

The Origins of the Modern World

A Global and Ecological Narrative

ROBERT B. MARKS

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Preface

September 11, 2001. Although the details of how and why nineteen hijackers of four U.S. domestic flights slammed them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. may never be known, the events raise profound issues about the nature of the world we live in. Americans are searching not just for answers to who is responsible for killing nearly 3,000 people, but for how and why they could hate the United States that much. Osama bin Laden, leader of al Qaeda, the organization that stands accused of masterminding and financing that acts, has evinced a deep hatred for the modern world and a desire to resurrect a Muslim empire reminiscent of its eighth-century glory.

Is this the beginning of the “clash of civilizations” that some have been predicting? As this book will make clear, I think not. The reason is that the basic elements of the modern world are not “civilizations,” but rather nation-states and global capitalism. To be sure, the modern West (the United States included) has benefited immensely from a world organized along the lines of nation-state and industrial capitalism, while others (including many in the Islamic world) have not. How and why that particular way of organizing the world came to be is the subject of this book, although it was written before the events of September 11. Thus, I do not specifically address the attacks in the body of the text, but I do believe my arguments are highly relevant to helping us place those events into a broader historical context. At the end of the conclusion I have appended an afterword where I reflect more on the events of September 11 and how the material in this book helps to frame an interpretation of what they might mean.

Like the modern world, this book has its origins. At the 1998 Pacific Centuries conference at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, sev-

eral of us were discussing over lunch issues that had been raised at the various panels. Among those at the table were Andre Gunder Frank and Kenneth Pomeranz, two scholars whose new work has profoundly influenced me and this book. Gunder lamented the fact that it often takes decades for the results of new research to get transmitted from scholars to students, and thought that it would be a great idea for someone to make these new ideas accessible to a wider audience, college students and the educated public alike. I concurred, but quickly put the project out of mind because I already had another research project on my agenda.

However, I also teach an introduction to world history with colleagues at Whittier College, and we have been working to incorporate this new scholarship into our course. When my sabbatical began in the summer of 2000, I was still thinking about the questions we had faced in teaching that course and decided to spend a few months composing a brief narrative of the origins of the modern world for use in that class. Those months became a year, and that project became this book.

When college students take an introductory U.S. or European history course, most already know the broad outlines of the story. Not so with students taking an introduction to modern world history. If they come to class with any background knowledge at all about "the history of the world," it usually includes a variant of what Europeans had done in the past five hundred years. The problem is that the result of work by scholars like Frank and Pomeranz demands a wholly new approach—a new narrative—one that is not centered on Europeans. Additionally, I have found in over two decades of teaching Asian history that it is a good idea to provide students with a brief overview in the first two weeks of class so they have a framework within which to place all the new material they are learning. That is what I thought our students in world history needed too, and that is what I started to write: a narrative of the making of the modern world incorporating the results of new (and somewhat iconoclastic) scholarship.

The resulting book is brief. But that does not mean that it is easy or simplistic. In fact, this book covers some very contested terrain: virtually every sentence here can be debated (and probably will be). I have no intention of providing a "balanced" story, one that spends an equal amount of time (or ink) on anything and everything. Rather, this book offers to readers the narrative of the origins of the modern world that I have put together for myself and that I present to my students.

That does not mean that I do not owe immense debts of gratitude to other people from whom I have learned, and continue to learn. I have already men-

tioned Gunder Frank and Ken Pomeranz; without their scholarship, this book would be inconceivable. Gunder also criticized the last draft, but ("alas," he might exclaim) production of the book had progressed too far for me to do much with his comments. Team-teaching with José Orozco led us to explore the connections between Latin America and Asia by following the silver trail. My colleague Dick Archer read and critiqued the entire manuscript, for which I am grateful, as did two anonymous readers for Rowman & Littlefield. Mark Selden, editor for the World Social Change series at Rowman & Littlefield, offered encouragement, advice, and criticism; he read the manuscript more than once. Steve Davidson too graciously read and commented on an earlier draft. Students in my fall 2001 capstone seminar (Sarah Alvarado, Roy Contreras, Jhalister Corona, Daniel Diaz, Aaron Ellis, Josh Fields, Andres Gorbea, Evan Gramly, Rocky Holman, and Andrea Ybarra) read and critiqued the manuscript and developed materials that will become the basis for Web-based learning aids. At the press, executive editor Susan McEachern not only read and critiqued the manuscript, but pushed me to deal with details on cover art and layout, and Erin McKindley oversaw copyediting and production. Phil Schwartzberg drew three historical maps, without continually asking me questions like "Where was Samarkand?" Last but certainly not least, Joyce Kaufman offered me companionship and criticism as we both worked on books for Rowman & Littlefield. Time to write the book was made possible by a sabbatical leave from Whittier College and a grant (FB-36592) from the National Endowment for the Humanities; their support is gratefully acknowledged.

My colleagues and students thus offered me helpful comments and suggestions, all of which I take very seriously, much of which I accepted, and some of which actually got incorporated into the final draft. Determined to keep the narrative brief and as sharply drawn as possible, I resisted the temptations to explore additional topics, or to address the ones I do consider in greater detail. Because this book draws so heavily on the ideas of others, I cannot absolve them of all responsibility for the interpretation of the origins of the modern world history offered here. However, the synthesis of others' work into the narrative told here is mine, and for that I alone am responsible.

