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AHR Forum
The Problem of Interactions in World History

Patrick Manning

JERRY BENTLEY, in proposing a periodization of world history, offers us more than a set of periods. He defends a specific criterion for evaluating world-historical change, develops his set of periods out of that criterion, and utilizes the periods to suggest long-term interpretations of history.

His criterion focuses on cross-cultural interaction. More precisely, he identifies three main kinds of processes (mass migration, empire building, and long-distance trade) as having had "significant repercussions across the boundary lines of societies and cultural regions." In applying his criterion to develop a periodization, Bentley relies on documented changes in the scale and character of these three - "kinds of processes" to identify six major periods in the history of the Afro-Eurasian land mass.¹ Then, within the framework of this periodization, he offers a narrative of periodic expansion in scale and transformation in character of cross-cultural interactions. The latter point is worthy of underscoring: if Bentley's interpretation focused mainly on expansions in the scale of cross-cultural contacts, we would have yet another narrative of progress. Instead, he sidesteps a linear interpretation of world history by emphasizing successive changes in the character of cross-cultural interactions along with their growing magnitude.²

I find Bentley's presentation to be elegant and comprehensive, and I am inclined to accept cross-cultural interaction as an appropriate criterion for periodizing world history. But the implications of Bentley's scheme may be broader than they first appear.³ For if one accepts cross-cultural interaction as the criterion for periodization in world history, one tends at the same time to accept such interactions as the main subject matter of world history. This big step requires some discussion.

¹ Jerry Bentley, "Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History," *AHR*, 101 (June 1996): 752, 756. Bentley restricts his argument to contiguous regions of Afro-Eurasia. As I will note below, certain alternative perspectives would call for the inclusion of the Americas in interpretations of world history even before 1492.

² Bentley defines his periods in large measure by the emergence of new technologies and by successive expansions in the scale of commerce, population, and administrative units. In addition, however, he portrays each period as having distinct character. Thus he emphasizes the spread of literacy in the period of early complex societies and the exchange of artistic traditions in the classical era. He also associates cyclical change with his periods, as with the spread of epidemic disease in the wake of population growth and migration.

³ In calling it his scheme, I mean that it represents his enunciation of an approach shared implicitly among contemporary world historians. William H. McNeill may be considered to have laid groundwork for this scheme with his notion of periodic closure of a global ecumene. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago, 1963).

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Bentley contrasts his scheme of periodization with those based on stages of social development or cycles of expansion and contraction. Schemes of evolutionary stages and of civilizational rise and fall have indeed structured much interpretation of world history.⁴ Perhaps less centrally but still significantly, various other criteria have played roles in the long-run interpretation of history: these include the diffusion of technical advance, the experience of chosen peoples, the interaction and successive dominance of great powers, the development of "culture areas," the inevitability of progress, and the progress of human freedom.⁵

All of these criteria for evaluating world history entail some degree of interaction. But Bentley offers us a distinct and selective topical focus for world history. He focuses on the interaction itself, while in the other approaches interaction is placed at the service of some other purpose, often Ideological. Just as urban history does not aspire to the study of everything about cities, world history does not aspire to the study of everything about the world: to try to study everything at once is far beyond our mortal powers of comprehension. Nor is world history a totalizing analysis centered on ethereal generalizations at the planetary level: such a history would effectively deny the individual any opportunity to participate in world history. While it is probably too early in the development of the field to attempt an authoritative characterization of its focus, one can suggest for a start that world history emphasizes the interaction of the pieces (be they community, societal, or continental) in human history and that it seeks to assess the experience of the whole of humanity through study of those interactions.

Bentley's clear and direct approach to periodization includes, of necessity, some simplification—streamlining his presentation at the cost of setting aside some issues worthy of discussion. First, Bentley documents his periodization primarily with results of recent research. One can only applaud the volume and the diversity of new research, as well as Bentley's mastery of it. Still, the work of periodization relies not only on new evidence but also on the conceptual frameworks within which

⁴ Visions of evolutionary stages in history include those elucidated by Karl Marx, the marquis de Condorcet, G. W. F. Hegel, and others. Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee contributed significantly to twentieth-century views of civilizational rise and fall. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; Oxford, 1992); Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caristat, Marquis de Condorcet, *Tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1796; Paris, 1900); G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (London, 1968); Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Charles Francis Atkinson, trans., 2 vols. (London, 1926-28); Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (London, 1934-61).

