

Introduction: Forging the Modern World

This is a book about history. It's important to point out from the start that when we say history, we don't mean the past. Despite science fiction plots and the musings of some physicists about the possibilities of time travel, we're comfortable saying that the earth's past cannot change: what happened once cannot be altered. History, however—our understanding of the past—changes all the time. New sources are found, new methodologies develop, and new concerns about the human experience emerge as subjects for investigation. New histories result, and this is one of them.

Forging the Modern World emerged from a question: if we had only one history course that we could teach every university student, what would that course look like? Our answer had two key parts. The first was to help students understand the development of the most important structures through which people around the world relate to each other (both the structures and the people who act within them are critical to the story we wanted to tell). The second was to pull back the curtain on what historical inquiry is so our students could better understand the distinction between the past and history and learn to analyze historical arguments (including those made by their instructors).

When we got the opportunity to design a course based on these ideas, we did not intend to write a book. However, conversations with colleagues and students led us to write one that would reflect the goals of the new course. This book is the result. It's a relatively short book with ambitious goals that tries to stick to some basic ideas: focus on a limited set of arguments based on the best available evidence; explain assumptions and terms clearly; and trust that readers will use this book as a starting point, rather than an endpoint, in the exploration of world history.

What Is This Book About?

The title is an important place to start understanding anything you read, watch, or hear. With that in mind, why do we call this book—and the course that produced it—*Forging the Modern World*? The last word, *world*, indicates that we are writing a history of the entire world, not of any particular place or group of places. We don't mention all areas evenly. Some places get more attention than others, and we leave out many important events. Nevertheless, the argument we try to make is one that applies to the entire globe.

Forging is the least common word in the title. We like it because it conveys the sense of active creation that applies to both historical actors and historians like ourselves. A smith in a forge takes raw materials and uses skill and hard work to shape them—within limits—into something new. In this same way, people in different times and places have shaped their world through their decisions and actions. Karl Marx, who we discuss later in this book, wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) that people “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” In other words, everyone affects the world, but circumstances limit how and how much. This book looks at the decisions, actions, and contexts of people in the world and how those things created—*forged*—the modern world.

We, as authors, are forging something too: creating a history from sources, interpretations, our own experience and training, and the goals of the book. We're also limited in the tools that we have. We don't have access to every source, and we're not experts in every part of the world or every time period—not even close. Within these limits, we've crafted an argument and supported it with sources, forging our own modern world history. There are other ways it could have been created. You may not agree with every choice we have made in the way we present our evidence. If you're reading this in a class, your instructor, classmates, and you will disagree with some of the decisions we made and the conclusions we drew. We think our arguments are sound, but it's just as important to make the point that historical arguments are not received truths that exist outside of time and space: they are created by historians.

The Modern World

And what about *modern*? In everyday speech, this word means something like “newest” or “most current.” With technology, for example, a radio in 1920, a television in 1940, or a desktop computer in 1980 might have exemplified modernity. The term *modern* in our title refers to something else, however. Starting sometime in the past few hundred years (exactly when is hard to pin down because it

happened at different times in different places), the concept of modernity came to be used to define characteristics of certain societies that distinguished them from societies that existed in earlier eras and particular characteristics of the world as a whole that distinguished a new historical era from what came before. Coming up with a precise definition of modern that applies to all places and in all circumstances is impossible. We argue instead that there is a constellation of features that, taken as a whole, represents the modern world. Some are more, or less, present in any given place or time, but overall these seem to us a good list of what separates modern societies from what came before.

We ourselves, as authors, may be accused of *presentism*: seeing the past only through the lens of present outcomes. We'd respond in part by saying that the present is the only place where humans live—we're stuck here, at least for now! To be sure, many struggles and joys of the human experience endure across time and space, and there is value in studying them on their own terms. It does not diminish the grandeur, complexity, and variety of the past to say that in fundamental ways—politically, economically, and socially—human society looks very different today than it did only a short time ago and try to understand how those changes occurred. What, then, are some of these essential differences?

A Belief in Progress

A fundamental (and tricky) feature of modern societies is the belief among people, mostly elites, that they were thinking and acting in ways that were distinct—not just different but also fundamentally changed—from their predecessors. In societies that considered themselves modern, people have tended to believe that human action could, and with proper understanding of what needed to be done would, improve societies.

