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# In Search of Contact Zones: Nations, Civilizations, and the Spaces of Culture

Arif Dirlik

This article argues against the identification of culture with units such as nations, civilizations and continents. It uses the examples of China, Asia and Islam to illustrate that all these supposed units of culture are marked by important internal differences that belie any claims to cultural homogeneity. Contact zones, it suggests, have historical and logical priority to such units, and should provide the point of departure for analysis of both commonality and difference. Rather than spreading out from some original core area, units such as nations and civilizations are the products of many local interactions, and are formed from the outside in as much as they are from the inside out.

In the discussion below, I question modernity's ways of mapping human societies in terms of civilizations, nations, and cultures, which appear in history and historical geography in their location in or relationship to some physical entity, ranging from trans- to sub-continental regions to national and sub-national territories. These mappings establish boundaries that are thought to express something about what they contain – more often than not a political unit that derives its identity from particular social and cultural practices, the one not clearly distinguished from the other. These practices are usually taken to radiate from a center somewhere within the boundaries, fading to near invisibility by the time they have reached the boundaries, or are checked in their progress either by the obstacles of physical geography, or encounter with another unit in search of *its* limits.

The encounter produces a boundary, but also a “contact zone,” which Mary Louise Pratt has used to conceptualize “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing

relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”(6)<sup>1</sup> We might add that the “colonial encounter” is only one among a multiplicity of possible encounters that shape the contact zone. In contemporary postcolonial criticism, which has stressed the interaction rather than the hierarchy aspects of the encounter, the interactions in the contact zones have been credited with the production of hybridities that point to the possibility of new social and cultural departures and formations.

Increasingly in recent years, there has been an unease about the mapping of the world in terms of modernity’s political and cultural units, provoked by the questioning of boundaries in globalization literature and postcolonial criticism, the one informed by developments in the global political economy, the other motivated by a desire to overcome the legacies of colonialism, most importantly in the realm of culture. Both in critical writing and educational practice, these mappings of the world and of its peoples and cultures increasingly appear as products of the political and cultural inventions of modernity that has conceived of the world in terms of nations, cultures and civilizations, but also imposed upon the world so conceived the ordering principles of geometry, endowing the products of a historical era with the staying power of natural endowment, and simultaneously naturalizing the relationship of human entities to the physical territories they occupy in one form or another. The same spatializations inform the ways in which we think the past, most importantly in the formation of cultures, traced back in most historical writing to the process of occupation of the territory – from a center out, as I remarked above. As contemporary processes of political economy call into question the stability of the political and cultural units in terms of which we have conceived the world, underlining their historicity, they find expression in intellectual life in a concern to explore different possibilities of conceiving space in social, political and cultural life, that better answer to the phenomena of contemporary life, but also compel us to rethink the past in different ways.

I suggest here that modernity’s ways of mapping the world in terms of nations, cultures and civilizations have served to provide with a historical geography forms of power created by modernity, but in the pro-

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<sup>1</sup> Pratt borrows the term from its use in linguistics, with reference to “contact languages.” She notes also that a similar conceptualization has been deployed in literature, in the reference to “contact literatures.”

cess have erased alternative ways of conceiving space, as well as complexities in the dynamics of "the production of space," as Henri Lefebvre put it, that might point to alternative ways of organizing society and culture. In many ways, it is arguable that modernity's ways of conceiving historical spaces put the cart before the horse in establishing that it was the whole that was the point of departure in reading the parts rather than the other way around: that it was a historical process of countless encounters between different spaces out of which wholes have been constituted. The constitution thus conceived has been a process not of the diffusion of social and cultural practices from some center but of dialectical encounters in many contact zones. From this perspective, the claims of the whole to priority represent as much a "strategy of containment," to use Fredric Jameson's term for the function of ideology (50-51), as some coherent reality (not to be confused with homogeneity or some identifiable essence), and are subject for the same reason to forces of destabilization produced by the very same encounters as they assume new historical guises. There is little reason, in rethinking global formations, why our notions of space should be limited by nations and civilizations, which then also shape the ways in which we conceive of cultural spaces.

