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Review of *Essays on Twentieth Century
History*

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Review by Stephen Wertheim, Columbia University

For those still teaching world history as a motley collection of essentialized, pre-modern ‘civilizations,’ there is no longer any excuse. *Essays on Twentieth-Century History*, the last in a trilogy of volumes edited by Michael Adas, exhibits several of the fine efforts historians have undertaken in the past decade to explain the recent roots of today’s seemingly globalized world.

The eight essays cover not just any aspect of the twentieth century but more precisely global phenomena unique to the “long twentieth century.” Only in the twentieth century did women worldwide identify and mobilize as women, Bonnie Smith writes. As Gabrielle Hecht and Paul Edwards show, nuclear and computer technology developed in mid-century according to Cold War political dictates. Cities began the century having lured one-sixth of the world population with the promise of jobs; by 2006, as Howard Spodek explains, cities housed half of humanity and were most characteristic of the developing world, with its vast urban slums. Other essays chart trends in world migration, environmental change, and human rights and humanitarian norms. Still others frame U.S. history and the two world wars in a global context. In all, the essays begin to convey the awesome depth, diversity, and speed of the century’s global transformations.

But that is also the problem. An endless number of phenomena are exclusive to the twentieth century, let alone the (indeterminately) long twentieth century. Why select these? If environmental change, why not demographic trends? If gender, why not race? If the United States, why not China? Europe? The global south? Where is religion? Economics? What about the end of empire and diffusion of the nation-state? Adas, while admitting that the topics he selected are not exhaustive, calls them “defining phenomena” of the twentieth century, in which he detects a “fundamental unity” (pp. 3, 8). This, however, presumes a definition of the century as a coherent historical epoch — no obvious thing — that he does not proffer and the essays seldom broach.

Indeed, can a long twentieth century be defined on a world scale? It is easy enough to trace a single phenomenon on such a scale, as these essays demonstrate. Conversely, it is often viable to define an entire century on smaller spatial scales, whether local, national, or regional, especially where contemporaries have a common consciousness of decisive breaks. But to define a *century* on a *world* scale? Major phenomena must rise and fall together, in coherent ways, over roughly one hundred years, spanning more or less the globe. If too many people are left out, the claim to globality becomes not only inaccurate

but also effacing. Enough ‘universal history’ has been written without leaving Königsberg. That is not to foreclose the possibility that a coherent global twentieth century might emerge, only to say that there need not be one. C.A. Bayly, among others, has made sophisticated arguments for a global nineteenth century lasting from 1780 to 1914, although European hegemony imposed much order on that epoch. So far, the best candidate for a long twentieth century is probably the period of global interconnections dating from the mid- to late nineteenth century, as Carl Guarneri suggests in this volume, following Michael Geyer and Charles Bright. Yet we might be living in this long twentieth century still today, unbeknownst to us. It could end up outstripping the bounds of a century, even a long one. Or change in such a way as to elevate, say, the 1970s from an intermediate position to a cornerstone of demarcation. If we must continue to refer to a “twentieth century” in world history, let us understand that we do not really mean it, that what we intend is to mark the beginnings of a period that interests us precisely because we think we are living through it now and therefore has a future and an ending we cannot foresee.

The issue of definition is not merely semantic. Absent a convincing organizing principle, *Essays* amounts to little more than the sum of its parts. Fortunately, that sum is substantial. But one wonders how these essays *could* speak to each other. The lack of shared, overarching problems is striking. Spodek compellingly compares cities under capitalism, communism, and colonialism, but this does not help readers understand Richard Tucker discuss the emergence of the environmental movement.

These essays therefore merit individual attention. A highlight is Jose Moya’s and Adam McKeown’s portrait of world migration. Mass migration was part and parcel of modernity, originating around the 1840s and embedded in broader global processes. Far from straightforwardly forging transnational identities subversive of national ones, Moya and McKeown argue, migration emerged from the very forces that constructed nationalism and nation-states. In the 1870s, control of migration began to be conferred on receiving nations as a sovereign right. Border control, privileging wealthy, educated incomers, became “one of the last and most significant institutions of systematic discrimination in the world” (p. 40).

Jean Quataert rightly emphasizes that human rights and humanitarian laws were recent historical inventions, not teleological culminations of moral principles everywhere. Most original in summarizing women’s critiques of human rights practices, she is alive to the paradoxes of international law, such as its legacy of humanizing conduct among ‘civilized’ states while rendering those deemed ‘uncivilized’ vulnerable to unregulated violence. But she understates the importance of the 1970s in elevating human rights to centrality in international

politics, perhaps because her focus on legal covenants is too formalistic to situate human rights and humanitarianism among political alternatives.

John Morrow Jr., in an excellent survey, affirms that the two world wars are aptly named. Not only fought around the globe, the world wars were rooted in global phenomena, including pan-ideologies and the quest for empire. Morrow's global framework allows him to redress the Eurocentrism of standard accounts without slighting Europe's importance. He notes, for example, how Britain's war against Japan in Southeast Asia was fought by troops drawn from British colonies in India and Africa; historians have marginalized this ferocious combat because Europeans were not involved.

Guarneri provides a trenchant, up-to-date historiographical review locating the United States in twentieth-century world history. Recent cross-pollination in the subfields of American and world history has proven fertile, he argues, but must avoid presenting the world's history as an extension of America's. Guarneri's chapter is packed with intriguing leads, such as the suggestion that at the mid-century height of U.S. power, Americans were in powerful ways more isolated and insulated from the world than they are today.

In its shortcomings, *Essays* reflects sizeable challenges for the subfield of world history at large — chiefly how to problematize the twentieth century and develop overarching narratives to which world historians can relate their work. So be it, for now. The incisive essays are a valuable resource for teachers and scholars alike.