

"OPEN TO CHANGE" AND "CULTURAL BORROWING":
IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?
(William H. McNeill and his Eurocentric Textbook)

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Those who teach world history cannot escape being influenced by the issues of our time. The relative decline of the United States as a global power has made us acutely aware that Americans need a better understanding of the world at large if we are to retain great power status in the future. So too, it has become increasingly obvious that the world is an interconnected place in such areas as the economy, the ecology, and politics. The viability of the nation-state itself has recently been challenged by the rise of world ethnic-cultural politics, and the current chaos and stagnation throughout the world challenges the Eurocentric notion that westernization promotes modernization and progress. Indeed, the recent increase in the number of world history classes nationwide has been prompted by such contemporary political, economic, and social events.

The topic of Eurocentrism is what concerns this paper. Defenders of traditional western interpretations of history worry about a lack of emphasis on western values in the classroom, and a weakening or potential weakening of a unifying set of proud beliefs.¹ But many of us who teach world history believe we must overcome the Eurocentrism inherent in western history, and guide our students out of the bigotry of our lingering notions of western superiority. In the words of William Green, we non-Eurocentric scholars "reject self-serving notions of western exceptionalism, of western material, moral, and cultural superiority."²

At Kennesaw State College, we have had a strong dose of Eurocentrism because of our unfortunate decision to adopt William H. McNeill's *A History of the Human Community* for the world history core requirement during the 1991-1992 college year.³ The essential thesis running through McNeill's textbook found early expression in his *Rise of the West*, (1963) which developed the idea that the "principal factor promoting historically significant social change is contact with strangers possessing new and unfamiliar skills." Thus, "centers of high skill (i.e. civilizations) tend to upset their neighbors by exposing them to attractive novelties." Backward peoples then have a painful choice, to imitate their superiors or to retain the past. As the superior

civilization exerts its powerful influence, the "grain of world history begins to run in a single direction."⁴ McNeill's thesis remains a powerful idea and by itself is not inherently Eurocentric. A *History of the Human Community*, based upon McNeill's *Rise of the West*, describes the creation of civilization, its subsequent spread, the rise of a superior Europe, and its subsequent dominance over other civilizations.

As indicated above, I believe that McNeill's textbook is Eurocentric, but before I define this Eurocentrism, it must be observed that numerous segments of McNeill's text are broad-minded and wise, and should not insult any culture or nationality. McNeill demonstrates that world civilization resulted from a vast interchange of ideas and discoveries, that many cultures in the past have obtained periods of greatness, and that powerful nations (or empires) tend to rise and fall. McNeill does not, in short, attribute positive characteristics only to the West. He notes, for example, that "Moslem civilization carried forward and developed some [positive] aspects of the Greek and ancient Near-Eastern heritages."⁵ Also, "Moslem authors began to confront Greek learning with ideas and data that reached them from India and China," and soon produced "original work."⁶ Before the rise of the West, "China surpassed the achievements of all other civilizations of the age" and the "wealth, skill, cultivation, and learning of China were immense."⁷ After 1914, Europeans would realize, "as other peoples had been compelled to do, that their way of doing things was only one of many ways and not always or necessarily the best."⁸

Why then do I claim that *A History of the Human Community* is Eurocentric? Because McNeill glorifies the West. He describes the West as innovative, dynamic, and progressive; and he describes the rise of the West and its dominance over much of the world as a tremendous success story. The choice of words McNeill uses to describe western development is positive and enthusiastic. "The Classical civilization of ancient Greece and Rome attained an enormous success between 500 B.C. and 200 A.D."⁹ In the Middle Ages, the people were creative and inventive.¹⁰ And, "Europeans were able to respond to new possibilities more successfully than others."¹¹ Europeans "did not meekly submit to their social superiors."¹² Between 1500 and 1850, Europe succeeded to become the "strongest and most skillful civilization in the world," because of "Europe's readiness to learn and experiment, to change its own habits in the light of new experiences, and, above all, never to flinch from

the next confrontation."¹³ In sum, McNeill's enthusiasm encourages the reader to believe that the peoples of Europe had special, superior human characteristics.

McNeill has no such enthusiasm for the other civilizations, which he believes lacked those unique characteristics that would ensure the success of the West. These other civilizations were "disturbed by change."¹⁴ When faced with the new ideas from the West, "these communities hesitated, worried, floundered, and endured."¹⁵

China had developed a "conservative and stable style of civilization" with a "remarkable uniformity" where strong Chinese families would "mold their members to the roles tradition demanded of each of them, generation after generation, no matter where the family might find itself."¹⁶ The Chinese "allowed their distrust of all things foreign to blind them."¹⁷ Chinese merchants "lacked any sort of independent spirit."¹⁸ The extreme study of Confucian classics "molded the rulers and leaders," and "completely closed their minds" to other ways of thinking.¹⁹ China suffered from a "smug self-satisfaction."²⁰