Contact zones historically precede national and civilizational formations, or the formations of political economy, in the many and multifaceted encounters among humans that were crucial in generating new social and cultural practices, including, ultimately, nations and civilization. These encounters are not just between politically identifiable units, but involve the encounters of many social and cultural spaces. They are, therefore, overdetermined, and subject to the dialectics of the parts of which they are constituted. They need not be atomized to the level of the individual, because individual encounters take place within contexts that seek to reproduce themselves, creating the possibility of continuity, but also of disruption, depending on circumstances. It is not simply nations, civilizations and other social/political units identifiable as groups (including places) that have cultures. Social spaces represented by concepts with which we think the world – from ethnicity to gender to class, to name a few prominent ones – also compel us to think of cultural coherence as a crucial aspect in the constitution of social groups encompassed by the concept, from which the concept derives its plausibility. Culture needs to be conceived, in other words, not just in terms of physical, political and economic spaces, but also through the many en-



counters between social spaces. Such a complicated notion of contact zones would suggest also that localized encounters take historical if not logical priority in the formation of larger political and cultural units, and it is "hybridity" that generates notions of civilizational or national conceptions of cultural purity, rather than the other way around as is often assumed, even in so-called postcolonial critiques of essentialism.

We are also all aware by now that the organization of space in modern ways of mapping, backed by the authority of science, has erased alternative ways of representing space that gave priority to other conceptualizations of the relationship between humans and their social, political, economic and cultural environment. This organization of space continues to dominate our lives globally. We travel in maps delineated and named by the conquest of the world by Euro/American capitalism, and it takes much effort to think (or even to name) the pasts that already have been consumed by a modern historical consciousness. And yet, those alternatives were never completely erased, and emerge to the surface as that conquest, and the coloniality that is its legacy, are challenged in the name of right to difference. Needless to say, culture is central to validation of claims to difference, and the different epistemologies that are brought to bear against modernity's erasures (Tongchai; Deloria). There is a problem here, too, that renders culture elusive both as phenomenon and as a principle of mapping and historical explanation. Rendered into a weapon of struggles over identity and difference, culture becomes more questionable than ever as a principle of social and historical explanation. This perspective underlines the constructedness of culture, and draws attention to agency from lasting structural significance – even if the structure is conceived as ongoing reproduction. It is the perspective of what I have described elsewhere as Global Modernity, which is conceived at once as a negation and fulfillment of a colonial modernity, in which cultural identity is inextricably entangled in the political economy of a globalizing capitalism, and the world is divided, so to speak, by a commonality of interests. As an anthropologist of media writes:

difference can no longer be understood as a function of culture. Difference is no longer so much a measure of the distance between two or more bounded cultural worlds; rather, we may now understand it as a potentiality, a space of indeterminacy inherent to all processes of mediation, and therefore inherent to the social process per se. (Mazzarella 360)

This, too, calls for new ways of conceiving space, especially social and cultural space.

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I would like to illustrate these rather abstract observations through a discussion of problems in the spatialization of the world in the practice of world history, and in the area bases around which we have organized our study and understanding of the world. These practices, while specialized in their realms, are nevertheless also closely related to the popular understanding of the world, as the two share a common language and common ideological assumptions in the delineation of the world and of its spaces. I will first suggest the necessity of the deconstruction of the spaces in terms of which we conceive the world, and follow that up by an alternative conceptualization that is also important for the ways in which we spatialize cultures, and understand their dynamics.

Historiographically speaking, what makes world histories based on conventional spatialities of nations or civilizations (or cultures, as they are sometimes described euphemistically), or even world-systems, seem retrograde these days is that these spatialities have become increasingly questionable in the present, raising questions about their deployment in the past. This is by no means to state that they are irrelevant politically, intellectually or historiographically. What is in question is whether they are autonomous subjects of history, or subjects to history themselves, with all the temporal and spatial implications of such subjection. Let me illustrate by referring to some problems in the study of China, Asia and Islam, corresponding respectively to issues of nation, continent and civilization. I will take up issues of world-system analysis in the course of these illustrations. I choose these three because they have been of concern to me in my work, but also because they play a major part in contemporary geopolitics.

The "idea" of China has acquired considerable complexity in recent years, presenting unprecedented challenges in the writing and teaching of Chinese history. The complexity itself is not novel; I derive the term, "idea of China," from the title of a book by Andrew March, published three decades ago. China as an imagined entity that has assumed different characteristics over time has been the subject of many a splendid

study, from Raymond Dawson's *The Chinese Chameleon* to Harold Isaacs' *Scratches on Our Minds*. The fact that such studies are still called for, and produced, may also alert us to continued resistance among the general public (here, or in China), as well as in scholarship, to viewing China historically.

