

Teaching World History: One Path through the Forest

Eve Fisher

Teaching world history presents any number of challenges, and the first one is simply, how do we do it? What approach should we use to hack our way through this vast forest of information? What textbook should we use? What emphasis should we give? Should we approach it thematically, chronologically, or geographically? My answer, in a nutshell, is “all of the above.”¹ World history requires constantly shifting perspectives in order to keep students oriented in time and space while providing contemporary relevance, emphasizing themes with regularity, having a certain amount of fun, and moving at the warp speed that covering 10,000 years in 31 weeks necessitates. Daunting, isn’t it? And we haven’t even gotten to what we should expect the students to actually learn.

As a college teacher of world history, I have faced challenges that are similar to those that confront world history teachers in schools. My students are usually recent high school graduates, and my suggestions and recommendations will, I hope, assist teachers to give their students the best possible preparation for college.

Before I continue, I would like to state a few caveats. First, I personally have no interest in theories of why we *should* teach world history. For me, the answer has always been obvious: because without some knowledge of world history, we have no idea what has happened, what is happening, and what is going to happen in the future. Case closed.²

Second, I’m not particularly picky about the right theme to use. I think teachers need to teach what they are most interested in, because that interest (or lack of it) will be communicated to students. And I firmly believe, based on personal experience, that students’

long-term learning usually centers on what teachers taught with personal interest and passion. (Short term, they learn for the test.) I have heard presentations by teachers whose whole world history class revolved around the theme of slavery; of trade; of voyages; of genocide; of gender issues; or of the heritage of Ancient Egypt. While some themes are more limiting than others, I think most themes can work, mainly because, unless you are indeed a monomaniac, you will also present the basic history.

Third, I believe we have to be honest with our students and ourselves. We cannot present the whole of world history in 31 weeks of class. There are going to be omissions. Each teacher decides what those omissions will be, and everyone’s choices are different. I am deeply suspicious of those who claim that, while of course they will not (cannot!) lecture on everything, they do expect their students to know and synthesize everything in the textbook. I don’t think that’s possible

for every student in the class: some can and will, some can and don’t; and some can’t, no matter what kind of tutoring they get.

I have never taught AP World History. My world history classes were general education, 100-level university classes, with 98+ students per class, two sections a semester, two classes a week for 31 weeks, with no graduate assistants or work studies. Truthfully, at that level, what we’re doing is giving students the “Cliff Notes” of world history, hoping that we’ve provided enough of an overview that they will understand some of what’s going on in the evening news. And that we might have sparked enough interest so that they will pursue an upper level class, or at least undertake further reading in a particular area.

Finally, I always used a textbook. I have heard of teachers who do not use a textbook, only assigned readings, but I profoundly disagree. Most students these days have no knowledge of world history or geography. Set them loose in a mass of readings and Internet sites, and, like Pip left behind swimming in the vast Pacific, they go mad. On the other hand, I don’t think the choice of textbook is as vital as it sometimes appears; any one of the major standard textbooks will do. It’s all a matter of which one you like well enough to actually read yourself.

Planning a world history class begins with writing a course outline. If you have

ever taught a Western History or East Asian survey class, that can be your beginning. Or you can download course outlines from AP World or H-Net websites. The class outline is your framework: it should be subtly flexible, with space for expansion when the discussion gets hot and heavy, or you get a bright idea that needs to be incorporated at the last minute, or when the students are particularly stuck over certain concepts or situations. This outline will eventually become part of your syllabus, which (at my university) was our contract with the students. Assignments, test schedules, and grading have to be spelled out from the beginning, because if they're not, you will be challenged on requirements.

