Western Europe as a Region: Shared Features

I now turn from describing and analyzing events to the more challenging task of interpreting and explaining them. Part 3 addresses expansion. The central question is why, from the fifteenth century onward, a few west European states governed so many lands and peoples in so many parts of the world. A secondary question concerns the timing and geography of initiatives. Why was the predominant pattern in phase 1 formal empire in the New World and informal influence in the Old, while phase 3 featured the reverse?

The subject’s vast scope and complexity and the variety of forms expansion took in specific situations pose formidable obstacles to efforts to devise a theory of European imperialism. Such a theory cannot be simultaneously comprehensive in scope, accurate in accounting for all the story’s details, and parsimonious in identifying causal factors. My task is not to account for every event described in the preceding chapters but rather to make sense of broad historical patterns. It is not to search for one factor explaining everything but to identify several factors whose interaction and cumulative impact go a long way toward making broad patterns comprehensible. For reasons given earlier, the search is for conditions conducive to overseas expansion, since sufficient conditions cannot be found.

A theory of European imperialism is strengthened by being neither too restricted nor too broad in temporal and spatial coverage. Is its time span sufficiently broad to account for several centuries of overseas rule? Answering this question entails a search for factors prominent in both expansionist phases, not just one. Is spatial coverage sufficiently comprehensive to account for parallel empire building by several European states? Answering this question entails a search for features widely shared throughout western Europe, not features prominent in a few metropoles but absent in others.

Does the theory avoid covering too long a span? Specifically, does it help explain not only why Europeans formed overseas empires from phase 1 onward but
also why they did not do so in earlier centuries? The best way to answer this question is to focus on early phase 1 to see if changes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries significantly increased European capacity and will for effective aggression overseas. A feature prominent from phase 1 onward but less prominent or absent in preceding centuries is a strong candidate for inclusion as a contributing cause.

Does the theory avoid overshooting the mark spatially? That is, does it explain not only why Europeans founded overseas empires but also why other societies with the maritime capacity to do so did not? The best way to answer this question is to compare western Europe with Arab-speaking peoples and China around the start of phase 1. A feature present in Europe but less prominent or absent in the other two leading candidates for global dominance helps account for the direction world history actually took.

So many factors vie for inclusion as important contributing causes that the search for explanation threatens to become unmanageably complex. If some factors can be discounted for failure to pass the “both phases” temporal comprehensiveness test, then the task becomes more tractable. Expansion occurred in the preindustrial era, during the first Industrial Revolution of iron, textiles, and steam power, and during the second industrial revolution of steel, chemicals, and electricity. Expansion took place when capitalist institutions were in nascent form and when they reached the advanced “finance capital” stage described by Lenin; when Europe produced little for export and when it faced periodic overproduction crises. Colonies were founded during periods of intense intra-European warfare and decades of unusually peaceful interaction; during periods of rising and falling prosperity; before nationalist ideas gained currency and after they became popular; when settlers were integral to the process and when they were absent. It follows that a theory of European imperialism cannot plausibly identify industrialization, advanced capitalism, overproduction, war, a particular phase of the business cycle, populist nationalism, or settler activity as essential causal agents. There are simply too many instances when expansion occurred in the absence of any of them to be conducive to a process lasting five centuries.

By the same logic, variations among metropoles can be used to rule out otherwise plausible causal factors for failing to pass the spatial comprehensiveness test. Empires were constructed by states that were large and small (by European standards), rich and relatively poor, industrialized and agrarian, monarchical and republican, democratic and authoritarian, feudal and postfeudal in social structure. The size, wealth, level of industrial development, type of political system, degree of democratization, or social structure of metropoles cannot be considered necessary, sufficient, or even conducive conditions for European global dominance. There is simply too much variation in each category among states sharing the capacity and
will to establish overseas possessions. To say this is not to deny that each metropole differed in important ways from the others. Chapter 9 discusses these distinctive features, showing how they help account for variations in the extent, duration, and character of various empires.

The search for dissimilarities between phases and among metropoles performs the useful function of decreasing the number of plausible causal factors. The search for widely shared features of west European geography, society, and history takes in a more positive direction. What merits inclusion as a conducive cause? The criterion is how well a given factor fares against the comprehensiveness tests just described. It would be unreasonable to expect any factor to pass all four tests. For example, a feature of European geography shared by all metropoles but not present in other world regions is too comprehensive temporally: it cannot distinguish between Europe pre- and postphase 1 because it remains constant across time. A more reasonable standard is that a causal factor pass at least one and preferably two or three tests, and that each of the four tests be passed by at least one factor. What sets modern western Europe apart, both from its medieval predecessor and from other societies that might have attained world dominance, are the conjuncture and interaction of factors noted in chapters 8-10.

TECHNOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

The one obviously necessary condition for overseas empire is maritime capacity: ships sturdy enough to survive long journeys across rough seas, sailors with sufficient nautical knowledge and skill to reach distant destinations and return home. Western Europe was aided in meeting this condition by being a peninsula surrounded on three sides by ocean waters. For centuries peoples living along its coastlines made a living, directly or indirectly, from the sea. By the fifteenth century information and technologies imported from the Middle East and Asia greatly increased European seafarers' confidence that they could take to the high seas and return safely.

But western Europeans were by no means the only candidates for overseas initiatives early in phase 1. Long-standing traditions of maritime trade evolved in East and Southeast Asia, along the vast arc of the Indian Ocean basin, and in the eastern Mediterranean. Large polities with some state-controlled naval capacity included China and the Ottoman Empire. Numerous smaller polities looked out to sea: city-states along the Arabian peninsula's southern and eastern edges, in Gujarat, on southern India's Malabar and Coromandel coasts, and bordering the Strait of Malacca. The Chinese (Ming) imperial court dramatically demonstrated that it could show the flag far from home by sponsoring seven major expeditions to the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433. Egypt's Mamluk rulers dispatched ships to the Indian Ocean in the early sixteenth century. Arab seafarers traveled widely, founding city-
states along the East African coast. By the eighteenth century Oman, on the Arabian peninsula, claimed quasi-formal authority over several East African ports.

If other polities and peoples had substantial maritime capacity, why did they not compete more effectively with west Europeans for control of the seas? One answer, advanced by Carlo Cipolla, is that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries European societies fronting the Atlantic greatly improved the quality and versatility of their ships. The key innovation was to carry guns and, later, cannon fixed to the deck. Thus equipped, ships could sink enemy vessels at a distance and intimidate rulers of port cities by launching artillery without disembarking. This method of warfare contrasted with one favored in the Mediterranean by the Ottomans as well as by Venice and Genoa: oar-propelled galleys that rammed and boarded enemy vessels. When ships with sails and guns confronted galleys, their speed, mobility, and ability to inflict damage from afar gave them a decisive edge. For long-distance voyages ships designed for the Atlantic’s rough waters held enormous advantages over vessels better suited for the calmer Mediterranean. Polities facing the Atlantic consequently enjoyed a geostrategic lead over Mediterranean counterparts. This helps to explain the northwestward power shift within Europe during phase 1.

Sailing ships with guns could outdo sailing ships without them, as shown in the Portuguese victory over a much larger Egyptian and Gujarati fleet near Diu in 1509. This was a turning point in world history, enabling Portugal’s ships to sail essentially uncontested thereafter throughout the Indian Ocean. Cipolla contends that Europeans enjoyed a comparative advantage in sea warfare long before they developed this advantage on land. Hence they were able to expand overseas while Ottoman armies advanced into southeastern and central Europe from the fifteenth century until well into the seventeenth.

Cipolla’s argument leads to a more general point. From early phase 1 onward west Europeans invested time, ingenuity, and resources to improve the means of transport and warfare. Whether by design or accident, these improvements made it much easier to attain overseas political goals. Progress in transportation was obviously important given the immense distances between a metropole’s capital city and its colonial frontiers. The carrying capacity, speed, and safety of European ships improved dramatically after the fifteenth century, as caravels were succeeded by caracks, galleons, and steamships. Steam-driven railroads permitted access to continental interiors in phase 3, paralleling Europe’s access to continental coastlines in phase 1. Progress on the military front was likewise crucial, with continuous improvements in deployment of soldiers, in battle tactics, and in the distance, accuracy, destructive power, and firing speed of artillery. No comparable technological breakthroughs occurred among non-European peoples to counter the latest round of innovations launched against them.
Further distinguishing Europeans from other societies was the practice of combining improvements in mobility and firepower. The *Diana*, which wreaked so much damage in the first Anglo-Burmese war, was the latest version of the gunned ship that produced victory off Diu three centuries earlier. With the coming of the railroad, troops and repeating rifles could be moved quickly from place to place to quell risings. Unusually mobile firepower encouraged Europeans to take the offensive in land warfare despite their unfamiliarity with the local terrain. Mobility gave them the advantage of tactical surprise, as the sudden arrival of troop or matériel reinforcements upset enemy battle plans. In the Battle of Plassey in 1757, for example, English East India Company troops taken by ship from Madras to Bengal were invisible to enemy forces before they disembarked yet extremely effective once deployed in battle. The ability to move quickly while killing efficiently was a pivotal factor in Europe’s global dominance.

