

As a child, one of my most prized possessions was a large map of the world. It was pinned on the wall by my bed, and I would stare at it every night before I went to sleep. Before long, I had memorised the names and locations of all the countries, noting their capital cities, as well as the oceans and seas, and the rivers that flowed in to them; the names of major mountain ranges and deserts, written in urgent italics, thrilled with adventure and danger.

By the time I was a teenager, I had become uneasy about the relentlessly narrow geographic focus of my classes at school, which concentrated solely on western Europe and the United States and left most of the rest of the world untouched. We had been taught about the Romans in Britain; the Norman conquest of 1066; Henry VIII and the Tudors; the American War of Independence; Victorian industrialisation; the battle of the Somme; and the rise and fall of Nazi Germany. I would look up at my map and see huge regions of the world that had been passed over in silence.

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The accepted and lazy history of civilization, wrote Wolf, is one where ‘Ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution. Industry crossed with democracy in turn yielded the United States, embodying the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ I immediately recognised that this was exactly the story that I had been told: the mantra of the political, cultural and moral triumph of the west. But this account was flawed; there were alternative ways of looking at history – ones that did not involve looking at the past from the perspective of the winners of recent history.

*from the brilliant book **The Silk Roads: A New History of the World** by Peter Frankopan (2015)*