

The Two World Histories

Ross E. Dunn

“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Ross Dunn to examine the world history curriculum in U. S. schools in light of new developments in world history scholarship.

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” Editor,
University of Washington, Seattle.

Playing off the title of C.P. Snow’s famous essay “The Two Cultures,” I would like to argue that public discourse over world history as a school subject has largely taken place in two separate arenas, neither of which has fully understood or engaged with the other. In consequence, world history as a developing and intellectually lively academic discipline has not had as much impact on school curriculum as it should have. Conversely, state education agencies and school districts have in recent years written scholastic standards that embody outdated and inadequate conceptions of world history. On the whole, world history curriculum in public schools lags well behind the research curve, and it fails to pose enough of the key questions that might help young Americans better understand how the fluid, transnational, economically integrated world in which we live got to be the way it is. This state of affairs needs to change.

In the arenas where the two world histories have taken shape, educators vigorously debate among themselves intellectual, pedagogical, and policy issues surrounding world history as a school subject. The people in each arena tend to share, despite internal disagreements, a common set of premises and assumptions for ordering the discussion of world history as a research and teaching endeavor. But in the two arenas the premises are quite different. Individual educators sometimes leave their own arena to visit the other one, but the two groups rarely hold joint meetings.

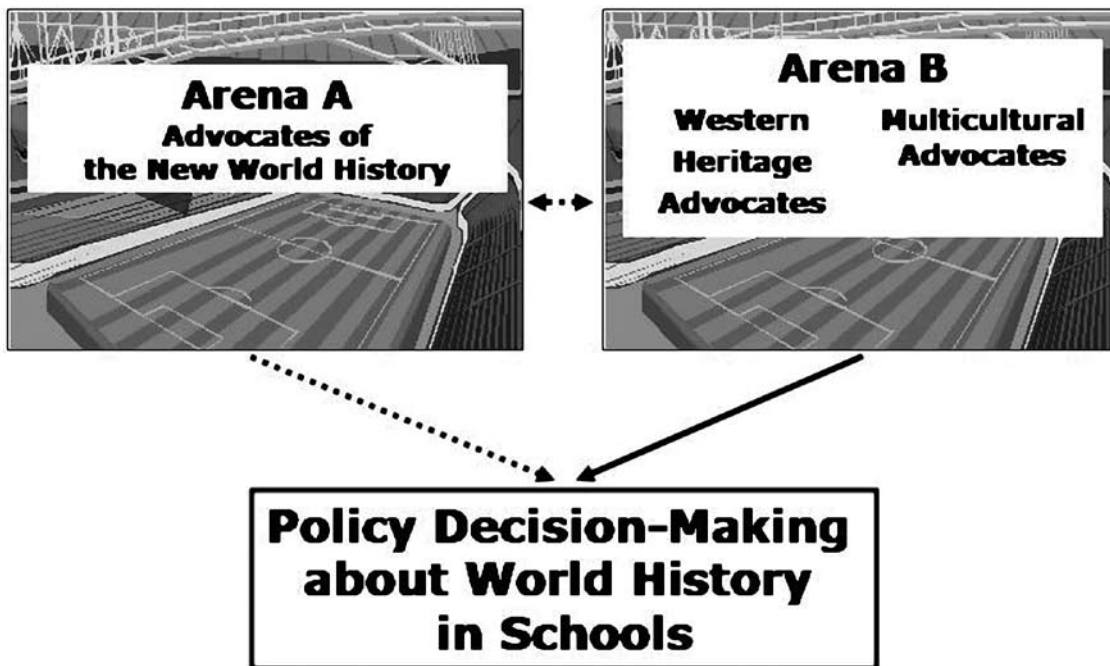
World History in Arena A

Gathered in what we will call Arena A are scholars and teachers who subscribe to the premise that the primary field of world historical investigation must be the planet as a whole, that is, the human species in its changing physical and natural environment. This group holds contentious

debates over evidence, interpretation, and teaching strategies, but its conversations tend to be protean, multi-sided, and, for the most part, affable. The leading organizations in this arena are the World History Association (WHA) and its several regional affiliates. The key media are the Journal of World History, the World History Bulletin, the new Journal of Global History, the online journal World History Connected, and the H-World email discussion group. The majority of educators in Arena A are academic historians, but WHA meetings, summer institutes, workshops, and various collaborative projects bring them together with K-12 teachers, publishers, and a few scholars from university education departments. For high school teachers, the main stage in Arena A has in the past few years been the Advanced Placement World History program, which sponsors its own institutes, website, print resources, and email list.