Virtually uncontested control of the high seas offered advantages on land as well. Europeans could select among invasion sites, avoiding hostile places and favoring ones in which resistance was known to be weak or nonexistent.

The vehicle of choice for moving Europeans inland in phase 1, the horse, was ideally suited for conquest in the Americas. Because the animal was not native to that hemisphere, European horsemen enjoyed an immediate and usually decisive advantage over local warriors. The sixteen horses accompanying Cortés’s men to Tenochtitlán in 1519 figured prominently in the victory over the Aztecs. Pizarro’s reliance on horses for overland transport and warfare was vital to his men’s success over vastly larger Inca forces at the Battle of Cajamarca (1533). These creatures were truly “the tanks of the Conquest.” Incan soldiers “thought little of a Spaniard on foot, cumbersome in armor and breathless from the altitude; but the horses filled them with dread.” Europeans did not enjoy a comparable advantage in the Old World, where many other peoples were as skilled as they in horsemanship, in some cases more so. In other Old World areas diseases threatened the animal’s survival. Europeans consequently remained confined to coastal enclaves in many parts of Africa and Asia until the nineteenth century, when the railroad made interior penetration possible. The sequence of reliance on the horse and then on the iron horse explains the New World thrust of phase 1 and the Old World emphasis of phase 3.

The New World’s indigenous peoples were not technically equipped to take to the high seas and discover the Old World. But several Old World societies were equipped to make voyages to the New World and back. Whichever society first made sustained contact with the New World was in a position to gain enormously. Conquest and settlement would be facilitated by the vulnerability of New World peoples to imported diseases. The “horse differential” has been noted. Concentration of mineral wealth in the hands of Aztec and Inca political elites gave outsiders
incentives and opportunities to acquire these resources for themselves through military victory. Maize and potatoes, the New World's fecund and nutritious staple crops, could be literally transplanted to the Old World with positive effects on agricultural yields and population growth. There was of course no guarantee that invaders from the other hemisphere would reap all these potential benefits. But considering the sheer magnitude of possible gains one could conclude that the pioneer would be strengthened politically and economically. Enhanced strength could then influence relations with other societies in its own hemisphere.

West Europeans gained the New World prize, benefiting greatly in phase 1 from the "Columbian exchange" of people, raw materials, diseases, plants, and animals. Exploitation of indigenous and African slave labor gave Europe access to silver, sugar, tobacco, animal hides, and other commodities at high volume and low cost. Bullion from New World mines stimulated monetization of the European economy and growth of its market system. New World bullion stimulated European consumption as well as production by enabling its holders to pay for Asian luxury and consumer goods. Silver from the rich mines of Potosí, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato helped phase 1 Europe make up a perennial trade deficit with Asia. Such economic gains in turn increased Europe's capacity to confront Old World societies that had hitherto been able to hold their own. There is thus a logic to the temporal/spatial sequence outlined in part 2. European states' formal control of much of the Old World might not have occurred had their power not been enhanced by prior formal control of the New.

The logic of this sequence is illustrated and symbolized by the story of quinine (see chapter 5). Europeans could not safely enter the malarial zones of Africa and Asia until they became aware of the beneficial effects of a substance—quinine—derived from bark of a tree whose original habitat is the South American forest. Access to a New World tropical plant became a necessary condition for the penetration, conquest, and administration of Old World tropical interiors.

But why did western Europeans reach the Americas while other Old World maritime powers did not? Here geography figures as a conducive condition. With the possible exception of the Chinese, other societies with seafaring experience plied waters in which additional profits could be gained by expanding and diversifying trade among Old World regions. The Mediterranean was basically a closed sea connecting European, African, and western Asian port cities, which relied in turn on trade with their respective hinterlands. The Red Sea linked the coasts and interiors of Africa and Arabia. The Indian Ocean, in premodern times far more deserving of the "middle of the earth" moniker than the Mediterranean, offered enormous opportunities for gainful trade in ordinary consumer goods as well as luxury items. East Africa, Arabia, the Indian subcontinent, and mainland and insular Southeast Asia could be reached be made by low winds that shift from the Ottoman Arab and indeed, in close waters.

Arabs might have controlled Europe, though there were nor were they aware of the maritime invention. The Arabs across North Africa queros were peripheral. They to keep Europe no resistance to being intercepted the Cape of Good the outset, why the expansion might be far to the Atlantic were and merchants trying so desperately opposite directions.

Peoples of the Pacific—enjoyed the renowned fifteenth-century maps and Vasco da Gama area. A major destination was to reach the Spice
could be reached by short voyages from one port to another. Or connections could be made by longer open-sea voyages relying on well-known, predictable monsoon winds that shifted back and forth depending on the season. Even assuming that Ottoman, Arab, Indian, or Indonesian sailors had the capacity to reach the Americas, they would have had no incentive to do so given the still untapped potential for profit in waters close to home.

Arabs might have sponsored a New World expedition. After all, for centuries they controlled large portions of the Iberian peninsula, the same area from which Europeans set off on epochal exploratory voyages. Arabs in the late medieval period, moreover, were world leaders in the practical arts of seafaring and its more abstract dimensions, notably astronomy and cartography. European rulers and mariners were aware of this. Prince Henry did not hesitate to borrow liberally from the Arabs’ maritime inventory for expeditions he sponsored.

The Arabs, however, relied far more upon land than sea power as they sped across North Africa and into Iberia in the seventh and eighth centuries. The conquerors were peoples of the desert. Their mobility was based on the horse and camel, not the ship. When it came to sea power Iberia and northwest Africa remained peripheral. The Arab and indigenous Berber inhabitants of Morocco, who were able to keep Europeans from conquering the hinterland until the end of phase 3, offered no resistance to European ships sailing past their Atlantic coastline. Had Gil Eannes been intercepted he might never have made it to Cape Bojador, much less back from the cape to Portugal. Prince Henry’s ambitious plans would have been thwarted at the outset, when prospects for success were most tenuous. And Europe’s global expansion might not have occurred. The Arab maritime presence was most impressive far to the east: in the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. These were waters so distant from the New World that efforts to reach, much less cross, the Atlantic were out of the question. Moreover, at the outset of phase 1 Arab sailors and merchants were active in the Indian Ocean, the very region Europeans were trying so desperately to reach. Why should Arabs want to circumvent Africa in the opposite direction, abandoning a profitable trade zone for no known or even imagined destination?

Peoples at Eurasia’s edges—Europeans facing the Atlantic, Chinese facing the Pacific—enjoyed a geographic advantage in access to the New World. But in the fifteenth century it was the Indian Ocean and adjacent Spice Islands, not an unknown hemisphere, that attracted sailors from the two edge societies. Cheng Ho’s and Vasco da Gama’s voyages mark the convergence of East and West on the same area. A major difference, however, was that Europeans had to circumvent a huge land mass to reach the Indian Ocean, whereas it was relatively easy for Chinese ships to reach the Spice Islands, Strait of Malacca, and points further east. For Europeans to
bypass Africa they had to mount a sustained, risky, and expensive exploratory campaign. This entailed ventures financially supported by a government. Wealth seekers needed power holders. Power holders figured they could share in the profits if wealth seekers reached the source of Asia’s fabled riches. An early basis was laid for collaboration across sectoral lines. This gave European overseas operations the empowering combination of institutional backing, strong and complementary motivations for aggression, and tactical flexibility (see chapter 10).

The serious obstacles fifteenth-century Europeans confronted in sailing so far south to travel east gave rise to the idea that their ultimate destination could be reached by sailing west. Once Columbus persuaded public officials in Spain to finance a venture based on this idea, the epic voyage accidentally linking Europe with the New World could take place.

By contrast, the relatively short distance between China and lucrative trade sites to the south and southwest meant that China’s government and private merchants could gain access to these areas without having to cooperate. Indeed, non-collaboration between the two sectors was the norm. The Ming court was sole sponsor of Cheng Ho’s voyages. When in the 1430s imperial officials chose to discontinue these remarkable initiatives, there were no interests outside the court actively pressing it to reconsider what in retrospect was a momentous decision to abandon maritime outreach. Merchants from southern China were active throughout Southeast Asia for centuries. But they operated on their own as participants in what Philip Curtin terms a “trade diaspora.” They neither requested nor received support from an imperial court that, in any case, was located hundreds of miles from their hometowns. If anything, the Ming court tried periodically to restrict Chinese merchants’ international activities. The same geographical factors that encouraged cross-sector alliances in western Europe discouraged them in China.