⁵ This is but a partial list of available interpretive frameworks in world history. Technologically determined interpretations of world history remain influential, especially for long-term change; histories of chosen peoples (Romans, Jews, Chinese, and others) have contributed to the interpretation of world history. Writers from Leopold von Ranke to Paul Kennedy have interpreted the world through the interaction of great powers. Anthropologists and some historians have utilized "culture areas" as an alternative to civilizations in exploring world history. The interpretation of world history in terms of the progress of one era over the preceding, while derisively labeled "Whig history," remains widely practiced. In a more specialized view of progress, Hegel in the nineteenth century and Francis Fukuyama in more recent times have emphasized the progress of human freedom in history—Leopold von Ranke, "The Great Powers" (1833); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987); Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York, 1951); Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

For a defense of an expanded world-system paradigm that conveniently reviews a wide range of historical frameworks, see Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, eds., *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (London, 1993).

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evidence is collected. Thus much of my commentary below focuses on conceptual frameworks in world history, their continuities and changes. In another simplification, Bentley abbreviates discussion of the modern period, assuming that 'the significance of cross-cultural interaction in recent times is evident.'⁶ Some writers, however—whose vision of global connections goes no further than diffusion and dominance—have found it possible to write, interpretations of world history in the modern period that neglect or minimize interaction.⁷ In discussing Bentley's periodization, I wish therefore to consider outlook as well as evidence and the modern era as well as earlier times.

Having indicated my largely favorable response to Bentley's interpretive framework, I wish nonetheless to pose three major questions. Two address the meaning of the framework itself, and the third addresses its application. These are questions of detail that, under certain circumstances, become fundamental: What is meant by "interaction"? What is meant by "cross-cultural"? What changes does this framework imply for the interpretation of world history?

HISTORIANS COMMONLY DESCRIBE the movement of cultural influences from one place to another through the use of such terms as "diffusion" and "dominance." When a language or system of government "diffuses," it keeps the same character in the new place and perhaps displaces its predecessor. When an empire or a technology comes to "dominate" a new area, it imposes its patterns to the detriment of those preceding. With such terms, scholars convey specific meanings for the general notion of interaction in history.

More broadly, interaction involves phenomena ranging from the collision of two billiard balls (where everything about them remains unchanged except their direction) to the development, of a new life out of the linkage of sperm and egg (where interpenetration replaces collision and where two bodies unite to form another body). The notions of diffusion and dominance, as types of interaction that might best be placed between these poles, clearly fall short of exhausting the possibilities in interaction.

Bentley has focused on recent research revealing cross-cultural interaction: he gives particular emphasis to results established in the past decade, notably on the early importance of trade.⁸ While the accomplishments in recent research are indeed formidable, I would rather add a step to the analysis and explore the framework in which the new results have been developed. That is, I would treat the term "interaction" as problematic and consider its changing conceptualization and application over time.

⁶ As he puts it, "Legions of scholars have examined the effects of cross-cultural interactions in modern times." Bentley, "Cross-Cultural Interaction," 751.

⁷ Rosenberg and Birdzell have assumed, in their widely cited interpretation of modern economic history, that there is no need to include interactions with areas beyond "the West" in their analysis. Paul Kennedy's study of great powers focuses on interactions among the powers, but he allows little role in his story for smaller or weaker polities. Nathan Rosenberg and L. E. Birdzell, Jr., *How the West Grew Rich: The Economic Transformation of the Industrial World* (New York, 1985); Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

⁸ Bentley, "Cross-Cultural Interaction," 753-56.

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What varieties of "cross-cultural interaction" have existed in history? To what degree do terms such as "diffusion" and "spread" and "dominance" capture the relevant range of cross-cultural interactions? How have historians and social scientists (such as sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists) conceptualized "interaction"?

