

# THEMATIC APPROACH TO WORLD HISTORY

*Peter N Stearns, Ph.D.*

Traditional work in world history – the efforts of great historians like Herodotus or Ibn Khaldun—sought to encompass the essentials of the world’s past, as they knew it, in a single volume. As world history has revived as a field for teaching and research in our own day, it has most commonly been expressed through single textbooks – often rather large ones – or a classic survey course. These efforts remain vital: many students and readers will continue to benefit from efforts to present a whole picture.

As the field has matured, however, and particularly as specialized research has developed within a world history framework, a more thematic approach is also proving valuable. Particular aspects of the human experience can be examined, but with the benefit of a global framework, complete with appropriate comparisons and examinations of interregional contacts and crosscutting experiences.

The thematic approach to world history does not contradict a parallel commitment to larger surveys. In the long run, the surveys will improve as we learn more about particular facets of societies in the past. But the combination of world history context and thematic focus will also benefit more specialized research, not only in history but in other disciplines, where a grasp of the global experience will add greatly to knowledge about individual societies. Most obviously many specialties, such as the history of science, that have usually been examined largely within a Western framework can be dramatically enriched by the global focus.

The thematic approach is particularly important in allowing some of the most striking advances in historical understanding now to be blended with the commitment to a global approach. Over the past forty years historians have opened a host of new topics for historical research. They have explored gender, or childhood, or the experience of leisure; they have offered important new insights in the nature and service of early consumerism. Typically, and understandably, the first efforts in these new fields have developed within single societies – most often, in parts of Western Europe or the United States, though some pioneering work has also emerged for China and Russia. It has not always been easy to extend findings to a wider geographical or chronological framework. But in many cases scholarship is now sufficiently advanced to permit this expansion, and indeed in the long run the expansion is essential not only to enrich world history itself, but to permit the kinds of comparisons that will improve analysis even for individual societies.

Of course there are complexities in the thematic approach. Not all the possible themes are yet ready for world history coverage. For example, exciting new fields, such as the history of emotion or the history of the senses, do not yet boast enough work in various world regions to permit more global statements – though advances are in process. Even better-established topics suffer from deficiencies for particular regions. Work on the history of the family in the Middle East, for example, has not yet matched developments for other parts of Asia, not to mention the West or Latin America. In these cases a thematic effort can both pull together the general patterns that are fairly well established, while encouraging further research in future.

Despite some challenges, thematic work on world history advances steadily, as one way of making the global past more digestible, more applicable to interests in specific topics. The approach requires appropriate specialized focus, but it also depends on decisions concerning regional and chronological alignments in the world history field as a whole. Introductory essays in this section help present these first steps in the thematic approach.

## **Questions to Consider:**

1. Do standard world history time periods work better for some thematic topics than for others, and why?
2. What themes should be added to the available roster in world history?
3. What regions are most clearly established in world history overall, and which ones require more discussion? Do decisions about regions vary depending on the particular theme in question?