A similar point applies to Chinese settlers, whose migration from (primarily) southern China to many parts of mainland and insular southeast Asia took place over several centuries. These emigrants’ departure was not approved by court officials in Beijing. Neither did the court take special notice of the economic activities of Chinese communities overseas or try to protect their interests. Rulers in territories in which overseas Chinese communities formed did not perceive them as advance agents of Chinese imperial ambitions. In sharp contrast, migration from Europe was accompanied from the outset by metropolitan claims to possess territory the newcomers occupied. Whether deliberately or unintentionally, European settlers were advance agents of distant polities. Chinese settlers were not.

Migratory movements across Eurasia account in part for the contrasting attitudes of Chinese and European rulers toward overseas initiatives. Nomads originating in Central and Eastern Asia were directly or indirectly responsible for some of the
world's greatest land empires: Mongol, Mughal, and Ottoman. Being close to the nomads' steppes, China has historically confronted military threats from its hinterland, as witness the enormous efforts across two millennia to construct and maintain the Great Wall. The danger of invasion was not hypothetical: Mongol rule lasted almost a century and was not terminated until 1367. It would be quite understandable if Ming officials opposed Cheng Ho's expeditions for diverting resources and attention from defense against highly mobile peoples living to the north and west. By contrast, western Europe was not threatened by nomadic groups after the Arab invasion from Morocco in the eighth century and Magyar advances to the middle Danube in the ninth and tenth. Mongol armies advanced no closer than Hungary, the Ottomans no closer than Vienna's outskirts. Europeans did not construct a Great Wall to repel invaders from the east because they never considered "steppe imperialism" a clear and present danger. Being distant from the Eurasian heartland, west European polities were more readily disposed than the Chinese to face away from it. Rulers could sustain maritime initiatives once threats from quite another direction—Viking raids on coastal zones—had subsided.

Europe and China differed in another respect. The Mongol Empire greatly facilitated overland contact between China, the Middle East, and Europe. The opportunity this offered for long-distance trade was seized by the Venetian merchant family, the Polo's, among others. Europeans knew of "Cathay" through Marco Polo's well-known account of his Asian travels in the late thirteenth century. He conveyed the image of an imperial court with far greater wealth and artistic treasure than any European monarch, or even the pope, possessed. Europeans thus had strong economic incentives to reach Cathay. Ming dynasty rulers had no comparably detailed knowledge of Europe prior to phase 1. Even if they had they would not have learned of a single source of wealth so impressive they would have wanted to dispatch expeditions to acquire it. In Europe wealth was more dispersed, geographically and among sectors and classes, than in China. Europe had the will as well as the capacity to reach China. China had the capacity but not the will to reach Europe.

It was much more likely that a European sailing west to reach Cathay would have chanced upon the New World than that a Chinese ship sailing east would have done so. Columbus's route across the Atlantic was less than half the distance of a voyage from East Asia to Central or South America, using the most favorable wind patterns across the Pacific.

In summary, for both technical and geographical reasons sailors from Eurasia's western extremity were more likely than those based elsewhere in the Old World to set up the first two-way ties with the New World. As these ties deepened and broadened they enhanced Europe's wealth and power, strengthening its capacity to take over Old World societies at a later point. Sailors from the Eurasian far west also had
more economic incentive to reach the Indian Ocean and China than mariners from those regions had to reach Europe. The unequal distribution of perceived opportunities for wealth helps explain why westerners sought the East and not the reverse.

**GEOSTRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS**

West European states were surrounded by states with relatively well equipped armies. This made territorial expansion at the expense of neighbors problematic and costly in men and materiel. Advocates of expansion were therefore inclined to look outside the region. Arab and Chinese armies found it easier to extend their political boundaries or conquer and administer neighboring areas because large portions of their borderlands were lightly populated and culturally and politically fragmented. The expansionist impulses of Arab and Chinese rulers could be satisfied close to home without recourse to the sea.

The centuries-long struggle of Iberian Christians to wrest control of the peninsula from Muslims concluded successfully in 1492 with victory over the kingdom of Granada. After that point all of western Europe was ruled by Christians, and it experienced no invasion threat from outside forces. The cultural as well as military foundations of their civilization having been secured at home, the region's rulers were more favorably disposed to sponsor activities far afield. The clearest illustration of this point is the decision by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand to support Columbus's westward voyage to the Indies almost immediately following their armies' victory over Granada. The intimate connection between these two world-historical events is noted in the opening paragraph of Columbus's log:

Most Christian, exalted, excellent, and powerful princes, King and Queen of the Spains and of the islands of the sea, our Sovereigns: It was in the year of 1492 that Your Highnesses concluded the war with the Moors who reigned in Europe. On the second day of January, in the great city of Granada, I saw the royal banners of your Highnesses placed by force of arms on the towers of the Alhambra, which is the fortress of the city. And I saw the Moorish king come to the city gates and kiss the royal hands of your Highnesses, and those of the Prince, my Lord. Afterward, in the same month, based on information that I had given your Highnesses about the land of India and about a Prince who is called the Great Khan, which in our language means "King of Kings," Your Highnesses decided to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the regions of India, to see the Princes there and the peoples and the lands, and to learn of their disposition, and of everything, and the measures which could be taken for their conversion to our Holy Faith.19

In contrast, from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries the Arabs and Chinese periodically experienced the threat—and at times the reality—of invasion. Mongol armies captured Baghdad, seat of the Abbasid caliphate, and took over
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China. Ottoman Turks subdued Egypt and occupied the Fertile Crescent. The potential of borderlands to pose strategic dangers as well as opportunities partly accounts for Arab and Chinese rulers' disinclination to use their ships for expeditions of conquest. The risk of diverting scarce resources to distant places when the home base was not secure outweighed gains anticipated from overseas ventures.

An Assertive Worldview

Was expansion aided by the way empire builders perceived the world and the place of human beings in it? Were psychological and cultural factors widely shared by Europeans conducive to global dominance? People's worldviews doubtless influence their will to act in specific situations. The will to act is a component of power. And empires are products and expressions of power. But how can one ever know the worldviews or motives of persons separated from us by time, societal setting, and subtle differences in assumptions about reality? From what is known about prominent empire builders one can infer that their motives and their understandings of what they were doing varied greatly. Are generalizations about their states of mind more liable to mislead than enlighten?

If one can identify broad perspectives that underlie and encompass the wide range of motives operating at the personal level, the risks of making unsupportable, overgeneralized claims are reduced. If there is evidence from phases 1 and 3 of worldviews compatible with expansion; if these worldviews were more prevalent in European society during the past five centuries than in premodern times; and if they were more prevalent in Europe than in other societies that might have formed overseas empires but did not, then a causally meaningful cultural factor is at work.

Widely shared among empire builders was the view that life was most meaningful when actively engaged, for the dual purpose of understanding the world and changing it. I term this assertive stance the explore-control-utilize syndrome (see chapter 2). Its first component was exploration: the practice of leaving familiar settings to learn about unfamiliar and often unknown places. In taking this initiative, explorers implicitly affirmed the importance of other places and people. For if there were no reason to fill gaps of knowledge about them there would be no grounds for leaving home. Exploration affirmed the importance of curiosity and the value of satisfying it. Turning the unknown into the better known was for many a desirable goal in its own right. But if curiosity, once satisfied, could be the means to other ends, so much the better.

The second component was control. Empire builders wanted to possess distant places and people. Possession might result from subduing others through force, but it was perceived as more than sheer coercive superiority. It had a legal and normative dimension as well, linked to deeply engrained notions of property. The European
state, which ensured private property rights in its domestic domain, felt itself entitled to exercise collective property rights abroad.

The third component was utilization, the realization of imagined potential. Europeans expressed activism not only by going out to create empires but also by what they did with what they claimed to possess. A recurring pattern was the deliberate, systematic attempt to transform the social structure, economy, culture, and physical environment of other places. These invaders were perpetually restless, dissatisfied with what they found, and anxious to put it to more effective or efficient use. The principal though not exclusive beneficiary of the transformation project was themselves. Cortés’s remark to the first messengers sent by Moctezuma sums up the insatiable appetites impelling so many Europeans in his day and afterward. After being presented fabulous gifts of gold he asked in apparent indignation, “And is this all?”

