

# “I would be flattered to think that anyone saw me as globally broad-minded!”

An interview with Felipe Fernández-Armesto by Peer Vries

*Peer Vries:* Would you consider yourself a ‘global’, or what would be synonymous a ‘world historian?’

*Felipe Fernández-Armesto:* I use the term ‘global history’ to mean the attempt to look at the planet conspectually and see it whole – tracking genuinely global events and experiences. ‘World history’ is a much less ambitious term, which I use to mean the attempt to juxtapose the history of different cultures, like a jigsaw-composer in those senses, I do ‘global’ but not ‘world’ history.

*P. V.:* So I guess, in contrast to e.g. Chris Bayly, you do not mind being described as one?<sup>1</sup>

*F. F.-A.:* No. I never mind being called by any name, however, opprobrious. I would be flattered to think that anyone saw me as globally broad-minded: That is what I aspire to.

*P. V.:* Does this imply that there is actually such a thing as a discipline called ‘global history’ that can and should be taught, and can and should be learned?

*F. F.-A.:* It’s a branch of the historian’s discipline, which can be taught like any other. Whether it should, is entirely a matter of individual choice: I never prescribe my own interests and tastes for other people, not even my own children or students. I do think global history can be taught. I know so, from experience. I teach global history myself, viva voce in class and in print in my books. I think my textbook *The world: a History*<sup>2</sup> decisively demonstrates the possibilities, covering the world in just about every chapter, instead of breaking it down into cultures or countries or units of area studies. I am notorious, I guess, for describing a technique that involves an imaginary shift of perspective to the point of view of the creature of my imagination that I call ‘the galactic museum-keeper’, contemplating our planet from an immense distance of space and time and seeing it whole, with a level of objectivity

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inaccessible to us, who are enmeshed in our history.<sup>3</sup> I do not see this as an *outré* or an particularly hard technique. All historical enquiry involves shifts of perspective – and acts of imagination – as we dodge and slip in and out of the viewpoints the sources disclose in other times and other cultures than our own. Global history merely demands more of the same – a bolder imagination and mastery of or at least data from a wider range of sources.

I suppose, there will be many historians who repudiate the more adventurous frontiers of my work and want to exclude it from history, traditionally understood, which has always been classed as a humane discipline. I reject the distinction between science and the humanities and study what I call “cultural organisms”, of which humans are one among many. Some people might want to call this by a new name – “human and animal ethology” perhaps, or “comparative anthropology and zoology”. I think that in order to understand humans fully, one must embrace the context of other cultural creatures. Just as to understand one human group properly one must compare it with others. But of course, one can be a very good historian without venturing so far.

*P. V.*: Would that not imply that every historian or every student in university has to learn how to ‘go global’?

*F. F.-A.*: If you mean, “how can a historian be good without being global?”, I admit that the broader the context the richer the insight. But the context is composed of myriad details and the researchers who provide those details – the intensely local narratives, the editions of sources specific to one time and place – are often heroes of scholarship and sometimes write beautifully.

*P. V.*: How did you become to be regarded as one? You did not start your career as such.

*F. F.-A.*: I guess by writing *Millennium*, the book in which I first tried to see the world whole.<sup>4</sup> Appearing in the nineties, it was a pioneer work in the reaction against what some people called eurocentrism, anticipating books by Goody, Frank, Pomeranz, and Hobson.<sup>5</sup> I have continued to tackle global topics: In *Civilizations*, I divided the world into biomes instead of countries or cultures or whatever.<sup>6</sup> I think that is a one-off. In *So you think you’re human?*<sup>7</sup> I asked how we got to the universal concept of humankind we have today.

*P. V.*: Even now it is almost impossible to really study global history and to be educated into a global historian: institutionally the field still is very weak, I think.

*F. F.-A.*: True, but it is early days. Global History is the fastest-growing field in the discipline, with 300,000 undergraduates a year taking courses in something of the sort in the USA and Canada alone. Attempts by universities to launch graduate programs in it are multiplying fast. I introduced such a program at the Tufts University Boston, while I was there.