Edward Gibbon and the marquis de Condorcet, writing at the height of the Enlightenment, each created a text that has remained influential in thinking about world history. Gibbon's ten volumes are elaborately nuanced, while Condorcet had time only to give a sketch of his broad vision, yet each made his mark. Gibbon remains an icon for the notion of civilizational rise and fall, as Condorcet remains an icon for the vision of stages in human progress. Both of their analyses assumed the existence of cross-cultural interaction, yet neither specified how it took place.⁹

As the Enlightenment's focus on classification came to be supplemented by the nineteenth century's elaboration of positivism, concerns with cause and effect came to the fore. Thus Karl Marx's evolutionary scheme of human progress differed from that of Condorcet in that it had a cause—changes in mode of production propelled by contradictions within the productive system—and effects radiating into social and cultural arenas. Herbert Spencer's vision of social change, while politically antithetical to that of Marx, shared some of the same analytical framework. In this world of cause and effect, the diffusion of influences from one center to another was the relevant mechanism of interaction, and the dominance of social classes and economic orders was a major focus of world history.¹⁰ These were the intellectual environments in which historians lived and worked as the historical profession formalized its organization at the end of the nineteenth century.

As the era of World War I reinforced new doubts about the inevitability and the benefits of material and moral progress, Oswald Spengler articulated these doubts in historical context. Spongier, in *The Decline of the West*, perhaps the most sophisticated interpretation of world history to that time, railed against "Darwinists," by which he meant the positivistic thinkers who perceived a mechanical sort of evolution in world history. Spengler's organic metaphor was biographic and self-contained: the birth, maturation, and death of each major civilization over a thousand-year life span, with a focus on its achievements in high culture.¹¹ All the

⁹ Gibbon's notion of decline and fall finds its reflection in the gloomy prognostications of Oswald Spengler and in the downswings at the end of Bentley's cycles; Condorcet's stages parallel the opening of new periods. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (London, 1776-78); Condorcet, *Tableau historique*; Spengler, *Decline of the West*.

Andrew M. Watson, in one of the fine recent studies to which Bentley refers, uses botanical and Arabic text data to trace a wave of agricultural innovation in the early Islamic world. His analysis of agricultural change, however, focuses dominantly on diffusion as the mechanism of change, and his conclusion contextualizes his results through a vision of civilizational rise and fall similar to that of Gibbon. Arnold Pacey's history of technology, in contrast, gives explicit consideration to varying mechanisms of transfer and innovation in technology. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World: The Diffusion of Crops and Farming Techniques, 700-1100* (Cambridge, 1983); Pacey, *Technology in World Civilization: A Thousand-Year History* (Oxford, 1990).

¹⁰ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*; Herbert Spencer, *The Evolution of Society* (selections from *Principles of Sociology* [London, 1876]), Robert L. Carneiro, ed. (Chicago, 1967).

¹¹ Spengler, *Decline of the West*. Probably Herbert Spencer was among those he targeted; Spencer's notion of Patrick Manning

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interactions of interest took place within each civilizational organism, rather than from one to another.

Arnold Toynbee, whose twelve-volume *Study of History* parallels that of Spengler in some ways, instead adopted a sociological approach on the organizational and military strength of civilizations. His "encounters" of civilizations emphasized the diffusion of influences and the dominance of some civilizations over others.¹²

World history has followed the path of Toynbee more closely than that of Spengler. William McNeill, whose 1963 *Rise of the West* is arguably the beginning of systematic academic study of world history, presented in that volume a narrative of civilizational rise and fall and periodic connection that focuses more on statecraft than on high culture and avoids explicit reliance on an organic metaphor.¹³ McNeill's narrative showed a far more complex and balanced set of interactions among civilizations than his predecessors, but the mechanism of interaction remained the same: diffusion.

From the mid-twentieth century, there arose at least four new or revived frameworks for understanding interaction: Weberian sociology, systems analysis, Marxian analysis, and postmodernist thinking. The flowering of Weberian and Parsonian sociology from the 1950s brought an analytical focus on states, bureaucracies, and economic relations.¹⁴ The revival of academic Marxism in the 1960s brought an interdisciplinary concentration on political economy.¹⁵ Meanwhile, John von Neumann and Ludwig von Bertalanffy led in publicizing a newly explicit systems analysis. This approach, while still deterministic,

evolution, however, was Lamarckian not Darwinian. It may be that Spengler drew on the thinking of Emile Durkheim in elaborating his organic metaphor. Durkheim, in his studies of suicide, developed organic metaphors for human society. Durkheim, *Suicide; in Sociology* (1897); New York, 1966).

¹² Toynbee, *Study of History*. Toynbee treated civilization as a "unit of analysis" rather than as an organism. His sections on "encounters" include "contacts between civilizations in space (encounters between contemporaries)" and "contacts between civilizations in time (Renaissances)," respectively Part IX (vol. 8, 88-629) and Part X (vol. 9, 1-166) of his study.