The forms these multiple transformations took differed in phase 1 and phase 3, if only because industrialization enormously increased Europe’s capacity to alter physical landscapes and social and psychological patterns. But the dream of radical change was there from the early years. Within hours of Columbus’s first landfall in what turned out to be the New World, he mused in his journal about what could be done with the land and people he had just claimed on behalf of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella:

I went this morning, that I might be able to give an account of all to Your Highnesses and also say where a fort could be build. I saw a piece of land, which is formed like an island although it is not one, on which there were six houses, it could be converted into an island in two days, although I do not see that it is necessary to do so, for these people are very unskilled in arms, as Your Highnesses will see from the seven whom I caused to be taken in order to carry them off that they might learn our language and return. However, when Your Highnesses so command, they can all be carried off to Castile or held captive in the island itself, since with fifty men they would be all kept in subjection and forced to do whatever we wished.

Columbus and the millions of Europeans crossing the oceans after him had a profoundly teleological conception of the world. Their task was to bridge the gap between the realities they experienced and their idealized versions of reality by reshaping what they found to become what it could and should be. This perspective is well illustrated in Sir Walter Raleigh’s widely read account of his quest in the jungles of Guiana for the mythical golden city of Manoa (1596). Raleigh spelled out the tempting possibilities if only England possessed the land: “To conclude, Guiana is a country that hath yet her Maydenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought, the
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ace of the earth hath not beene torne, nor the vertue and salt of the soyle spent by
manturace [cultivation], the graves have not beene opened for golde, the mines not
broken with sledge, nor their Images pulde down out of their temples.”

Writing of merchants, whalers, settlers, missionaries, soldiers, and adminis-
trators who came to the Marquesas Islands from the eighteenth century onward,
Greg Dening concludes, “There were very few outsiders who came to [this island
chain] who did not want to remake it.” The same could be said of many other parts
of the world.

Europeans were hardly unique in wanting to control physical and human
environments. What made them distinctive, from phase 1 onward, was their reliance
on exploration to gain political control and then to put available resources to use in
new ways. The cumulative and interactive effects of the syndrome’s three com-
ponents were extraordinarily empowering. The link between exploration and control
was well expressed by the chronicler of Prince Henry’s expeditions, Gomes Eanes de
Zurara, who wrote of captains of caravels sailing for Cape Verde saying, “Great is the
desire of our Senhor the Infante to learn something of the Land of the Negroes,
especially of the Nile; let us then go forth to conquer until we have found the Earthly
Paradise.” A similar link was referred to in phase 3 by the French geographer La
Roncière de Noury: “Providence has dictated to us the obligation to know the world
and to conquer it.” Cecil Rhodes took this self-designated obligation to its logical
conclusion. “Expansion is everything,” said the great imperialist. But then, writes
Hannah Arendt, he “fell into despair, for every night he saw overhead ‘these stars ... these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could.'”

The link between control and utilization was expressed in British colonial
secretary Joseph Chamberlain’s oft-cited reference to the world’s tropical areas as
“undeveloped estates.” Implicit in this phrase is the view that humans enjoy the
privilege but also bear the moral responsibility of turning the potential of their phys-
ical surroundings into something useful to themselves or others. Non-Europeans, in
this view, have abdicated that responsibility. For cons they moved lightly across the
land or squatted upon it, letting its abundant resources lie unused. In striking
contrast—so the argument goes—Europeans have shown the capacity and will to
realize nature’s untapped potential. They therefore have the right to take possession
of land others failed to utilize, transforming it into a productive estate. In Locke-
ian terms, Europeans have progressed far beyond a State of Nature. They are entitled to
take whatever they want from those who remain in that primitive condition or not
far removed from it. In effect, Europeans have use rights to vast portions of the globe.

From phase 1 onward this argument was advanced by settlers to justify seizing
land from indigenous occupants, expelling “useless” non-European peoples, and
forcibly mobilizing their labor. “That which lies common, and hath never beene

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replenished or subdued is free to any that possesse and improve it.”27 These words by the Puritan leader John Winthrop summarized the doctrine of *vacuum domicilium*, according to which undeveloped land occupied by people could be deemed uninhabited, hence rightfully seized. A phase 3 example comes from Sir Charles Eliot, high commissioner for the East African Protectorate (Kenya) from 1901 to 1904. Eliot wrote in 1905, “We must assist Europeans to develop the fine land the Protectorate contains, and must not allow nomadic tribes to monopolize huge areas of which they can make no real use.”28

Does the explore-control-utilize syndrome distinguish phase 1 from prephase 1 Europe? To be sure, there is no precise break in modes of consciousness from one century to another, and thinking of 1415 or any other date as a decisive turning point in all aspects of European life, especially subjective ones, is unwarranted. Yet there is a shift in mentality between the closest prephase 1 equivalent to imperialism—the Crusades—and empires described in this book. The military expeditions west Europeans launched between 1096 and 1291 had a control objective: wresting possession of Jerusalem and the tomb of Christ from Muslim rulers. But control was in the hands of soldiers on the spot or of military-religious orders—notably Knights of Malta and Templars—not sovereign states administering conquered areas from afar. And the Crusaders’ travels did not qualify as exploration. Warriors left Europe not for places whose location and potential were unknown, but for well-known lands perceived to be the religious center of the world. The Crusaders’ interest in conquest was unmediated by curiosity about other people, and control was not as prominently linked to utilization as in later empires. The principal artifacts crusading armies left in the Levant were fortified castles, designed to hold conquered territory against implacable foes. Crusaders had neither the means nor the desire to transform the Levant’s economic, social, and cultural landscape. Control was decoupled from exploration and utilization. Motivations driving the Crusades were less complex and synergistic than in the empire-building projects—which may explain why the earlier outward-facing ventures failed while those from phase 1 onward fared much better.

Were Europeans more likely to exhibit the explore-control-utilize syndrome than other peoples? A majority of the world’s great explorers of seas, continents, and polar regions was born in western Europe.29 Travel to distant places was socially understood and accepted in Europe, often conferring fame. This social role had institutional backing, most expeditions being financed by government officials or scientific societies or both. Government sponsorship greatly increased the likelihood that knowledge generated from exploration would be followed by political claims in newly discovered areas.

In most other societies, by contrast, the explorer role did not emerge, and scientific societies designed to learn about unknown places were not formed. The
Islamic world had a tradition of travel accounts by Abu al-Idrisi, Ibn Hawqal, Abu al-Hasan al-Masudi, and the incomparable Ibn Battuta (1304–77), at more than seventy thousand miles the greatest explorer of all time. But these men generally confined themselves to areas inhabited by fellow Muslims. A recent account of Ibn Battuta’s travels notes that “almost everywhere [he] went he lived in the company of other Muslims, men and women who shared not merely his doctrinal beliefs and religious rituals, but his moral values, his social ideals, his everyday manners.” The compulsion to visit places and people manifestly foreign—a prominent motivation among many European travelers—apparently was much less strong among their Muslim counterparts. Moreover, Ibn Battuta and his predecessors traveled on their own, covering expenses through their own initiatives. Lack of institutional support meant that the knowledge they generated did not lead to expansionist claims by rulers of Muslim states.

The closest Chinese parallel is Cheng Ho, whose expeditions were officially sponsored and reached lands of which the Ming court had been at most dimly aware. But the Chinese admiral was a historical anomaly, not a contributor to an ongoing, socially acknowledged tradition of exploration. Whatever he learned had no policy impact once his sponsors lost interest in convincing foreign potentates of China’s greatness. Even when the court was interested, its goal was not to assert power through military and administrative means but to enhance status and encourage trade through symbolic government-to-government tribute relations. Thus, in the exceptional Chinese instance when exploration was valued, formal control was not, at least in the way Europeans understood and practiced it.

Exploration from the Islamic world and China was on the decline when west Europeans began to reach outward. Ibn Battuta and Cheng Ho were the last of their kind rather than pioneers inspiring successors to build on their findings. The contrast with the cumulative acquisition and wide dispersal of knowledge from European exploration is clear.

Links between control and utilization were also less evident in the great non-European overland empires. The tendency was for rulers to extract resources from the populace without trying to change what their subjects produced or how they produced it. The idea of remaking the natural environment and rearranging the way people lived so as to realize a vision of a more perfect order of things did not figure prominently in the thinking of non-European elites.

One reason the explore-control-utilize syndrome could emerge is that exploration and utilization become more highly valued in a particular era, hence more readily linked to control objectives, which can be assumed to be fairly constant over time. That phase 1 Europeans placed a higher priority than their predecessors on exploring the world and putting new knowledge to practical use is demonstrated in
the domains of science and technology. Advances in theoretical and experimental science and the impact of scientific thinking on everyday life accelerated during the Renaissance, about the time the early explorations took place. Like imperialism, the ascendant scientific worldview set modern Europe apart from its premodern predecessor. Over time it increasingly set European societies apart from non-European ones. According to this way of thinking human beings are not simply immersed in Nature; they are in some sense distanced or alienated from Nature. The key to scientific knowledge is systematic observation, which assumes some distance between observer and observed yet posits that this distance can be traversed through careful observation. Another mental distancing operation involves distinguishing between Nature as what is apprehended by the senses and Nature as what lies behind signals the senses convey. The essence of Nature in this latter manifestation is conveyed by comprehensive, unchanging, abstract laws, typically expressed in mathematical form. 31

Having postulated various kinds of distance between the observing mind and Nature, the modern scientific enterprise tries to reduce that distance as much as possible through systematic exploration. This may involve traveling to places the scientist wants to reach or devising sophisticated instruments to observe distant or very small objects. Scientific exploration probes beyond the empirically observable level to reveal or “dis-cover” natural laws. These laws subsume a confusing array of sensory data under patterns that are at once comprehensive and comprehensible.