*P. V.:* Then what is your intellectual background? Where did you learn your trade?

*F. F.-A.:* I feel uneducated. I was an undergraduate and doctoral student at Oxford in the late sixties and early seventies. So my formation was heavily textual and humanistic and actively hostile to theory, with little opportunity for interdisciplinarity. But interesting initiatives were underway outside the curriculum in my days, with Peter Brown, Keith Thomas, Michael Hurst and Edwin Ardener, all promoting anthropology for historians, and Alistair Crombie advocating historical ecology, with mind-broadening discussions available in tutorials – especially, in my case, with Karl Leyser, whose scholarship was highly focussed but whose conversation ranged over the cosmos – and in our undergraduate history club, the Stubbs Society, where I met Needham and helped launch discussions of socio-biology and chaos theory. I have always been intellectually indisciplined and disrespectful of the limits of any curriculum. As an undergraduate, I did a lot of work on comparative colonial history and became a ‘heretical disciple’, as I called myself, of Charles Verlinden long before I met him and befriended him.<sup>8</sup>

*P. V.:* Global history has often, rightly or wrongly, been associated with philosophy of history, the Hegel/Marx/Spengler/Toynbee type of grand history with history having a motor, structure or even a direction. As such this approach, in these explicit terms, is no longer much appreciated, but without some basic opinions about what matters and how the world works, I guess, it is impossible to write a coherent text. What are your main assumptions?

*F. F.-A.:* I do not think coherence necessarily has to be teleological or partisan. In any case, I would not stick Toynbee into the same category as Hegel, Marx, or Spengler, all of whom were determinists who thought the course of history was inevitable and therefore predictable. Toynbee thought it was analysable at a high level, but highly mutable and contingent. I do of course have basic assumptions about how the world works: These include the theory of evolution, the conviction that human minds are essentially the same in every period and culture, the perception that humans are not the only cultural creatures, and the realisation that environment conditions everything else. But none of this makes me a materialist or a determinist. I also think that mind is best treated as immaterial, that imagination – which I claim is an accidental by-product of evolution – is where most historical change starts and that events in the world are commonly the externalisation of ideas, which I define as purely mental events. As a catholic, I naturally believe in the reality of universals. Still, the coherence of my work, if it has any, comes not from these assumptions, but from my fidelity to the narratives that thread it together – the strands, if you like, in my yarns – which are the story of how human societies have interacted with each

other, diverging, converging, exchanging and repudiating influences, and the story of how humans have interacted with the rest of nature.

*P. V.:* You are quite outspoken in claiming humans are a part of nature and little different from apes...

*F. F.-A.:* We are well-adapted apes. That is a foolproof proposition. Every attempt to distinguish us as uniquely endowed in some way – with a rational soul (whatever that is), with drivellingly superficial prowess in tool-making or other technical accomplishments, or with self-consciousness or altruism or culture – have proved unsatisfactory: falsifiable or unverifiable. To me, the feature of human life that is interestingly distinctive is that we are the only animals with history – creatures, that is, with the volatile, highly mutable cultures characterised by the rapid and accelerating changes we call history. Potentially, other animals could match us in this respect, and I would argue that we can already see the beginnings of accelerating change and diversification in the cultures of some non-human cultural animals, notably chimpanzees. In any event, my current obsession is that history cannot be just a humane discipline: We need to compare ourselves with other cultural animals if we are to understand our history fully and, in particular, if we are to discover what, if anything, really differentiates us from the rest of creation.

*P. V.:* This might bring you close to ‘big history’ as e.g. David Christian and Fred Spier are practising. What do you think about their work and approach?<sup>9</sup>

*F. F.-A.:* I like their work, but think that the first few billion years, before the emergence of life and perhaps before the emergence of cultural organisms, are pretty much irrelevant. In some ways, I prefer Dan Smail’s term ‘deep history’, which is meant to get us to include pre-history and even the hominid past in our study of why and how human cultures change. I suppose I want to go further than Dan, but don’t see the need to go as far as David.<sup>10</sup>

*P. V.:* This conviction that man is part of nature and human history the interaction of humankind with the rest of nature, implies that what is normally called a ‘civilization’ must have a firm basis in geography.

