"'The World & the West' in the West: Teaching Modern World History at UC Santa Cruz, 1978-1998"

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It is a pleasure to have the opportunity of joining in this discussion and celebration of the great influence Philip Curtin has had on the teaching of world history in this country. To explain his influence on my teaching, I'll begin by saying that I have been the beneficiary of Phil's work for no less than forty years, since I was a mediochre senior history major, aspiring to be a professor, at Oberlin College in 1958. My teacher George Kren, then a recent University of Wisconsin graduate, took note of the curious fact that I was trying to study Chinese, Southeast Asian and every other kind of history excepting that of the U.S. and Europe on which Oberlin's curriculum was then firmly focussed; and he showed me a brochure for the new graduate program in Comparative Tropical History at Wisconsin. From then on I never wanted to continue my studies anywhere else. Having been turned down in my first application, I applied again every other year until on the fourth try (having spent the intervening years as a student of history and a rural community development worker in Latin America), I was admitted, and with a fellowship that made it possible to accept.

Those years abroad had been critical for my education, convincing me that poor people in poor countries had histories that were as interesting and important as any others -- something that none of my teachers up to then appeared to have understood -- and that these histories should be studied by historians and taught to Americans. I'd guessed already that this would probably require forging new tools, drawing on new sources, and developing new ways of telling history along the way; and the conviction that all of

that was possible was sustained for me by the very existence of Phil Curtin's pioneering program, far away in the North.

When I went to Madison as a "re-entry" student with language skills, considerable field experience and a family to support, I tackled that long-awaited opportunity with great zeal and determination. Coming from a leftist and activist background and descended from preachers, I had a tendency to look for the moral lessons and the practical political uses of history; and I always thought of myself as an apprentice teacher first, a public citizen second, and a scholar third -- though thanks largely to Phil Curtin I soon came to love scholarship, and have practiced it erratically ever since as a sort of consuming hobby for which there is never enough time, while making my living as a teacher.

With this mindset I was purposeful from the beginning about watching my teachers at work, and making notes for myself about what they did that I could emulate, and what I would do differently when I got to doing the job on my own. In Phil's case this created an extraordinarily productive dynamic, because on the one hand he presented a vision of the global past that was astounding, compelling and subversive of existing paradigms; and he did so wonderfully. On the other hand, it seemed to me always that he was "soft on imperialism," complacent about the rise of capitalism and the damage it had done to the world. So while entranced by his pedagogy, I would also sit there muttering to myself about how to improve upon it.

Since Latin America was my principal and Southeast Asia my secondary field as a graduate student, I spent more time in Madison with the three very teacherly and supportive Latin Americanists from whom I learned a great deal, and with the Southeast Asianist John Smail, than I did with Phil Curtin. With Phil I did only the World and the West course and one topical seminar, an unforgettable exploration in truly splendid company, of social mobility in slave societies. I did put in some time as research

assistant for his Alantic Slave Trade project, and that allowed me to watch him at work for a bit at his scholarship.

But in both style and approach to teaching, Phil Curtin and John Smail were my principal mentors. It was they who persuaded me by example that no matter what the particular subject of historical inquiry may be, the whole of human experience in the world as a natural environment is its context. Because of Phil Curtin my house is full today of tens of thousands of 5x8 cards and note slips and xeroxed articles on every subject under the sun. Because of him I have understood that "expertise" is not the sine qua non of intellectual work, and that given a couple of days in the library a serious history teacher ought to be able to deliver a cogent talk on most any historical subject. Because of him I believe to this day that the proper way to conduct a seminar course in history is to have a really interesting topic for comparative study, get everybody to do some common reading that is conceptually rich and provocative, have everybody dig into the primary and secondary sources on a well-focussed topic as exhaustively as possible in the time available -- and then to have them write bigger papers than they thought they had in them, distribute all papers to everybody for constructive criticism, and then rewrite those papers before the end of the term. Because of Phil Curtin too, I've spent a lot of my life trying to bone up on arcane subjects like epidemiology, tropical forest botany and zoology, limnology, ethnology, theology and missiology, in order to be able to write a modest book of history on the early modern history of the Brazilian Amazon.

In 1971 I got my first and and as it turned out only teaching job at the new Merrill College of the University of California in Santa Cruz. The other Third World historian there was Middle Easternist Terry Burke, my close friend and colleague from the start, whose more traditional training at Notre Dame and Princeton had been focussed first on Europe, and then on Arabic language and Islamic studies and early 20th-century Morocco. His background was very

different from mine; but we shared the conviction that history-teaching has a moral dimension and a political purpose. Terry admired Marshall Hodgson (whose editor and interpreter he has since become); and he was good friends with world-historian Ross Dunn, another product of the Wisconsin program; but he always claims that I aroused his enthusiasm for world history by talking about my experiences in Madison.