Discussions in Arena A center on the history of connections and interactions among human societies, patterns of change that cut across and transcend particular countries or civilizations, studies of societies in world-scale contexts, and comparisons of historical phenomena in different parts of the world. The denizens of Arena A are also inclined to investigate globalization, that is, the making of connections among peoples and societies, as a long-term historical process, not just a phenomenon of the past century.

Most Arena A dwellers are interested in exploring patterns, connections, and comparisons within limited frames of time and space rather than in constructing holistic histories of humankind. On the other hand, they work from the premise that the grand sweep of the past, not just the histories of particular aggregates like nation-states or civilizations, can, indeed must be, made intelligible. Moreover a subgroup in Arena A has formed around the new discipline known informally as “big history.” This emerging field draws upon both scientific and humanistic disciplines to locate the history of our species within large-scales of change up to the scale of the entire universe and to pose large questions about human evolution and cultural development.¹ However, all researchers who frequent Arena A, whether big or not-so-big historians, aim to obey the rules of evidence that the modern discipline honors. As the world historian Patrick Manning has written,



World history ... is an array of approaches to the past rather than a single formula for explaining our history. It is an umbrella of historical themes and methods, unified by the focus on connections across boundaries but allowing for diverse and even conflicting approaches and interpretations.²

Between about 1960 and 1985, the pioneers of world history as it has been formulated and practiced in Arena A published the seminal works that have inspired and guided the field ever since. These founders include William H. McNeill, Marshal G.S. Hodgson, Leften Stavrianos, Philip Curtin, Alfred Crosby, and Immanuel Wallerstein.³ Since 1985, by which time the WHA was well established, the corpus of writings in world history has grown exuberantly. Among numerous books and essays, four works are especially useful for getting a sense of the history, scope, and aims of the field. One is Bentley's booklet *Shapes of World History in Twentieth-Century Scholarship*. A second is Manning's *Navigating World History*. A third is Hughes-Warrington's edited collection of essays titled *Palgrave Advances in World Histories*. A fourth is Dunn's *The New*

World History: A Teacher's Companion, also an edited collection, which includes 56 essays on the problems of conceptualizing and teaching the field.⁴

World History in Arena B

As writing, teaching, and debate proceed in Arena A, educators and policymakers in Arena B on the other side of town have been engaging in a largely separate discourse. Their focus of debate is the social studies curriculum in American schools, including subject matter in non-American history, geography, culture, and current affairs. In most states, social studies include one or more courses in world history (sometimes called "world civilizations" or "world cultures"). The curriculum framework for California, for example, includes three full years of world history, in grades six, seven, and ten. In some other states, by contrast, courses in world history or other international studies are offered only as electives. In the great majority of states, changes have taken place in middle and high school world history curriculum in the past decade in connection with the development and implementation of new content and skill standards.

People in Arena B have been particularly concerned about history and social science standards as expressions of national values and purpose. Therefore,

the discussions have been emphatically political. What knowledge and understandings of the world will form the best citizens? Which version of world history should students learn, and who should create it? The federal government? The states? The teacher behind the closed classroom door? Should history education strive primarily to achieve national consensus about the human past, or should it equip students with tools of critical thinking with which to challenge "official" narratives, interrogate political authority, and propose solutions to contemporary problems in the light of history?

The debates in Arena B have been harder-edged and more impassioned than in Arena A because control of committees, agencies, endowments, legislative processes, and textbook sales are at stake. Moreover, two generally opposing advocacy groups have formed in the arena, producing a chronically confrontational atmosphere. One of these two groups argues from the premise that history in schools should aim principally to transfer Western political, intellectual, and cultural ideals to the rising generation in order to strengthen their loyalty to the United States as an ongoing experiment in democracy and capitalist enterprise. Public school curriculum centered on American and European history and on

a consensual narrative of achievement is commendable, the argument runs, because it serves national unity, inspires civic participation, and combats social forces that might fragment America into mutually antagonistic classes and ethno-racial groups. According to William Bennett, former secretary of education and an exponent of this viewpoint, America's European political, philosophical, literary, and aesthetic legacy is "the glue that binds together our pluralistic nation." Other expositors of the idea that education should provide in-depth study of the Western civilizational heritage have included Paul Gagnon, Diane Ravitch, Gilbert Sewall, and Jonathan Burack.⁵ Ideologically conservative governors, legislators, and agency heads usually urge public education that instills patriotism and "Western values" and that emphasizes differences between "cultures" that are democratic and those that are not. Even the most liberal politicians, however, subscribe to the fundamentals of nationalist ideology, shunning education proposals that might appear to advocate "dropping the West" or merging the study of American history into world history.

