Exploring Themes in World History
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By Peter N. Stearns

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Introduction

What are the benefits to approaching the study of history thematically? How can we choose the themes that work the best for both students and instructors? Why do global thematic histories encourage deep insights into the human experience?

In the following pages, Peter N. Stearns, series editor of Routledge's *Themes in World History* series, addresses these questions and more.

After Stearns’ thought-provoking exploration, key excerpts from books in the series show how important world history themes are highlighted to inspire critical historical thinking.

The *Themes in World History* series provides exciting, new and wide-ranging surveys of the important themes of world history. Each theme is examined over a broad period of time, allowing analysis of continuities and change, and introduces students to historians’ methods and debates in their context.

Peter N. Stearns is Provost Emeritus and Professor of History at George Mason University. He is the author of many books, including *World History: The Basics.*
World history has been gaining ground as a field for history teaching and research for over three decades, building on pioneering work even earlier. In many countries, the rise of world history constitutes the most important change in the history discipline in our lifetimes, modifying for example the long devotions to studies only of Western civilization or, even more sharply, challenging the focus on a purely national framework.

Growing interest and success inevitably raise new questions about the field, and new opportunities to move into additional domains. The interest in probing particular themes in world history is a major extension of the field as a whole. A recent survey of world history, *Thinking Historically Globally* by Diego Olstein, singled out the thematic approach as a significant contrast to the more standard efforts to cover the whole chronology of the human past: a single major issue can now be followed up with the world as its context, providing historians with various backgrounds the largest framework for interpreting any historical phenomenon or development. The result serves history teaching, by expanding the exploration of major human activities, while also reflecting and encouraging world history research.

For obvious reasons, world history efforts long emphasized large studies of the subject as a whole, including substantial textbooks. All sorts of materials had to be left out even of these extensive surveys, but the focus was on as wide a compass as possible, from human origins, or at least the origins of more organized societies, to the present. Several approaches overlapped: many big studies identified major civilizations such as China or Greece and Rome, and then traced their evolution while adding some direct comparisons. Others focused on contacts among major societies, or trends such as trade, migration or missionary religions that cut across political and cultural borders. These encompassing efforts remain vital, but their very success has encouraged newer ways to take on the world history field. The interest in tracing particular themes through the world history lens is one crucial outcome.

The thematic approach responds to two other, related impulses. World history treatment long disproportionately emphasized political and intellectual developments, with some economic history tossed in. The structure of major states, the expansion of empires, invasions and wars were complemented by some characterizations of the leading philosophies and religions. Trade patterns, because of their fundamental role in promoting contacts among major regions, gained some attention as well. This structure remains important, but it is both understandable and desirable that historians move beyond it, to analyze other aspects of the human endeavor, such as gender relations or environmental changes.

For – and this is the second point – the history discipline as a whole has been pushing out its frontiers over the past half century, particularly through examination of various social patterns and manifestations of popular beliefs and values. The doings of ordinary
people, and activities beyond formal statecraft or intellectual life, capture this growing belief that history can and should shed light on a much larger range of human engagement and human problems. The thematic approach to world history marries the ambitious range of world history itself with the growing commitment to expand the human past that is open to historical analysis. The argument is that along with trying to look at the “whole” global experience, we can gain greater insight into particular human and social experiences if we explore them on a world stage. Not surprisingly, the range of themes itself can be considerable. Gender relations is an obvious target, because it has become so important in the extension of historical interests.

Environmental change, another growing research area, responds to pressing contemporary problems. But the thematic approach goes well beyond current hot button items. It includes food supplies and habits, and the results of interregional contacts in changing diets. It embraces key stages of life, like childhood or old age (interestingly historians are just now turning to another age category, middle age). It encompasses the structure and experience of poverty, or the evolution of drinking habits. It deals with less familiar political topics, like the surprisingly rich history of peace. The goal, in adding up these options and many more, is both to provide a wider range for world history itself, and to improve more specialist interests by adding the world as a stage.

Exploring a theme in world history involves several components. Understanding what is involved will also help readers grasp the thematic approach more successfully.

First, of course, the theme has to be reasonably significant, in terms of the human experience, and it must have some resonance in a variety of different regions. American football in world history would be a nonstarter; for except for a few games played abroad, and some interaction between Canadian and American forms of football, this is strictly a national passion, interesting as part of the evolution of the United States over the past 150 years but not the world. Left-handedness in world history would be mildly tempting, because this does have global applicability and different societies have managed or oppressed left-handers differently; additionally, approaches to left-handers have changed over time, another vital feature of valid world history themes. But the subject is probably not important enough to warrant serious thematic analysis on its own (as opposed, perhaps, to being part of a larger history of childhood). Second, if it passes the significance test, the theme must have generated enough research, or be open to sufficient research, to permit a reasonably global treatment. Here, to be blunt, there can be some real challenges. Some newer historical themes have been far more widely explored in a Western or American context than in their global dimensions. The history of emotions, for example, is a hot field in the West, with major centers in Australia, Germany and Britain dealing with changes and continuities in the experience of fear or shame or love. But we are just beginning to see serious work for Eastern
Europe, China and Africa, and the Islamic world is virtually untouched. Result: in the long run we can hope for the opportunity to do a thematic treatment of key emotions in world history, but frankly not yet. Even for themes that are ready – for example, the history of old age – there is unevenness in the existing scholarship, so some major societies do not gain as full a treatment as will ultimately be desirable.

Building thematic approaches to world history, in other words, is a sequential process. There has to be some varied regional work available to launch the effort in the first place, without being confined just to the Western experience or another single case. But the thematic approach may also encourage additional research once a framework has been suggested, allowing a more encompassing global treatment the next time around. And over time we can expect more global balance, as in the history of emotions, which will continue to expand the list of serious thematic possibilities.

If the preconditions are fulfilled – the topic is significant and reasonably global and can call on sufficient existing scholarship to be feasible (while perhaps hoping to promote more in the future) – then the real fun begins. Implementing the thematic history – or interpreting the presentation of a thematic approach – requires attention both to time and to place and this is where the crucial decisions are made.

Chronology is crucial. There must be a clear beginning to the thematic account. Sometimes the origins are coterminal with the human experience itself. The theme of migration, for example, goes back to the early stages of the initial human species, when small population increases forced some small bands to strike out into new territory. Food exchanges among regions did not begin quite that early, but obviously go well back in time. The theme of education, in contrast, while it may have patterns of socialization in hunting and gathering societies as a backdrop, awaits more organized societies and the invention of writing to develop any real significance. Starting point established, the next step in chronology involves selecting those periods in which significant changes enter in, altering the direction of established patterns. (If the theme does not feature genuine change over time, it is probably not worth historical treatment.) Here, in dealing with change markers, thematic approaches interact strongly with the kinds of periods used in the more general world history surveys, to test their applicability to the particular topic in question. For some subjects – childhood, for example – key chronological divisions mirror the most basic shifts in world history: from hunting and gathering to agriculture, and then more recently from agriculture to industrial society. Other topics, however, may be more sensitive to other divides – for example, the advent of the great missionary religions, or the new trade patterns that emerged with the inclusion of the Americas after about 1500. Or, finally, the theme may warrant a somewhat different periodization at some junctures; the theme of globalization in world history, for example, demands attention to
developments around 1850, which is not a standard dividing date for other aspects of world history. There is no set formula here, but rather a requirement that the thematic account clearly register what internal breaks are emphasized and why – in terms of their impact on that theme – they have been selected. Most thematic histories take their coverage on to the present, and this has the added advantage of providing direct historical perspective on current issues and trends. A few important themes, however, may trail off before modern times, suggesting a different terminus. Again, the chronological tests are crucial: is the beginning point clearly explained and established? Are the subsequent change dates firmly identified and explained, and do they allow some linkage to the more general world history chronologies? Can we (in most cases) see how contemporary patterns emerged from the prior evolution of the theme? Geography is the second variable, within the requirement that to be thematic world history a number of regions must be involved. The theme may prove to be more important in some regions than in others, or it may be more strongly influenced by developments in some regions than in others. Where the theme involves contacts among regions, for example, the Americas will present a different kind of experience, before 1492, than the major regions of Africa, Asia and Europe, where exchanges were more widespread. Some regions take a lead in certain domains, with influence expanding gradually to other areas. China, for example, was long a technology leader in world history. Western Europe in the 17th century introduced crucial innovations in science and the cultural position of science.

There is no single formula that determines geographical emphases, any more than there is for basic chronology and periodization. But thematic history must be clear on the regional emphases, explaining what factors determine why some regions may legitimately gain somewhat more attention than others. Geography also factors into a final set of considerations, on comparative balance. World history often highlights the differences among major societies around the globe. Cultural distinctions loom large here: Hinduism and Buddhism obviously differ from the “religions of the book” that emerged in the Middle East, and both clusters in turn differ from East Asian Confucianism. Separate and contrasting treatments obviously follow, simulating the most obvious comparative approaches among the regions over time. Explorations of childhood or sexuality may be an ideal way to test the practical, human impact of big-ticket phenomena such as the major religions. Or, in the long 19th century, the clear distinctions in power position between Western Europe, on the one hand, and its various colonies or near-colonies encourage another set of differentiations that will last well into the 20th century, and that inevitably influence a number of specific themes. Themes in world history may well echo these larger distinctions, based on the great cultures or more recent variations in access to economic and military power. But they also may not, at least entirely. Some themes may in fact reveal more similarities
among otherwise different societies than textbook approaches often encourage. Or, even more commonly, they may promote more nuanced comparisons, in which widely shared human reactions, bolstered in some cases by mutual contacts, shade off more subtly based on cultural or political differences. Widely hailed distinctions, for example between communism and capitalism in the modern periods, may not matter as much in specific domains – such as changes in the expectations applied to childhood – as more superficial comparison suggests. On the other hand, apparently widespread impulses – for example, toward consumerism in modern world history – may need to be broken down more carefully, where the comparative combination ultimately reveals some unexpected differences. Exploring themes in world history requires intelligent and explicit decisions – about time periods, about regional emphases, about comparative balance. The choices must reflect the characteristics of the theme itself; there is no standard formula. Overall, however, it is easier to isolate the analytical challenges that the thematic choices reflect, than to deal with world history "as a whole," where the sheer mass of data may seem overwhelming. Themes, in this sense, sharpen the capacity for historical thinking. The thematic approach is, of course, only one of several strategies that have emerged as knowledge about, and interest in, world history have improved. It does offer a particular kind of reward: following through a significant theme in global context simultaneously improves one's grasp of what world history is all about, and allows deeper insights into one slice of the human experience from past to present. The opportunity will continue to expand as the boundaries of our knowledge push forward.

For there is a final, alluring challenge: what are the next major themes that should be added to the world history exploration list?
Of Purple Men and Oil Merchants
In the eleventh century BCE the coastal Canaanites of the Levant arose from the debris of the Late Bronze Age cataclysm with a vengeance. Henceforth known by the name the Greeks gave them – the Phoenicians – they returned to the sea doing what they did better than anyone of their age: sailing to places hitherto unknown, buying where cheapest, selling where dearest, and making boatloads of money. For a while, they were the master entrepreneurs of the Mediterranean, answering the call for metals by finding new sources and creating new routes to replace those that had been disrupted. They imported raw material, processed it in their workshops, and exported sumptuous luxury products.

As before, the Phoenicians continued to live in independent city states. The ancient port of Byblos revived as a center for the Egyptian trade, but Egypt was not nearly so dominant as before, and the overly conservative merchants of Byblos did not seize on new opportunities. Instead Tyre and Sidon became the chief commercial centers, especially Tyre, which was built on two islands joined together several hundred yards from the mainland. The prophet Isaiah calls Tyre "the merchant of the nations" and "the bestower of crowns whose merchants were princes." Ezekiel concurs, noting, "You satisfied many peoples with your abundant wealth and merchandise, you enriched the kings of the earth." He lists 16 different places in which the Phoenicians traded, from Tarshish in southwestern Spain to Sheba in southwestern Arabia and provides a catalogue of trade goods ranging from precious stones, ivory, ebony, and spices to metals, foodstuffs, livestock, wool, and slaves. For the early centuries of the first millennium BCE, Tyre could justly claim Ugarit's old title of greatest port in the Mediterranean and perhaps the world.

In the tradition of their forefathers, the Phoenicians were excellent sailors who enjoyed certain technical advantages centering on the development of more seaworthy ships capable of long voyages. They were referred to in the Bible as the "Ships of Tarshish," meaning ships capable of sailing from one side of the Mediterranean to the other. They developed the keel, allowing for better control in rough seas, and used adjustable sails. According to Pliny, they "invented observing the stars in sailing" and by using the Pole Star became the first to sail at night beyond the sight of land over the open waters.

Beginning in the ninth century BCE, the Phoenician world became more complicated with the arrival of a new power from the east, the Assyrians. Wisely, the Phoenicians chose to bow to the weight of the ferocious Assyrian war machine, striking a deal under which they paid a large tribute in silver. Tyre lost control over much of its Syrian and Anatolian trade to the Assyrians themselves, but the conquerors did have an important place for the Phoenicians in their overall commercial scheme. Wool, a staple in the
Mesopotamian export trade for millennia, was now directed to Phoenician cities where it was woven and dyed purple, then sent to various destinations within the empire, including back to Assyria. The Phoenicians could also help to assure the Assyrians a large and steady supply of metals: gold and silver to power their economy and bronze and iron to equip their armies. Phoenician ports became the Assyrian Empire's window to a new and virtually untapped storehouse of metals, the western Mediterranean.

Despite increasingly exorbitant demands for tribute and not being allowed to trade with Assyria's enemy Egypt, the Phoenician cities generally benefited from their position in the Assyrian system, at least for a while. Assyrian markets were open to Phoenician goods, and the empire provided security and stability. The Canaanite–Phoenicians had always enjoyed a happy balance of palace-based and private sector trade, but under Assyrian control this shifted, reflecting a decline in Phoenician state power. Long-distance overland trade came into the hands of independent merchant houses operating through a system of agents. This system did not endear Phoenician political authorities to Assyrian rule, and in the late eighth and seventh centuries BCE they became party to several unsuccessful attempts at throwing off the imperial yoke. Tyre was not destroyed but was forced to pay an onerous exaction in gold. Sidon, considered as less essential in the Assyrian commercial scheme, paid for a rebellion by being sacked and wasted.

The Assyrian presence helps to explain the most important role the Phoenicians played in the history of trade, their push across the Mediterranean. The collapse of Mycenaean power several centuries earlier had opened the western Mediterranean, but the vacuum had yet to be filled. The need to pay their tribute in silver as well as the opportunity to serve as the connection between the interior of Southwest Asia and the lands ringing the Mediterranean drove the Phoenicians westward to seek new sources of metal. In the end their goal became nothing less than a monopoly over the natural resources of the western Mediterranean. A key strategy in Phoenician trade was to create a demand for a new product, usually a luxury item that would appeal to a local elite, who would then organize production of the commodity the Phoenicians were seeking. Among goods the Phoenicians commonly offered were wine, olive oil, unguents, perfumes, cosmetics, jewelry, trinkets, statuettes, and textiles. The nodes of this network were stations carefully selected as emporia, processing centers, and strongholds for safeguarding vital points along the way. Several were founded with substantial numbers of settlers from the homeland and evolved into independent cities.

Classical authors including Pliny and Strabo claim that the Phoenicians were active in the western Mediterranean in the twelfth century BCE with their earliest outposts at Lixus in Morocco and Gades (Cadiz) in Spain, both beyond the Straits of Gibraltar on the Atlantic side, both founded c. 1100 BCE. The archaeological evidence points to the
eightth and seventh centuries BCE as the time for such expansion although a recent discovery of Phoenician inscriptions on Sardinia dating to the eleventh or tenth century has rekindled the controversy. Using, perhaps, old Mycenaean routes, the Phoenicians hopped from Cyprus to the Aegean, where they were seeking silver and slaves by the mid-nineth century, and beyond to Sicily, Sardinia, the Balearic Islands, and Spain. Some evidence shows them in the Rabat area of Morocco in the eighth century. They tended to settle their colonies in clusters along the Tunisian and Libyan coasts, on Sicily, and in southeastern Spain. Until the rise of Carthage, the most important was at Gades and beyond in the mysterious land of Tartessia (the Biblical Tarshish) although it is not clear exactly who lived in the latter place, Phoenicians, native Spaniards, or more likely both.

