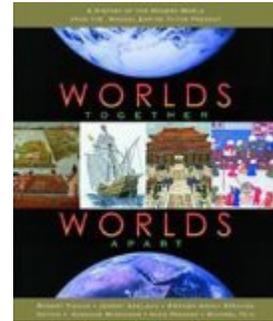


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Tignor Tsin, Jeremy Adelman, Stephen Aron, Stephen Kotkin, Suzanne Marchand, Gyan Prakash, Michael. *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the Modern World from the Mongol Empire to the Present*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002. xxx + 495 pp. \$58.75 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-97746-2.

Reviewed by Pamela McVay (Department of History, Ursuline College)  
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## Teaching World History from *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*

Teaching World History from *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*

Because I have used the textbook in the classroom, and because I was one of the “consulting editors” who saw and commented on earlier versions of it, it seems appropriate to couch this review in terms of my experience teaching with it as well as my assessment of its narrative. In brief, I like the narrative a great deal, consider the teaching aids fairly helpful, and felt the text worked well enough in the classroom that I shall probably use it again. The text will not be suitable for every world history teacher, however. For instructors whose survey histories of the world also serve as their institutions’ surveys of western history, much of what I like about it may make *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* an inappropriate choice.

*Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* promises its readers to “expand the horizons of world history textbooks” and advertises itself as a “bold step forward” from previous textbooks. These claims are accurate. First, the text shifts the usual boundaries of world history sequences by starting not from the voyages of Columbus but from the era of the “pax mongolica.” Second, it does a creditable job of creating a fresh narrative, one much less dependent on older narratives of “western civilization” than many current texts. Chapters 1-9 discuss competition and connections among the major cultures of East and South Asia, Africa, Europe, Northern and/or Central and Southern America, while chapters 10-12 (from 1910 to the present) concen-

trate on global phenomena. The text even pays moderate attention to Oceania and Indians of North America. The narrative is quite far removed from older versions of world history that could be charitably described as “Western Civilization Plus,” or uncharitably described as “Eurocentric.” It also manages (mostly) to maintain narrative continuity within and between each chapter. For those of us teaching world history separately from western history, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* would be a good choice of textbook.

A number of what I consider the best features of the text reflect my own classroom practice, which is why I selected it as the main text for my survey of world history last fall. For example, although there is not a great deal of women’s history in *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, what is there seems solidly researched and well integrated into the narrative. We do not find twelve chapters in which women’s lives are changelessly bad from culture to culture until women mysteriously start protesting during the 1840s and then again in the 1960s. Rather, we find changes in women’s situations, political influence, and cultural influence. Meso-American women’s ritual responsibilities with respect to food and Muslim women’s veiling practices are discussed in the context of “religion” on the one hand and “family life” on the other. In general, the textbook is long on social, intellectual, and economic history and shorter on political history, which all suit my inclinations in teaching. Another feature I especially like is the textbook’s use

of one-page inserts (under the clunky heading “Global Connections and Disconnections”) to introduce fascinating microcosms of world history. These introduce such subjects as the French Revolution’s relationship to the Haitian independence movement, the rapid world-wide spread of coffee drinking and coffee houses, or the metamorphosis of samba music and dance from its origins in the ghettos of Rio de Janeiro to a mass culture phenomenon and political organization. For me, each insert represents a possible student research topic, which generally have between fifteen and thirty students. The text also has numerous (sixty) maps, all of which have several questions appended. Because my students often have very weak backgrounds in geography, it was helpful to have map exercises available inside the book. Finally, although it was not really up and running when I taught the course in Fall of 2002, the current incarnation of the online tutor looks as if it would be helpful: <[\\$>\\$](http://www.wwnorton.com/worlds/index/index.htm).

Online the authors include versions of the map discussions, overviews, and chronologies already in the textbook, as well as review quizzes. These I did not and do not expect to use much, even though having the maps online is useful for classroom projection. However, the sections on research and resources look useful. These include substantial assignments, links to primary sources not already in the textbook, and numerous links to web sites devoted to topics from the chapters. In short, “*Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*” has enough “bells and whistles” to use it as the only “textbook” for the course.

One of the text’s best features is its brevity. At just under 450 pages, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* is short enough that I was able to assign four whole works—a col-

lection of poetry, two novels, and a monograph. Because my previous collections of primary sources have added so much to the price of books while world history textbooks have been so long—1,000-1,500 pages, in the context of a freshman-level course—I have not often felt free to assign so many whole works. This time my students read all of the whole works and were able to integrate short papers about them with materials from the textbook. I received no complaints about the readability or intelligibility of *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* during the course or in student evaluations, and their work showed that they had understood it. Even more important, many of them mentioned the whole works as having been the most enjoyable part of the class, where in previous years students had clearly found reading them a chore.

This paean of praise should not be taken to mean that *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* is flawless. The chronologies would be more helpful if they stacked cultures against each other on a timeline, so that students could see events in Asia separately from those in Africa. The “focus” questions at the start of each chapter were not very helpful—they were often too general for my students to follow, and they never generated any classroom excitement. Given the book’s brevity, most instructors will find topics they want to teach left out. For instance, I myself would have liked to see more on the slave kingdoms of Africa. But for me, that disadvantage is outweighed by having a coherent shorter narrative. Overall, I found the textbook well-balanced and well-equipped with teaching aids in the text and (now) online. It worked well in the classroom, providing a readable and manageably sized framework for classroom discussions as well as readings in primary sources and monographs.

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