¹³ William H. McNeill, for instance, developed his broad interpretation of world history after having spent some years championing the teaching of Western Civilization. If McNeill's analysis is patterned somewhat after that of Toynbee, his title echoes that of Spengler. For a work similar to that of McNeill but that did not have such an echo among historians, see Jacques Pirenne, *The Tides of History* (Lavett Edwards, trans., 2 vols. (New York, 1962), first published as *Les grands courants de l'histoire universelle* (Brussels, 1948).

¹⁴ Positivist sociology includes the work of Weber, which became widely influential after World War II (following translation and publication of new works), and that of Talcott Parsons; a focus on bureaucratization and on modernization flowed from this framework. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds., 3 vols. (New York, 1968), trans. of Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Johannes Winckelmann, ed., expanded 4th edn. (Tubingen, 1956); Talcott Parsons and Neil J. Smelser, *Economy and Society: A Study in the Integration of Economic and Social Theory* (Glencoe, IL, 1956).

¹⁵ As the publication of Weber's full study on economy and society led to a burst of work drawing on his framework in the 1960s, so also did the publication of Karl Marx's notes on the method of political economy combine with the current political climate to bring a burst of new studies in political economy. Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, David McLellan, ed. and trans. (New York, 1971).

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emphasized complex interactions and feedback among numerous variables, rather than cause and effect.¹⁶ It set individual variables in the context of the whole system in which they operated: it explicitly contrasted diffusion with other types of interaction.

These frameworks, distinct yet overlapping, have each brought implications for the study of world history. Thus Immanuel Wallerstein's *Modern World-System* relies on his synthesis of Weberian bureaucratic analysis, Marxian class analysis, Braudelian concern with the *longue duree*, and the notion of a world system.¹⁷ Another rising subfield within world history, focusing on biological and environmental change, came to rely on the insights of systems analysis.¹⁸ The interdisciplinary nature of Weberian and Marxian analysis, and the emphasis on feedback in systems analysis, led logically to more complex lists of interactions in world history and to more complex maps of cause and effect.

The emergence of postmodernist philosophy brought a new challenge to the diffusionist model of cultural interactions. This outlook, arising almost contemporaneously in a series of fields (psychoanalysis, history, literary theory, and gender studies), brought a fundamental change in analytic orientation.¹⁹ Postmodernism adopted the logic of systems and suspended that of cause and effect. It focused on interactions of various sorts but declined to divide variables into the independent and the dependent: it emphasized correlation of changes but downplayed determinism. The historical applications of postmodernist thinking have concentrated in national and local studies of history, rather than in world history.²⁰

The field of world history is both advanced and backward in its handling of interaction. The simple

¹⁶ John von Neumann, *The Computer and the Brain* (New Haven, Conn., 1959); Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *Robots, Men and Minds: Psychology in the Modern World* (New York, 1967). Quantitative work arose in social and economic history in the 1950s, leading to study of more variables in a positivistic and deterministic fashion.

¹⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974). Subsequent volumes were published as: *The Modern World-System, II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750* (New York, 1980); and *The Modern World-System, III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730-1840s* (New York, 1989). Bentley's citations include echoes of Wallerstein's framework applied to earlier times: for instance, Philip L. Kohl, "The Use and Abuse of World Systems Theory: The Case of the 'Pristine' West Asian State," in C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky, ed., *Archaeological Thought in America* (Cambridge, 1989), 218-40.

¹⁸ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, 1986); see also William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976).

¹⁹ For a range of interpretive statements on postmodernism, see E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (London, 1988); Agnes Heller and Ferenc Feher, *The Postmodern Political Condition* (New York, 1988); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989); and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C., 1991).

²⁰ For initial work in this vein, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, A. M. Sheridan Smith, trans. (New York, 1973); for more recent work drawing on the same tradition, see Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992); both of these studies focus on France.