*F. F.-A.:* I propose that we should use the word civilisation to mean a process of adapting the environment to human purposes and tastes. I see no virtue in using it as a synonym for something for which we already have a perfectly good word, such as socialisation. Nor do I like to use it to designate societies distinguished by arbitrary criteria of supposed excellence: city-dwelling, writing, political complexity, whatever. These check-lists are usually determined by the prejudices of the writer, who invariably comes from a society that has those features. My definition strips civilisation of connotations of value and enables us to see societies as more or less civilised without meaning that they are any better or worse for it. In some ways, if survival is the goal, it is more rational to defer to nature, and adapt one’s lifeways

to one's environment, than to be arrogantly interventionist and try to adapt the environment to one's own ambitions. Environments heavily modified by human hands have always tended to be fragile and precarious. That is why societies properly classifiable as civilised always end up once with Nineveh and Tyre.

*P. V.:* In that context it strikes me that you tend to deny there would be such a thing as 'Western' or 'European civilization'. On what grounds do you do so, and would that not imply to admit that there is no such a thing as 'Chinese civilisation' or a 'Muslim world' either? This brings us to a fundamental problem in global history, that of deciding adequate units of analysis. History has to be located somewhere: one can only write the history of something. Nietzsche may be right in saying one can only define what has no history but he then proceeds and talks about the Germans, if you know what I mean.

*F. F.-A.:* I don't think "European civilization" is a coherent concept in the sense that I can think of no culture that is both common to and distinctive to anything we could reasonably call 'Europe' or anything we could locate within credible boundaries under that name. I do, however, think Europe is a potentially coherent unit of study, if we define it as three ancient economic zones – roughly corresponding to the north shore of the Mediterranean, the marine corridor linking Atlantic-side Europe, and the Volga valley; to me, European history is the story of the interactions and gradually intensifying interconnections between these zones. I do think it is possible to speak of 'Western civilization' if one means the community of people on either shore of the Atlantic who have defined themselves as such and who have used that self-designation as a means of self-differentiation from the rest of the world. Indeed, I have just written, or at least roughed out, a history of those people.<sup>11</sup> It is possible to speak of Chinese or Islamic civilization in the same sense.

*P. V.:* So in any case you Europe is not Christendom. You just referred to your being a Catholic: does that have any bearing on your work?

*F. F.-A.:* It certainly influences my teaching, now that I have joined a catholic university, as I am curious to know whether my overwhelmingly catholic students have any common habits of thought. I use a lot of catholic lore in classroom examples, and am always tweaking and tugging at my students' catholic assumptions. I often get it wrong – devoting a class exercise once, for instance, to a sixteenth-century catholic text satirising votive offerings. My students are Catholics but they are American Catholics who are unfamiliar with votive offerings and find them bizarre. I am not sure, however, that there is a lot that is peculiarly catholic about the way I think about history – I don't see it as a providential arena or anything of that sort, or at least, I do not think it is my job as an historian to do so. A lot of people who have anti-catholic prejudices assume that Catholics are mired in dogma and warped in their vision of the world. So I always mention the communion to which I belong

in order – as a matter of charity – to give people the pleasure of hating or dismissing me if they so wish. But I think it makes only a positive difference to the way my mind works. I find Catholicism liberating. Reverence for a human god makes me interested in other people, despite my natural egotism, perhaps, my children say, touched by a bit of autism. My obsession with making whatever I say consistent with the lessons of science and reason is a direct application of a doctrine that distinguishes Catholicism from some other religious traditions that uniquely privilege faith or defer to the authority of a book.

*P. V.:* Discussing differing civilizations in the context of global history almost inevitably brings up the topic of Eurocentrism. It is obvious that ‘the West’ was not always the most important or even an important part of world, and its heydays at least in my view are clearly over. But in the making of the modern world in which we now live, it was disproportionately important. Does one not need a point of departure, a point of reference for one’s readers and is it not more efficient and relevant for the society one lives in to start from the known, and then spread one’s wings? To put it bluntly: western global historians are Westerners living in the West, having a Western audience; are they not entitled to a certain amount of ‘ego-centrism’?

