The West and the Rest Revisited: Debating Capitalist Origins, European Colonialism, and the Advent of Modernity*

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Abstract: The ascent of the western European powers to global hegemony in the early modern period remains a central problematic in social scientific inquiry. In seeking to comprehend the causes that facilitated the European passage to colonial domination and capitalist modernity, scholars have looked to a series of interdependent institutional and cultural developments that unfolded cumulatively over the long-term, and which issued in greatly enhanced capacities in coercive and productive power. Revisionist scholarship is now challenging this understanding. Dismissing the consensus view as a mirage of “Eurocentric” and “Orientalist” mythologizing, revisionists are insistent that the major societies across Eurasia were all progressing along a comparable course of modernizing development, and that the West’s surge to global supremacy was a late and contingent historical outcome. It will be argued here that the revisionist position is both empirically suspect and analytically incoherent. Affirmed in counterpoint are the explanatory principles of path-dependent historical trajectories and the pervasive structural integration of social formations.

Résumé : La montée des pouvoirs de l’Europe de l’Ouest vers une hégémonie globale au début de la période moderne demeure une question inquiétante dans les sondages socio-scientifiques. Pour comprendre les causes qui ont facilité la domination coloniale des Européens et le capitalisme des temps modernes, les érudits se sont tournés vers des développements institutionnels et culturels

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There is a pattern to intellectual controversies in the human sciences, and its logic is dialectical. Following an initial phase of exploration, an interpretive consensus commonly emerges, which informs ongoing research during a period of knowledge cumulation. Over time, lacunae and strains within the established paradigm become apparent, and revisionist challenges arise to unsettle the field. New insights are proclaimed, decisive refutations are alleged. Texts formerly deemed canonical are suddenly subject to dismissal, and yesterday’s authorities are censured for the errancy of their guidance. As word of the uprising spreads, paladins of the entrenched order are roused to action, and countering fire is directed against the insurgency. A grand interpretive battle is joined. The claims of partisans notwithstanding, victories here — in marked contrast to the natural sciences — are rarely total, and the new positions agreed to are seldom supersessional of the old. Continued factionalism is commonplace, but accommodations do also occur, as reigning paradigms selectively incorporate those revisionist contributions that offer greater analytical comprehension or enrich our range of empirical reference.

For students of comparative world history, this is a time of unexpected exhilaration, and unease. Long established certainties have come under sustained questioning in recent years, and the new interpretations being proposed are not limited to issues of marginal importance. Several of the classic concerns of social science inquiry — the origins of capitalism, the global ascendancy of Europe, the fashioning of that cultural and institutional nexus commonly styled “modernity” — are all up for fresh consideration. Though debate is ongoing, the contending parties have engaged with critical force along the major fronts, such that the main lines of argument are now fully discernable. Refinements factual and analytical are to be expected, but a general assessment is presently feasible,
and perhaps also timely for identifying those interpretive problems that call for closer attention. Fundamentally at issue is the alleged “Eurocentric” bias that is said to inform and debase the orthodox account which, summarized most broadly, views the making of the modern world as a correlate and consequence of the rise of capitalism, a globalizing form of social power initially harnessed and deployed by western Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries. The fortunate beneficiaries of an advantageous ecology (temperate climes, deep soils, navigable rivers and abundant coastlines, pronounced resource diversity) and a unique institutional and cultural inheritance from the past (Greek philosophy and science, Roman law, a monotheism hostile to animistic conceptions of nature, citizenship ideals and representative forms of governance, segmentary and competing sovereignties, an accumulating technological competence), these formerly laggard Europeans were able to exploit this manifold endowment, synergistically, and so progressively modernize their societies. As older forms of communalism, tradition, and hierarchy gave way to the surging currents of “restless rationalism” and “possessive individualism,” a connected series of revolutionary transformations — in their modes of production and exchange, in their polities and military capabilities — would impart to these upstarts a range of potencies so enhanced that, carried forcibly outwards by the fluxions of conquest and commerce, an extended period of world supremacy and domination would come their way.

United in their opposition to the triumphalism they detect in this grand narrative of enlightened empowerment and exemplary enrichment, the proponents of revision lack a convenient identifying label. Their shared objective, however, is an account of world history that is suitably “de-centred” or, more expressly, “polycentric” in orientation. The partiality of the Eurocentric paradigm, they insist, has unjustly excluded from view the “multiple modernities” that have conjunctively shaped the course of world history, resulting in distorted renderings of both past and present. Properly situated, the story of the European ascendancy must shed many of its claims to distinctiveness, and temper its self-legitimating appeals to both historic and enduring superiorities in customs, practices, and institutions.

There can be no downplaying the radicalness of this revisionist dissent. The orthodox consensus, viewed as an assemblage of largely congruent interpretations and mutually reinforcing empirical disclosures, is easily the most formidable and imposing edifice of sustained collective scholarship yet produced. Any reading list of the essential contributions to this many-sided subject — involving a complex interplay of political, military, economic, cultural, scientific, and technological developments — would run to a great many pages, and preoccupy a lifetime of study. Taking guidance from the founding insights of Adam Smith and Henry Maine, Karl Marx and Max
Weber, a diverse array of scholars has since fortified, expanded, and refined their initial reconnaissance. Think of Polanyi’s contributions on the historical anthropology of trade and markets; Merton on the sociology of modern science; Tilly on the war-making, state-building dynamic. Think of the indispensable work of all the many great medievalists and early modern historians, the likes of Bloch, Tawney, Postan, Cipolla, Lane, Duby, Le Roy Ladurie, Le Goff, Hobsbawm, Hill, Thompson, Hilton, Vilar, Laslett, Stone, Elliot, Parry, Wrigley, Brenner, Wickham, de Vries, O’Brien. Think also of the grand comparativists and synthesizers, a list that would include Braudel, McNeill, Barrington Moore, Eric Wolf, Gellner, Worsley, Wallerstein, Anderson, Jones, Finer, Hall, and Mann. To all this one must add that immense and proliferating body of specialist research that addresses those facets of culture and social structure deemed contributory to the European passage to modernity: (i) its distinctive patterns of civic urbanization; (ii) legal-juridical developments that extended rights and protections to persons, subjects, and their claims to property; (iii) productive innovations in agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing; (iv) reforms in military organization and decisively lethal upgrades in weaponry and logistical capabilities; (v) the rise of bureaucratized, territorially consolidated polities, as legitimized by representational and constitutional compacts with the governed; (vi) unprecedented advancements in scientific understanding, and an accelerating capacity for technological application; (vii) the onset of a vibrant and popular print culture; (viii) shifting relations and mobilities between classes and estates; (ix) nationalist stirrings and mobilizations; (x) a demographic transition that sustained expanding internal markets and ventures in colonialism; and, not least, (xi) a massive fissure within Latin Christendom that facilitated, quite unintentionally, a multi-faceted secularizing dynamic that would refashion not only the institutional orders of Europe, but the mentalities of its inhabitants as well.

Any attempt to overturn our reigning comprehension of the key determinants in the European trajectory, from ancient beginnings to modern consequences, would thus appear to be an audacious, unpromising venture. Yet the revisionist ambition is more challenging still, for there stands another consensus requiring subversion.

I refer to that significant body of scholarship on Europe’s foremost rivals in power and contenders for civilizational primacy — India, China, and the Islamic world — whose distinctive patterns of social organization and developmental histories have been explored and detailed with analytical sophistication and exacting empirical specificity. If less voluminous in output relative to the privileged focus on Europe, this fund of knowledge lays claim to contributors no less distinguished in stature and importance. Think of all the many invaluable studies that have been authored by the likes of Srinivas, Thapar, Hocart, Hutton, Marriott, Dumont, Beteille, Chaudhuri, Basham, and Habib (for India); Granet,
Eberhard, Wittfogel, Lattimore, Needham, Fairbank, Krader, Twitchett, Schwartz, Gernet, Balazs, Spence, and Elvin (for China and Central Asia); Abrahamian, Amin, Arjomand, Bulliet, Hourani, Inalcik, Keyder, Lambton, Lapidus, Keddie, Crone, Mottahadeh, Issawi, and Watson (for the societies of the dar al-Islam). From the work of these and other Middle Eastern and Asian specialists, it has become the prevailing view that neither in the Indian subcontinent, nor in China, nor in the Islamic world was a breakthrough to capitalist modernization in the offing. And why should such be expected? The leading powers of the East — the Ottoman empire, Safavid Persia, Mughal India, China’s Ming and Manchu dynasties — were keyed to their own specific institutional arrangements and cultural traditions, and situated within historical currents that flowed accordingly.

Matters would change dramatically, however, with the violent remaking of the globe that commenced c.1500, as the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, and French began seeking their fortunes far beyond their own national domains. Early forays and encroachments eventually led on to more substantial and permanent forms of presence and acquisition, with the profits and plunder so gained flowing back to stimulate still greater economic expansion and continued advances in military capabilities. As industrialization ushered in a revolutionary transformation in material production and transport, the European advantage passed over into worldwide predominance. Indeed, this was a reality so manifest at the time that a variety of reformist movements came to the fore within the societies threatened or subordinated, openly calling for “self-strengthening” programs that would restore lost autonomy and greatness by selectively adopting Western technologies and practices — economic, military, educational, political — while otherwise preserving core cultural conventions. Such efforts typically proved belated and inadequate (Meiji Japan being the most notable exception), as reform efforts were routinely stymied by the conservatives still dominant and the massive impracticalities of modernizing societies still locked into peasant-based agrarian systems.

How, then, to account for this global re-ordering, and the astounding historical fact that such strikingly small numbers of intruders from the West were able to impose their aggrandizing will and purpose in lands so distant and populous, and in civilizations so accomplished? Hitherto, scholarly attention has concentrated on identifying the principal sociological differentia that seem to be implicated in these fateful dispensations, with the aim of explicating both the European rise and the protracted decline and fall of the Eastern empires. As befits the scope and scale of the interpretive challenge, the body of historical-comparative research on this subject is both deep and ranging, resistant to easy summation. A broad base of agreement does exist, however, on what might be called the fundamental axis of difference: the nascent European fusion of mercantilist imperialism with a technologically driven capitalistic transforma-
tion of production and exchange was the decisive development; and the pros-
psects for any comparable coalescence elsewhere were greatly limited, largely
owing to the patterns of culture and social organization there prevailing.