A few years and many hours of talk later, emboldened by Phil's having given me a copy of his lecture notes for the epoch-making "World and the West" course as a farewell present when I defended my dissertation in 1974, Terry and I decided to develop a world history course of our own. Rather than tackle from the start the really difficult problems of making this into an introductory course (for students who generally arrive in the university, at least nowadays in California, with very little prior knowledge of either history or world geography), we decided on a capstone course that was designed to help smart juniors and seniors integrate what they had learned in other courses on modern history and the social sciences. This was "The World and the Imperialist West," which we launched with fanfare, a respectable enrollment, and confidence in its revolutionary potential, in 1977 or 1978. (During the Reagan years, the sober-minded Terry, with a weather-eye to the market, renamed our course "The Making of the Modern World," under which banner it navegates to this day).

Merrill College had been established to organize undergraduate education around the study of the Third World and its relationship to the United States. It had a small, young interdisciplinary faculty. The traditions of the profession weighed on us like a feather; and nobody told us what to teach. (The institution also did not, as it turned out, reward young teachers for bold innovations in pedagogy; nor had we any idea of how to make of our enterprise a durable academic institution; and in our chaotic Santa Cruz structure, no sound initiative was safe from the turning of the wheel!) But Merrill was a politically lively, intellectually

stimulating place, a self-conscious citadel of anti-imperialism in an astoundingly multiethnic state, for about a third of whose inhabitants the Third World was home. California was different from the East & Midwest in having many more Asians than African-Americans, and many more Latin Americans than both of these combined. In the years since we designed our course, it has in fact become the first state in which White people are in the minority. The Vietnam War was just ending; everybody around us was following events in Chile, Central America, Southern Africa, the Middle East and so on. At Merrill we had an introductory core course called "Social Change in the Third World" and an activist student body that seemed as if it was sure to respond well to our project. In that heady environment, we expected that our radically innovative course might soon establish itself as a part of the core curriculum of our college, and of our department.

Getting started was hard in one way during the late 1970s, because despite the good work being done at Wisconsin, the profession (and our colleagues in history at UCSC in particular) were not at all ready for this approach to the study of history. We were welcome to offer such a course if we liked; but even though we were committed by that time to offering quite a bit of non-Western history at Santa Cruz (maybe a third of the total number of courses), to try and organize a specialty in world history, and to invite both our students and our colleagues to take such a thing seriously, proved to be a bit too much.

In the first place the college system at UC Santa Cruz underwent a tremendous battering in the late 1970's, and most of its unique features (including the possibility for organizing an intellectual community of faculty and students around something like the study of the Third World and its relationship to the United States) went out the window. The college core course and other residual features of the original vision remained; but faculty energies were for the most part refocussed on career advancement within

traditional departments. This was the end of the idea of our course as a core offering for students in Merrill College.

Shortly after launching our undergraduate course, Terry and I took the lead in instituting an M.A. program in Comparative World History that was built around it. This seemed to us to be a way to put our small institution on the map as a place for training historians for the 21st century; and we did succeed in attracting a small number of excellent students to that program over the period of some five years, among them Helen Wheatley who is with us here today. The students throve; and they produced theses of a very high quality; but the two colleagues who had initially joined and seemed willing to work on us on this project did not in the end stick with it; and the remainder always viewed it with suspicion.

The result was that after a few years' time the Department moved to cancel our innovative graduate program, and replace it with a more conventionally conceived PhD. program centered on Europe and later the United States. So the graduate and undergraduate teaching of world history at Santa Cruz has been centered for twenty years on the "Making of the Modern World" course alone, and on the small graduate seminar that is associated with it; and the few graduate students who are interested in world history are encouraged to take those courses and prepare it as a teaching field. I was very discouraged by these set-backs, and withdrew for a decade to do my own world-history teaching in the context of Latin American and Southeast Asian history courses; but Terry Burke soldiered on with "The Making of the Modern World"; and in recent years I have rejoined him in offering it with enormous pleasure and satisfaction.