*F. F.-A.:* Although I seem to be a bit of a bogey for the self-appointed defenders of the uniqueness and supreme value of western civilization, I am happy to be Eurocentric myself in one sense: Over the last couple of hundred years or so the ‘rise of the west’ really has been one of the most conspicuous global stories. So in my textbook *The World*, while I devote a lot of space to tracing the seepage of Chinese and Islamic culture from their heartlands in earlier phases of the work, I tell an unashamedly Eurocentric story in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But to appreciate that story – which, as you rightly imply, is what interests most people, because most people are never interested in the past for its own sake but only for its relevance to their own predicaments – you must give plenty of space to the rest of the world and to earlier periods, when western lands were poor, marginal, and relatively isolated. You cannot simply assert western hegemony without seeing how western political and social modalities, science, and art impacted on other parts of the world. You cannot understand western global hegemony without studying the indigenous wielders of initiative – the collaborators and quislings – who were vectors of western power. You cannot appreciate the western achievement without acknowledging how far westerners came from behind.

*P. V.:* To be honest, I never have had to combat any Eurocentric aprioris, prejudices et cetera in my students. Upon arrival at the university they simply know so little about the past that there is no room for that. Moreover, they do not place themselves in any continuity, which, to again be honest, I do not do either. I can not really be bothered by whether ‘my predecessors’ in 1400 were more or less civilised

than people in China. If they are, that is fine with me; if not that is also fine. In that respect much of this permanent attacking of Eurocentrism is a waste of time.

*F. F.-A.:* The question is not, and should not be, who was more civilised, but who influences whom and in what ways. I find students fascinated by the discovery, say, of how much thought and learning, was common to parts of Eurasia in the first millennium before Christ, or how much enlightenment political thought owed to accounts of China, India, and Japan, or how much the renaissance owed to Islamic influences, or how much of the distinctive culture we associate with 'the west' or with 'modernity' originated in China: printing for communications, fire-power and fundamental nautical technologies for war and shipping, paper money for capitalisms, blast-furnaces for industrialisation, intellectually selected bureaucracies for government, perhaps even the very idea of scientific empiricism. Equally interesting are how and why some influences have been exchanged in the opposite direction. I always find students respond excitedly to the role of astronomy in gaining respect in the orient for wise men from the west.

*P. V.:* Here it of course it is very relevant to know what one thinks is relevant in history and the past, and what is not. Global history is often defended by referring to its importance in our globalising world; that is by referring to the present. Is it important for you to connect your historical work to the present?

*F. F.-A.:* I think presentism is respectable and I dabble in it for amusement from time to time, but my own criterion is what mattered to the people whose memorials I am contemplating in the form of documents or art or material objects. If it mattered to them, it matters to me because it helps me in my attempt to understand them. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as the present. Whatever we think or do, passes instantly into the past and becomes suitable subject matter for historians. That is a further reason why presentism does not worry me.

*P. V.:* Do you really think historians have to take what people in the past thought and regarded as important as their main guiding thread in presenting their histories? Did not Braudel have a major point, some would even say he created a major historiographical breakthrough, when he emphasised the importance in history of what people in the past were *not* aware of, or did at least *not* 'problematise', the anonymous, structural, often silent history of the *longue durée* as it is conditioned by e.g. geographical and demographical factors?<sup>12</sup>

*F. F.-A.:* To begin with I am not sure there is an awful lot else. Collingwood was almost right to say that the only evidence present to our senses is evidence of what was in people's minds, because people mediate and select it.<sup>13</sup> We are very lucky sometimes to have rare archaeological evidence unmediated in this way. Even when I am an environmental historian, I am looking at how humans have interacted with the rest of nature – imprinting their stamp, inscribing their presence. Even when I

try to talk about non-human histories and reconstruct what I claim are structural changes in the politics of apes, I am, in a sense, trying to get inside the apes minds and describe what they might think they might be doing.

