CHAPTER ONE

THE FALL OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION AND THE RISE OF MULTICULTURAL WORLD HISTORY

The greatest publicist of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, even while he advocated the widening of historical inquiry to embrace social and economic activities and their effects, strongly believed that the only objects worthy of historical study were the peaks, not the valleys, of the achievements of mankind. Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*

However much the science of culture [anthropology] may protest its innocence of all preferences or evaluations, it fosters a specific moral posture. Since it requires openness to all cultures, it fosters universal tolerance and the exhilaration deriving from the beholding of the diversity; it necessarily affects all cultures that it can still affect by contributing to their transformation in one and the same direction; it willy-nilly brings about a shift of emphasis from the particular to the universal: by asserting, if only implicitly, the rightness of pluralism, it asserts that pluralism is the right way; it asserts the monism of universal tolerance and respect for diversity; for by virtue of being an ism, pluralism is a monism. Leo Strauss

*Early World Historians and the Idea of Progress*

From the Enlightenment until about the 1970s the liberal idea that human history could be comprehended in a progressive way commanded wide credence in the West. While there were a variety of interpretations about the moving forces of history and the nature of the stages one would expect to find, not many world historians doubted that it was possible to offer a grand view of history typified by increasing knowledge and freedom. In the 19th century this view sometimes came with assumptions of racial hierarchy. “We are fully authorized to say,” wrote William Swinton in his *Outline of the World’s History*, published in 1874, “that the Aryans are peculiarly the race of progress.” Similarly, in a popular high school textbook he authored in 1889, Philip Myers offered a narrative of progress with references to “the White, or Caucasian race” as “by far the most perfect type, physically, intellectually, and morally” (in Allardyce 2000: 35). Myers removed these racial remarks from later editions, but the liberal idea that history was
moving in a desirable direction continued to be infused with imperious attitudes toward cultures and peoples believed to be outside the mainstream of cultural progress.¹

The idea of progress had indeed developed into much more than an explanation of world history; it spawned a Western arrogance that belittled the historical role of non-Western societies. As Marshall Hodgson (2000: 113–14) lamented in the early 1950s, world history was “essentially Western history amplified by a few unrelated chapters on other parts of the world.” “Prehistoric man” and several of the ancient civilizations – Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Palestine – were sometimes treated fairly well, but once the story moved on to Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe, the Near East tended to disappear from the texts, except for a brief section on the expansion of Islam between the 8th and 12th centuries. The achievements of Indian and Chinese were highlighted, but Mesoamerican and Sub-Saharan cultures were usually given little attention until Europeans came into contact with them in modern times. There was a triumphalist assumption that Western peoples were always the progressive ones, and that Asians contributed little to human amelioration after the first millennium BCE. Western European civilization, having inherited the Judeo-Christian vision of a universal brotherhood of man, the Greek ideal of a free citizen, and the Roman legal tradition, was considered the “mainstream” of world history.

It would be extremely tendentious and unfair, however, to assume that the conception of world history Hodgson observed in the 1950s was simply the product of Western racial arrogance and ethnocentric malice. The study of world history was still in its infancy in the 1940s and 1950s and, yet, one can only marvel at the vast body of scholarship generated in earnest during the first half of the 20th century by Western-trained scholars on the cultures, traditions, and histories of all the regions of the world. A complete listing of these works would consume much of this chapter. Even more remarkable perhaps is that, by the early 1960s, scholars in the United States were already trying to deal with the problem of ethnocentrism in the study of non-Western cultures – some loudly calling for the integration of the new findings and ideas of anthropologists, sociologists, and “area studies” historians engaged in research on non-Western lands. Robert Crane, a 1962–63 fellow at the American Institute of Indian Studies, was already hoping

¹ The beginning sections of this chapter are based upon a previous publication, see Duchesne (2009).