There were few models available to us in the late 1970's for designing our course; and none seemed anywhere nearly as satisfactory to us as Curtin's was. No textbook seemed adequate to our needs; and we didn't know enough between us about the history of most of the world to strike out on our own. So we

worked with Phil's syllabus, and often enough with his very lecture notes, while getting our bearings at the start; and for this reason a good many pieces of it are with us still. We were obliged to cram his semester-length courses into our quarters; but at the same time we sought to stretch it. The World and the West was not really a world history course at all; and we hoped to make it more of one, without abandoning the great strength of its thematic approach to the subject. We thought that Phil had privileged the commercial exchanges and played down the cultural exchanges too much; and that by focussing on frontier interactions in the early modern portion, he had largely ignored the principal cultures and polities. But at the same time we too eschewed the chronological "civilizations" approach, and the Eurocentrism, that appeared to dominate all the world history textbooks. We steeped ourselves in McNeill and Boxer and Parry and Braudel, and later in Stavrianos and especially in Al Crosby. But in the end, though making considerable use of their stories we did not follow any of these very far in their view of the broader outlines of the making of the modern world.

A Merrill colleague was a student of Immanuel Wallerstein's; so we were encouraged by discussions with him to think about the rise of capitalism rather than the expansion of Europe as the main story, even before Wallerstein's first volume appeared. But in the face of that we retained the historian's skepticism about tidy systems, and the Third World historian's even deeper skepticism about the idea of cores and peripheries. Eric Wolf later on seemed largely to confirm our approach, but in the end did not seem to us satisfactory as a text for students. Where were the people? Where was the history, in Wallerstein and Wolf. Later we expected graduate students to familiarize themselves with all of these writers; but we could not build our course around any of them.

So we followed Curtin in focussing on detailed case studies while trying to borrow piecemeal or develop our own schematic representations of the patterns and big picture, inviting our

students to join in that process and avoiding getting too attached to any scheme. A productive tension between Terry's versions of both halves of the course and mine is that he tends to "macroize" more, and reach for the comprehensive explanation; whereas I tend to "microize" and expect students to get caught up in the stories themselves, and I either work in the patterns or save the explanations for later on. Both of us, nevertheless, have sought to ground our stories as Phil had done in Africa Remembered, though I think not so much in the classroom, in the concrete experiences of ordinary people. This in turn has led us both into thinking about social biography in colonial and neo-colonial contexts, and eventually to assembling the Struggle and Survival books that both of us have edited to open windows for students in our more regional courses on the broader patterns of world historical experience.

We wanted to move beyond the white guilt and sometimes perfunctory anti-imperialism of the Vietnam War years, and responded with enthusiasm to Curtin's imagining of the vital interconnections between societies, his projection so to speak of Hodgson into the southern hemisphere. He showed us that the Atlantic slave trade story was more complicated and more African than previously imagined. He fascinated us with the details of the Indian Ocean world of trade. Both of these subjects are of course much more thickly imagined and more accessible to students now than they were then, as a result to some degree of Phil's impetus. He introduced us in Canada and Siberia to what we have called the Great Forest System, which we have extended to Amazonia and Zambezia. When Cross-Cultural Trade in World History appeared, to transport us into the hitherto unsuspected mental worlds of travelling merchants, it fit our enterprise like a glove; and it has been a big hit with our students ever since. He wove the important story of Christian missions into a world-historical narrative; and we have expanded on that theme as well.

Our own dissertation researches and John Smail's "Autonomous History" article also had a big impact on our thinking about world history, encouraging us to move even further away than Phil had from the "expansion of Europe" as a model of early modern history, and to conduct a series of never fully satisfactory experiments in looking at the world from shifting non-European perspectives. We have tried to bring Chinese, Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic as well as Animist and ordinary European experiences of the transformation of the world more clearly into view, without attempting to introduce or characterize those civilizations per se. But as in Phil's vivid story-telling about Ethiopia or Timor or Malacca, we probably do a better job with the small places; and we have introduced a good many of these ourselves as seemed appropriate: the Canaries, Paraguay, Potosí, the Philippines, Formosa, and so on. In general, not surprisingly, we pay more attention to mainland Latin America, Southeast Asia and the Middle East in all periods than Phil did. The Spanish colonial labor system constructed around silver and gold mining gets as much attention, for example, as does plantation slavery.

The first quarter of our course, as was true I think of Phil's, is more coherent and more effectively destabilizing for students; and the exponential growth of the social and cultural historical literature for all of the regions it addresses has only served to strengthen it -- enabling us nowadays to have students reading Richard White's Middle Ground, for example, and Jonathan Spence's Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, and Steve Stern's Peru's Indigenous Peoples and John Thornton's Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World.

