03 State and Empire in Eurasia / North Africa
500 BCE – 500 CE
Introduction

– The 2007 book *Are We Rome?* asked if the United States has become the new Roman Empire.
  • collapse of the Soviet Union
  • overextension of the United States
  • sense of unique, global mission
  • commitment to military dominance
  • reminder of continuing relevance of a long-dead empire

– Modern fascination with empires
  • earliest empires developed in era of First Civilizations
    – Akkadian Empire
    – Babylonian Empire
    – Assyrian Empire
  • empires have been central to world history for 4,000 years
What is an empire?

- simple answer: empires are political systems with coercive power
- more typical: larger, more aggressive states
  - conquer other states
  - use their resources
  - usually include multiple peoples and cultures under a single political system
- no clear line between empires and small multiethnic states
  - can have a common culture without a unified political system

Eurasian empires of the classical era include:

- Persian Empire
- Greek empire of Alexander the Great
- Roman Empire
- Chinese empire (Qin and Han dynasties)
- India (Mauryan and Gupta empires)
— Common problems of classical empires:
  • Would they try to impose their culture on varied subjects?
  • Would they rule conquered peoples directly or through local elites?
  • How should they extract wealth while maintaining order?
  • all eventually collapsed

— Why have empires always been so fascinating?
  • size was imposing
  • blood and violence of conquest
  • satisfaction in witnessing the fall of the mighty when they collapse
  • contrast to nonimperial civilizations
  • empires were *important*
    – majority of humans before twentieth century lived in empires
    – stimulated exchange of ideas, cultures, and values
      » e.g., Roman Empire as vehicle for spread of Christianity
    – peace and security encouraged development, commerce, and cultural mixing
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<td>553-330 BCE</td>
<td>Persian Achaemenid Empire</td>
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<td>509 BCE</td>
<td>Founding of Roman Republic</td>
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<td>500-221 BCE</td>
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<td>200 BCE-200 CE</td>
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<td>Transition from republic to empire in Rome</td>
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<td>Collapse of Han dynasty</td>
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<td>320-550 CE</td>
<td>India’s Gupta dynasty empire</td>
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<td>First Century CE</td>
<td>Collapse of western Roman Empire</td>
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## Distinctive Features of Second-Wave Eurasian Civilizations

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<th>South Asian</th>
<th>Middle Eastern</th>
<th>Mediterranean</th>
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<td><strong>Political Features</strong></td>
<td>Unified empire under Qin and Han dynasties; “Mandate of Heaven” concept; examinations for official positions</td>
<td>Mauryan and Gupta empires; frequent political fragmentation</td>
<td>Persian Empire; royal absolutism; conquest by Alexander the Great</td>
<td>Greek city-states; Athenian democracy; Roman Empire; unification of Mediterranean basin</td>
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<td><strong>Cultural Features</strong></td>
<td>Confucianism / Daoism</td>
<td>Hinduism / Buddhism</td>
<td>Zoroastrianism; Judaism; Christianity</td>
<td>Greek rationalism; spread of Christianity</td>
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<td><strong>Social Features</strong></td>
<td>Class hierarchy; dominance of bureaucratic and landholding elites; peasant rebellions</td>
<td>Caste system; purity and pollution; social position as indicator of spiritual development</td>
<td>Benevolent posture toward minorities in Persian Empire; Jews returned to homeland; tension between Greek and non Greeks</td>
<td>Unusually prominent role of slavery in Greek and Roman society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Empires and Civilizations in Collision: The Persians and the Greeks
The Eurasian classical era saw a flowering of second-wave civilizations.