INTRODUCTION



The Rise of the West?

July 20–22, 2001; Genoa, Italy. Leaders of the major industrial countries in the world—known as the Group of Seven, or G7—met in July 2001 in this Mediterranean seaport city to discuss the world economy. The G7 stated that “sustained economic growth worldwide requires a renewed commitment to [global] free trade. . . . Opening markets globally and strengthening the World Trade Organization (WTO) as the bedrock of multilateral trading is . . . an economic imperative.”¹ The G7 meeting, like the 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle, attracted thousands of people opposed to both the meeting and its objectives. Indeed, during those three days in July, 100,000 protestors against “globalization” came to Genoa, most to hold counter-meetings to point out inequities in the global economy, but thousands also marched, considerable numbers trashed stores and sparred with police, hundreds were arrested, and one was killed.

We start this brief history of the origins of the modern world with a recent event because the G7 meetings—which have been going on for the past twenty-five years and will continue into the foreseeable future—reveal much about the nature of the world we live in and raise some very interesting historical questions about how our globalized world came to be the way it is. Let us take first the description of the G7 as “major industrialized countries.” This statement points to the fact that the world today is composed of sovereign political units called “countries,” and that those countries are industrialized. Indeed, the G7 countries account for two-thirds of all the world’s economic output and wealth. By implication, the rest of the world is poorer and less, if at all, industrialized. The world is thus divided between those parts that are industrialized and those that are not or are trying to become industrialized.

When placed in a broad historical context, this G7 fact is exceptionally

interesting and raises profound questions. Just 200 years ago, two other countries—India and China—accounted for two-thirds of the world's economic output, and they are not European. In the space of just 200 years, the world has seen a great reversal of fortune: where once Asians held most of the economic cards, today it is primarily Western countries and Japan. The first question centers around how this happened. How did industry and European-style countries called nation-states—rather than highly developed agrarian empires like China and India—come to define our world?

Second, among the issues on the G7 agenda was what, if anything, to do about the growing gap between the richest and the poorest parts of the world, the latter located mostly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Like industry, nation-states, and Western dominance, this gap, too, has appeared within the past 200 years. How and why large parts of the world and its people have been condemned to increasing poverty is also an important question addressed here, as is the question of whether some parts of the world got rich only at the expense of others becoming poorer.

Third, industry has conferred great power on the G7 countries, so great that their leaders can meet to set the rules for how the world economy works. Of course, this is one of the prime causes of the protests against the G7, the WTO, and other financial institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund [IMF]). Protestors are in effect asking, "How come you get to decide the rules?" and demanding that other global arrangements be made.² Nonetheless, the leaders of the industrial world do make the rules, a power that is exercised in part to ensure the continuing wealth and power of the industrialized world. Although this power is exercised mostly through global trade and financial institutions such as the WTO and the IMF, it is backed by substantial military power, sometimes wielded unilaterally by G7 nations (such as the United States) but also by alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When placed in a global historical perspective, this power is exceptionally interesting, for Westerners have not had this power for very long.

Thus, to understand our world we have to understand not just how nation-states ("countries" in the G7 statement) and industry came to shape the modern world, but how and why those European ways of organizing the world came to dominate the globe. Explanations abound, but for most of the past two centuries, the predominant explanation in the West, the United States included, has been "the rise of the West." As we will see, recent research has shown that that explanation is no longer persuasive, but because it is probably the one most readers may be familiar with, I will take some time exploring it and pointing out its flaws.

The Rise of the West

The concept of the rise of the West provides both a rationale and a storyline that purports to explain not just the modern world, but why it is defined by primarily European features. The idea behind it is fairly simple and began to emerge shortly after the Spanish conquest of the Americas, during the Italian Renaissance of the sixteenth century. Europeans were quite astounded to see hundreds of Spanish conquistadors vanquish huge and very wealthy American civilizations, in particular the Aztecs and the Incas. Being ignorant of the germ theory of diseases and the cause of the "great dying" in Mexico, where nearly 90 percent of the central Mexican population of thirty million succumbed to European diseases such as smallpox and influenza, Europeans first attributed their superiority to their Christian religion. Later, during the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they attributed their superiority to a Greek heritage of secular, rationalistic, and scientific thought.

In the late 1700s this storyline continues, both the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution of 1789 reinforced the awareness in European minds not just that Europeans were different from the rest of the world, but also that Europeans were "progressing" rapidly while the rest of the world appeared to be stagnating, that Europeans were somehow exceptional—better, even—than the rest. Nineteenth-century European historians, impressed with what many considered to be the universal appeal of the ideals of the French Revolution—*égalité, liberté, fraternité* (equality, liberty, and brotherhood)—looked back to the ancient Greeks, their institutions of democracy and republics, and their rationalistic bent toward understanding the natural world in scientific, not religious, terms. In this early telling of the "rise of the West," the story is somewhat like a relay race, with the ideas of democracy that arose in Greece passed off to the Romans, who dropped the baton (the fall of the Roman Empire followed by the so-called Dark Ages), but Christianity was then on the scene to pick it up and run with it, creating a distinctive European culture during feudal times. The ancient Greek heritage was rediscovered in the Renaissance ("renewal"), elaborated during the Enlightenment, and ultimately fulfilled in the French and American revolutions and "the rise of the West."

