



Introduction to International Relations

Chapter Notes: Chapter 2

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Chapter Two:

Perspectives on World History

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 provides students with an introduction to world history, starting with the first recorded civilizations and progressing up through the nineteenth century. In addition to this basic factual framework, however, it also introduces students to a conceptual framework of world history through the use of the three perspectives. Realists, for example, highlight the continual cycle between empire and equilibrium, while liberals emphasize the expanding and increasingly complex nature of human society. For its part, the identity perspective examines the development of ideas and identities, such as humanity's evolution from mythology to the Renaissance and Enlightenment.

Realist view of history

- Realism looks at world history through the lens of power distribution.
- It sees two primary configurations over the past 5,000 years: empire and equilibrium.
- Empire and equilibrium cycled back and forth, as civilizations amassed power and smaller powers resisted.
- Recorded history began around 3000 BCE in Mesopotamia and Egypt.
- By 2000 BCE, Indian and Chinese civilizations began to emerge.
- About 1000 BCE, center of civilization began to shift westward toward the Mediterranean. Greek civilization started to flourish.
- Roman Empire began to expand around 300 BCE; lasted approximately 800 years.
- When Roman Empire crumbled, Arab civilization flourished, peaking with the “Golden Age of Islam.”
- Medieval period was a time of slow consolidation for Europe.
- After Reformation, Europe roiled by religious wars.
- The Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War, established principle of sovereignty.
- After Westphalia, the rise of the modern nation state – and the decentralization of power – led to a period of relative equilibrium among states.

Liberal views of history

- Liberals pay less attention to cycling between empire and equilibrium and place a greater focus on expansion of international interdependence.
- Since they focus on relationships, liberals point to the increasing complexity of the global society.
- Liberals look at growth of political bodies from villages to city-states to nation-states as evidence for the growth of human society.
- At 1000 CE, over 3,000 political entities existed within the Holy Roman Empire; by 1648, that number was 300; by 1815 it was less than 40; today it is limited to two states, Italy and Germany, that are rapidly becoming part of one, the EU.
- Liberalism also emphasizes trade and transnational relations between non-state actors.
- Big breakthrough came with the industrial revolution, which caused the proliferation of trade agreements, nongovernmental organizations, transnational banks, and domestic actors with an interest in international affairs.

Identity views of history

- Identity perspectives root the explanation of historical events in the ideas and dialogues of international actors.
- Identity perspective focuses directly on who historical actors were and how their use of power stemmed from their identities.
- For identity perspective, history is marked by evolution from early clan- and tribe-based societies and mythology to philosophy to other religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism.
- In modern era, ideas such as nationalism and other domestic ideologies also influence states' identities.

Thought Questions

1. Which of the perspectives' approaches to history makes the most sense to you? Why?
2. What aspects of history is the realist perspective likely to overlook? The liberal perspective? The identity perspective?
3. Liberals point out that the basic political unit has evolved from tribes and clans to city-states, city-leagues, and finally the modern nation-state, arguing that states will likely continue to coalesce into larger aggregations. Do you see evidence of this in the world today? Do you agree that human history is moving inexorably along this pattern?

4. What aspects of history does the identity perspective highlight? When future historians are examining the early twenty-first century from an identity perspective, what will they likely emphasize?
5. If an historian was writing an account of 9/11 from the realist perspective, how would he or she argue that it fit into the larger pattern of history? From the liberal perspective? From the identity perspective?