- Civilizations did not usually encounter each other directly.
- Mediterranean world and Middle East were the important exceptions
  - Persians and Greeks were neighbors
  - Very important cultural encounter
The Persian Empire

- in 500 B.C.E., it was the largest and most impressive empire
  - Persians were Indo-Europeans, homeland on the Iranian plateau
  - imperial system drew on Mesopotamian prototypes
  - much larger and more splendid
  - Cyrus (r. 557–530 B.C.E.) and Darius (r. 522–486 B.C.E.) expanded empire from Egypt to India
  - diverse empire with population of around 35 million people

- elaborate cult of kingship
  - rule by will of the god Ahura Mazda
  - absolute monarchy
• holding the empire together
  – violent punishments by king
  – effective administrative system
    » satraps governed the empire’s 23 provinces
    » lower-level officials were local
    » system of imperial spies (“eyes and ears of the King”)
  – respect for non-Persian cultural traditions
    » Cyrus allowed Jews to return from Babylonian exile and rebuild Jerusalem temple
    » Herodotus: Persians adopt foreign customs readily
  – standardized coinage, predictable taxes
  – encouragement of communication and commerce
    » canal dug between Nile and Red Sea
    » “royal road” 1,700 miles long across empire
    » imperial courier service
• immense wealth and power
  – elaborate imperial centers (especially Susa, Persepolis)
The Greeks

- Indo-Europeans
- classical Greece emerged ca. 750 b.c.e., flourished for about 400 years
- distinctiveness of Hellenistic civilization
  - population of Greece and the Aegean basin was 2 million to 3 million people
  - geography of mountains, valleys encouraged development of hundreds of city-states and small settlements
    » most had 500–5,000 male citizens
    » fierce independence, frequent conflict with neighbors
  - shared common language and common gods
    » common participation in Olympic Games (founded 776 b.c.e.)
  - between 750 and 500 b.c.e., colonization around Mediterranean basin and Black Sea
– most distinctive feature: popular participation in political life of city-states
  » equality of all citizens before the law
  » extent of citizenship varied depending on time and city
    • early Greek history: only wealthy and well-born were citizens
    • gradually expanded to middle- and lower-class men
    • an important element was ability to afford armor and weapons to fight as *hoplites* for the city-state
  » *tyrants* (dictators) emerged in many areas, supported by the poorer classes against the rich
  » Sparta gave most political authority to Council of Elders
  » Athens: most distinctive expression of political participation
    • period of intense class conflict
    • Solon’s reforms began in 594 b.c.e.
    • extension of citizens’ rights by Cleisthenes and Pericles
    • by 450 b.c.e., holders of public office chosen by lot, paid
    • the Assembly was open for participation by all citizens, was center of political life
  » differences between Athenian and modern democracy
    • direct, not representative
    • women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded
### Key Moments in Classical Greek History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional date for the first Olympic Games</td>
<td>776 b.c.e.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergence of Greek city-states and overseas colonization</td>
<td>750-700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolution of hoplite military tactics</td>
<td>700-650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrants rule in many city-states</td>
<td>670-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparta dominant in Peloponnesus</td>
<td>550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleisthenes’ political reforms in Athens</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greco-Persian Wars</td>
<td>490-479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Age of Athens (Parthenon, Athenian democracy)</td>
<td>479-429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helot rebellion in Sparta</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peloponnesian War</td>
<td>431-404</td>
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<tr>
<td>Macedonian conquest of Greece</td>
<td>338</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conquests of Alexander the Great</td>
<td>333-323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hellenistic era</td>
<td>323-30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece comes under Roman control</td>
<td>2nd century b.c.e.</td>
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</table>
Collision: The Greco-Persian Wars

- point of collision was Ionia (Greek settlements on Anatolian seacoast)
  - in 499 b.c.e., some Ionian Greeks revolted against Persia
  - were supported by Athens
- Persia responded with expeditions against Greeks in 490 and 480 b.c.e.
  - Greeks astonishingly defeated Persians on land and sea
  - Greeks believed they won Battle of Marathon (490 b.c.e.) because they were motivated by Greek freedoms
- notion of East/West divide as dominant theme in European thought
  - Greece = Europe, freedom
  - Persia = Asia, despotism
victory radicalized Athenian democracy: poor rowers received full citizenship
  - fifty-year Golden Age of Greek culture after Persian Wars
    » construction of Parthenon
    » birth of Greek theatre (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides)
    » early career of philosopher Socrates
  - beginnings of imperialism
    » Athenian naval power led to dominance over allies
  - Peloponnesian War (431–404 b.c.e.)
    » Sparta led resistance to Athenian imperialism
    » Athens defeated
    » Greek states were exhausted, distrusted each other
    » opened the way to takeover by Macedonia (frontier region on northern edge of Greece)
Collision: Alexander and the Hellenistic Era