Of the purported “constraints” or “barriers” that are thought to have
combined to forestall an indigenous capitalist modernization within the major
Eastern powers, the following arrangements receive prominent mention: (i) the
persistence of centralized forms of imperial autocracy, and an attending confine-
ment of politics to court factionalism and dynastic cycles; (ii) a state-directed
economy keyed to the stable extraction of a sustainable surplus, drawn chiefly
from the peasant masses through taxation and corvée; (iii) a corresponding
control over mercantile and craft sectors, in the form of official markets, price
regulations, trade restrictions, licensed brokerages, and state monopolies both
in production (armaments and prestige goods, most notably) and in the
procurement of strategic resources (such as metals and salt); (iv) a functional
symbiosis within elite ranks between state service (administrative or military)
and landholding opportunities, with officials and gentry alike dependent for
salaries and incomes upon the taxes and rents yielded up by peasant cultivators;
(v) a general situation wherein proprietary rights remained insecure, chronically
vulnerable to both official graft and arbitrary seizures — hazards that prompted
hoarding and other wealth concealment strategies in response; (vi) urban centres
under the administrative sway of imperial governors and officials, and whose
ruled inhabitants lacked legal-juridical status as citizens; (vii) a tendency to
concentrate handicrafts and manufacturing (textiles most notably) within the
domestic sphere of peasant production, thereby limiting the possibilities for
economies of scale and a wider mass market in consumption; (viii) a customary
avoidance of primogeniture, with partible inheritance leading periodically to
excessive land parcellization; (ix) the persistence of collective status orders —
kinship lineages in China, castes in India, the dhimmis or ‘protected’ religio-
ethnic minorities within Islam — which provided an organizing basis for the
mobilization of labour, occupational specialization, and enterprise pursuits that
resisted any full subordination to strict market criteria; and (x) a diverse set of
institutionalized and cultural restrictions on modes of inquiry, as variously
imposed by religious and political authorities, such as the “closing of the gate”
of legal interpretation (ijtihad) in Sunni Islam, following codification of the four
approved schools in the mid 9th century, or the educational conservatism that
was enshrined in China’s imperial examination system, a sorting mechanism for
the recruitment of scholar-officials on the basis of their memorization of ancient
classic texts, musical-poetical sensitivities, skills in calligraphy, and adeptness
at ritual grace and propriety.

In presenting these abbreviated expositions of the two prevailing comparative
accounts of modern world history, no suggestion is being made that all matters
of interpretation have been settled, or that every relevant circumstance and detail has found secure integration. These are synthesizing narratives of immense complexity, with weaker and stronger strands of analysis and evidence interwoven in patterns and textures of uneven clarity and solidity. Controversies and disputes within each paradigm continue accordingly. But even as the ideal of full explanatory closure proves elusive, epistemological caution invites reflection. Is it likely that either of these accounts — so complementary in all essential points — could have achieved such wide and lasting recognition, if the evidentiary materials upon which they are based have been grossly misread or mythologized? Is it likely that such productive lines of inquiry could have been sustained for so long if, in actuality, they are projections more ideological than scientific? Accusatory labels such as “Eurocentric” or “Orientalist” are valuable to the extent that they alert us to the realities and the possibilities that socially encoded biases have infiltrated and canted the theories and presuppositions in deploy. They cannot be used, in dismissive license, to circumvent the task of documenting the presence of the alleged bias, as it manifests in the specifics of the interpretations in question.1

1. A distinction surely needs to be made between an ideological or “normative” Eurocentrism, and a historical-sociological analysis that regards certain developments that arose within the European setting, at a particular moment of world-time, as being of paramount importance in shaping global destinies. How can the latter form of “centrism” be objectionable, when so much of the world’s history turns on the rise and fall of successively ascendant powers, of varying hegemonic reach and duration? Cogently focussed is Hall, “Confessions of a Eurocentric” (2001); see also Mann’s response to revisionist criticisms, reaffirming the necessity for long-term perspectives and an integrative focus on comparative questions of social power (2006).

2. The informative review essay on Goody’s work in this journal by Langlois (1989) now reads as a mid-career appraisal.

I. The Revisionist Challenge: A Belated and Incidental Rise of the West?

An opportune and fitting point of entry into this ranging and pivotal dispute is Capitalism and Modernity: The Great Debate (2004), a recent offering by the endlessly productive Jack Goody, an inveterate comparativist now well into his sixth decade of scholarly publication.2 Himself an early dissenter from the mainstream consensus, Goody has long provided a distinctive take on history’s multiple pathways to the present, instructively attentive to such central issues as marriage and inheritance patterns, the social consequences of literacy, technology and state formation, and the cultural expressions of class and power. From his vantage as a specialist in sub-Saharan Africa, it is perhaps not surprising that Goody should be inclined to highlight that continent’s distinctiveness — historical, social, ecological — while also discerning far greater
parallels, continuities, and connections across the major societies of the vast Eurasian landmass. The conventional East-West binary has thus consistently struck Goody as an untenable conceptual framework, and much of his work has been devoted to “washing out” many of the key lines of demarcation (1996).

Never entirely alone in his contrarian leanings, the revisionist ranks have grown perceptibly over the last decade, and Goody is now able to incorporate a wider range of specialist scholarship to inform and supplement his arguments, even as his own contributions afford direction to others rallying to the polycentric persuasion. An expanding armature of mutually supportive citations is suggestive that a “school” is attaining maturity, its leading advocates drawn promisingly from a variety of disciplines. In addition to anthropologist Goody, noteworthy contributions have been made by Marshall Hodgson (1993), an Islamicist; Janet Abu-Lughod (1989), a historical sociologist; Andre Gunder Frank (1998), the iconoclastic economist; James Blaut (1993, 2000), a geographer; Jack Goldstone (2000, 2002), historical sociologist; Roy Bin Wong (1997) and Kenneth Pomeranz (2000), economic historians of China; and John Hobson (2004), a specialist in international relations. What unites this core group of revisionists is a basic agreement on a two-fold claim, strikingly conveyed in the assertion that the European rise to preeminence was, in historical fact, both “late and lucky.” That is to say, not only were there no appreciable differences between the major European powers and those of the Middle East and Asia — in regards to economic productivity, commercial vitality, urban dynamism, and general living standards — up until c.1800, when an industrial revolution did launch the West into a truly global ascendancy; but, in addition, Europe’s movement beyond the general Eurasian pre-industrial pattern was itself fortuitous, an accidental breakthrough made possible by a convenient abundance of English coal and the plundered gains and resources obtained through colonial conquests in the Americas. What is explicitly rejected in all this is any notion that the rise of the West should be explained in terms of a unique set of institutional and cultural transformations that unfolded cumulatively over the longue durée, or that European societies were differentially organized in ways that provided them with an inner dynamic that led progressively towards capitalist modernization.

In proposing this astonishingly novel historical sociology — markedly ahistorical and non-sociological in its underlying premises — the revisionists incur a challenging string of large explanatory obligations. Three appear to be particularly pressing. If, as alleged, decisive European advantages in social capabilities only arose in the wake of industrialization, how are we to account for the preceding three centuries of European encroachment and conquest, and the increasingly manifest incapacity of the Asian powers to repulse the predatory incursions of an unwelcome interloper? Correspondingly, on the revisionist assumption that the major Asian economies were no less technologi-
cally inventive and commercially vibrant than those in Europe up to the end of the 18th century, why were the Eastern imperial states incapable of channeling a measure of that prosperity into greater military preparedness and effectiveness, particularly once the European armed presence left little doubt as to the threats posed for regimes losing control over borders, territories, and populations? Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, if there was no long-term dynamism within the West — i.e., if the societies of western Europe were simply on a developmental par with the pre-industrial civilizations of the East — how could an abrupt breakthrough to industrialization have been even possible, absent a preparatory process that altered the social relations of production, yielded the advanced technological capacities and skills required for machine-based manufacturing, or created the circuits of financing and exchange that provided the requisite capital for sustained investments?

With these adjudicating questions posed, let us turn to Goody’s synoptic restatement of the revisionist case, which we will supplement with a number of corollary arguments that underpin the polycentric program.3

Noting that the lead controversies in the “Great Debate” turn largely on disputes over the causes and timing of three historic developments — those of capitalism, industrialization, and the advent of cultural modernity — Goody opens his critique by challenging the prevailing notion that these complexes form either a unique European experience, or a nexus of necessarily enchained processes. His dissent, like that expressed by his revisionist peers, features a mix of conceptual redefinitions and selective empirical claims. Standard views on capitalism, which emphasize the combined presence of a proletarianized work force whose labour power is procured through the wage mechanism, accumulated capital for productive investments, and the emergence of a mass market for the circulation of commodities geared to the accrual of private profit — the basic syndrome proposed by Marx, Weber, and Polanyi — are, in Goody’s opinion, too narrowly based, and “take a singularly modern European view of history” (p. 5). From the dawn of the Bronze Age (c.3000 BCE) onwards, Goody insists, propertyless labourers have been available for hire and mercantile groups have trafficked in goods produced and sold in markets. While

3. Scholars who belong to what might be called the “multiple modernities” camp are likewise interested in transcending a reified East-West binary, though they typically do not call for a wholesale repudiation of the established narrative of Europe’s developmental dynamism, nor do they discount the role of institutional and cultural differences in the shaping of the distinctive trajectories that collectively comprise world history. A special issue of Daedalus, edited by Eisenstadt and Schluchter (1998), offers an overview. See also the aptly titled Beyond Binary Histories, edited by Lieberman (1999); his own award-winning study on precolonial Southeast Asia (2003) instructively navigates between the excesses of ideological Eurocentrism and revisionist overstatement and evasion.
conceding that both of these features “would grow much more significant in the
eighteenth century with the process of industrialization,” this development
entailed “increases in scale” rather than “innovatory changes” (pp. 4–5).
Industrialization, too, has an antiquated pedigree, as marginal forms of “the
factory mode of production existed in ancient times” (p. 15). As for modernity,
Goody questions the validity of subsuming a cluster of phenomena —
individualism, rationality, pluralism, democracy, romantic love, secularization
— beneath so loose a periodization, an error compounded whenever the
“modern” is used as a polar contrast to all that is purportedly “traditional.”

Having thus jumbled and expansively loosened the conceptual field, Goody
proceeds to assess the various claims for Europe’s distinctive long-term
advantages in social development. On the fundamental issue of technology,
Goody discounts the notion that Europeans enjoyed any demonstrable edge
prior to the industrial revolution. Against the interpretations of two prominent
specialists — Lynn White, Jr., and Joel Mokyr — Goody adopts a countering
line that does not directly dispute the factual record of European inventiveness,
but minimizes its significance by pointing to the occurrence of technological
achievements elsewhere. Thus White’s well-known thesis of a revolutionary
advance in agricultural productivity in the early European Middle Ages, based
on the adoption of the mould-board plough, improved harnesses for draught
animals, iron horseshoes, the spread of the three-field rotation system, and
increased use of advanced windmills and water-wheels, is not refuted by Goody,
but simply censured for an “exclusively European focus” (p. 20). The charge is
a curious one, considering that White makes greater mention of non-European
inventions than does Goody, as can be confirmed by checking the index entries
on China, India, and Islam, in White’s classic study, Medieval Technology and
Social Change (1962). As for Mokyr’s (1990) detailed affirmation of a major

4. A similar view on Bronze Age continuities is offered by Frank (1993, 1998), who posits the
operation of an integrated Afro-Eurasian “world system” of some 5,000 years duration,
cyclically progressing through growth-decline phases and shifting core-periphery relations.
With this grand reification, Frank collapses any distinction between capitalist and pre-capitalist
social formations, thereby eliding those differences in the modes of surplus extraction —
tributary, slave-based, serfdom, petty commodity production, mechanized labour, etc. — that
decisively govern processes of production and attending forms of political dominance. Goody
applauds Frank’s apostasy from Eurocentrism and endorses the notion of a foundational Bronze
Age capitalism, but takes issue with Frank’s monocausal focus on bullion flows and trade
balances (pp. 75–79).