One way to make this clear is to think about the way the term *backward* came to be used to criticize other societies (or policies in one's own society). The belief in progress was tied to ideas about technology and material resources: modern societies had both the physical stuff and the ways of thinking to create progress, while *pre-modern* societies would not progress until they acquired these things. If you didn't have the right technology, or the right mindset, to move forward to the next stage, then you were behind, facing or moving backward. The idea that there is a single path and direction through history and toward the future, and that societies can move along it like pieces on a game board, is a common feature of how modern people view the world. This optimistic outlook overlooks many of the disastrous events and outcomes of world history over the past centuries. As we will explore in this book, those who possess political and economic power tend to overestimate the universality of their claims to truth and the justice of their

decisions (calling both modern) while dismissing (perhaps as backward) those who disagree with them, especially those who are poor or culturally different.

Production of Knowledge

To support this position, modern people used particular forms of knowledge to assert that their ways of understanding the world were fundamentally different from, and superior to, the ways of earlier generations. Science became the quintessentially modern form of knowledge. Observation, hypothesis, and experiment produced results from which to better understand cause-and-effect relationships rooted in the natural world, not in the supernatural, spiritual, or religious realms that had been primary in earlier eras. Modern people came to think of themselves as rational, using the scientific method to solve all kinds of problems, while pre-modern peoples were superstitious, guided by custom. That isn't to say that modern people were always rational or even that they were more rational than people in the past, but rather that a general belief emerged that the world is governed by rules that can (in theory) be understood and applied equally to all things.

These ideas could be applied not only to the natural world but also to the social world. Egypt five thousand years ago, China three thousand years ago, and Greece twenty-five hundred years ago were technologically, socially, and politically sophisticated societies but they were not modern because those in power did not typically base their decisions—or justify their rule or political organization—on the methods and techniques of scientific inquiry. Explanations for the social order, government, or natural phenomena were often sought in supernatural authorities, in the inertia of custom or tradition, or in the private deliberations of an elite few. In contrast, by the middle of the nineteenth century, those with the greatest amount of economic and political power throughout most of the world tended to make political and economic decisions based on claims of progress and reason and a belief that the world is understandable through rational, scientific inquiry.

Global Interconnections

Connections between and among different parts of the world—even parts far away from one another—are not new. Ancient Rome and ancient China, for instance, traded with one another more than two thousand years ago. However, the quantity and quality of global connections have increased sharply in the past several centuries. In 1400, direct communication between China and North America was nonexistent. In 1600, letters from India to Europe took months to reach their destination, if they arrived at all. Just a few decades ago, communication beyond one's own town was frequently slow, expensive, or both.

Today, we receive emails, texts, and phone calls from around the world, all instantly delivered at low cost. This instant communication has enormous impact. Stock markets in New York rise and fall based on news from Beijing. Factory workers in Vietnam might be laid off because of an economic downturn in the United States or offered more work when reports arrive of a natural disaster in Indonesia. Gasoline prices in London can rise overnight on word of political unrest in Venezuela. In our global village, what happens anywhere can affect people and places everywhere.

Alongside increased global communication, patterns of mobility have fundamentally changed how people live. In one day, many of us travel farther than most people moved in their entire lives two centuries ago. This mobility matters: clothes at your local store cost less than they did a few decades ago because they can be produced at lower cost in other countries and shipped cheaply to the United States. Likewise, jobs at factories in the United States or Europe might disappear when their products can be made less expensively in another country. Workers may move thousands of miles in pursuit of new jobs. The effects of this great mobility can simultaneously increase economic productivity, degrade the natural environment, disrupt social relations, and rock the political order. Taken together, the movement of ideas, goods, and people across the globe is an essential part of how most people experience the modern world.

Production and Distribution of Resources

The interconnectedness of our world changes how resources are produced and distributed. Economic, social, cultural, and intellectual resources have never been evenly spread across the planet; we will analyze the reasons why. In 1400, material resources were arranged much differently than they are in the modern world. Because of differences in climate, geography, and technology, certain goods and commodities were only available in specific places. China was the main producer of silk and porcelain. The best cotton textiles came from India. Spices such as pepper and cinnamon were unique to Southeast Asia. Gold was concentrated in Africa and India. Europe was rich in some things, but lacked other valuable commodities and useful resources.

