

Beyond modernist and postmodernist history

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How we understand the past goes on to shape our future. Both modernist and postmodernist accounts of history are inadequate and reductive accounts of how the world arrived at its present state. Modernism defends a naïve account of progress as driven by reason and science, and while postmodernism rejects that simplistic story, it falls prey to its own version of cultural imperialism. What we need then is a cognitive history of humanity, one that explains how different cultures, operating under different conceptual frames, saw the world differently, leading them to chart different paths. Only then we'll begin to recognize our own culture's conceptual framework, its limits, and the ways it needs revising, argues Jeremy Lent.

The way we interpret history has profound implications for how we understand the present and, most importantly, how we determine the priorities that will decide our future. Modernist interpretations of history, along with more recent approaches colored by postmodernism, are insufficient to provide us with the tools we need to respond to the existential crises our civilization faces this century. For that, we need a new type of history, one that emphasizes the way in which different cultures operate under radically different conceptual frameworks that shape the course they chart.

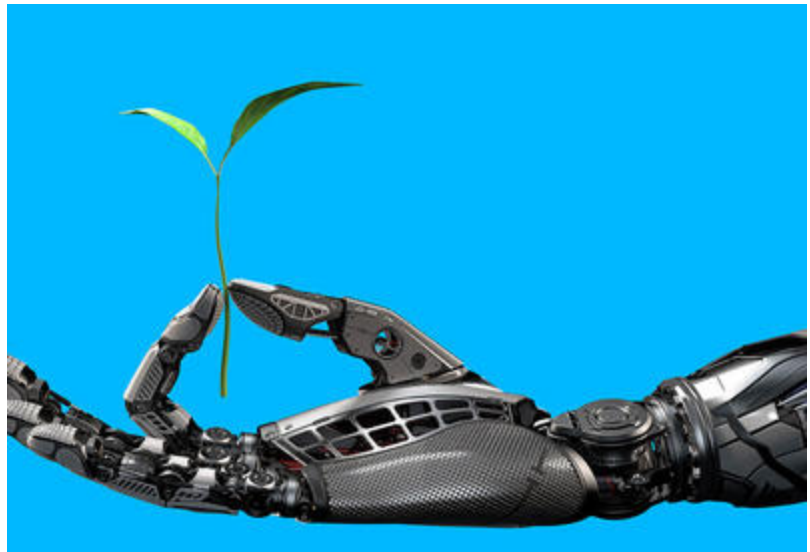
Modernist history: Reason, Science and Progress

While we may not always realize how historical interpretations influence our values, their power to do so is enormous, precisely because of its implicit nature. As a teenager, growing up in London in the 1970s, I remember watching TV with my father as we avidly soaked up *The Ascent of Man*: an award-winning BBC documentary series produced by Dr. Jacob Bronowski. For my father, it was a splendid exposition of how “Man” (there were no qualms in those days about giving humanity a male gender) climbed from peak to peak in his ascent

to the pinnacle of modern scientific achievement. In contrast to animals who merely adapt to their environment, Bronowski explained triumphantly, Man is “not a figure in the landscape; he is the shaper of the landscape.”

I didn’t know it at the time, but what I was watching was a swansong of the modernist interpretation of history.

Underlying the storyline was a cognitive framework that went something like this: the Truth has been discovered by Science, which enables continual Progress resulting from Man using his unique faculty of Reason for the benefit of all. While other cultures might have something to offer, they were generally viewed as complementing the rule of Reason as defined by Western civilization.



The modernist storyline, infused by the discoveries of Europe’s Scientific Revolution, had for centuries inspired historians to extol the inexorable march of progress that culminated in the glorious achievements of Western civilization. The conquest of nature achieved by science was paralleled by an equally ambitious conquest of the rest of the world by European powers, leading to the decimation of Indigenous populations and the rise of empires that spanned the globe. By the time Jacob Bronowski took the stage, the aftermath of the totalitarian horrors of the mid-20th century had added some ambivalence to the triumphalist storyline, but the core thesis remained the same.

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The Postmodernism Critique of Cultural Essentialism

However, in the same decade that Bronowski was eulogizing the Ascent of Man, a new generation of intellectuals set out to challenge the assumptions underlying this narrative. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said showed how centuries of cultural prejudice had shaped the West’s romanticized image of Oriental mystique. A series of critiques by a school of

French philosophers coalesced into a movement now known as postmodernism, which attacked the notion that objective truths could be applied universally under the rubric of such capitalized abstractions as Truth, Science, Reason, and Man.