5. Early on and explicitly, White made the very point Goody and other revisionists falsely accuse
him of missing. In his revealingly titled “Tibet, India, and Malaya as Sources of Western
Medieval Technology,” (1960), White explores select aspects of “the remarkable complexity
of the interplay between the Occident and East Asia from Roman and Han times onward. This
involved a two-way traffic, in many items, along many routes, and of varying density in
different periods” (p. 515). How “Eurocentric” is that?
technological surge in Europe between 1500 and 1750, Goody again responds by mentioning a number of important inventions in China and the Islamic world, adding that many Western advances were based on the diffusion of techniques and ideas from the East. Since neither White nor Mokyr deny or ignore the commonplace facts that Goody restates, the point of his criticism is elusive. By conflating two distinct positions — an absurd and unauthored claim that “inventiveness” is an “exclusive prerogative of the Europeans” (p. 20), and an empirically based documentation that in both medieval and early modern Europe, a succession of technological inventions and upgrades combined to greatly enhance productivity and significantly improve working conditions in the agrarian and craft sectors — Goody fails to engage the interpretations he seeks to discredit. It is not, in other words, a question of technological ingenuity per se that is decisive, but the various social articulations that both precede and flow from such discoveries, i.e., the contexts that differentially foster or promote continuous inventiveness and facilitate effective application. To tell us that inventions can be documented for all times and all places does not appreciably advance our understanding of why some societies experience periods of technological dynamism, or stagnation, while others do not.

Goody turns next to “culturalist” explanations for the European ascendancy, by which he means accounts that posit distinctive beliefs, values, and institutional arrangements — e.g., norms of rationality, property rights, religious worldviews, forms of polity — as providing the keys to Europe’s progressive modernization. His principal target is the economic historian David Landes, whose The Wealth and Poverty of Nations (1998) serves as a favored lightning rod for revisionist criticism. The choice here is unsurprising, for in this particular work — unlike Landes’s earlier Unbound Prometheus (1968) — the author organizes his claims within a framing narrative of unabashed boosterism

6. Goody’s rejectionist case might be more convincing if he could enlist the support of the foremost authority on Chinese technology, Joseph Needham. But the great Sinologist’s summary judgment affirms the standard view without equivocation: “The fact is that scientific and technological progress in China went on at a slow and steady rate which was totally overtaken by the exponential rise in the West after the birth of modern science at the Renaissance” (1969: 285, italics added). Note as well that Needham offers a consistently focussed historical sociology on this question, equally stressing that “between the first century B.C. and the fifteenth century A.D., Chinese civilization was much more efficient than accidental in applying human natural knowledge to practical human needs” (1969: 190). A similar “earlier surge/later lull” sociological history of Chinese technology and science is offered by Elvin (1973; 1996). Pomeranz categorically denies any such stagnation, though inexplicably concedes that continuing progress in these areas “did not revolutionize the Chinese economy (2000: 48). For an insightful overview on Indian science and technology, through the ancient, medieval, and colonial periods, see Baber (1996). Adas (1989) offers a fascinating study of European imperialist ideologies, particularly illuminating on changing views regarding non-Western scientific and technological capabilities.
for the liberal-capitalist order, openly celebratory of “free enterprise” and the virtues of “rugged individualism.” Against Landes’s essentialist reifications and dualistic stereotypes regarding entire civilizations (liberty vs. despotism, open vs. closed societies, thrift vs. indolence, even commodities vs. copulation!), Goody encounters little difficulty, and usefully exposes the ideological blinders in play. His specific substantive rejoinders, however, are of questionable cogency.7

On the issue of whether European political institutions provided an advantageous setting or support for developmental modernization, Goody is insistent that alleged historical differences have been overdrawn. He asserts “there have been plenty of ‘democratic’ regimes in the East,” though references in support only the work of Oppenheim on ancient Mesopotamia, and of Thapar on ancient India (p. 42). Since both of these authors carefully delimit the scope and scale of what they take to be partially identifiable “republican” elements — Oppenheim (1964) repeatedly emphasizing the political and economic predominance of palace and temple, as coordinated through a divine kingship that was allied to oligarchical elite families, and Thapar (1966) referring expressly to a transitional phase of “tribal republics” in regions peripheral to the central Indian kingdoms — it is difficult to credit Goody’s sweeping denial of difference with any significance. Does he really wish to convey the impression that Eastern and Western political structures and developmental patterns exhibit no salient contrasts? Apparently so, given observations like the following: “Every ‘despotic’ regime has some consultative procedures, every democratic one some authoritarian ones”; and “in every state system, some rights must rest with the sovereign power and some with the user of the land; a division is critical and universal, though the balance differs” (p. 42). Since Goody leaves this all-important matter of “balance” unexplored and underspecified in every instance of comparison, all we are left with — as he himself later characterizes the “general thrust” of his book — is a methodological injunction, curious and unreasoned, “against drawing too sharp a contrast between East and West in those features of social organization that could relate to the onset of capitalism, modernization and industrialization” (p. 102).

7. He seeks to rebut Landes’s emphasis on economically relevant cultural differences by referring to Iran’s modern oil industry and Iraq’s technologically advanced military, neglecting to mention that both sectors were developed on the basis of science and engineering skills (even personnel) that were largely imported rather than indigenous (p. 30). Also curious is Goody’s charge that Landes’s comparative focus is almost exclusively economic, and thus fails to register “the depth of civilization in other respects, the quotient of sunshine, the standard of cuisine, of clothing and similar factors” (p. 34). Cuisine and fashion I can appreciate, but sunshine as a marker of civilizational depth?
What of Europe’s constitutionally-based political freedoms and forms of civic empowerment? Nothing unique, Goody exclaims, for “all governments could be said to confer social status and political rights, though the latter will differ depending on the type of governance” (pp. 43–4). And since “republican institutions” and “democratic regimes” did flourish “in parts of India, China, and the Near East,” apparently from the Bronze Age onwards, Goody is confident that “men and women elsewhere succeeded in having a say in the running of their lives, especially if they were merchants” (p. 45). Though this thought is an uplifting one, it comes to us without the requisite confirming details on even a single case in support, outlining the political arrangements that bestowed representational institutions, legal-juridical protections, or office-holding powers on the subjects of Eastern potentates, comparable to those we find functioning in the post-feudal polities of Europe. Unattended by any attempted specification of Eastern analogues to, say, the parliamentary developments that brought the prosperous commoners of Europe into the political arena from the late 12th century onwards (e.g., the Spanish cortes, the États Généraux of France, the English House of Commons, the German Reichstag), this revisionist “denial of difference” comes to us not as a substantive discovery of actual commonalities, but as a rhetorical declaration that the sociological variances disclosed by earlier scholarship are either figmentary or irrelevant to understanding the trajectories of world history.

What about the rise of towns during the “weak states” phase of the European Middle Ages, and the urban communes that spawned those economically vigorous city republics and confederations that came under the sway of merchant oligarchies? Again, a dissenting refusal: “the European town was in no way unique as regards the development of the market,” for “Chinese and other Asian towns ... provided more than adequate environments for the growth of commercial exchange” (p. 21). Unfortunately, this unqualified rejoinder likewise abjures any specific comparisons (on credit and insurance, banking, business organization, factor markets, contract law, etc.), and simply ignores the pertinent historical fact that, in Europe, both urban revival and territorial state-formation arose out of the fragmented disarray of the feudal era. Ensuing efforts at royal centralization and consolidation could proceed effectively only through a series of negotiated compacts with those to be incorporated. European towns and cities were the beneficiaries of this particular power constellation, as chartered privileges, immunities, and favoured terms on tolls, customs, and excises stimulated trade and drew settlers keen to “run their own lives” through the exercise of civic enfranchisements. Did the Asian “commercial cities” of which the revisionists speak enjoy the same or similar legal and political

8. A justifiably acclaimed synthesis on this and related topics is provided by Bartlett (1993).
charters? Did they extract or obtain from their imperial rulers comparable powers of self-governance and autonomy, or send voting delegates to national assemblies vested with deliberative responsibilities? Are there Asian counterparts to, say, Venice or Genoa? Or to the federated cities of the German Hansa, a mercantile alliance that sent and received diplomatic missions, and even waged war against the Danish crown (1367–70), imposing terms upon a defeated king that ratified the League’s commercial privileges in the Baltic and reaffirmed the municipal liberties of its member communes? Does the functioning of markets or the economic vitality of cities depend so little upon the political and social contexts in which they are embedded, that we can simply bracket out anything other than strictly commercial considerations? Are merchants who control or influence at least some of the levers of political power — directly relevant for fiscal matters and policies on trade and labour — no better off than those without any comparable “burgher status,” and whose enterprises were oft dependent upon a timely bestowal of “gifts” to the administrative functionaries who requisitioned and taxed at the behest of a sovereign will?9

Turning to the Renaissance and the communications revolution ushered in by Gutenberg’s movable-type press, Goody initially counters with references to “the encyclopaedias of the Sung period” and “the much larger libraries of Islam,” (p. 36), though he later grants that European knowledge systems did move towards greater cumulation and secularity from 1500 onwards, encouraging science and leading on to the Enlightenment (pp. 73–4). Unfortunately, this observation of a notable sociological difference is not expanded upon, nor is it made clear why a European divergence would have occurred in this particular domain, if so many other aspects of social life were marked by a basic Eurasian similarity? As for Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis, Goody claims that the German sociologist’s “comparisons have turned out to be flawed,” and notes that recent studies have documented elements of a similar ethos among the mercantile Jains of India, China’s “highly restrained” Confucians, and the “puritanical” Wahabis of Islam (p. 56). Goody’s familiarity with Weber’s work is in some doubt, however, seeing as Weber himself discussed the parallels between Jainism and ascetic Protestantism on select aspects of life regulation (1958: 199–203), and offered an entire chapter exploring Puritan and Confucian

9. Here again Needham offers a pointed contrast to Goody’s revisionism, expressly proposing that “it is precisely in the inhibition of the rise of merchants to power in the state that we have to look for the reasons for the inhibition of modern science and technology in Chinese culture” (1969: 187). Habib (2002) documents a similar dependent status for the merchants who flourished and functioned within the patrimonial order established under the Sultanate of Dehli and later extended by the Mughals. For institutional arrangements within Islam that constrained capitalistic development more generally, see Kuran (2003).
contrasts (1951). More troubling is Goody’s mistaken notion that Weber’s Protestants were “risk-taking individuals” (p. 88), when the aspects he emphasized were “sober, methodical conduct” and the Puritan’s “reputation for reliable dealings.”

General appeals to the distinctiveness of “Western Individualism” for the emergence of capitalism are correspondingly downplayed by Goody, who alleges that “bourgeois revolutions” led by merchants and literate professionals took hold widely, “in other parts of the world that had seen a mercantile expansion” (pp. 61–2). Repeatedly singled out for their importance and ubiquity, merchants are the collective actors chiefly responsible for the Eurasian parallels and uniformities Goody insists prevailed over the course of more than four millennia, up to the time of Europe’s late breakthrough to modern industrialization. Individualistically entrepreneurial, calculatingly rational, the purveyors of valued commodities and the conduits for cultural interchange and diffusion, merchants are seen by Goody to have functioned in a largely uniform manner — their diverse local milieux or variable structural locations notwithstanding — and to have imparted a comparable dynamism and organizational patterning to all the civilizations that followed in the legacy of the Bronze Age urban revolution.

