



**Eric Vanhaute.** *World History: An Introduction*. Oxon: Routledge, 2013. 182 S. ISBN 978-0-415-53578-6; ISBN 978-0-415-53579-3.



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## **E. Vanhaute: World History**

Historians do not always indulge in the usual stories of departmental shenanigans when they share a meal with colleagues they have met at a conference or following a presentation. This is likely why I remember this conversation with Eric Vanhaute in Ghent, in the Spring of 2010. He told me about the world history course he had been giving at the University of Ghent since 2005, and about his choice to organise it thematically rather than chronologically. Eric also explained his teaching choice to frame the whole course around âbig issuesâ chosen to arouse the studentâs curiosity and for their capacity to connect the study of history with present concerns. The fact that his introductory course catered for first year students in different disciplines underwrote this decision to connect the past and the present through a limited number of fundamental themes (nature, food, political organisation, social inequalityâ!).

Since that moment, I always think about him when I look at new or revamped world history textbooks and their rich and thick content and its invariably chronological organisation. Or when I read the discussions on the electronic list H-world, with colleagues from Kinder-

garten to graduate school agonizing about the naming of periods used to teach world history, or about the pros and cons of teaching the Roman and the Han empires in a same lesson while there were few if any interaction between the two. This reminds me of that Ghent conversation which convinced me that the thematic organisation was a most efficient way to convey the message of world history and to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the abundance of information that perspires from any world history textbook. When I met him, Eric Vanhaute had already transformed his course into a book, published in 2008. Eric Vanhaute, *Wereldgeschiedenis. Een inleiding*, Ghent 2008. The book was a frank expression of his tenets about the content of world/global history, which âtrinityâ of priorities he once expounded on H-World : âa comparative analysis of societies and human systems, an analysis focusing on connections, interactions, and circulations between societies and human systems, and a systems-analysis, looking at societal (economic, social, cultural) structures as units of analysisâ. Eric Vanhaute, *World history theory*, in: H-World, Tuesday 13 July 2010. With publication in English by Routledge in 2013, this analytical framework is now developed for a wider au-

dience. Who now can cope with Vanhaute's big issues, 8 large themes and questions which are stated concisely on page 21 and form the 8 core chapters of the book:

• A human world: how humankind developed from a threatened to the most successful species.

• A natural world: how nature helped shape human history.

• An agrarian world : how agricultural societies gave human history a new twist.

• A political world: how human got organized into increasingly more complex administrative systems.

• A divine world: how humankind developed new religious and cultural life orientation patterns.

• A divided world: how the paths of the West and the rest of the world separated over the last centuries.

• A global world: how the world became more global at the same time.

• A polarized world: how the world became and is marked by diverging patterns of wealth, poverty and inequality. Eric Vanhaute, *World History*. An introduction, p. 21-22

Fleshing out this skeleton, Eric Vanhaute has given us a short and generous volume.

It is a short book in size, and at 159 pages it does live up to its subtitle of 'introduction'. Each of its chapters is also quite short, because the author made choices. To answer his 8 big questions, he selects a few centuries or several thousand or hundred thousand years, and picks up specific places or regions of our planet to compare them with one another and reckon the patterns and links that assemble them into specific systems or flows. But he also makes topical choices. • A divine world, a chapter where in fact only a few pages actually deal with religion, is just 12 pages long and mostly deals with civilizations as containers and tropes of and for world history. Instead, at 21 pages, chapter 7 and its study of the economic divergence of Europe and the rest of the world reminds us that Eric Vanhaute is an economic and social historian with a strong interest for the 19th and 20th century. Another choice is to focus on areas that are central to the 'big issues' the author is dealing with. In that same chapter 7, the emphasis is chiefly on the separating paths of Europe and East Asia, while Africa only intervenes in a brief appendix at the end of the chapter. Such choices are not flaws or weaknesses: they are the key for a compact treatment of the 'big issues' defined by Vanhaute.

And, when readers feel they can make other choices to handle these big issues, Eric Vanhaute's framework in fact entices them to do so. By insisting relentlessly on comparisons, interactions and systems, he offers guide-

lines for others to scrutinize different places and moments than the ones he chose for the book. This is one of the reasons why this is also a generous volume. Another one is that, in its conception of world history, it is open-ended and does not churn out some holistic explanation of the historical trajectory of human societies. Readers and users can add their own 'issues' to the author's Big 8. Or they can sharpen their own sets of questions around Vanhaute's big issues, for instance to explore political ideologies, cultural products or aesthetic preoccupations in the history of mankind. Meanwhile, the way Vanhaute unfolds his own issues will be precious for starting up classroom discussions, and this is another aspect of the generosity of the book. In his different chapters, Eric Vanhaute chews up material to transform it into compact and problematised accounts that can be elaborated upon in lectures or in student assignments.

Not even mentioning textbooks, there are several other available introductory texts to world history. Some are short, like David Christian *This fleeting world*, a 'short history of humanity' in 105 pages, arranged in chronological sequence David Christian, *This Fleeting World. A Short History of Humanity*, Great Barrington 2008. . Or Pamela Kyle Crossley *What is global history?*, with its decided historiographical take Pamela Kyle Crossley, *What is Global History?* Cambridge 2008. . Some are longer, like William and John McNeill's narrative of the *Human Web* J. R. McNeill / William McNeill, *The Human Web. A Bird's Eye View of World History*, Norton 2003. , or Fred Spier's search for the laws that govern the rise and demise of complexity in the history of Planet Earth and its crew Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity*, Malden 2010. . Others, rather than telling the story of the world, captured the story of the knowledge about the history of the world, as with the formidable *Navigating World History* by Patrick Manning. Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History*, New York 2003. Eric Vanhaute's book does not duplicate any of them. It is not another brief history of the world that tries to sum it up in the minimum of pages. It is not a new exposition of another 'Grand Explanation' that should provide us with the next grand unified theory of history. Raymond Grew, *The contexts of global history*, in: *New Global Initiative* 18, 2013, URL : <http://toynbeeprize.org/new-global-history-initiative/> (accessed 11 January 2014). In a decided and simple manner, Eric Vanhaute does what is needed to convince students to pay attention to the history of the world: he transforms past facts, events, moments into issues, problems and chal-

lenges for today. "An introduction to, writes Vanhaute, "strive to interest others into it, will hail this stance. And is more important than a summary of" (p. 15). People get his book. who want to interest themselves in world history, or who

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