The trip from Tyre to Gades took 3 months, at the end of which a ship had to navigate the Straits of Gibraltar with its treacherous tides and sometimes violent winds. Gades is believed to have been founded in c. 770 BCE as the gateway to Tartessia, a place still not archaeologically pinpointed but said to contain so much silver that the inhabitants made furniture from it and ships headed back to Phoenicia used it for ballast. The mining, production, and transport of metals on so large a scale across such a distance were enormous undertakings. The value represented and the profits realized had to be huge to justify the effort. Tartessia became a byword for wealth and remoteness. The early Greeks associated Tartessia with Hades, that is until a Greek merchant named Colaeus was blown off course on his way to Egypt in 638 BCE by a wind so relentless it carried him across the Mediterranean and, according to Herodotus, through Gibraltar to Tartessia: “This trading center was virgin territory at the time, and consequently they came home with the biggest profit any Greek trader we have reliable information about has ever made from his cargo.” This amounted to 60 talents, an incredible 3,600 pounds of silver!

In the long run, the richest and most powerful of Punic cities did not prove to be Gades even when combined with Tartessia. Carthage had a spacious natural harbor, commanded a good defensive position, and fronted on a hinterland that proved to be an excellent place to grow grain, olives, grapes, and other fruits. Nearby waters contained the purple-producing murex shellfish. The traditional date for the founding of Carthage is 814 BCE. At first, it was little more than a stopover for traffic en route to Spain, but its position at the narrowest point in the Mediterranean where the North African and Sicilian coasts are only 75 miles apart gave it an unmatched strategic position. The power that controlled both sides could control traffic passing between the eastern and western Mediterranean.

As the mother cities back in Phoenicia slowly declined under the tribute burdens imposed by Assyria, Carthage assumed control over their trade routes. In the late fifth
and fourth centuries BCE, Carthage emerged victorious from a series of wars against the Greek cities of Sicily, capturing the trade that had previously flowed through them. Carthage's port had to be refurbished and expanded to accommodate the boom. The metals of Spain and Sardinia were now brought there to be processed, and the city also became famous for other merchandise, especially carpets, pillows, and perfumes. Carthaginian amphorae fashioned in a distinct cigar-shape were shipped around the western Mediterranean, and although the contents are not certain, most indicators point to wine.

Unlike their Roman rivals, the Carthaginians were more concerned with making money than ruling. They had little interest in creating a large land empire stretching out in all directions from their city, and most of the time the Carthaginian gaze was turned toward the sea even when their interest was in Africa. The Phoenicians had sailed into the Atlantic, with their archaeological remains extending as far as Essaouira midway down the Moroccan coast, and they visited Madeira and the Canary Islands. How much farther the Carthaginians went is a matter of speculation. Herodotus has them trading for gold in a version of the silent trade at a location that may have been the mouth of the Senegal River. In another account a fleet under Hanno in 465 BCE is said to have reached a spot between Sierra Leone and the Congo River. The problem in accepting this is that the wind and the current both flow from the north. Hanno may have been able to sail down the West African coast, but neither he nor anyone else of his time had the navigational techniques or the equipment to sail back. This is also a problem in accepting the story of the Phoenicians who circumnavigated Africa under orders from the Pharaoh Necho II.

Pliny mentions Hanno along with a contemporary named Himilco, who was sent to explore the coasts of Europe in what appears to have been a two-pronged assault to bring the lands beyond Gibraltar into the Carthaginian commercial fold. The Tartessians had earlier established trade contact with the "Tin Islands," and Himilco's venture may have been a follow-up on this. Himilco sailed up the coasts of Portugal, northwestern Spain, and France and likely crossed to Britain and Ireland. On the way he reportedly encountered sea monsters and got stuck in a morass of seaweed.

Back in the Phoenician homeland, matters were not getting better. The fall of the Assyrian Empire in the late sixth century BCE brought the rise of a new power in Mesopotamia, the Neo-Babylonian Empire, whose armies besieged Tyre for 13 years. Tyre survived but was exhausted. The Neo-Babylonians didn’t last long and soon were replaced by the Persians, under whom the Phoenicians fared somewhat better. The Phoenicians provided the Persian Empire with much of its fleet but, during the Macedonian conquest of Persia, Tyre provoked the wrath of Alexander the Great and was destroyed in 332 BCE. This opened the gate for the last flood of refugees into
Carthage and marked the passing of commercial prominence on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean from the cities of the Levant to a new center on the Egyptian coast, Alexandria.

During the heyday of the Phoenicians, their only major commercial rivals in the Mediterranean were the Greeks. The collapse of Mycenaean civilization was so complete that it took the Greeks almost four centuries to recover, a period known as the Dark Ages. The small amount of goods exchanged during this time was through reciprocity rather than commercial trade. Grave goods from Cyprus, the Levant, and Egypt dating from the tenth and ninth centuries BCE have been found at one site, probably carried there by Phoenicians in very casual, sporadic, small-scale trade.

In the Homeric epics, which were composed following the end of the Dark Ages, the attitude toward trade was decidedly negative, which was not a residue from the Mycenaeans, who were enthusiastic traders. Goods might be exchanged on a one-time basis between parties of equal strength, and people who had frequent contact with each other exchanged gifts, but to trade for profit was considered a contemptible vocation. For the Homeric Greeks this was a matter of ethics: it was thought nobler to plunder someone of their goods than to trade for them. In the *Odyssey* Odysseus in disguise visits some Greeks who are holding athletic contests. When he refuses to join in, he is taunted by a brash young man who lays on Odysseus the deepest of insults: “You are more like a skipper of a merchant crew, who spends his life on a hulking tramp, worrying about his outward freight, or keeping a sharp eye on the cargo when he comes home with his extortionate profits. No: one can see you are no athlete.”

Beginning in the eighth century BCE, Greece underwent a dramatic change with a population boom amounting to an increase of between 300 and 700 percent over less than a century. The economy changed virtually overnight, with the production of surplus goods, the appearance of an entrepreneurial spirit, the emergence of market forces, and the reestablishment of significant overseas trade. Greece is a relatively small, rocky place with a huge coastline featuring a multitude of natural harbors and bordered by a sea having an abundance of islands and lacking tides. The Greeks returned to this sea with gusto, initially in undecked, broad-bottomed, 20-oared ships but soon in much larger double-banked 50-oared ships up to 80 feet long, the famous pentekontors. The old palace-dominated system of the Minoans and Mycenaean was not reestablished. Instead profits were the driving force although, taking a lesson from the Phoenicians, Greek merchants often facilitated contact with foreign partners through gift-giving. This long-distance trade would not just focus on securing imports in the form of luxury goods and metals but also on exports, including products manufactured expressly to sell abroad to make a profit.

The initial direction of the new long-distance trade was eastward with old trading
partners in the Levant. By 800 BCE Greeks from the island of Euboea were established at Al Mina ("the Port") in northern Syria just up the coast from ancient Ugarit. Al Mina would be used by Greek merchants from various cities for the next four centuries as an emporium for the transfer of goods between the interior of Southwest Asia, the Aegean region, and later the western Mediterranean. Probably the Greeks were seeking metals carried on from Anatolia and Armenia, but later, after they found better sources in the western Mediterranean, they reversed the flow and carried metals, especially iron, into Al Mina. Other goods the Greeks sought from the east included such high-tech products as glass, medicines, and dyes.

The Euboeans also pioneered Greek trade to the west. The common assumption has been that Greek colonization was primarily a matter of overpopulation and land hunger, with surplus people spilling out of Greece to find new places to farm. Whereas this was true in some instances, a closer look at the earliest Greek settlements in the west seems to show most were established as part of a trade-route building process for contact with peoples such as the Etruscans, who lived on the Italian peninsula north of Rome. Even colonies established for agricultural purposes were soon producing surpluses of grain and other products in demand by the folks back home. The earliest of the Euboean colonies in the west was at Pithekoussai ("Ape Island") on the northern rim of the Bay of Naples, a strategic location for contact with the Etruscans but hardly an attractive place to farm. Soon goods were moving from Pithekoussai not just to Greece but as far as Al Mina with stops along the way.

The Euboean Greeks and the Phoenicians were often partners in trade, and part of the population at Pithekoussai was Phoenician. Since the Phoenicians preceded the Greeks in this part of the world, it is unlikely that the Greeks could have entered this market without Phoenician acquiescence. For a time, until the founding of Massilia (Marseilles) in c. 600 BCE, the Greeks did not attempt to penetrate farther west into territory that fell under the Phoenician monopoly. In some places Greeks also lived side by side and formed business partnerships with Etruscans. The Greeks did safeguard the entryway into their own area of operation by taking control over the Straits of Messina, the narrow passage separating Italy and Sicily, and various Greek cities set up colonies on both sides, usually where trade prospects looked promising. Soon colonies were founding their own colonies.

The era of peace and partnership, however, did not last indefinitely. By the early sixth century BCE, chronic warfare existed between Greek and Phoenician colonies in Sicily over control of the doorway between the eastern and western Mediterranean whereas to the north Greeks and Etruscans struggled to determine commercial supremacy in the northwest. The colony of Massilia, which soon became a thriving city, must have been of considerable annoyance to both Etruscans and Phoenicians. Located near the mouth
of the Rhone River, it could tap into the huge hinterland of Gaul (France and Belgium).

In Gaul goods moved across well developed exchange networks using river valleys, one running from the Seine to the Saone to the Rhone, another up the Loire to the Rhone. The Greeks of Massilia became middlemen in the flow of goods between northwestern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. A much desired commodity on this route was tin, some of which came from Brittany on the northwestern coast of Gaul, but the major source was across the English Channel in the British Isles. This system was still active in the first century as noted by the historian Diodorus Siculus, who observed that British tin was transported by packhorse across Brittany by a tribe called the Veneti, who had become very wealthy from this. Along with tin came perishables such as hides, salted meats, grain, slaves, and, from farther north, furs.

The Greeks brought the grape vine and olive tree to southern France, and Massilia sent much of its own wine and oil inland as well as related products such as goblets, cups, jugs, and kraters (bowls used for mixing wine and water). Iron Age princely graves and votive deposits in western and northern Europe contained many elite goods of Greek and Etruscan manufacture, some of which were quite exquisite, including bronze swords; cauldrons and feasting equipment; coral beads, amulets, and brooches; furniture sometimes with ivory inlay; and wheeled carts and wagons. Initially many of the imports were still distributed through prestige chains but, as time went on, more and more entered the nascent market system as exchange moved away from social relationships to profit-making. Economies in the interior became more geared to the production of goods desired in Mediterranean markets in order to obtain Mediterranean goods.

Massilia’s interests were not confined to the northern interior. It also came to control the overland trade routes between Spain and Italy and established its own colony at Emporiae (Ampurias) and smaller outposts down the Spanish coast, challenging Carthage’s monopoly. One source mentions a maritime route originating in Ireland or Britain, crossing to Brittany, then moving down the Atlantic coast to Tartessia, through Gibraltar and north along the Mediterranean coast to Massilia. This was made possible by the recent introduction of the sail into northwestern Europe, the earliest of which were made of leather. Prior to this, boats had to be paddled or rowed. A trader from Massilia named Pytheas searching for tin claimed to have sailed beyond Britain in the fourth century BCE to a place he called Thule, which modern speculation has as either Iceland, Norway, or the Shetland Islands, then continued on, eventually reaching the Arctic ice. On the way back he picked up a load of amber on an island off Denmark, which must have made the trip worthwhile.

The Greek diaspora stretched north and south as well as east and west. Greeks settled along the rim of the Black Sea, where there was good agricultural land, particularly on
Map 6.1 Mediterranean Basin and Europe 1500 BCE–200 BCE
the northern shore and Crimean Peninsula. Soon copious amounts of grain were flowing back to the homeland along with timber, pickled and smoked fish, slaves, horses, hides, furs, honey, wax, amber, gold, and iron. Northern shore cities such as Olbia (“Wealthy”), reputed to be the richest of all Greek colonies, had access to the river system that penetrated far into the Russian interior, and Greek pottery and other products have been found hundreds of miles from the last Greek settlements. On the western shore the Danube River opened the hinterland of eastern and Central Europe, where mountains contained gold and silver, and southern shore cities served as the terminus for land routes running to Iran. Black Sea trade was so crucial for Athens that the Athenians kept careful tabs over the various states that lay along the way, using a combination of diplomacy and threats to keep the grain lifeline open.

Across the Mediterranean to the south in Egypt, the XXVI Dynasty reversed traditional policy and opened Egyptian trade to Greeks and Phoenicians. When Colaeus was blown off course and made his famous detour to Tartessia, he was on his way to Egypt, a trip that apparently was by that time commonplace. Under the XXVI Dynasty Greek ships were required to trade specifically at the delta town of Naucratis, where the government collected rich customs duties. A similar site was assigned to Phoenician merchants, and in both places Egyptians lived side-by-side with the foreigners. Naucratis had four large warehouses and a factory for mass producing faience products, including vases, statuettes, and scarab seals as good luck charms for the Greek market. The main commodities that the Greeks sought from the Egyptians were grain, papyrus, linen, ivory, magic amulets, alabaster, cosmetics, drugs, and semi-precious stones. In return, the Greeks in Naucratis imported from their homeland olive oil and wine and most importantly silver carried as coinage since the Egyptians did not mint their own coins. The merchants of 12 Greek cities were represented at Naucratis, and the relationship they maintained with each other did not involve their home governments.

During the first millennium BCE, the carrying business in the eastern Mediterranean gradually shifted from the Phoenicians to the Greeks, and within the Greek community commercial initiative passed from the Euboeans to Corinth. The Corinthians made much in demand painted pottery vessels that held perfumes and unguents and also assumed a middleman role in re-exporting Egyptian products. Nevertheless, in the mid-sixth century BCE, Corinth’s time also passed when the Athenians developed new techniques in pottery-making that allowed them to produce the ultimate in Greek ceramics, known as Athenian black and red figure pottery, a smooth-textured product with brilliant sheen and glossy pigment. Vases in this style were considered so beautiful that they were in demand from Etruria to Syria and Egypt with one found as far as Meroe in Kush (Republic of Sudan).

Initially Greek commerce depended on private shipowners who served as their own
captains, raising whatever capital they could for individual voyages. By the fifth century BCE they were renting space on their ships to professional traders. The trading system that was in evidence by the time the Greeks entered their Classical Age was different from earlier luxury-based systems, or even from the Phoenicians, who were essentially middlemen dealing in large-scale commodities such as metals rather than mass consumables. Greek trade reached down the social scale in the production, exchange, and consumption of staple goods such as grain, wine, and olive oil within a mass market context.

Given their soil, topography, and climate, the Greeks could grow olives and grapes much more efficiently than grain, and a modest quantity of oil or wine could return a substantial amount of grain from places such as Egypt, the Black Sea, and Sicily. Such an exchange in bulk goods needed to be transported over water rather than land, again ideally suited for people in the Aegean region. Often it was cheaper for Athens, for example, which imported about two-thirds of the grain it consumed, to buy bulk quantities of grain from Egypt than from parts of Greece less than 100 miles away if that grain had to be brought overland. The Athenians went so far as to legislate which crops could be exported and imported. Athens itself produced the highest quality olive oil, but the best wine came from Ionia, lying across the Aegean on the west coast of Anatolia and nearby islands. The Greeks mixed their wine with water and often added ingredients such as honey, herbs, nuts, lime, and even ashes and goat milk. The quality of Greek wines varied tremendously from excellent vintages to vile swill made palatable only when blended with another strong flavor.

The men that bought and sold these products, the merchants of Athens and similar cities, were often resident foreigners, both Greeks from other city states and non-Greeks. Referred to as “metics,” they were frequently encouraged to come to a particular city and allowed to make as much money as they could even though they were relegated to the lower ranks of society and were discriminated against in various ways as, for example, by not being allowed to become citizens or own land. Nevertheless, some metics did very well since in red-hot markets the demand for imported products generally outran the supply, and if a merchant could obtain a desirable product, or even a large quantity of a common product, he could generally sell it for a hefty profit. In large part they were responsible for the great leap into the forefront of international commerce made by the Greeks.

