



A Different Story

BY STEPHEN DAVIES

In the days when there was still a pretense that the public school system was actually concerned with education, one of the main elements of instruction was to make sure that pupils could remember a series of important historical dates and their significance. It was thought that everyone should know why dates such as 1492, 1776, 1815, and 1914 were worth remembering.

The reason for this was that such dates and the events associated with them formed part of a complex narrative that it was thought all educated people should understand. Such understanding was desirable because the narrative explained how important aspects of the world came to be and so made sense of the present. The dates identified what were seen as crucial events, ones that had extensive effects and so shaped and determined what followed. They marked major turning points or moments of decision in the course of history.

The nature and content of the historical narrative can be deduced from the dates and events that were given prominence. Almost without exception they involved episodes in war and revolution, the deaths or triumphs of major political figures, and events that, while not political in themselves, had major impacts on political events (the voyage of Columbus for example). In other words, the world we live in is seen to be mainly the outcome of politics, wars, and the careers of rulers.

Obviously there is a great deal of truth in this. Politics and power do indeed have far-reaching effects on people's lives in a dramatic way. However, the view of history, and of human social life more generally, that we get from the classic lists of important dates is partial and distorted. Other kinds of narrative can be constructed that would yield a very different list. One might emphasize the role of ideas and knowledge in human affairs. From that point of view 1776 would be memorable not so much for the American Revolution as the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*. The most important event in the history of seventeenth-century Europe would not be

the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) but the publication of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687).

In fact we can go even further. Maybe there are other dates associated with other kinds of events that are actually more significant than those that mark the course of political power. It may be that it is not power that is the fundamental driving force in the history and evolution of human society but something else. The revealing point is that the key dates in that alternative story are almost unknown to the public, and the understanding of human society and history that goes with it is seldom even formulated and articulated.

One example of a very important date in this kind of narrative is January 22, 1970. That day saw the first passenger-carrying flight of the Boeing 747, the jumbo jet, from New York to London. This was the culmination of years of work by Boeing, and it marked a revolutionary transformation in the nature of air travel. Before then air travel had been expensive and planes could not carry significant cargo loads or numbers of passengers. Although air transport had become prominent following earlier technical breakthroughs (notably the production of the Dakota), it was still not a regular part of most people's lives and had a correspondingly limited impact on human affairs. The Boeing 747 changed all of this and in a very short time. Within six months of that first flight 747s had carried one million passengers, and after only one year, there were a hundred in operation and the number of passengers had risen to seven million. Other manufacturers soon tried to enter the market that Boeing had discovered, and the era of the wide-bodied jet airliner and mass air transport arrived.

The significance of that date can be understood by trying to imagine what the world would be like if we were to revert to the limited use of long-distance air

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travel that was the norm before 1970 and how much of what we now take for granted would change or vanish. (This is not simply a thought experiment—there are loud voices urging exactly this course of action.) Several important features of the contemporary world, such as mass long-distance tourism, are only possible because of the revolution begun on that day in 1970. In general we can say that the peoples of the world are much more closely connected than they were before. Trips to other parts of the world that would previously have been major undertakings are now routine.

Much modern business and trade depend on the ease and low cost of modern long-distance air travel. For billions of people the world has shrunk, and contact between different parts of the world has become simpler and cheaper. This has brought about much greater cultural and intellectual contact between different peoples and cultures.

Another date that would find a prominent place on this alternative list is April 26, 1956. That day the first containership left Newark for Houston. It was the brainchild of an entrepreneur called Malcom McLean. As a young man running a trucking firm, he realized that the main cause of delay in moving goods was not the actual shipping but the transshipping from one mode of transport to another. His simple yet brilliant solution was the metal container and the containership. The immediate effects of this were dramatic, reducing costs 35-fold. In the long run the container played a crucial part in the great surge of economic integration (known as globalization) that occurred in the late twentieth century and so contributed to a massive rise in living standards for millions of people worldwide. A hundred years earlier, inventions such as the railroad, the iron-

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hulled steamship, the freezer ship, and the telegraph had driven the great economic transformation of the second half of the nineteenth century, which brought about an unprecedented rise in real incomes and living standards.

Growth of Trade

Dates such as these mark key points in a very different narrative from the one that concentrates on power and its workings. This other narrative traces the growth of trade, the interconnections between more and more people, and the greater part of productive activity over an ever-larger portion of the planet's surface. Aspects of this story are the discovery of previously unknown wants, a steady growth in the range of possibilities and opportunities open to ordinary people, a massive improvement in living conditions, and the mutual exchange of ideas and cultural expressions between the various parts of the world to their mutual enrichment.

However, because this narrative is not spelled out and its key dates are mostly unknown, we are generally unaware of it. The process it traces and its benefits are taken for granted and assumed to be natural. If we do stop and think about it, however, we will see the world and the course of human history differently from how the narrative of power would have us see it. We should realize that what is important for the everyday life and hopes of ordinary people is not power but peaceful cooperation and exchange. Not everyone welcomes this. There are those who would decry increased affluence, regret the easier movement of people, and deplore cultural mixing and exchange. We should ignore them and reject their argument.

