Asia in the ReMaking of the Modern World

By Robert B. Marks

How did our world—the modern world—get to be the way it is? By that I mean a world structured by an increasingly globalized industrial capitalism coupled with the nation state, and consequences arising from those two driving forces (e.g., rising living standards for some, but also international war, global poverty, and environmental degradation), and by 1900, military and economic domination of the world by Europe. Until recently, the answers to those questions have revolved around what happened in Europe in general, and for industry, in England in particular.

The usual story of the modern world thus is told in the narrative of “the Rise of the West” or “the European miracle” in which endogenous developments—sometimes seen as arising relatively recently, sometimes in medieval times (ca. 1300), or sometimes as long ago as the Greeks with their democratic institutions—propel “progress,” “development,” and “advancement” in Europe, while the rest of the world, in particular Asia, “stagnates” under “despotic” rulers and “backward” economies. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, this version of the story continues, the secrets of how to become modern diffused from Europe to Japan, pointing the way for others in the twentieth century. Modernity thus has been seen as a uniquely European invention, but one that can be universally adopted—if only non-Europe would change their cultures and institutions (a comprehensive version of this argument is synthesized in Landes 1998). In the twentieth century, when the Soviet Union existed and China was building socialism, the diffusion process was called “modernization” to distinguish it from industrialization under communist auspices; now that challengers to capitalism have been vanquished, the process is called “globalization.”

In “the Rise of the West” narrative of how the modern world came to be, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century creators of social science, in particular Karl Marx and Max Weber, sought to explain European uniqueness by looking at Asia in general, and China in particular, asking the famous negative question: Why did capitalism not develop in China? Weber found the answer in cultural differences, while Marx implied the despotism of Asian states. Europe was rational, disciplined, scientific, inventive, and dynamic, and modernity was imminent in its historical development (a very Hegelian idea); the rest, Asia in general and China in particular, was passive, irrational, lazy, despotic, and incapable on its own of developing modern institutions (Hobson 2004: ch. 10).

For over a century, Western social science accepted the idea of European exceptionalism and sought, as one of its primary intellectual goals, to explain it. That task not only continues to inform much contemporary historical inquiry, but also to structure world history texts and courses. The implication of this body of scholarship is that Europe possessed unique characteristics that allowed it—and only it—to modernize first, and hence gave it the moral authority and the power to diffuse “modernity” around the globe, where cultural, political, or economic “obstacles” prevented modern development from occurring Indigenous. Hence this storyline purports to explain (and sometimes to justify and defend) the rise of the West to global dominance. It is Eurocentric history.
But so what? It’s true, isn’t it? Maybe not. What if this whole way of looking at the making of the modern world—“the rise of the West” and the spread of its system on the basis of its supposed superiority to the rest of the world—is wrong?

That is the possibility raised in the body of recent scholarship on Asia by a group of scholars dubbed the “California school” (because they lived or published in California). Their work is shaking up the historical profession and prompting historians to produce new narratives of the making of the modern world. Four important books, all conceptually ground-breaking, have challenged the master narrative of the “rise of the West:” R. Bin Wong’s *China Transformed* (1997); André Gunder Frank’s *ReOrient* (1998); James Lee and Wang Feng’s *One-Quarter of Humanity* (1999), and Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence* (2000). In all, Asia or China now figures prominently in the story of the modern world. While each of these books has its own argument and evidence, and none is an easy read, the cumulative effect has been to challenge the idea that Europe’s historical experience should be considered the norm (Wong), to argue that Asia was at least as developed as Europe (or more precisely, parts of each were equally advanced) until 1800 or later (Pomeranz and Frank), to show that Malthusian arguments about China’s tendency toward chronic overpopulation are wrong (Lee and Wang), to demonstrate that all of the factors historians have cited for Europe’s “rise” can be found in China (Pomeranz), and hence to show that new explanations must be found for why England industrialized first and the forces of modernity then transformed Western Europe before the rest of the world. In turn, I have made the results of these scholars (and more) accessible to students and the general public in my book, *The Origins of the Modern World* (2002 and 2006).

Let me cite two specific examples of the way this new scholarship questions the “rise of the West” narrative.

One of the answers to the question of what caused “the European miracle” concerns families and the number of children each family had. The argument goes something like this: after the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century, various economic and environmental pressures prompted Europeans to marry late, thereby reducing family size. Fewer children meant farming families could begin to accumulate capital, thus sending Europe on its way to an “industrious revolution” that incorporated the Industrial Revolution. “By delaying marriage,” according to a recent history, “European peasants set a course that separated them from the rest of the world’s inhabitants” (Huppert 1998: 13).

While it may be true that west European peasants did in fact behave that way, thereby freeing themselves from “instinctive patterns of behavior” (i.e. the unregulated child-bearing that Thomas Malthus assumed had condemned China to overpopulation and poverty), it simply is not true that European peasants were unique in this behavior. Recent work on China’s demographic system by James Lee and Wang Feng (1999) shows that rural families there too—and probably for a lot longer—limited family size, although the methods used differed. Indeed, Lee and Wang demonstrate that everything Malthus thought about China was wrong. In this instance alone, one prop has been removed from underneath the claim of the uniqueness of Europeans and the reasons for their “rise.”