If the West was "rising" during the eighteenth century, during the nineteenth its ascent was completed. As the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was just beginning, the classical British political economists—Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and David Ricardo—developed another strand to be woven into the story of the rise of the West: the ideas of capitalist development as "progress," the West as "progressive," and Asia (and by

implication, Africa and Latin America, too) as “backward” and “despotic.” To be sure, contrasts between the virtues of the West and the flaws of the East—the Orient—may have dated back to the Greeks, but eighteenth-century Europeans had been impressed with the wealth and governance of Asian countries, especially China. As the pace of economic change accelerated in nineteenth-century Europe, while much of Asia was in internal decline, analysts like Smith and Malthus began to revert to a view of the West as dynamic, forward looking, progressive, and free, and Asia as stagnating, backward, and despotic.

Even Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the most powerful critics of the new capitalist world order, believed that nineteenth-century European expansionism was bringing “progress” to the rest of the world. As they wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848:

The [European] bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most backward, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the underdeveloped nations' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world in its own image.¹

Of more importance for Western conceptualizations of their own history, though, has been Max Weber, a German sociologist who wrote around the turn of the twentieth century. Where Weber shared with Marx a fascination with explaining how and why capitalism developed in Europe—and only Europe—Weber parted with Marx in his explanation. Instead of focusing as Marx had on “materialist” explanations, Weber looked to those aspects of Western values and culture, in particular the rationalism and work ethic that he associated with Protestantism, as being crucial to the rise of capitalism. But rather than basing his ideas about the rise of the West solely on studies of the West, Weber actually investigated Chinese and Indian societies, compared them with Europe, and concluded that those two societies at least, and by implication all other non-European societies, lacked the cultural values necessary for capitalism. Nonetheless, they too could “modernize,” Weber thought, but only by going through a painful process of cultural change, getting rid of their cultural “obstacles” to capitalist development.

“The Gap” and Its Explanations

Since the mid-nineteenth century, then, European social theorists have been aware of a growing gap between the industrialized countries and the rest of

the world. Believing both that western Europeans—and they alone—had unlocked the secret of modernization,⁴ and that others too could learn, twentieth-century followers of Smith, Marx, and Weber have propounded a “diffusionist” theory of how world history has unfolded. Europeans found out how to get rich first by industrializing, Japan and a few other places learned from the Europeans and have caught up, and eventually every other place on the globe will too, as long as they identify and eliminate the local institutions and cultural traits that prevent them from becoming modern.

Viewed now from the beginning of the twenty-first century, these ideas appear to be quite unconvincing, particularly in light of the fact that the gap between the wealthiest and poorest parts of the world continues to grow, not shrink, as “diffusionist” theory would have us believe. However, the fact that these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European theorists—Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, Marx, and Weber—all accepted the idea of European exceptionalism and sought, as one of their primary intellectual goals, to explain it, is important. These men were the founders of modern social science theory, and in the twentieth century virtually all of the social sciences, in particular sociology and economics, have incorporated the idea of European exceptionalism into their basic assumptions. As historians sought to become more “scientific” in the twentieth century by adopting and adapting the insights of this social science to historical inquiry, they too became captivated by the search for the origins and causes of European exceptionalism. But as we will see, Europeans were not exceptional, and one of the most important points about the history of the world until about 1800 is the general comparability of Asia with Europe. Nevertheless, the search for answers to “why” Europeans were perceived as exceptional and hence ultimately superior continues among historians today, even though many now think it is the wrong question to be asking.

In the post-World War II era, this search has produced an impressive body of scholarship looking for the key to what one economic historian has called “the European miracle.” These scholars begin with what they see as the fact of the rise of the West, but propose differing solutions to the questions of when and why the “rise” or the “miracle” began. The question of “when” will be discussed first, since in many ways it is relevant to considerations of “why.”

Adam Smith saw 1492 and 1498 (the voyages of Columbus to the Americas and of Vasco da Gama around Africa to India respectively) as the most significant events in history. As Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776): “The discovery of America, and that of the passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest events recorded in the history of mankind.” Marx, too, saw these two dates as crucial, as have several twentieth-century

scholars working in a Marxist tradition who have pointed to the subsequent European colonialism, slavery, and exploitation of colonies in the Americas and Asia as the primary explanations for the rise of the West. Many non-Marxists have contested the idea that Europe's rise was a result of the exploitation of others,⁶ an inconvenient and awkward fact if true, and instead have turned their attention to those aspects of European culture that predate European colonialism, beginning with the Spanish conquest of the New World.

To avoid the possible embarrassment of attributing the rise of the West to its colonial ventures, and not its inherent virtues, much post-World War II scholarship on the origins of the rise of the West has looked farther back in European history, in some cases as far back as the Middle Ages in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or yet earlier to the ancient Greeks, for factors that could only be attributed to Europe's own exceptional development. Factors that have been identified, in addition to the cultural values discussed by Weber, include environmental ones (temperate climates promote hard work, or poor soils stimulate agricultural innovation), technological ones (plows, stirrups, or reading glasses), political-military ones (feudalism leading to absolute monarchs and then nation-states and the evolving technology of war), demographic ones (small families promote capital accumulation), and in the minds of several historians, combinations of all or some of these.⁷

The implication of this body of scholarship is that Europe possessed some unique characteristics that allowed it—and only it—to modernize first, and hence gave it the moral authority and the power to diffuse “modernity” around the globe where cultural, political, or economic “obstacles” prevented modern development from occurring indigenously. Hence, this storyline purports to explain, justify, and defend the rise of the West to global dominance. Just how wrongheaded this theory is will become clearer as the industrial superiority of much of Asia to that of Europe, at least prior to about 1750, is revealed in the course of this book.

