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*Review Essay*  
The Fates of Human Societies: A Review of Recent  
Macrohistories

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GALE STOKES

NOT MANY HISTORIANS would subtitle their book "The Fates of Human Societies."<sup>1</sup> History on that scale is far removed from the "brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundations" of which Margaret Atwood spoke recently in these pages.<sup>2</sup> And indeed, Jared Diamond, the author of the book with that subtitle, is neither a historian nor a novelist. He is an evolutionary biologist. Nevertheless, in the past few years, a number of scholars like Diamond have published historical studies that confront the broadest kind of macrohistorical issues.<sup>3</sup> Many of these works focus on variants of the question that inspired Diamond to write his book. While he was doing fieldwork in New Guinea, a native informant asked him, "Why is it that white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?"<sup>4</sup> Diamond knows that from a genetic point view humans have been essentially equivalent for tens of thousands of years, and fieldwork in New Guinea convinced him that the peoples he worked with there were on the average more intelligent than Westerners; thus the question seemed to him both puzzling and worth pursuing.<sup>5</sup> And so it has seemed to many others.

The issue that has occupied many macrohistorians over the past generation can be stated quite succinctly: "Why Europe?" Why did a relatively small and backward periphery on the western fringes of the Eurasian continent burst out into the world

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<sup>1</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York 1997)

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," *AHR* 103 (December 1998): 1505. A relatively recent historiographical genre that follows Atwood's advice with a vengeance is microhistory, almost the precise opposite of macrohistory. For an introduction, see Jacques Revel, "Microanalysis and the Construction of the Social," in Revel and Lynn Hunt eds., *Histories: French Constructions of the Past, Vol. 1: Postwar French Thought* (New York, 1995), 492-502; and the collection edited by Revel, *Jeux d'echelles: La micro-analyse a l'experience* (Paris 1996)

<sup>3</sup> By macrohistory, I refer to what Charles Tilly calls "world history," which falls in between broad metahistory and narrower national history. See Tilly, "A Grand Tour of Exotic Landes," *AHR* 104 (October 1999): 1253-57. David Christian argues that really big history should comprise all of time. In his thirteen-week introductory course, he takes eight weeks to move from the Big Bang to early Near Eastern civilizations. Christian, "The Case for 'Big History,'" *Journal of World History* 2 (Fall 1991): 223-38.

<sup>4</sup> Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> For Diamond's argument that "Stone Age" peoples are "more intelligent, more alert, more expressive, and more interested in things and people around them than the average European or American," see *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 20-21.

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in the sixteenth century and by the nineteenth century become a dominant force in almost all comers of the earth? Until recently, two responses have dominated the answers to this question. The first is that something unique in the European past lay behind its eventual economic development and power. This something special is often seen as a universal good, such as reason, freedom, or individualism, that relates, or should relate, to all human beings. The best-known recent study in this school is David Landes's *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*.<sup>6</sup>

The second response is that there was nothing particularly special about Europe until at least 1500, and probably not until 1800. Even then, its rise to dominance by the nineteenth century was due not to any exceptional qualities but to its good fortune in being able to seize vast amounts of gold and silver in the New World and to create other forms of wealth through colonial trade. The second group tends to see the last thousand years as an era dominated primarily by the cultures and economies of Asia, especially China, with a relatively brief and likely to be transient burst of European power in the last quarter of the millennium.<sup>7</sup> The most successful synthetic study in this vein is Andre Gunder Frank's *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*.<sup>8</sup>

Both of these approaches tend to be polemical. For example, Landes calls criticism of works that emphasize European uniqueness "simply anti-intellectual; also contrary to fact," while Frank believes his analysis "pulls the historical rug out from under the *anti*-historical/scientific—really ideological—Eurocentrism of Marx, Weber, Toynbee, Polanyi, Braudel, Wallerstein, and most other contemporary social theorists."<sup>9</sup> Recently, a less polarized way of attacking macrohistorical issues has begun to emerge, the world-historical approach.<sup>10</sup> World historians tend to see the past thousand years, and maybe even longer, as a system of interactions and encounters in which humanity as a whole participated in a vast adventure of development, the sources of which were varied and the impact of which was worldwide. Historians in this school remain interested in issues of development, but they tend to focus on encounters and comparisons rather than on hegemony and dominance. In this way, they offer narratives more appropriate for the post-Cold War era of globalization than the essentializing styles of the first two approaches. Two important examples are R. Bin Wong's *China Transformed: Historical Change*

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<sup>6</sup> New York, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> A typical comment: "East Asia is a great region of the past, having been in the forefront of world development for at least two thousand years, until the sixteenth, seventeenth, or even eighteenth century, after which it suffered a relatively brief but deeply felt eclipse." Gilbert Rozman, "The East Asian Region in Comparative Perspective," in Rozman, ed., *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Berkeley, Calif., 1998. In the last years of the 1990s, comparisons of Landes and Frank became almost a historical parlor game, with discussions ranging from conferences and special meetings to a debate between the two protagonists on the cable channel that covers Congress, C-SPAN.

<sup>9</sup> Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 514; Frank, *ReOrient*, xv-xvi. For heated attacks on Frank by three former collaborators—Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, and Immanuel Wallerstein—see *Review* 22, no. 3 (1999): 291-371.

<sup>10</sup> The approach is not necessarily new. Marshall G. S. Hodgson began moving toward this sort of analysis a generation ago. However, its momentum has only recently accelerated. See Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, Edmund Burke in, ed. (Cambridge, 1993).

and the Limits of European Experience and Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*.<sup>11</sup>

One approaches these issues with considerable trepidation. Indeed, one might ask if it is even possible to write scholarly work on a macrohistorical scale. Histories that sweep across centuries, languages, and cultures cannot be based on detailed archival research, which disqualifies them from the ranks of the serious for some historians. The low esteem in which Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee have been held by professional historians grows in part out of the conviction that their work is not solidly grounded.<sup>12</sup> William H. McNeill, who is one of the two universally admired macrohistorians—the other is Fernand Braudel—does not agree that macrohistorical investigations are methodologically unsound. While primary sources are important, he argues, it is not the scale of the topic that is the key to good history writing. It is quite possible to write poor history on the basis of the most impeccable documentary evidence. The fundamental desideratum is the skill with which the historian chooses questions and the integrity that he or she brings to the task.<sup>13</sup> The logic of explanation does not change with the generality of the developments and outcomes to be explained.<sup>14</sup> Accepting this view, but also acknowledging that few people are fully qualified to comment on all the controversial subjects that arise in writing macrohistories, I will discuss the two contending (and contentious) schools and then outline the beginnings of a new approach.