Metics were also involved in the system of banking that developed in Greece since one of the occupations they practiced was that of moneychanger. These individuals sat at tables near where ships docked, at city gates, and in the marketplace and took in foreign money, weighed and appraised it, and changed it into local currency for a small fee. At some time they also began to make loans to traders and to broker partnerships
for larger ventures. As they had earlier in Mesopotamia, temples were also involved in a basic function of banking by serving as places of deposit since they were considered to be safe under the protection of the temple divinity. The depositor paid a fee for safekeeping unless his deposit, when combined with that of others and the capital of the temple itself, was lent out, in which case he received a portion of the interest. When temples became objects of plunder beginning in the fourth century BCE, the business of accepting deposits for making loans shifted to the class of moneychangers turned moneylenders. Credit was especially important in the grain business. A trader would borrow from a moneylender to purchase a cargo of grain abroad. Rates were high since the cargo served as the only security, and interest was charged by the voyage rather than per annum. The trader then reserved space in which to put his load of exports on a ship headed for a grain-producing region. More often than not, he accompanied the ship as well. On the return home the grain was sold to wholesalers, allowing him to pay off his debt and realize a profit.

The ancient world was turned upside down by the conquests of Alexander the Great, who intended for his empire to be economically integrated. On his early death his political accomplishment broke into pieces, but economic expansion continued. During the Hellenistic period that followed, commerce in the Mediterranean flowered due in part to advances in ship design and construction and improved port facilities. Small-time moneylenders sitting at tables were replaced by large-scale institutions that could transfer funds from city to city through letters of credit. The center of commercial activity shifted from the Greek mainland to transit trade cities on the west coast of Anatolia such as Rhodes, which by the third century BCE had the largest commercial fleet in the Mediterranean.

In matters of trade the most important city in the Mediterranean, particularly as Carthage fell on hard times in its struggle with Rome, was a new one, Alexandria. It exported and imported the same products that had flowed into and out of Egypt for centuries but in vastly expanded quantities. The city's port was an enormous facility with two harbors whose stone quays could reportedly hold up to 1,200 ships at a time. Warehouses lined the shores, but the Pharos lighthouse built on an island three-quarters of a mile offshore was Alexandria's wonder of the ancient world. It was the largest lighthouse in the ancient world, consisting of a tower almost 400 feet high built in three stories with the top functioning as a lantern. There, eight columns supported a cupola under which a huge piece of polished steel served as a convex mirror reflecting sunlight. At night a fire of resinous wood brought up by a lift, possibly powered by hydraulic machinery, guided ships far offshore.

The Hellenistic kings dabbled extensively in trade with the Ptolemies of Egypt, surpassing even their predecessors, the pharaohs, in creating a system in which all
economic activity came under state control. With the exception of Alexandria and Naukratis, the king owned all land and virtually all means of production as well as controlled all commerce. The goal was to squeeze as much wealth as possible for the dynasty's use, much of which was then expended on fighting wars with other Hellenistic states. Grain and all other export commodities were taxed several times and attracted compulsory warehouse, lading, and shipping charges. Yet so much grain was produced so efficiently it still undersold all other grain on the Greek market. Imports into Egypt such as timber, metals, oil, wine, and horses were often assessed duties up to 300 percent of their value.

The Hellenistic state-directed commercial model did not completely replace the more free-wheeling system that had emerged under the classical Greeks. Rather, as in earlier times, the two existed side-by-side with the Hellenistic kings themselves often playing the role of entrepreneur on the international market. Trade in the Hellenistic world reached a peak in the mid-third century BCE and declined thereafter due to a series of natural and manmade problems, not the least of which were the results of economic disruption resulting from chronic warfare among Alexander's successors. This did not prove to be a good time for such indulgences. To the west the Second Punic War caused great destruction and economic dislocation, and shortly thereafter Roman armies moved into the eastern Mediterranean, where they dismembered Macedonia, crippled the Seleucid Empire, cowed Ptolemaic Egypt, and reduced the Greek cities. In 146 BCE both Carthage and Corinth were obliterated by the Roman onslaught ostensibly for political reasons although it is hardly coincidental that both were trade rivals of Rome. Other economic powerhouses such as Massilia, Athens, Rhodes, the Greek cities of Sicily and southern Italy, and even Alexandria would eventually be reduced to dependent roles. The Romans extracted a heavy burden in tribute, and wealth flowed out of all other places to the city on the Tiber.
CHAPTER 2

The Jews of Islam
The emergence of Islam as a major western religion during the seventh century C.E. fundamentally altered the political and cultural landscape of the Jewish world. For much of world Jewry, the Islamic conquest brought a reprieve from the harshness of Byzantine rule. In addition, the unifying of the heretofore separate Jewish populations of Byzantium and Sassanid Persia under a single Islamic ruler would prove critical in the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism for the first time as the normative Judaism for most of the Jewish world.

Furthermore, by the end of the eight century the influence of Islamic culture on Jewish culture, reminiscent of the impact of Hellenism a millennium earlier, would expand the cultural and intellectual boundaries of Judaism to include the philosophical tradition of the ancient Greeks, refashioning the archetypical Jewish scholar as a master of rabbinic text and Greek wisdom. As with earlier encounters between Judaism and non-Jewish cultures, the encounter with Islamic culture would engender the emergence of two rival traditions claiming to be the one authentic and legitimate Judaism: Rabbinic Judaism and Karaism. Karaism would pose the greatest challenge to Rabbinic Judaism, and be the focal point of rabbinic efforts to establish Rabbinic Judaism as normative Judaism.

Historians have disagreed in assessing the favorable and deleterious aspects of Jewish life under Islam. In response to a long-time prevailing assumption that the Jews of Islam fared better, on the whole, than Jews under Christendom, several historians asserted that the Jewish experience under Islam amounted to little else than 1,300 years of uninterrupted adversity and persecution. This point of view, labeled by its detractors as a “neo-lachrymose” view of Islamic Jewish history, in reference to an older “lachrymose view” of endless Jewish suffering in the Christian world (to be discussed in the next chapter), presumes above all that Qur’anic doctrine exerted a decisive and overarching influence on Islamic policy and popular attitudes toward Jews, and that the disparaging view of Jews expressed in the Qur’an translated directly into the political and social status of Jews. This claim has recently been called into question, particularly in light of three episodes in the history of Jews in the Islamic world that contradict this view: eighth- and ninth-century Baghdad, tenth- and eleventh-century Spain, and the early-sixteenth- through late-seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire. Each of these three episodes reflects a significant gap between the theological and the sociopolitical attitudes toward Jews.

The status of Jews under Islam, and the ways that it differed from the status of Jews under Christendom, reflected a combination of theological and political factors that stemmed partly from the initial Islamic and Christian encounters with Jews and
Judaism. Early Christianity was one of several Jewish sects competing for hegemony in a land where Judaism was the dominant and majority religion. By contrast, Muhammad encountered Jews as a minority, and thus did not see Judaism as a rival religion. Moreover, by Muhammad’s time, Judaism itself had developed beyond the laws of the Bible and the moral teachings of the prophets; Muhammad drew on a much larger corpus of rabbinic teachings in conceptualizing Judaism as a precursor to Islam. For example, the Midrashic story of Abraham’s path to monotheism was retold in the Qur’an as Abraham’s path to Allah. While the theological image and view of Jews in Muslim theology were ambiguous, at best, at no point did the Qur’an or Hadith villainize Jews the way Christian doctrine had. Simply put, there was no Islamic belief that Jews had murdered Allah or his son, or that Allah had singled out the Jews to be persecuted for all eternity. The notion that Islam had supplanted Judaism (and Christianity) was far less antagonistic toward Jews than the Christian notion of divine rejection and condemnation.

There was also a crucial difference between the Muslim ulam and caliph on the one hand and the Catholic priest and king on the other – a difference that stems from the disparate roles that Jesus and Muhammad played as founders of their respective religions. Jesus’ leadership was exclusively religious. He never ruled an empire in the temporal sense, envisioning Christendom exclusively as a theological realm. As a result, Christian sovereigns, while periodically acting independently of, or contrary to, Christian theology, on the whole regarded their domain as a Regnum Marianum, limiting the theological and political space for Jews in the world of Christendom.

By contrast, Muhammad was a political leader in addition to founding a religious faith. Hard-wired into the fabric of Islamic civilization, therefore, was a dimension of politics and statecraft that was independent of theology. Hanafi, one of the schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam, allowed political leaders to make decisions based on reason and the demands of circumstance. All in all, Islamic leaders had greater freedom to act pragmatically, independent of religious doctrine; their decisions that determined the privileges, obligations, and restrictions imposed on their subjects were based in no small part on non-religious considerations such as economic utility and political allegiance.

The specific relationship between Muslims and non-believers was defined by circumstances. The status of Jews in Islam was defined first during Muhammad’s initial encounters with Jews on the Arabian Peninsula, and then in the vast territory conquered during a century or more of Islamic expansion. Muhammad’s first encounters with Jews quickly turned violent, with Muhammad eradicating one of the three Jewish tribes living in Medina and forcing the others to flee to an oasis at Khaybar. Later, after laying siege to Khaybar, he forced the Jews to surrender and pay an annual tribute.
Soon afterward, he expelled the Jews from the Hijaz, the Arabian Peninsula and heart of Muhammad’s empire.

During the ensuing period of expansion and conquest, Muhammad and his Muslim followers became increasingly a small minority ruling a large non-Muslim population. The conquest of the Sassanid Persian and Byzantine Empires brought a large Christian and Jewish population under Islamic rule. Eventually, Muslims, Jews, and Christians found a common adversary in the polytheistic pagan population. This was to prove decisive in defining the theological and legal status of Jews and Christians.

Theologically, Islam divides the world into two great realms, Dar al-Islam (House of Islam) and Dar al-Harb (House of the Sword), and believes that a perpetual state of war existed between the two. Most non-Muslims, once conquered, were given the choice of entering Dar al-Islam through conversion, or being put to death. Because Islam defined Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians as ahl-al-kitab (peoples of the book) who had recognized part of the truth of Islam, they were exempted from this choice. They were given a special pact of protection, and known as dhimmi: people of the pact, or protected peoples. Dhimmi status meant having the right to live, and to practice one’s scriptural religion unmolested by the populace, as long as one recognized one’s inferior status. This the dhimmi were expected to do principally through the payment of special taxes such as the jizya and kharaj and by acting at all times with humble deference to Muslims.

The legal status of the dhimmi was codified in the Pact of Umar, a late-seventh-century agreement concluded initially between Muhammad’s successor and the Christians of Damascus. The heart of this agreement was the obligation of the dhimmi to show deference to Muslims, and to remain culturally distinct from the Muslim population. To be sure, neither dhimmi status nor the Pact of Umar was applied uniformly. To orthodox Muslim leaders, it meant protection with humility. In other instances, dhimmi status was applied with excessive harshness or lenience.

In a sense, Jews had certain advantages over Christians in adapting to Muslim rule. The ongoing and seemingly endless wars between Islam and Christendom fostered an adversarial attitude on the part of Muslims toward Christians. In addition, while Byzantine Christians had to adapt to a second-class status after having been the dominant religious group since the fourth century, Jews were already prepared for a subordinate role. For Jews, the Islamic conquest entailed largely a change in overlords. In the case of the Byzantine Jews, this meant a significant improvement.

The Muslim conquest of Persia and Byzantium united most of world Jewry under a single rule for the first time in over a millennium. The center of this united Jewish world was naturally the capital of the Islamic world. Under the Umayyad dynasty, this
meant Damascus. Following the Abbasid conquest of the Umayyads in 750, the capital moved to Baghdad. The proximity of the new capital to Sura and Pumbedita, the intellectual centers of Babylonian Jewry, significantly enhanced the prestige and authority of the Jews of Babylonia. Coupled with the decline of the rabbinate in the Land of Israel, the proximity of the new capital to Sura and Pumbedita, the intellectual centers of Babylonian Jewry, significantly enhanced the prestige and authority of the Jews of Babylonian Jewry. The Jews of Baghdad, in particular, would soon become the undisputed leadership of world Jewry.

The leadership of Babylonian Jewry lay in the hands of three groups: the exilarch, a coterie of leading Jewish families, and the Gaonate. The exilarch was the liaison between the Jews and the Muslim caliph. As a scion of the Davidic dynasty, he was treated as royalty. While nominally tagged with dhimmi status, he was allowed a royal entourage and had unimpeded access to the court of the caliph. His stature was buttressed by the support of leading Jewish families in Baghdad. The installation of the exilarch took place in the magnificent home of one of these families.

Gaon (the plural is “geonim”), the title given to the heads of the rabbinic academies in Sura and Pumbedita, was a shortened version of Rosh Yeshiva Ga’on Bet Yaakov (Head of the Academy and Sage of the House of Jacob). Each gaon regarded himself as an heir of the Amoraic scholars who had participated in the deliberation of the Gemara via the Savoraim, a transitional group of scholars who lived and adjudicated immediately after Sof Hora’a (literally, the end of instruction), the rabbinic epithet that placed the interpretive authority of the Amoraim on a superior footing even to that of their immediate successors following the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud – that is, from the mid-sixth through the mid-eighth century. The geonim, while acknowledging their inferior authority vis-à-vis the Amoraim, regarded themselves as the authoritative voices of their age. In particular, this meant elevating the Babylonian Gaonate over the rabbis of the leading academy in the Land of Israel, located mainly in Tiberius, despite the latter’s similar pedigree. By the end of the ninth century, the geonim had managed the arduous task of extending Rabbinic Judaism and imposing rabbinic authority through much of the Jewish world. As H. L. Ginsburg noted, “The Amoraim of Babylonia wrote a Talmud; the Geonim made it the Talmud.”

This remarkable achievement was facilitated by the general mobility in the Abassid Empire, which allowed the geonic leaders to send emissaries throughout the Jewish world. The task of these emissaries was further aided by the Radhanite merchants, a coterie of international Jewish merchants who traveled and traded from the Far East to Spain. By the end of the ninth century, the families of the Radhanites and the geonim merged through intermarriage. Under these favorable conditions, the emissaries collected donations for the rabbinic academies, and brought religious queries to the
Geonim from Jews throughout the Jewish world. The replies of the geonim to these queries, eventually published as responsa, expanded the religious authority of the geonim. Emblematic of the impact of this achievement was the Seder Amram (Order of Amram), written by Amram Gaon toward the end of the ninth century in response to a query from the Jews of Spain, which regularized the order of Jewish prayer into what is, in large part, still the liturgy used in most traditional communities to this day.

In addition to unifying the Jewish world and facilitating the extension of Rabbinic Judaism, the Islamic conquest also began a period of Arabization of Jewish culture. Arabic replaced Greek and Aramaic as the language of Jewish high culture at the moment when the Arabic world discovered the wisdom of the Greeks, and when Arabic became the language of science. This led to the emergence of a new image of the ideal rabbinic scholar. Previously, the ideal scholar had been a master of biblical, Tannaitic, Amoraic, and geonic literature. By the ninth century, knowledge of the Kalam – the Arabic translation and interpretation of Greek philosophy – and the ability to interpret biblical and rabbinic teachings philosophically as well as exegetically was an essential element of the ideal Jewish scholar.

A towering example of this new scholarly ideal, and the leading figure of ninth- and tenth-century Baghdad Jewry, was Sa’adia Gaon (882–942). His life and career embodies not only the intellectual achievements of the age, but also the conflicts. Sa’adía was born in humble circumstances in Egypt, but his intellectual prowess propelled him by early adulthood to the upper echelon of the Jewish intellectual elite. In 910, he was brought to Baghdad to help mediate a conflict between the exilarchate and the Gaonate, and was rewarded by being appointed the gaon of Sura. Sura, which had recently been overshadowed by Pumbedita, regained its scholarly primacy under Sa’adía Gaon’s leadership. During his years as gaon of Sura, he authored his major works: the Tafzir, a commentary on the Hebrew Bible written in Judeo-Arabic; and The Book of Opinion and Beliefs, a philosophical treatise in Arabic. The latter was the first to present the laws, beliefs, and principles of Judaism systematically. In addition, he authored numerous piyyutim (religious hymns) that were hailed by later Jewish poets for their poetic virtuosity.