Before turning to the question of why all this matters, let me first say a few words about geographic units used in this book. In the paragraph above, I mentioned a comparison between “Asia” and “Europe,” implying both that these units are comparable, and that they have some kind of unity that distinguishes each one from the other. That assumption is problematic, mostly for Asia, because of the immense variety of societies it includes, ranging from China and Japan in East Asia, through the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, to India in the south, and the Muslim West Asia (Middle East). Even Europe has little coherence if it is taken to include everything from Portugal to Russia. Moreover, until very late in our story (at least until 1850 or so), Asia contained about two-thirds of the world's population and was larger than Europe in virtually every re-

spect. To that extent, Europe and Asia were not comparable. Furthermore, one of the most important points I make in this book is that understanding the origins of the modern world requires taking a global view, first of how the vast continent of Eurasia, coupled with Africa, interrelated, and then after 1500, how the New World fit into the story. Finally, even the geographic terms “China,” “India,” and “England” or “France” conceal much variation within their borders—different peoples, many languages or dialects, and vast differences in wealth and power. Nevertheless, I will use these geographic terms to begin locating the story, but readers should be aware that generalizations based on large geographic units will not be true at all times and places within the places named, and that in reality what was truly comparable occurred in *parts* of China, *parts* of England or the Netherlands, and *parts* of India.

Readers may be wondering why the issue of the rise of the West matters. Indeed, why even study history? The brief response is because our understandings of the past—who we are, where we came from, why we are here—inform our definitions of who we are in the present and have real implications and applicability for actions taken by us or in our name to shape the future. The ideas developed by the story of the rise of the West to explain the nature of the world we live in, especially the values of marketplace capitalism and democratic institutions, are thought to have originated uniquely within Western civilization, yet to have universal applicability—to be “good,” not just for the West, but for everybody. Following that assumption, the solution to virtually all problems in the world today, at least according to U.S. and European political leaders (e.g., the G7), is the adoption of free markets.⁸ Thus, to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to the communist leaders of China, to the leaders of Mexico, Nigeria, and Indonesia, Western leaders have said that the answer to any and all problems they face is: “More democracy and free markets.” The idea is that the institutions and values that supposedly propelled the rise of the West are universal, and can—indeed, must—be adopted throughout the world. That is a political agenda.

But what if this way of looking at the making of the modern world—the rise of the West and the spread of its system on the basis of its supposed cultural superiority to the rest of the world—is wrong? That is the possibility raised by a new body of scholarship, especially over the past twenty years.

No longer do all historians picture the world as merely a continuation of universal and necessary trends that began centuries ago in Europe. What many are seeing instead is a world in which population, industry, and agricultural productivity were centered in Asia until 1750 or 1800. The European world of industrial capitalism and nation-states is thus both quite recent and a reversal—for how long, though, remains the big question—of long-standing

historical trends favoring Asia. Europeans may have painted a picture of the rise of the West over this original one, but the patterns of Asian strength and economic vitality are beginning to show through once again. Artists call this concept of one painting showing through an original painting or parts of it *pentimento*. As this book intends to show, the more we look at the world and its past through a new light, the pictures painted in our minds by the rise of the West will reveal another, and rather different pattern, underlying. To see it, though, we will have to begin shedding our Eurocentric perspectives.⁹

Eurocentrism

One critic has said that the idea that “the West has some unique historical advantage, some special quality of race or culture or environment or mind or spirit, which gave this human community a permanent superiority over all other communities” is a myth—the myth of Eurocentrism.¹⁰ Another has seen Eurocentrism as an ideology, or a distortion of the truth, used by the West to mask its global dominance,¹¹ and still another deems it a “theoretical model,” one explanation among several for how the world works.¹² In this section, we will examine two aspects of what critics call Eurocentrism: first, what it is; and second, the extent to which it can be seen as wrong, a myth, an ideology, a theory, or a master narrative.

The essence of Eurocentrism, according to the critics, is not merely that it views history from a European point of view (the “centrism” part)—it is not just one of many ethnocentric views of the world. A merely ethnocentric perspective recognizes that there are many different peoples and cultures in the world, but that mine is better *because* it arises from my people and culture. They are mine, better, and not yours. Eurocentrism also emphasizes the superiority of Western culture—all that is good, progressive, and innovative starts only in Europe—but it also sees that package as having universal applicability: it is not peculiar and limited to Europe, but has spread to encompass the globe by the twentieth century.

Going a bit deeper, critics say, Eurocentric views of the world see Europe as being the only active shaper of world history, its “fountainhead” if you will. Europe acts; the rest of the world responds. Europe has “agency”; the rest of the world is passive. Europe makes history; the rest of the world has none until it is brought into contact with Europe. Europe is the center; the rest of the world is its periphery. Europeans alone are capable of initiating change or modernization; the rest of the world is not.