DAVID LANDES'S RICH STUDY unapologetically argues that the key factor in the last one thousand years of progress has been "Western civilization and its dissemination."<sup>15</sup> The reason is that Europeans invented systematic economic development. Even though this invention is related to technological improvements, Landes argues that three nonmaterial and unique aspects of European culture were central to Europe's propensity for economic growth. First, he places great importance on the development of science as an autonomous method of intellectual inquiry that succeeded in disengaging itself from the social constraints imposed by organized religion and from the political constraints of centralized authority. Paradoxically, given the diversity of Europe that he and others believe was vital in permitting it to break out into the Atlantic in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, European scholars used a single vehicle of communication: Latin. This commonality facilitated an adversarial discourse in which advances in understanding of the physical world could be tested, demonstrated, and then accepted across the continent eventually across the world, even though Europe lacked a political center.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence* (Princeton, N.J., 2000).

<sup>12</sup> For a sympathetic entry into the Toynbee phenomenon, see William H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life* (New York, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> See McNeill's remarks on the occasion of his receipt of the Erasmus Award in 1996, in *Praemium Erasmianum 1996* (Amsterdam, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> For a powerful theoretical support of this view, see Fritz Ringer, *Max Weber's Methodology: The Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 513.

<sup>16</sup> Printing presses with movable type, which Landes does not emphasize, were also vital here. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (New York, 1979). For the limitations of movable type in Chinese printing, see Joseph Needham, ed., *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. 5, Pt. 1: Tsien Tsuen-Hsuei, *Paper and Printing* (Cambridge, 1985), 220-22.

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Second, Landes advocates a generalized form of the Max Weber thesis that values work, initiative, and investment made the difference for Europe. Unlike some, he does not stress the notion of rationality as such. In Landes's view, "What counts is work, thrift, honesty, patience, [and] tenacity."<sup>17</sup> The only route to economic success for individuals or states is working hard, spending less than you earn, and investing the rest in productive capacity. This is his fundamental answer to the problem posed by the subtitle of his book: "Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor." For historical reasons – not because of any racial, genetic, or special intellectual endowments – Europeans have, on balance, followed those practices, and therefore they have prospered.<sup>18</sup>

The third quality Landes proposes is perhaps the most important one. Europeans were learners – they "learned rather greedily," as Joel Mokyr puts in his review of Landes's book.<sup>19</sup> Even if the Europeans possessed indigineous technology that gave them an advantage, as Landes believed they did (spectacles, for example), their most important asset was the ability to put knowledge to use wherever they found it – as in borrowing the concept of zero and rediscovering Aristotle's *Logic* from the Arabs, and taking paper and gunpowder from the Chinese via the Muslim world. Landes argues that a systematic resistance to learning from other cultures and remains the greatest handicap of Arab countries today.<sup>20</sup>

Despite his belief in Europe's significance, Landes does not argue that the Europeans were beneficent bearers of civilization to a benighted world, although his analysis of European expansion is almost nonexistent. Landes relies on his own commonsense law, "When one group is strong enough to push another around and stands to gain by it, it will do so." In contrast to the complex approaches of the new school of world historians (to be discussed later), Landes simply holds that technological advances achieved on the basis of specific cultural values made some Europeans strong enough to dominate people in other parts of the world, and therefore they proceeded to do so with great viciousness and cruelty.<sup>21</sup> By focusing

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<sup>17</sup> Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 523.

<sup>18</sup> Surprisingly, Landes does not stress property rights. The most powerful discussions of that aspect of Western development remains Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic* (Cambridge, 1973).

<sup>19</sup> Joel Mokyr, "Eurocentricity Triumphant," *AHR* 104 (October 1999): 1243. See also Donna J. Guy, "The Morality of Economic History and the Immorality of Imperialism," *AHR* 104 (October 1999): 1247-52; and Tilly, "Grand Tour."

<sup>20</sup> Fouad Ajami and Toby E. Huff, although writing about completely different phenomena, hold similar views. Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey* (New York, 1998); Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China, and the West* (Cambridge, 1993). Huff shows how the Arabs successfully learned from others in the early days of Islam but have since erected cultural barriers to scientific learning that are not connected to faith. Even Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Sextents of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History* (New York, 1999), who argues that the Chinese were more open to outside influences that threatened "Their political autonomy and distinctive cultural identity"; p. 284.

<sup>21</sup> For a harrowing narrative of one example, see Adam hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston, 1998).

on their victimization in this process, Landes believes, some postcolonial states have wasted much of the energy that they could otherwise have put into productive work, and investment. If one could sum up Landes's advice to these states in one sentence it might be, "Stop whining and get to work." This is particularly important advice he would argue, because success is not permanent. Comparative advantage is not fixed, gains from trade are unequal, and different societies react differently to market signals. Therefore, not only is there hope for the undeveloped, but id developed countries have little cause to be complacent, because the curr4 situation "will press hard" on them.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this hint of possible decline, the usual thrust of studies like Landes's is to find the short list of the elements of European civilization that lie behind the creation of modernity. Two recent books in this genre emphasize the importance of the medieval church, as does Landes's, but for different reasons. Landes's argument is that the European propensity for growth is linked with the ancient idea of private property, which church pretensions against medieval rulers helped support.<sup>23</sup> David Gress develops this point by criticizing what he calls the "Grand Narrative" of European history, which allegedly claims that liberty is an abstract principle traceable through the great books back to ancient Greece. While the original ingredient of the West is indeed liberty, Gress argues that this relationship grew slowly, not as an ideological legacy of the classical world but as a set of practices and institutions that served the interests of power, specifically the independence of the church in the Middle Ages. Deepak Lal, on the other hand, argues that individualism, the rise of which he also links to the medieval church, is the key element in the long-term economic success of the West.<sup>24</sup> Gress and Lal remain rather traditional. Craig Clunas in a review essay lists some less common proposals for key Western ingredients in the invention of modernity that go beyond the ideas of church, liberty, and individualism: the propensity of Westerners to think quantitatively, the invention of pornography, a commitment to certain forms of picturing food styles, fashion, diversity, a new understanding of public trust, and oversea colonization. Jacques Barzun takes a different tack, listing seven cultural themes that run through European history of the last five hundred years: abstraction, analysis, emancipation, primitivism, reductivism, secularism, self-consciousness, scientism, and specialism. Barzun is more pessimistic than Gress or Lal, but he does believe that "the peoples of the West offered the world a set of ideas and institutions not found earlier or elsewhere."<sup>25</sup>