It may be the result of my own mental myopia, but I do not regard Braudel's point of view as a breakthrough. If anything I see him as part of the humanist tradition, showing how what earlier generations of Marxists and historical geographers saw as determinants were really better understood as conditioning influences – inescapable, of course, but not wholly intractable. The Mediterranean is a great example, its geographical unity permanent and pervasive yet – peppered with cultural differences. [If you keep the present state of your question one might add:] The purpose of knowing the conditions is to understand better the thinking they conditioned. The purpose of wanting to know what people were unaware of is for the light it casts on what they were aware of.

*P. V.:* Many people would claim the future belongs to a more global history. What do you consider to be the main trends in the discipline: what is history now and where is it heading?

*F. F.-A.:* I wrote a whole chapter in response to exactly that question in the volume of the same title edited by David Cannadine.<sup>14</sup> As I have been part of the moves towards global history, interdisciplinarity, the dialogue with hard science, environmental history, the return to narrative, and what I call total history – embracing every kind of evidence, including archaeological data, language, material culture, you name it – I revel in those trends and want to see them accelerate. But I worry about the intensifying vice of academic specialisation, and the academy's abandonment of its public. I would like to see universities show some interest in the genealogical work that most amateur historians now do. I would like to see academics reclaim popular historical writing and the historical divagations of such other media as television, film and radio from the charlatans, nincompoops and axe-grinders who have colonised much of the terrain we have vacated. I have had my moments of anxiety, of course, about postmodernism and relativist indifference to truth. And about the tyranny of political correctness, though I think we have pretty much domesticated that form of savagery now. The great unnoticed change of my lifetime has been what I call the collapse of the *longue durée* you pointed at earlier on.

When I was a student, I was told to be a gradualist, to see great events as having long, cumulative beginnings, and to trace every episode of history to origins in the remote past. Every episode had to be located in the long term, or gradually modified traditions. Every conjuncture had to be understood against the background of the slow-grinding forces of economic and environmental change. We no longer bother with all that.



When we confront the fall of the Roman Empire we no longer go back, like Gibbon, to the Antonines, but focus on the lurches of late fourth- and fifth-century barbarians. When we talk about the English Civil War, we no longer hear stuff about the Germanic woods or even Lancastrian or Tudor parliaments, but cut straight to the strains of the war with Scotland, when we study the French Revolution, we don't start, as Tocqueville did, with Louis XIV, but with the crisis induced by overspending on the American revolutionary war. The causes of the First World War no longer lie where Albertini sought them, in the diplomatic system of the nineteenth century, but in the short-term breakdown of that system or even in the deficiencies of the railway timetables of 1914. I wonder why our perspective shifted in this way. Is it because history really is a system without what we used to call long-term causes, or because our experience of sudden, rapid change has convinced us that the world lurches unpredictably, chaotically or at random?

*P. V.:* I am sure you do have an opinion on what would be the answer...

*F. F.-A.:* I don't know. I used to think I or the guys who taught me must be cleverer than Gibbon or Tocqueville or Braudel. Now, that seems highly unlikely. I suspect we are all just children of our times. Our science has disclosed to us a chaotic world of random mutations, "punctuated equilibrium", untraceable causes, untrackable events, unpredictable consequences, and we expect history to happen with the same spectacular disorder. Our cultures are highly mutable. Living in the twenty-first-century is like inhabiting Rip van Winkle's world. Every time one goes to sleep one awakens in an unrecognisably different place. Naturally, in these circumstances, we find it unnecessary to search hard to explain the revolutions of the past. Our historical paradigm, if you like, reflects the state of scientific perceptions of the world and our own experience of change in our own lifetimes. The *longue durée* suits some periods, short-term lurches seem more plausible in others. Presumably the truth involves a bit of both.