On a deeper level yet, according to critics, Eurocentrism is not just a belief in the past or present superiority of Europe, but is “a matter of . . . scholar-

ship”¹³ (i.e., of established “fact”). It is not a “bias,” but a way of establishing what is true and what is false. To that extent, Eurocentrism is a way of knowing that establishes the criteria for what its practitioners deem to be “the facts.” It is thus a *paradigm*, a set of assumptions about how the world works, that generates questions that can then be answered by ferreting out “the facts.”¹⁴

Finally, Eurocentric ideas about the world and how it came to be the way it is are deeply held by Americans. Indeed, American history is often presented as the pinnacle, the purest and best expression, of Western civilization. European and even world history are most often presented from a Eurocentric point of view, whether or not students or faculty recognize it. Mostly, it is assumed to be “true.” The situation is like that faced by Keanu Reeves in the movie *The Matrix*, or Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show*. Those on the inside really do not have an independent way of knowing whether they are inside a matrix or an encapsulated TV stage unless they can get a look at it from the outside. Collecting more facts would not suffice, since all the facts on the inside tend to confirm the reality, the truth, of the matrix one is in. Some facts that are collected might not fit, but mostly those are simply discarded or ignored as being anomalous—accidents, if you will. The same is true of Eurocentrism. If Eurocentric ideas, if the rise of the West, are wrong, how would we know it? The way to know is by getting outside of that way of explaining how the world came to be the way it is and thinking about other ways of understanding the big changes that have shaped our world.

Readers may sense a paradox here. On the one hand, I started by pointing out that key features of the modern world are European in origin, and that I think an historical approach can explain how and why industry, the nation-state, and the gap between the wealthy and the poor define our world. On the other hand, I have just rejected the usual Eurocentric explanations of the origins of the modern world. How can there be a non-Eurocentric explanation of a world that has European features? In short, we can do that by broadening the storyline to include parts of the world that have thus far been excluded or overlooked—we can begin and end the story elsewhere.¹⁵ When we do that, we will see that only a new, global storyline—one not centered on Europe—will suffice to explain the origins of the modern world.

Stories and Historical Narratives

For historians, constructing a narrative—a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end—is central to how we know what we know, how we determine what is true about the past.¹⁶ The rise of the West is a story—to be sure, a story

at the core of Eurocentrism—that provides the criteria for selecting what is and what is not relevant to that story. But because the rise of the West informs all the other historical scholarship mentioned above, it is more than just another story or narrative; it is a “master narrative,” “a grand schema for organizing the interpretation and writing of history,” “sweeping stories about origins,” as historians Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob put it.¹⁷

So, the only way to determine if the rise of the West is wrong is to construct an alternative narrative of how the world came to be the way it is: we have to get outside of the rise-of-the-West matrix. Doing so will accomplish three things. First, it will provide an independent way to tell which parts, if any, of the rise-of-the-West paradigm can be kept and which need to be rejected. Second, it will help readers to critically examine their own assumptions about how the world works. And third, it will raise the more general issue of how we know what we know about the world and its history. That is the task of this brief history. In the remainder of this introduction, I want to sketch out the elements of that alternative narrative.

I need first to introduce three additional concepts: those of historical contingency, of accident, and of conjuncture. We start with the idea of *contingency*. One very powerful implication of the storyline of the rise of the West, though it is seldom made explicit, is that the way the world turned out was the only way possible. Because of the historical advantages enjoyed by Europeans, possibly since the fall of the Roman Empire or even as far back as the Greeks or to European genetics, this interpretation implies that the rise of the West was *inevitable*. It might have taken some twists and turns, had some fits and starts, but sooner or later the West would rise above all other parts of the world.

Although we will also have to deal with the political, economic, and military dominance of Europe and its offshoots (e.g., the United States) for the past 200 years, there is no reason to think that that dominance was inevitable, or for that matter, that its dominance will continue. Indeed, it appears inevitable only because that storyline was centered on Europe. But once a broader, global perspective is adopted, the dominance of the West not only happens later in time, probably as late as 1750–1800 and perhaps not until the early nineteenth century, but it also becomes clearer that it was *contingent* on other developments that happened independently elsewhere in the world.

Most important, the economic engine driving global trade—and with it exchanges of ideas, new food crops, as well as manufactured goods—was in Asia. Probably as early as 1000 c.e., China’s economic and population growth stimulated the entire Eurasian continent; another surge came after about 1400 and lasted until 1800 or so. Asia was the source of a huge demand for silver to keep the economies of China and India growing and also the world’s

greatest source of manufactured goods (especially textiles and porcelain) and spices. Also very significant in our narrative will be the beginning of Islam and the expansion, from the seventh to the seventeenth centuries, of Islamic empires westward into the Mediterranean Sea and eastward into the Indian Ocean as far as Indonesia. Where Asia attracted the attention and interest of traders from all over Eurasia, the Islamic empire blocked direct European access to the riches of Asia, stimulating a desire among Europeans to find new sea routes to the Indian Ocean and China.

Even Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas and Vasco da Gama’s sailing around Africa to get to the Indian Ocean would not have done much for European fortunes had they not found both vast quantities of silver in the New World with which to buy Asian goods and a supply of African slaves to work New World plantations after European diseases killed off most of the Native American population. As we will see, the creation of the institutions and sources of wealth and power in a few advanced parts of Europe, enabling these areas to establish dominance over the rest of the world, was *contingent* upon these, and other, developments.