These proposals assume the fundamental rightness of their question: What are the factors that characterize European success? It is a short leap from this assumption to outright triumphalism. The paradigmatic book of this school is, of course, *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which Francis Fukuyama argues

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<sup>22</sup> Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 63, 434, and 522.

<sup>23</sup> Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 35-36.

<sup>24</sup> David Gress, *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents* (New York, 1998); and Deepak Lal, *Unintended Consequences: The Impact of Factor Endowments, Culture, and Politics on Long-Run Economic Performance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Craig Clunas, "Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West," *AHR* 104 (December 1999): 1508-09; and Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Culture Life* (New York, 2000), xv. Gale Stokes

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that after the collapse of both Nazism and Communism in the twentieth century, the only possible remaining model for human organization in the industrial and communications ages was a combination of market economics and limited, pluralist, democratic government<sup>26</sup>. But even theoretically inclined and sophisticated sociologists are not immune to the temptation, as Anthony Giddens shows in *The Consequences of Modernity*. Is modernity, which has characteristics like disembedding mechanisms and the reflexive appropriation of knowledge, which is inherently globalizing, a Western project? "[T]he blunt answer must be yes, says Giddens.<sup>27</sup>

THIS KIND OF CONFIDENCE provokes not only heavy fire but also resentment and downright anger. Critics argue that the undoubted ascendancy of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is substantially less inevitable than most have assumed and certainly not due to any inherent European superiorities.<sup>28</sup> Instead of growing out of unique European experiences, Western domination was almost accidental; it has been brief, and it will remain short-lived. "The myth of the European miracle," James M. Blaut writes, making use of the title of E. L. Jones's widely read book of twenty years ago, "is the doctrine that the rise of Europe resulted, essentially, from historical forces generated within Europe itself."<sup>29</sup> By assembling a multitude of data undermining the demographic, climatic, and geographical arguments of European uniqueness, Blaut critiques religious, rationalist, and social claims. He makes a strong case that European success was due to primarily to its food fortune of being well placed geographically to exploit the gold and silver of the Americas and the colonial trade that the resources made possible.

Blaut's critique of Eurocentrism is the most systematic within the critical school, but Andre Gunder Frank offers the most thorough alternative theory. Frank does not give an inch to Europe, which in his view made little or no contribution to its own nineteenth-century hegemony. Early modern Europe was not more advanced

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<sup>26</sup> New York, 1992. For useful retrospectives by Fukuyama, see "Reflections on *The End of History*, Five Years Later," in Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick, and Richard T. Vann, eds., *World History: Ideologies, Structures, and Identities* (Malden, Mass., 1998), 199-216; and the discussion in *The National Interest* 56 (Summer 1999).

<sup>27</sup> (Stanford, Calif., 1990), 175.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to the works discussed here, see also the following: Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (London, 1989), argues that capitalism has led to an international impasse and that socialism is "at the end of this long tunnel"; p. 152; Bobby S. Sayid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London, 1997), posits that resurgent Islamicism fills a space left by the erosion of Kemalism, which disarticulated Islam from the state; Peter Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1996), holds that the Enlightenment produced Euro-centered visions that were always "materialist, androcentric, statist, violent, intolerant, and misogynist"; p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York, 1993), 59; E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environment, Economics, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge, 1981). See also John Goudsblom, Eric Jones, and Stephen Mennell, *The Course of Human History: Economic Growth, Social Process, and Civilization* (Armonk, N.Y., 1996).

“in any way than other regions of the world.” “Europeans did not do anything – let alone modernize – by themselves.” “The Europeans did not in any sense ‘create’ the world economic system itself nor develop world ‘capitalism.’” “The Europeans had no exceptional, let alone superior, ethnic, rational, organizational, or spirit-of-capitalist advantages to offer, diffuse, or do anything else in Asia.”<sup>30</sup>

Instead, Frank argues, European successes were the result of the operation of the world economic system, which has been in operation since at least 1400 and probably substantially before that time. As a structuralist, Frank believes that local and regional events take place within the system of trade linkages through which products and money are exchanged on a worldwide basis, or at least on a very large intercontinental scale.<sup>31</sup> During most of the last one thousand years that system was centered in Asia, especially in China, which under the Song dynasty experienced remarkable economic growth. Janet Abu-Lughod has argued that when the system began to decline, as part of a worldwide decline in population in the fourteenth century, the stage was set for the emergence of the truly worldwide system of the post-Columbus era.<sup>32</sup> Frank does not agree. Believing that the world system operates in very long-term cycles of rise and decline, Frank argues that Asia began an “A” phase of economic upturn about 1400 that continued into the seventeenth century. Only when that cycle went into its “B” phase, or decline, did words, 1500 is not the dramatic milestone of a new era for Frank, as it is for many other world historians, but rather a moment when the world system was restructured, or “inflected,” because the European fortuitously stumbled into the Western Hemisphere.

Frank buttresses the larger theory with, among other things, a substantial discussion of global trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He also presents five excellent maps that show in easily comprehended detail early modern trade flows.<sup>33</sup> He identifies three areas of surplus production (India, China, and Southeast Asia) and four deficit regions (the Americas, Japan, Africa, and Europe). In order to be able to obtain some of the surpluses of the former areas, the Americas and Japan exported specie and Africa exported slaves. Europe, with nothing of great value to sell, achieved success by managing the exports of the deficit areas. Frank particularly emphasizes the importance of silver. Because the price of silver was approximately twice as high in China as it was in Europe or the New World, because Asian traders wanted, about one quarter to one third (and perhaps more) of silver produced in the New World ended up in Asia, especially China.<sup>34</sup> This Frank argues, and nothing more, is what provided

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<sup>30</sup> Frank, *ReOrient*, 5, 259, 167, 284.