The present presents its own challenges. The knowledge of changing images of China was not accompanied in the past by any radical questioning of the realities of China, or of being Chinese. Until only a generation ago, the dominant historical paradigm identified China with the boundaries of the so-called "Mainland China," saw in the unfolding of the past the formation-in its more culturalist guises, articulation-of an identifiable "Chineseness," and viewed regions and regionalism as legacies to be overcome in the process of nation-building. China in this paradigm was not just a nation, it was a civilization, with a "great tradition" continuous from the earliest times to the present, possibly matched only by India – "five-thousand years of civilization," as the common cliché would have it. It is fair to say that for all their differences otherwise, Chinese and non-Chinese historians shared in this common paradigm.

The culturalism – and the clichés – persist, but they face new challenges, not by phenomena that are necessarily novel in themselves, but by older phenomena that have been given a new kind of recognition. Terms such as "Greater" or "Cultural" China that have become commonplaces of contemporary geopolitics implicitly repudiate the identification of the physical boundaries of "China" or "Chineseness" with the Mainland. Greater China brings in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the populations of Chinese origin in Southeast Asia, while Cultural China is global in scope, in its reference to a so-called Chinese diaspora that somehow retains a fundamental cultural Chineseness against the very forces of history (Tu; Wang; *China Quarterly*). Such a notion of Chineseness carries with it strong racial presuppositions. The new visions of China and Chineseness are at once imperial in spatial pretensions, and deconstructive in their consequences. Spatial expansion of notions of Chineseness brings historical differences into the very interior of the idea of China, calling into question the idea of China as the articulation of a national or civilizational space marked either by a common destiny or a homogeneous culture. The "China Reconstructs" of an earlier day has been transformed in the title of a more recent study into "China Deconstructs," foregrounding the emergent importance of regional dif-

ferences against pretensions to national unity (Goodman and Segal). And this is not just the doing of non-Chinese scholars of China, as the most important challenges to the idea of national or civilizational unity and homogeneity come from Taiwan and Hong Kong, bent on asserting their local identities against Beijing's imperial ambitions over territories deemed to be "historically" Chinese. Ideologically speaking, however, it seems to me that the more important effect of these new conceptualizations of Chinese spaces is in fact the questioning of those historical claims, that the history of China may be grasped in terms of an expansion from the Central Plains outward when it may be exactly the reverse: that looking from the borderlands in is crucial to understanding the formation of so-called Chinese culture, which may be understood as a unified culture only in the sense of variations on common themes.<sup>2</sup> There is an important recognition here that earlier notions of Chinese culture – textbook as well as popular notions – identified Chinese culture with a textual culture, and textual culture with a national identity as Chinese, meaning mostly the culture of the elite. Such identification has done much to disguise the complexity of Eastern Asian cultural formations that has persisted despite political colonization from imperial centers, which also would suggest that the cultural formations of this region are best grasped in ecumenical terms, rather than by the extension to the past of claims of recent origin, most importantly nationalism.

I do not need to belabor here that similar problems plague the very idea of Asia, which is even more obviously a creation of modern Europeans (even if the term itself goes back to the ancient Greeks or Mesopotamians). It was through Jesuit maps that Chinese of the Ming Dynasty found themselves in Asia, and even that did not matter much until the nineteenth century when knowledge of geographical location ap-

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<sup>2</sup> This perspective, too, is not entirely novel. It is a tribute to the power of the idea of a "middle kingdom," possibly even more powerful among Euro/Americans than among Chinese themselves, that persuasive evidence of cultural formation through interactions stretching across Asia has not succeeded in dislodging it from historical or political analysis. Wolfram Eberhard, Owen Lattimore and Edward H. Schafer stand out as three of the foremost scholars drawing attention to this perspective. For more recent noteworthy examples, see, Liu, Sen, Holcombe. It is interesting that the last two works, devoted to demonstrating the importance of commercial and religious interactions in producing the societies and regions in question, nevertheless continue to project upon the past the modern vocabulary of nations and regions (such as India and China), which attests, I think, to the power of modern ways of mapping history, as well as to the dilemmas presented by the very vocabulary of historical and cultural analysis.