Reflecting this distribution of resources, the wealthiest parts of the world then were in East and South Asia; the world's richest man was probably the emperor of Mali in Africa. Trade routes crisscrossed the Indian Ocean to connect the unique products and commodities found along its rim with consumers. Overland trade routes brought the wealth of the Indian Ocean to the Asian, African, and European interiors. Other resources, too, were differently distributed than they are today. China had a distinct advantage over other regions in shipbuilding. Islamic empires in the Middle East and western Asia generated new insights

in mathematics and astronomy. Indigenous societies in the Americas produced agricultural surpluses with ingenious engineering solutions.

By the twentieth century, that pattern had changed. Material wealth was concentrated in North America and western Europe, where the world's richest nations were found. The gap between the amounts of wealth controlled by residents of some regions compared to others had also increased dramatically so that the wealth of the average person in a rich country could be one hundred times that of an average person in a poor country. These same wealthy states exercised political control over much of the world and dominated scientific and cultural production as well. What changed? How? Why? Partly, political elites made decisions about how they wished to preserve their power. Partly, individuals and groups pursued their interests given the best information available to them. Both actions often led to unintended consequences in the long-term distribution of resources.

Technologies and economic productivity changed too, at different rates in different places, much of it having to do with circumstance. Although manufactured goods like porcelain or textiles were important to pre-modern long-distance trading networks, most economic production was locally generated and consumed. The power to grow crops, acquire commodities, finish goods, and transport it all to market was provided by human or animal muscle or wind or water power. Most producers were only indirectly linked to global, or even regional, economies. Barter was common; sophisticated economic transactions were not.

By the twentieth century, most goods—industrial and agricultural—were mass produced using machines powered by fossil fuels. Coal was of limited use in preindustrial societies, but once the use of steam engines spread, improving productivity, some coal-rich regions became economic powerhouses. Access to coal became a vital strategic and economic factor, although certainly not the only one, that explains where and how industrialization occurred.

For reasons and in ways we will demonstrate, political and economic elites in the industrializing zones of Europe and North America used emerging disparities in technology to redistribute wealth from other parts of the world to themselves and their countries. One feature of the modern era has been its coincidence with the dominance of western Europe and the North Atlantic, to the extent that some have argued that this part of the world is uniquely suited to be modern. Evaluating this claim is a central task of *Forging the Modern World*. India, Africa, and Southeast Asia still produced great wealth in the nineteenth century, but more of it came to be controlled by the populations of Europe and North America. Further shifts in the amount and distribution of the world's wealth characterized the twentieth century and this continues to our own day, as an accelerating pace of economic and technological change became one of the defining features of the modern world. Charting and explaining these shifts is thus another main aim of this book.

Political Organization

Try boarding a plane traveling from Atlanta to Tokyo without a passport: you'll fail. A valid passport, issued by a recognized nation-state, enables you to travel because citizenship—belonging to a nation-state—is an essential component of modern identity. Today, the landmass of the entire world is divided into nation-states. The only exception, Antarctica, is unclaimed by any nation . . . by an agreement among nations! The ability to live, work, travel, raise children, receive medical care, express yourself, and communicate with others is influenced by citizenship. Nearly every aspect of life on earth today depends on nation-states and the relations among them.

Six hundred years ago, there were no nation-states of the kind that exist in our time. Political organization in the world varied greatly, including large empires and kingdoms, smaller principalities or duchies, free cities, city states, and many others. Even if you lived in one of the large empires, like Ming China or Mali, connections to your family and village were still tangible in ways that more abstract associations to a larger political entity could never be. There is nothing natural or inevitable about the rise of nation-states, but they are a fundamental fixture of the modern world. Defining and understanding the characteristics, origins, development, and consequences of nation-states is essential to understanding modernity. This book traces the ebb and flow of political organization over several centuries, through waves of empire building and reorganization, and finally—and only in the twentieth century—to the domination of nation-states that characterizes the modern world.