<sup>31</sup> Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, eds., *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (London, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York, 1989).

<sup>33</sup> For informative maps of Indian Ocean trade routes, emporia, winds, and other factors, see K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> Given the imbalance, one is surprised to learn that the Chinese state did not actually mint silver coins. Millions of foreign coins circulated, and so did chunks, ingots, and bits of silver, but no Chinese silver coins; Ray Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge, 1988), 79. For the silver trade that came directly from the New World to Asia through Manila, see Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, “Born with a ‘Silver Spoon’: The Origin of World Trade in 1571,” *Journal of World History* 6 (Fall 1995): 201-21; and the articles in Flynn, *World Silver and Monetary History in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Aldershot, 1996).

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the basis for European development. As he puts it, "the Europeans bought themselves a seat, and then even a whole railway car, on the Asian train."<sup>35</sup>

As this formulation suggests, Frank has even more of a tendency toward overkill than Landes. According to Frank, Asians were superior or at least equal to Europeans in the fields of guns, ships, printing, textiles, metallurgy, and transport. State institutions had little or no importance in deflecting processes. Even the Crusades was nothing more than a European effort "to plug its marginal economy more effectively into the new Afro-Eurasian dynamic." And, unlike Landes, Frank has very little room for people. For Frank, structure is all: For example: "[I]t was this Kondratieff 'B' phase that generated the industrial revolution (as well as the American and French political revolutions)."<sup>36</sup> "Frank calls this approach humanocentric." That is, rather than taking one relatively small group of human beings as his central point, he tries to comprehend humanity as a whole. There is merit in this idea. After all, in the long run of human experience, worldwide industrialization has taken but an instant. However, it is a profoundly anti-humanistic approach. Cycles occur and structures inflect, but human agents do not really exist.

Frank's reliance on economic motivations and activities is typical of most analyses, but another common thread is the Weberian notion that in some sense rationality lay behind Europe's success. We have already seen the importance Landes places on science, and recently Alfred W. Crosby has argued that the West's lead in its ability to quantify reality was fundamental to its commercial and other successes."<sup>37</sup> Crosby holds that the quantification of notions of time and space, as well as the development of skills such as art, writing, and bookkeeping, gave Europe a unique conceptual advantage by the sixteenth century. British anthropologist Jack Goody takes a countervailing position. He argues that many of those features sometimes claimed as European developmental advantages are in fact not uniquely European."<sup>38</sup> If we judge by actions rather than by post hoc observations of who ended up in the dominant position, it is difficult to make global assessments about the relative rationality of such things as bookkeeping practices or family relations. Goody's underlying point is that the primary cultures of the Eurasian continent, especially those of the Mediterranean, India, and China, all grew out of similar Bronze Age innovations. Whereas mercantile activities may have prospered first in one region and then in another, the developmental process had broad similarities across Eurasia.

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<sup>35</sup> Frank, *ReOrient*, 227.

<sup>36</sup> Frank, *ReOrient*, 353, 293.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, *The Measuring of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600* (Cambridge, 1997). See also the discussion of this book by Roger Hart, Jack A. Goldstone, and Margaret C. Jacob, *AHR* 102 (April 2000): 485-508.

<sup>38</sup> Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge, 1996).

IMPLICIT IN ALL THESE WRITINGS is the obverse of the question "Why Europe?" - namely, "Why not China?"<sup>39</sup> Many specific issues separate the advocates of European uniqueness and their critics, but they are united in their interest in the why/why not issue. A neuralgic moment on both sides of the debate is the cancellation of the Chinese voyages initiated early in the fifteenth century by the influential court eunuch Zheng He. Zheng He's initial treasure fleet consisted 317 ships, the largest of which were 400 feet long (compared to the 85 feet of Columbus's *Santa Maria*), and 27,000 crewmen, the largest fleet assembled for a single voyage until the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> The Chinese made seven major voyages to the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as Madagascar. But because of internal political conflicts, the emperor eventually ordered the fleets destroyed and went as far as to ban the building of ships with more than two masts or even making oceangoing voyages.

Authors who begin from a European perspective almost uniformly find this moment crucial in their discussions of why Europeans rather than Asians came to dominate the seas of the world. They adopt the same general theme: China was a centralized empire and Europe was not. If and when the central regime in China wished to prohibit the construction of ships with more than two masts, as it did by 1500, it could do so. Europe, by contrast, consisted of a large variety of kingdoms and proto-states in which no such blanket prohibition could be sustained. Jared Diamond's version of this conventional wisdom has a typically twist: China is a compact landmass with a relatively limited coastline, while Europe consists of numerous peninsulas and major islands with very extensive coastlines. Therefore, when the Han Chinese of northwest China developed agriculture around 7500 BCE, bronze metallurgy in the third millennium BCE, and iron technology in 500 BCE, they were able, over a space of two or three thousand to spread their culture to the southeast, eliminate hundreds of indigenous and create a centralized state in a way not possible in Europe.<sup>41</sup>

Cultural differences have also been used to explain why the Europeans, not the Chinese, came to dominance in the nineteenth century. Typical arguments that Confucianism, with its ethic of harmonious living, contrasts with the nature of monotheistic Christianity; that the Chinese sense of being at the center of the world contrasts with the obvious realization of peoples like the Portuguese that they were not even in the center of Europe, let alone the world; and that the social position of the merchant in China was inferior to that of the merchant in the so that property rights were poorly protected. These cultural differences could be neatly summed up in the contrasting ways the emperor of China and the king of Portugal styled themselves. The Chinese emperor was the "Son of Heaven," around whom the rest of the world revolved, whereas King Manuel I, king of Portugal from

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<sup>39</sup> One also might ask, "Why not India?" For good discussions of this question, see Goody, *East in the West*; and the several works of K. N. Chaudhuri, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, C.A. Bayly, and Frank Perlin.

<sup>40</sup> Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* (New York, 1994). The Spanish Armada of 1588, for example, consisted of 130 ships; Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada* (Boston, 1959), 247.