Where does Goody’s revisionist reconfiguration leave us? The so-called Eurocentric consensus has been dismissed on all key points; and in its place we are to envisage a long Eurasian history of broad developmental parity, of isomorphic or homologous social practices and of comparable advances in rationality, individualism, technology, and economic productivity. Finely-grained cultural and institutional comparisons between East and West have been ruled out in favour of purported commonalities grounded in the pervasiveness of “merchant cultures” and attending market dynamics. All potentially invidious distinctions have been removed, and we are instructed to reappraise world history knowing that, economically, “the distinct qualitative difference between East and West came only with industrialization” (p. 60).

10. The Jewish scholar-merchants of the Genizah district in Cairo (8th and 9th centuries), of Granada and Cordoba (10th century), and of early Reconquest Spain (11th and 12 centuries) are the curious examples cited, their restrictive “ethnic minority” status as dhimmis going unmentioned. Yet Goody assures us that, contrary to the Eurocentric view, “bourgeois revolutions” occurred widely in Islam and in China. That the terms “bourgeois” and “revolution” are being applied a bit loosely here is suggested by the claimant’s failure to provide any accompanying specifics as to how, when, and where these alleged revolutionary transformations occurred, raising mercantile and urban strata to effective political involvement and cultural ascendancy in the empires within which they functioned.
How, then, is this epochal transformation to be accounted for? Goody provides no answer. Having denied that European, Asian, and Middle Eastern histories followed distinctive developmental trajectories, with East and West diverging early on, as directed and enabled by varying sets of cultural, institutional, and ecological resources, he is left without any causal mechanisms to explicate the European breakthrough. The conundrum is inescapable: *a world flattened of determinant social differences makes the local emergence of any historical novelty structurally inexplicable, and restricts explanatory options to conjectures aleatory or incidental.* But is it sensible to renounce a global historical sociology that is founded upon systemic, differentiating comparisons that are temporally specific, and adopt in its stead an analytical strategy that conjoins an insistence on social commonalities of millennial extension with an abrupt and late invocation of radical tychism? This is a logic lacking in both reasoned theoretical justification and empirical persuasiveness; its only expressed rationale is a negating ambition, to overturn a paradigm deemed inherently ideological. So committed, all the many strained denials of any salient East-West differences appear to convey an intentionality of their own: a reaction-formation directed less by a disinterested desire to “get the history right” (an obligation that requires, surely, an unflinching gaze at power and its inequitable dispensations), than by a politico-ethical need to suppress claims of difference through an agreeable invocation of imagined commonalities.11

II. Eurasian Efflorescences and Equilibrium Traps All-Round?
Geographical Contingencies and the Great Divergence

Having discounted orthodox claims that the European passage to capitalist modernity is to be explicated in terms of distinctive institutional and cultural developments that unfolded over centuries, the revisionists proceed to a second and related line of critique: a repudiation of long-standing assumptions that the Eastern civilizations were mired in protracted equilibrium or even stagnation — economic, technological, political, cultural — prior to the catalytic disruptions

11. The “politics of scholarship” has intruded upon Goody’s work on an earlier occasion, during a time when he was professionally troubled by mounting charges that British social anthropology had been complicit — ideologically and functionally — in the business of imperialism. In an insightful book, *The Expansive Moment: Anthropology in Britain and Africa, 1918–1970* (1995), he provides a convincing rejoinder to many of the specific charges, though a mere citation and dismissive remark on the now classic collection edited by Asad, *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (1973), is disappointingly evasive on the larger issues. In the current climate of “political correctness,” it is conceivable that some scholars of Western affiliation might be disposed to downplay or even disparage those social aspects or historical accomplishments that previously found normative affirmation, in a subliminal act of intellectual resistance that allows both a comforting measure guilt-displacement and an imagined solidarity with those on the receiving end of conquest and hegemony.
12. The orthodox interpretation, properly conceived, does not require conditions of perpetual inertia — societies “without history,” so to speak — but only an insistence that such changes as occurred did not alter the basic configuration of centralized agrarian empires, operating in a tributary mode of surplus extraction over peasant majorities and limited and controlled artisanal and mercantile sectors (see Wickham, 1985, for a compelling overview, theoretical and substantive). That patrimonial systems of domination typically held sway in the East is not disputed by revisionists, but this fact is either moderated (as in Goody’s claim that “authoritarian” and “consultative” arrangements are found everywhere), or is considered causally inconsequential as regards the progressive changes they purport to have discovered. Revisionist economics thus comes to us largely untouched by the politics that set limits and directionality — in terms of institutions and the balance of class forces — on what was historically possible. By way of contrast, Needham’s reflections on what he styled China’s “cybernetic homeostasis” remain instructive: “A predominantly mercantile order of society could never arise in Chinese civilization because the basic conception of the mandarinate was opposed not only to the principles of hereditary aristocratic feudalism but also to the value-systems of the wealthy merchants” (1969: 197).


14. The analytical hazard, of course, is that a concentration on micro-regional phenomena can miss or occlude the wider political, economic, and cultural forces at work in these local settings, and so misread or exaggerate the developmental possibilities of sectors whose destinies were occasioned by the European onslaught. Where the orthodox model identifies the major Islamic, Indian, and Chinese imperial powers as “societies of replication,” i.e., as enduring systems that were regularly reconstituted as agro-managerial patrimonial autocracies (with peasant uprisings and periodic military and ecological crises providing grounds for the latest dynastic takeover), the revisionist optic discerns societies of vibrant economic and cultural dynamism, each progressing along its own modernizing course of development. For revisionists, it is China of the Ming and Manchu periods that is said to provide the strongest grounds for abandoning the received dynamism-stasis binary, with developments in Japan, Mughal and Hindu India, and the Islamic Middle East more selectively invoked. Two major publications, Wong’s China Transformed (1997) and Pomeranz’s The Great Divergence (2000), both attempt to make the case that late Imperial China, from roughly 1400 to 1800, experienced massive growth in its economy, brought on by significant gains in agricultural productivity, market-driven commercial expansion, and an incipient industrialization (largely rural) that stimulated inter-regional trade as well as a significant rise in exports. The data mobilized in support of these claims are typically drawn from the most advanced and prosperous regions — principally the Yangzi delta, and the coastal areas active in sea-borne commerce — but this is defended methodologically as a way of comparing “leading edge” sectors, and of avoiding misleading portraits based on aggregate national estimates, where extreme social differences can obscure local trends and potentials for wider development.
Pomeranz, expanding upon earlier suggestions by Wong, paints a surprisingly shimmering portrait of Chinese society, highlighted by standards of living and productive practices he claims were comparable or even superior to those found in Europe: in public health and sanitation, medicine, caloric intake, life expectancies, domestic consumption, soil conservation, scientific and technological competence, agricultural yields, market efficiencies, and even a more balanced income distribution (2000; 2002). Gazing westwards, he can detect little in the European case to suggest that an internally generated breakthrough was in the offing. Across Eurasia, he insists, the more prosperous sectors were proceeding along similar paths — expanding their output through Smithian market specialization and intensifications — but steadily approaching developmental limits, owing to resource and energy constraints under existing productive techniques.

Pomeranz accordingly proposes that neither in Europe nor in Asia was a sustainable “take-off” to modern economic growth historically imminent. On the contrary, the likely destiny for all the more commercially vibrant regions was a “common ‘proto-industrial’ cul-de-sac” (2000: 207), as existing “best practices” would have required ever greater intensifications just to keep pace with population growth and rising resource and energy costs. That the English would be the first to escape this fate was largely fortuitous, attributable to the combined “accidents” of a geology that placed massive deposits of coal within convenient access, and a geography that situated the African and New World continents within proximal predatory and colonizing range. Absent these “exogenous” advantages of coal and colonies, Pomeranz reasons, the leading European economies would not have overcome the energy bottlenecks that beset all other organically fueled societies, nor benefitted from the “windfall gains” of plunder and optimizing trade that attended the expropriation of Amerindian lands, the enslavement of millions of Africans, and establishment of overseas settlements that expansively transformed the domestic economy through maximally stimulative import-export linkages.

So concise and bold a reinterpretation of world history, supported by many dense pages of econometric calculations and critical reappraisals of earlier lines of scholarship, has justifiably attracted immense interest and recognition. But how cogent are the claims informing Pomeranz’s compounded thesis, of “surprising Eurasian similarities” and a “contingently fortuitous” shift in possibilities, with the Europeans gaining lucky access to a range and quantity inextricably bound up within social formations of larger compass. A centralized, bureaucratically administered empire that engaged in massive manpower mobilization, extensive infrastructural development and maintenance, strategic resource management, and integrative economic regulation, would appear to be a high-risk choice for this particular strategy.
of resources that suddenly propels and makes possible their divergent modernization?

Intensive criticism, from European as well as Chinese specialists, is steadily mounting, directed not only at the empirical foundations of Pomeranz’s argument, but also against the ordering narrative he proposes to explicate his “late great divergence.” For Pomeranz’s historiography is not so much based on bringing to light new or unfamiliar sources of information, but is carried in the main by recalculations and realignments of existing data. Moreover, as all authorities here acknowledge, it is exceedingly difficult to construct reliable quantitative indices for the economic history of premodern China, given the unevenness and paucity of relevant statistics and quantifiable records — on prices, wages, costs, incomes, resources, output, etc. — for any period much earlier than the Republican era. Pomeranz himself concedes that his quantifying efforts are based on “admittedly spotty data” and often involve a complicated series of “backward projections” from later and indirect evidentiary sources. To read his book’s six technical appendices — or better, to peruse his critical exchanges with those who take issue with his estimates and calculations, is to immediately appreciate that econometric historiography is an enterprise admirably long on ambition, arduous if not arcane in its operations, and unsettlingly speculative in its findings.15

Perhaps no issue has stirred greater controversy than Pomeranz’s assertion that the more prosperous regions in late Imperial China featured productive practices and living standards that either matched or bettered those found in comparable European settings. Critics contend, however, that his surprising recalculations and estimates — on life expectancies, consumption patterns, earnings, productivity yields, soil conservation, etc. — impart an unwarranted positive tilt to the Chinese scenario, while minimizing confirmed European achievements in these and related areas (as detailed in Huang, 2002, 2003; Brenner and Isett, 2002; Duchesne 2004). Arbitration here must await continued sifting by the specialists, but with the issues so deeply contested, it is clear that Pomeranz’s empirical claims are more provocative than proven.16

15. Lest this be misread to imply a blanket refusal of “cliometrics,” let the challenge be stated more precisely. Where quantifiable records are beset by problems of reliability and representativeness, ensuing efforts at narration can carry only provisional exploratory value. Any array of numerical indicators so derived must be tested and probed for their resonance and consistency with the wider range of sources available — texts, material artefacts, cultural continuities, known historical outcomes, etc. Otherwise, suspicion will remain high that the findings are a mirage of method, imaginatively fashioned out of the orienting suppositions and categories that frame and order the data.