*P. V.:* As you explicitly stated in a book about the topic, you are convinced that historians can tell a true story. In that respect in any case you are not a post-modernist.<sup>15</sup>

*F. F.-A.:* By 'truth' I mean language that matches reality. I appreciate that it is hard to get an exact match and that our resources for knowing reality – experience, reason, insight of various kinds – are inadequate. But I have no doubt reality is there to be grasped. I advocate approaching it humbly, by adopting a variety of perspectives, not for postmodernist reasons but because our image of reality is bound to be built up bit by bit, like a painting by Cezanne, if you like. The objectivity to which historians aspire lies at the sum total of all possible subjectivities. There is no single viewpoint, like Borges's aleph, from which the whole of reality is visible at once. I am much quoted for a politically incorrect way of putting it. Clio is a muse

you glimpse bathing between leaves and the more you shift your point of view, the more is revealed. I do not want to be classed as an adversary of the post-modern. I love a lot of avowedly post-modern art and architecture. I am deeply sympathetic to philosophical pluralism and cultural relativism. But I reject as literal nonsense the extreme postmodernist outcry against the existence of objectively verifiable knowledge. As Roger Scruton said, the man who tells you there is no such thing as truth is asking you not to believe him. So don't.<sup>16</sup>

*P. V.:* As I see it, you pay relatively little attention to 'politics' and to economics. Topics like the rise and fall of empires, colonialism and decolonisation, and warfare are much less prominent in your works than in most historical surveys. When it comes to economics you do seem to be interested in material life but not so much in the major questions of current global economic history like economic globalisation or the Great Divergence. You seem to be more culturally focused. Is that correct?

*F. F.-A.:* Yes, but I understand culture very widely to include politics and economics. I see economics mainly in terms of the food supply, because that is what matters most to most people for most of the time.<sup>17</sup> For a similar reason, I like to think of politics not exclusively in terms of high politics but also or rather as low-level relationships of power in households, neighbourhoods, towns, estates, classes, institutions, and voluntary groupings.

*P. V.:* What do you actually do at the moment? You have held quite varied positions in Academia over the last years: you were Professor of Global Environmental History at Queen Mary, University of London, member of the Faculty of Modern History at Oxford University, held the Principe de Asturias Chair in Spanish Culture and Civilization at Tufts University Boston...

*F. F.-A.:* I am now William P. Reynolds professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, with a special responsibility for teaching in the University's London program. I never like to say that I teach, because it is a transitive verb and I leave it to my students so say whether they learn anything. I am employed to teach global history, global environmental history, historiography, and some subjects in what one might call early modern colonial history. I have done a lot of other stuff, too, especially in Spanish and Latin American subjects in every imaginable period. I have a course I teach at intervals nowadays of which I am inordinately fond, on how people of indigenous provenance in colonial Mesoamerica perceived Spaniards. I have even taught a course in golden-age Spanish poetry. I can no longer count up the number of different courses and topics I have tackled as a teacher. I am afraid I am a *Maitre Jacques*. I sometimes yearn for the simplicity of my early days as a teacher of Latin and scripture. But there is a lot to be said for intellectual indiscipline in a teacher. Everything my students are interested in arouses my own curiosity.

P. V.: In 2006 you wrote a textbook, *The world: A history*, that is regarded as very original and successful. What do you think a good textbook in global history would look like?

F. F.-A.: Thanks for your kind words. I am pretty pleased with the book as it is, now that I have revised it for a new edition, which has just been published. I would stress the following virtues, which distinguish my book from others: (1) It is genuinely global, identifying global themes, covering the whole world in just about every chapter. (2) It is problem-oriented, confronting the reader candidly with the problematic and usually unresolved nature of historical enquiry. (3) It takes the reader constantly to the sources, alluding or citing them on every page, almost in every paragraph, (4) it integrates maps and illustrations with the text, mapping the places named, amplifying the points made. I wrote all the captions, (5) it is written to make reading it a pleasure, without conscious dumbing-down, with plenty of imagery and jokes and lots of vivid, detailed stories of human (and occasional non-human, animal) lives; (6) it is exceptionally strong on aspects textbooks routinely underplay: environmental history, history of science, history of thought; (7) it is a bit shorter than its competitors; (8) it privileges the twentieth century much less than most books (giving it a seventh of the coverage rather than a sixth, at least, in other books); (9)

I have not gone for artificially contrived balance between different peoples or sexes or whatever, but have tried to cover the world rationally, omitting no part of it and unashamedly concentrating on the places and peoples that have generated the most representative or world-ranging effects.