peared as a necessity of political survival for the Qing.<sup>3</sup> Until the modern period, knowledge of what passed for Asia was knowledge of limited spaces produced by states but also by merchants and travelers. It is fair to say that Marco Polo's Asia was not Ibn Battuta's Asia was not Rabban Sauma's Asia or, going back a millennium in time, Faxian or Xuanzang's Asia (Dawson; Dunn; Rossabi; Chau Ju-kua).<sup>4</sup> Whether we speak of pre-modern world systems or political states, Asia consisted of localized spaces – either for outsiders or for insiders. Notions of inside and outside are themselves products of modern delineation of spaces; accounts of human motions such as those cited above mark passage from one place to another (kingdoms, cities, Buddhist monasteries, etc.), but, as far as I am aware, not one speaks of the crossing of continental boundaries. These spaces were endowed with different significations, moreover, depending on the motives and activities that produced them, so that the same spaces carried multiple meanings – all of them contrasting with the reductionist homogeneity of modern "scientific" mapping.

The multiple "world-systems" Janet Abu-Lughod has identified for 13th Century Eurasia suggests some overarching order of world-systems and their interactions in the delineation of spaces stretching from one end to the other of Eurasia, including large parts of Africa. It is important, however, not to allow the abstract structures suggested by motions of commodities to cover over and erase these other spaces that coexisted with, and created perturbations, within and across the boundaries of world-systems – and contributed to their structuring. It is even more important to underline here that world-systems, conceived in terms of national or civilizational entities such as the Mongol, Arabic, Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires, or Song-Yuan-Ming China, or the kingdoms of the Indian subcontinent, should not be allowed to cover over the immense differences within the territories designated by these political entities. Abu-Lughod's preferred term, significantly is "circuits," referring to networks and their nodes rather than entire surfaces (ch. 11). How these "networks" contributed to the formation of the

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see Dirlik (1996). It was the Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, who introduced "Asia" to Ming thinkers. It is equally interesting that the "idea of Asia" was largely forgotten until it was revived again in the 19th century, this time as a serious geopolitical problem.

<sup>4</sup> Chu-fan-chi was first published in 12th/13th centuries. For the modern, scientific erasure of alternative mappings, see Tongchai (1994) These mappings, needless to say, are very much entangled in questions of national, class, gender and ethnic power relations.

political entities indicated by those terms is a fundamental question that has priority over the more common practice of describing the networks in terms of the political entities – which is putting the formation before some of the crucial processes that went into its making.

These complexities in the notion of Asia persist to this day, ultimately undermining confidence in the possibility of defining such an entity, or delineating its boundaries. The appearance or re-appearance of a discourse of Asian values since the 1980s, in its identification of those values with values that are at best national or regional in origin, only goes to underline the fragmentedness of the notion of Asia. The idea is to be understood at best as a utopian ideal and, therefore, itself another mode of constructing Asia, that has many a hurdle to overcome for its realization. On the other hand, the very effort is indicative of the historical reality and significance the idea of Asia has acquired regardless of who initially constructed it, where, and when. I am not referring here only to the persistence of Orientalist notions of Asia in Euro-America or the reification of Asia in elite and state ideologies in Asia itself, but to more radical efforts to find “Asian” alternatives to Euro-American hegemony that acknowledge the fragmentedness of Asia, and seek on that basis to produce a more dynamic conception that brings unity and difference together dialectically (*Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5-6).

The third case I would like to use by way of illustration is Islam. It is not just George Bush, Samuel Huntington, Benjamin Barber, evangelical Christians or fundamentalist Moslems who reify Islam, taking it out of history as a civilization or a deviation from it. In the aftermath of 9/11, a hue and cry went up all over US campuses about the need to find out more about Islam. Those who led the demand were usually liberal scholars, including specialists on Islam, or various Islamic societies. In another example of identifying a “civilization” with a text, the University of North Carolina even made selections from the Koran into a required assignment for the orientation of incoming freshmen, and got sued in the process. Within my immediate circles, everyone wanted to bring an Islam specialist into the faculty; few thought or said anything about an Afghan, a Central Asian, or a Saudi historian who might have something to say about concrete circumstances that produce terrorists: struggles within Islamic societies over political, cultural and social differences, the entanglement of those struggles within a history of imperialism, and resentments bred currently by US colonialism and imperialism, including cultural imperialism, against a modernity dominated



by the same powers that have colonized the many worlds of Islam for more than a century, and continue to do so with the complicity of native élites. Peter van der Veer has written of the importance of nationalism in the religious revival in India. The relationship between nationalism and a civilization conceived in religious terms is also very much at issue here. It is a contradictory relationship, a relationship of unity and opposition, that is further exacerbated by class, gender and ethnic divisions which are as important in so-called Islamic societies as in others (Dirlik). And yet these problems are routinely ignored in the reification of Islam, when it is clear that such reification no longer serves the purposes, as it might have a millennium earlier, of unifying either a divided world of Islamic societies or their historical "Other," the equally divided world of Christianity.

