtful book can help give coherence to my ever changing version of the intellectually flabby world history survey. Although I have doubts about the reaction of the weaker students, I am confident that the brighter students will welcome Curtin's book.

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