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fact of placing the various nations, civilizations, cultures, and regions of the world into a single framework addresses one of the most important prejudices limiting the understanding of our common human existence. Yet world history practitioners continue to use simplistic conceptions of interaction and continue to be insufficiently self-conscious in using them. German scholars of the nineteenth century, in publishing compendia on world history, assembled chapters on distinct national and civilizational histories, with no attempt to unify them.²¹ Then Leopold von Ranke, Oswald Spengler, and H. G. Wells began the work of synthesis, developing single-author interpretations of civilizations in world.

history.²² The civilization paradigm, with its focus on dominance, rise and fall, and diffusion, has remained dominant in world history until this day. Bentley's proposal for a *periodization* based on cross-cultural interaction raises the possibility of a *paradigm* based on cross-cultural interaction. Such a paradigm would set the history of civilizations into some more general context.

In a word, it is not sufficient to identify "interactions" in world history—one must also identify the type and character of interactions. Historians, in adopting such terms as "interaction" and "diffusion," have set them into distinct and competing analytical and philosophical systems, and thus their meanings become quite variable. For guidance in characterizing interactions in the past, world historians need to be aware of the development of world-historical debate and its relationship to broader trends in analytical modeling, from romanticism and positivism through systems analysis to postmodernism.²³

THE CULTURAL ASPECT of cross-cultural interaction is problematic to the same degree as the notion of interaction. Bentley, in using the adjective "cultural" rather than the noun "culture," has avoided one of the pitfalls in recent debate on cultural analysis: do "cultures" exist as bounded entities? If we say that world history includes the study of "other cultures," are we assuming a clear frontier between "us" and "them"? Arc interactions across cultural boundaries different from those within cultural limits?

Historians have developed their idea of "cultures" and "societies" over the past century, in relatively

²¹ German compendia on world history began in the early nineteenth century, reached a peak late in that century, and continued into the twentieth century. See, for instance, Heinrich Leo, *Lehrbuch der Universalgeschichte*, 6 vols. (Halle, 1835-44); Wilhelm Oncken, ed., *Allgemeine Geschichte in Einzeldarstellungen*, 32 vols. in A series (Berlin, 1879-90).

²² Leopold von Ranke, *Weltgeschichte*, 8 vols. (1879-87); Spengler, *Decline of the West*; H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (London, 1920).

²³ The term "diffusion" seems to have entered the humanistic lexicon in the wake of Enlightenment-era scientific discoveries, and it has been used within several frameworks since. (Alfred Crosby, among others, has emphasized the benefits of the term, "connections" in describing interaction: the term invokes a range of types of interaction without being either explicit or limiting.) Organic metaphors and evolutionary schemes became popular from the time of Spencer to that of Spengler. Mechanical metaphors then came to the fore, in the wake of great advances in physics in the early twentieth century. A return to an interest in evolutionary models has become evident within, recent social science, perhaps in a reflection of the great advances in microbiology. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. (Cambridge, 1988); William H. Durham, *Coevolution: Genes, Culture, and Human Diversity* (Stanford, Calif., 1991).

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common interchange with sociologists.²⁴ During the same century, anthropologists have carried on a somewhat different discourse about the notions of "culture" and "society." In crude terms, the sociologists analyzed the "nations" and the anthropologists analyzed the "tribes." As long as world history retained its focus on great civilizations and declined to study the "tribes," historians could feel safe in ignoring the anthropological literature on cultural change and cultural interaction. But a growing concern with broad coverage and with interaction led historians to greater, interest in those previously classified in "tribes" and thereby to a hesitant encounter with anthropology.

Anthropology, meanwhile, went through a remarkable set of conceptual shirts. Paradigms labeled as evolutionism, historicalism, diffusionism, functionalism, and

configuralism succeeded each other from the 1870s through the 1950s. As the theories of anthropologists changed, so, too, did their definitions of culture: Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, in a 1952 article, counted over 160 anthropological definitions of culture.²⁵

The evolutionist school, following on the work of L. H. Morgan, accepted a broad succession of social organization from primitive to savage societies to civilization. Among the historicalist school, the American Clark Wissler developed the notion of "culture areas," which were determined through mapping cultural "traits" or "elements" at a given time. The concept of culture areas survived and entered the historical literature, but the concept of discrete "traits" came under severe anthropological critique in the 1930s, largely on the grounds that a specific, cultural manifestation should not be abstracted from its context.²⁶ Nevertheless, George Peter Murdock gathered a huge amount of ethnographic data, essentially in the form of putative culture traits, into his Human Relations Area Files, where they have served as data for a number of global historical studies.²⁷ Meanwhile, diffusionists focused on the occasional invention of major social advances, functionalists emphasized the integrity of each society, and configurationists sought to synthesize the various frameworks.

