Periodization Reading Questions for Analysis

Write your answers in complete sentences and supply a quote (excerpt) as evidence to support your answers from the reading below.

1. List & Define 5 Vocabulary Terms you didn’t know:

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

2. Define Periodization and explain why historians find it to be a useful tool for analyzing history.

3. Explain why Periodization is a challenging and controversial issue in World History.

4. Elaborate on the historian’s role in creating periodizations. Explain how the historian’s point of view might affect how they organize history into manageable chunks.

5. Describe the organizational challenges faced by historians. Supply at least 2 examples.
6. Historians face ethical challenges when they create historical periodizations. Describe the ethical challenges faced by World Historians.

7. Explain how the various calendars used by the many people in history creates technical problems for the World Historian trying to create a global periodization. List at least 2 examples from the reading.

8. Describe at least 3 periodization “schemes” that have been used by past World Historians.

9. Examine the advice David Christian (the author!) gives regarding the division of history into organized periods of study. Describe how he describes “World History as a whole”.

10. Refer to the APWH Course Description and list how time will divided in our course this year. APWH Course Description
Before we go any further we need to consider the issue of periodization. Periodization refers to the way historians divide the past into distinct eras. How can we possibly divide the history of humanity into manageable chunks?

Like all storytelling, history requires a structure, and periodization is one of the main devices historians use to create structure. Yet the past is seamless, fluid, and continuous. There are few natural breaks, so any attempt to divide the past into neat chronological chunks must be artificial. Periodization always does violence to the complex reality of the past, and even the most conscientious attempts at dividing up the past involve some distortion. Any scheme of periodization must compromise between the often contradictory demands of clarity, coherence, accuracy, and honesty.

The challenge of finding an appropriate scheme of periodization is particularly complex in world history, which tries to construct a coherent account of the past of all human societies. The challenges are even greater for this essay, which tries to describe the past at scales that will seem unfamiliar even to some world historians. Inevitably, it will sacrifice important details, as it tries to sketch out the larger patterns. For example, it describes the evolution of agrarian civilizations as a whole, rather than the distinct histories of particular civilizations. It takes a very different slice of the past, one that is neither better nor worse than more familiar slices, but simply different. And because it is different it can show some new things, and show some familiar things in a new light. Perhaps the most important object that we can see at these large scales is humanity as a whole. At this scale, and only at this scale, it is possible to get a sense of the historical trajectory of humans as a whole.

Problems of Periodization in World History

The problems we face are theoretical, organizational, ethical and technical.
Theoretical Problems

Periodization poses theoretical problems because any chronological scheme highlights some aspects of the past and obscures others. While a historian of gender might look for eras in which the relative status and power of women and men changed (the granting of suffrage to women, perhaps, or the emergence of patriarchal social relations in early agrarian societies), a historian of war might focus, instead, on changes in weaponry and tactics (such as the use of gunpowder or the appearance of the first organized armies), while a historian of religion might concentrate on the appearance of the first “universal” religions in the first millennium BCE. Different questions highlight different aspects of the past and generate different periodizations. In other words, to choose a periodization is to make some rather arbitrary judgments about what is and what is not most important in human history. By focusing on a small chunk of the past historians can avoid some of these challenges, but in world history periodization requires judgments as to the most important changes across all societies on earth. Is there sufficient consensus among historians as to what those changes are? At present, the answer is probably no.

Organizational Problems

Periodization also poses severe organizational challenges. How can we find labels that do justice to many different regions and societies, each with its own distinctive historical trajectory? After all, at any given moment, a million different things are happening. Which of them should the historian concentrate on? The problem is peculiarly acute in world history because while neighboring regions or states may evolve in closely related ways, societies separated by large distances may have little in common. Should we place them in the same period just because they existed at the same time? Or should we have separate periodizations for each region? In which case we risk losing any sense of the overall coherence of world history. The modern history profession emerged in Europe, and many well-established schemes of periodization were designed to make sense of European history. This is true, for example, of the traditional division into ancient, medieval, and modern periods. But such labels make little sense outside of Europe, though they are so well established that they sometimes get used nevertheless. Similarly, Chinese historians have long used dynastic labels to provide a framework for historical writing, but these, too, are labels that mean little elsewhere. What would it mean to talk of “Tang dynasty America”, for example? Is it possible to find labels that make sense for Africa as well as for the whole of Eurasia, the Americas, and the
Pacific? Here, too, there is little consensus amongst world historians about the best solution.

**Ethical Problems**

Periodization poses ethical problems because it can so easily imply value judgments. This is particularly true if our periodizations assume that some eras were more “evolved” or “progressive” than others. School texts on European history have commonly used labels such as the “Dark Ages,” the “Middle Ages,” the “Renaissance,” the “Scientific Revolution,” or the “Age of the Democratic Revolution.” When used of entire historical periods, such labels are by no means neutral. They were generally used with the clear understanding that the Dark Ages were backward, that the Middle Ages were transitional, and that real progress towards modernity began with the Renaissance. Such schemes carry value judgments about different regions as well as different eras, because they implicitly compare the differing levels of “progress” of different regions. Until recently, it was commonly argued that, while Western societies had modernized, many other societies were stuck in earlier historical eras or stages and needed to catch up. Is it possible to construct a system of periodization that avoids imposing the values of one period or region on another? For this problem, too, there are no generally accepted answers.

**Technical Problems**

By technical problems, I mean the many problems that arise from the presence of numerous different calendars.