In contrast to the modernist view of the world, the postmodernists seemed to suggest that there is no neutral view of reality—the way we come to experience it is always to some degree shaped by the mind, and can never therefore be described objectively. Each culture, they argued, develops its own version of reality that arises from its specific physical and environmental context. If you try to “essentialize” a culture’s frame of reality and compare it with that of another culture, you risk decontextualizing it and therefore invalidating its unique attributes.

The postmodernists accused Westerners who had attempted to do so of engaging in a form of cultural imperialism, seeking to appropriate what seemed valuable in other cultures for their own use while ignoring its historical context. A more useful investigation, according to the postmodernist critique, would be to recognize the multiplicity of discourses created by various cultures, and rather than try to distill some essential meaning from them, to trace how certain social and political groups used these discourses to maintain or enhance their own power relative to others.

The postmodernist critique has had a profound effect on the social sciences, and even when it hasn’t been fully accepted, some of its principles have helped shape the current norms of many academic disciplines, including history.

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A major step in establishing this new standard was the publication by Jared Diamond of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* in 1997, which investigated one of the crucial questions of history: why did the Eurasian civilizations establish hegemony over the people of other continents? Diamond claimed the reasons could be found, not in genes or culture, but in geography. For example, the broad east-west axis of Eurasia meant that newly domesticated crops could easily spread across zones with similar climates, whereas the north-south axis of the Americas prevented it. This, along with other contingencies of geography, led to the Eurasian population developing the tools of civilization before the rest of the world, resulting in the guns, germs, and steel that permitted them to dominate other continents.

Eurasia, however, includes not just Europe but China, Russia, and India. If geography caused Eurasia’s rise, why was it Europe that eventually established empires throughout the world? There is no end of different explanations offered, but a prominent one again fingered

geography as the cause. Historian Kenneth Pomeranz argued in *The Great Divergence*, that it was England's easily accessible coal deposits and the proximity of Europe to the New World that gave it the impetus to achieve the Industrial Revolution and thereby dominate the rest of the globe.

While these, and other influential modern histories, may not be conventionally viewed as quintessential postmodernist texts, something they have in common with postmodernism is a rejection of cultural essentialism. It's assumed there are no intrinsic behavioral differences between the peoples of various parts of the world, and therefore we need to look to environmental factors to explain how each developed in different ways. This is an admirable improvement over the racist assumptions of Western superiority that previously infused theories of history, but the approach adopted by these histories inevitably creates its own form of cultural imperialism by implicitly assuming a new set of human universals.

The distinctive values and beliefs about human nature that form the bedrock of Western thought are silently assumed to be those that drive people all over the world and throughout history. When investigating, for example, why Europe rather than China experienced an industrial revolution, most historians take it for granted that this was a wholly desirable goal that China "failed" to achieve before Europe. Similarly, when asking why Europe, not China, conquered the New World, it's generally assumed that, if Chinese navigators had reached the Americas before the Europeans, they would have plundered the continents in the same way that the Europeans did. The underlying values that drove Europeans into these historical pathways are simply taken to be universal human norms, leaving as the only remaining question: who got there first?

The Need for a Cognitive History

It's a compelling thesis that's generally accepted by many influential thinkers. The only problem with it is that it's wrong. In fact, as I demonstrate in my book *The Patterning Instinct*, different cultural complexes throughout history have developed fundamentally different value systems, and have conducted their activities accordingly.

For example, nearly a century before Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain in 1492, Admiral Zheng He set off from China with a glorious armada, leading three hundred magnificent ships on a thirty-year odyssey to distant lands as far afield as Africa. His ships inspired awe in those he visited—not surprisingly since his crew of twenty-seven thousand men was larger than the entire population of many ports of call. Indeed his fleet was the greatest the world had ever seen, dwarfing the technological capabilities of Europe at that time. He wasn't afraid to use his military might when needed, suppressing piracy and influencing local politics when he deemed it helpful. He could have done virtually anything he wanted to the places he visited: enslaved the populations, mined their mineral wealth, and

entrenched China's empire throughout the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean. Instead, he set up embassies in China's capital, Nanjing, bringing emissaries from Japan, Malaya, Vietnam, and Egypt.

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While some have tried to point to various ad hoc explanations for the divergent approaches taken by Zheng and Columbus, the ultimate cause for the difference lay in the framework of values that they both shared unquestioningly with their respective cultures. These contrasting cognitive structures made it just as unthinkable for Admiral Zheng to have conquered and enslaved the societies he visited with his armada, as it would have been unthinkable for Columbus to have set up embassies with the Indigenous people he encountered in the New World.