From the 1960s, the decolonization of the modern world led to the decolonization of anthropology. Perhaps more than any other field of study, anthropology, has undergone a self-conscious reevaluation of

²⁴ Collective terms for humans vary with the collectivity and with the approach of the analyst. Thus the meanings of the terms "nation," "race," "society," "commonwealth," "empire," and "culture" change with time and circumstance.

²⁵ Felix M. Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology: The Science of Custom* (New York, 1958); A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, "Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions," *Peabody Museum Papers*, 47, 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), as cited in Keesing, 18.

²⁶ Clark Wissler, *Man and Culture* (New York, 1923). Among the leading world historians, Philip D. Curtin has been most consistent in his references to "culture areas." See, for instance, Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984), x.

²⁷ George Peter Murdock, *Human Relations Area Files: Outline of Cultural Material* (New Haven, Conn., 1950).

Among the major studies that have relied heavily on these data are Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); and Frederic L. Pryor, *The Origins of the Economy: A Comparative Study of Distribution in Primitive and Peasant Economies* (New York, 1977).

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its methods, assumptions, theories, and practices, in reaction to the realization that the field has been as much a tool of colonial administration as a tool of scholarly inquiry.²⁸ In one contribution to the debate, Adam Kuper has shown the dramatic transformations in kinship theory over the past century, leading to the virtual abandonment of that field of study by anthropologists.²⁹ This and other chapters in the reevaluation of anthropology, coming in the era of systems analysis and postmodernism, led to devastating critiques of the earlier models and terminology for cultural contact. World historians naively continue to use the old models with impunity.³⁰

World historians have gone little further in exploring anthropology than utilizing

empirical results of anthropological studies and giving warm citations to the work of Clifford Geertz and Eric Wolf. Geertz's famous description of a Balinese cockfight and the police inquiry in its aftermath served as a marker of the complexity and contingency of life and of the limits on theorizing.³¹ But it did not lead world historians to a thorough exploration of the anthropological literature on culture and cultural change. Eric Wolf, in *Europe and the People without History*, provides an anthropologist's history of the incorporation of peripheral regions into the political economy of the modern world; remarkably for an anthropologist, however, he does not address cultural change.³²

As the debate has developed, postmodern cultural theorists have declined to use "culture" in the noun form. They do not speak of a culture as an identifiable social unit, nor do they speak of artifacts as pieces of culture. By the same logic, they are critical of the notion of cultural boundaries. They rely instead on adjectival forms, speaking of process rather than product: they analyze cultural production and cultural change rather than cultures or cultural traits. Thus Johannes Fabian, in analyzing the rise of the Shaba Swahili language in twentieth-century Zaire, focuses not on the *subject* of the language but on the *debate* over what was to be the vehicular language of Shaba; he challenges the notion that Swahili "diffused" to Shaba from some point in East or Central Africa, and he asserts that the language "emerged" as a range of speech patterns rather than descending from a single ancestral language.³³

This debate on how to conceptualize culture is not over; indeed, it has hardly begun among historians. As a result, I think we may safely presume that for some time to come, historians will have to acknowledge the competition of two widely different conceptions of culture. In one, a "culture" is virtually

²⁸ The founding of Journals such as *Critical Anthropology* and *Dialectical Anthropology* thus meant not only the establishment of Marxist factions among anthropologists but also the beginnings of a transformation of the discipline as a whole.

²⁹ Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London, 1988). For an analogous study linking anthropological theory to academic social history, see Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge, 1991).

³⁰ One well-known counter-example, in which historians joined with anthropologists to overturn a narrow and biased interpretation, is the refutation of C. G. Seligman's "Hamitic hypothesis," according to which all the history of eastern Africa could be interpreted through the percolation, over the millennia, of white racial influences from the north. Seligman, *Races of Africa* (London, 1936); Joseph Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction" in Ki-Zerbo, *et al.*, eds., *General History of Africa*, Vol. 1: *Methodology and African Prehistory* (Berkeley, Calif., 1981), 21.

³¹ Clifford Geertz, "The Balinese Cockfight," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973).

³² Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982).

³³ Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880-1938* (Cambridge, 1986).