<sup>41</sup> Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 322-33; Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 23-28. See also Jared Diamond, "Peeling the Chinese Onion," *Nature* 391 (January 29, 1998): 433-34.

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1495 to 1521, styled himself the "Lord of Conquest, Navigation, and Commerce of Ethiopia, Asia, Persia, and India."<sup>42</sup> Landes makes the cultural argument in a typically aggressive way, repeating the refrain of a changeless China.<sup>43</sup> After the Ming prohibited oceangoing voyages, he writes, "the Celestia Empire purred along for hundreds of years more, impervious and imperturbable."<sup>44</sup>

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, a historian of the Spanish expansion to the Atlantic islands prior to the sixteenth century, makes the most bizarre response to these assertions in a recent history of the past thousand years that he entitles *Millennium*. Fernandez-Armesto agrees that, under the Ming, conservative Confucians achieved a "near-exclusive triumph," to the detriment of development although sinologists by no means support such a bald assertion. He believes that, in the long run of the next ten thousand years, this may prove to have been a "clever long-term strategy." By choosing not to enter into world trade competition, China created a "homeland more defensible, a culture more durable, and a power more concentrated."<sup>45</sup>

Blaut's critique is considerably sharper. He points out that if length of coastline and pluralist politics are criteria for development, then South and Southeast Asia should have been the innovators, since the Indian coastline is relatively long in relation to its landmass, and the islands of what is today Indonesia provide both diversity and coastline.<sup>46</sup> Blaut agrees that Chinese technological innovation slowed significantly after the fifteenth century, but the important question for him is not why it stopped but why it should have happened in the first place.

The most powerful reply to the argument that Chinese advances stopped with Zheng He again comes from Frank. Basing his analysis on a wide reading of the latest scholarship, Frank makes a convincing case of something that has been known to sinologists for some time, but not to Europeanists. Rather than remaining static in the late Ming and early Qing, the Chinese economy showed considerable vigor, as did the Asian trading system of which it was a part.<sup>47</sup> Frank bases his argument on the fact that the Chinese population grew substantially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which implies a concomitant economic growth. Other factors intervened as well. Weather patterns made it reasonable for the Chinese to travel to accessible entrepôts such as Melaka, where they could trade with merchants coming from the Indian Ocean rather than mounting lengthy, and therefore expensive, round trips to South Asia. As forests close to rivers

were cut

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down and accessible lumber supplies dwindled, it also became less and less economical to build

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<sup>42</sup> For Manuel, see Patricia Seed, "Taking Possession and Reading Texts: Establishing the Authority of Overseas Empires," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 49 (1992): 197, n. 55.

<sup>43</sup> For a fascinating discussion of these impressions, see Jonathan D. Spence, *the Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York, 1998). Contrary to more recent interpretations from the imperialist era that may have influenced Landes, over the centuries European interpretations of China tended to be respectful of what was perceived to be an ancient and wise culture. See also David E. Mungello, *The great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800* (Lanham, Md., 1999), who briefly chronicles both the fascination and repulsion each civilization felt for the other.

<sup>44</sup> Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 98.

<sup>45</sup> Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* (New York, 1995), 149.

<sup>46</sup> Blaut, *Colonizer's Model*, 92-93.

<sup>47</sup> For a review of the substantial literature demonstrating this point, see Evelyn S. Rawski, "Research Themes in Ming-Qing Socioeconomic History – The State of the Field," *Journal of Asian Studies* 50 (1991): 84-111.

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large ships. Chinese merchants responded by building smaller ones and traveling shorter distances with them.<sup>48</sup>

Frank does not deal with culture, but here too, China exhibited a number of characteristics that seem similar to those of pre-capitalist Europe. As early as the fourteenth century, for example, a machine for spinning hemp thread that could be powered by water wheel came into widespread use in North China, and a potentially automatic loom for ramie and silk production was invented.<sup>49</sup> During the Ming dynasty, authors wrote theoretical treatises about the market and about modes of behavior that have a startling similarity to the Calvinist virtues of diligence, stewardship, and accountability. In 1506, Qui Jun defined a market and argued that marketing should be left to the merchants without state interference (except food supplies). In 1635, Li Jinde advised merchants who wished to be successful to be diligent, make sure expenses do not exceed income, go to bed early and rise early, avoid ostentation, and keep careful accounts. Both of these books were couched in Confucian terms, but the last one in particular indicated that “the core philosophy of the age was being molded to accept commerce in a way that previously had not been though possible.”<sup>50</sup> And yet, despite a booming trade in cotton goods under the Ming, spinning and weaving technology was never transferred to the production of cotton. Styles of what elsewhere have been called capitalist modes of behavior never became widespread.<sup>51</sup>

Of the many proposed explanations for this failure, an intriguing recent entry is Jack Goldstone’s suggestion that the unavailability of female workers prevented the development of a cotton industry in China. Many have argued that one reason behind Chinese unwillingness to put its technological inventions to the aggressive uses the Europeans did was family structure.<sup>52</sup> Typically, these arguments have danced around the rationality issue. By marrying late and having fewer children, European families allegedly showed a propensity for economically rational behavior that did not exist in China, where early marriage and large families were the custom.<sup>53</sup>

Goldstone points out that much recent research into Chinese family patterns has exploded

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<sup>48</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World that Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400-the Present* (Armonk, N.Y., 1999), 51-53.

<sup>49</sup> Ramie is a nettle plant whose fiber can be woven. On the remarkable hemp-thread spinning machine, see Mark Elvin, “The High-Level Equilibrium Trap: The Causes of the Decline of Invention in the Traditional Chinese Textile Industries,” in W.E. Willmott, ed., *Economic Organization in Chinese Society* (Stanford, Calif., 1972), 137-72.

<sup>50</sup> Timothy Brook, “Communications and Commerce,” in Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 8: The ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 2* (Cambridge, 1998), 673-75, 704-05.

<sup>51</sup> Despite a highly developed cotton trade, a putting-out system similar to the European proto-capitalism did not appear in Qing China. Brook, “Communications and Commerce,” 692.