The educators, media commentators, politicians, and think tank fellows who assemble on the Western heritage side of Arena B do not usually argue that world history curriculum should be limited exclusively to Europe and its ancient Mediterranean antecedents. They contend, rather, that study of "other cultures" should not take up too much school time and perhaps should focus on two or three "non-Western cultures." Most in the Western heritage caucus scorn what Jonathan Burack calls "the drive to cover all cultures equally" and would agree with him that European political and cultural history makes a persuasive and convenient motif for organizing the history of all of humankind, at least in the past 500 years.⁶

Clustered down at the other end of Arena B are the multiculturalist educators. Prominent here are professors in schools of education, leaders of the National Council for the Social Studies,

collegiate historians, and affiliates of a variety of public interest organizations that speak for cultural diversity, social justice, and international-mindedness and that tend to distrust appeals to fervent, exclusivist nationalism. This group advocates social studies education dedicated to multicultural tolerance, empathy as opposed to rigid moral judgment, critical study of contemporary international issues, and inclusion in the curriculum of a variety of past civilizations. Whereas the Western heritage camp starts with an ideal of contemporary America as a society whose origins run back through time to western Europe, Rome, and Greece, the generally more liberal multiculturalists see an America made up of diverse ethno-racial groups whose cultural antecedents extend back to Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as well as to Europe.

Light Traffic between the Two Arenas

The Western heritage and multiculturalist blocs in Arena B have largely ignored the discussions going on in Arena A, concentrating their energies on disputing each other. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's report titled *Terrorists, Despots, and Democracy: What Our Children Need to Know* is a recent example of a broadside directed against multiculturalists. In it, William Damon writes that schools "must abandon the well-intentioned but intellectually corrosive species of moral relativism that now infests public school curricula in the name of 'multiculturalism.'" Social studies educators have vigorously challenged this opinion: Luis Urrieta, for example, declaring that a 2003 Fordham Foundation report titled *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* "is an activist project based on irrational and short-sighted, but deeply ingrained, ideologies of cultural domination that attempt to maintain and reinvigorate a system of cultural hegemony, in this case by means of the social studies curriculum."⁸

Nevertheless, the two camps have understood each other's ideological positions quite well and have assumed the same basic terms of debate. Both tend to

see world history fundamentally as the study of different "cultures," these aggregates conceived as homogeneous entities and as the natural units of historical investigation. According to this premise, each culture, usually understood as synonymous with a "civilization," possesses distinctive, indeed inherent traditions that emerged largely out of the operation of mechanisms internal to the particular unit. The culture becomes anthropomorphized, a kind of being that holds this or that belief or performs this or that action. Samuel Huntington, author of the "clash of civilizations" thesis, neatly expresses the idea of Western civilization as a thing that exists in nature and that possesses historical agency:

The West differs from other civilizations not in the way it has developed but in the distinctive character of its values and institutions. These include most notably its Christianity, pluralism, individualism, and rule of law, which made it possible for the West to invent modernity, expand throughout the world, and become the envy of other societies.⁹

Sometimes, however, proponents of multiculturalism take similarly essentialist positions, even if arguing for broader inclusion of several cultures in the curriculum. For example, one educator has written that "every culture has its own internal coherence, integrity, and logic" and that "no one culture is inherently better or worse than any other." In fact, most anthropologists have abandoned the notion that cultures are closed systems possessing "coherence, integrity, and logic." And the question of "better or worse" can legitimately be applied only to particular variables—better or worse leaders, decisions, policies, customs, technological capacities, and so on. The notion of comparing cultures as entities is akin to asking whether Buffalo is better than Baltimore or if Denver is worse than Detroit. Comparative questions like these only make sense in relation to particular variables.

Neither camp in Arena B seems to have much awareness of world history as the investigation of change, both long-term and short-term, in the world at large, as opposed to the fundamentally ahistorical study of the achievements, attributes, and differences of named cultures. The Western heritage bloc seems to think that world history education starts invariably with the premise that “all cultures are equal,” when in fact no scholars or teachers that I know of who are actually engaged in the field as it has been worked out in Arena A subscribe to such a nonsensical proposition. In reviewing world history standards in all 50 states, the Fordham Foundation report titled *The State of State World History Standards 2006* takes a strong stand for curriculum that includes the experience of peoples around the globe and that helps students “navigate confidently through a multinational environment.”¹⁰ But the report appears to be oblivious to the world history research and methodological debates of the past few decades.