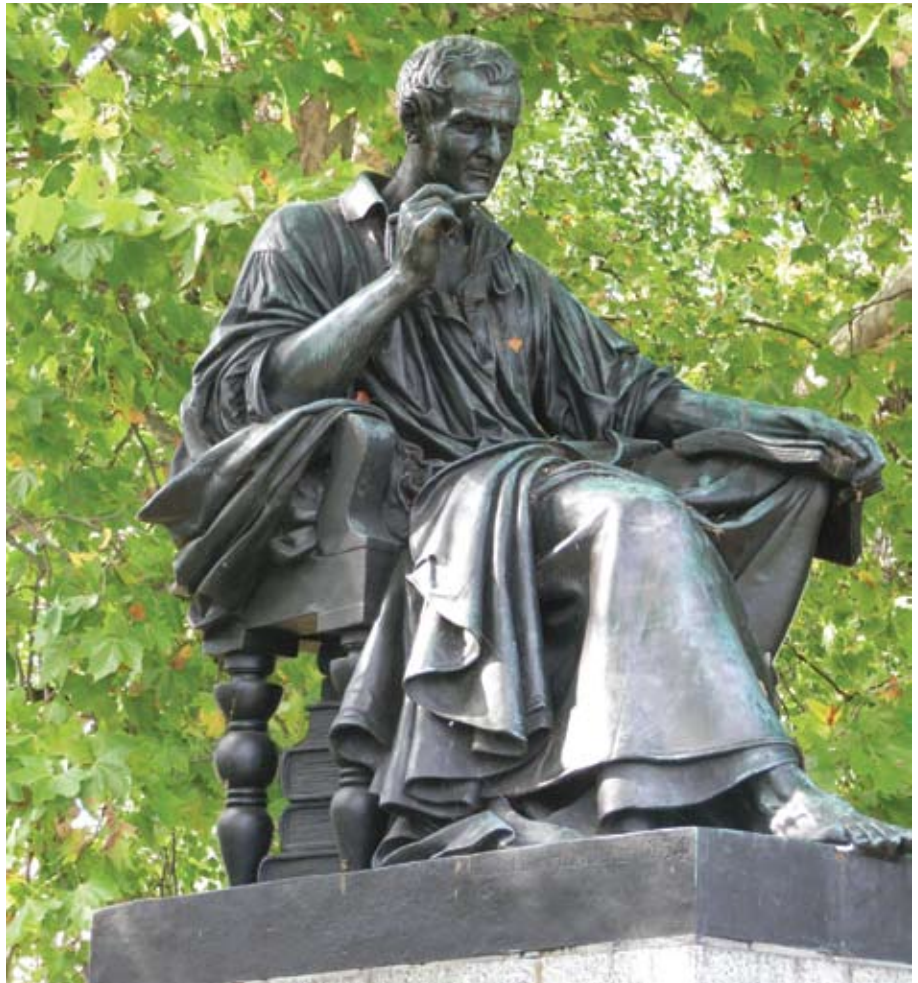
The first week—two class periods—I always went over the syllabus and course outline which led to overall historical timelines: the classic Western Civilization timeline; Asian timeline; AP World timeline; climate theory timeline; geologic timeline, etc. After that, I had major timelines up on a power point for every class that reflected what we were covering, what else was going on around the world and, where appropriate, how the one influenced the other.

Another lecture/discussion was about what historians do:

- **Primary and secondary sources:** I provided explanations and examples and then asked the students for more.
- **Biases:** I went through a few of the standard biases, including, but not limited to, time is an arrow leading to us; progress means we're smarter than people in the past; technology is proof of intelligence and morals.

Themes and Approaches

The two major themes that I repeatedly stressed were (1) ideas have consequences; (2) what drives technology, and what technology drives. Most students were woefully ignorant of almost all the major thinkers (religious, political, philosophical) of world history, and had to be



A statue of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Geneva, Switzerland (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

shown, clearly and explicitly, how these thinkers still influenced the world today. On the other hand, students today are inordinately impressed by technology, and their common bias is that if a culture didn't have, say, iPods and combustion engines, that culture must have been ignorant. Thus, both ideas and technology seemed to be points where students could be engaged in ways that they never had before.

Ideas Have Consequences

First of all, I confess to students that we can only talk about the ideas that survived the long slog of time, usually by being written down. Thus, we don't have much from the Americas, because almost all of the Aztec records were burned; and the Inca did not have writing that we know of. However, of the

ones we know, these are some major players I discuss at length: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Lao Tse, Confucius, Buddha, the Legalist School, Jesus, Mohammed, the Renaissance Humanists, Hobbes, The Enlightenment School, Rousseau, Marx, Lenin, Mao. Some examples of how we grappled, and who we grappled with, follow.³

(1) In the Western world, almost all philosophy and political science is a debate with, against, or about Platonic thought (this includes Socrates and Aristotle). The same can be said in Asia about Confucian thought (which includes Mencius and Xunzi). Both have to be understood, in depth, to understand future developments, and each received significant class time. One commonality was the search for a philosopher king/emperor; and we tracked this goal/longing through every

twist and turn of political science and history. One of the main differences is that of human nature: Socratic/Platonic thought implies that humans are damaged—having fallen from the Realm of Ideals, become encased in matter, and even split in two—and from this (via Hellenistic and Roman philosophers, as well as Gnostic thought) comes the Christian concept of original sin. Confucian thought says that humans are basically good, and, despite argument from the Legalist school, that core belief about human nature has held throughout Chinese history.⁴ How this major similarity and difference (among others) played out in human history was a major topic of research and discussion.

(2) Another important topic is the transmission of ideas in history, specifically the transmission of Platonic and Confucian thought through formal education, religion, and government over two millennia:

- In the West: Short term: During the Roman Empire most of what will become Europe is Romanized - linked by language, law, customs. Long term: Latin becomes the language of the Church, history, and diplomacy for over a thousand years, and Greco-Roman architecture becomes the architecture of power through today. Perhaps even more importantly, Greco-Latin literature became the primary curriculum for all schools until well after World War I, perhaps World War II.
- In Asia: Short term: During the Qing Dynasty most of what will become China undergoes Sinification: linked by written language, law, and customs. Long term: (1) written Chinese, largely unchanging, is the medium of politics, history, philosophy and religion for almost 2,000 years; (2) Confucianism becomes the philosophical base of Asia as a whole; (3) thanks to Confucius, late Zhou dynasty documents (and

subsequent Confucian documents) became the primary curriculum for all schools until well after World War I.⁵