In India, the caste system "reinforced the normal human habit of sticking to familiar and well-tried ways."²¹ Also, "schooling in India was often defective, and graduates were usually more interested in getting a job in a government office than in interpreting western civilization to their own people or in reforming Hindu customs in the light of European ideas or examples."²² And in the nineteenth century, industry grew very slowly in India because of a "lack of will."²³

Moslems also had a hard time learning what was best. "Islamic thinkers turned their backs upon science and philosophy," and "almost ceased to concern themselves with anything foreign."²⁴ And "most Moslems felt deep doubts about trying to imitate the West. To do so ran against their deepest prejudices."²⁵

Japan became the major exception to the rule, for Japan accepted change based on western influences. Japanese were "open to new thoughts in a way that was not true in China."²⁶ In short, "Japan chose to borrow from the west and soon forged ahead."²⁷ An acceptance of western ways thus led to success.

But the transfer of new ideas to Japan is uniformly described as Japan's ability to "borrow" and "imitate"; words which are essentially submissive and negative in connotation. The Japanese would "imitate Chinese painting and literature."²⁸ Japanese Shinto "borrowed" from Christian and Buddhist rituals.²⁹

Threatened by the West in 1853, Japan "meekly agreed" to open itself to contact,³⁰ and then plunged into the future "by opening itself wide to imitation of and borrowings from the West."³¹

The transfer of new ideas to Europe is always described in positive terms, such as "discover" and "learn." Words such as "copy" and "imitate" are never used to describe change in Europe or the West. Europeans made the "discovery of the Roman law, which had remained continuously alive in Byzantium."³² The Europeans had a "recovery" of Greco-Roman science and philosophy, which the Greeks and Arabs "could pass on to them."³³ Europeans "took advantage of what they could learn from distant China, as well as from nearer regions and places, with reckless energy."³⁴ They had an "acquaintance" with Chinese technology.³⁵ Europeans "learned" about Chinese gunpowder and guns.³⁶ And, various chapter titles proclaim "The Great European Discoveries"; "Europe's Self-Transformation"; and "Europe's Achievements." The West became powerful through its "openness to change" and by "self-transformation."³⁷

Thus the rise of the West is treated as a glorious success story; as an exciting and heroic march forward into the modern world. Very little of the negative aspects of western expansion are described, nor are the anti-western beliefs of the other civilizations taken seriously. McNeill proclaims that the West offered the world beneficial change, but in the main the world remained too closed minded to accept the change peacefully. McNeill accepts only the Japanese as a relatively open people, but describes them as borrowers and imitators. In fact, *A History of the Human Community* essentially reflects a recent statement by McNeill: "We must, I think, admire those who pioneered the enterprise and treat the human adventure on earth as an amazing success story, despite all the suffering entailed."³⁸ There may be merit in being positive about human history, but McNeill treats only the West in a truly upbeat manner. Moreover, the basis for this glorification rests on material and military power, not on morality or goodness.

Open pride in European empire is insulting to the peoples who were dominated and often enslaved. Such a prideful attitude also reinforces a sense of western superiority held by some students, which has been demonstrated to me by the answers given on student exams. Commonly, in reply to "Why did the West become dominant?" my students too often point out western inventiveness, openness to change, and other alleged special western characteristics.

McNeill may fervently believe that the West deserves glorification, while the remainder of the world merits chastisement. And his vision of history is certainly compelling enough to deserve consideration. But an increasing number of talented works have challenged Eurocentrism, and a better textbook would enter into dialogue with some of these other points of view. Perhaps the scholar who best challenges McNeill's rise of the west theses is Janet Abu-Lughod, who believes that the East had already entered a period of decline before the Europeans began their takeover. The East was "a plum ripe for the taking," and "no special 'virtue' inhered in the conquerors."³⁹ The field of world history owes much to McNeill. But world history (in part because of him) has progressed, and Eurocentrism eventually will be out of fashion.

NOTES

¹See for example Allan David Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

²William A. Green, "Periodization in European and World History," *Journal of World History* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 41.

³William H. McNeill, *A History of the Human Community: Prehistory to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey, 1987).

⁴William H. McNeill, "The Rise of the West" after Twenty-Five Years," *Journal of World History* 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1990): 2.

⁵McNeill, *History of the Human Community*, p. 217.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 574.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 289.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 313.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 334.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 466.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 578.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 248-249.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 480.

²⁰Ibid., p. 483.

²¹Ibid., p. 128.

²²Ibid., p. 478.

²³Ibid., p. 593.

²⁴Ibid., p. 237.

²⁵Ibid., p. 47.

²⁶Ibid., p. 416.

²⁷Ibid., p. 578.

²⁸Ibid., p. 304.

²⁹Ibid., p. 484.

³⁰Ibid., p. 546.

³¹Ibid., p. 486.

³²Ibid., p. 287.

³³Ibid., p. 288.

³⁴Ibid., p. 313.

³⁵Ibid., p. 334.

³⁶Ibid., p. 349.

³⁷Ibid., p. 347.

³⁸McNeill, *"The Rise of the West" after Twenty-Five Years,* 3.

³⁹Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).