• Philip II of Macedon completed conquest of Greece by 338 b.c.e.
  – political unification of Greece by force
  – plan for great Greek expedition against Persia

• Alexander’s expedition against Persia (333–323 b.c.e.)
  – created a massive Greek empire that reached from Egypt and Anatolia to Afghanistan and India
  – defeat of Persian Empire, destruction of Persepolis
  – Alexander anointed as pharaoh of Egypt, declared to be “son of the gods”

• Alexander died in 323 b.c.e.; empire divided into three kingdoms, ruled by Macedonian generals
• Alexander’s conquests were most important in world history terms for creation of the Hellenistic era (323–30 b.c.e.)
  – dissemination of Greek culture through much of Asia and Egypt
  – role of cities in spread of Greek culture
    » Alexander and successors established many cities
    » many thousands of Greek settlers
    » Greek public centers and government
    » Alexandria (Egypt) as great cosmopolitan center
      • library of 700,000 volumes
      • the Museum: sponsorship of scholars
• A simplified form of Greek was widely spoken from Mediterranean to India
  – Indian monarch Ashoka published some of his decrees in Greek
  – many Jews were attracted to Greek culture; Pharisees developed their own school system to counter the influence
• Hellenistic cities were much more culturally diverse than original Greek city-states
  – were not independent, but part of conquest states
  – Macedonians and Greeks formed the elite
    » efforts to remain separate from the natives
    » periodic rebellions against Greek exploitation
  – cultural interaction and blending were still possible
    » Alexander encouraged intermarriage
    » Greek rulers supported native cults
    » many natives became Greek citizens by adopting Greek education and culture
    » in India, Greeks became part of Ksatriya (warrior) caste
    » some Bactrian Greeks converted to Buddhism, including King Menander
    » depiction of the Buddha in human form, Greek style

• Roman rule replaced that of Greeks in western part of Hellenistic world
  – continued to spread Greek culture and ideas
Comparing Empires: Roman and Chinese
The Roman and Chinese empires had little direct contact but interesting similarities.

- both flourished ca. 200 b.c.e.–200 c.e.
- were of similar size (about 1.5 million square miles)
- both had 50 million to 60 million people
- between them, they controlled nearly half the world’s population
- interesting variations on imperial theme
- Rome: From City-State to Empire
  - started as small, unimportant city-state in central Italy in eighth century b.c.e.
  - overthrew monarchy and established a republic ca. 509 b.c.e.
    - dominance of wealthy patricians
    - rule by two consuls, with advice from Senate
  - conflict with plebeians (poorer classes)
    - developed into political role for the plebeians
    - tribunes represented plebeians, could veto legislation
  - pride in republican values: rule of law, citizens’ rights, lack of pretension, morality—“the way of the ancestors”
• creation of the empire
  – began in 490s b.c.e. with wars to control Italian peninsula
  – 264–146 b.c.e.: Punic Wars with Carthage
    » gave Rome control over western Mediterranean
    » made Rome a naval power
  – conquest of Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and present-day Spain, France, and Britain
  – reached greatest geographical extent in early second century c.e.
  – gradual, unplanned pursuit of opportunities
  – skill and brutality of Roman army
  – usually generous treatment of conquered peoples

• political crisis of first century b.c.e.
  – rise of military leaders (Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Julius Caesar)
  – decline of republican values
  – Caesar Augustus (r. 27 b.c.e.–14 c.e.) was first emperor
    » maintenance of republican forms
    » reality: emperor as sole authority