Sources and Methods

This book is not *the* history of the modern world; it is one among many possible histories to be written on the topic. There are many different arguments to be made about the past, depending on an author's goals, perspectives, and sources. This is why so many books—so many histories—may be written about a single event. Thousands of books have been written about the US Civil War and each one is different. Books written today about the war differ from those written fifty or one hundred years ago. Some focus on military tactics, others on economics, or the causes of the war, or the experience of soldiers, or civilians. Even two books on the same subject, written at the same time, may be quite different. Can only one be “true” or “right”?

The differences among historical works come from how historians make history. (Yes, historians make history—though good ones do not make it up.) Historians combine raw materials and their own expertise to create histories. There are many ways to do this. Some are more interesting, more creative, and more

sophisticated than others. Some approaches don't work at all. But they all require the historian to gather and interpret sources and to construct an argument about the past from them.

Before we go further, then, let's explain what we mean by evidence and by argument and look at some of the factors involved in putting them together. Historical evidence is anything that helps us understand the past. For the most part, historians work with two kinds of evidence: primary and secondary sources. (A third category, tertiary sources, usually refers to works like dictionaries, encyclopedias, or textbooks.) Primary and secondary sources are used differently, although they can overlap, and sometimes it can be hard to distinguish between them. In some cases, the same source can be either primary or secondary, depending on how it is used.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources are typically produced in the time being studied. Written documents are the most common, but photographs, paintings, sound recordings or music, buildings, and other objects can also be primary sources. Written primary sources include letters, government documents, memoirs, diaries, or any other document produced at, or near, the time of the events under scrutiny. A good rule of thumb for deciding what constitutes written primary sources is that they are generated by people who do not know how the subjects they are writing about will turn out at the moment they are writing. It is also important to understand that historians are limited by the availability of primary sources: a great idea about the past cannot be turned into history unless primary sources can be located and examined. Put another way, important questions about the past cannot be answered without relevant primary sources. Much of the human past has disappeared without a trace, and we can't write histories of it.

Like primary sources, secondary sources can be sounds, images, the printed word, or other kinds of objects. Usually these are produced not at the time being studied, but sometime later, and they typically use primary sources (and other secondary sources) to make their arguments. The most common of these are books or articles. Most of what you find in the history section of bookstores or online retailers are secondary sources: works of history that interpret primary sources to make an argument.

Historical arguments are made when researchers ask questions about the past. They then gather and analyze both primary and secondary sources and compare the results of their research to the work of others. Putting all this work together, historians offer conclusions about the best way to answer the question. An example illustrates how historical arguments get constructed. Let's take the sinking

of the *Titanic* in 1912, an event that has been studied in many different ways for more than a century. A letter written by a passenger the night the ship sank or the captain's log of one of the rescue ships would be primary sources. So would the distress calls from *Titanic* and communications among different ships on the North Atlantic that night. Blueprints and plans for the vessel, weather reports, photographs of survivors, passenger lists, artifacts from the ship, and even the ship itself would be primary sources that can help us understand the events of that night, their causes, and their effects.

When historians gather sources and make arguments about what happened and why, they produce secondary sources. The first book about *Titanic* came out within a year of the sinking, and hundreds have been printed since then. Each uses some of the sources available to make an argument. No single work could use all the potential sources that exist at any given moment, and sometimes new sources are discovered. In addition, the interests of authors and the audience for books about history also change over time. Some authors and audiences are interested in the history of shipbuilding and technology, others in the social lives of the passengers, and still others in the cultural changes that *Titanic* represented. The discovery of the ship's wreckage in the 1990s led to new theories about how the ship sank. A 1997 movie about fictional passengers on the ship spurred a new round of historical research and writing.

To understand better the idea that sources might be either primary or secondary sources, depending on their use, let us take the example of books written about the history of Native Americans. These books might be used as secondary sources for understanding the expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century because these books use primary sources and the authors' analytical skills to make arguments about that topic. However, if we take a different topic—say, how portrayals of Native Americans changed over time—history books themselves could become primary sources.

Which are more useful for understanding the past, primary or secondary sources? The answer depends on what you are looking for. People sometimes assume that primary sources are better or more accurate than secondary sources and that is why they are called primary sources. This interpretation misunderstands the distinction between primary and secondary sources. Primary sources often convey immediacy and emotional power, but even the most detailed and beautifully written eyewitness accounts contain a limited perspective on events. They may lack important information unknown to the author and may even be untrue by design or unintended error.