P. V.: There, of course, also have been critical comments e.g. on the H-World Discussion Network. What do you think about them?

F. F.-A.: I always welcome adverse criticism because it is a chance to know what readers want. And it is a great help to have one's mistakes pointed out. In the second edition I have made lots of changes on the basis of readers suggestions and complaints. In particular, I have accepted that I assumed too much prior knowledge of obvious stuff like ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and the French Revolution and I have boosted the coverage of those – not, I hope, in a boringly predictable way. Of course, there are criticisms that are wrong. My friend the late Jack Betterly, whom I greatly revered, challenged me on H-net on the grounds of his credentials as a Buddhist, for my claim that early Buddhist texts evince belief in what can properly be called a soul and in reincarnation. I was right. He was wrong. I have shoved a bit more of the evidence into the second edition. There are criticisms that come *a parti pris* from people who have not read the book. One woman accused me of limiting coverage of Africa to Ethiopia – an utterly bizarre accusation. One man accused me of suppressing the Jesuit contribution to Chinese culture. I say far more about this

than any other textbook-writer. Some critics thought my book was light on religion or anti-religious, which is inexplicable on any fair reading of the text. I treat religion more as experience and practice than dogma or doctrine, but I think that is the right balance. I do not think any other textbook has more on religion or gives religion its due place in the history of the enlightenment, say or the twentieth-century world. One reader complained that my book had little about ideas and was, by implication, environmentally determinist. I do not think anyone who reads my work could believe any such thing. I have more on intellectual history than any other global history textbook-writer – whole chapters on science and philosophy, which most textbook-publishers eschew as supposedly too difficult. And I have said repeatedly in various works that I think ideas motivate history, that most historical changes start in people's minds, and that change typically happens not when forced on us by environmental or economic stresses, but when we re-imagine the world and labour to realise our imaginations.

*P. V.:* You are more a writer than a scholar who revels in detailed research, and you seem to focus more on reaching a wide audience than on publishing in specialised journals: is this on purpose and a matter of character?

*F. F.-A.:* I am typecast. I long to get back to writing monographs, but the publishers and grant-making institutions reject my proposals and urge me back to mega-subjects. But as Salvador de Madariaga said, you need to be both a bricklayer and an architect to build a historical edifice.<sup>18</sup> I try or aspire to be both.

*P. V.:* I guess anyone looking at your oeuvre can only be amazed by its volume. How do you actually write these enormous amounts of texts? How do you actually go about when dealing with such enormous topics? How to know all these things and how to know what one should know and does not know?

*F. F.-A.:* Solvitur ambulando.

*P. V.:* But still, many people would like to know how you do your 'ambulare'!

*F. F.-A.:* Mainly by wandering around library stacks encountering by serendipity sources you would have never found in any bibliography. I think the key to writing up any subject is envisaging a pathway through it. This may be a story, an argument, a vision – a sort of picture, an arrangement of shapes – an analysis or scheme of classification, a comparison or juxtaposition, a series of revelatory disclosures, or of associations like an interview on Freud's couch or a trip through Cicero's house of mnemotechnics. The important thing for success, at least in an artistic sense, is to choose your path and stick to it. Diverge and you and the reader will get lost.

*P. V.:* I can imagine this will not exactly reassure or convince many 'professional' who claim that global history lacks its archives and the kind of primary sources and primary source critique that has always been regarded as the essence of professional historiography, thereby implying it would not be real history.

*F. F.-A.*: There is a global institution that has been around for centuries and has a global archive: the society of Jesus. For a PhD Student who wants to do a global thesis in a period before other such institutions multiply, I would recommend a Jesuit subject, or some wide-ranging comparison. But that is not quite what you mean. Global history does not have a peculiar body of data. If you are on this planet, you are part of the story and every piece of evidence about the past is evidence about the whole of it. If one adheres to my definition of global history, one tries to be alert to the most broadly resonant episodes and events and thoughts and artefacts and images.

