

Chapter 42

A 21st-Century World: Trends and Prospects

Chapter Summary. The study of history can be used to develop a framework for thinking about the future. Rapid change has been a constant since the time of the 1st civilizations, and new discoveries today probably have quickened the pace. Individuals always have devised schemes to look forward. River valley peoples used astrology and divination; Chinese and Muslim scholars saw history moving in cycles. Christians and Marxists looked to a great change in the future. No system yet devised provides any accuracy.

Optimism or Pessimism. Many individuals believe that steady progress has occurred in world history because of advancing technology and progressive enlightenment. People live longer, women and children receive better treatment, and slavery has been abolished. But the 20th century has been marked by unprecedented cruelty and inhumanity. Technology increases war-time losses, and industry supplies all classes of weapons. Religious intolerance has appeared in once more-tolerant societies. Clearly, human history has a mixed record. Speculation about the future must be carefully done.

A New Period in World History. The 20th century can be called a new historical period, one in which some older trends are ending. We still do not know what will come next.

Using the Past to Address the Future. During the 1920s and 1930s a new phase of history began to form. There were parallel developments in major civilizations, reshuffling of geographical boundaries, and intensification of international contacts. Thus many 19th-century patterns, such as Western colonialism, will continue to recede. Societies, like China under Mao Zedong, will not be able to isolate themselves from world currents. But, although we know that the relative importance of the West has declined, we do not know if this will continue. Some form of European revival is possible, or a new dominant civilization might appear. Religious revivalism might reverse the trend of growing secularization. New patterns in history inevitably produce doubt about the future for directions.

Making Sense of Recent Developments. The greatest political developments of the late 1980s occurred in the communist world. China experimented with interactions with the capitalist world, but continued to suppress democracy. East European states escaped from Soviet control and the Soviet Union collapsed. The future of Russia - authoritarian or democratic - is unclear. The close of the cold war raised many questions about the world balance of power. Regional disruptions occur as leaders test new international conditions. The spread of nuclear weapons intensifies old rivalries. Banking and economic growth crises influence in uncertain ways the future of East Asia and Russia.

Extrapolating Trends in World Societies. The extrapolation process posits forecasting by focusing on processes and identifying strong current trends to give a sense of the future. In the West and Japan, for example, we can be sure that there will be problems associated with the increasing aging of populations.

Political Issues. In politics the shifting balance between democracy and communist and authoritarian forms offers a link between the past and future. Western democratic regimes seem firmly rooted, and more recent democracies such as Japan and India appear solid. Democratic impulses are spreading widely elsewhere and already have ended many authoritarian governments. Perhaps liberal democracy will be the new general form of government, but there are challenges to it in Latin America, while authoritarian regimes, as in China and the Middle East, continue.

Cultural Issues. A path to worldwide homogeneity has been caused by the adoption of Western cultural values, consumer goods, and the English language. Separate civilizations keep their own basic forms, but the friction between modernity and tradition is constant. Perhaps the trend will result in greater

international understanding. Another issue is the effect of industrialization on the arts. A focus on science and technology may push local arts and rich popular traditions to the periphery. The impact on major cultures remains uncertain.

Economic Issues. Contemporary economic divisions are more complex than the old dichotomy between industrial and developing nations. Some nations struggle for agricultural subsistence while others are in rapid economic transition. Sharp disparities of development occur within nations. Economic imbalances help to explain the unresolved problem of the international drug trade. The movement of peoples seeking better economic and social conditions has mixed peoples in unprecedented ways and created much tension. One trend appears clear: population growth will be important, but will continue to slow.

Social Issues. Varieties in development among civilizations produce radically different social issues. Problems of urbanization are common in all societies and thus raise global questions. The issue of land control has become less significant as a basis for social position in urbanized societies placing emphasis on wealth and knowledge.