Knowledge obtained from scientific exploration has long been considered intrinsically desirable by its practitioners. Yet there has been a strong tendency in modern European society to view basic knowledge in instrumental, utilitarian terms. Technological innovation has flourished, bringing closer to fulfillment Nature’s imagined potential to enhance human well-being. Since the Renaissance a series of research and development cycles may be observed in which basic knowledge stimulated technological advances, which in turn permitted further exploration at the more fundamental theoretical level.

That Europe began to project political power outward at about the time its innovations in scientific thinking and technological application were accelerating is not a coincidence. New levels of activism in these two domains, from early in phase 1 and continuing through succeeding centuries, reflect a close, mutually supportive linkage among exploration, control, and utilization. Imperial expansion and scientific/technological innovation share an underlying logic because both are derived from the same syndrome of attitudes.

Interaction between these separate yet similar domains was synergistic and mutually reinforcing. Explorers of seas and continents accumulated a vast amount of information that enriched basic and applied scientific work at home. Their early
findings may have fostered qualities of mind essential for scientific advance. Germain Arciniegas argues that because ancient classical and medieval Christian scholars were unaware of the New World, its discovery increased skepticism about the claims of received wisdom from whatever source and led Europeans to ask more insistently whether statements about the world were supported by evidence. Maritime exploration having paid rich and unexpected dividends, scholars were emboldened to apply its unabashedly empiricist approach to other endeavors as well.\textsuperscript{22}

Some revenues extracted from the colonies were invested in scientific research and development at home. The quest for natural laws in turn unearthed knowledge leading to breakthroughs in transport and communication, which made it easier for Europeans to conquer other people. Sometimes geographical exploration combined imperial and scientific motives. Back of Captain Cook's first voyage to the South Pacific in 1768, for instance, lay the geostrategic goal of finding a southern continent to which Britain might lay claim. Accompanying Cook was the young naturalist Joseph Banks, who won a well-deserved reputation for his careful observation and impressive collection of flora and fauna. Banks became first director of the famed botanical garden at Kew, outside London, and was president of the Royal Society for forty years.\textsuperscript{23} The network of botanical gardens connecting metropoles and colonies further illustrates the fusion of imperial and scientific enterprises. Botanists at Kew, the Jardin d'Essai Colonial in Paris, and government-sponsored gardens in Buitenzorg (Dutch East Indies), Calcutta, Peradiniya (Ceylon), Singapore, Libreville (Gabon), Saigon, and elsewhere collected and classified specimens. Much of the botanists' work was then put to commercial use. Cinchona, rubber, and sugarcane were transplanted from continent to continent and stimulated economic development far from their places of origin.\textsuperscript{24}

In retrospect, advances in knowledge leading to the gunned ship of early phase 1 were not accidental or isolated. They were the opening rounds in a series of advances that progressively enlarged the technology gap between Europeans and others. By phase 3, when the gap had become a chasm. Europeans saw their scientific and technological accomplishments as evidence of their across-the-board superiority over others. Empire was explained as a manifestation of that superiority and justified as a way to civilize materially less advanced cultures. A growing capacity to understand and manipulate the physical world thus reinforced the will to dominate the human world (see table 8.1).\textsuperscript{25}

A society with the will to explore, control, and utilize its environment is well positioned to conquer societies less inclined to think in this way. If in addition the more assertive society can call upon a steady stream of advances in science and technology while others cannot, its prospects for political dominance are even better. From the fifteenth century western Europe linked control vertically to exploration
### Table 8.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syndrome</th>
<th>Imperialism</th>
<th>Stance Toward Nature</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td>expeditions by sea, land</td>
<td>↔ basic and experimental science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>colonial rule</td>
<td>↔ applied science; technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize</td>
<td>economic, social transformation of colonies; transfer of resources,</td>
<td>↔ higher standard of living via reliance on technology and its products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>profits to metropole</td>
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and utilization *and* laterally to advances in the exploration, control, and utilization of Nature. The combination was hard to resist.

### Sectoral Institutions

Are there features of west European society that permit one to think of the region as a single, coherent unit? If so, do they help explain why the region had such an impact elsewhere? We do speak, after all, of European civilization, culture, and empires; when traveling abroad, Europeans persistently referred to their continent of origin as a source of identity and loyalty. In a sense, an entire region, not simply the political units embedded within it, projected power and influence overseas.

Here I stretch the concept of sector to refer to functionally specific activities within western Europe as a whole. When one examines recurring patterns of government, economic activity, and religious belief and ritual, one sees underlying themes conducive to global dominance: each sector displays a high level of institutionalization, autonomy, and willingness to extend itself overseas.

**Public Sector: The Bureaucratic State**

Europeans were long accustomed to living within territorially bounded polities and under rulers with substantial power and moral authority. The sequence was from one unit to a multitude to a few: from an immense empire centered in Rome to hundreds of small feudal principalities to a much smaller number of states. At all times, however, could be found specialists in rule visibly presiding over a public realm.

Given this experience, Europeans defined living in a polity as a defining feature of civilized life. It is not accidental that the Latin root for civilization is *civis*, “citizen.” Europeans looked down upon societies that lacked recognizable, specialized political structures as uncivilized—Rudyard Kipling’s “lesser breeds without the law.”
The Spanish, for example, called stateless New World peoples savages (indios salvajes), as distinct from indios policías who lived under identifiable governance structures. By conceptualizing differences in the way societies performed political functions as inequalities between superior and inferior ways of life, Europeans handed themselves a powerful moral justification for imperialism. Placing stateless peoples under the jurisdiction of political institutions was deemed an essential part of the noble task of improving the lives of savages. In many parts of the world the European state was a symbol of the purpose of empire as well as the tool for constructing it.

The line separating a feudal principality from a modern state is blurred, conceptually as well as in actual historical circumstances. Generally speaking, however, early in phase 1 western Europe began to accelerate the transition across that line. Modern state formation involved a shift in power and status from physically dispersed, rural-based aristocrats to court officials in a capital city; codification and territory-wide application of legal norms and procedures; the growth of standing armies to defend rulers against domestic and external challengers; and a functionally specialized bureaucracy largely recruited, trained, compensated, and directed through the central government. Modern state building involved the elimination of many small units by incorporation into larger ones. By Charles Tilly’s estimate, western Europe had some five hundred political units at the start of the sixteenth century and about twenty-five early in the twentieth.

Modern states were far better positioned than their feudal predecessors to construct overseas empires. Their greater size and population, their rulers’ capacity to amass taxes and borrowed capital in central treasuries, and their control of standing armies gave them more human and financial resources to deploy, abroad as well as at home. Had Europe remained as politically fractured after the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as it was in the feudal era the region could not have had the global impact it did. The external projection of power was facilitated by the internal consolidation of power by centralizing dynasties: the House of Aviz in Portugal, the Aragón-Castile merger followed in 1516 by Habsburg rule in Spain, the Bourbons in France, the Tudors in England, and subsequently the Prussian Hohenzollerns in Germany.

The prospect that colonies might enrich a metropolitan government’s coffers was, of course, a strong incentive to look abroad. State building in Europe was an extremely expensive proposition. Funds had to be raised to induce or coerce otherwise unwilling subjects to obey the government as well as to wage war against neighboring enemies. Resources from abroad could help resolve the state’s perennial fiscal crisis.

European colonies may be considered protostates. Territorial boundaries, capital cities, defense forces, functionally specialized bureaucracies—these features were
transferred deliberately from metropolitan core to imperial periphery. Construction of protostates abroad could not occur until the modern state was in place as a model for export.¹⁹

The sequence of European political evolution from one unit to hundreds to a few affected relations among sectors. Private profit and religious institutions that emerged prior to modern state building had opportunities to take root in society, gain legitimacy on their own terms, and enjoy autonomy from political control. From the feudal era came a tradition of largely unfettered entrepreneurial activity in urban areas. Among the Roman Empire’s legacies was the Catholic Church. The autonomy of urban capitalist institutions was clearly a factor in Europe’s sustained economic development. The autonomy of its religious institutions—Roman Catholic and eventually Protestant—limited the arbitrary and authoritarian exercise of power by state officials. Sectoral autonomy also influenced the way Europeans acted overseas. Capitalist and Christian institutions had the leeway to set their own foreign policy agendas and the financial and personnel resources to carry them out. This meant that the number of actors and the range of motivations and incentives operating overseas at any given time was far greater than a survey of government actions alone would suggest. It also meant that Europeans could exert influence even when the states from which they came were unable or unwilling to govern specific overseas territories (see chapter 10).