• establishment of pax Romana (Roman peace)
  – security
  – relative prosperity
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Moments in the History of the Roman Empire</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional date of Rome’s founding as a monarchy</td>
<td>753 B.C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishment of Roman Republic</td>
<td>509 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turmoil between patricians and plebeians (“struggle of the orders”)</td>
<td>509-287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelve Tables (Rome’s first written law code)</td>
<td>450 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punic Wars</td>
<td>264-146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil war; Julius Caesar appointed dictator and then assassinated</td>
<td>49-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reign of Caesar Augustus</td>
<td>27 B.C.E. – 14 C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Great Fire in Rome; Nero blames Christians</td>
<td>64 C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roman citizenship extended to almost all free subjects</td>
<td>212 C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constantine converts to Christianity</td>
<td>312 C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Founding of Constantinople as the “New Rome”</td>
<td>324 C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roman Empire split into eastern and western halves</td>
<td>395 C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Barbarian” invasions</td>
<td>4th-5th centuries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collapse of western Roman Empire</td>
<td>476 C.E.</td>
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</table>
— China: From Warring States to Empire

• creation of empire regarded as a restoration
  – Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties had created a Chinese state
  – system fell apart by 500 b.c.e.
  – age of warring states: seven competing kingdoms
  – multiple states were regarded as unnatural

• unification by Shihuangdi, ruler of Qin (r. 221–210 b.c.e.)
  – adopted Legalism as political philosophy: clear rules and harsh punishments to enforce state authority
  – Shihuangdi means “first emperor”

• expansion of empire into northern Vietnam and Korea and into steppes to northwest
• creation of empire was brutal
  – military force
  – execution of scholars, book burning
  – hundreds of thousands of laborers built Great Wall
  – Shihuangdi’s monumental tomb, with about 7,500 life-size ceramic statues
  – standardized weights, measures, currency, written Chinese, and even axle lengths for carts

• Qin dynasty collapsed in 206 b.c.e.; followed by Han dynasty (206 b.c.e.–220 c.e.)
  – kept Qin centralization
  – less harsh
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<tr>
<td>Political fragmentation (&quot;warring states&quot; period)</td>
<td>500-221 B.C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unification of China: Qin Shihuangdi and Qin dynasty</td>
<td>221-206 B.C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beginning of Han dynasty, with Liu Bang as its first emperor</td>
<td>206-195 A.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reign of Emperor Wudi, who established Confucian Academy for training imperial bureaucrats</td>
<td>141-87 A.D.</td>
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<td>Emperor Wang Mang attempts land reform, without success</td>
<td>9-23 A.D.</td>
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<td>Yellow Turban peasant revolt</td>
<td>184 A.D.</td>
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<td>Collapse of Han dynasty</td>
<td>220 A.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Renewed political fragmentation</td>
<td>220-581 A.D.</td>
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<td>China’s unity is restored (Sui dynasty)</td>
<td>589-618 A.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tang dynasty</td>
<td>619-907 A.D.</td>
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— Consolidating the Roman and Chinese Empires
  • both empires defined themselves in universal terms
  • both invested heavily in public works
  • both claimed supernatural sanctions
    – deceased Roman emperors as gods
      » persecution of Christians for nonparticipation in cult
    – Chinese emperor as Son of Heaven
      » rule by Mandate of Heaven
      » dependent on just rule
      » heavy ritual duties to maintain relationship between earth and heaven
      » moral government spelled out by writings of Confucius and his followers
• both absorbed a foreign religious tradition
  – development of Christianity in Roman Empire
    » eventually became dominant religion of Europe
  – introduction of Buddhism into China by traders
    » not very popular until collapse of Han dynasty
    » temporary state support under Sui dynasty
    » never dominated in China

• relationships with societies they governed
  – Romans were always a minority in empire
    » gradual expansion of Roman citizenship; was granted to nearly all free people of empire in 212 c.e.
    » did not imply cultural assimilation
    » some Roman culture was attractive to western Europeans
    » Greek culture continued to dominate eastern empire
  – ethnic Chinese had much larger cultural heartland
    » active assimilation of “barbarians”
• role of language differed in the two empires
  – Latin (alphabetic language) gave rise to Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Romanian
  – Chinese characters (represented words or ideas) could not be transferred easily to other languages
    » but all literate people could understand written Chinese
    » more important than Latin in assimilating the elites
• Roman Empire’s peoples maintained separate cultural identities far more than in China
• Bureaucracy was much more elaborate in China than in Roman Empire
  – Chinese emperor Wudi (r. 141–87 b.c.e.) established an academy to train officials based on works of Confucius
    » developed into civil service system
    » lasted until twentieth century
  – Roman administration relied on regional elites and army
    » unlike China, developed major body of law that was applicable equally to all people of the realm
The Collapse of Empires