I do not need to remind readers of the historicity of Islam, in the sense both of its temporal transformations and its spatial diversity. Even in Samuel Huntington's delineation of civilizations, Islam stands out for the impossibility of locating it within identifiable boundaries. Aziz Al-Azmeh's *Islams and Modernities*, to cite one outstanding example, has made a cogent case for the diversity both of Islam, and Islamic modernities. Where factionalism is not suppressed by the domination of one or another sect, Islam is divided into competing and conflicting factions, as is quite evident in the tragic case of Iraq, or the competition among sects that has marked the recent Islamic resurgence in Turkey (Yavuz). The evidence of history, once again, seems unable to overcome the weight of established traditions – not traditions of Islam, but traditions of scholarship and popular imagination.

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My rehearsal of the historicity, boundary instabilities, and internal differences – if not fragmentations – of nations, civilizations and continents is intended to underline the historiographically problematic nature of world histories organized around such units, which in turn is justified by the attribution to them of some cultural unity and historical continuity, accompanied, in most instances, by location in some identifiable locality. These entities are products of efforts to bring political or conceptual order to the world-political and conceptual strategies of containment. This order is achieved only at the cost of suppressing alterna-

tive spatialities and temporalities, however, as well as covering over processes that went into their making. A world history organized around these entities itself inevitably partakes of these same suppressions and cover-ups.

It may not be very surprising that as global forces, including forces of empire, produce economic and cultural processes, and human motions that undermine modernity's strategies of containment, we have witnessed a proliferation of spaces, as well as of claims to different temporalities. Perhaps it is living in a state of flux that predisposes intellectual life presently to stress motion and process over stable containers; traveling theorists are given to traveling theories, as cultural critics from Edward Said to James Clifford have suggested by word or example. What is important is that we are called upon to face an obligation to view the past differently, to open up an awareness of what was suppressed in a historiography of order, and take note of the importance of human activity, including intellectual and cultural activity, in creating the world – performance in the sense both of accomplishing the world and representing it, each one an indispensable condition of the other.

At the same time, in a world that seems to be caught up in a maelstrom created by forces that are productive at once of homogenization and heterogenization, history seems to be receding rapidly into the past, even as the past returns to make claims on the present – “resurgence of history,” as the French writer Jean-Marie Guehenno puts it in his study of the decline of the authority of the nation-state under the assault of forces of globalization and the resurgence in response of a consciousness of the local. The world of Global Modernity witnesses a return of civilizational and cultural claims, bolstered, ironically, by the same destabilizing forces of transborder ethnicities and diasporas, and calling for alternative epistemologies and alternative claims to historical consciousness. This is the case not just with different civilizations, such as they are. Different epistemological claims mark cultural struggles over the future of the same civilization, as in the resurgence of biblical attacks in the United States on science and history – as in the bible-inspired history of the world written by James Ussher, *Annals of the World*, popular among evangelicals and, apparently, an inspiration behind the proliferating Creation museums and theme parks across the United States. So-called “culture wars” in the US since the 1980s point to the cultural contradictions that need to be suppressed in order to keep alive the myths of cultural homogeneity in civilizational or national

units of social organization. These contradictions mark encounters not only between different nations, nationalities or ethnic units, but also between classes, genders and races, with the different social, political and cultural spaces they imply.

One historian of China has written cogently if somewhat simplistically of "rescuing history from the nation" (Duara). Cogent because the "nationalization" of history has indeed been of primary significance in shaping understanding of the spaces of history, if not the denial of history as such. A political idea to which the legitimization of history is crucial, the nation has sought to disguise its historicity by projecting itself across the knowable past – a kind of colonization of history that corresponds to nation-formation itself as a colonizing process. From a historiographical perspective, a national perspective on the past, including the national past, is woefully inadequate, as some of the most important forces in the shaping of the past transcend national boundaries. The same may be said of a world history that is conceived in terms of nations and civilizations.