Our second course, like Phil's, moves from the comparatively intimate worlds of the early modern frontiers to the more complex and larger-scale realities of the 19th and 20th centuries. But here we have been less satisfied with the course as inherited from Phil, and even more inclined to try and reconceive the patterns. Our Santa Cruz ambience has given central place to the demolition of

modernization theory, which was very influential in framing the old World and the West (and to which I had already grown hostile in while working in rural Latin America before ever taking Phil's course!). So we have come to organize the treatment more in terms of the diverse struggles of the world's peoples around the implementation of the Liberal Project, viewed as a process that on balance has proved more destructive than liberating for most of the world. Brad Burns' Poverty of Progress focussed on Latin America has helped to set that tone.

Our course still begins with the French and Industrial Revolutions; and through the 1980s it more or less followed Hobsbawm's story of the making of the modern world. While still featuring the Meiji and Tanzimat reforms, it focussed too on the Mexico of Porfirio Diaz. It then foregrounded nationalist movements as responses to incorporation into the world capitalist system, with the Third World attempting in the 20th century to do what Europe had done in the 19th. The Chinese, Indian and Algerian revolutions received considerable attention.

We have always thought that this course should really end in 1914 and have a sequel dealing with decolonization and neocolonialism. But we've not found the colleague who is willing to make a commitment to this; and we can't sustain a three-course sequence on our own; so the second quarter of our course has always seemed to us to end awkwardly with the Europeans getting kicked out , and to do scant justice to the contemporary period.

In the 1990s, we have come to see the colonial and neo-colonial state as doing some of the same work as Meiji and Tanzimat, and the role of local capitalists looms much larger. So the story is now not so much about imperialism and anti-imperialism as about rethinking modernity itself. The older focus on class and the industrial revolution don't seem sufficient; the Enlightenment is of course not only discipline & punish; it is also liberation. But the state and the world economy are nevertheless increasingly and

ever more oppressively dominant. The Mexican Revolution has proved especially useful as a context in which to explore these themes for young Californians. We have also grown more concerned in both quarters with the ecological dimensions of every phase of the story, and with exploring the evidence that capitalism is intrinsically destructive not only of humanity, but of nature as well.

This last is the subject of the second of the NEH summer institutes that has been organized by Terry Burke for college teachers of world history at Santa Cruz, and that gets underway the day after tomorrow. Finally, we are intrigued by the continuing relevance of religion in human affairs, and in general by the role of of ethnicity and of "non-Western cultures" in the world; and we feel obliged to assist our students in imagining the backgrounds for those elements of the world-wide resistance to capitalism and modernity as well.

The purpose of this whole enterprise, we have learned over the years, is not to encourage students to join us in playing our own explanatory games or anybody else's, as we attempt to understand the history of the modern world. Rather it is to get them to think about history more vividly in terms of interactions between equally real and vibrant peoples and cultures, and to free them up for observing those continuing interactions closely throughout their lives, and figuring them out on their own. We think that the first part of our course, as of Phil Curtin's course, is much better on the whole than the second, because teaching it is a more engaging and more clearly humanizing endeavor. Even capitalism is revealed there as a joint product, the result of activities on all sides that is eventually "bigger than anybody". Whereas in the second half of the course, capital and the state appear almost inevitably as juggernauts; and it is harder to keep the eyes focussed on the particular human experiences, and the particular interactions of peoples and cultures, from which students can learn most and from which they can derive most hope.

"The Making of the Modern World" has been offered during most academic years over the past two decades, to a total of perhaps a thousand undergraduate and a few dozens of graduate students. It has not achieved core status in any program; and its enrollments do not reflect the huge student interest in history and in the Third World that are evident on our campus. Most history students don't take it; and most students of the social sciences interested in Third World affairs are reluctant to study history. But it though viewed by students as an exceptionally demanding course and also as a bit of a "downer" because of its sometimes depressing subject-matter, it has enjoyed a modest following over the years, especially with those among the brighter and more ambitious history majors (many of whom plan to continue on to graduate school and become history teachers themselves), who have gotten a good background in European or North American or East Asian history, and now feel the need for broader view that can help them to begin to understand the whole world and the new "global economy" of today. For Terry and me, it has been a durably exciting, challenging, ever-changing pedagogical endeavor, and at the same time a continuing education program for working historians that is entirely beneficial to the advancement of "our own work." So in those senses at least, and despite the painful absence of broader institutional support for the enterprise, it has seemed to us to be considerable success.