*P. V.*: Your writing, at least as I see it, has a tendency toward pointillism, e.g. in a book like *Millennium*. Is that on purpose, an explicit choice?

*F. F.-A.*: Yes, that is like doing the bricklaying. The argument or overall narrative is the architecture. You must have both. To me historical writing is good in as much as it conveys a vivid sense of what the past felt like to live in. Only tiny, almost niggardly details from the sources can excite that sensation of sharing the past with its inhabitants.

*P. V.*: I sometimes – and I guess I will not be the only one – lose track. Is this because to a certain extent you have a post-modern view on the past not in the sense that we cannot know it: we have heard you are a firm believer in truth, but because it actually was very messy and the historian should be careful not to make it too well-ordered?

*F. F.-A.*: Yes. But I am not trying to reproduce the mess, only to convey a sense of it while unfolding my argument or narrative. So if you get lost, I have done a bad job. But I think it is better to lose you than oversimplify. If I fail to understand something I read, it stimulates me to think harder. I deliberately use allusion, analogy, and irony rather than explicit statement to tease and engage the reader. Sometimes, therefore, just as when one is reading fiction or poetry one is left wondering – which is a good thing to do. Except in the textbook, where I try to make the experience of reading a little less mentally taxing, I rely on allusions to world literatures and to the Bible and to the common heritage of humankind in art and music to evoke feelings and responses. Readers who do not recognise the allusion will miss something. I ban professional jargon, which is usually the esoteric device that impedes understanding and turns drivel into hierophancy.

*P. V.*: Is it because you think history is also an art and a form of literature?

*F. F.-A.*: Yes. It's an art like any other – an act of disciplined imagination, disciplined, in this case, by the sources. All writing should aspire to be classed as literature, by being as beautiful, concise, evocative, and suggestive as one can make it.

## Notes

- 1 Chris Bayly, I am not going to call myself a global historian. An interview with Chris Bayly, in: *Itinerario. International Journal on the History of European Expansion and Global Interaction*, vol. 31, issue 1 (2007), 7–14. In the text Bayly actually says “I am not going to call myself simply a global historian”, 12.
- 2 Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *The world: A history*, originally Prentice Hall 2006, new edition 2009.
- 3 Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Millennium. A history of our last thousand years*, London 1995, Preface and Prologue.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 See Jack Goody, e.g., *The East in the West*, Cambridge 1996; *Capitalism and modernity. The great debate*, Cambridge 2004; *idem, The theft of history*, Cambridge 2006; Andre Gunder Frank, *Reorient. Global economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley et al. 1998; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence. China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy*, Stanford 2000; John A. Hobson, *The eastern origins of western civilisation*, Cambridge 2004.
- 6 Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Civilizations*, London 2000 and New York 2001.
- 7 Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *So you think you’re human*, Oxford 2004.
- 8 Charles Verlinden was a Belgian economic historian interested, in particular, in the medieval origins of colonisation, especially of Spain and Portugal.
- 9 For the work of David Christian see his article in this issue. Fred Spier is a Dutch ‘big’ historian who wrote *The structure of big history*, Amsterdam 1996.
- 10 See e.g. Dan Smail, *In the grip of sacred history*, in: *American Historical Review*, vol. 110, issue 5 (2005), 1337–1361.
- 11 *The world’s horizon*, Upper Saddle River New York, forthcoming.
- 12 See e.g. Fernand Braudel, *Écrits sur l’histoire*, Paris 1969.
- 13 For the ideas of Collingwood see R. G. Collingwood, *The idea of history*. Revised edition, edited with an introduction by Jan van der Dussen, Oxford and New York 1994.
- 14 David Cannadine, ed., *What is history now?*, Houndmills Basingstoke and New York 2004.
- 15 Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Truth. A history*, New York 1997.
- 16 Robert Scruton, *Modern philosophy*, New York and London, 1994, 6.
- 17 Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Near a thousand tables. A history of food*, New York 2002.
- 18 Salvador de Madariaga y Rojo, 1886–1978, was a Spanish diplomat, writer and historian.