The overarching goal of Sa’adía’s philosophical and rabbinic works was to defend Judaism’s validity by demonstrating its philosophical and rational underpinnings. For example, he explained why the Jewish belief in revelation did not belie the primacy of reason. Revelation, he argued, augmented the human power of reason. Theoretically, he suggested, it was possible to grasp the divine will through reason alone. Revelation provided a means to accomplish this task for those who lacked the intellectual ability to reason philosophically or rationally. Revelation also provided a shortcut to rational truth – that is, something to believe in while trying to understand the divine will.
philosophically.

The cultural and intellectual achievements of Sa'adia Gaon and other Babylonian Jewish scholars, however, did not ensure the predominance of Babylonian Jewry. Beginning in the 920s, Sa'adia played a major role in the two arduous struggles waged by the Babylonian Gaonate, the first against the Gaonate of the Land of Israel over the right to determine the calendar, the other against the Karaites (see below) over the exclusive authority of the Babylonian Talmud. In 920, Rabbi Aaron ben Meir and the rabbinate of the Land of Israel attempted to revive and reclaim the rabbinate in the Land of Israel’s practice of determining the Jewish calendar on a monthly and yearly basis, a practice that had been discontinued nearly six hundred years earlier.

This was no small challenge. The uniformity of the Jewish calendar allowed Jews to travel anywhere in the Jewish world safe in the knowledge that festivals and fast days would be observed on a given day. The ability to determine the calendar was a foundation stone of world Jewish leadership. In a larger sense, the dispute reflected the discontent of the Gaonate in the Land of Israel at the Babylonian effort to usurp world leadership. More specifically, in 835, the gaon of Sura had solicited instruction from the rabbis in the Land of Israel regarding the calendar, only to then claim superior knowledge of and authority over it, in the face of Amoraic statements that reserved the right to determine a Jewish leap year to the rabbis in the Land of Israel.

Buttressed by the support of an Egyptian sovereign trying to assert his independence from Abbasid rule, ben Meir reinstated the older calendar practice over the objections and condemnations of the Gaonate. Unprecedented in the history of the diaspora before or since, in 921 the Jews in the Land of Israel followed a different calendar and observed holidays on different days than the rest of the Jewish world. In response, Sa'adia Gaon published Sefer ha-Mo'adim, a compendium of laws concerning the Jewish calendar and festival. In addition, he spearheaded a campaign to win the support of the Jewish world for the Babylonian rabbinate. By 923, Sa'adia Gaon had persuaded ben Meir and the other rabbis to acquiesce.

Nonetheless, this episode demonstrated the limits of Babylonian hegemony as late as the early tenth century. The calendar controversy might not have been so contentious had it not taken place against the background of a second, larger challenge to the authority of the Babylonian Gaonate: Karaism. The Karaites were a sectarian movement that originated in the maverick biblical interpretations of Anan ben David, an eighth-century member of the exilarch’s family. Anan articulated an alternative interpretation of the Torah that contradicted conventional rabbinic tradition. Some of his stricter interpretations of the Torah suggest a more literal reading. For example, whereas as the rabbis interpreted Exodus 35:3 (“You shall not kindle a flame in all your domain on the Sabbath”) as not precluding the use of a flame that had been kindled
prior to the Sabbath, Ananite tradition banned the use of any flame. In fact, this stricter interpretation derived from Anan’s use of some of the same exegetical tools that the rabbis used; he simply drew different conclusions. Among other things, Anan and subsequently his Karaite followers observed the older, Land of Israel-dominated system of determining the Jewish calendar.

By the beginning of the tenth century, the followers of Anan had expanded and crystallized his system of interpretation to form a distinct brand of Judaism: Karaism. As Karaism came into conflict with conventional Rabbinic Judaism, Karaite scholars looked for ways to defend themselves. For example, Jacob al-Kirkisani’s history of Jewish sects argued that sectarian movements, from the Sadducees to the Karaites, were an inherent part of Judaism’s natural development and survival. Sa’adiah Gaon spearheaded the campaign against Karaism. Bringing to bear an arsenal of rabbinic and philosophical modes of argument, he denied Karaism entry to the Jewish mainstream. While recognized as a Jewish sect by the Abbasid caliphate, by the end of the tenth century Karaism was regarded by mainstream Jewish society as an illegitimate form of Judaism. In retrospect, Karaism was not the first challenge to the hegemony of Rabbinic Judaism. Rather, it was the last gasp of non-rabbinic forms of Judaism that had coexisted with Rabbinic Judaism for centuries. In the end, though, the preeminent position of Babylonia and Baghdad was relatively short-lived. By the beginning of the tenth century, rival Jewish centers began to appear in the Islamic world in Egypt, Kairwan, and, most notably, Spain.

“Convivencia”: the Jews of Muslim Spain

By the end of the tenth century, the breakup of the united Abbasid caliphate led to the emergence of new Islamic kingdoms in Egypt, North Africa, and Spain. Concurrently, new centers of Jewish life emerged in each of these new caliphates, most notably in Spain. Until recently, historians generally regarded Muslim Spain as a highly favorable situation for Jews, a view that was often telescoped into a single Spanish term: convivencia. This term referred to an extended, relatively peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Spain from the eighth through the end of the tenth century, often characterized as a golden age in the history of the diaspora. To be sure, Spain was the only country in Europe where three major religions coexisted for an extended period of time, and where Jews were not the only religious minority. Yet the notion of a golden age for Jews in Muslim Spain, while perhaps tenable from the vantage point of Jewish culture, is harder to defend in light of the tumultuous political climate of the Iberian Peninsula. From the eighth through the end of the fifteenth century, Christendom and Islam met and fought in Spain. In addition, during the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, war between Muslim states continued unabated.
Still, Muslim Spain was at least no less hospitable to Jews than other parts of the Muslim world, and considerably better for Jews than any part of Christendom prior to fifteenth-century Poland.

The origins of Jews in Spain are a melange of mythical, semi-historical, and historical accounts. The mythical origins trace Jewish life in Spain back to the time of Solomon, who, according to legend, sent a tax collector to Spain, who died and was buried there. The prophet Obadiah made reference to “captivity in Sepharad,” which later became an epithet for Spain. There were also tales of Jewish refugees from Babylonian and Roman captivity settling in Spain. Semihistorical accounts, based on historical suppositions or circumstantial evidence, include an assertion that since the apostle Paul had traveled to Spain, there must have been Jews there, else why would he have gone there in search of converts? Similarly, there was the presumption that the Jewish presence extended to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire, which included Spain. The earliest historical evidence of Jewish life in Spain, a tombstone of Anna Salo (Hanna bat Solomon), dates to the third century C.E.

Crucial in understanding the situation of Jews in Spain is the fact that Spain was a frontier region with respect to the early Christian and early Islamic worlds. Thus, conditions in Spain until the high Middle Ages often deviated from conditions closer to the center, sometimes to the advantage and sometimes to the detriment of Jews. In fourth-century Spain, one of the few extant sources from this period, the proceedings of a church council in Elvira, suggests a close relationship between Jews and Christians, in contrast to the deteriorating relations between Christians and Jews in points to the east. This council found it necessary to issue a ban on Christians eating with and marrying Jews, and Christians asking Jews to bless their crops.

This situation inverted following the Visigothic conquest of Spain during the sixth century. The Visigoths, extremist Christians, went to great lengths to limit the comforts of Jews in Spain. They heaped all sorts of restrictions on them, culminating in efforts to force them to convert, in violation of Augustine’s injunction to the contrary. By the beginning of the eight century, Jewish life in Spain was on the verge of ending.

The conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by the Muslim forces of Al-Tariq in 711 brought a major reprieve for Jews. As his army gained ground, he recruited Jews in conquered towns to be standing garrisons, while Muslim armies advanced. Later, Spanish Christians would accuse Jews of betrayal, even though most Christians had fled before the Muslims arrived. The Muslims extended to Jews, along with Christians, dhimmi status, a quarter of their own in each town, and, in violation of the Pact of Umar, the right to bear arms.

Until 756, Muslim Spain was ruled by military governors from Muslim North Africa,
leading to a period of instability, anarchy, assassinations, and tensions between Arabs, and Berbers, and Slavs. The situation improved after 750 following the Abbasid conquest of the Umayyad Dynasty. The lone Umayyad survivor of the Abbasid slaughter was Abd-ar-Rachman, who fled to Spain. After subduing the local rivals, he was proclaimed emir of al-Andalus in 756. During his thirty-year reign, he ended the internal strife that had plagued Iberia.

Distrustful of other Muslims, Abd-ar-Rachman implemented a broad policy of toleration of Jews and Christians, a policy that was pursued by his successors as well. By the reign of Abd-ar-Rachman II (822–52), Spain had become an international power with fleets and foreign embassies. Abd-ar-Rachman II forged an alliance with Byzantium in order to fight their common enemy: the Abbasid caliphate.

The rise of Muslim Spain as an important center of Jewish life coincided with emergence of Spain as an independent caliphate. Full independence was achieved during the reign of Abd-ar-Rachman III. In addition, this caliph wanted to create a royal court that would rival the imperial court in Baghdad. To this end, he invited leading Muslim, Christian, and Jewish intellectuals to join his court. This coincided with the decline of the exilarch and the Gaonate in Baghdad.

The independence of Jews in Spain from the Jews of Baghdad was completed under the leadership of Hasdai ibn Shaprut, a Jewish parallel to Abd-ar-Rachman III. Hasdai ibn Shaprut was a wealthy, well-connected courtier, and thus a natural leader of Jews in Spain. He was also an accomplished scholar, characteristic of Jewish courtiers. In this sense, he combined the religious leadership of a gaon with the political leadership of the exilarch.

His patronage, moreover, was instrumental in the flourishing of Jewish culture in Spain. He imported volumes of the (Babylonian and Jerusalem) Talmuds and spent lavishly to obtain correct talmudic manuscripts. Until Hasdai expanded the parameters of Jewish culture according to the Islamic Jewish model, there was no evidence of non-traditional Jewish culture in Spain. The court of Abd-ar-Rachman III in Córdoba was worthy of emulation, and, in addition, the royal policy of toleration encouraged interpenetration of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish culture, based partly on religious competition. Finally, the personal example of Hasdai himself spurred other Jews to expand their cultural horizons.

As a patron of the arts, Hasdai sponsored many promising young scholars. Principal among them were Menachem ibn Saruk and Dunash ibn Labrat. Ibn Saruk, Hasdai’s secretary, compiled the first Hebrew dictionary. Eventually he met a tragic end, when he was suspected of being a Karaite and chased out of Córdoba. Ibn Labrat was born in Fez, Morocco, and educated in Babylonia. Under Hasdai’s tutelage, he became the first
Hebrew poet in the Muslim world, and the first secular Hebrew poet since ancient
times. He introduced Arabic meter into Hebrew poetry. Though not a great poet, he
prepared the ground for the great poets who would follow.

Hasdai was also involved in the discovery of the Khazars by the Jews in Europe and the
Middle East. The Khazars were a pagan people in Central Asia whose king had
converted himself and then his people to Judaism in the eight century C.E., for reasons
unknown. In Hasdai’s correspondence with the king of the Khazars, he attempted to
present himself as near-royalty, comparable to the Jewish king of Khazaria.

The cultural development of Jews in Muslim Spain reached a high point at the end of
the tenth century during the life of Samuel ibn Nagrela (997–1056), the most
accomplished and successful Jew in Spain, if not in the entire history of the diaspora. He
was a product of the cultural developments that preceded him. He received a dual
education, Jewish and Arabic. He was an accomplished talmudic scholar, but also a
great poet, Arabic scholar, statesman, and military leader. He would eventually hold the
highest position obtained by any Jew in the diaspora.

Ibn Nagrela was born at a time of growing political instability during the breakup of
the caliphate of Abd-ar-Rachman III at the end of the tenth century. In 1013, a series of
civil wars climaxed with the Berbers capturing Córdoba, and the ensuing emergence of
many petty states. The Berbers were far less tolerant of non-Muslims than the Arabs
had been, prompting the center of Jewish life to shift from Córdoba to Grenada.

Against this background, Ibn Nagrela rose from humble beginnings to greatness. As a
young man, his knowledge of Hebrew and Arabic earned him a job as a scribe, first for a
local official and then for a courtier of King Habus of Grenada, and finally for the king
himself. In 1020, Habus appointed Ibn Nagrela royal vizier owing to his skill as a scribe,
and because the Berber king ruled an Arab majority and deemed Jews to be the most
trustworthy of his subjects. As vizier, Ibn Nagrela had authority over all Muslims except
the king, and even led the Muslim troops into battle.

In 1027, he assumed the title of nagid of Granada, the de facto leader of the city’s Jews.
In this capacity, he supported academies not only in Granada and elsewhere in Spain,
but also in Babylonia and Jerusalem. He purchased manuscripts for poor Spanish Jews,
and was a patron of leading Jewish scholars such as the biblical commentator Abraham
ibn Ezra, and leading Jewish poets such as Moses ibn Ezra and Solomon ibn Gabirol.

The biblical commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra, in particular, underscores the complexity
of Jewish culture in Muslim Spain. Building on the work of Sa’adiah Gaon, Ibn Ezra
composed one of the most elegant commentaries on the Hebrew Bible. It combined
mastery of rabbinic literature, Aristotelian philosophy, and the literary and linguistic
sensitivities of the age. Commenting on Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your
God with all your heart and all your soul,” Ibn Ezra notes, “The heart is knowledge and is the pseudonym for the enlightening spirit and the prime mover. ... The soul is spirit of the body of the body that desires.”

Ibn Ezra, moreover, periodically used his commentary on the Torah as a vehicle to defend Judaism from its Muslim, Christian, and philosophical assailants. For example, by the tenth century there was a prevailing notion among Christian and Muslim astrologers that Jews were closely aligned with the planet Saturn, regarded by astrologers as the most malevolent of the planets. This notion had originated much earlier among Roman astrologers such as Tacitus before finding its way into the writings of Saint Augustine and Muslim philosophers such Abu Ma'ashar, and would remain a core element of Christian and Muslim critiques of Judaism until the sixteenth century.

In response, Ibn Ezra recast the influence of Saturn in a more positive light from malevolence to fear of heaven, initially in his work on astrology, Reshit Hokhma, and later in his biblical commentary. In his commentary on the Ten Commandments, Ibn Ezra linked the nine known planets to the last nine of the ten commandments. Saturn, he claimed, coincided with the commandment to keep the Sabbath, noting, “It is therefore unfit for one to occupy himself on that day with everyday matters. On the contrary, one should devote himself on the Sabbath day solely to the fear of God.”

Ibn Nagrela was also an accomplished scholar in his own right. He was the greatest theologian of Islam anywhere in Spain, and wrote a critique of the Qur'an. He composed poetry using the finest metric virtuosity of any premodern Hebrew poetry. He developed the wine-song to its apex, and wrote war poems in Hebrew in which he attributed his military victories to divine providence. Typical among these, and indicative of his profound sense of greatness, was the poem “Ani David Le-Dori” (I am the David of my generation).

His stature as nagid and vizier challenged the notion that Jews' lack of sovereignty was a result of a divine punishment. For this reason, some Muslims regarded his high position as scandalous and a violation of Muslim law. Such discontent was galvanized by Ibn Nagrela's arrogance. During his lifetime, though, criticism against him remained muted and dormant.

After his death in 1056, these tensions surfaced and were directed at his son, Joseph ibn Samuel. Ibn Samuel inherited his father's status as nagid and was a courtier, but was not the royal vizier. Soon after his father's death, there appeared a scathing polemical attack against him. In 1066, Muslim rioters destroyed the Jewish community of Granada, in retrospect the beginning of the end of Jewish life in Muslim Spain. During the ensuing decades, a Berber invasion brought to power a series of fundamentalist Muslim
rulers who were intolerant of Jews.

The collapse of Jewish life in Muslim Spain elicited three responses from the Jews, each of which reflected a distinct view of the future of Jewish life in the diaspora: migration to elsewhere in the Muslim world, migration to the Land of Israel, and migration to Christian northern Spain. The contours of each of these responses can be described with reference to the lives of Moses Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi, and the Ibn Ezra family respectively.