Take private property and free markets as another example, both of which European institutional historians (e.g. North 1976) have identified as unique to Europe and hence explanatory of its “rise.” What we now know is not only that private property in land ownership was protected by legal code in China, and that free markets for land, labor, capital, and commodities existed in China, but that commodity markets in late imperial China (ca. 1400–1800) were more efficient than those in Europe . . .
The question of nineteenth-century Europe’s rise, along with Asia’s relative decline, constitutes one of the most exciting intellectual controversies in world history. In addition to the “California School” titles included in this article, readers who wish to gain a better sense of this controversy and an understanding of traditional arguments for Europe’s rise should examine David Landes’ 1998 book, The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are So Rich and Some So Poor, Douglas C. North’s and Robert Paul Thomas’ 1976 book, The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History (both are mentioned in Professor Marks’ essay), or some of North’s more recent works. The 1998 exchanges between the late André Gunder Frank and Professor Landes are also illuminating. Interested readers can search the two scholars’ names online and read their arguments and counter arguments (also see citation at the end of this article titled “Economic History Debate”). Readers who desire more knowledge about this ongoing controversy should pay particular attention to notes one and three in the reference section of Marks’ article.

My thanks go to Chris Gray for his advice about this topic.
consequences of losing ground to Britain), began to escape by applying sources of stored energy (first coal and then oil) to the production process.

The resulting transformations changed global dynamics, resulting in the boom and bust of the business cycle, growing divisions between new social classes and between the people and the state, growing competition among European states for colonies that would give their economies guaranteed markets and sources of raw materials, and the scrambles for Africa and for concessions in China. Unfortunately, for those parts of the world facing severe ecological constraints, the most powerful El Niño conditions in 500 years developed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, killing tens of millions in drought-induced famines, and driving much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America further into conditions we now call “third world” (Davis 2002).

In summary, the new scholarship presents a global narrative of the origins of the modern world, not the uniqueness of Europe. Unlike the standard Eurocentric narrative, which assumes that the “rise of the West” is the story of the coming of the modern world, this new narrative, drawing upon new scholarship on Asia, Africa, and the New World, constructs a story in which those parts of the world play major roles. The modern world is understood as one marked by industry, the nation state, interstate warfare, a large and growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest parts of the world, and an industrial escape from the previous ecological limits on growth in pre-industrial, agrarian societies. The explanation emphasizes contingencies (such as the conquest of the New World); the broad comparability of the most advanced regions in China, India, and Europe until about 1800; the reasons England was able to escape from common ecological constraints facing all of those regions by the eighteenth century; and a nineteenth-century conjuncture of human and natural forces that solidified a gap between the industrialized and non-industrialized parts of the world.

SOURCES (CITED AND SUGGESTED)


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SOURCES (CITED AND SUGGESTED) CONTINUED


NOTES

1. So identified by Jack A. Goldstone (2000): Cameron Campbell, Wang Feng, Jack A. Goldstone, Kenneth Pomeranz, R. Bin Wong, and Richard von Glahn at University of California campuses; Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giraldez at the University of the Pacific; James Lee at the California Institute of Technology; Robert Marks at Whittier College; and André Gunder Frank, who published at the University of California Press. I would add Mike Davis at UC-Irvine. Some of their scholarly work is listed in the suggested readings.


3. This brief article is not intended to be a comprehensive historiography of the debate over “the rise of the West,” but, with such a complex phenomenon, it should not be surprising that the historiography is likewise complex. Nonetheless, and at the risk of oversimplifying, historians who see the Industrial Revolution arising from unique European (or English) characteristics include those like Landes (1998), who emphasizes culture, drawing on Weberian traditions, as well as those more inclined to use economic, social, or institutional explanations, such as Jones (1981), Brenner (1985 and 2002), de Vries (1994), Wallerstein (1974), and North (1976). A recent addition to the cultural explanation is Stark (2005). Despite their differences (and they are substantial; e.g. Jones 2005), they all posit the centrality of Europe in making the modern world and hence contribute to a Eurocentric master narrative of the “rise of the West.” Pomeranz (2000), Frank (1998), Wong (1997), Lee and Wang (1999), Hobson (2004) and Marks (2002 and 2006) all challenge the Eurocentric narrative. Goldstone (2002) sees the Industrial Revolution as one of several cases of economic “efflorescences” that have occurred elsewhere in the world at various times, but were cut short for different reasons.

4. El Niño is one part of a global climate condition scientists call ENSO, for El Niño-Southern Oscillation, driven by the relative heating or cooling of the eastern Pacific Ocean. When the ocean waters warm, it produces extra rain in the Americas, but brings drought conditions to vast regions of Asia and Africa, and to northeastern South America, sometimes lasting for more than a year. When the eastern Pacific cools, the effects are reversed.

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