The denial of the nation is also simplistic, however, because it does not recognize that while the nation itself is historical, which may make the national space into an "artifice of history," it nevertheless carries all the force of a historical reality. We may dismiss nations, civilizations and continents, and much else besides, as constructs of one way or another, but there is no denying that despite all the criticism, they refuse to go away, partly because of their continued importance in the realities of culture and politics, and partly because of the important place they hold in the political and cultural unconscious, including the unconscious of scholars, who still seem to think nothing of terms like "uniting East and West," or "Asian perspectives," to cite two recent examples from my own campus. Besides, the space of the nation is not the only space that history needs to be rescued from, and not all phenomena lend themselves easily to understanding outside the context of the nation. Some may even suffer a distortion when forced into transnational or translocal frameworks; issues of democracy, citizenship and civil society readily come to mind. This qualification may be especially important when we consider the public pedagogical functions of history.

The issue here is not merely national against transnational or world history, but the proliferation of space that attends the de-privileging of conventional modes of conceiving of historical spaces. The very deconstruction of national or civilizational spaces, in other words, raises the

question of how to reconstruct history spatially and temporally, if that is indeed a desirable goal. Why put Humpty Dumpty back together again, especially after seeing how much mischief he has done? In many ways, this is a fundamental question facing the practice of world history, which simply re-spatializes the past, not through a radical reconsideration of the spaces of history, but simply by rearranging existing spaces from a perspective that supposedly transcends them all. An anarchist would see right away the consolidation of hegemony that may be at work in such a rearrangement.

Is there any way to bring these critical perspectives into history, in this case, world history, without falling into some kind of postmodern and postcolonial cynicism about past ways of doing history? By way of conclusion, I would like to put forth three considerations.

First, a distinction is necessary, I think, between world-wide and transnational, as the two point to different spatialities.<sup>5</sup> The transnational is not the same as world-wide. World-wide as concept can still accommodate such units as nations, cultures and civilizations as principles of organization. What makes "transnational" radical in its implications is its emphasis on processes over settled units. More importantly, perhaps, the other side of challenging national history from supranational perspectives is to bring to the surface sub-national histories of various kinds. The radical challenge of transnational history itself lies in its conjoining of the supra- and the sub (or intra)-national – which calls forth an understanding of transnational as translocal, with all its subversive implications historiographically and politically. If national history serves as an ideological "strategy of containment," the containment of the translocal – as process or structure – is of immediate and strategic importance as it bears directly on the determination and consolidation of national boundaries. The translocal presents challenges that are quite distinct from the multi-cultural, which has been attached to world history, as one of its political and cultural goals. The difference may be the difference between placing national history in the perspective of the world versus abolishing it (or at least cutting it down to size among other histories). Translocal also draws attention to "contact zones," in the sense suggested above, which serve as crucial locations for the production of cultures and cultural spaces.

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<sup>5</sup> For examples of transnationality, by no means bound to projects of "world history," see Karl, Esenbel, Osterhammel, Richards, and Weaver. Most works viewed as world history should, less misleadingly, be described as transnational or translocal histories.



Second, therefore, it may be very important to reconceive nations and civilizations not as homogeneous units but as historical ecumenes.<sup>6</sup> This is readily evident in the case of civilizations conceived in terms of religions, from which the term derives. The volume edited by Michael Adas, *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, provides a good example. Jerry Bentley suggests in a recent paper that an ecumenical approach is necessary to overcoming the Eurocentrism of world history. His intention is most importantly ethical. The concept of "ecumene," however, may also be translated into a way to grasp spatialities. The idea of the ecumenical may be applied productively to regions, civilizations and continents, among other large entities, as well as to nations; the important issue being the foregrounding of commonalities as well as differences, and recognizing a multiplicity of spatialities within a common space marked not by firm boundaries but by the intensity and concentration of interactions, which themselves are subject to historical fluctuations. Such an understanding of ecumene accords with the term's etymological origins, meaning the inhabited or inhabitable world, which is how peoples from the Greeks to Europeans to the Chinese conceived of the world, which did not encompass the world as we understand it, but referred only to the world that mattered. It was modernity that invented one world out of the many worlds of earlier peoples, and even that has been thrown into doubt by so-called globalization that unifies the known globe, but also fragments it along fractures old and new.