Jerry Bentley has written that political conservatives and right-wing evangelicals who write about world history in schools “blithely ignore a generation of scholarship that has demonstrated the powerful effects of transregional and global historical processes such as large-scale migrations, cross-cultural trade, biological diffusion, technological transfers, and cultural exchanges in world history.”¹¹ He is certainly right, but I would contend that many social studies educators who favor multicultural curriculum also seem poorly connected to world history research. This is not because they oppose study of transregional and global patterns of change. Other factors are at work. Some are so dedicated to culture-specific subject matter that they have not had the time or inclination to think much about larger-scale historical issues. Others believe that history in general should be given less school time than the social science disciplines, especially study of contemporary issues.¹²

Perhaps most important, most social studies teachers, who are likely to have

had thin preservice training in non-American history, perhaps any history, have neither the time nor the resources to educate themselves on world history as a distinct disciplinary approach. Professional development opportunities are available, but they are paltry compared to the \$700 million or so of taxpayer money that the Department of Education has paid out over the past seven years to advance the professionalization of U.S. history teachers. By contrast, Congress has not voted one thin dime to help world history teachers. Very likely, Congress has an “Arena B” mentality, thinking of world history in schools (if legislators think of it at all) as a device exclusively to advance multiculturalist or internationalist goals that might be read by voters as culturally disunifying or even far left-wing.

State World History Standards: An Arena B Endeavor

In the past three decades or so, most public policy and legislation related to history and social science curriculum has been negotiated and implemented in Arena B. Because of the conservative tilt of many state legislatures and governorships, as well as the reluctance of centrist or liberal politicians to appear to support school programs that might be perceived as working to divide rather than bind Americans, the Western heritage camp has had a stronger voice than multiculturalists in education agencies. Multiculturalists, however, have kept up a steady barrage of criticism of politically pious and excessively Eurocentric curriculum, demanding that the ancestral cultures of African-, Hispanic-, Asian-, and Native-Americans be represented in the classroom as well. Consequently, in many states the two sides have reached compromise agreements, though usually tacitly and indirectly, over the premises and organization of world history content standards, notably in states such as California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Virginia where the standards specify significant historical content rather than only nebulous generalities.

These compromises vary from state

to state, and in some cases academic historians, though not necessarily world historians, have intervened to prevent publication of versions of history standards that were grossly inaccurate, misleading, or shallow. Minnesota is one example. Nevertheless, state standards tend to share a fairly consistent set of characteristics. These elements also appear in standards published by educational interest groups, for example, the National Council for History Education’s booklet *Building a World History Curriculum*.¹³

First, all these guidelines include content on Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but they organize world history civilization by civilization (or region by region), each of these units embodying its own historical chronology. Consequently, historical developments that cut across civilizations and conventional regions receive minor attention. The interregional developments that do get listed usually concern ancient or medieval developments such as the Silk Road or the Mongol empire.

Second, the standards cover the narratives and cultural achievements of a number of civilizations or regions in pre-modern times, but once students learn that there were great civilizations in different parts of the world before 1500, the scene shifts to Europe. It then receives in-depth treatment for the period from 1500 to about 1950, when the “rise of new nations” requires modest attention to other corners of the globe once again. Thus, for the 450 years when genuinely global developments had greater and greater impact on human life, Europe and its internal developments and foreign initiatives are largely allowed to stand in for world history. The primary topic headings of the Indiana state standards are typical of this approach:

1. Beginnings of Human Society
2. Early Civilizations: 4000 to 1000 B.C.E.
3. Classical Civilizations of Greece and Rome: 2000 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.