Why does it sound odd to say that: “In 897 Columbus crossed the ocean blue”? Because I’ve used the Muslim rather than the Christian calendar. Ancient Greek city states mostly dated events by the year of each ruler. Not until the 4th century did Plato’s friend, Timaeus, propose using a common system of chronology, based on the date of the first Olympiad. According to the modern (Christian) calendar, this was in the year 776 BCE. As these examples suggest, establishing a universal calendar has itself been a complex, prolonged and difficult task. However, of all the problems I have described, this is the one on which there has emerged a reasonably broad consensus. But even here there remain arguments. Is use of the Christian calendar perhaps a subtle form of cultural imperialism? Can we escape that charge simply by using the abbreviations “BC/AD” (Before Christ and *Anno Domini*) or “BCE/CE” (Before the Christian Era, and Contemporary Era)?
No system of periodization can solve all these problems or satisfy all these
different demands. Like historical writing in general, schemes of periodization reflect the
biases and judgments of the era and the people that produced them. They also reflect
the questions being asked and the scale on which those questions are posed. This
means that no single scheme will be appropriate for the many different scales on which
historians can and do write about the past.

Schemes of Periodization

The simplest approach to periodization—one that is present in many creation
stories—divides the past into two great eras. These can be thought of as the era of
creation and the era of present time (as in some Australian Aboriginal accounts), or the
eras before and after “the fall” (as in the Genesis story within the
Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition). Dualistic periodizations offer a powerful way of
contrasting the present and the past, either to praise or condemn the contemporary era.
Traces of such periodizations survive, even today, in dichotomous schemes such as
those of modernization theory, with its stark contrasting of so-called modern and
traditional societies.

However, most periodization schemes divide the past into several major eras,
each with subdivisions of its own. Dynastic histories weave their accounts of the past
around the reign dates of major kings and emperors. Such accounts can be found in
Chinese
dynastic histories and in Mayan chronicles. Dynastic histories often imply a cyclical view
of the past, in which each era (like each ruler) passes through periods of strength and
weakness. Historical accounts conceived within a more linear view of the past often
take as their framework a series of distinct eras, all of which may be seen as part of a
larger, universal trajectory. Writing in the eighth century BCE, the Greek poet Hesiod
described five great ages of history, beginning with a golden age, in which humans were
contented and godlike, and passing through several stages of decline—the ages of
silver, bronze, and heroes—and finally to the era of his own day, which Hesiod
characterized as one of violence and stupidity.

Similar patterns of rise and fall have reappeared in more recent writings, such as
in the work of Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) or Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975). Marxian
historiography offered a combination of cyclical and linear chronologies, beginning with
an era of simple perfection (the era of primitive communism), that was followed by
stages characterized by increasing productivity and increasing inequality and
exploitation. But the Marxist scheme culminated in a future that would resolve these
contradictions by combining high productivity with a return to the egalitarianism of the
first era.
Most modern periodization schemes have been linear. Such schemes have been greatly influenced by the work of archaeologists and anthropologists, for whom the problem of constructing a periodization covering the whole of human history was often more urgent than it was for historians. Because archaeologists, unlike historians, deal mainly with material artifacts, it was natural for them to construct their periodizations around aspects of material culture. And, at large scales, these seemed to point unequivocally to a history of linear change. The nineteenth-century Danish archaeologists Christian Thomsen (1788-1865) and Jens Worsaae (1821-1885) constructed a scheme comprising three ages—a Stone Age, a Bronze Age, and an Iron Age. That scheme still has some influence on the study of prehistory. In the twentieth century, G. Gordon Childe (1892-1957) built on the Marxist insight that particular technologies imply distinctive lifeways and social structures to argue that the major turning points in human prehistory were technological and social. He stressed above all the appearance of agriculture (the “Neolithic Revolution”) and the appearance of cities and states (the “Urban Revolution”). Nineteenth-century anthropologists such as Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) and Edward Tylor (1832-1917) offered parallel schemes in which different eras were distinguished by different social structures in a progressive movement from “savagery” to “barbarism” to “civilization.”

In the late twentieth century, historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists became increasingly sensitive to the dangers of using schemes that imply easy value judgments. So, while most modern schemes of periodization retain a sense of directionality in history, they usually resist the assumption that directionality implies either progress or decline. On the other hand, most modern schemes of periodization at the largest scales still rely primarily on a combination of technological and sociological factors to distinguish between different eras. This is a tradition with roots going back to the earliest written histories. The Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, which dates from the third millennium BCE, recognizes, in the contrast between the urban warrior hero Gilgamesh and his great friend Enkidu, who came from the wild lands beyond the city, that different technologies imply different ways of living, different systems of ethics, and different types of political and social action. Karl Marx (1818-1883) formalized this insight within the notion of a mode of production. The best justification for such an approach to the challenge of periodization is that fundamental technologies shape so many other aspects of human history, including living standards, demography, gender relations, political structures, and the pace and nature of historical change.

A Periodization for World History as a Whole

The best way of solving the ethical problems posed by any scheme of periodization is simply to take great care with language and labeling, and to remember
that all periodizations are somewhat arbitrary. . . . . . to imply no judgments as to the superiority or inferiority of different types of society or different eras of human history. On the other hand, . . . periodization clearly does imply a trajectory of some kind. On the largest scales, there can be little doubt that there is a directionality to human history. Foraging, agrarian, and modern societies have not appeared in a chronologically random jumble, but in a clear sequence. And that sequence has an underlying logic that reflects changing human relations with the environment. On large chronological scales, human technologies have changed so as to yield increasing amounts of energy, food, and other resources, which allowed human populations to increase. This, in turn, has given rise to larger and more complex communities, whose technologies and sheer numbers have given them many advantages whenever they came into contact with smaller communities with less productive technologies. There is a shape to human history, and that is precisely why a global periodization scheme of some kind is so necessary.

Further Reading