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a synonym for a "society" and consists of discrete elements. In the other, "cultural production" results from the interaction of individuals and groups and their contradictory ideas; in this approach, cultural change is the rule rather than the exception. Historians speaking of "cultural interaction" need to know that they cannot get far without acknowledging the contested and problematic nature of the term. Indeed, one may hope that by involving themselves in the study and conceptualization 'of cross-cultural interactions, historians will be able not only to survive the debate but also contribute significantly to its clarification.³⁴

ASSUMING THAT ONE ACCEPTS the presumptions of Bentley's analysis and the resultant periodization, what are the interpretive implications of these choices? The spans of time that Bentley proposes as his periods are not unfamiliar, and the terms he uses to characterize them carry a distinctly familiar ring.³⁵ Is this, then, a new set of labels for the same old periods developed for civilizational rise and fall or evolutionary stages? I think not. Bentley's approach to periodization can take us beyond restatement of old interpretations. And, when adopting the tool of cross-cultural contact for making sense of our global past, I would suggest three techniques for sharpening and deploying it.

First, consider a wide range of interactions. That is, historians should allow the meaning of "cross-cultural interaction" to extend to a range of issues beyond mass migration, imperial rise and fall, and commerce. If we include the exchange of food crops, domestic animals, and other technology, as Bentley has suggested, we may either find a new periodization or an independent confirmation of an existing one. For instance, the early movement of sorghum from its region of domestication in the African savanna to India and beyond, along with the westward movement of such Southeast Asian crops as bananas, yams, and taro, suggests the existence of little known historical dynamics and might imply alternative periodizations. The tale of the domestication of the camel serves in some ways to reinforce a periodization including

³⁴ On a somewhat analogous point, one may note that gender has yet to become a major conceptual issue in world history. A trend toward greater empirical inclusion of women in the world-historical narrative is evident, but the debates in feminist theory, linked to other developments in postmodernist thinking, have yet to address history at the global level.

³⁵ To recapitulate, Bentley's periods are:

1. 3500-2000 B.C.E.: Early complex societies
2. 2000-500 B.C.E.: Ancient civilizations
3. 500 B.C.E.-500 C.E.; Classical civilizations
4. 500-1000 C.E.; Post-classical age
5. 1000-1500 C.E.: Transregional nomadic empires
6. 1500 C.E.-present: Modern age

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classical and post-classical periods, yet in other ways it bridges those two periods.³⁶

Similarly, we may trace exchanges of music, dress, and other elements of material and expressive culture. If the sounds of music are difficult to recover for ancient times, the instrumentation can be explored through pictorial, archaeological, and written records. In the social history of dress, Fernand Braudel's exploration of early modern dress reveals the possibilities of a search for stylistic interactions on a global scale.³⁷

Further, we might also consider cross-cultural connections in political institutions and family structure. Jan Vansina, in a synthesis of a generation's intensive, collaborative research on the historical linguistics of the Bantu-speaking peoples of Africa, has reconstructed a narrative of four millennia of successive political transformations in the equatorial forest. Institutions of matrilinearity and patrilinearity were invented, exchanged, transformed, and sometimes rejected along with

the changes in chiefdoms, age groupings, and religious associations.³⁸ The wealth of actual and potential results from historical linguistics suggests that, although the research is laborious, a great deal can be learned about past social evolution and social interaction through analysis of the remnants of the past in the languages of today.³⁹

Second, be increasingly specific in identifying criteria and agents for cross-cultural contact. If trade was central to cross-cultural interaction, what dimension of trade was the locus of contact? Do we focus on merchants at the great marketplace at the terminus, on the transport workers by land and sea, or on the artisanal workers creating the product in workshop or mine? If the great bazaars of Samarkand and Damascus were the loci of transmission of new designs in tapestries, the ideas for the new designs may

³⁶ Watson, *Agricultural Innovation*; Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

³⁷ Braudel is particularly skillful in his display of the influence of sixteenth-century Spanish fashion, but one could equally explore the periodization accompanying earlier interregional connections reinforced through the use of turbans as headgear or the adoption of Hellenistic garb. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, Vol. 1; *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, Sian Reynolds, trans. (New York, 1979), 311-25; see also Frank L. Holt, *Alexander the Great and Bactria: The Formation of a Greek Frontier in Central Asia* (Leiden, 1989).

³⁸ Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, Wis., 1990). See also Christopher Ehret and Merrick Posnansky, eds., *The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982).