As an example of the challenge of primary sources, let's think again about the US Civil War. If you were to read, as we did, the diary of a Confederate soldier who participated in the Battle of Gettysburg, you would discover that on July 1, 1863, his

unit took three thousand prisoners and drove the Union soldiers out of the town. If you stopped your research here, you might conclude that the Confederate army was on its way to a quick victory (and many people did think this was the case at the end of the battle's first day). But this source gives only a brief portrait of events that this soldier believed to be true at the time, followed by a compelling description of what it was like for him to participate in battle. Despite what this source describes, the Union army won the battle, turning the tide of the war in its favor. This primary source might tell us many things of value about how a soldier lived and fought and thought, but this snapshot of one day's events does not reveal the bigger picture.

Using multiple primary sources and comparing them with one another helps get a more complete picture, but does not solve the problem of understanding the past in and of itself. To illustrate this limitation, let us imagine that you want to write the history of a college's sophomore class experience. If every person in that class—hundreds or thousands of students—kept a diary of what life at that university was like, they would produce a wealth of primary sources. Yet, even if they all tried to tell the truth, there would be major disagreements. What one student describes as the best part of college (location, food, social life, a particular course, sports), another may find unbearable. If you rely on just one of these sources, you may get a view of college life that is unrecognizable to another student. Yet these diaries would be eyewitness, first-person accounts: primary sources. What's more, they may all be true! The historian's challenge is deciding how to use these sources to answer questions that will help explain life at this college, assessing the collective experience of students, rather than trying to figure out which individual perspective is the singular historical truth.

The Question of Bias

The diaries of college sophomores would certainly include entries whose accuracy or objectivity you might doubt. There is much to think about in approaching this issue of bias in sources. The concept of bias is important but often misunderstood. Sometimes, a source will be clearly biased: skewed to a predetermined conclusion regardless of any consideration of the evidence. Adolf Hitler's writing about racial difference would be a clear example of this type of bias. If we understand Hitler's assumptions, we should know not to accept his opinions on Jewish culture at face value. More often, however, bias refers to unintentional assumptions and presuppositions that shape how an author interprets events. A newspaper report from the United States in the 1950s might contain observations or use assumptions—about different races, ethnicities, or political or social groups, for instance—that would seem odd or even outrageous in the twenty-first century, but they might have been typical for the time. In the same way, a French missionary's account

of Native American society written in the 1600s would most certainly describe Huron social practices in ways that were influenced by the author's French and Catholic upbringing. These sources can be valuable for the historian, but to take advantage of them, one must work hard to account for how each author's worldview affects what was written and how it was written. In this way, a source might be less valuable for learning about Huron social organization than for understanding French missionary attitudes toward Native Americans. Bias is rarely a conscious attempt by an author to lie and more often the way in which deeply held perspectives and expectations shape the way an author writes.

All sources are biased. It is impossible to be human and not have presuppositions or a point of view. It's tempting, because of this, to throw up our hands and say that all sources are just opinions. But the fact that all sources contain bias does not make them invalid or useless . . . or equal. One of our jobs—our most important and most difficult job—as readers is to assess sources and their biases, how important those biases are, and how they affect what knowledge and information we can glean from the sources. We try always to learn as much as possible about who created sources and what their motivations were—goals, audience, background, worldview, and so forth. For primary sources, we often practice *close reading*, collecting everything possible from the sources themselves. For written sources, we take note of the organization, vocabulary, symbols, references, arguments, and suppositions. As we gather information about individual sources, we begin to compare them with other sources to build the base of evidence from which we will draw our own arguments and conclusions.

Just as all sources are biased, all readers are biased as well; and, as with sources, this bias is not necessarily a bad thing. Our biases are the sum of all the life experiences that we carry with us, including our ability to form thoughts with language. They are the things that allow us to learn in the first place. But reader bias can also affect how we evaluate sources in negative ways. For instance, if you know the race, gender, age, nationality, or social class of an author, do you take him or her less (or more) seriously? Should you? In the same way that we must make sure we understand the limits within which our sources are working, we need to undertake the (even harder) work of understanding our own limits as readers. Good historical inquiry means examining our own assumptions and preconceptions about the past and adjusting them if new evidence suggests that they need adjusting.