The Roman Empire was far enough removed in time to pose no challenge to Europeans constructing states out of the huge territory Rome once controlled, yet sufficiently recent to be on state builders’ minds. Its legal and architectural legacies affected the way European polities operated at home. Rome also served as a role model for external relations. Modern empire builders, familiar with classical history through their formal education, often described their actions as replicating Rome’s accomplishments. Patricia Seed observes that every imperial power in the New World between 1492 and 1640 invoked Rome. Doing so “served to foster the sense that Europe was indeed engaged upon a single legitimate project—domination of the peoples/lands/commerce of the New World in the name of recreating the imagined ideal of the Middle Ages—the medieval dream of a single unified Rome.”²⁰ The ancient empire cast a shadow even in phase 3, though the medieval ideal had by then been discarded.

Luis Vaz de Camoêns’s sixteenth-century poem The Lusiads, written in praise of early Portuguese explorers, is filled with references to classic mythology and history. The poet writes that Venus “was attracted to the Portuguese, seeing in them many of the qualities of the ancient Rome she had loved so much.” Jupiter promises Venus, “You shall see Greeks and Romans cast into oblivion by the great deeds this people will perform in the East.”²¹
The British in phases 3 and 4 were especially fond of comparing their accomplishments to those of Rome, as seen in the phrase *pax Britannica*. Classical studies (*litterae humaniores*) were popular among students at Oxford and Cambridge, and colonial officials from these elite institutions frequently referred to Greek and Roman themes. Cecil Rhodes liked to be told that his bust resembled that of a Roman emperor. Richard Symonds writes that Rhodes, "brooding often on the lessons of Rome for Britain,. . . had the books Gibbon used as sources for the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* translated into English for his personal use." In *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India* (1914), Lord Bryce compared Rome's impressive road network with the British feat of crisscrossing India by railway.

In both expansionist phases the Roman Empire was an exemplar for several states whose territories had been incorporated within it centuries earlier. Rome's lesson was not so much that Europe could again be unified as that its people could again perform great deeds on other continents.

**Private Profit Sector: Urban Capitalist Institutions**

Western Europe developed a regionwide private profit sector through the institutions and values of capitalism. As the word "bourgeoisie" indicates, the key to this outcome was the rise of urban areas specializing in production of marketable goods and services. Cities have been to the region's economy what states have been to its politics. As Tilly puts it, "Europe's system of cities represented the changing relations among concentrations of capital, its system of states the changing relations among concentrations of coercion." Before the Industrial Revolution rural areas accounted for a sizable proportion of handmade goods. But even then, "wherever physical production might take place, the intangible processes of information flow, decision making, and exchange concentrated firmly in cities." The onset of factory-based industry in phases 2 and 3 led to a dramatic urbanization of nonagricultural production.

In the late Middle Ages European towns and cities enjoyed considerable political autonomy from neighboring barons—a legacy that insulated them to some extent from the centralizing activities of state builders in phase 1. Another feature of late medieval life was the dense network of trade and credit linking cities throughout the region. These two features were interdependent. Autonomy within a polity was enhanced by flows of valuable resources across political boundaries. Partial insulation from external political control enabled cities to concentrate on economically productive activities and to maintain direct trade ties with other regional urban centers.

Although much of this trade took place overland, western Europe's extensive coastline encouraged reliance on ships to transport bulk as well as luxury goods. Douglass North and Robert Thomas observe that during the sixteenth century a
thrusting trade along the Atlantic coast tended to join together the greater commercial loops of the Mediterranean and the Baltic regions until these three loops became one chain of commerce. Merchants and traders were ideally positioned by early phase 1 to extend to other continents patterns of maritime activity already serving their own region.

Europe's urban population was driven primarily by the imperative of economic survival, considering that the time-honored means of subsistence—land—was inaccessible to the great majority. For a growing number of city dwellers, however, accumulation of wealth over and above subsistence became an attainable goal. Such a goal was hardly unique to European society. What was distinctive was the high priority placed on acquiring wealth and the innovative techniques used to do so.

European capitalism was marked, first, by societal acceptance of private ownership of property (including land) and by effective enforcement of claims to property rights. As the legal system developed, public sector officials came to acknowledge private claims even when these were directed against the government itself. Second, the search for profit was linked to an interest in technological innovation that might lower production costs or generate new products. Third, wealth was valued not only for the goods and services it could purchase but also as a means to generate even more wealth in the future. The idea that capital derived from putting resources to use should itself be put to use was consistent with the explore-control-utilize syndrome. Rapid, efficient recycling of capital into subsequent rounds of production was an enormously potent stimulant of economic life and technological change over the long run.

Fourth, urban political autonomy enabled entrepreneurs to avoid being crushed by taxes and regulations imposed by central governments. The will of urban capitalists to generate profits was complemented by their capacity to retain substantial portions of what they accumulated.

Fifth, although a driving force in Europe as elsewhere was the self-interest of individuals and families, a large and growing role was played by institutions whose organizing principle transcended individualism and kin loyalties. Examples were artisans' guilds, joint-stock trading companies, and banking houses. Once established they could grow, taking advantage of economies of scale in ways not open to individual or family enterprises. They could also extend their territorial scope, competing effectively with enterprises elsewhere whose outreach and personnel recruitment policies were limited by dependence upon kinship.

Sixth, people engaged in making a profit—from artisans and tinkers to traders, industrialists, and bankers—were not relegated to inferior status. Skilled manual labor and the drive for material possessions were respectable. The stratification system was sufficiently flexible that ambitious persons from lower-class backgrounds could move upward, spending wealth to acquire higher status.
Western Europe's merchants favored overseas exploration as opening up additional sources of profit. Lands distant from Europe were especially attractive if they produced commodities unavailable at home. The will to reach beyond Europe was coupled with capacity to do so, especially through joint-stock companies whose capital assets were pooled from many private investors. The autonomy capitalist institutions enjoyed gave them latitude to act overseas on their own and with their own interests uppermost in mind rather than as agents of a metropolitan government. The trade frontiers along which they operated might coincide with the political boundaries of empire. But they need not. During phase 1 they extended well beyond de facto political frontiers in such diverse places as Canada, Brazil, India, the West African coast, and the Dutch East Indies.

Religious Sector: Euro-Christian Missionary Agencies

Christianity was an enormously important cultural unifier in Western Europe, even after the Protestant Reformation ended the Roman Catholic Church's virtual monopoly of religious life. For one thing, Catholicism retained widespread support. Three of the five phase 1 imperial powers were officially Catholic, and a substantial Catholic population lived in England and Holland long after rulers there broke with the papacy. For another, Protestant reformers, whether they retained much of the Catholic liturgy (as in the Church of England) or rejected the old tenets and rituals (as in the more radical dissenting sects), could never fully disentangle themselves from Rome. The Protestant/Catholic divide added an element of competition to overseas initiatives—but it should not obscure beliefs and practices that made Western Europe, on balance, remarkably homogenous in religious terms.

Christianity is an institutionalized religion whose governance structures are separate from those of secular political authority. Even when European governments formally adhered to a branch of the faith and had a say in promotion to top ecclesiastical posts within their borders, religious structures maintained autonomy from the state. The Roman church's autonomy was aided by several factors: its universalistic (catholic) claims; a historical pedigree far more ancient than any European government; a centralized, transnational bureaucracy; recognition by late medieval and early modern national legislatures of the clergy as a separate corporate estate; and location of the Papal See in Rome, far from the emerging centers of European power and an autonomous polity in its own right. Most Protestant sects enjoyed independence from government control for a quite different reason: a high degree of self-government at the local congregational level. Whether autonomy was derived from suprastate centralization or substate decentralization, the freedom Europe's Christian institutions enjoyed gave them leeway to set their foreign agenda and act on it.

The agenda always had an outward-oriented dimension, for Jesus directed his
followers to "go out to all the world" and convey the Good News. His command took institutional form in denominational agencies specializing in conversion: for example, Jesuits, Franciscans, Augustinians, and White Fathers for Catholics, the Church Missionary Society for Anglicans, the English Baptist Mission, and so forth. Mission agencies were headquartered in Europe and found recruits there to send forth with instructions to report on what they accomplished. European soldiers, administrators, merchants, and settlers did convert the occasional individual to Christianity. But the vast bulk of the work was done by missionaries because their reason for being where they were was to persuade others to replace false beliefs with true ones. This motive being separate from political control—though not necessarily incompatible with it—mission agencies had strong reasons to set up distant outposts regardless of whether a colonial regime was in place there. What Alistair Hennessy calls "the mission frontier" extended well beyond de facto political frontiers in Canada, Brazil, and Paraguay in phase 1 and in many parts of Africa in phase 3. The parallel with the overseas ventures of European capitalists is obvious.