The family of Moses Maimonides was among those who opted to migrate elsewhere in the Muslim world. Maimonides was born in Córdoba in 1135. When he was 13, Córdoba was conquered by the Almohads, Muslim fundamentalists from North Africa. The ensuing religious persecution prompted the Maimon family to leave Córdoba and, after wandering for twelve years, to settle in Fez, Morocco, by 1160. There Moses Maimonides studied with Judah ha-Cohen ibn Susan. In 1165, Ibn Susan chose martyrdom over forced conversion – a subtext of Maimonides’ treatise on the subject of forced conversion. The Maimon family then moved to Cairo, so that Moses could fight against the Karaites. Until 1168, Moses was supported by his brother David, a physician. When David died in 1168, Moses studied medicine so as not to have to earn a livelihood from the study of the Torah.

By 1177, Moses Maimonides was appointed the head of Jewish community of Fustat, a suburb of Cairo, and would often be referred to as the Sage of Fustat. In 1185, he was appointed the physician of Al-Fadil, royal vizier of Egypt. From this point, he worked nearly around the clock as royal physician and physician to the Jewish community. On the Sabbath, he addressed legal and theological questions all day. Given this full schedule, it is hard to imagine when Maimonides slept, let alone found the time to write books. Nonetheless, he was a prolific scholar, producing some of the most influential legal and philosophical works of his time. Chief among these was his legal code, Mishneh Torah, written in clear, concise Hebrew for a broad Jewish audience. His philosophical treatise Guide to the Perplexed, which he wrote in Arabic for the older children of the Jewish elite, was intended to resolve tensions between Judaism and Greek philosophy; and his numerous epistles dealt with a diverse array of subjects such as the Messiah and the status of converts in Jewish communal life. A common thread in his varied works was a sense of dislocation. In his introduction to the Mishneh Torah, as well as his introduction to his commentary on the Mishneh, he noted a concern lest the transmission of scholarship be interrupted by the travails of the time.

Yet neither the Maimon family’s response to the decline of Jewish Muslim Spain nor the writings of Moses Maimonides revealed a sense of disillusionment with the future of Jewish life in the diaspora, but only with Muslim Spain. This was in contrast to the response of Yehuda Halevi, who despaired of any future for Jewish life anywhere in the
diaspora. Halevi, the greatest Jewish poet in the history of the diaspora, was born c. 1075 in Toledo amid the tempestuous transition in Spain from Muslim to Christian rule. His friendly demeanor gained him access to elite circles. He won an Ibn Ezra poem improvisation competition, and the admiration and support of the Ibn Ezra family, who invited Halevi to Granada. There he remained until 1090, when the Muslim fundamentalist Ibn Tashfin captured the city.

At this point, Halevi began to travel, and spent time in Lucenna and Seville. Eventually he settled in Córdoba, which was still home to Jewish scholars and writers. He earned a living as a physician, and became rich. His literary output marked the pinnacle of Hebrew poetry in Spain. More of his poems were incorporated into the Jewish liturgy than those of any other poet.

Most striking among his poems were those in which he expressed his yearning for Zion, such as “Libi ba-Mizrach” (My heart is in the east). Unlike his contemporaries, Halevi believed that the Muslim–Christian conflict in Spain was a microcosm of global conflict. He saw Spanish Jews as caught between hammer and anvil, tottering on a precipice, and felt that Spain was at best only a temporary refuge. He argued that Jews should return to Zion. Centuries later, proponents of Zionism would (anachronistically) claim him as a precursor. In fact, his yearning for Zion reflected a traditional messianic belief, with one modification: that Jews should wait for the Messiah in Israel in order to hasten the arrival of the Messianic Age.

Parallel to his disillusionment with the prospects for Jewish life in Spain was his critique of the influence of philosophy in Jewish intellectual life. In the greatest of his works, Kuzari: A Defense of a Despised Religion, Halevi produced what has been described as a philosophical critique of philosophy. In this work, he imagined the decision-making process that led the king of the Khazars to convert to Judaism. In a series of dialogues, the king listens and dismisses the arguments of a Muslim, a Christian, and a philosopher. He then listens and accepts the arguments of a rabbi, deciding that Judaism is the bearer of divine truth.

In the end, though, while Maimonides and Yehuda Halevi were undoubtedly not the only Spanish Jews to leave Spain, many others remained in Spain by migrating northward to Christian Spain. Notable among these Jews were Abraham ibn Daud and the Ibn Ezra family, who were able to reestablish themselves in the comparatively less contentious climate of the Christian North. There they would encounter a whole new set of challenges and opportunities in the world of European Christendom.
Alcohol, Cultural Development and the Rise of Trade in the Post-Classical and Early Modern World
Chapter 3. Alcohol, Cultural Development and the Rise of Trade in the Post-Classical and Early Modern World

Dramatic changes characterized many areas in the Post-Classical world. The rise of Islam and its spread across the Middle East and parts of Europe brought trade and technology in its wake. In the Americas vast empires expanded across the continent, creating sophisticated societies in Meso and South America. In the East modern forms of government and society began to develop, while in the West the growth of the merchant class and the rise of technology transformed society. The production, trade, consumption, and regulation of alcohol influenced many of these changes. For example, the production of alcohol in South America by women solidified gender roles in that area. Trade in alcohol across Western Europe facilitated the rising merchant class and the interactions among regions, while consumption patterns in Eastern Europe and Japan delineated social hierarchies in those areas. Finally, regulation of alcohol fostered the development of tax systems in Western Europe.

The Middle East

Islam began to define much of the Middle East toward the end of the Classical Period and beginning of the Post-Classical period. Arab Muslim armies conquered much of the Middle East, including parts of Africa and the Mediterranean. While the entire Middle East was not ethnically unified, Islam served to unite the area and provide the impetus for the spread of culture. Islam began in the 600s with the teachings of the prophet Muhammad, and soon spread throughout the Middle East and Asia. Alcohol regulation became one of the founding principles of the religion. Islam prohibited the consumption of alcohol. A perhaps apocryphal story explained why Mohammed believed drinking should not be tolerated in the Islamic religion. The story related that on one occasion when the prophet's disciples were drinking together, one of them from Mecca stood up and began to recite a rather uncomplimentary poem about one of the disciples from Medina. This resulted in the recipient of the poem hurling a bone at the head of the reciter. Mohammed supposedly asked God, Allah, how to remedy such problems. The result was that alcohol should be outlawed in the religion. Historians have argued that refraining from alcohol was a way for Muslims to distinguish themselves from the Christians who drank wine.

In any event, the spread of Islam across the Middle East and North Africa dramatically decreased alcohol consumption in those areas, but it did not completely erase it. Religious proponents destroyed many vineyards and thus wine consumption necessarily diminished. Sometimes, however, non-Muslims in a religious area were allowed to continue to brew and consume alcohol. And there were still poems that extolled the virtues of wine. In addition, a Persian tradition, for example, allowed for moderate consumption of wine if one was ill. There were other ways around the prohibition of
wine by Islam as well. For example, boiling wine or adding salt or relishes to it made it acceptable to drink.

The Quran also mentioned that there were some benefits from wine, and Mohammed claimed that for those Muslims who made it to heaven, wine would be part of the reward. Islamic physicians also used wine to cure ills. One prominent Persian physician, Avicenna (980–1036 CE) wrote that white wine could relieve headaches, and that wine was good for digestion. At the same time, however, he wrote that children should not be given wine and that frequent intoxication was bad for the body, particularly the liver, brain, and nerves. The Quran also noted that wine caused more ills than benefits. Early portions of the Quran mentioned that it was impossible to meditate or pray while intoxicated. Later verses stated that there was a link between wine and a variety of social evils.

Some scholars have argued that the prohibition of wine in the Quran was ambiguous, and that it was not the use of wine, per se, but the use of wine in pagan rituals that was outlawed. Other scholars have argued that rather than being explicitly forbidden like blood or pork or carrion, the Quran maintained that it was the misuse of alcohol that caused severe social problems. It could create divisions among men, and could separate them from God. These historians contend that the prohibition of wine came more from a historical context than divine law. Theocrats in Muslim countries during Mohammed’s time did enact controls to regulate drinking. Group pressure was used to curb drinking, and under subsequent caliphates punishments for drinking ranged from between 40 and 80 lashes.

Indeed as Islam spread across parts of the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Europe it changed the drinking habits of the societies there. The absence of alcohol brought on by Islam changed the nature of rituals and ceremonies, as well as social interactions in those cultures. In some regions abstinence did not prevail, however. For example, in Spain wine drinking continued, even in Muslim societies. Similar to the famous symposia of the Greeks, men gathered in the evening and drank, talked, and read poetry. So even in Islam many contradictions existed between the precepts and actual practice. It can be said, however, that the prohibition of alcohol considerably shaped the cultures to which it spread.

**Pre-colonial Americas**

In the Americas during the pre-colonial period, large sedentary populations grew in Meso-America and in the Andes. Each had their own kind of alcohol based upon the plants available to them. Mexicans drank pulque, made from the agave plant, and Andeans drank chicha, made from corn. In each civilization alcohol figured prominently in daily life, as well as in the cultural construction of gender, social hierarchy, and
religion. Alcohol production, consumption, and regulation in the Americas helped define the Aztec and Inca empires. In Meso-America the ubiquity of pulque, even with its long and intense production process, suggests how important alcohol was to that society. The Aztecs regulated its consumption, helping to solidify class and gender distinctions within the empire, and reinforcing the control of the state over its people. Since pulque was consumed during most ritual and ceremonial occasions it helped to define social and religious structures within the empire as well. In Peru, chicha, much like pulque, was important to ceremonies in the Inca empire. Only women produced chicha, so chicha production helped to define gender roles in that culture. Inca leaders regulated chicha use, which became an important tool to strengthen the control of the empire over its conquered areas. In these ways alcohol was central to the development of class, gender, and governmental control in both cultures.

In Mexico, alcohol, in this case pulque, shaped history and religion. According to one folktale, pulque was discovered by a great Toltec noble named Papantzin. Evidence suggests, however, that it was likely used at least 1,500 years before the Toltec civilization. From as early as 200 CE stone carvings showed pulque, although no evidence exists regarding the beginnings of its production. Aztec society linked pulque with fertility, femininity, and agriculture; the goddess of pulque, Mayahuel, was an earth mother who had 400 breasts.

The production of pulque required several years and was very involved. The maguey plant, which was a type of agave plant similar to a cactus, had to grow for eight to ten years in order to mature enough to make pulque. After the plant matured the juice of the plant was extracted over a period of months and stored inside containers inside a tinacal, which was a special building made for that purpose. Pulque was also made by removing the leaves from the agave to get to the heart of the plant. Workers cut the heart into two pieces and slow-cooked it for two or three days in a below-ground earthen oven lined with moist leaves of the plant. Afterwards, the hearts were removed and laid in the sun for several days to dry. After the hearts dried, the pulp was separated from the fiber, and then steeped in water to begin fermentation. The name pulque in Nahuatl means decomposed, or spoiled, which probably relates to the fact that it did not keep long, sometimes only a day after being made.

Consumption patterns of pulque during the Aztec period shaped religion, ritual, social status, and medicine. The Aztecs predominantly used pulque for ritual and medicinal purposes. Only during designated annual ceremonies were people allowed to be publicly intoxicated. For example, annual feasts in honor of the gods as well as harvest festivals called for mass drinking. William Taylor points out in *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* that other occasions for drinking in pre-colonial Mexico included births, weddings, funerals, and a warrior's rights of passage, all of
which justified several days of drinking. During all other times of the year only elites, the elderly, and people who were considered wise were allowed to drink pulque. The majority of the population was rarely allowed to drink. Lower-class women could drink pulque after giving birth, men could drink after strenuous work, and warriors were given pulque after a victory. Drinking pulque on these occasions was allowed because pulque was thought to restore strength. In order to regulate the use of pulque Aztec leaders imposed several punishments for casual pulque drinking, which ranged from having one's head shaved in public, to whipping, or even stoning. These regulations in Aztec society emphasized who could drink and when they could drink, but not how much. Excessive drinking during sanctioned occasions was expected. Taylor points out that “[p]ulque, then, was an important drink ... before the conquest: not really a forbidden drink, but a powerful, almost sacred substance, with unpredictable effects, and generally controlled by rules of periodic, ritual use.” Pulque held an important place in the religion and society of the Aztecs and was central in defining how festivals and rituals took place.

In Peru, the first evidence of chicha comes from the period 500–300 BCE. Chicha was generally made from maize, but it could also be made from quinoa, manioc, and peanuts – depending upon the region. The most common kind of chicha was maize chicha, however. Chicha was used in the pre-Incaic empire of the Chimú Indians of Peru. People in that society drank chicha every day as a food-beverage and also used it during ceremonial occasions as well as work parties. Both individual households as well as political leaders used chicha to gather workers.

During the Inca period chicha influenced origin myths, gender ideologies, religion, and the spread of culture. The origin myths of the Inca state included chicha. The Incas believed that the four ancestors of the Incas came out of three caves in a mountain called Tambo Toco. Manco Capac, one of the four men from the mountain, pulled out some corn seeds that he had brought from the cave where he had emerged and then planted the first cornfield in the Cusco valley. Chicha then began to be made from that field. In another myth, Mama Huaco, one of the original ancestors, planted the first field of corn. After she died her body was embalmed and mummified and the people responsible for caring for her mummy made chicha from the corn grown in that field. The chicha was given to those who maintained her cult.

Only women produced chicha, providing a key component in the makeup of female gender identity. Specially chosen women, called mamacona, made chicha for the Inca king. These women were judged the most beautiful in the kingdom and were required to be virgins. They were revered and lived their lives in large, state-run centers made especially for producing chicha and weaving cloth. They procured their grain from tribute to the king and thus had a never-ending supply of maize for their work. Not only
did mamacna make chicha for the kingdom, but also individual women made chicha in
their homes. Chicha production began when women shaped mouth-sized balls of maize
dough and masticated these dough balls until sugar was produced from the starch. To
cook the chicha women used large clay pots over open fire pits. A woman heated water
in one pot and then poured that hot water over the masticated maize in another clay
pot. She then stirred the mixture until it became a paste, which took several hours. The
paste slowly separated into liquid at the top and solids at the bottom. Then she boiled
more water and slowly added this water to the mixture of masticated corn and water
until it produced a cloudy mixture, which she stirred into a soupy consistency. After the
mixture rested it separated into three layers. The top layer was skimmed off into a
separate pot, as was the second layer. These two layers became chicha after a few days
of fermentation. Chicha was opaque and effervescent and tasted a little like apple cider.
It usually contained less than 5 percent alcohol, although it could contain up to 12
percent alcohol. Chicha was drunk through straws put into various drinking vessels
shaped into llama heads, reed boats, and even the skulls of enemies, all of which held
meaning for the Incas.

Chicha also structured the daily lives of the Incas, shaped religious and social
ceremonies, and spread Inca culture throughout the empire. Most Andeans in
corn-producing areas drank chicha as one of their main food sources. It contained
numerous vitamins and nutrients. Inca leaders and their subordinates drank chicha
during major feasts and work parties. It was also used in ceremonies of large land
holders (patrons) and their workers. Moreover, Incan kings offered chicha to their gods
and ancestors. Patrick McGovern in Uncorking the Past describes how in a ritual the king
poured chicha into a golden bowl located on a throne in the central plaza of the
capital. The chicha spilled down the “gullet of the Sun God” into the Temple of the Sun.
In addition, commoners drank prodigious amounts of chicha during festivals. Moreover,
human sacrifices were “rubbed in the dregs of chicha and then tube-fed with more
chicha for days while lying buried alive in tombs.” Some authors argue that maize
chicha was also crucial in the spread of Incan culture throughout the empire. For
example, Inca chiefs gave villagers in far-flung regions of the empire abundant chicha
to drink at large banquets held to reinforce the power of the chief. In addition, when
Inca representatives stopped along the roads as they traveled, people expected them to
provide chicha. In return, the Inca received both the loyalty and the work of the
villagers in the Inca’s fields. It therefore was the most important piece of material
culture that represented and reinforced the social and political hierarchy within the
Inca state.