In this process, secondary sources become essential to historical inquiry. The authors of secondary sources benefit from hindsight, which can offer a perspective that primary sources lack. Secondary sources can combine, evaluate, and synthesize primary sources and weigh them against other secondary sources. A good secondary source provides balance, insight, and convincing analysis. Nonetheless, historians need to approach secondary sources with as much care

as primary sources. They need to analyze the creator of the source and the context and motivations under which it was created. What do authors claim they are going to prove? Does the evidence they present adequately support the argument? For example, an author may present a portrait of life in the United States during the Great Depression using examples almost entirely from Chicago. The book may be a compelling analysis of life in Chicago, but we must be cautious about leaping to the conclusion that this study can apply to life in all cities during the same period, much less to other periods and places.

In secondary sources, we also look for transparency and reproducibility. Credible historical writing makes it easy for the reader to figure out what sources the author used, how they are used, and where those sources came from. Often that information is contained in notes, a bibliography, and perhaps even a separate discussion of how sources were located and used. Other researchers and readers can then track down the author's sources for themselves to confirm their content and verify that the author is using the sources responsibly. Casual readers often skip the documentation contained in notes and bibliographies, but they can be a key means to assess the value of secondary sources.

Practicing History

All these concerns and qualifications can overwhelm readers looking for an introduction to world history, so we decided to move much of the work we've done collecting, assessing, and interpreting sources to the background. Throughout the book, we provide readers with what we think are the best interpretations of all the evidence available, but we do not provide a very detailed roadmap of how we arrived at these conclusions. In the language of math tests, we haven't always shown our work and there are few footnotes in the book. This simplicity is important, but to emphasize that history is created by historians, we want to review for you some of the decisions that we've made in writing this book.

"Historians Explore..."

We devote one section of each chapter to a more detailed analysis of how historians explore a case, a theme, or different kinds of sources. Sometimes we highlight recent historical research that has challenged, changed, or enhanced our understanding of the past and thus made new history. For example, we present details about newly discovered sources (like data from slave cemeteries in the Caribbean or declassified documents from the Cold War) or especially innovative interpretations of sources. In these sections we cite the work of our colleagues, enabling readers to find their original research for more information or further

explanation. In other places, we take an issue on which historians disagree and lay out the terms of the debate. We take a side in some of these debates; in others we just point out the different arguments and why historians disagree. Our goal here is to illustrate how even scholars with access to the same sources reach different conclusions on a topic. These tend to be big and controversial topics, often with contemporary political considerations and with great implications for our understanding of the past and the present: the reasons the Cold War ended or the nature of population decline after Europeans arrived in the Americas. In these cases, we present some of the competing arguments and cite books and articles where readers can learn more about them. These footnotes are not comprehensive but are designed to point readers to important original sources for the debates we describe.

You will also find footnotes in each chapter that reference specific secondary sources from which we drew information that we found innovative or particularly helpful in making a point. Please don't misunderstand our goals in proceeding this way. We don't intend to give the impression that these are the only areas where history is controversial or innovative—certainly not. Everything we know about the past is the product of historical research, and almost every sentence in the book could have been footnoted and expanded on. By highlighting instances of how historians practice their craft within the broader synthesis of this book, we hope to demonstrate that history is not a series of received truths while still writing a concise and readable introduction to a vast topic.

Labeling Time

In thinking about history, we often refer to memorable chronological markers—important years, days, generations, or epochs: 1492; 1776; December 7, 1941; and the sixties, for example. However, the study of world history challenges us to recognize both the power and the limits of convenient chronological markers. Let's take 1776 and the Declaration of Independence as an example. That summer day when the declaration was signed, it certainly didn't matter to the emperor of China or the sultan of the Ottoman Empire or even to many people living in North America. The declaration didn't even begin the American Revolution! This event clearly matters for world history, but knowing exactly how, for whom, and when means that our job barely begins with knowing that the US Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.

