

**Sydney Boys High School**  
**History Extension**  
**Term II Week 10**

**Practice Paper**

## Section I

Total marks (25)

Attempt Question 1

Allow about 1 hour for this section

In your answer you will be assessed on how well you:

- \_ present a detailed, logical and well-structured answer to the question
- \_ use relevant issues of historiography
- \_ use relevant sources to support your argument

Using Source 1, answer the question that follows.

### Source 1

Processes in World History

An Internet Dialogue

*From: Ken Pomeranz*

*Subject: Processes in World History*

Has anyone tried to make a list of the terms historians use to characterize processes and trends in world history (or ANY history, for that matter)?

Such a list would include terms such as "centralization," "decentralization," "expansion," "decline," "colonization," "modernization," etc. If so, I would appreciate a copy of such a list or a reference to same.

The reason I ask is at once pedagogical and theoretical. The pedagogical reason is that I am dissatisfied with the timeline exercises I have been using in my world history survey. While they reinforce students' sensitivity to and knowledge of historical sequence, they also tend to reinforce the image of history as one damn thing after another--a series of discrete, unique events strung together like beads on a chain. It occurred to me that an additional column entitled "Trends" or "Processes" would force students to use the larger concepts that are the real point of the exercise anyway. It would also allow them to see similarities between, say, the competition and consolidation of states in Zhou China and Medieval Europe (anyone got a word for this process--"state formation?").

The theoretical reason is that it seems, as I reexamine my syllabus and rethink my goals for the world history survey, that there are a finite number of such terms that we do in fact use for descriptive, explanatory, and comparative purposes. It might be useful to try to identify these concepts, if only to critique them as an implicit paradigm of historical thinking (to recall an earlier conversation). Such an enterprise would also help to characterize the motley assortment of concepts we use as our intellectual toolbox.

Any thoughts on or contributions to such a list would be appreciated.

*Subject: Processes in World History*

*From: Haines Brown, Central Connecticut State Univ.*

While historians habitually employ terms that refer to processes and probabilistic causality, merely the use of that terminology does not carry us very far. How do we in fact represent processes in a way that is operational and explanatory?

There's a danger, I think, that once we have identified and labeled a pattern of empirical change we assume we have explained history. This is probably a consequence of our positivist cultural baggage of covering-law explanation. OK for short range-explanation, I think, but not long-range history such as world history.

That is, while generalizations do capture some of the truth of a historical situation, the wider the scope of our concern the less they are useful. If we extend our knowledge of general patterns into a much broader arena, we loose contact with empirical diversity and so inevitably impose a subjective order upon chaos. The result is a representation of world history in terms of our own cultural experiences, social location or ideology.

The wider the geographical scope of our concern, the more it seems that diversity prevails. Also, as an emergent process, the greater the chronological scope of our historical investigation, the more it will seem that fundamental change is typical of history and consistency the exception. In world history, explanation that is based on generalizations or upon static description simply does not work. This is why I'm not enamored of the comparative method in world history, for it is grossly reductionist.

In historical explanation, time, place and circumstance are just as important as the realization that circumstances are a product of historic processes. This is not peculiar to historiography, but to any evolutionary science. For example, we don't understand much about our solar system simply by describing it and by applying general laws such as  $f=ma$  to what we have described. Certainly general laws are at work, but what interests us most (in the present century, but perhaps not in the nineteenth century) about the solar system is the emergence of its unique qualities, why it is as it is. Structures inherited from the past constrain emergent processes in the present to give them such improbable outcomes as our solar system.

Likewise, in historiography, description of circumstance cannot just serve to generate covering laws or to reduce a complex existence to its hidden essence. Indeed, history IS one damn fact after another. The issue is, what do we mean by "explanation?" Many historians limit themselves to the "one damn fact after the other" approach because it is empirically verifiable, because it lends itself to short range explanation based on mechanical determinism, because those facts can be source of self-identity (one's particular "roots") or because thick description is certainly entertaining. But I think we need to keep in mind also that what is inherited from the past constrains processes in the present, defining its inherent limits and potentials by determining the relative probability of its possible outcomes. This mode of probabilistic explanation of processes reconciles the determination of the past with some freedom to act in the present.

I'm as little impressed by the "damn facts" approach as I am by the covering law approach to world history. While both have some validity, they seem very shallow; products of our peculiar (positivist) cultural baggage. I believe that in Western culture (not sure I know just what that is), there has been a categorical distinction between the particular (one damn empirical fact after another) and the universal (general laws). I suspect this contradiction makes explanation of world history impossible, although each gains validity as we reduce the scope of our concern.

We need to reconceptualize a "process," as a vector that welds together the particular and universal.

Haines Brown

Subject: Processes in World History

From: Jack Betterly, Emma Willard School (Troy, NY)

I always find Haines Brown's postings worth reading, and the latest on processes is typical of his willingness to ask the right questions. All too often we are simplistic about processes and insensitive to our own analytical blind spots. (Example: Our knee-jerk tendency to anthropomorphize the nation-state to create a narrative epic - "Germany declared war on England", "The United States entered the world stage.") Nothing could be more misleading in what it suggests about historical processes.

### **Question 1 (25 marks)**

With reference to the internet dialogue and at least three examples from other historians, discuss the issues of the nature and purpose of History.