- Why do they fall?
  - Han dynasty ended in 220 c.e
  - Traditional date for fall of western Roman Empire is 476 c.e.; eastern half survived as Byzantine Empire
• common factors
  – excessive size, overextension, too expensive for available resources
  – no great technological breakthrough to enlarge resources
  – tax evasion by large landowning families
  – tax burden fell heavily onto the poor
    » provoked Yellow Turban Rebellion, peasant revolt in China in 184 C.E.
  – rivalry between elite factions created instability
  – epidemic disease
  – threat from nomadic or semi-agricultural peoples on frontier
    » China had dealt with Xiongnu for centuries
    • as state weakened, nomadic peoples breached frontier defenses
    • establishment of “barbarian states” in north
    • gradual adoption of Chinese culture
  » Rome: Germanic-speaking peoples
    • began to enter empire in fourth century C.E.
    • establishment of independent kingdoms
    • only partially adopted Roman culture
    • creation of Latin/Germanic hybrid culture
• effects of imperial collapse
  – decline of urban life
  – population decline
  – reduction of international trade
  – vast insecurity

• most important difference between collapse of Han and Roman Empires: what happened next
  – China: about 350 years of disorder, then creation of a similar imperial state (Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties)
  – Europe: no large-scale imperial system has ever been successfully established in western Europe since Romans
    » division into large number of states with weak rulers
  – Why was China more successful in restoration?
    » greater cultural homogeneity
    » stronger bureaucratic tradition
    » Confucianism valued state; Christianity often at odds with the state
    » China had more advanced agriculture and metallurgy
Intermittent Empire: The Case of India
– The idea of empire was much less prominent in India than in Persia, the Mediterranean, or China.

• fall of Indus Valley civilization by 1500 b.c.e.

• creation of new civilization along Ganges River
  – debate continues over role of Aryan invaders

• establishment in northern India of classic civilization of South Asia by 600 b.c.e.
  – enormous political, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity
  – Indian civilization as a whole shaped by political fragmentation and cultural diversity
  – identity provided by distinctive religious tradition and social organization
    » Hinduism
    » caste system
Mauryan Empire (326–184 b.c.e.)

- stimulated by Persian and Greek penetration of northwest
- ruled all but southern tip of India
- population of around 50 million
- large military and civilian bureaucracy
- state-operated industries
- Ashoka (r. 268–232 b.c.e.) is best-known emperor, thanks to edicts
  - conversion to Buddhism
  - effort to rule empire peacefully
  - effort to develop a moral code for whole empire
- Mauryan Empire broke apart after Ashoka’s death
– Gupta Empire (320–550 c.e.) and other short-lived empires followed

– Why couldn’t India maintain an empire?
  • states failed to command loyalty
  • great cultural diversity
  • frequent invasions from Central Asia
  • caste system encouraged local loyalties

– Indian trade flourished despite the lack of unity.
  • merchants and artisans patronized public buildings and festivals
  • Hinduism and Buddhism spread through much of Asia
  • Indian mathematics and astronomy flourished
Reflections: Classical Empires and the Twentieth Century

– Classical empires continue to be used as models and inspirations.
  • Mao Zedong compared himself to Shihuangdi
  • Modern Indians pride themselves on Ashoka’s nonviolence and tolerance
  • Great Britain celebrated its empire as a modern Roman Empire
  • Mussolini regarded Italian expansion as the creation of a new Roman Empire
  • recent question: are Americans the new Romans?

– There is a danger of misusing historical analogies, but history is vital to understanding the complexities of contemporary life.