16. On the basis of extensive price and wage data, Broadberry and Gupta (2006) conclude, contra Pomeranz, that “the prosperous parts of Asia between 1500 and 1800 look similar to the stagnating southern, central, and eastern parts of Europe rather than the developing northern
Central to the revisionist argument is a purported discovery of a Ming-Manchu “efflorescence” marked by rising productivity, widening networks of commercial exchange, and a robust expansion in rural-based manufacturing (chiefly in textiles) — a growth pattern allegedly no less dynamic than those occurring in the leading economic regions of western Europe. In confirmation of this “economic boom,” Pomeranz points to the sundry “living longer, living better” indices he has constructed, and thereupon deduces that the Chinese and English economies — at least in their advanced sectors — could not have been trending along significantly different trajectories. This latter inference is surely problematic. For even if one were to grant a general parity in abstracted indicators like life expectancy, tea and sugar consumption, home furnishings, and fertility rates, this does not necessitate or imply that the economies in question exhibited a corresponding isomorphism, seeing as life-quality measures have complexly diverse and multiple determinations. The crucial issues in contention, moreover, concern developmental possibilities, and the ways in which material surpluses were produced and differentially appropriated. Indeed, if the consensus view is to be overturned, what the revisionists must demonstrate is that China and western Europe were undergoing comparable structural transformations, in (a) shifting the balance of material production away from agriculture and increasingly towards industrial manufacturing, and (b) that profits from commodity exchanges and capital investments were correspondingly gaining ground against taxation revenues, rental fees, usury, pawnbrokerage, and other forms of economic traditionalism. No such comparative demonstration has been offered.17

That late Imperial China experienced phases of both overall and sectorial economic expansion has long been recognized. For proponents of the estab-

parts” (p. 26). The Ottoman case appears comparable. Examining both skilled and unskilled employments, Ozmucur and Pamuk (2002) establish the following: “real wages in Ottoman cities were lower in 1750 than in 1500, ... real wages in northwestern Europe (Amsterdam, Antwerp, and London) were already higher than in Istanbul at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and ... this gap remained roughly unchanged up to the Industrial Revolution” (p. 316).

17. Frustratingly absent from the revisionist narrative is any effort to identify the institutional and cultural possibilities for indigenous capitalist transformation of the social order. But is it conceivable that Chinese officialdom, or the patrimonial elites of the Mughal or Ottoman empires, would have facilitated or tolerated the ascendancy of mercantile interests? Did commercial expansion and entrepreneurial enrichment attain such levels that new class forces and alignments were on the verge of ushering in “bourgeois revolutions,” or state policies solicitous of private capital accumulation? Were the requisite scientific and technological foundations in place for a full-scale mechanization of production and transport? Or do Pomeranz and Wong simply wish to argue, counterfactually, that the “exogenous inputs” of coal and colonies — their causal trigger for the English breakthrough — would have spurred a comparable developmental advance in China, institutional arrangements notwithstanding?
lished view, however, this dynamic must be situated within the context of a rapidly multiplying population: rising from an estimated 100 million in 1500, to 150 million in 1700, passing beyond 300 million by 1800, and expanding to over 400 million by 1850. Given that core production technologies were not significantly improved over this period, most scholars have characterized Ming and Manchu era growth as largely quantitative, a multiplication of output and exchanges that reflected the sheer growing density of the human population and attending needs to intensify production. Hence Elvin’s familiar notion of a “high-level equilibrium trap” (1973, 1996), wherein a pre-modern production regime of considerable sophistication, based on advanced irrigation works and high-yield agriculture, can sustain population growth and acceptable living standards quite durably, but only to a point. For in the absence of mechanization and the tapping of new energy sources, ecological constraints will inexorably begin to issue in resource shortages and diminishing returns on continued labour intensifications. Land clearance and reclamation projects (e.g., frontier expansion, deforestation, the draining of lakes and marshes, terracing at higher elevations), the switch to early ripening varieties of rice, double-cropping, an increasing use of bean cakes fertilizer, the adoption of New World cultigens for more marginal soils (corn, peanuts, sweet potatoes), the expansion of textile handicrafts within the peasant household, widening circuits of commercial exchange — all these enhancements in overall production do not appear to have generated a proportional growth in the available surplus, as an accelerating population surge literally consumed the higher levels of output that were being attained through intensifications.18

Here, then, is a major difficulty for the revisionist argument, for if China’s remarkable population growth more or less kept pace with (or drove) the quantitative expansion in material output, the Ming-Manchu “efflorescence” would more plausibly signal a maximizing of the potential within the existing means of production, rather than a transformative dynamism comparable to that which would carry England and northwestern Europe into capitalist modernization. Not surprisingly, therefore, the revisionist paradigm is accompanied by a revisionist demography.

Dismissing the standard “Malthusian mythology” of a late Imperial China increasingly subject to social strains brought on by an unsustainable increase in population, a team of revisionist demographers — led by historian James Lee

18. Maddison (1998: 32), synthesizing much of the specialist research, provides data showing that even with land extension projects and improved agricultural practices, grain output per capita remained essentially flat from roughly 1400 to 1820 — a finding largely explicable in terms of a demographic increase that resulted in progressively smaller plot-holdings for the peasant majority. China’s increasingly unfavorable land:population imbalance is the focus of a richly detailed economic and social history offered by Chao (1986).
and sociologists Wang Feng and Cameron Campbell (2002) — proposes an alternative interpretation that posits significantly lower marital fertility rates and a correspondingly manageable population trajectory. While offering, paradoxically, even higher population estimates than those listed above for the orthodox view (125 million in 1500, 200 million in 1700, upwards of 350 million by 1800, and a staggering 500 million by 1900), Lee, Feng, and Campbell discount any notion that “overpopulation” was a significant factor in bringing on late Imperial China’s mounting social crises — large-scale famines, epidemics, peasant rebellions, rent strikes, protests against rising food prices, vagabondage, banditry and piracy, aboriginal uprisings, ecological degradation and resource depletions — and suggest instead that these are all attributable, in ways unspecified, to “political and organizational problems, not excess population per se” (2002: 594). This disjunctive interpretation is based on what they take to be their central discovery: Chinese couples had been limiting their reproduction rationally over many centuries, through a pattern of “late starting, long spacing, and early stopping.” Though this alleged behavioral syndrome is inconsistent with most of the available historical-cultural data, which is overwhelmingly suggestive of a strong pro-natalist orientation and practice (particularly pronounced for the genealogical/religious imperative of producing sons, as popularly expressed in the duo zi duo fu slogan of ‘more sons more fortune’), and is difficult to reconcile with the social and ecological crises just mentioned, Lee, Feng, and Campbell believe their quantitative simulations and recalculations permit no other inference. “Chinese fertility rates,” they insist, “are so low that they are almost inconceivable without assuming widespread sexual restraint and/or the technology for family limitation” (Lee and Campbell, 1997: 91–92). However, neither the claim of low fertility nor the inference of widespread birth control seem secure on closer methodological examination and a consideration of wider evidentiary indicators.

Lee, Feng, and Campbell’s revisionist demography relies heavily on three data sources: a genealogical record of the Manchu imperial lineage, covering the years 1700 to 1840; the household registers of Han military families living in a village in Liaoning province, Manchuria, from 1774 to 1873; and a Chinese government fertility survey taken in 1982, of rural women born between 1914 and 1930. Employing computer simulations and mathematical modeling, Lee, Feng, and Cameron calculate that the total marital fertility rate in late Imperial China ranged from an average low of 5.3 births per married woman to a high of 6.5, varying by region and status (2002: 595). Their corresponding estimate for European populations is a marital fertility rate of 8 to 9 births. Are these figures reliable? Specialists have noted that their sources are not without problems: population dynamics in an imperial lineage are unlikely to be representative of the fertility practices of the vast rural population; the registers for the Han Army Eight Banner military farmers (working on state-owned lands) were not
carefully maintained, and systemic under-registration — to avoid rising service obligations — is likely to have resulted in significant undercounting; and as the sample from the third source is historically late, it attests primarily to post-Imperial developments (for discussion and bibliography, see Wolf, 2001). More troubling, however, are several analytical decisions that underpin revisionist mathematics: the use of sociologically dubious homogeneity and linearity assumptions in estimating population trends over the many centuries of the Ming-Manchu dynastic reigns; a decision not to adjust for the massive mortality crises associated with major famines or the many violent popular uprisings, such as the White Lotus (1796–1804), Celestial Order (1811–14), Eight Trigrams (1813), Taiping (1850–64), Nian (1853–68), Miao (1850–72), and Muslim rebellions (1855–74), the inclusive casualty toll for which ranges from an estimated low of 60 million to a high of 118 million (Fairbank, 1998: 216; Huang, 2002: 528); comparisons between China and Europe that feature marital rather than total fertility rate estimates, which mislead by failing to register the markedly higher levels of European females who never married (Wolf and Engelen, 2006); and an innovation in demographic logic that reclassifies female infanticide as “postnatal abortion,” a category shift that excludes these births from their mortality and fertility counts, and which results, respectively, in inflated life expectancy calculations and in depressed estimates for total marital fertility. Given the apparent artifice of the mathematics, and the fact that other detailed studies of genealogical records by demographic specialists have consistently yielded much higher fertility estimates, typically on the order of 7 to 8 births (discussed in Wolf, 2001: 136–37), it is difficult to credit revisionist claims on these issues.19

Moreover, as Wolf has proposed, an inferred procreation strategy of “late starting, wide spacing, and early stopping” (with its attending high risks of failing to secure the desired family composition) readily permits an alternative interpretation more consistent with the extensive evidence on mounting social distresses for the peasant masses: i.e., as a correlate of chronic malnutrition, untreated health problems, the custom of taking subfecund adolescent brides, and the accumulating physical toll of intense manual labour and of pregnancies that commonly issued in female infanticide (generally estimated at 25% for all female births). Nor does the revisionist rendition cohere with what is known of China’s traditional pro-natalist culture, as Wolf’s pointed summary establishes:

19. As the authors state in reply to their critics: “One key assumption in this exercise is the constancy of population birth and death rates, or the assumption of a stable population regime” (2002: 602, italics added). While conceding that this mathematically convenient fiction is “far from the historical reality,” they fail to consider the multiple ways in which a methodological reliance upon linearity and homogeneity assumptions is likely to modulate, and so misrepresent, the more turbulent and interactive historical processes in question.
“Birth control was not a Chinese theme... Medical texts did not label abortifi-
cients as such; they did not describe them in detail; they did not compare them in terms of their effectiveness; proverbs did not recommend birth control as a provident strategy; they did not ridicule the man who improvidently raised five sons; the symbols decorating weddings did not suggest that newly-weds should wait a while before starting a family; they did not hint at the advantages of an early end to childbearing; and when Chinese officials worried about the balance of population and resources, they did not advocate birth control as a solution ... [but] tried to persuade tradesmen and artisans to return to farming and sought to discourage farmers from planting commercial crops” (2001: 151–52).