<sup>52</sup> Primary among them was Max Weber. For a balanced discussion, see Martin King Whyte, “The Chinese Family and Economic Development: Obstacle or Engine?” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 45 (1996): 1-30.

<sup>53</sup> Jack Goody argues that, despite a mythology to the contrary, family links in the capitalist world have often been just as important in deciding who succeeds in business as they were in Asian societies, thus undercutting the rationality argument. Besides *East in the West*, see Goody, *The Development of Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge, 1983); and *The Oriental, the ancient and the Primitive* (Cambridge, 1990). The classic article from the European perspective is John Hajnal, “Two Kinds of Preindustrial Household Formation System,” *Population and Development Review* 8 (September 1982) 449-94.

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view. He moves beyond these arguments to suggest that differences in the life path of women was the decisive factor. In the West, women between puberty and marriage were typically wage earners. Considered to be individuals, they were available to work for a wage under the supervision of a non-family adult as a servant or later a factory worker. The pay was meager, less than a man might earn doing the same thing, but in earning it they produced more than they could living at home. In China, spinning and weaving were traditionally household tasks formed by women, even though the product might enter into far-flung trade networks. In contrast to Europe, women were not considered individuals but, rather, members of a family. The Confucian life path of women did not take them out of the household until marriage; they were “‘locked’ into upholding family continuity by restricting them to household life.”<sup>54</sup> Consequently, Goldstone argues appropriately cheap female and child labor was not available to Chinese entrepreneurs. Unlike their European counterparts, such entrepreneurs would have had to hire more expensive male labor, the product of which would not have been competitive with the very much cheaper household Production of family-bound women. Therefore, the tendency was to make the economically rational choice not to build cotton mills.

Philip Huang generalizes this argument. As the Qing population grew and the implicit wage of unpaid household labor declined, labor-saving machinery became increasingly pointless. As Huang puts it, the economy became “Involuted.” Kenneth Pomeranz does not accept Huang's argument, but he does agree that gender norms made it proper for women to work indoors spinning and weaving and that it was difficult for women to migrate alone in China. This may have hindered “the replacement of domestic textile production by factory production,” but Pomeranz holds that this was a “temporary conjuncture, rather than a fundamental feature of long-term Chinese development.”<sup>55</sup> In short, Goldstone's proposal sheds considerable light on a blockage to development that is characteristic of China but not Europe.

IN DISCUSSING THESE AND OTHER ISSUES, the main protagonists of both sides engage, in their own ways, in conversations initiated more than a generation ago. Argu-

ments for European uniqueness grow out of the Western Civilization tradition that goes back at least to the 1920s, and their critics grow out of a Marxist style of criticism that became

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<sup>54</sup> Jack Goldstone, “Gender, Work, and Culture: Why the Industrial Revolution Came Early to England but Late to China,” *Sociological Perspectives* 39 (1996): 8. By the 1920s, however, two-thirds of the workers in Shanghai's cotton mills were women; Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949* (Stanford, Calif., 1986). In Japan, women were millworkers from the beginning of the Meiji period; E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*, (Princeton, N.J., 1990). “It may be,” comments Gail Hershatter, “that the widespread use of female labor [in Shanghai after World War I] was a pattern imprinted by Japanese millworkers from mills in Japan, and that Chinese millowners followed suit in Shanghai in order to keep labor costs competitive.” Hershatter, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949* (Stanford, Calif., 1986), 54. I would like to thank Angus Lockyer for help on these points. Finally, see Richard John Lufano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu, 1997), for absence of women in small Chinese businesses.

<sup>55</sup> Philip Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Lower Yangzi Region, 1350-1988* (Stanford, Calif., 1990). For Pomeranz's critique of Huang's position, see *Great Divergence*, 91-106. For the two quotations in this paragraph, see Pomeranz, 292. See also Pomeranz, 85 and 248-250.

particularly salient in the 1960s.<sup>56</sup> Both of them are concerned with origins and hegemony. Why did Europe (or Japan) break out as it did? Why didn't China (or India)? When did Europe become hegemonic in the world system of capitalism? Was China hegemonic for most of the last millennium? Questions of this sort were part and parcel of a way of thinking that identified East and West as somehow opposed. Practitioners of the new field of world history have begun to sidestep or ignore questions such as these in favor of what Pomeranz calls "reciprocal comparisons."<sup>57</sup> This approach recognizes that a truly comprehensive account of the past thousand years must concentrate on polycentric interactions rather than questions of priority or hegemony that have exercised scholars like Landes and Frank for the past generation. This approach – less essentialist, less polemical, and less focused origins – is on the verge of entering the mainstream of the American historical profession. In a clear, succinct exposition of the "Shapes of World History in Twentieth Century Scholarship," Jerry H. Bentley traces the origins of the field back to Spengler and Toynbee and to its great early practitioners McNeill and Braudel. But only in the last decades has world history begun to achieve a youthful maturity, as the formation of that sine qua non of respectability, its own journal, eleven years ago suggests.<sup>58</sup>

Many of the critics of the European perspective are, or consider themselves, world historians, of course, but what I mean by the term here is the growing group of scholars who put aside questions of hegemony and *ressentiment* and attempt to write truly comparative history. An ambitious, but not entirely successful, example is Victor Lieberman's effort to demonstrate that, between 1450 and 1830, "localized societies in widely separated regions [Burma, Siam, Vietnam, France, Russia, and Japan] coalesced into larger units – politically, culturally, commercially." That is, "sustained integrative patterns were not restricted to Europe" but were "variants of more general Eurasian patterns."<sup>59</sup> Jack Goody takes a much larger view, arguing that the main regions of Eurasian development can be shown to be similar because they are all variations on the same theme – the Bronze Age innovations connected with agriculture and metal industries. The two most important works in this new genre, however, are Wong's *China Transformed* and Pomeranz's *Great Divergence*. The analyses presented in both books go well beyond Lande's difficult-to-pin-down arguments and Frank's aggressive polemicizing to create sustained and substantial interpretations.<sup>60</sup>

Wong not only compares Europe and China in terms of economic development, but he investigates political issues of state formation and social movements of protest. Rather than attempting to answer the question "Why Europe?" or "Why not China?" Wong simply seeks to

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<sup>56</sup> For a good set of reading and arguments from both traditions, as well as many other useful views, see Ross E. Dunn, ed., *The New World History: A Teacher's Companion* (Boston, 2000).

