The history of the development of human societies from the age of the hunter-gatherer to the age of knowledge has been a long and turbulent one. It has involved conflict and profound change, countless bloody wars, and massive—at times chaotic—sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural transformations due primarily to countless scientific discoveries and the development of innovative technological tools, machines and systems. These developments have affected all aspects of human life: the social and economic structures of society, culture, political organizations, modes of production, and environmental settings. Nature, geography, ideas, innovations, technology, religious and political leaders, states, and chance have contributed in different ways and to varying degrees to the making of human history. This chapter tries to briefly review the major conceptions of world history, explain their rationale, and expose their shortcomings, consequently paving the way for the introduction and articulation of a new conception of world history.

History books are records of important events and explanations of what caused such events to happen in the past and how they influenced life conditions in general. Interest in world history has led historians to rediscover ancient peoples and investigate the possibility that something larger than events, actions, leaders, states, and ideas might be driving history and charting its course. Conceptions of world history as a whole seek to present the history of humankind as a process that has a logic and life of its own. Theories of history, therefore, are attempts to detect the main currents of history, define the historical process, identify the forces that are driving it, and describe its path.

Despite the work of many philosophers of history, historians have not been able to agree on a unified theory of world history. Their individual points of departure and life experiences, varied cultural backgrounds, and specific interests have prevented them from reaching the same or even
similar conclusions. The major theories that have been produced tend to see history in general as being linear, cyclical, or chaotic. Although the three conceptions are dissimilar, they have all survived, and none of them has been either completely discredited or universally accepted. The many contradictions of history seem to have convinced historians and students of history to find merits in each conception.

**The Linear Theory**

German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is considered the father of the linear theory of history. He and Karl Marx were responsible for advancing the idea that contradictions exist as an inherent characteristic of social systems or formations, and that such contradictions cause conflict, which in turn causes the systems to collapse. As a consequence, new social formations or syntheses emerge to replace the old ones. And unlike the previous social formations, the new ones solve the major contradictions but give birth to new, less severe ones. As this process continues, contradictions become less basic, leading ultimately to the formation of a harmonious system where all basic contradictions are resolved. Both Hegel and Marx saw the continuous search for syntheses as a process reflecting the spirit of history. This process would, according to both Hegel and Marx, lead ultimately to solving all contradictions and creating conditions for a life without conflict. However, the contradictions that Hegel argued as being the driving forces of history are not the same contradictions seen by Marx.

Systems of thought and sociopolitical systems fall apart and disintegrate under the pressure of their own internal contradictions, Hegel claimed. They are then replaced by new, more complex systems that contain less fundamental contradictions. This seemingly an unending process of systemic change explains the notion of the historical dialectics put forth by the Hegelian and Marxist philosophies of history. However, the basic contradictions in society, according to Hegel, are related to human freedom, and, therefore, the conflict they cause and the syntheses they produce are of a political nature.

Hegel argues that progress in history is a result of the blind interplay of human passions that lead to conflict, revolution, and war. For him, “nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion.” He maintains that “the history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom,” which itself is driven by passion. Hegel argued further that communities have very specific reasons for their own self-development and that these reasons drive human progress and chart the course of history. “Each [historical] period is involved in such peculiar