³⁹ Joseph Greenberg, in conducting field research in northern Nigeria that led him to a general classification of African languages, observed that the Hausa words for saddle and gun were borrowed ultimately from Arabic but that the Hausa had borrowed these terms (and presumably the items themselves) from their neighbors the Kanuri. An accumulation of such observations can contribute greatly to an understanding of world history. Greenberg went on in more recent work to classify the languages of Native Americans into three major groupings and to postulate the linkages of these groupings to major Eurasian language groups. Greenberg, "Linguistic Evidence for the Influence of the Kanuri on the Hausa," *Journal of African History*, 1,2 (1964): 205-12; Joseph H. Greenberg and Merritt Ruhlea, "Linguistic Origins of Native Americans," *Scientific American* (November 1992): 94-99.

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have occurred to weavers working in isolated villages. Merchants may have controlled the luxury goods and dominated contacts among the wealthy, but simple boatmen, and teamsters may have been those who carried most of the seeds and cuttings or who passed on new techniques in saddling. The Tang monarchs could concentrate all the wealth and innovations of the world in their court, but they had to reach far and wide to get hold of the wealth, and they could never gain control of innovation itself. Overall, we may find that there have been different groupings of human agents for different types of linkages among societies. Some criteria for cultural interaction may highlight innovations in imperial capitals and civilizational heartlands; others may highlight innovations at the village level in steppes, forests, and across archipelagoes.⁴⁰

Third, consider the changing character of cross-cultural interaction from period to period. We will need explanations of what brought continuity in cross-cultural interaction within periods and what brought the changes that ended each period and opened the next. Bentley emphasizes such changes in his period of nomadic domination and, to a lesser degree, in his emphasis on the development of cosmopolitan religious tradition in the classical era. In addition, we should be looking for changes in the character of the interaction as well as changes in the

results of interaction. Did the long-distance migrations of individuals become more common with the passage of time? Did they vary cyclically?⁴¹

⁴⁰ Gills and Frank emphasize the contributions of artisans and minces, located far from. The Mesopotamian heartland, to the wealth and coherence of Sumerian society; Bentley traces the spread of Buddhism through the agents of merchants but also notes the work of missionaries who accompanied merchants; while Liu Xinru emphasizes the breadth of the trade in silk as a religious artifact. Barry K. Gills and Andre Gunder Frank, "World System Cycles, Crises, and Hegemonic Shifts, 1700 BC to 1700 AD," in Frank and Gills, *World System*, 152-57; Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pro-Modem Times* (New York, 1993); Liu Xinru, "Silks and Religions in Eurasia, c. AD 600-1200." *Journal of World History*, 6, 1 (1995): 25-48.

⁴¹ One might go further and consider alternative ways of defining the continuities and changes across periods. The continuities within Bentley's periods appear as plateaus of active cross-cultural contact, separated by troughs of diminished contact; Bentley notes that episodes of epidemic disease and population decline mark the boundaries between these periods. But times of intensive cross-cultural interaction might also have been times of rapid change, and thus one could suggest treating the peak periods of interaction as the boundaries between periods, with the continuities being reflected in the periods of lesser interaction.

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Finally, an explicit contrasting of periodizations—those based on cross-cultural interaction, on rise and fall, on evolutionary change and perhaps other criteria—will clarify the strengths and weaknesses of each. For instance, Bentley, in his emphasis on cross-cultural interaction, appropriately restricts his analysis before 1500 to the Afro-Eurasian land mass. In contrast, an emphasis on evolutionary stages in world history surely ought to include the Americas and the Pacific before 1500, since a comparison of isolated regions seems a good way to test theses of evolutionary development.

The emphasis on cross-cultural interaction provides an attractive formulation of an analytical approach to world history. It is, however, just the beginning of the work. The follow-up to Bentley's proposal, in addition, must be conceptual as much as it is empirical. World historians, working within an inherited literature dominated by a focus on dominance and centrality in our global past, need to develop alternative metaphors for historical interaction and transformation, as well as a facility for exploring and comparing the implications of these images in interaction with the historical record. World history, integrated across time and space according to the criterion of cross-cultural interaction, has the potential to provide historians with a framework unifying historical problems and linking the particular to the general. The enterprise seems likely to provide its practitioners with an ample collection of debates—empirical, analytical, and philosophical—about the nature and implications of human interaction, within and across the lines that we are accustomed to labeling as cultural.

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