And what is 1776 anyway? What most people in Philadelphia, where the declaration was signed, called 1776 AD—Anno Domini, Latin for "In the Year of Our Lord"—was the year 5536 in the Hebrew calendar, 1768 in Ethiopia, 1154 in Persia, 1189 by the Islamic calendar, 2320 by the Buddhist calendar, An'ei 5 in Japan, and Qianlong 41 (or the Wood Goat year 4472) in China, just to name a

few alternative ways of marking time. Christian thinkers developed the designation Anno Domini about fifteen hundred years ago as a means of dating events from the presumed birth of Jesus Christ, adding this to a calendar system first adopted by the Romans. In English, dates preceding the presumed birth of Christ came to be designated *bc*: before Christ.

All calendars are frames of reference, marking the passage of time from some point in the past—perhaps the reign of a ruler, the mythical beginning of time, or a religious event. Most of the world, for most of its history, has not been Christian, so perhaps this calendar is not the optimal way to organize historical time. For that matter, not even all Christian calendars agree (and contemporary evidence suggests that Jesus was most likely born sometime between 3 *bc* and 1 *ad*).

To further complicate matters, different calendars measure the year differently. Many calendars measure the moon's orbit around the earth, but others keep track of the earth's orbit around the sun or a combination of the two. Years can last anywhere from (about) 354 days to (about) 365 days. Without agreement on how long a year is or when to start counting them, the seemingly simple question of when something happened becomes difficult to answer. Fortunately, we don't need to weigh in on any astronomical, mathematical, or theological debates about time. For this book, we consider the calendar a tool that allows us to establish when events happened in relation to each other. What is most important about the dates in this book is their usefulness to readers. So, how will we mark time in this book?

We have chosen to note dates throughout this book using the Gregorian calendar, a sixteenth-century revision of Julius Caesar's solar calendar, which has grown since the eighteenth century to become the most widely accepted calendar. As an acknowledgment of this shared past and common experience, we will refer to most dates in this book as belonging to the Common Era, abbreviated *ce* rather than *ad* (retaining the convenience of the Gregorian dating system without its religious overtones). However, in this book, because nearly all the dates we mention are from the Common Era, we will not typically use any letters after the numerical date. On those occasions when we refer to events prior to the Common Era, we will use the label *bce*—before the Common Era. If you are accustomed to seeing dates with the labels *ad* and *bc* attached to them, keep in mind that it is not the dates themselves that are different, just the way they are labeled: it is an attempt to recognize difference while still embracing the links and shared experiences among people and places.

How Each Chapter Is Structured

A similar concern about the portability of dates across cultures and countries shapes the construction of the book's chapters. Periods like the Victorian era or the age of revolution depend on specific geographical, social, and cultural

limits: they aren't universal. One way that we attempt to align our readers with the global context of this book is by creating less familiar starting and ending points for each chapter and overlapping them from chapter to chapter. Each chapter begins with a pair of vignettes, marking a start and end date for the chapter. The main importance of the events and people of those vignettes is symbolic, tying together the themes around which we have constructed that chapter. After these two vignettes, we provide questions that may prompt discussion in class or help you think about the themes we are trying to develop in the book. By overlapping the dates each chapter covers, we want to emphasize that history is not a linear progression of events but a series of interrelated and variable events that affect different parts of the world at different times and in different ways. The dates, and the vignettes that go with them, alert readers to themes that will be addressed and foreground our intention to move away from any effort to create in each chapter a self-contained historical epoch.

Places and Place Names

World history also challenges our ideas about geography. Different groups used different names to refer to the same place, place names changed over time, and even geographic markers that may appear objective are themselves historical artifacts injected with cultural and ideological meaning. Think about the term *Middle East*, for example, which is used daily in the US media to describe a vast and vaguely defined part of the world that is sometimes stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea and beyond. The term entered common usage only in the early twentieth century and only in some parts of the world. We have tried to balance historical accuracy in using place names with the need to help our readers find things on maps so that they may be compared over time. This means that, at times, we will use more than one term to refer to the same place or that we will use terms that carry heavy, even controversial, cultural and ideological meaning.

Generally, we use the current common Anglicized spellings of cities, countries, and other political geography, omitting accents and diacritics unless they are present in the English usage (for example, Mexico does not have an accent, but Potosí does). We have taken a similar approach to the labels we attach to people and things throughout the book. For proper names and transliterations, we have attempted to adhere to conventions that would make the text both acceptable to specialists and accessible to nonspecialists. But it would be fair for any of our readers to question the choices we made about naming and spelling and to decide whether they would have made different ones and, if so, why. Our hope is that questions about naming conventions proceed hand in hand with other discussions about the nature of historical events and processes.