It is one thing for European Christians to want to convert people to their faith. It is quite another to think of the faith as distinctly European, a factor setting the region apart from and above other parts of the world. Yet several developments converged to produce just this way of thinking, with the result that missionaries consciously spread the gospel of European civilization as well as of personal salvation. In this respect they served, deliberately or unconsciously, as advance agents of regional aggression.

In its early years Christianity could not possibly have been identified as a west European cultural artifact. It originated, after all, in Western Asia, spread north to Armenia, south to Abyssinia, and southeast to Mesopotamia and India as well as to the Mediterranean basin. Conversion of Europe's northern areas to Roman Catholicism was not completed until the fourteenth century. But ways of thinking began to change with the rise of Islam, which severed or severely frayed links between Catholics and non-European Christians. The initial wave of Arab conquests led many Western Asian and North African Christians to convert to the new faith. It isolated Christian communities in Asia and Africa (Nestorians and Monophysites, for example) from those living north of the Mediterranean. Subsequent advances of Seljuk and then Ottoman Turks into Asia Minor challenged the Eastern Roman (Greek Orthodox) Church, official faith of the Byzantine Empire. This branch of Christianity was dealt a tremendous blow in 1453 with the capture of the imperial capital, Constantinople.

Largely because of Islam's rise, inhabitants of western Eurasia began to think of themselves as having a shared European identity. The first use of the term "Euro-
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pean" has been traced to the Battle of Tours in A.D. 732, when Romano-Gallic and so-
called barbarian armies came together to defeat Muslim forces invading France.51
Because the challenge was religious as well as political and military, Europeans came
to regard their regional identity as intimately connected to their faith. The origins of
this subjective change long preceded phase 1, being traceable to the Arab conquest of
the Holy Land and invasion of Iberia. What was new about the early years of phase 1
was the Islamic challenge's next round under Turkish leadership. Ottoman advances
through the Balkans and into central Europe led people living close to the Atlantic to
perceive western Europe as the cultural heartland of the entire continent. With the
fall of Constantinople Roman Catholics saw themselves as the only Christians left to
combat the infidel. Pope Pius II, who took office five years after Constantinople's fall,
was a leading proponent of the idea that Europe was a single entity unified by its
Roman Catholic faith.52 Increasingly the broad, pre-Ottoman category of Christian
Europe was displaced by a narrower Roman Catholic western Europe.

The Ottoman Turks' role in spreading Islam made that faith more cosmopoli-
tan because no longer could it be seen as the ethnic property, so to speak, of Arabs
who originated and initially spread it. Paradoxically, the Ottomans made Christi-
anity less cosmopolitan by further reducing the already limited contact among
Christians on different sides of Muslim-controlled lands. Roman Catholics in early
phase 1 had a vague sense that Christian communities existed south and east of the
line, an awareness expressed in the myth of Prester John. But the myth's appeal lay
precisely in the absence of hard evidence to support it. Even if Prester John existed,
Catholics could not assume the priest-king would reach out to find them. It was they
who had to take the initiative to locate him and form a grand anti-Islamic alliance.
An idea one may term Euro-Christianity gradually took shape: if the faith was to
flourish, Europeans had to shoulder the responsibility for going out to all the world.

The reality of Ottoman military power, coupled with knowledge of a wider
world conveyed by explorers, persuaded fifteenth-century Europeans that it was time
to change strategy and tactics from crusading days. The earlier goal had been to
conquer the Holy Land. Conversion was an incidental aim because Crusaders were
realistic even if defeated on the battlefield. Muslims were not going to become
Christians. The new goal was to bypass the Holy Land and place top priority on
converting pagans in areas far from it. The task was assigned not to warriors but to
missionaries. If Christians could not control sites central to their faith, they could
compensate (and retaliate) by mounting conversion campaigns elsewhere.53 The
prospect of finding non-Muslims in other regions was appealing, as they would be
less inclined than Muslims to reject the Good News out of hand. This proselytizing
impulse, seen in the despatch of friars to the Mongol court in the thirteenth century,
became pronounced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Changing attitudes took institutional form with creation of the Jesuit order (in 1540) and redirection of the Franciscan and Dominican orders toward overseas work.

Adding impetus to this new approach was the conquest of Granada. Religious zeal generated in the final round of the long crusade to retake Iberia was there to be tapped and redirected at the very moment Spain’s rulers decided to sponsor a major overseas venture. One can see this clearly in the selection from Columbus’s log cited earlier.

To summarize, several features of western Europe made it a distinct, relatively homogeneous, integrated regional system. Its political life was organized around territorially bounded states, its economic life around urban-based private actors seeking and recycling profit, its religious life around versions of Christianity grounded in Roman Catholicism. Regionwide sectoral activity was institutionalized in the Middle Ages but became even more so from phase 1 onward with the centralization and bureaucratization of state structures, increased use of joint-stock corporations to amass and invest capital, and formation of specialized mission agencies. All three sectors had the organizational capacity to project themselves overseas while retaining control of operations from region-based headquarters.

Europe’s private profit and religious sectors were relatively autonomous from its state structures. Autonomy was aided by separate institutions and by a widely held view that each sector could perform its specialized functions best when given a large measure of freedom. The sequence of European political development was crucial in making sectoral autonomy possible. The politically fragmented feudal era that followed Rome’s collapse was conducive to the rise of capitalism; the earlier concentration of power under Rome and Emperor Constantine’s conversion were conducive and perhaps necessary conditions for Christianity’s spread. Because capitalism and Christianity took root before modern states were formed, they could protect themselves from autocratic state builders and limit the scope and arbitrariness of public sector power. Geographic factors were also important. Capitalism was based in urban centers considerably smaller than the states into which cities were eventually incorporated. The Roman Catholic Church had a hierarchy and base of believers far more extensive than any one state. Many denominations formed from the Protestant Reformation stressed local congregational self-government. Whether the key sectoral unit was smaller or larger than the state, the fact that it did not coincide with state boundaries helped insulate it from political control.

Sectoral autonomy meant that states were not the only actors able to assert themselves abroad and that nongovernment agencies could act without waiting for home governments to approve what they proposed. The fact that many kinds of institutions operated overseas, with varying but complementary goals in mind, gave
Europeans a wide range of options for penetrating and influencing other societies (see chapter 10).

A high capacity for overseas initiatives was complemented by will. Political control, commercial gain, conversion—all could be achieved by looking abroad. At the outset of phase 1 the image of the Great Khan attracted rulers and merchants, while the image of Prester John attracted rulers and supporters of Christianity's global mission. These myths did not correspond to reality. But their allure helped shape the way the modern world emerged.

The features discussed here have sufficiently broad geographic range to apply to all eight metropoles. Are they sufficiently narrow temporally to distinguish between western Europe before phase 1 and afterward? If one focuses on capitalism the answer is a qualified no. Its orientation and urban base were in place well before the fifteenth century, but its reliance on corporate structures to accumulate and recycle profit accelerated after that time. With Christianity the answer is a qualified yes. Its institutional and ideological roots were obviously premodern. But the way its adherents associated region with religion—what I term Euro-Christianity—was a response to Ottoman advances early in phase 1. And the emergence of specialized missionary agencies is a feature of the imperial era. Emergence of the modern state coincides most clearly with the early years of phase 1. Empire building depended on state building, in that small feudal principalities had insufficient resources to administer colonies. The point is not that all three sectors changed radically in the fifteenth century but that when the public sector was finally ready to act the other two sectors were ready as well. The triple assault could then be launched.

The political dominance of several European states becomes more understandable in the context of multisectoral activity based in an entire region.

A revealing indicator of regional identity is the willingness of individuals born in one part of Europe to work for "foreign" sponsors. One sees this in the Ceuta expedition. Ferdinand Magellan was born in Portugal and claimed the Philippines for Spain. Italian-born explorers found sponsors where they could, Columbus visiting royal courts in France and England before winning support from Ferdinand and Isabella. Amerigo Vespucci and Giovanni da Verrazzano worked for Spanish monarchs, John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto) for England. So many Venetians did early exploratory work for Spain off the South American coast that Venezuela (Little Venice) was named for them. The Englishman Henry Hudson came upon the river named after him while reporting to the Dutch East India Company. The Bavarian count Prince Rupert was an architect of the Hudson Bay Company. In phase 3 Italian-born Savorgnan de Brazza worked for France, Welsh-born Henry Morton Stanley for Belgium's Leopold II. The German explorers Heinrich Barth and Carl Weis helped Britain and Portugal, respectively. Recruitment of Catholic missionaries shows another
form of cosmopolitanism. Father Eusebio Kino, for example, a pioneer in northern New Spain, was born in the Tyrolean Alps.