4. Major Civilizations, States, and Empires in Asia, Africa, and the Americas: 1000 B.C.E. to 1500 C.E.
5. Medieval Europe and the Rise of Western Civilization: 500 to 1500.
6. The Renaissance and Reformation in Europe and the Development of Western Civilization: 1250 to 1650.
7. Worldwide Exploration, Conquest, and Colonization: 1450 to 1750.
8. Scientific, Political, and Industrial Revolutions: 1500 to 1900.
9. Global Imperialism: 1750 to 1900.
10. An Era of Global Conflicts, Challenges, Controversies, and Changes: 1900 to the Present.
11. Historical Research.¹⁴

A third shared element in state standards has to do with the design process. With some partial exceptions, standards writing has not involved much participation from people who have thought seriously about world history as a new research field and as a distinctive way of investigating the past. Rather, state educational authorities have for the most part visited Arena B to put together in-house committees, independent consultants, and selected teachers and curriculum designers, most of whom see world history as the study of “different cultures.” Consequently, these standards have taken little account of the lively and pathbreaking world historical scholarship of the past quarter century.

To give just one example of this research, scholars in Arena A know that a world-girdling economy took shape in the sixteenth century and that thereafter this economy became increasingly complex in terms of transport networks, commercial exchange, and commodity production, as well as in its impact on societies everywhere. One important aspect of this development was, in the

context of the previous 5,000 years, the astonishingly sudden growth of western Europe as a hub of production, trade, and technical innovation. The intertwinings of the world economy and the successive regional shifts in the balance of global economic and military power from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries is a vital topic for understanding the world in which we live. This topic, broad in space and time, is one that classrooms might examine through any number of intriguing questions:

- What impact did the exchange of food plants between the Eastern and Western Hemispheres have on the growth of the world economy?
- Why did West African states find it in their interest to sell people for export to American plantations?
- Why did world population start to soar in the eighteenth century?

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- Why did steam-powered mechanical industry develop first in England rather than in China or India?

Numerous world historians have written about the birth and development of the modern world economy, and several have produced scholarly—though reader-friendly—books and essays that could help teachers, textbook publishers, curriculum specialists, and standards writers produce course materials which throw into relief big historical patterns obscured by the one-damn-civilization-after-another or the myopically European centered approaches to the past.¹⁵ Unfortunately, state standards and most middle and high school textbooks have so far largely overlooked these big questions, because these questions require approaching the whole world, not just partitioned sections of it, as the primary terrain of investigation. It is pedagogically easier, for example, to explain the “rise of the West” to great economic, technical, and military power by studying mainly what happened inside Europe or by dwelling on Western “core values.” However, that approach cannot provide persuasive answers because it ignores too many world-scale factors, variables, and influences.

Advancing a World History of Humankind

The curricular models that have emerged from the compromises among educators in Arena B are insufficient to equip high school graduates with the understandings they need to make their way in an exceedingly complicated world. School programs, therefore, should start with the world and with human beings as a species, not with Mesopotamia or any other particular “culture.” This does not mean that study of change in particular societies is unimportant, but students should understand that all societies are in a continual state of fluidity and that narratives of particular societies are invariably embedded in contexts of time and space larger than themselves.

The people in Arena B are probably not going to do much by themselves to

advance world history curriculum suitable for the new century. So the educators in Arena A, ideally led by the WHA, are going to have to elbow more places for themselves at the policymaking tables.

Have they already made significant headway in advancing what some call the “new world history?” Indeed, they have. First, the project in the mid-1990s to develop the National Standards for History was a huge collaboration of teachers, scholars, and public interest organizations, and it recruited, unlike most of the state standards projects, a critical mass of forward-thinking world historians. This team produced standards that pointed the way toward a history of change in the world, not serial histories of separate societies. Right-wing operatives, however, made a sustained and fundamentally deceptive assault on the standards for taking an insufficiently triumphalist view of American and Western political heroes, institutions, and founding documents. This campaign was also just one dimension of the Republican “Contract with America” initiative to close the national endowments for the humanities and arts and the Department of Education. Consequently, no state in the union dared to adopt these guidelines as templates for its own standards. Nevertheless, the national benchmarks have had significant impact on the organization and content of U.S. and world history standards in some states and on numerous other curriculum-writing projects.¹⁶

Second, and a greater success story, has been the phenomenal growth of the Advanced Placement World History program. Its testing population has risen from an impressive 21,000 or so in 2002, the first year of operation, to about 125,000 in 2008. Most of the historians and teachers who have developed AP World History frequent Arena A. Consequently, the course has a unified chronology rather than several civilizational timelines, and it “highlights the nature of changes in global frameworks and their causes and consequences, as well as comparisons among major societies.”¹⁷ The AP program has thus intro-

duced to thousands of high schools an ecumenical approach to world history offering an alternative to the culturist models inscribed in most state standards and secondary textbooks. AP presenters usually appear at NCSS meetings, and the program is serving as a meeting point between world historians and educators dedicated to international and multicultural perspectives.