<sup>57</sup> Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 10. A good introductory text in this style is David R. Ringrose, *Expansion and Global Interaction, 1200-1700* (New York, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Bentley's pamphlet appears in the series *Essays on Global and Comparative History*, edited by Michael Adas for the American Historical Association (1996). Bentley also edits the *Journal of World History*, which is published by the University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>59</sup> Victor Lieberman, "Transcending East-West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas," *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997): 468.

<sup>60</sup> David D. Buck reviews Landes, Frank, and Wong in "Was It Pluck or Luck That Made the West Grow Rich?" *Journal of World History* 10 (Fall 1999): 413-30. He suggests that "it is Wong's comparative approach. . . that will probably be most copies in the next few years"; p. 429.

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uncover where China and Europe are similar, where they differ, and what this implies for our understanding of these two worlds. Wong argues that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries both the Chinese and the Europeans faced economic problems characteristic of societies based on agricultural production. They approached harvest insecurities, material limitation, and demographic issues in ways that would be familiar to Adam Smith: by the division of labor and specialization, for example. The European and Chinese economies were not exactly the same, of course. A large proportion of Chinese production was always rural, not urban, whereas in Europe some production that began in towns and cities migrated to the countryside in proto-industries. But in general, Wong extends and elaborates the argument made by others that Smithian economic development was characteristic of both China and Europe. E. L. Jones has called this kind of development "extensive"; that is, growth occurs primarily because of an increase in inputs, such as land (expansion of the arable) or labor (population growth).<sup>61</sup> Technological improvements and better farming practices have been important in permitting agricultural societies to grow, but extensive growth has been roughly characteristic of agriculturally based societies that rely on organic materials as their source of energy. This is the kind of growth Frank is talking about when he notes how the Chinese economy kept up with population growth in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. But extensive growth, even when technological improvements are factored in, does not necessarily imply any kind of breakout to industrial revolution. Wong does not believe one could look at China and Europe in, say, 1700 and predict what was going to happen.

What did happen, in his view, was something entirely new—the discovery of how to extract energy systematically from mineral rather than organic material.<sup>62</sup> The steam engine turned coal into energy at a stupendously greater rate than ever before possible, thus setting off "intensive" growth based on the increased efficiency made possible by technology rather than on expanded inputs. Frank, because he is so wedded to his structural explanations, mentions this momentous event only in passing as a subheading in a list of various factors. Landes, while agreeing that the steam engine was important, does not give the energy transformation it wrought a central place in his analysis. Wong, on the other hand, fully recognizes its importance. He is correct when he states that "the world of material

possibilities was dramatically altered between 1780 and 1880"<sup>63</sup> No previous century witnessed

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<sup>61</sup> E. L. Jones, *Growth Recurring: Economic Change in World History* (Oxford, 1988). The fundamental work on growth is Simon Kuznets, *Modern Economic Growth: Rate, Structure, and Spread* (New Haven, Conn., 1966). Fernand Braudel distinguishes between the market economy and capitalism, as does Albert Feuerwerker, "Presidential Address: Questions about China's Early Modern Economic History That I Wish I Could Answer," *Journal of Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (1992): 757-69. See, too, John Lee, "Trade and Economy in Preindustrial East Asia, c. 1500-c. 1800: East Asia in the Age of Global Integration," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58 (1999): 2-26.

<sup>62</sup> For the organic/mineral categories, see E. A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge, 1988). Wong relies on Wrigley's view that classical economists did not foresee industrialization and economic growth but instead described an agrarian economy bounded by longstanding limitations. See Wrigley, "The Limits to Growth: Malthus and the Classical Economists," in Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter, eds., *Population and Resources in Western Intellectual Traditions* (Cambridge, 1989), 30-48.

<sup>63</sup> For a fascinating argument based on this point see, Jack Goldstone, "The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, no. 3 (1998): 249-84. Goldstone argues that use of the

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such changes."<sup>64</sup> This does not, however, lead him to any essentializing speculations. Instead, through a discussion of state formation and function he shows how the competing European states, with their semi-autonomous social classes and independent church, provided a structure amenable to development and growth. This did not mean that the European state system was superior to the Chinese. The Chinese state's concern for the welfare and moral education of the public, specially the poor, produced social policies that European states could not even imagine until very recently. Since at least 1100, China had been ruled by a bureaucracy "according to rules and regulations created by a policy-making process that limited the arbitrary actions of the ruler."<sup>65</sup> And the Chinese state's ability to raise taxes, albeit using very different principles, would have been the envy of any European monarch who had been aware of it. The fact that they were not aware of it helps demonstrate Wong's point that Europe and China developed politically along separate courses until the nineteenth century. Unlike Frank, who sees everything linked in one way or another within the world system of exchange, Wong accepts the relative autonomy of the state as well as the ability of those conducting public affairs to make creative decisions.

Pomeranz mounts an even more detailed and complete argument that, prior to 1800, European and Chinese political economies did not differ in ways that would obviously lead one to nineteenth-century domination and the other to decay.<sup>66</sup> Wong concentrates on the structural elements within the developing European political economy that permitted it to take advantage of the unanticipated energy breakthrough, Pomeranz provides an explanation of how the features of the Atlantic trading system, as part of a larger world system, made the breakthrough possible. Parts of both China and Europe were experiencing Smithian growth from at least the sixteenth century if not before, but by the century ecological constraints, such as shortages of wood and fiber and declining soil fertility, were pushing both economies to their limits. Traditional practices, such as those followed earlier when Europeans traded silver for Asian porcelain and silk, copper, and gold, could not solve this problem because the foundation of the Eurasian economies was land-based production. A freely functioning market could not solve the problem either, because as populations grew it became increasingly difficult to switch land from food production to industrial products. In any event Pomeranz argues that Asian trade was actually closer to a neoclassical idea of multiple, competing buyers and sellers, especially in grain and cotton, than European trade was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The solution was a new kind of trade network in which non-market factors played a fundamental role. The most important innovation in this process was not new technology or rational markets, according to Pomeranz, but an innovative combination of entrepreneurship and coercion,

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term "early modern," implying a pathway toward modernity, makes it difficult to appreciate the similarities among Eurasian societies in the period 1500-1800 and makes misinterpretation of the unanticipated breakthrough almost inevitable.