Value systems ultimately derive from a culture's underlying worldview—a set of assumptions about how things work, how society functions, its relationship with the natural world, what's valuable and what's possible. We form our worldview implicitly as we grow up, from our family, friends, and culture, and once it's set, we're barely aware of it unless we're presented with a different worldview for comparison. The unconscious origin of a worldview makes it both inflexible and powerful. Like fish that don't realize they're swimming in water because it's all they know, we tend to assume that our worldview simply describes the world the way it is—rather than recognizing it's a constructed lens that shapes our thoughts and ideas into certain preconditioned patterns.

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I believe it's critical to recognize that the cognitive frames through which different cultures perceive reality have had a profound effect on our world—an approach that underlies what I call *cognitive history*.

The worldview of a given civilization has, in my opinion, been a significant driver of the historical path each civilization has taken. But at the same time, I disavow any affinity with the old triumphalist view of history, which posits some characteristic of the Western mindset that made it somehow superior to that of other cultures, and therefore led to the West's "success" over the rest of the world. Instead, cognitive history reveals an underlying pattern

to Western cognition that is responsible both for its Scientific and Industrial revolutions, as well as its devastating destruction of Indigenous cultures around the world and our current global rush towards possible catastrophe. In this respect, cognitive history shares much with the postmodern critique of Western civilization, recognizing those capitalized, universal abstractions such as Reason, Progress and Truth to be culture-specific constructions. In fact, a central project of cognitive history is to trace how these patterns of thought first arose and then infused themselves so deeply into the Western mindset as to become virtually invisible to those who use them.

In essence, cognitive history is based on a simple but powerful precept: Worldviews shape values, and those values shape history. This is especially important to understand as we face our interlinked unfolding crises of civilization—climate breakdown, ecological collapse, and outrageous inequality—because, following the same logic, the values that dominate today’s world will shape the future. Ultimately, the direction of history is determined by the dominant culture’s worldview.

A lot has changed since Columbus landed in what is now Hispaniola in 1492, but crucial elements of his worldview remain paramount today. Columbus, like modern entrepreneurs who want to “move fast and break things,” was driven by a worldview that saw everything around him as resources for potential exploitation. Struck by the ingenuousness of Hispaniola’s indigenous people, he informed the King and Queen of Spain that “all the inhabitants could be taken away to Castile or made slaves on the island. With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

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The wave of global imperialism that ensued was the midwife to modern capitalism, with the first limited liability corporations formed to maximize resource extraction from the colonies. Since then, the view of the planet as a resource to exploit has become so entrenched throughout our cultural and economic system that, even when faced with the existential threat of ecological overshoot, the idea of transforming our economic system away from its growth-based trajectory remains almost unthinkable in mainstream discourse.

For this reason, if we want to redirect our civilization’s trajectory away from its acceleration to disaster, we must recognize the limitations of our dominant worldview and open our cognitive frameworks to different forms of meaning-making. The dominant culture’s depiction of humans as selfish individuals, the view of nature as a resource to be exploited,

and the idea that technology alone can fix our biggest problems, are all serious misconceptions that have collectively led our civilization down an accelerating path to disaster.

Fortunately, there is an alternative lens with which to see the world—one that emerges from modern scientific findings in such diverse fields as evolutionary biology, cognitive neuroscience, and complexity theory. It's a worldview of deep interconnectedness—one that sees humans as integrally embedded in the web of life rather than separate from it, and recognizes that what distinguishes humanity as a species is not selfishness but our instinct to cooperate even with those who are not kin.

As I describe in *The Web of Meaning*, this worldview, which is based on a firm scientific foundation, affirms profound insights from the world's great wisdom traditions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional Indigenous knowledge. If adopted more widely, it might have the potential to lead our civilization toward a very different trajectory than the one we're currently on—one that could set the conditions for sustainable flourishing on a regenerated Earth. Whether we achieve the cognitive shift needed before it's too late is one of the greatest questions of our time, and one that will likely determine humanity's future course.

**This article contains some excerpts from the author's books *The Patterning Instinct: A Cognitive History of Humanity's Search for Meaning* and *The Web of Meaning: Integrating Science and Traditional Wisdom to Find Our Place in the Universe*. For more information on the books visit <https://www.jeremylent.com/> **