As late as 1750, as parts of Europe approached the levels of development reached in key areas of Asia, all of these most developed parts of Eurasia—Europe as well as Asia—began butting up against environmental limits to further growth. Except in England, where easily accessible coal deposits enabled the British to escape from these constraints by industrialization based on the new sources of steam power. In the early 1800s this new power source was put to military use, and then—and only then—did the scale tip against Asians and did Europeans, led first by the British, move toward establishing clear global dominance. The point is that the rise of the West was not inevitable, but was highly contingent. The world we live in might have been different; there is nothing in the past—unless you adopt the rise-of-the-West construct—that indicates that the world had to become one dominated by Western institutions.

Moreover, if the rise of the West were not inevitable but instead contingent, that would mean that the future too is contingent, and that is why it matters what our view of the past is. If nothing anybody could have done would have changed the outcome of history, then nothing we can do *now* can shape our future: we are trapped in a further elaboration and extension of that which exists in the present, unless some huge accident of history pushes us in a different direction. On the one hand, if history—and our view of it—is contingent, then the actions that we take in the here and now do indeed have the possibility of changing the world. We are not trapped, but rather we (and I take that to mean all the peoples in the world, not just Americans or those in the West) can have agency. If the past could have been different, then so

too can the future. Being “contingent,” on the other hand, does not mean that European dominance of the world for the past 200 years was an accident, for there were causes for that development, as this book will make clear.¹⁸

That does not mean that historical *accidents* do not happen, for they do. Let me give two examples that will be discussed later in the book. In agricultural societies, which is what most of the world was until very recently, climate changes could have a major impact on the size of the harvest, not just in one year but over decades. More favorable conditions could produce larger harvests, lowering the price of food for everyone and stimulating the growth of the economy. Poor conditions, such as happened in large parts of the world during the seventeenth-century “Little Ice Age,” could put whole economies under severe pressure. Although climate changes do indeed have causes, from the point of human history, they are accidents in the dual sense of being unpredictable and beyond human control.

Another “accident” is important to the story of coal and its relationship to industrialization. Coal deposits were laid down hundreds of millions of years ago, and where they were in terms of where people lived is purely accidental. Some coal deposits turned out to be near to where people both needed and knew how to use them, and some were far away and hence unusable. Neither the Dutch nor the Chinese, for example, both of whom had the ability and the need to develop a coal industry to supply energy to sustain their economic growth, had coal deposits near the areas that needed them. This was one reason that their economic growth in the eighteenth century slowed while that of Britain, which just happened to be sitting on huge, close, easily worked coal deposits, accelerated. The distribution of coal deposits thus is accidental as far as human history is concerned, but it certainly had a dramatic impact on which countries industrialized and which did not.

Next is the idea of “*conjuncture*.” A conjuncture happens when several otherwise independent developments come together in ways that interact with one another, creating a unique historical moment. For our purposes, one way to think about this is to consider the world having had several regions that were more or less independent of one another, thus having their own histories. In China, for example, the decision in the early 1400s by the government to use silver as the basis for their monetary system arose out of circumstances particular to Chinese history. But this Chinese decision had global impact in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Europeans discovered both huge supplies of silver in the New World and an even larger Chinese demand for it. As a result, silver flowed into China (and India), and Asian silks, spices, and porcelains flowed into Europe and the New World, inaugurating the first age of globalization. That was a conjuncture: things hap-

pening in different parts of the world for reasons having to do with local circumstances that then became globally important.

Conjunctures can also occur within a given region when several otherwise independent developments reach critical points and interact with one another. For instance, the development of nation-states as the dominant form of political organization in Europe happened for reasons quite independent of those leading to industrialization. Nonetheless, when the two converged in the nineteenth century—came together to produce a conjuncture—a very powerful global force developed, particularly when the two provided the basis for military preeminence.

The attention we give to contingency, accident, and conjuncture means that our explanation of major developments in the making of the modern world will involve several causes, not just one. Monocausal explanations are too simple to take account of the complexity of people, societies, and historical change. We should thus not look for “the” cause of the Industrial Revolution, for it will not be there. Instead, we will find a complex of factors that go a long way toward explaining the Industrial Revolution. I say “a long way” because we have to leave open the possibility that as we learn more or as our perspective changes, we might see the shortcomings of the explanation offered here.

So, the narrative in this book about how the modern world came to be—the world of industrial capitalism, a system of nation-states and interstate wars, and a growing gap between the richest and the poorest in our world—will be one that has contingency, accidents, and conjunctures. The world could have been a very different place. Until about 200 years ago, the most successful way people found to organize themselves and to promote the growth of their numbers was in large land-based empires in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas. But if not for a series of contingencies, accidents, and conjunctures, we might still be living in a world of agrarian empires.

Besides a plot, or a storyline, though, a narrative has a beginning, a middle, and an end, the choices of which significantly affect the story that is told. We have chosen to begin our story with how the modern world came to be around 1400, and we will end it in 1900. The reason for beginning around 1400 is that it predates the circumnavigation of the globe in the mid-1500s and hence allows us to examine the world and its dynamics prior to the first time a truly globally connected world became possible. The story ends around 1900 because that is when industrial capitalism and nation-states become fully elaborated on a global scale, which then structured the history of the twentieth century. The middle of the story revolves around the beginning of

the Industrial Revolution in 1750–1800 with an explanation of why the most decisive events happened first in Britain and not elsewhere in the world.