The revisionist bid to dispel the Malthusian spectre of an increasingly unmanageable growth in population invokes the “rational birth control” inference as a decisive objection, and is insistent that the various social crises that destabilized the imperial order over the course of the nineteenth century were unconnected with the demographic increase that did occur. Evidence to the contrary, however, is substantial. Peasant uprisings are usually a strong indicator of agrarian distress, whether occasioned by intensified tax and tribute exactions from crown and bureaucracy, expropriating predations and “rent squeezing” by landed elites, or a “land hunger” crisis brought on by excessive population pressures. Though the Manchu state generally adopted a protectionist policy as regards its majoritarian peasant population, and its tax bite appears to have been modest (probably under 10%, in contrast to the 40% of the crop estimated to have been appropriated by Mughal imperial elites), the fiscal system did permit a massive “leakage” of resources and funds to the local officials who directed its operation and their gentry allies who effectively conspired to minimize their own share of the tax responsibility. Stern warnings and

20. Lee, Campbell, and Feng do not display much interest in these ethnographic criticisms, taking their stand on what they regard as the manifest superiority of “social scientific history” over traditional “social history” (2002: 601–2). The former method, they tell us, “uses empirical evidence to identify patterns through a rigorous process of deduction as well as a systematic process of induction,” whereas the latter “relies on assertion and illustration.” The scientific findings attained through stylized models and large quantitative data-sets are not shaken by “the presentation of selected counterexamples that may well, indeed should, exist, but as minority phenomena.” Some might read in these comments an epistemological overconfidence in the assumption sensitive arts of number-crunching, and in the capacity of the formalized mathematics to track and explicate the anfractuous proceedings of real-world histories.

21. Habib has calculated that the top 445 officials of the Mughal regime (the mansabdars, whose total numbers ranged on the order of 8000) were recipients of roughly 60% of the imperial revenue; and of these, 68 grand princes and nobles were assigned rent and tax benefices (jagirs) that covered nearly a third of the empire’s territorial expanse. These immense resources were necessary to provision the military contingents that each official was expected to maintain; but even after disbursing their assigned income on the soldiery, these mansabdars remained fabulously enriched (2002: 95–99). While wealth concentration in late Imperial China does not appear to have reached so striking an imbalance, and large-scale landlordism
moralizing laments against the reality of massive corruption were repeatedly sounded in official pronouncements, but as every attempted reform intended the continuance of the imperial system, no effort was made to break the functional symbiosis (and circulation) between officials and gentry, whose shared social origins and economic interests precluded any curtailment of their customary privileges or opportunities for extortionate enrichment. Hard-pressed by these illegal exactions and the manipulated tax burdens, large numbers of peasant families were driven into unfavorable tenancy arrangements — perhaps upwards of 50% of the households in the core Yangzi provinces, and an estimated 20% in the poorer north and western regions (Esherick, 1981: 395). Customary rental fees could claim up to half the annual harvest, yet competition for these tenancy leases only intensified, in the wake of a population tide that added continuously to an already glutted supply of rural labour. As the population pressed ever more heavily upon the cultivable land, ecologically destructive deforestations and land-clearing drainage projects resulted in only marginal gains and more frequent and devastating droughts and floods, disasters that carried malnutrition, famine, and epidemics in their wake. Little wonder that brigandage and piracy grew rampant, that aboriginal peoples rose against Han territorial encroachments and colonization, or that millenarian and messianic promises gave direction and hope to millions of impoverished and desperate people who took up arms repeatedly against an autocratic conquest regime and those of enriched privilege who benefitted from its inequitable dispensations.23

22. As reported in the Manchu Veritable Records for 1806: “when the tribute grain is collected the local officials in the provinces collect more than the amount sanctioned by law... [They] have gentry of bad character act as their agents in coercing payment... [They] bribe them in advance, granting them the right to contract for a certain portion of the tribute grain. The rustics and the poor have a redoubled burden because these persons can levy an excess amount from them just as they please” (quoted in Elvin, 1996: 15–16). The consensus view is that the entrenched problem of bureaucratic corruption grew more debilitating from the mid-eighteenth century on, and contributed significantly to the Manchu state’s administrative difficulties in responding to natural disasters, social crises, and the growing intrusions of the European “barbarians.” An insightful and richly documented overview is provided by Park (1997).

23. The major clandestine religious organizations and movements — inspired by an eclectic range of Buddhist, Manichaean, Daoist, Islamic, Christian, and folk religious beliefs — commonly assumed a social protest and utopian edge as they erupted into open rebellions. The various White Lotus uprisings, for example, typically featured the promised earthly manifestation of
Against this backdrop of rising social disturbances and ecological stresses — abundantly attested to in the local gazetteers and in the official records — the revisionist discovery of an “economic boom,” an “efflorescence” of rising productivity and prosperity, stands out in puzzling incongruity. For how is it possible that an agrarian population could double or triple in size within a compressed temporal period and on a finite surface of quality arable, without accompanying technological advances or dramatic resource and energy capture, and yet still achieve productivity gains and rising living standards? Pomeranz, Wong, and Goldstone see the increasing commercialization and proto-industrialization of the countryside as the affluence-generating processes at work here — as in the advanced regions of Europe — but critics contend that they have falsely assimilated two radically different social-historical contexts, and so have erroneously assumed a uniform or broadly similar developmental dynamism.

In an important series of publications, the historian Philip Huang has applied the term “involution” to characterize the uniqueness of late Imperial China’s socio-economic trajectory, which followed a course of “output growth without productivity development” (1990, 2002). That is to say, although forms of economic growth did take place — a significant expansion in rural handicraft production, widening commercial exchanges, and an overall increase in agricultural yields — the social specificities and articulations of these forms were all conditioned by the constraints brought on by a steadily deteriorating land-population ratio. As plot-holdings declined in size through the combined workings of partible male inheritance and a surge in population, peasant families found it increasingly difficult to secure a livelihood through agricultural production. By the close of the eighteenth century, average farm size in the Yangzi delta had fallen to a mere 1.25 acres (down from the 4 to 5 acre range of earlier periods) — this at a time when England’s farms were swelling to averages beyond 100 acres, through enclosures and consolidations (Huang, 2002: 511). A similar trend of excessive parcellization has been documented for the North China macro-region, where average holdings had declined to 2.5 acres, farms of over 20 acres were increasingly rare, and where the landless now encompassed more than a quarter of all rural households (Spence, 1991: 95). The mounting subsistence pressures that attended this severe compression in holdings necessitated a compensatory expansion in what had formerly been a subsidiary seasonal activity: domestic textile production, the marketable demand for which grew apace with a rising population. But contrary to revisionist views
that the growth in silk and cotton handicrafts signaled a modernizing advance, an enrichment that increased life expectancy and sustained higher consumption levels, most scholars view this development as a preservation strategy, a desperate struggle by land-hungry peasants to fend off destitution through a relentless intensification of family labour.

The high-yield returns afforded by irrigated rice production could not be matched by a corresponding shift into textiles. The largest part of cloth production, spinning, returned only a third to a half of what could be earned through grain production, while cotton cultivation typically required twice as much labour per unit of land as did rice (Huang, 2002). Contemporary witnesses leave little doubt as to the difficulties and hardships that confronted the rural population, as in this report from an advanced region in the delta, c.1750: “The peasants here get only three months of food from their rice fields. After they pay off their rent, they hull the rest of the rice ... and turn it over to the pawnshop to redeem their clothing. In the early spring, the entire household spins and weaves in order to exchange cloth for rice, because the family no longer has any grain left” (quoted in Huang, 2002: 518). Or, from another delta gazetteer: “The poor folk go to the market at the break of day with what they have spun or woven, exchange it for raw cotton. ... They burn oil lamps to work in the hours of darkness. Men and women sometimes do not sleep the whole night through. When farming families have a harvest, once they have used it to pay off their obligations to the state, their dwellings are bare at the end of the year, so they rely entirely on this industry for their clothing and food” (quoted in Elvin, 2004: 214). Poetry from the Ming-Manchu era conveys the same prevailing reality, of debts, taxes, and rents driving peasant households into unrelenting labour: “By candlelight they work through darkness. Forget their beds ... The quilts are cold”; “Hungry, she still weaves. And numbed with cold, still weaves. Shuttle after shuttle after shuttle ... she tries to get it done, ... her strength deserts her, and she turns away, to choke down tears — Consoles herself they have done better than those next door, so destitute, that once they’d sold their loom, they’d had to sell — their son” (from Elvin, 1996: 45–47). 24

24. In reply to Huang’s criticisms, Pomeranz concedes that Yangzi peasants intensified their labour as they shifted greater efforts into textile production and multicropping. He insists, however, that it is gross output that matters, not labour inputs: “If I work twice as long on my one-acre plot as somebody else but get twice as much from it, I do not suffer from lower returns to my labor: we eat and wear what is produced, not the land it is produced upon” (2002: 543). Is there an “academic” disconnect here between mental and manual forms of exertion? A life of exhausting physical labour normally entails pronounced physiological deterioration, psychological stress, and premature aging — outcomes not easily reconciled with Pomeranz’s “living longer, living better” claims for the Chinese peasantry. Correspondingly, an intensifying effort to maintain or increase yields from diminishing land holdings cannot be extended indefinitely, and will eventually issue in soil exhaustion and decreasing marginal returns.
The expansion of textile spinning and weaving within the peasant household ushered in neither an economic boom nor a dynamic that would structurally transform the workings of the late Imperial economy. Even as late as the 1890s, handicrafts contributed only an estimated 8% to the Gross Domestic Product, trade roughly another 8%, whereas nearly 70% of the total was generated in agriculture — hardly a surprising profile for a society that remained overwhelmingly agrarian, even into the 1950s, when the rural population still dwarfed the urban at an 88% to 12% imbalance (Maddison, 1999: 155; 77).

