



## Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. What is Early Modern History?

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**Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E.**

*What is Early Modern History?*

Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021. Pp. 154. ISBN 978-1-5095-4056-3 (hardcover) \$77.75; ISBN 978-1-5095-4057-0 (paperback) \$27.95.

We're in the middle of a stock-taking moment in early modern historiography, driven in part by anniversaries and retirements, and fed in even larger part by a profusion of new handbooks, study guides, essay collections, *Festschriften*, and special journal issues. It's an exciting period of reconceptualization, though to read some reflections, the world is coming to an end. Certainly the academic world as some may have known it, with tenure lines corresponding neatly to chronologically driven national histories in the galloping narrative of Western Civilization. That world is shrinking because of budgetary pressures, curricular renovations, and departmental reconfigurations. With familiar historiographical landscapes passing, if not already gone, there is no shortage of declensionist narratives ready to discern nothing but grim news on the horizon. Viewed from the ground level—or the trenches—the old signposts and standards are indeed harder to locate. But when taking a reconnaissance from somewhat higher up, things may look rather different. Altitude is everything. The early modern still appears, though when reconfigured through themes like global, environmental, sensory, or digital history, it can look quite different and even novel.

Merry Wiesner-Hanks is perhaps the most gifted narrator of early modernity today, in large part because she has chosen to locate it in larger narratives and aims to convey it to broader audiences. This capaciousness allows her to produce a survey that is brisk, informed, and forward-looking. She brings the experience of having entered the field when the old landscape of “Renaissance and Reformation” was still pretty fixed, and of having been a leader in a generation that worked hard to refashion it in the 1980s and 1990s. That experience tempered with personal generosity allows her to survey the intellectual struggles without rancour or score-settling. The result is a readable and informative overview of how early modernity first emerged as a concept, how it expanded through a series of disciplinary controversies and ideological fights in the final decades of the last century, and where it is heading now as the academy responds to #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and globalization. There isn't a better volume that will give graduate students and senior undergraduates an approachable and engaging crash course in how the field took shape and took

off, and where it is heading now. This is the audience Wiesner-Hanks aims to address as an engaging, realistic, and ultimately optimistic interlocutor.

Wiesner-Hanks opens with a brief explanation of historical periodization before reviewing the emergence of the term “early modern” in mid-twentieth-century economic and political histories, with the concerns around modernity and Eurocentrism that made discussions of its utility increasingly heated from the 1990s onwards. The six chapters that follow review particular subfields, beginning with economic and social history. Here she reviews works on capitalism, markets and consumption, and globalization before turning to demography, family history, and histories of emotions, senses, and the body. She moves in the second chapter to religious, intellectual, and cultural history, with attention to new work on the movements that used to be taken as transparent and definitive of the period (Reformation, Enlightenment, Scientific Revolution). Those definitions were implicitly gendered, and the following chapter opens by tracing how early works on women’s history helped reimagine those key movements through a progressive expansion of works on gender and sexuality more generally, before moving to discussions of agency, queer theory, and studies of masculinity. The fourth chapter surveys works on Europe’s move across the Atlantic, with particular attention to enslavement and the slave trade; tightening definitions of race; the Columbian exchange and its impacts on environment, diet, settlement, and economies; and the intersections of revolutionary ideas and movements between America, Haiti, and France. The fifth chapter broadens to the global scale, with attention given both to traditional topics like politics, empires, and war, and to newer work on environmental shifts from the impact of the Little Ice Age on global societies and the impact of those societies themselves on the environment in what some see as the first emergence of the Anthropocene. The final chapter returns to Europe and to popular history to remind us that the early modern remains very prominent on the cultural radar, from films and series on the Tudors and Borgias, to video games featuring Florentine assassins and Caribbean pirates, to fairs and martial arts tournaments. Wiesner-Hanks closes with a look at public history and discussions around how figures like Columbus, Luther, and da Vinci have been moved off their pedestals—sometimes quite literally—in a broader re-evaluation of modernity as Europe’s gift to the world.

The book moves along at a brisk pace, much like the previous paragraph. Yet its pace doesn’t hinder or forestall reflection. Wiesner-Hanks is fair to a

fault and generous in the notes and suggestions for further reading. She is wry in her judgments and openly challenges the field to embrace new questions and approaches, but she eschews the kind of jargon and positioning that might lead some readers to think they are being initiated into a cult or catechized into right thinking. Her elegant short book invites reflection without directing it, and in that way demonstrates early modern historiography's future as it surveys the recent past.

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