This narrative of world history also strives to be a *non-Eurocentric narrative*, that is, to provide an alternative to the storyline developed around the existing master narrative of the rise of the West. But does it matter? Why should we care about constructing a new, non-Eurocentric narrative of the making of the modern world? That question can be answered on a number of levels. First, the overall story of the rise of the West may be misleading or wrong in fundamental ways, even though parts of it may be correct. For example, one of the most powerful of recent answers to the question of what caused “the European miracle” concerns families and the number of children each family had. The argument goes something like this: After the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century, various economic and environmental pressures prompted European families to marry late, thereby reducing family size. Fewer children meant farming families could begin to accumulate capital, thus sending Europe on its way to an “industrious revolution.” “By delaying marriage,” according to a recent history, “European peasants set a course that separated them from the rest of the world’s inhabitants.”¹⁹

Although it may be true that west European peasants did behave that way, thereby freeing themselves from “instinctive patterns of behavior” (i.e., unregulated childbearing) that supposedly condemned other peoples to overpopulation and poverty, it simply is not true that European peasants were unique in this behavior. A recent work on China shows that rural families there too—and probably for a lot longer—limited family size, although the methods used differed.²⁰ In this instance alone, one prop has been removed from underneath the claim of the uniqueness of Europeans and the reasons for their “rise.” Indeed, scholars recently have shown that virtually every factor that its proponents have identified with the “European miracle” can be found in other parts of the world,²¹ that is, they were *not* unique to Europe, and hence cannot be invoked to explain the rise of the West.

This narrative also is non-Eurocentric because much of it will be devoted to showing the ways in which other parts of the world were either more advanced or at least equivalent to the most developed parts of Europe, over many centuries, at least until about 1800. This book could not have been written without the vast amount of scholarship published in English on Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which provides the basis for a non-Eurocentric narrative. We are thus fortunate to no longer be dependent for our understanding of the world on the accident that most of what has been written in the past 200 years has been by and about Europeans exploring their own history. As one critic put it, until recently historians have been like the drunk

under the street light trying to find his lost car keys: when asked by a police officer why he was looking there, he said “Because this is where the light is.” Fortunately, scholars recently have begun to shine a lot of light on other parts of the world, so we do not have to fumble around in the dark. We now know enough about the rest of the world to question the master narrative of the rise of the West and to begin constructing another, non-Eurocentric narrative.

If the concept of the rise of the West cannot adequately explain why the West and its institutions became the dominant force in the world over the past 200 years, still less the sustained rise of East Asia over the past four decades,²² then continued use of it does indeed perpetuate a mythology. Some mythologies may well be harmless, at least when they are recognized as such, as when we find Greek or Native American stories about the constellations charming. But when a mythology perpetuates the idea that one group of people is superior, has been for centuries if not millennia, and that all others are thus in various ways inferior, as the ideas inherent in the rise of the West do, then the mythology does violence to others and should be abandoned.

The Elements of a Non-Eurocentric Narrative

First, we have to take the entire world as our unit of analysis, rather than particular countries or even regions (e.g., “Europe,” “East Asia”).²³ We will have the opportunity to discuss developments in particular nations and empires, but always in a global context. For instance, we will see that while the Industrial Revolution started in Britain (and even there, in just a part), it was not because of English pluck, inventiveness, or politics, but rather because of global developments that included India, China, and the New World colonies. In other words, the Industrial Revolution was historically contingent on global forces.

However, taking a global perspective does not imply that the world has always been an interconnected one with a single center from which development and progress spread to less-developed regions. Instead, it makes much more sense to think of the world in 1400 as having been composed of several regional systems, or in other words to have been “polycentric,”²⁴ each with densely populated and industrially advanced cores supplied from their own peripheries. Although trade and cultural exchanges did mean that most of the world regions interacted, or overlapped, on the margins (with the exception of the regional systems in the Americas, which interacted with one another, but not until 1492 with Eurasia-Africa), what happened in these regions was more a result of dynamics specific to that place.

The assumptions that the world in 1400 was polycentric and large parts of Eurasia were broadly comparable in terms of levels of development help us

understand how a much more integrated world came about, and how and why Westerners ultimately came to dominate it. The implication of the Eurocentric model is that development and progress originated in Europe and spread outward from there to encompass the rest of the world: Europeans acted, and the rest of the world was passive or stagnant (until having to react to Europe).²⁵

In this narrative, by contrast, we will see that China and India in particular play significant roles, and that we cannot understand how and why the world came to be the way it is without understanding developments in Asia. We will learn how and why China developed such a huge appetite for silver that it created a global demand, drawing silver from around the world to China and flooding the world market with Chinese manufactures. We will also investigate other commodities and their global supply and demand as well, especially for sugar, slaves (unfortunately human beings were commodities), and cotton textiles, all of which were first produced (and produced more efficiently) in parts of the world other than Europe.

This book will emphasize historical contingencies and conjunctures; China and India; and silver, sugar, slaves, and cotton as we develop a non-Eurocentric picture of how the world came to be the way it is.