If I may illustrate by an example from the part of the world I study, there has been much talk in recent years of a Confucian or Neo-Confucian Eastern Asia, and, of course, Confucianism long has been held to be a hallmark of a Chinese civilization that holds the central place of hegemony in Eastern Asia. It is interesting to contemplate when Confucius became Chinese; when he was rendered from a Zhou Dynasty sage into one of the points of departure for a civilization conceived in national terms. When the Japanese, Koreans and Vietnamese adopted Confucianism for their own purposes, all the time claiming their own separate identity, did they do so to become part of the Sung or Yuan or Ming, whom they resisted strenuously, or because they per-

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<sup>6</sup> "Ecumene" understood as "areas of intense and sustained cultural interaction." This definition is offered by John and Jean Comaroff (294) on the basis of works by Ulf Hannerz and Igor Kopytoff.

ceived in Confucianism values of statecraft and social organization that were lodged in the texts of a tradition that was more a classical than a Chinese tradition, and which unfolded differently in these different states?<sup>7</sup> This is what I have in mind when I refer to commonality as well as difference, even radical difference. It could be complicated further by the extension of the argument to the entanglement of societies in a multiplicity of ecumenes. What we call China itself did not simply grow from the inside out, radiating out from a Yellow River plains core, but was equally a product in the end of forces that poured in from the outside in, from different directions, producing translocal spaces. These interactions of the inside and the outside produced the China we have come to know, which once formed, would contain them, and push their memories to the margins. Their recovery toward the center of historical inquiry recasts the history of China in more ways than one as I noted above.

In underlining the overdetermination of parts that resist dissolution into homogenized wholes, my goal is not to do away with history by rendering it into a conglomeration of micro-histories. I merely wish to illustrate what a radical and thoroughgoing historicism might lead to. As Charles Holcombe has argued, what we call Eastern Asia, no less than the nations it contains, is a product of historical interactions that produced the region as we have come to know it. And if it has a beginning, sometime around the turn of the first millennium AD, there is no reason to think that the region, as we have come to know it, should be invested with the longevity of eternity. The region is in the midst of radical transformations once again in our day as its "global connections" create new kinds of differences to disturb the variety of commonalities that have given it shape in recent centuries (Holcombe ch. 4).

The paradigm (or metaphor, if you like) of ecumene is one that may be used productively in many cases. One of its advantages is that it also

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<sup>7</sup> For the most up-to-date, comprehensive and illuminating discussions of these issues, see Elman, Duncan, and Ooms. Noting the anachronism of using the term "China," with reference to the past, a recent work notes that, "... in traditional times, the people who participated in this core civilization did not think of it as 'Chinese' civilization – in contrast to other alternative, non-Chinese civilizations – so much as simply the universal standard of civilization." (Holcombe 10). The habit, and the limitations of vocabulary are so powerful, however, that Holcombe himself cannot resist referring to the civilization in question repeatedly as "Chinese civilization"!



allows for different parts of the ecumene to react differently – and autonomously – with parts of different ecumenes. Regions may in some instances serve similar functions, but an ecumene conceived not in terms of physical proximity but social and cultural constructions may also be deployed across vast distances as, for example, with the crucial interconnections between the Sinic and the Indic ecumenes that played such an important part in the formation of the areas we have been discussing. The socialist and revolutionary movements of the twentieth century provided similar interconnections. Incorporation of the region within a capitalist economy and colonialism created new relationships within the region, and in its relationships to what is “outside.” What long-term legacies they may have left remains to be seen. In our day, the connections that criss-cross the region and beyond extend globally once again, as migrant populations from the region spread across the globe.

The third consideration involves the worlding of world history – its relationship to living in a world that is as much about difference as it is about sameness or commonality. It may be that a day will come when all around the world we will conceive of the world – and its history – in identical ways. Until that day arrives, however, we need to be attentive at all times to the limited standpoints and visions from which we think and write history, regardless of how global or universalistic we may wish to be. Societies around the world past and present have thought the world, and its history, differently, which must enter as a fundamental consideration into any practice of world history. This requires, I think, that world history can be written ultimately only as historiography – as an account not just of different conceptualizations of the world, but also of different ways of conceiving the past. This needs to be undergirded by a consciousness of our own place in time, a self-reflexiveness that serves as a reminder that we are not at the end but somewhere along the course of history, and that the very next generation may demand a different kind of history than the one(s) that our imagination allows. Awareness of spatial and temporal restrictions is crucial, I think, to any critical practice of world history. For similar reasons, it may be impossible to take up the study of culture without a critical sense of culture itself – beginning with the cultural premises and conditions of studying the world. This calls for an awareness that cultural formations and processes may not be grasped independently of their entanglements in social, economic and political processes, among others, that mediate, and are mediated by what we may view as cultural practices.

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