Indeed, as critics of the revisionist argument have extensively documented, the developmental contrasts with England and the more advanced European regions could not be more striking. Where Chinese agriculture remained massively bound to small-scale peasant production, on diminishing holdings that necessitated an intensification in domestic handicrafts to secure subsistence, European agriculture passed through a series of transformations that were revolutionary in their social and economic consequences. By 1800, English farms ranged on average between 100 and 150 acres, a doubling in size from c.1600, and roughly 130 times larger than contemporaneous farms in the Yangzi delta (Brenner and Isett, 2002: 619–21). These larger units permitted a more synergistic mix of grain production and livestock rearing, which significantly improved diets, increased productivity through the substitution of horse and oxen for human labour, and enhanced soil fertility through increased manuring and the rotation of staple cereals with nitrogen-fixing forage crops. Between 1600 and 1800, the English population grew from roughly 4 to 8.5 million, but the percentage of those engaged in agriculture actually fell by nearly one-half, from 70% of the total to 36%, all accompanied by remarkable gains in per capita productivity (nearly a 60% increase in the 18th century alone), rising discretionary incomes, and a doubling of grain and livestock output from 1700 to 1800 (Duchesne, 2001: 453–55; Huang, 2002: 502–3). Chinese peasants, in contrast, were increasingly driven into a crops-only pattern, as contracting plots ruled out the planting of fodder cereals or grasses (leaving room only for scavenger pigs and poultry), and led to the reverse substitution of human for animal labour power. Where commercialized farms employing wage labour grew significantly in Europe, the larger farming units in the Yangzi delta that offered hired employment virtually disappeared over the course of the Manchu era, as peasant households were able to operate below the market rates for paid employment, simply by intensifying demands on family labour (Huang, 2002: 514; see also Gates, 1996, particularly insightful on the patriarchal exploitation of female labour power).25

25. The Jesuit scholars residing in China provide invaluable comparative commentary, much of it informed by balanced appraisals, critical as well as positive, of both their host and home environments. Elvin quotes a highly revealing passage, from c.1750: “In France, the land rests every other year. In many places there are vast tracts under fallow. The countryside is broken
Where the productivity revolution in European agriculture increasingly released labour for proto-industrial and factory employments, the Chinese pattern of concentrating handicrafts within the peasant household produced no structural differentiation between the two sectors; nor did it foster any comparable growth-enhancing articulations between town and country. Where western Europe witnessed a dramatic increase in urban population, particularly in small and mid-sized manufacturing towns and cities, China experienced no parallel dynamism, as its economy remained tied to subsistence farming and supplemental domestic handicrafts — a social arrangement that restricted the scope for economies of scale and limited both the demand stimulus for industrialized commodity production and the capital accumulation necessary for its expansion (Brenner and Isett, 2002: 632–36). The demographic realities of mounting land scarcity and a surfeit of cheap labour decisively governed all economic considerations, even to the point of resisting the spread of labour-saving technologies and the coordinating concentration of employment in town workshops and factories. In the textile sector, for example, the cheap production costs of peasant handicrafts long delayed the advance of machine-spun yarn and weaving (Xu, 1988; Huang, 2002: 519); and despite the fact that multi-spindle wheels and advanced hemp-spinning machines had appeared in China as early as the 1300s, they found scant utilization in a society where labour costs were so low that the productivity advantages of machinery could attract little interest, or investment (Elvin, 1996).26 Rentier orientations thus prevailed over technological and industrial interests, as various forms of landlordism, leasing out...
an estimated 40% of the country’s arable (Esherick, 1981), along with traditional money-lending and pawnbrokerage, consistently yielded the safest and highest average returns, ranging upwards of 50% (Gernet, 1993: 571). And while entrepreneurial merchants and artisans in Europe were exerting greater control over production, through “putting-out” mechanisms of advancing raw materials and equipment to rural and town workers, Chinese merchants generally adhered to a commercial strategy of simply purchasing output from larger numbers of peasant households, seeking price advantages rather than improved means of production (see Elvin, 1996: 48–60).²⁷

Given all these pronounced differences in social organization and in economic practices, is it sociologically plausible that the advanced regions of China and Western Europe were trending along a comparable developmental course, a shared trajectory that would have yielded similar outcomes, but for the “accidents” of geography? How can a society that remained overwhelmingly agrarian, increasingly overpopulated relative to resources and technologically stationary, and whose key social players were peasants, rentier landlords, merchants, and a stratum of governing officials whose training was literary rather than technical, have been open to the developmental possibilities of a society that was increasingly urban-based, effectively harnessing new scientific knowledge to technologies that were revolutionizing the means of production, and whose key social players were, as these changes unfolded, capitalistic farmers, proletarians, industrialists, and parliamentary representatives? To advance a “Eurasian similarity” thesis on the basis of data-poor econometric indexes and estimates — of life expectancy, fertility rates, consumption patterns, grain yields, textile output, and fertilizer levels — without a systematic

²⁷. Goody, Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz all tend to elide or blur the distinction between merchant and industrial capital, which results in a sociologically insecure engagement with the historic rise of capitalism as a mode of production. But as Marx and Weber both established, the mere co-presence of commodities and merchants does not yield capitalistic social relations. Mercantile capital is typically deployed to facilitate pricing differentials — buying low, selling high — by exploiting timing and distance advantages. Gains are realized through the price disequilibria occasioned by shortages or gluts (via monopolies, social or natural crises, supply-demand imbalances), and by trafficking goods between regions marked by dissimilar production capabilities (owing to resource availability, labour and technology factors, etc.). Merchants everywhere have operated in this fashion, their capital circulating as a mechanism that links consumers and producers in local and regional networks of exchange. Industrial capital, in marked contrast, generates surplus value by seizing direct hold of the production process, which it progressively revolutionizes by way of technological improvements and by subjecting “free” labour to the controlling disciplines of wage and factory. To conflate commerce with capitalism, or to substitute the anodyne category of “economic growth” for a more precise concern with the functioning and articulations of specific modes of production, exchange, and exploitation, is to dull rather than sharpen our understanding of social-historical processes.
The West and the Rest Revisited: Debating Capitalist Origins  433

effort to comprehend and explicate those findings by contextualizing them within their specific institutional and cultural settings, is to propose isomorphisms and parallels without having produced the requisite historical sociology. An abstractive economism that neglects or obscures the causally determinant implications of markedly variant social structures can hardly provide compelling grounds for a new narrative of comparative world history.

Specificities of history and sociology likewise loom large in orthodox rejoinders to the Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz contention that it was “coal and colonies” that provided Europeans with their late and fortuitous “breakout” capacity. Apart from implausibly reducing questions of developmental growth and blockage to matters of resource availability, this contingency argument fails for a number of reasons. To begin with, standard “Eurocentric” accounts of the industrial revolution do recognize the importance of the shift to inanimate forms of energy, as well as the benefits derived from colonial expropriations. But industrializing processes were well underway prior to any significant utilization of coal, and likewise preceded, and would even make possible, major increases in the import-export trade (Vries, 2001). Coal in the ground counts for little without the technical means and mining skills to extract and process it into usable energy — as appears to have been the case with late Imperial China, which while abundantly endowed with this mineral (ranking third globally in verified reserves), failed to exploit its potential until after the inroads of Western capitalist penetration (and despite having pioneered coke and iron production centuries earlier in the Song period). Transoceanic colonies likewise did not simply become available as a “resource windfall,” but were seized and effectively utilized on the basis of advanced shipping and navigation capacity, political-administrative coordination, a pronounced and growing military superiority, and technologically dynamic economies that sustained and deepened these ventures in empire. In a word, the latent advantages of geology and geography only became manifest upon the development of new forms of European power projection.

28. Marx’s position is unambiguous: “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre” (in Chapter xxxi, Capital, Volume 1 [1867] 1967: 751). More prosaically, Weber registers the same fundamental point: “The acquisition of colonies by the European states led to a gigantic acquisition of wealth in Europe for all of them. The means of this accumulation was the monopolizing of colonial products, and also of the markets of the colonies, that is the right to take goods into them, and, finally, the profits of transportation between mother land and colony” ([1927] 1981: 298).
The revisionist position also misleadingly discounts the preponderant role of intra-European trade, which dwarfed in volume and value all colonial exchanges. Even for England, the world’s foremost trading nation by 1800, commerce beyond the bounds of Europe contributed less than 10% to the English total (O’Brien, 1982, 1997; O’Rourke and Williamson, 2002). Revisionists downplay as well the capacity of regions such as Scandinavia, the Baltics, Eastern Europe, and Russia to supply many of the key raw resources and grains that stoked the emerging capitalist juggernaut. France would industrialize without much reliance on coal, securing essential energy needs through waterwheels and turbines, while the Dutch sustained a number of key industries on the heat energy provided by peat (see Duchesne, 2004). And as economic historians have extensively documented, it was not the comparative cheapness of colonial resources that provided Europeans with their decisive advantage, but the astounding productivity gains that came with mechanization and the factory organization of labour. Savery’s steam pump (1698), Newcomen’s atmospheric engine (1705), the fly shuttle (1733), spinning frame (1738), carding machine (1750), cylindrical air pumps (1761), steam engine (1769), spinning jenny (1770), Crompton’s mule (1779), cylindrical press (1783), rolling mill (1783), steam hammer (1784), power loom (1785), metal-turning lathe (1797), boring machines (1803), the hydraulic turbine (1825): these were the technological advances that resulted in revolutionary enhancements in productive power and in ensuing material enrichment, which in turn extended and secured the European ascent to global preeminence and imperialist hegemony.

Revisionist polycentrism, both as history and as sociology, is lacking in explanatory coherence. Eurasian similarities and shared trajectories are alleged, but such presumptions are belied by the radically differing dispensations that would ensue. The protracted and forcible dominion of the West over the Rest was an occurrence of world-shattering, transformative consequences; it cannot logically be accounted for on the basis of fundamental similarities between conqueror and conquered, oppressor and oppressed, but must, in the very nature of so inequitable an outcome, register the relational consequences of differences and disparities — political, military, economic, technological, cultural, ecological — as these played out in a coercive contest for land, resources, mastery. The historic rise and fall of local as well as more extended systems of domination is ever keyed to these shifting and unequal equations of power, from which hegemonies and empires derive their social possibilities, whether Assyrian or Mongol, Aztec or Zulu, Han or Mughal, American or Soviet. By failing to place their purported isomorphisms and parallels within the larger problematic of why the various Middle Eastern and Asian empires would collapse or succumb before the European onslaught, from its mercantile-piratical beginnings to subsequent colonial settlement and industrialized
militarism, the polycentric paradigm provides no insights as to how the modern global hierarchy came into being. Before and After have here lost their necessary connectedness.  

III. World History as Ephemeral Causation and Radical Contingency?  
A Critique of Polycentric Analytics

Revisionist polycentrism proposes a sweeping new narrative for world history. Discounting as ideological the established consensus, which explicates the developmental histories of the major Asian, Middle Eastern, and European societies, as these were shaped by diverse ecological settings and resource endowments, varying institutional arrangements and cultural patterns, the revisionists offer an account that posits long-standing Eurasian similarities and a comparable modernizing dynamism. Repudiating the “old story line” of variant trajectories, parallel itineraries are alleged, with a late great divergence arising only through the boons of geography, which bestowed upon Europeans a resource windfall that made possible and sustained their industrial breakthrough.