<sup>64</sup> Wong, *China Transformed*, 279. Jones argues that one other moment of "intensive" growth that led to a simultaneous growth in population as well as in per capita income took place in Song China, *Growth Recurring*, 73-84.

<sup>65</sup> Wong, *China Transformed*, 79.

<sup>66</sup> Note that Pomeranz is careful not to essentialize "Europe" and "China." Instead, he speaks of specific regions and locations, recognizing the enormous diversity within each concept.

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especially though not exclusively in the Atlantic. Whereas the Qing government did not try to protect the sizable Chinese trading enclaves in East Asia, the Europeans, especially the British, did. Furthermore, the special characteristics of slave economies, in which the slaves produced agricultural products for export but not their own food or clothing, encouraged a complex trading system that permitted the British to escape the approaching Malthusian trap. Essentially, the system traded land-based products, such as sugar and cotton grown in the Caribbean, for manufactured goods produced in England, such as cloth and later iron goods, that used very little land.<sup>67</sup> Pomeranz is not a doomsayer—he does not predict what might have happened had this exchange not eventuated, except to say that Denmark provides a good example of how a labor intensive political economy might have looked. But, like Wong, he does say that when the coal breakthrough occurred, the British in particular were in a position to take maximum advantage of it. The breakthrough itself, Wong and Pomeranz agree, was as much a product of geographical good luck—the proximity of English coal and iron ore deposits, as well as the chemical qualities of some of the coal—as it was anything else. Pomeranz's argument, however, is that when it happened, the industrial revolution completed "abolishing the land constraint" not only in Britain but, in a very short time, throughout most of Eurasia. "Thus a combination of inventiveness, markets, coercion, and fortunate global conjunctures produced a breakthrough in the Atlantic world, while the much earlier spread of what were likely better-functioning markets in east Asia had led instead to an ecological impasse."<sup>68</sup>

Clearly, Pomeranz is a critic of those who posit a special kind of European uniqueness. He does not deny that in some areas, such as in scientific instruments, Europeans had an edge by the eighteenth century. But he makes a persuasive argument that the great breakthrough was not primarily the product of internal European developments, as Landes claims. Pomeranz is also skeptical of those like Frank who are so anxious to counter the tradition of stressing European uniqueness that they overcorrect on the other side. In discussing the role of silver as a commodity, for example, he recognizes the significance of the silver windfall for Europe, but he criticizes Frank's contention that the sole driving force is the Chinese demand for silver. After all, European elites did desire luxury goods such as porcelain and silk, while others sought the copper and gold that China exported to Europe. "[S]urely the growth of European demand," Pomeranz comments, "needs to be *part* of the story."<sup>69</sup>

WONG AND POMERANZ AGREE that the coal revolution was the defining moment of the modern world. Wong sees Europe and China developing in similar ways quite independently, although neither end of the Eurasian continent was necessarily heading toward that breakthrough, whereas Pomeranz finds that the interactions of the Atlantic system made it possible for Britain to

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<sup>67</sup> Of course, the system was much more complex than this simplistic statement suggests, with North America providing foodstuffs, Africa slaves, India cloth and cotton, and so forth.

<sup>68</sup> Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 23. The entire question of consumption has begun to inspire its own literature. See Clunas, "Modernity Global and Local."

<sup>69</sup> Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 191.

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overcome a possible Malthusian trap. What neither author suggests, however, and what the most critical authors fail to even approach, is the nature of the impact of the European domination that the coal breakthrough brought about. One-sided though the Eurocentric approaches may be, by attempting to find the uniqueness of the European experience they implicitly suggest that Europe has left important legacies to our contemporary world. Gress, Lal, and Barzun may or may not have their casual strings correct, but at least they make the warranted assumption that ideas of liberty and individualism are new ingredients in a globalized world that need explaining. It is difficult to see how other widespread contemporary ideas such as equity, which is the basis of the entire genre of human rights concerns, or popular sovereignty, which is the basis of at least the formal structure of a majority of states in today's world can be seen as growing equally out of the traditions of Europe. They are not the ideals of an entirely Smithian world, even if their roots might be found there. Everyone admits that the Europeans exploded into the world over the past few hundred years. Wong and Pomeranz show the key moments in this process were, and at the same time how unique the coal breakthrough really was. But they do not tell us what happened next: how that sudden European incursion into a Smithian world created an entirely new worldwide situation and what the elements of that situation are. This is the next step that the world historians need to take. They have provided powerful arguments that are pushing the "European miracle" up to about 1800. It remains to be seen whether they will be able to use their relatively balanced methods of reciprocal comparison to assess the significance of the European domination they all agree occurred.<sup>70</sup>

Macrohistory is not a new field, but it is a maturing one. In part because of the division of the world into two camps after World War II, some of the best work on the fates of human societies during the last generation has taken place on a terrain occupied by those who emphasize the uniqueness of the West and those who criticize them. Even the best examples of this recent work, such as the engaged studies of Landes and Frank, ask us to choose – one or the other but not both. The practitioners of the new world history do not ask us to make that choice. They are moving away from Eurocentric versus anti-Eurocentric polemicizing into a style of work in which encounters, system-neutral analysis, and gendered interpretations emphasize the contingent nature of historical events. The suppleness of their intercultural understanding seems more appropriate for a globalized world than the harsher judgements of the earlier approaches.

Macrohistorical works will never supplant the narrower monographic studies that

constitute the solid basis of the academic historical profession. Indeed, they cannot because without monographic studies there are no resources for metahistorical works that cut across languages, cultures, and centuries. But for those with an interest in the fates of human societies, for those who have to teach the wide-ranging courses that are common in universities and

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<sup>70</sup> For a sophisticated start on this project, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2000). "European thought is both indispensable and inadequate," Chakrabarty argues. "[P]rovincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody's heritage and which affects us all – may be renewed from and for the margins"; p. 16.

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secondary schools, and for those with a taste for scale, the new style of world history is beginning to provide a balanced alternative to the "us or them" approach.

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