Notes

1. "Statement of the Group of Seven Leaders," July 20, 2001 (www.usinfo.state.gov/admin/004/). The G7 countries are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Russia was invited to join the G7 in 1998, so now it is sometimes called the "G8," or the "G7 plus Russia."
2. See the Draft Program of the Genoa Public Forum (www.genoa-g8.org/gpf-eng.htm).
3. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964), 64–65.
4. Philip D. Curtin has sensibly defined "modernization" as the drive to achieve high economic productivity and high consumption levels, regardless of cultural differences. *The World and the West: The European Challenge and the Overseas Response in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110. However, post-World War II "modernization" theorists of the 1950s and 1960s developed a list of what it meant to be "modern" that looked very much like the United States.
5. The term is taken from a book by E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
6. Especially the British economic historian Patrick O'Brien. See his article "European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 35 (1982): 1–18.
7. As examples of these various theses, see David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of*

Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998) and *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Lynn White, Jr., *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Alfred Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West 1500–1800*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

8. As U.S. President George W. Bush put it, international free trade is "a moral imperative" that will "build freedom in the world, progress in our hemisphere and enduring prosperity in the United States." Quoted in the *New York Times*, May 8, 2001, national edition, p. A7.

9. For a review of three recent books on this topic see David D. Buck, "Was It Pluck or Luck that Made the West Grow Rich?" *Journal of World History* (Fall 2000), 413–430.

10. J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographic Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 1.

11. Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), vii.

12. Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 32.

13. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, 8–9.

14. The idea of scientific paradigms and the exploration of the conditions under which they might change was first developed by Thomas Kuhn in a classic work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d enlarged ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Kuhn's primary example was the Copernican revolution, that is, the change from a view of the solar system with the Earth at the center (the view then supported by the Catholic Church), to one with the sun at the center. Although Kuhn discussed "paradigms" and paradigm shifts only with respect to science, the idea has been extended to the way social science works too.

15. Some might object that even this approach remains mired in Eurocentrism because of several unexamined assumptions about the very concepts being used, the objects being identified as in need of explanation, and even history as a method, all of which some claim are implicitly Eurocentric. For example, some have questioned whether states and industrial capitalism are really all that important to be explained, raising instead the possibility that other aspects of our world might be more important to explore, such as our very concepts of self, body, sexuality, place, causation, and story, and they have proposed new "postmodern" methodologies of "deconstruction" or "discourse communities" and their "privileged language," which confers "power," to explore them. This is an extremely complicated topic, but those wishing a sensible introduction might start with Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).

16. Not all stories are "true." Some are invented by the author: they are fiction (like Goldilocks and the Three Bears, or the Harry Potter books). While both history and fiction develop stories, what distinguishes history from fiction is that historical facts are true. Historians have developed sophisticated tools and methods for writing historical narra-

tives (i.e., stories that are "true"). As the following discussion of "master narrative" shows, though, the idea of historical truth is complex and cannot be reduced merely to what is true and false, but must include a consideration of how we determine the criteria for deciding what is true and what is not.

17. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 232.

18. For a succinct discussion of determinism and chance in history, see E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), chap. 4.

19. George Huppert, *After the Black Death: A Social History of Modern Europe*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 13.

20. James Z. Lee and Wang Feng, *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Myths and Chinese Realities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

21. See the works by Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*; Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient*; R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

22. See Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita, and Mark Selden, *The Rise of East Asia: 500, 150, and 50 Year Perspectives* (forthcoming).

23. Fernand Braudel is the most important of recent historians to take a global approach in attempting to explain at least one part of the European miracle, capitalism. His three-volume *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979–84) is an intellectual tour de force in which he argues that while many parts of the world developed highly sophisticated market economies, few came close to developing real capitalism, and it only flourished in Europe. Braudel makes the interesting point that capitalists were not at all interested in free markets and open competition, but instead worked to obtain monopoly concessions from European monarchs: under those peculiar circumstances, capitalism grew rapidly in a European hot house. We will have an opportunity in later chapters to examine Braudel's ideas in more detail.

24. See Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, chap. 1. The question of whether the world was a single, integrated system, and if so, when it first became a single system is an interesting one that will be taken up more in the chapters to follow. Suffice it to say here that there are at least three basic positions. Like Karl Marx and Adam Smith, Immanuel Wallerstein (*The Modern World System*, 3 vols. [New York: Academic Press, 1974–89]), and J. M. Blaut (*The Colonizer's Model of the World*) take 1492–1500 as the time of the creation of a single world system; Janet Abu-Lughod (*Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989]) has put forward strong evidence for a world system ca. 1250–1350, which fell apart prior to the establishment of the modern world system; and Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gillis have argued for a 5,000-year history of a single world system ("The Five Thousand Year World System: An Introduction," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 17, no. 1 [1992]: 1–79).

25. This model, it should be pointed out, is equally shared by Marxists and by champions of capitalism, so I am not proposing to develop a Marxist narrative of the making of

the modern world as an alternative to a celebratory rise of the West that has already been done, several times over. See, for example, Eric J. Hobsbawm, the four-volume set including *The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital*, *The Age of Empire*, and *The Age of Extremes*, all recently republished (New York: Vintage, 1994–96) and the Marxism-influenced work, Wallerstein's *The Modern World System*.