(3) The wide and disparate audience and influence of various thinkers:

- The Enlightenment thinkers, of course, are required, and (in my opinion) the most fascinating is Rousseau. We studied his ideas as deeply as possible, and then hunted down his influence. I began with some basic questions: Why would both Simon Bolivar and Maximilien Robespierre describe themselves as Rousseau devotees? Why are the slogans on the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's *1984* directly derived from *The Social Contract*? Why would so much educational thought be based on the ideas of a man who never raised a single one of his children, but put them in an orphanage? And then I encouraged the students (provided with "starter names") to go out and discover more of Rousseau's legacy.
- Mao Zedong, while by no means the greatest thinker of modern Asia, has had a tremendous influence. Mao hated intellectuals, trusted only peasants (and not always them), and believed in perpetual revolution. Maoism has influenced people from Huey Newton to Pol Pot; and Maoist parties are active in Peru, India, and Nepal. Where does Maoism differ from Marxism or Leninism? Is Maoism a coherent ideology, or is it a mirror? What makes it attractive? What makes it (apparently) violent?
- The ideology of non-violence: Buddhism, Jainism, Ashoka Maurya, Henry David Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr.

What Drives Technology, and What Technology Drives

One of the first things I always liked

to do was to show that prior ages were perfectly capable of sophisticated reason, invention, and technology. Specific lessons included:

(1) Proving that knowledge of the mathematical structure of the universe is not a modern discovery. The Sumerian base 60 is still used in our clocks and compasses. The Greek mathematicians: Thales (first predicted eclipse of the sun), Pythagoras (pi, the musical octave), Aristarchus (heliocentric solar system), Euclid (still the standard geometry text), Eratosthenes (circumference of the earth); and Archimedes.

(2) Speaking of Archimedes, one of the standard questions in students' minds, even if they do not say it aloud, is, if the ancients were so smart, why didn't they invent the technology of today? The answer is to consider where and how technology was used: (1) Archimedes, the "mad scientist" of Alexandria, with his war machines (including the Archimedes Claw and the first try at a laser beam); Greek fire; ancient smelting of bronze, iron, and steel; gunpowder, etc.; (2) Chinese paper and compasses, originally used for religious prayers, timekeeping, and divination; and the Greco/Roman Antikythera Mechanism, c. 150 BCE, an early computer/clock; (3) the immense amount of technology of Ancient Rome that went into public baths and public entertainment. So, in pre-modern times, technology was used primarily for war, timekeeping, calendars, and entertainment.⁶ Where are the most rapid advancements in today's technology?

(3) All right, but why didn't the ancients do more than they did? Since the Industrial Revolution was the replacement of muscle by machine, why didn't they do it earlier? This is the time for a good, long talk about slavery and its history (from earliest writing to the mid-1800s in the West). When was slavery finally abolished (at least in the West)? What replaced

slavery? Where slavery was replaced, how did former slaves earn a living? How does technological change impact employment? Lifestyles? Expectations regarding employment and lifestyles? Where have machines NOT replaced muscle, and why?

There are, as you can imagine, many more questions, lesson plans, and concepts possible when it comes to teaching the themes of ideas and technology. This has only been a very general overview of the *what* and the *how* of my world history classes. I admit, every year, no matter how good the class was, I always saw areas that could be improved (I hoped) the following year. I think this is normal. And every year, I learned something new about history, about students, about teaching. Teaching world history is daunting, challenging, hard work: but it's also exciting, educational,

and fun, hopefully for both the teacher and the students. 🌍

Notes

1. Another answer is, "Don't worry: whatever approach you use, you will leave something out (and someone will be sure to tell you about it)."
2. There is also the fact that, for many teachers, they've been told that they're going to teach it, so therefore, they do.
3. A quick note: I would assume that, while we would all agree on the importance of Plato and Confucius, my focus on Rousseau might be replaced by another teacher with an emphasis on Locke or Lenin. And Hobbes is good for many reasons, among them that the phrase "nasty, brutish and short" is still used regularly in books, articles, and op-ed pieces.
4. Both Buddhism (which is far less concerned with sin than with illusion) and Daoism helped support this optimistic view of human nature.
5. Side note: when comparing Western to Asian, most textbooks compare Roman to Han; however, this is strictly based on chronology, and misses the entire literary, educational, and emotional impact of a massive empire's rise and fall upon subsequent generations. I always compared Rome to the Qin Dynasty in the short term, and Rome to Zhou in the long term. Emotionally, the fall of the Roman Empire reverberates through the subsequent history of Europe until post-World War II. In the same way, Chinese history could be seen as an echo chamber, where the horror

of the Warring States period (the collapse of the Zhou, 403-221 BCE) is picked up and amplified during the fall of the Han (Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties, 220-589 CE), and again during the fall of the Northern Song and eventual collapse of the Southern Song (1127-1279) to the Mongols.

6. Also sanitation. Many societies had flush toilets and excellent sewer systems. But not nearly as many as had war, timekeeping, calendars, and entertainment.

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