The empirical support for these innovative claims consists mainly of decontextualized econometric estimates, utilizing thin and uneven data sources; ethnographic testimony from contemporaries — a keystone in much of the orthodox historiography — is rarely invoked. Even more problematic is the theoretical logic that is implicit, and necessary, to render the revisionist narrative plausible. For what this perspective presupposes, as an ontology, is a

29. Revisionists are willing, even eager, to grant that the early modern Europeans did surpass their co-inhabitants of the globe in one particular capacity: that of effective armed violence. But their treatment of this issue, commonly styled the European “military revolution” (see Parker, 1996), is as decontextualizing as is their account of the later industrial revolution. For rather than acknowledge that the growing European advantage in armed coercion was made possible by and integral to wider social developments — economic, political-administrative, technological, and scientific — revisionists simply present this as an unaccounted for propensity. Indeed, Goldstone goes so far as to liken European imperialism to just another instance of aggressive expansion by “underdeveloped, barbarian peoples,” similar to the earlier armed ascendancies of the Huns and Mongols (2000: 188). Many problems attend this strained comparison, not least the decisive point that the nomadic horsemen who swept through the agricultural empires of their day were not, like the European interlopers, the carriers of advanced sciences and technologies. Power capabilities of entirely new dimensions — as instrumentalized in the form of cannonading sailing vessels, the coordinated musket fire of drilled and disciplined infantry, and massive fortifications defended by heavy artillery — would enable astonishingly small numbers of Europeans to project, and then tighten, their predatory hold over immensely distant seas, lands, and peoples. Ness and Stahl, “Western Imperialist Armies in Asia” (1977), provide documentation, instructively illuminating on the need to link “the microprocesses of battlefield organization” to the “macroprocesses of a broad historical movement.”
fundamentally skewed understanding of how social structures cohere, how historical processes operate. In place of cumulative, path-dependent lines of causality and densely contextual interdependencies, the revisionist paradigm offers a more episodic and atomistic view of social change, wherein determinant efficacy is vested not with ongoing trajectories and systemic institutional configurations, but with the autonomous play of variables and the re-routings occasioned by extraneous contingencies. Hence the disavowal that Europe’s capitalist-industrial transition was the catenated outcome of successive turns and developments that unfolded over the longue durée, and the accompanying homogenizing claim that Eurasian civilizational histories were marked by enduring continuities and isomorphisms — in mercantile cultures, commercial dynamism, technological inventiveness, scientific rationalism, demographic patterns, etc. — dating from the Bronze Age. The epoch of Western ascendancy is thus attributed to a happenstance, a circumstantial rupture, rather than to a combinatorial consequence of the distinctive historical trajectories that produced a plurality of social worlds, all singularly endowed with resources and capabilities that would prove of uneven potency in the contests that carried the Europeans to global dominance.

Is there a logical justification for this analytical transposition, of the episodic over the genealogical, the contingent over the structural? Should we reconceptualize social-historical change accordingly, and limit our causal inquiries to tracking only immediate influences and short-term trend lines? Are the turning-points of history comprehensible as radical contingencies, interruptive moments that effectively annul or suspend the workings of anterior structural arrangements? Historical social science must encompass an awareness of both proximate causality and contingency in its explanatory protocols; but neither can be comprehended as an autonomous principle, given that deeper historical temporalities and wider contexts necessarily govern their operation.

The revisionist approach to explicating macro-historical eventualities — the European breakthrough to mechanized industrialization, the West’s forcible imposition of globally extended forms of dominance and colonialism, Imperial China’s abrupt shift from an alleged modernizing dynamism and efflorescence to mounting social crises and regime instability — is to invoke sudden ruptures and discontinuities, and to look to exogenous or conjunctural factors as the decisive causal keys. Consider again Pomeranz’s central claims: “Europe, too, could have wound up on an ‘east Asian,’ labor-intensive path. That it did not was the result of important and sharp discontinuities, based on both fossil fuels and access to New World resources, which, taken together, obviated the need to manage land intensively ... The East-West difference that developed around labor-intensity was not essential but highly contingent” (2000: 13). Or, more sweepingly: “There was no western European advantage sufficient to explain either nineteenth-century industrialization or European imperial success. It
seems more likely that no area was ‘naturally’ headed for the drastic discontinuity of industrialization, escape from shared resource constraints, and a role as ‘workshop of the world’” (2000: 111). As an interpretive category, this notion of social discontinuities, “sharp and drastic,” is rhetorically functional in licensing the excision of deep lines of historical causation from the analysis; but it conjures an ontological impossibility. The moving periodization we style “the present” is in all cases the outcome of a constitutive genealogy — a nexus of cascading and ramifying sequences of actions preceding — out of which the transmitted and the established are variously reproduced, reformed, or rejected. There is no historical creatio ex nihilo. A causal connectedness governs every transition from past to present, and even the most revolutionary of transformations is just that, an emergent “re-making” or “going beyond” on the basis of resources and opportunities that have been accumulating through prior developments. Without the enabling technologies, institutions, social relations, and cultural norms — all of which are mediated inheritances from the past — there can be no phased conversion to industrial modes of production or imperial forms of hegemony, regardless of the availability of “windfall” natural resources.

The revisionist preference for restricting effective or salient causality to shorter-term and immediate processes is likewise prone to explanatory distortions. A reduced temporal horizon obscures the extent to which distal developments were either contributory to or necessary for current trends and arrangements, and insensibly exaggerates the malleability of social formations to abruptly alter course and re-order their institutionalized practices. But macrostructural processes rarely if ever confine their causal significance to short-term temporalities or the workings of abbreviated sequences. Kinship patterns, population dynamics, state-formation, status and class relations, technological and scientific advances, the fashioning of worldviews and moral codes, production and exchange, war-making capabilities, environmental degradation and resource depletions: these kinds of organized relations and pursuits are all governed by long and medium-term developmental trends, and each is complexly conditioned by the larger constellations of mediating structures and processes within which they arise and function. A conception of world history that slights or minimizes the extent to which social phenomena are subject to path-dependent logics, whereby the prior states of a system order and limit the developmental possibilities for subsequent states of that system, will fail to register the depth-historical precedents and conditions that give form and direction to the social trajectories that variously intersect in the collective making of histories and societies. Restating the point more formally: if eventuality $E$ arose because of the causal efficacy of $D$ immediately preceding, and if $D$ in turn arose in consequence of $C$, and $C$ from $B$, $B$ from $A$, then a full explanatory account of $E$ must encompass the cumulative sequence $A \rightarrow D$. The revisionist reluctance...
to attend to origins and to distally anterior developments in explicating historical outcomes and divergences is thus logically indefensible, seeing as *all shorter-term causal influences are dependent upon and internal to the longer-term processes that successively condition their efficacy*.

Radical contingency arguments are predicated upon a kindred ontological fallacy. In sundering the contingent from the contextual, and by equating the former with the “accidental” or “fortuitous,” revisionists misleadingly imply that macro-structural outcomes are subject to random or extraneous interventions of autonomous causal efficacy. But this is to miss the fact that a *historical contingency entails a confluence of two causal orders: the so-called intervening cause or new condition, and an existing state of affairs, into which the intervention is subsumed or incorporated*. Contingent causality, in other words, is a context-dependent phenomenon, and the hazards of fortune yield results relative to the situations in which they occur. That coal deposits and transoceanic distances were relevant factors in the West’s rise to global dominance is hardly in dispute; but these so-called “geological accidents” exerted their specific causal importance only upon their “timely activation” by human agents whose technical skills, culturally informed ambitions, and organizational powers had reached an enabling level of development. The diverse and changing geologies of the planet offer a range of latent possibilities for human uses and abuses; but how and when these enter the historical process is contingent upon the particular structural constellations that direct their utilization.30 And if assigning greater explanatory prominence to the fortuitous is a central revisionist objective, why stop with England, “lucky” in coal, and neglect a symmetrical recognition for China, “lucky” in rivers? Were the developmental accomplishments of the latter any less influenced by its ecological endowment than those of the former? As an explanatory category, sheer luck provides scant purchase on realities that are irreducibly relational.31


31. For an incisive critique of the analytical limitations of much counterfactual reasoning, see Collins (2004). Noting the tendency of revisionists to focus narrowly on selected “turning points,” Collins exposes the errors entailed in the assumption that “causal conditions are pinpointed, rather than spread out across a wide range of situations which make up a structural pattern” (p. 279). Featured here is an engagement with Goldstone’s (2002) counterfactual that the Industrial Revolution might not have occurred, had Channel winds blown unfavorably at the time of William of Orange’s invasion in 1688. Against Goldstone’s imaginary reconstruction — king James retains power, aligns with Catholic France, Parliament is suppressed, Catholicism reinstated, Newton is replaced by Jesuits, Cartesianism prevails, and thus no steam-engine breakthrough — Collins rightly observes that broader and deeper structural patterns render each of these alleged contingencies highly unlikely, and that the fluxions of the short-term and local are invariably reintegrated within the institutional and cultural macro-dynamics underway.
IV. Coda: Integrating the Historical and the Sociological in Comparative World History

Which European society sustained its population on the basis of advanced irrigation systems, comparable to those of Imperial China? Was there an Asian society that exploited chattel slavery on the scale of the ancient Romans, or proceeded to establish slave-based plantation systems in colonies abroad? Which European polity matched the territorial expanse and bureaucratic regulation of social life that obtained under the successive dynasties of Chinese history? Are there European, Islamic, or Chinese analogues to the varnas and jatis of Indian civilization? Why did slave armies play so prominent a role in Islamic societies, but nowhere else? Was there an Indian or Islamic equivalent to the Magna Carta (1215)? Where is the Ottoman or Chinese analogue to the Royal Society of London, the French Académie des Sciences? Tibetan Lamaism aside, were there any Asian societies that featured arrangements comparable to Europe’s medieval Papacy? Which Indian or Chinese city was inhabited by citizens rather than administered subjects? Where was the Asian parliament that could influence a state budget or openly criticize governmental policy? Are there any Middle Eastern or Asian parallels to the English, Dutch, and French East India Companies, those chartered ventures in armed commerce that pursued profit and plunder with a full range of extra-territorial military, political, and judicial powers? Why did the Byzantines not keep pace with their western co-religionists in the fields of science and technology? Was there an Indian, Chinese, or Islamic patent office? And why were there no eunuchs at the courts of the Capetians, Tudors, Habsburgs, or Hohenzollerns?

As fractionated references to complexly interdependent and institutionalized ways of “doing and thinking,” the foregoing series of questions brings us to the principal challenge of historical social science: the ongoing genesis and transformation of multifarious human experiments in social living. To comprehend what C. Wright Mills styled “the human variety” requires a fully comparative analysis of the diversity of social worlds that have appeared in world history, and an attentiveness to the ways in which historical outcomes register the differences and disparities in the range of resources that groups mobilize in their pursuits and practices. Polycentric revisionism, in its eagerness to “provincialize” the European narrative by identifying purported structural similarities and multiple modernizing developments across Eurasia, has marginalized this long-standing concern with the changing differentials of social power. Rather than focus on variations in forms of governance, class and status orders, urban-rural interdependencies, regnant worldviews, accumulating technological skill-levels and scientific progress, we are invited to compare life expectancy estimates and consumption indices, and contemplate the ubiquity of merchant cultures and the galvanizing currents of commercialized markets. But this odd comparative strategy, at once decontextualizing and homogenizing,
occludes from view precisely those uneven instrumentalities of coercive power that issued in domination, exploitation, expropriation, and extermination. To suggest that the “advanced organic societies” of Eurasia were all trending along a shared modernizing course — up to the point where the accidents of geography intervened — not only misleadingly assimilates societies of significantly different constitution, it falsely standardizes the diverse developmental possibilities that attended these variable social arrangements.

Contrary to revisionist claims, comparisons that elide the salient sociological differences and inequalities that have given shape to the multiple and mixed histories of the human drama do not yield a “more inclusive story.” Social trajectories must be tracked from their founding moments, and the moving equilibria and interdependencies they precariously establish over the course of their development must be integratively and cumulatively analyzed. Their European provenance notwithstanding, the lessons of Marx and Weber still apply.

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