Post-Classical and early-modern Eastern Europe

In Post-Classical and early modern Eastern Europe alcohol swayed the course of
religion, defined social status, and structured festivals. When in the tenth century one Russian state, led by Vladimir, began to move toward a central religion, alcohol shaped the decision. Alcohol was so important in Russian society that Vladimir rejected Islam, for example, because of its proscription against alcohol. The most popular alcoholic drinks in Russia were kvass, which was a rye-based beer, and mead. Elites drank mead, especially in the thirteenth century when its main ingredient, honey, grew scarce because the bee population died out. As in other areas of Europe, elites also drank wine. Wine was imported to Poland, especially the city of Cracow, which was a trade hub. From here wine was transported to other Eastern European areas and to the Baltic region. The consumption of mead and wine, then, became a way for elites to culturally separate themselves from the rest of the population in early modern Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe.

Peasants drank beer. As in other agricultural societies drinking was a social ritual, based on the agricultural calendar. Binge, or excessive drinking took place during harvest time. Brewing beer was so important to the peasant class, in fact, that even in the times of famine, especially the great famine of 1601, beer brewing continued. Heavy alcohol consumption continued to be emblematic of Russian society throughout the modern period.

**Post-Classical and early-modern Japan**

Alcohol trade and consumption significantly influenced the development of Japan. During the Heian period, between 794 and 1185 the royal court focused on ultra-polite behavior and luxury. Part of the aristocratic lifestyle was the use of sake, or rice wine, which began to be produced in this period. Political leaders controlled the production of sake, and the royal court designated court brewers to make sake for ritual use. Because it was controlled by royalty and elites, access to sake was one of the factors that effectively separated the classes. Sake production continued to develop between 1185 and 1573, when the court, or shogunate, allowed select families to start independent breweries. These brewing families sold sake at the gates to the temples on market days and competed with each other for customers. Sake became an important commodity, which influenced the development of commercialization in Japan. Ceremonial use of sake helped to structure rituals in early modern Japan. For example, in rural areas most drinking took place during big celebrations where the community made large amounts of alcohol and drank it for days until it was finished. Alcohol continued to shape the Japanese economy and culture as Japan advanced into the modern world.
CHAPTER 4

The World Hunt
Twenty-first century landscapes and ecosystems are undeniably impoverished in comparison with those of the early modern centuries, especially in terms of the declining range and number of large animal and marine species. Five hundred years ago, the earth’s land surface and oceans teemed with an abundance and diversity of wildlife almost inconceivable today. Maps still show place names that capture something of this former richness, for instance, Rhenoster (rhinoceros) Kop in South Africa and Cape Cod in North America. But from the late fifteenth century, European colonial expansion and early forms of economic globalisation encouraged the rapid growth of what historian John Richards has called the ‘world hunt’. Unrestrained commercial predation for furs, feathers, ivory and flesh killed off enormous numbers of the planet’s wildlife, greatly diminishing the complexity of its ecosystems. In particular, populations of large mammals such as rhinos, tigers, elephants, bison and whales – whose carcasses possessed significant market value – declined dramatically. Since 1600, at least 485 animal species have become extinct (an extinction rate far higher than the ‘normal’ background average), many as a direct result of overhunting.

Until recently, the importance of hunting to the European colonial enterprise had not been fully recognised by historians. However, the work of Richards and others has shown that advancing colonial frontiers around the world were also hunting frontiers, with the rising demand for animal resources one of the primary drivers of expansion. The world hunt, as we shall see, comprised various types and overlapping phases of predation by humans, most notably organised commercial hunting for international markets, settler hunting for subsistence and vermin reduction and the killing of animals for sport and recreation. Over the past 500 years, systematic hunting on an unprecedented scale and of previously unseen intensity seriously depleted populations of what conservationists now call ‘charismatic megafauna’. Most large wild animals disappeared from increasingly homogenised landscapes, replaced by a smaller roster of domesticated and synanthropic species – horses, cows, sheep, pigs, rats, house sparrows and so on – that thrive in human-dominated environments. While the earth still teems with life, it is much less exotic and diverse.

Humans have been hunter-gatherers for most of their evolutionary history, and some small isolated groups have persisted in remote areas up to the present day. The apparent success of hunter-gatherers in using natural resources wisely over millennia and allowing underlying environmental support systems to remain in good working order has generated considerable scholarly debate as to whether such groups were the ‘first ecologists’ (and hence possible role models for a more sustainable future). The Inuit peoples of Arctic North America, for example, developed a sustainable hunting culture that depended on marine mammals – whales, walruses and seals – as a major
source of subsistence. Southern African societies, such as the San 'Bushmen', hunted for food and trade without noticeably disrupting the population dynamics of the vast numbers of wild animals dispersed throughout the region. There is, however, compelling archaeological evidence to suggest that some hunter-gatherers have been responsible for numerous cases of 'overkill' and species loss since the Pleistocene colonisation of the earth by humans. Whether or not hunter-gatherer societies, with their intimate knowledge of local ecosystems, were 'prudent predators' is still open to question. But their basic technologies, highly mobile lifestyles, lack of demand for material possessions and low population levels meant that their ecological impact was relatively light. In stark contrast, from the beginning of the early modern period, market-oriented hunting greatly accelerated the loss of biodiversity in nearly every part of the globe. It also enmeshed indigenous peoples in unequal trade relations with Europeans that both transformed their cultures and undermined their autonomy.

**Commercial hunting**

Market hunting for wildlife products went hand in hand with European exploration and expansion in the early modern period. Thanks to innovations in maritime transport, advances in mapping and navigational skills and the demands of a growing global economy, from the late fifteenth century organised commercial hunting was extended into every world region and ocean. Wealthy Europeans and Asians took pleasure in purchasing decorative objects fashioned from ivory, in wearing furs and feathers and in eating exotic cuts of meat and fish. Once a monetary value had been placed on these and other wildlife products – a new departure from pre-colonial trading systems that turned nature into a commodity – human hunters quickly depleted profitable 'target species' in one region after another. Frontiersmen (hunting was predominantly a male activity) 'mined' animal resources and fisheries as if they were mineral deposits of gold, silver or iron, working them until they were exhausted. For a time, at least until frontiers 'closed' and state control was extended, wildlife was an unregulated, open-access resource that was available to all users on a 'first come, first served' basis. The cultural systems of indigenous peoples that had previously determined access to hunting grounds broke down following European colonisation. To contemporary European market hunters, who generally did not look beyond maximising their short-term profits, it made sound economic sense to exploit what was a common resource until it was gone. In an increasingly competitive pursuit of resources, there was little incentive to conserve wildlife for the future.

Although approaches to commercial hunting varied under different colonial regimes around the globe, some common patterns and characteristics can be identified. The first European market hunters to penetrate new environments – from the Americas and
southern Africa to the Arctic Ocean – tended to view the abundance of wildlife they encountered as a resource ‘windfall’, and every advance was accompanied by widespread asset-stripping of valuable mammal and fish stocks. Responding to metropolitan consumer demands for wildlife products, the recurrent pattern of commercialised hunting both on land and sea was broadly as follows: the exploitation of local populations of preferred species until exhausted; where feasible, the location and ‘mining’ of new prey species that offered a viable alternative in the same area; then a move outward to find new hunting grounds once these lucrative ‘target species’ had been sequentially depleted. Island species in particular were, and are, extremely vulnerable to intensive market hunting and other human activities. Today, disproportionate numbers of endangered or threatened species are to be found on islands. For example, the millions of sea turtles that nested on the beaches of Caribbean islands such as the Caymans – first named Las Tortugas (The Turtles) by Christopher Columbus in 1503 – had been hunted almost to extinction by 1900 for their flesh, eggs and shells. Turtle soup became a popular dish in imperial Europe, and turtle shells were used to make jewellery and ornaments. Only remnants of the Cayman Islands’ formerly vast green sea turtle population, the most prized of the turtle species found in Caribbean waters, have survived.

The world hunt was important in altering relationships between indigenous peoples and their environments. It was also instrumental in weakening their societies and cultures. To meet rising consumer demands, European hunter-traders recruited large numbers of Native Americans, Africans and others to track, kill and process wild animals for export. These peoples were a cheap and mobile workforce who, for the most part, became willingly involved in commercial hunting to gain access to desirable European trade goods, such as metal tools, firearms, ammunition, textiles, tobacco and alcohol. Precious wildlife resources were extracted at minimal cost; although it should be noted that European merchandise had a high technological and symbolic value for indigenous peoples. Consequently, aboriginal hunting economies changed, with many becoming oriented primarily towards international markets rather than subsistence. Traditional restraints and taboos that had protected against overhunting and overfishing were often disregarded as indigenous peoples became ‘enthusiastic consumers’. Unsustainable levels of market hunting undermined aboriginal subsistence systems, as wildlife resources critical to their well-being became scarce. Not only that, as communities became ever more reliant on imported goods acquired from European trading posts, many native crafts and skills disappeared – bow and arrow making, for example – threatening the survival of their cultures. A very similar pattern of subcontracting out the labour involved in commercial hunting to indigenous peoples, and of growing economic dependence as a result of trade, also emerged in Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868), following its expansion into Hokkaido. If hunting for world markets
had a corrosive effect on indigenous peoples’ modes of life, it also had a devastating ecological impact, taking a heavy toll on biodiversity. From the late sixteenth century, an insatiable demand for furs in Europe and China – for warmth, fashion and status – saw the spread of commercial hunting across North America and Siberia. By this time, populations of European fur-bearing animals, such as bear, beaver, marten, otter and sable, were already in serious decline. Companies founded by the Dutch (Dutch West India Company, 1621), French (Company of New France, 1627), and English (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1670) led the way in organising the North American fur trade, with cut-throat competition between them placing increasing pressure on animal stocks. With firearms and steel traps coming into common use from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, hunting became more efficient too – compounding this pressure. Table 2.1 below shows the annual average yields for North American furs, harvested primarily for export to European furriers and hatmakers, spanning two centuries.

Such wholesale slaughter meant that fur-bearing animals were soon very scarce in eastern North America, forcing European hunter-traders and their indigenous partners – most notably the Iroquois – to push further and further west in search of more prey (which led to warfare and conflict at the advancing frontiers of empire over the control of new hunting grounds). Initially, the beaver was the main target species: hardest hit because its fur made sought-after, high-quality felt hats. The pre-colonial beaver population in North America has been conservatively estimated at about 50 million animals. But, as Table 2.1 helps to illustrate, its numbers had crashed by the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>1700–63</th>
<th>1780–99</th>
<th>Percentage change</th>
<th>1830–49</th>
<th>Percentage change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beaver</td>
<td>179,268</td>
<td>263,976</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>77,654</td>
<td>−70.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raccoon</td>
<td>91,637</td>
<td>225,115</td>
<td>145.7</td>
<td>322,759</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marten</td>
<td>51,315</td>
<td>88,856</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>130,283</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>18,411</td>
<td>20,360</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>79,056</td>
<td>288.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear</td>
<td>16,033</td>
<td>26,833</td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>13,229</td>
<td>−50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mink</td>
<td>15,730</td>
<td>20,680</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>144,719</td>
<td>599.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otter</td>
<td>11,525</td>
<td>36,326</td>
<td>215.2</td>
<td>20,169</td>
<td>−44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muskrat</td>
<td>10,432</td>
<td>177,736</td>
<td>1,603.8</td>
<td>849,865</td>
<td>378.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynx/bobcat</td>
<td>10,179</td>
<td>17,277</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>35,443</td>
<td>105.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisher</td>
<td>3,373</td>
<td>8,480</td>
<td>151.4</td>
<td>10,412</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolf</td>
<td>1,830</td>
<td>16,461</td>
<td>799.5</td>
<td>8,899</td>
<td>−45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverine</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>1,430</td>
<td>135.2</td>
<td>1,318</td>
<td>−7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>410,341</td>
<td>905,530</td>
<td>120.2</td>
<td>1,693,806</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

mid-nineteenth century due to overhunting. By the early twentieth century only around 100,000 beaver remained, and it was locally extinct in many of its former ranges. Overall, the figures show that the fur trade decimated a broad spectrum of North American wildlife, with bears, otters, wolves and wolverines proving especially vulnerable to human predation.

Cold climates produced the most coveted and luxuriant furs for making warm garments. At the same time as the English, French and their allies were pressing westwards across North America, the Russians were expanding eastwards into Siberia in what has been described as one ‘epic circumpolar quest for fur’. By 1800, the fur trade had come full circle as market hunters from two continents met on the Pacific coast of North America (the Russians were the first to arrive by sea in the 1730s). In contrast to the English and French, who traded with Native Americans for pelts, the Russians imposed the *iasak*, an annual tribute or tax, on the conquered Siberian peoples which had to be paid in furs – preferably sable. Throughout the seventeenth century, a combination of iasak collections and private hunting yielded an annual average of between 200,000 and 300,000 sable pelts, providing some 7 to 10 per cent of Russian state revenues. When supplies of sable began to dwindle – they could be found only in south-eastern Siberia by 1750 – the Russian state pragmatically accepted ermine, fox, marten, wolf and even squirrel pelts as payment of the iasak. However, unrelenting predation by both indigenous and Russian hunters was to rapidly strip these animals from the Siberian landscape. The opening up of rich hunting grounds along the coasts and islands of the northern Pacific Ocean gave frontiersmen access to new sources of fur, including large populations of the much-prized sea otter. In 1778, the best sea-otter pelts sold for the premium price of $120 in China. But in a highly competitive environment, with scant regard for the long-term conservation of resources, they too were soon hunted out. By the 1840s, despite the resilience of less valuable animals such as raccoons and muskrats, the circumpolar quest for fur was effectively over.

China had been the main marketplace for Russian hunter-traders after 1690, where they exchanged Siberian and Pacific coast furs for commodities such as gold, silver, silk, tea and porcelain. Similarly, until the nineteenth century, Chinese demand, together with consumerist pressure emanating from India and the Middle East, also propelled the lucrative international ivory trade. Elephant ivory was used for making ornamental statuettes, official seals, combs and jewellery, as well as for inlay work on expensive items of furniture. Africa was the world’s foremost source of supply, and for centuries sub-Saharan ivory resources had been exploited by African peoples without any serious reduction of the elephant population. East African ivory, for example, had been exported via Muslim intermediaries to Asian and Arab markets since the Middle Ages. However, in the nineteenth century, the demand for ivory in Europe and the USA – to manufacture cutlery handles, billiard balls and piano keys – dramatically increased the
volume of the trade. By the early 1880s, it has been estimated that an average of 12,000 elephants were being killed each year in East Africa alone. European hunter-traders were in the vanguard of exploration and expansion in Africa, lured ever deeper into the interior in search of ivory. As the hunting frontier moved outwards from the Cape Colony, elephants were cleared from much of southern Africa by the 1870s, and it was increasingly difficult to find them in Central and East Africa by the turn of the twentieth century. As in the North American fur trade, Europeans subcontracted out much of the hunting to indigenous peoples who, in return for firearms and other trade goods, probably killed more elephants on their behalf than they shot themselves. As elephants became scarce, commercial ivory hunters turned their attention towards the rhinoceros and hippopotamus. Rhinos were targeted for their horn (sold powdered in Asia as a medicinal ‘cure-all’), and hippos for their teeth (used for making dentures as well as decorative objects), but these great pachyderms were also fast disappearing by 1900.

The European fashion industry’s adoption of a traditional item of African dress – ostrich feathers – as a ‘style accessory’ contributed to setting off a craze for exotic plumage that was to wreak havoc on bird populations worldwide. Choice feathers had long been used by African, Amerindian, Asian and European rulers and elites, for ceremonial headdresses, feather standards and feather fans, as elaborate symbols of their power and position. In early modern Japan, for example, eagle feathers were a potent signifier of authority over others, and they were a valuable trade commodity. But it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that the plumage trade developed into a serious ecological threat, as feather boas and bird hats – which sported the heads and wings of birds as well as plumes – became a ‘fashion fundamental’ for women on both sides of the Atlantic. Ounce for ounce, the highest-quality ornamental feathers for feminine attire, such as ostrich plumes and aigrettes (the nuptial feathers of the egret), were worth more than gold. London was the centre of the international plumage trade, importing and re-exporting bird skins and feathers from the British Empire and elsewhere around the world. While statistical data on the scale and scope of the trade are few, Table 2.2 below shows the great mass of feathers that passed through British customs between 1895 and 1919.