Western heritage educators, however, have protested AP World History’s underlying approach. Jonathan Burack, a staunch member of that camp in Arena B, has warned in a Fordham Foundation report that AP World History “could well accelerate harmful trends in the teaching of world history by promoting the global education ideology...”¹⁸ Thus, he deploys the common ultranationalist tactic of conflating world history as a scholarly discipline with an imagined radical multiculturalism heedless of curricular coherence or intent on subordinating Western civilization:

The drive to cover all cultures equally adds enormously to the coverage problem by imposing an impossibly broad reach to the course. Moreover, by restricting coverage of the West, the course rejects what could provide a unifying principle for world history, at least for the past 500 years—namely, the central role of the West throughout the world.¹⁹

In fact, AP World History makes no claim to “cover all cultures equally.” Indeed, it does not aspire to “cover cultures” at all. Moreover, the research of the past quarter century has demolished the conventional myth that Europe has played a “central role” in the world since 1500. Excepting in the Americas, that domination was achieved only in the nineteenth century. And it may be seen as continuing in the past few decades only if one accepts the essentialist notion that any sign of economic growth, social progress, or democratic experimentation anywhere in the world is automatically evidence of the diffusion of “westerniza-

tion,” as if the “West” were a spreading organism. I should add that *The State of State World History Standards*, the Fordham Foundation’s 2006 report, judged AP World History an “excellent” program and advised states with weak standards to build their world history requirements around it.

A third world history project under development is *World History for Us All*, a web-based model curriculum for world history in middle and high schools. This project, inspired by the *National Standards for World History*, is a collaboration of San Diego State University and the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. It emerged from concerns that states were producing new guidelines that represented world history as the field was understood about 1970, that is, as the story of the West plus subsidiary material on “other cultures.” *World History for Us All*, which is an entirely free-access site (worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu), offers a framework for a more unified history of humankind. It has two major elements. The first is a conceptual framework of guiding ideas, objectives, themes, and historical periods. The second is a rich selection of units, lessons, activities, primary documents, and resources that are linked to this overarching conceptual structure. *World History for Us All* has a unified chronology organized in nine “big eras” of history, a rationale that encourages educators to think explicitly about world history as a distinct mode of inquiry, an approach to subject matter that permits classrooms to investigate the global past from the Paleolithic era to today without leaving out major periods or regions, and a foundation in cognitive research which shows that students are likely to achieve greater competence in history if they are guided to relate particular subject matter to larger patterns of historical meaning. *World History for Us All* continues under development, but teachers across the country are mining it.

The Way Ahead

Emulating most major league football and baseball teams, educators devoted to the

historical and international literacy of young Americans should agitate for a new and bigger arena to replace the two old stadiums. In this arena world historians, multiculturalists, global studies advocates, and all conservative educators who simply believe that strong history education is vital in our capitalist world would join together, not to promote global government or undermine the nation-state, but to study the history of humankind writ large, recognizing that the Earth is a “place” whose inhabitants have a shared history. To be sure, important developments have taken place within the confines of continents, regions, societies, and nations, but those ever-changing human aggregates remain parts of the globe in all its roundness. 🌐

Notes

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6. Burack, “The Student, the World, and the Global Education Ideology,” 43, 65, 66.
7. William Damon, “From the Personal to the Political,” in *Terrorists, Despots, and Democracy: What Our Children Need to Know* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003) 34-36.
8. Luis Urrieta, Jr., “The Social Studies of Dominion: Cultural Hegemony and Ignorant Activism,” *The Social Studies* 96, 5 (2005): 189.
9. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1998), 311.
10. Walter Russell Mead, Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Martin A. Davis, Jr., *The State of State World History Standards 2006* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2006), 5.
11. Jerry H. Bentley, “Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History,” *Journal of World History* 16, 1 (2005): 62-63.
12. Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 175. Evans argues that history takes too big a bite from the social studies curriculum, though he does not make a clear distinction between the “traditional history” advocated by the political right and the inquiry-based approach advocated by most academic historians. His book includes no explicit discussion of world history.
13. *Building a World History Curriculum* (Westlake, Ohio: National Council for History Education, 1997).
14. “World History and Civilization,” *Indiana's Academic Standards*, Indiana Department of Education, www.doe.state.in.us/standards/HS-Social-Studies.html.
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19. *Ibid.*, 43.

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