Nothing confirmed identification with one's continent so much as leaving it. People describing themselves as French, English, or German at home became Europeans abroad. In Camoëns's Lusiads, commonly seen as an ardent patriot's tribute to Portugal, Vasco da Gama is asked by the ruler of Malindi where he comes from. "We hail from the proud continent of Europe," the explorer replies. He goes on to give his African host a detailed description of European geography.54

Over a long time lines of causation become very complex and may indeed be circular. Such was the case with imperialism. The convergence of state building, urban capitalism, and Euro-Christianity was conducive to expansion. But the reverse was also true. Resources extracted from colonies were available for state building at home; profits accumulated overseas were available for recycling in later rounds of domestic private investment; ready access to raw materials from colonial plantations and mines facilitated the Industrial Revolution; opportunities for mass conversion overseas helped revitalize Christianity in Europe, substituting forward-looking, positive goals for the earlier defensive aim of halting Islam. Once circular causality came into play, powerful forces sustained patterns of dominance that were fast becoming the status quo.

A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON

If these features of modern Europe are found in other societies that might have established overseas empires but did not, the argument that they were conducive to empire is spatially overstretched and hence weakened. If the features were absent or less strongly felt elsewhere, the argument is strengthened. A brief look at the two peoples most likely to have competed successfully for global dominance—the Arabs and the Chinese—supports the argument.55

Arabs and Europeans alike followed missionary religions and had active private profit sectors with merchants traveling far afield. But the polities Arabs founded during their initial drive into the Fertile Crescent and across North Africa seem to have been weaker and less internally stable than states emerging in modern western Europe. On the one hand, suprastate constraints on sovereignty were set by incorporation into overarching political-religious structures: the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, later the Ottoman sultanate. On the other hand, rulers of many Islamic polities found it difficult if not impossible to control nomadic peoples in their domains' vast, dry hinterlands.56 Effective governance was more elusive than in Europe, where the population consisted mainly of sedentary agriculturals. The daunting challenge of subjecting urbanites and pastoralists to common bureaucratic structures left few resources and limited energy for administering territories elsewhere.
Arab long-distance trade was less hierarchically structured and metropole centered than trade patterns Europeans devised. Many Arab merchants set out on their own or joined sea voyages or caravans. They were not employed by firms headquartered in the Arabian peninsula, Egypt, or Fertile Crescent. The Islamic world did not have its Dutch or English East India Company. Less able than Europeans to accumulate gains from physically dispersed activities in one place, the Arab private profit sector was less able to place profits at the disposal of governments.

The religious sector offers an additional contrast. Islam's initial advance was simultaneously the expansion of Arab-speaking conquerors. But expansion was of a people on the move, not of a defined home state dispatching soldiers, bureaucrats, and settlers to implement an ambitious foreign agenda. The closest Arab equivalent to European metropoles was the administratively decentralized Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. But even this (somewhat forced) parallel disappeared with the decline of the Baghdad-based Abbasids in the tenth century and their decisive defeat by Mongol/Turkic forces in 1258. The rise of the Ottoman Empire, in many areas at the expense of Arab elites, hastened the decoupling of Islam from its Arab progenitors. Moreover, in the eastern edges of the Muslim world the original Muslim dynasties were not Arab. Facing Mecca in prayer had everything to do with a transcendent faith and nothing to do with acknowledging Arab ethnic superiority, much less Arab political hegemony.

The cosmopolitan trend in Islam reversed the tendency toward parochial association of region with religion that I have called Euro-Christianity. Both religions spread, each in keeping with its proselytizing mission. But over time Christianity became linked to the political project of one region, whereas Islam became increasingly disconnected from any particular region or people.

The conversion imperative took different institutional forms in the two religions. Heavy Christian reliance on missionary bodies permitted monitoring and control of operations from mission headquarters in Europe. With Islam, conversion was more the responsibility of specialists in nonreligious activities ranging from warriors to merchants. Islam did not generate orders like the Jesuits, White Fathers, or Church Missionary Society whose primary task was converting unbelievers. Its spread during and after phase 1 was a more diffuse, decentralized operation, with pressures for reform and mass conversion often coming from areas distant from the Arabian core zone. In the absence of missionary agencies based in a distant state, Muslims had no reason to take the promotion of that state's interests as their moral responsibility. What Cardinal Lavigerie said of the White Fathers—"We also work for France"—had no parallel in the Islamic world.

The Chinese empire had impressive, centralized, respected public sector institutions during the Ming (1368–1644) and Ch'ing (1644–1911) dynastic eras spanning
the centuries of European advance. Yet the very strength and historical continuity of these institutions may have hampered emergence of a private profit sector with the autonomy, social status, and incentives to stimulate growth at home and sponsor extensive activities beyond China's borders. The imperial bureaucracy was recruited largely from local landowning elements, and its revenues were derived primarily from agriculture. With its vast territory and agrarian fiscal base, China's central government had less incentive than rulers of smaller, ocean-oriented polities like Portugal and England to seek additional revenues from abroad. Cities lacked the degree of insulation from imperial control they enjoyed in feudal Europe. For these reasons, groups that led the drive for development in western Europe—urban-based artisans, traders, financiers, and manufacturers—played a more peripheral role politically and economically in China.

China's religious sector was integrated with the public sector through the practice of staffing the bureaucracy with scholars trained in the Confucian classics. None of the religions practiced in China had a hierarchical structure or degree of autonomy from state control equivalent to that of the Roman Catholic Church. Neither was there a strong will to go abroad. Confucian doctrines did not call for conversion of unbelievers elsewhere. If anything, Confucianism was a civil religion, supporting a domestic social and political order that was considered unique—and clearly superior to other societies. Uniqueness was a reason to stay home, not to reach out.

Joseph Levenson draws the contrast in these words:

From the point of normative Confucianism, wedded to culture and history and antianimealianic to the core, the barbarians are always with us. From the point of view of normative Christianity, transcending culture and history... the pagans are not always with us, let missionaries go overseas, seek them out, convert them. The “Kingdom of God” was nowhere in the world. But the “Middle Kingdom,” the point of balanced perfection in the world, under Heaven, was at home. Whatever it was that sent Chinese into Southeast Asia before the Portuguese ever got there, it had nothing to do with any pretensions to bearing out a Word.35

Subordination of the private profit and religious sectors to an inwardly directed public sector meant that people who in Europe had opportunities and incentives to go overseas, on their own or in cooperation with government, in China stayed home.

The contrast may be traced to patterns of overland migration and conquest preceding phase 1. The Roman Empire was the closest European parallel to the Chinese in territorial scope and the belief that it was a center of civilization. But the Roman imperium was broken into fragments by invaders, giving urban capitalists
and the Roman Catholic Church the political space to develop largely on their own in the millennium after the fall. China also experienced invasion. But the Mongols, instead of fragmenting China as the Huns, Vandals, Goths, and others did to the Roman domains, ruled it as a component of their vast Eurasian empire. China emerged from invasion and conquest an intact polity, with a government strong enough to limit the autonomous development of urban mercantile and religious institutions.

Ironically, the invasions which destroyed western Eurasia’s greatest empire laid the foundations for new rounds of empire building centuries later. The Mongol invasion, by failing to dismantle eastern Eurasia’s greatest empire, reinforced Chinese tendencies to avoid overseas involvement.

In brief, Arabs and Europeans possessed an outward-looking private profit sector and a missionary religion. But compared to western Europe. Arab states were weak and Arab economic and religious activities less institutionalized and more cosmopolitan. China and western Europe were similar in that their people lived under relatively centralized bureaucratic structures. But compared to western Europe, China’s private profit and religious sectors were less autonomous and less institutionalized. To the extent that China had an official religion, its message was that adherents should stay home. Taken together, these factors point to substantial differences between Europeans and the other two societies in the capacity and will of sectoral institutions to exert influence overseas. Evidence from crucial non-European cases thus supports the argument being advanced.

The separation of public, private profit, and religious sector institutions in western Europe was instrumental in placing limits on the arbitrary exercise of power by state rulers. One consequence of a distinctive regional pattern of sectoral relations was enhanced prospects for constitutional regimes respecting individual and group liberties. This same sectoral pattern had quite different, indeed opposite, consequences abroad. There, the triple sectoral assault facilitated formation of empires whose agents had substantial latitude arbitrarily to restrict the liberties of non-European peoples. Institutions conducive to a politically liberal order in one part of the world were the instruments of authoritarian control elsewhere.