In 1920, as trade networks disrupted by the First World War revived, critics of the plumage trade claimed that over 35 million bird skins were being annually imported into London for millinery purposes. Although this figure was undoubtedly exaggerated, by this time plumage hunters had pushed American egrets, West Indian hummingbirds, New Guinean birds of paradise and numerous other species to the verge of extinction (the South African ostrich had become domesticated). However, a fortuitous change in women’s fashion during the early 1920s considerably reduced the demand for exotic feathers and allowed some wild-bird populations to recover from the damage caused
by intensive market hunting.

While feathers fell in and out of fashion, the most prolonged assault on a specific species by commercial hunters was aimed at the whale. Before 1500, whaling was a relatively small-scale enterprise, with coastal communities such as the Inuit taking a small number of animals each year mainly to meet subsistence needs. Whales supplied meat and, more importantly, oil for heat and light, rendered from the blubber. The Basques pioneered deep-sea commercial whaling in the early sixteenth century, following their quarry across the Atlantic as far as the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador, as local stocks of right whales in the Bay of Biscay had diminished due to overharvesting. Whalers first targeted right and bowhead whales because they were abundant, slow-moving and unaggressive, which made it possible to hunt them using a simple technology: hand-launched harpoons. Whaling took a similar form to the other key constituents of the world hunt: the exploration of unknown waters, the repeated discovery of rich whaling grounds and the rapid depletion of new stocks from the Arctic to the southern oceans. By the seventeenth century, other European nations, most notably the Dutch, Germans and English, had also established deep-sea fleets to hunt whales for their valuable oil and baleen (whalebone). Commonly utilised North Atlantic whaling grounds were already coming under heavy pressure by the mid-eighteenth century, prompting a move into the Pacific Ocean in the late 1780s as catches dropped to an unprofitable level. The Industrial Revolution gave fresh impetus to the worldwide search for stocks, as whale oil proved suitable for the lubrication of machinery and whalebone – the ‘plastic’ of the period – was used extensively in the manufacture of corsets, umbrellas and the like. But after around three centuries of relentless commercial hunting the most easily captured whales were gone. By 1900, whaling was in terminal decline as populations of right and bowhead whales collapsed and bigger, faster species such as Antarctic humpback and blue whales were too difficult to catch and process using existing methods. However, new technological advances made by the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Pounds weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895–9</td>
<td>1,277,772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900–4</td>
<td>1,401,122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905–9</td>
<td>1,539,531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910–14</td>
<td>1,166,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915–19</td>
<td>440,564</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 Imports of exotic ornamental feathers (including ostrich feathers) into the United Kingdom (quinquennial averages)

Norwegians, particularly the harpoon gun and the factory ship, were to give the industry a new lease of life.

In the early twentieth century, the Norwegians, having developed the technologies to catch rorquals (larger whales), opened up the last unexploited whaling grounds in the Antarctic seas. Demand for whale oil products remained high. As well as being an effective lubricant, whale oil was widely used to make margarine, soap and even explosives. Others soon adopted the harpoon gun and modern methods of processing, including new entrants into the pelagic whaling industry such as Argentina, Japan and Russia, which, as Table 2.3 demonstrates, impacted dramatically on whale populations around the world.

By the eve of the 1982 ban on commercial whaling, the largest and most valuable species – bowhead, right, humpback and blue whales – had already been hunted out. Whales reproduce slowly, and there is no guarantee that remnant populations will ever recover to their initial size. Today, only the smaller minke whale survives in sufficient numbers to be killed for scientific purposes (although most turn up for sale in Japanese seafood restaurants). Commercial hunting has played the dominant role in depleting whale populations, ocean by ocean and species by species, over the past 500 years. As was the case with other open-access wildlife stocks, whalers usually took all that was available to them rather than leave behind valuable resources for the potential benefit of their rivals.

Table 2.3 Estimates of whale populations in the 1970s (in thousands of whales and percentages of initial populations).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Southern Hemisphere</th>
<th>North Pacific</th>
<th>North Atlantic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bowhead</td>
<td>Not present</td>
<td>1–2 (10%)</td>
<td>0.1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>3–4 (10%)</td>
<td>0.4 (unknown)</td>
<td>0.2 (unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humpback</td>
<td>2–3 (3%)</td>
<td>2 (unknown)</td>
<td>1.5 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>7–8 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fin</td>
<td>80 (20%)</td>
<td>14–19 (40%)</td>
<td>31 (unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sei</td>
<td>50–5 (33%)</td>
<td>21–3 (50%)</td>
<td>2 (unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryde's</td>
<td>10 (90%)</td>
<td>20–30 (100%)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minke</td>
<td>120–200 (80%)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>10 (unknown)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Labor for Industry and Empire, 1700 to 1900
Chapter 5. Labor for Industry and Empire, 1700 to 1900

The changing world economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought an expansion in migration for economic purposes: first the forced migration of slaves, then the migration of agricultural and industrial workers with varying degrees of free will. Most of the migrating workers entered new language communities in the lands of their destination. Speakers of African languages learned each other’s languages, the languages of their masters (such as English, Portuguese, or Arabic), and creole languages developed by communities of settlers. Chinese speakers of Cantonese learned Spanish in Peru and Thai in Thailand. Migrants from Scandinavia, Greece, and Lebanon learned languages of the Americas as they crossed the Atlantic. As so many times before, but now on a larger scale, people crossed community boundaries, and in so doing reinforced the creative energies of human society.

The pace of migration accelerated in these two centuries. In the early eighteenth century, tens of thousands of captives traveled each year in the sailing ships of the Atlantic slave trade. That number rose to nearly one hundred thousand transatlantic captives per year at the end of the eighteenth century, while tens of thousands of additional captives were forced to other African and Middle Eastern destinations. By the end of the nineteenth century, millions of free migrants sailed each year by steamship from Europe and Asia in search of work overseas. These long-distance, transoceanic voyages were supplemented by shorter-distance movements, increasingly by railway, to booming urban areas in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

This acceleration in migration brought a further mixture in populations. In Southeast Asia, most of the Americas, parts of Africa, and in the Pacific, there gathered competing groups of immigrants numerous enough to rival or outnumber the native-born. These groups, placed in proximity and often in relations of hierarchy with each other, developed tense relations and stereotypical views of each other. The realities of cultural difference and the visual cues of physical distinctions each played a role in developing the notions of racial difference and racial hierarchy which grew to an unprecedented level by the end of the nineteenth century. These notions of racial difference spread along land and sea routes to reach people in every region of the world. The expansion in the world economy thus brought migration and reallocation of productive labor, and also brought the spread of new ideas and new conflicts.

The four sections of the chapter address forced migration, the creation of national and racial identities, the migratory dimension of industrialization, and the linked expansions in empire and voluntary migration. Forced migration led captives to the Americas but also to destinations in the Eastern Hemisphere, so that slavery became a building block of modern society in many regions. The remarkable extent of slavery and serfdom in
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries leads one to think of forced labor as a significant and painful step in the creation of the modern world economy. Second, as both unfree and free migrants settled in new lands, they and their descendants developed new identities and new relationships with other groups. From the eighteenth century these evolving relationships gave rise to a new terminology, identifying "nations," "races," and "tribes." Third, as industrial growth and transformation took place in European factories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, related growth also took place in farms, mines, workshops, and harbors around the world. Migrants in this era moved to take up work in factories or farms, cities or countryside, and temperate or tropical areas. Fourth, the turn of the twentieth century brought massive imperial conquests by the leading industrial nations, but also record-setting migrations from the most populous areas of the world. These two phenomena, usually treated as unrelated, are here shown to be connected in several significant ways.

**Forced migration, 1700–1850**

Many migrants moved against their will. Involuntary movements included expulsion of whole populations and the transportation of prisoners. Even the migration of children, as they left homes they did not wish to leave in the company of their parents, can be seen as involuntary. Nevertheless, the main type of involuntary migration centered on enslavement. Where expulsions were large movements in a short time period, enslavement involved smaller proportions of populations moving over a longer time and resulted in a larger total of displacements. Slavery provided a way to obtain and exploit labor when voluntary or paid labor was insufficient.

Systems of slavery grew in several parts of the world from about 1400 until 1850. The most profitable and most concentrated system of slavery was that of the New World. This system – focused on Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America – produced gold, silver, sugar, tobacco, cotton, and coffee for the world market. As late as 1600, Africans remained a minority of the world’s slaves, since slavery at that time centered on the Mediterranean and most captives were drawn from Central Asia and Europe. By 1700, however, the largest slave populations were in the Americas, and they were overwhelmingly African (but included some Amerindians).

Why did slavery grow? The increasing European demand for slaves made the system expand. The ability of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, and French merchants to buy laborers for mines and plantations kept demand high and made slave prices rise. Captured Africans, taken to the Americas, built cities, cleared fields, hauled goods, grew crops, and ran the households of their owners.

The growing demand of European merchants drew steadily more Africans into
capturing and selling laborers. African merchants kept some captives, and a West African system of slavery grew up in response to the New World system. Through contacts across the seas and across the continents, several other Old World systems of slavery arose in response to the expanding slave system of the Americas: in eastern Africa, the Middle East, the Black Sea region, the Indian Ocean, and Southeast Asia. Slavery in Russia, while different from the other systems of slavery, also had a role in the overall pattern.

Wherever there were waves of enslavement, waves of liberation ultimately followed. In New Spain and Peru, imports of slaves declined in the eighteenth century, and many children of slaves became free. In Haiti, slaves gained their freedom through an uprising, and in other areas, they gained freedom through legislation. In Russia, the large slave population was transformed into “serfs” during the eighteenth century. The number of slaves and serfs in the world peaked at perhaps as many as fifty million persons in about 1850. Thereafter, emancipation of bonded persons came more rapidly than new captures or births of slaves.

**Forced migration, by gender and age**

The example of the Atlantic slave trade shows how enslavement had different effects by age and gender. In the Americas, demand and prices were highest for males. The captives crossing the Atlantic were over 60 per cent male, and the slave system of the Americas therefore had a significant shortage of females as long as new captives were coming from Africa. Captives embarked on European ships had often been held for weeks or even months on the coast, and their captors had to pay for feeding and clothing them during that time. Once on board, as on the coast, men tended to be held separately from women and children. The transatlantic voyage lasted several weeks, and the captives, already weakened, lost, on average, 15 per cent of their number during the crossing. In another gender-based difference, the shipboard mortality rate for females seemed always lower than the rate for males.

On the African continent, demand and prices were highest for female slaves. Thus, the captives retained in Africa were well over 60 per cent female, and the result was the development of a sizeable African slave population, dominantly female, living in households dominated by free males. The men were able to use the female slaves as domestics and as concubines – any children belonged to the owner.

Africans were enslaved primarily through warfare and kidnapping, but also through court proceedings or witchcraft accusations. Once in captivity, some went to African purchasers and others went overseas. Prices were highest for male captives on the African coast, so male captives tended to be walked whatever distance it took to get
them there. Females, on the other hand, had significant value as captives in many African societies, so female captives tended to be sold into slavery within Africa, near to their point of capture.

The other systems of slavery and instances of forced migration, which grew in large part as a reflection of New World slavery, also each had a particular composition by gender and age. The Middle East drew increasingly on slaves from North and East Africa and took mostly females for use in domestic service, leaving these parts of Africa with a shortage of females. The Russian system, in which the slaves were mainly male, was located near to that of the Ottoman Empire, in which slaves were mainly female.

**African slavery in the New World**

Some ten to twelve million Africans crossed the Atlantic in captivity. The oppression of slavery supported economic change through the expansion of plantation production of sugar, tobacco, indigo, and later cotton. Perhaps ironically, slavery also sustained economic progress because plantations contributed to the development of industrial organization. Cuban plantations expanded rapidly in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, using steam engines, railroads, and other advanced industrial technology, and relying on an elaborate division of labor and the techniques of mass production – all with slave labor.

Few slaves gained their freedom, and few of their voices were heard in the societies that used their labor. The silence, however, was by no means complete. Perhaps the most forceful voice out of the African diaspora in that era was that of Olaudah Equiano, who purchased his freedom, lived a full life as a free man in England, traveled widely, and wrote a powerful plea against slavery in the form of an autobiography. That same autobiography provides one of the best available pictures of the territories and the issues of the eighteenth-century Atlantic basin.

Migration of slaves went beyond their initial capture and transportation. In two major cases, large populations of slaves were moved great distances in response to opportunities for their masters. In the American South, the slave populations of the Old South, working on tobacco plantations along the Atlantic coast, were sold or moved with their masters to the New South in the era from 1800 to 1860. In this time, roughly one million slaves were displaced, sometimes with their families broken as they moved. At the same time, the numerous slaves of Bahia in Brazil, caught in the decline of the sugar industry, found themselves moved piecemeal by a similar process to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, to become workers on the expanding coffee plantations there. As in the United States, roughly one million slaves were displaced by command of their owners, sometimes with their families split by the movement. In these cases, as with
Cuban sugar, slavery was linked to growing industrial production.

Compulsion and gender in the Old World

In Africa, although European slavers occasionally came ashore to conduct raids, the only way they could get large numbers of captives was to buy them from African merchants. These merchants, in turn, set up arrangements with those that enslaved and transported people from coastal and interior areas of Africa. African populations suffered from the resulting warfare and kidnapping, and the fate of African kingdoms rose and fell with the slave trade. The Oyo Empire, a great state from the early seventeenth century, largely abstained from slave exports until the late eighteenth century. Then Oyo became an active participant in the slave trade for fifty years, which led to the collapse of the empire and abandonment of its capital circa 1830.

The demand for African slaves rose at the end of the eighteenth century in the Muslim Mediterranean and at the fringes of the Indian Ocean. Most of the Africans sent north and east were young women, who served mainly as domestics. African males were purchased for use as construction workers in the expansion of the holy city of Mecca, as pearl divers in the fisheries of the Persian Gulf, and as soldiers in Egypt. Texts and images from Istanbul show the importance of slaves as servants, as soldiers, as workers in mines and agriculture, and in other tasks.

Of captives taken into the Sahara, many did not complete the crossing. Some died in the course of the arduous journey, but many others were settled down as slaves in the desert – as miners digging for salt or as agricultural workers in the oases where dates and grains were produced for local use and for export. These Saharan oases were thus, in a sense, equivalent to the islands of the Atlantic and the Caribbean.

In Arabia, men expressed a particularly high demand for enslaved Oromo and Somali women from the Horn of Africa. These women became their wives and concubines. In Arabia as elsewhere in the Middle East, slave women tended to have children fathered by free men rather than by other slaves. The result, in contrast to the Americas, was the development of a slave-descended population that was assimilated, socially and biologically, into the free population. In the Americas, the maintenance of a separate black population was reinforced by racial discrimination and by prohibitions against the marriage of blacks and whites.

The shortages of women in the migrant populations of the Americas, and the shortages of men in Africa, were responsible for the small number of children born to slaves in the Americas and the relatively larger number of children born in Africa. Still, as calculations show, enough women left Africa in chains, or died in the process, that the African population declined in the eighteenth century, at a time when the populations
of other world areas were growing.

Slavery expanded in Southeast Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in much the same fashion as in the western Indian Ocean. The captive populations, however, came mainly from South Asia and from the islands that have since become Indonesia, rarely from Africa. Indonesian slavery expanded as local and Dutch planters in Java, Melaka, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) purchased slaves from those who would sell captives, and put them to work on plantations for coffee, spices, and sugar.

By the end of the eighteenth century, slavery had developed as a system of labor extending over much of the world, in which laborers were captured (mostly in Africa) and transported short or long distances to work, according to the needs and desires of their owners. African slaves worked on mines, on plantations, and as servants in the Americas; as servants and as laborers in Africa; as domestics and as artisans in North Africa, southwest Asia, and the Indian Ocean.

Not only was slavery a global system, but it helped change patterns in gender relations in every area it touched. The evidence available on the structure of enslaved populations provides insights into the lives of these populations. Ships’ records indicate the age and sex composition of slave cargoes; plantation records indicate the age and sex structure of the slave work force. By combining these documents and other knowledge of the characteristic patterns of populations, it is possible to show the interactions and changes in the populations of Africa, of the captives in transition, and of the slaves in the Americas.