Recommended Reading

Writing this book has reminded us of our limits as researchers and writers. We have read remarkable works by our colleagues, past and present, which push the boundaries of historical inquiry, from microhistory (the intensive study of a single place or issue) to *big* or *deep* history (which asks questions on enormous chronological and geographical scales). We have read masterful monographs and benefited from the ambitious projects of scholars who ask grand historical questions. We could not have finished this project were it not for the trust we place in our readers, especially the students and instructors who will use this book, knowing that they will understand that any individual text can only be a starting point. We assume that you will have ready access to the internet while you read this book. We encourage you to use it to find out more about the people, events, and arguments we present while you are working your way through the chapters that follow. We also want you to read what our colleagues have written, especially those who have different approaches and draw different conclusions from our own. To help with this, we end each chapter with a list of “a few good books” related to themes addressed in the chapter. By no means comprehensive, the lists are simply attempts to point out engaging, thought-provoking works so that you can continue the journey of historical inquiry.

Agency and Contingency

For us, being historians is an exercise in hope. Broad trends, covering large areas and long periods of time, are the stuff of world history. The enormous, abstract forces that shape history can make individual lives seem insignificant and individual actions appear irrelevant. Yet, a premise of this book is that historical outcomes happen because (but not *only* because) of human agency—people make choices. You will find in the pages that follow both analyses of large abstract processes and many stories about individual actions and decisions. Sometimes the actions of one individual can have enormous consequences. More often, groups of people bring about change. Human beings are not just passengers on a planet hurtling through space. The modern world is, within a set of material limits, a human creation.

In counterpoint, rarely are single human beings responsible for fundamental changes in world history. When Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) sailed from Spain to the Caribbean, he set in motion changes far beyond anyone’s expectations at the time. The specific choices he made mattered enormously, but he was not the only person of similar background and motivation traveling in the Atlantic Ocean during that time. If Columbus had not embarked on, or survived, his

transatlantic crossing, someone else would have, sooner or later. Columbus’s actions changed the world, yet it would be wrong to conclude that had he not lived, the Americas and Afro-Eurasia would have remained unknown to one another. To take another aspect of this phenomenon, we can look at the case of Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948), the activist for Indian independence. One of the most famous quotes about historical agency ever is attributed to Gandhi—“Be the change that you wish to see in the world”—and we can certainly say that the transition to independent nation-states in South Asia was shaped in large part by Gandhi’s hand, but the thoughts and actions of millions of others also contributed to this particular historical outcome. A single person can change the world, to be sure, but always in the context of other events and other people.

This discussion of agency leads us to one last distinguishing characteristic of historical inquiry: the concept of contingency. We believe that our job as historians is to present the possibilities that existed in any given historical situation, not derive laws that can predict the future. We believe that the path that led to the predominant models of political organization and economic activity in the modern world could not have been predicted but that it can be explained. To do so requires us to consider the entire world, even if we do not cover all parts of it equally or equally well. It would be a fool’s errand to try to account for every event that contributed to these outcomes. These pages don’t detail every event—even every important event—that has occurred across the globe, nor do they emphasize equally each of the world’s regions and distinct histories. Nonetheless, our scope is global. We are trying to explain how a world of distinct human traditions became increasingly interconnected, what the connections looked like, and why some connections, and not others, came to predominate in the modern world.

A Few Good Books

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| Joyce Oldham Appleby, Lynn Avery Hunt, and Margaret C. Jacob. <i>Telling the Truth about History</i> . New York: W. W. Norton, 1995. | Jared Diamond. <i>Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies</i> . New York: W. W. Norton, 1997. |
| Mark Bloch. <i>The Historian’s Craft: Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of Those Who Write It</i> . New York: Vintage, 1964. | Mark T. Gilderhus. <i>History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction</i> . 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2009. |
| Eric Foner. <i>The Idea of History</i> . Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. | J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill. <i>The Human Web. A Bird’s-Eye View of World History</i> . New York: W. W. Norton, 2003. |