In Depth: Evaluating the Conditions of Women. Two analytical problems - determining current trends and assessing ongoing diversities in civilizations - must be examined. Western feminists assume or hope that the movement to equality will continue in the West and spread elsewhere. Encouraging trends include the spread of education and voting rights, and declining birth rates. The changes allow new employment and political opportunities. Many significant inequalities persist. Peasant women remain bound by traditional patriarchy and religious fundamentalism constrains change. Developing economies often damaged existing women's influence. Some women do not accept Western standards and argue for different models for freedom conditioned by their own cultures.

Forecasting by a Single Causal Factor. Some forecasters rely on a single, major causal factor to provide a dramatic prediction for the future.

The Overcrowding Scenario. During the 1960s and 1970s there were predications of a "population bomb" that would outstrip the world's available resources and cause disaster. Concern had lessened by the 1990s as growth rates have slowed. Some experts argued that growth often spurs human innovation. A variant on the population bomb approach was an argument that earthly frontiers for expansion had been exhausted. The resulting frictions, they thought, were destined to cause trouble.

A Postindustrial World. Another group of forecasters argue that the 20th century is the beginning of a dramatic postindustrial revolution featuring service occupations and information exchange as machines take over in agriculture and industry. Social status will depend upon technological knowledge and cities will turn into centers for meetings and recreation. Critics reply that change is underway but that management and labor structures remain the same in postindustrial societies, and that the world, apart from the West and Japan, is not part of the revolution. Most historians reject single factor determinism because the reality of change is always more complex.

World History Themes: Since its origin, human experience has been described in many differing ways. Issues persist despite important changes in individual societies. The only major theme of the text has ended: importance of nomadic-civilization interactions. Even though rigid frameworks have declined, inequality continues in contemporary society. The most troubling instance of inequality at the end of the 20th century involved disparities in earnings and living-standards. Gaps increased during 1990s. Environmental degradation remained important because of the effects of expanding populations and industrialization. Many industrial societies are working to improve such conditions. World history presents a mixed picture concerning human agency. Judging its past is complex, as is the case for the future.

Regions, Civilizations, and World Forces. Are international forces overriding the essential characteristics of individual civilizations? Since the classical period there has been tension between individual civilizations and wider international forces. Perhaps 21st-century developments will splinter

civilizations to produce separate regional forms. Or are there more centripetal forces that will reduce the scope of individual cultures?

The Quest for Separate Identities. The formation of larger aggregates among peoples never has produced stability. Units, whatever the size, constantly fragment. In the 1980s demands for ethnic autonomy emphasized the breakdown process even in small regions. Many developments at the same time reflect continued civilization boundaries. The different results of the Indian and Chinese efforts to slow birthrates is grounded in the differing reaction of each people to state intervention. No major pattern of modernization has yet obliterated key boundaries among major civilizations. Any ongoing process must be evaluated specifically for each civilization. There has been a reassertion of cultural independence among many nations. Yet we must look beyond existing civilization areas since they may not remain constant.

The Forces of International Integration. Previous forces in world history had promoted transformations within separate civilizations. This may be changing as crosscutting forces now push to internationalization as transportation and communications systems bring societies closer together. There are now international artistic styles, while Western fads and fashions influence the daily lives of ordinary people. The spread of scientific knowledge among elites cuts boundaries in ways never achieved by religions. Within this change the simple model of all societies passing at different speeds into Western forms no longer holds. Traditional forces have revived in many societies. Postindustrial arguments may say that a new revolution is at hand - perhaps spurred by the computer - but it is not yet here. Still, a fundamental international community does now exist through the sharing of frames of reference such divisions as sports and business. For the present, however, separate civilizations remain very much alive.

Conclusion: Asking Questions. Questions always outweigh the answers when thinking about the future. Persisting past continuities make a single world framework unrealizable. The interplay between existing tensions will shape the future, and the study of history, through analogies to past situations, will sharpen abilities to ask questions and evaluate forecasts.

LECTURE SUGGESTION

1. What are the varieties of prognostication for the future? Which do you find the most meaningful? What sort of future do you foresee? [open discussion session with answers based on personal preferences.]

Map References.

Danzer, *Discovering World History through Maps and Views*.
Source Maps: S61 S62, S63, S64, S65, S66, S67.