An unusual category of evidence is Portuguese censuses of Angola in the late eighteenth century, which show how slavery could skew the ratios of male and female. These censuses, summarizing various regions of the colony, show a serious shortage of adult men. The documents confirm what is otherwise clear from the pattern of transatlantic slave migration: Africa lost many more men than women, and therefore African populations included many fewer men than women. The shortage of males in western Africa, and the large number of enslaved women, encouraged the rise of a new sort of patriarchy. The men who remained in Africa were able to have multiple wives or slave concubines.

By distinct but related processes, systems of patriarchy grew up all around the eighteenth-century Atlantic, all of them linked to the expansion of slavery. In the Americas, male slave owners dominated their slaves, but also had great power over all women and over poorer free men. Free white men had children with black women, often with no social obligation to the women or children. The power of owner over slave, of white over black, and of male over female combined to define the New World system of patriarchy.
Still another change in patriarchy developed in eighteenth-century Europe. There the growth of factory production and with it the rise of the family wage (in which men were paid well and women poorly) led to a type of patriarchy in which men controlled the family income. The shared family income and responsibilities were replaced by a hierarchy in which family members were separated at work and men dominated.

The triangular routes of trade linking Europe, western Africa and the Americas reinforced the growth of these patriarchal norms. The precise meaning given to “patriarchy” in the three situations differs. Yet, all three social systems grew up at the same time, and in interaction with each other. The European system of factories grew in connection with slavery in the Americas and with slave trade in Africa. Goods from European factories went toward the purchase of African captives, and African slaves in the Americas produced raw materials for European markets. So the gender roles of the modern world have been defined in part by global connections, migration, and the experience of slavery.
The Dilemma of Children’s Happiness
Chapter 6. The Dilemma of Children’s Happiness

Children’s happiness has gained new attention, on a global level, in recent decades. Growing valuation of happiness for the young raises a number of interpretive problems, and can serve as a further introduction to the crucial analytical problems in the latest phase of world history. The happiness theme helps focus the discussion of changes between the contemporary period and the past, including the causes of change; it advances consideration of comparative issues amid the obvious importance, but also the limitations, of Western models; and, above all, it virtually compels further evaluation of the complex impact of new ideas on adults and children alike. There’s a lot we don’t know about happiness as a recent-historical aspect of childhood, but what we do know is provocative, and the additional questions we must ask are revealing as well.

The first point is striking, but needs some immediate cautions: with a few limited exceptions, traditional societies (certainly agricultural societies) did not systematically associate childhood with happiness. We have seen that, during the classical period, few of the adults who left written records of their lives looked back fondly on any aspect of their early years, except for an occasional nice word about their mother. Parents, for their part, felt no particular responsibility for making children happy. Making them obedient and diligent, yes; providing moral training, definitely; but happiness was not part of the equation. In some cases, as with Christian belief in original sin, particular cultural artifacts might expand the normal distance between thinking about childhood and contemplating happiness. Frequency of child death and the obvious need to make children work surely complicated any notions of happiness even more generally.

But the cautions are important. The fact that childhood was not equated with happiness does not mean that adults usually sought to make children unhappy. Some did (some do in modern societies), taking pleasure in children’s suffering. But there’s no reason to think most adults were deliberately abusive, and many took real pleasure in their children and in enjoyments that could be shared – despite the lack of an explicit happiness commitment. Furthermore, except under abuse, there’s no reason to think that children themselves were necessarily particularly unhappy in traditional contexts. Surely they sometimes were, because of inferior status and work burdens in addition to the normal complexities of growing up. But children could often take pleasure in community festivals, and the extent to which they were left free to indulge in play, during non-work times, may actually have encouraged a certain amount of satisfaction. It’s the idea of happiness that was lacking.

This situation began to change, in Western societies, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – precisely the point at which attention to happiness began to gain ground in
other aspects of the culture. The Enlightenment expanded a positive valuation of happiness – this would show up, for example, in the American Declaration of Independence, with its reference to pursuit of same, along with life and liberty. As older ideas of original sin began slowly to decline in some Christian groups, a door was opened to rethinking how children might be treated. Later on, with the demographic transition, the decline in children’s death rates reduced a huge barrier to adult commitment to thinking of children in terms of more positive commitments, and attacks on traditional levels of child labor may have had the same effect.

Nevertheless, actual discussions of children in terms of happiness surfaced surprisingly slowly. There were some references in England, around 1800, but nothing very systematic. A few poems about infant joy, some intellectuals’ comments about children’s “freshness and wonder” barely suggested some new thinking. In the United States, references to children’s happiness crop up during the nineteenth century, but with a target on traditional moral upbringing, more than happiness per se (though it was interesting that the word was used): a variety of advice-writers urged parents that only through morality could children gain happiness: thus (in a famous manual by Catharine Beecher) “children can be very early taught that their happiness both now and hereafter, depends on the formation of habits of submission, self-denial, and benevolence.” Late in the nineteenth century, prescriptive literature increasingly mentioned the importance of cheerfulness in children, but while this was a new obligation in a society increasingly interested in pleasant human interactions, it was only a stepping-stone to a real association of childhood and happiness. The idea was that cheerful adults did best in life, so children should be handled in ways that would encourage this result.

Finally, by the 1920s, a full commitment to children’s happiness, at least in principle, emerged, at least in the United States. Childrearing manuals began to be peppered with statements such as “Happiness is as essential as food if a child is to develop into normal manhood or womanhood” and “The purpose of bringing-up in all its phases should be to make the child as happy as possible;” and book titles included How to Have Cheerful Kids (1927) or Child Training: The Pathway to Happiness (1948). Even discipline should be reconsidered: better to let children get away with minor infractions than spoil their pleasure with a reprimand. The only question, in this growing American surge, was whether children were naturally happy, so that adults merely had to worry about not spoiling things, or whether there were challenges in children’s nature that adults had to work against, in which case the new commitment spelled some additional work for parents and others. Considerable advice, for example, was now directed toward urging mothers and fathers to work hard to seem happy around their kids, to provide positive example and context – whether they felt like being happy or not. Even government policy might convert: by the 1950s, White House conferences on children turned from issues of physical health to broader concerns with happiness. And new
organizations for young people, such as the Boy Scouts and the Campfire Girls, built happiness into their fundamental principles: the Campfire group, for example, simply urged “Be Happy” as their final directive.

More than rhetoric poured into the new happiness movement in places such as the United States. Having even very young children smile for photographs was an interesting implementation of the new campaign. A host of consumer practices, buying toys and entertainments for the young, obviously sought to fulfill happiness obligations. The Disney Company, born in the 1920s, took as its motto “make people happy,” and sold lots of movie tickets to families expecting precisely this result for their offspring. During the Depression-infused 1930s, a child movie star, Shirley Temple, was billed as the Sunshine Girl. Psychologists urged the importance of childhood happiness, and many adults would be prodded to explain their problems by reference to unhappiness in their early years, implying that this could and should have been avoided. Perhaps most revealingly, in terms of capturing the new prescription, the song “Happy Birthday” (using a tune written in the 1890s) surfaced in the mid-1920s; initially used for shows and singing telegrams, over the next two decades the verse became a standard symbol for what children deserved on a newly special day.

The idea that children should be happy, then, is an innovation of recent history, initially in Western societies probably headed by the United States. The notion is so deeply embedded by now that some may be surprised by this fact, assuming that the whole concept is somehow natural. The contrast with more traditional ideas and practices makes it clear that real innovation is involved.

What caused the change? A number of factors conspired, but in fact it’s not entirely easy to identify the most important spurs. We have seen that preconditions include a much lower death rate and the attacks on child labor (many of which, by the twentieth century, invoked happiness as a contrast to undesirable work burdens). Consumerism played a huge role, as companies of various sorts realized how much could be sold to parents as part of the fulfillment of happiness obligations. New beliefs about adulthood loomed large as well, in societies that increasingly assumed that cheerfulness was a sign of mental health and a precondition for economic success. Compensation for the drudgery of schooling may have figured in as well, as parents, aware of the importance of school success, sought to motivate or reward kids with pleasures outside the classroom, and as schools themselves increasingly tried to make learning “fun.”

Do these factors add up to a sense that a turn toward happiness is an inherent part of the modern definition of childhood — or was it, rather, a product of a particular set of Western circumstances? The question is significant, the answer far more challenging.
What is clear is that, in recent decades, many Western notions have been adopted, or have more spontaneously developed, in a number of other societies, making children’s happiness an increasingly global topic. Not surprisingly, change has particularly involved more affluent and urban groups, particularly in societies where overall living standards continue to lag; but the theme is significant even so, as the ideas and behaviors continue to gain ground.

Thus in the past 20 years or so the rapidly growing middle classes in India have explicitly moved toward greater interest in children’s happiness. The website www.indiaparenting.com thus recommends “home-based birthday parties” with particular themes, adding that inviting a clown or a magician can help assure happiness. More generally, over 20 percent of parents in one Indian poll claim that children can and should be taught to be happy. The move away from an older view of childhood (after infancy) as a time of strict moral and religious training is considerable.

Similar patterns emerge in the Middle East, apart from the strictest Muslim groups. Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, features a “Favourite Things Mother and Child” shopping mall advertising itself as a premier site for a birthday party: with clowns, cotton candy machines, a petting zoo, and other entertainment centers, the site bills itself as “the first choice for parents who are looking for that personal touch, excellent organization, and a truly memorable day for their children.” Not surprisingly, a strongly competitive element enters into upper-class birthday celebrations. In Egypt also, lavish parties with decorations, singing, and dancing greet affluent children.

Latin American families have widely embraced the idea of children’s happiness, and here too the extensive adoption of elaborate birthday parties is one indication. Special emphasis on the fifteenth birthday, the Quinceanera, picks up an older cultural tradition, but the larger idea of the importance of a happy family extends well beyond this. For some groups, signs that children are happy help demonstrate that parents are meeting their obligations even amid poverty.

Change is particularly striking in China, where birthdays were traditionally downplayed (except for the sixty-fifth, which obviously celebrated old age in contrast to childhood), or even served as occasions for children to bring humble gifts to their parents in gratitude. McDonald’s, for example, rents out “party rooms” for the new focus on children themselves, with trappings very similar to those in the United States. Beyond celebration, parents increasingly report that disciplining children has become a stressful aspect of parents (in contrast to just fifteen years ago), because of the desire to share happiness instead.

All of this leads to the next question: how much of this is simply selective emulation of the West, which could turn out to be temporary, and how much responds to other
changes in the circumstances of childhood?

A strong “westernization” element is undeniable. The Chinese parents most likely to talk in terms of children’s happiness are those who have attended western-based workshops and conferences. Middle Eastern commitments to birthday parties come from social segments strongly influenced by Western consumer culture in other respects. On the other hand, westernization may not be the whole story. China’s dramatic birthrate reduction has produced parents increasingly anxious about the wellbeing of their child, both because he or she is the only one they have, and because they worry that contemporary children are missing out on fulfilling social experiences that they themselves remember growing up in larger families. Happiness here may seem to compensate for greater loneliness. In Japan and Korea, as well as China, strong emphasis on the importance of school success has helped parents accept responsibility for providing happiness as a legitimate need outside the classroom, to reward but also to compensate. Western models, in other words, may provide some slogans and practices that meet new and genuine needs that are part of modern childhood more generally. Time will tell about the durability and wider dissemination of new ideas and practices.

One point is clear, which is a standard concomitant of mutual cultural influences: while Western experience promotes new interest in children’s happiness in other societies, this interest is blended with local components as well. The spread of childhood happiness takes on varied comparative dimensions, even when a common theme of change is involved.

Thus the happiness theme in India merges with the much older tradition of extensive indulgence toward infants, showering love and attention in ways that many Westerners view as excessively permissive. What’s new is the extension of happiness concerns beyond this early period, but the merger has distinctive elements. Middle Eastern and, to some extent, Chinese interest in children’s happiness applies much more readily to boys than to girls, again reflecting older patterns. If only because the happiness impulse is newer in China, and partially foreign, discussions of the dangers of overindulgence are more extensive than in the contemporary West, and parents remain much more likely to be publicly critical of their children, particularly where school performance is concerned. Childhood happiness, in other words, is a real change, but it does not override local variants, reflecting a particular version of the local/global tension standard in the experience of globalization more generally.

The final question, applicable wherever happiness interests have accelerated, involves what the new emphasis means, for responsible adults and for children themselves. There’s no doubt that the change has generated a range of consequences. Most obviously, for many adults involved, the pressure to provide toys and other consumer
items for children has escalated steadily, supporting massive industries and redefining at least part of what it means to be a good parent. Shared pleasures can result, but also a sense of obligation and even guilt – when children’s happiness does not seem adequate – that can complicate the appreciation of parenthood. Outright manipulation adds to the complexity, as many companies, including Disney, explicitly train sales personnel to convince both adult and child customers that they are having a happy time, whether or not this is the case; some observers worry that the artificiality of consumer happiness can dull the capacity to identify the real thing.

The big issue, of course, is whether children are happier now that they’re expected to be. Some observers note that some of the drawbacks of childhood remain constant – lack of power, the stresses of growing up physically and mentally – so that all the happiness rhetoric imaginable cannot really have much impact. Others would add that specifically modern features, such as school tensions or lack of spontaneous play time, may actually make the attainment of happiness more difficult. The fact is that measuring happiness across historical time is virtually impossible, and judgments about childhood may be particularly challenging.

The narrower question involves the impact of the happiness push itself. On the one hand, many adults really do try harder to please children, and to avoid children’s discomfort, than their counterparts did in the past, and that may certainly have some effect. On the other hand, the happiness culture itself generates drawbacks. It makes children more dependent on entertainment, readier to declare boredom. It encourages parents, at least in some societies, to think of relationships with their offspring in excessively consumerist terms, buying lots of stuff but stepping back from deeper emotional contact. Above all, for children themselves, the new expectations of happiness undoubtedly make it more difficult to express or acknowledge sadness or disappointment, some of which arguably goes with the territory of childhood anywhere, anytime. A sad child now makes adults feel guilty, which in turn can encourage the child to conceal, which in turn can lead to outright depression that might otherwise have been avoided. Childhood depression is undeniably on the rise. Some of this simply involves new levels of diagnosis – the whole concept of depression entered psychiatrists’ diagnostic manual little more than a half-century ago. But some may be quite real, triggered by new modern pressures on children, but also the ironic constraints generated by happiness goals themselves.

The rise of happiness commitments as a tentative aspect of the globalization of childhood is a complex topic. Its analysis must embrace the drawbacks of explicit attention to happiness as well as apparent advantages. It must recognize the difficulty of comparing present with past, beyond surface rhetoric. It obviously has to incorporate some subtle issues of regional comparison.
And any analysis must acknowledge the huge, and in some ways increasing, gaps among childhoods in contemporary history. Happiness rhetoric has little or no applicability to the millions of children who have been caught up in warfare or civil conflict, or who are exposed to new levels of disease or labor exploitation. Even in affluent societies such as the United States, where poor children get some glimpses of the consumerist version of children's happiness through TV shows and commercials, growing gaps in income and even food adequacy challenge at least the most widely shared notions of happiness.

The inquiry into new ideas of happiness is a legitimate topic, but it calls attention to stark divisions in the ways childhood is defined and experienced.

The rise of a dramatically new approach to childhood, with happiness front and center, is an important development in the recent history of children and those who care for them. It places contrasts between modern and traditional contexts in sharper relief, and invites further analysis of the causes of change. It focuses attention, as well, on comparative issues – on the force of Western example; on other modern factors encouraging attention to happiness; and also on diverse cultural reactions and combinations as happiness is integrated with existing approaches to childhood. The big question, where the new ideas have surfaced coherently at all, of how happiness changes the actual experience of parents and children, is surely complex, requiring probes beneath the surface of pervasive rhetoric. And the whole process is not only recent, but ongoing: we cannot yet know how extensively Asian or Latin American societies will integrate the happiness approach, and there are certainly culture critics in the West who urge reconsideration, particularly against purely consumerist interpretations of modern goals for children.