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Review Essay: Teaching the Great Divergence

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Texts to Be Covered

Landes, David S., *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998). 650 pp. \$16.95.

Frank, Andre Gunder, *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (University of California Press, 1998). 416 pp. \$21.95.

Bin Wong, R., *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Cornell University Press, 1998). 327 pp. \$21.95.

Pomeranz, Kenneth, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2000). 320 pp. \$22.95.

Scholarship on the "Great Divergence": Why Did Europe Industrialize and Modernize First?

The last ten years have seen numerous books and articles published that attempt to answer the question why Europe industrialized, and eventually modernized, before China. Much of this literature, including the four books being reviewed here, raises important and timely questions about the historical roots of the global economy and its connection to today's world. The difficult problem with this important research for the teacher of world history is trying to figure out how to use it in the classroom. In looking at these four books, it is probably best to see them as resources for topics such as early modern trade, the Atlantic System, the Industrial Revolution, imperialism, twentieth-century China, and modernization in the developing world.

Landes: Culture as the Key

No one looking at the world in 1900 would question that Britain, the rest of western Europe, and the United States dominated the world and the global economy. This observation raises the question of the origins of the dominance. David Landes begins his book by suggesting that if it were possible to look around the world in 1000, few people would have guessed that Europe, and particularly Britain, would come to dominate the world by 1900, but he also points to 1000 as the origins of Western dominance. The other authors believe that if you looked around the world in 1800, it would be uncertain that Britain was poised to dominate the world, but by this point it simply was a choice between Britain and China. This is the fundamental difference between Landes and the other authors.

Landes' explanation for the rise of the West is a simple and traditional one: culture. He argues that between 1000 and 1500 Europe was fragmented, so there was no single political power to limit the development of European culture. European states were constantly competing with each other, so Europeans developed a uniquely dynamic culture in which rulers made decisions that benefited subjects: "Fragmentation gave rise to competition, and competition favored good care of good subjects" (36). Landes contrasts a fragmented and progressive Europe with a static Asia ruled by despotic emperors who exploited subjects for their own benefit. After 1492 Europeans extended this competition to other parts of the world. Europeans, because of their dynamic culture, were more willing to experiment with technology, more scientific, more driven by the acquisition of profit, and fundamentally more willing to experiment and try out new solutions. Because of these attributes, Europe quickly dominated the technologically primitive Native Americans and the culturally static and despotic Asians.

Culture is also Landes' explanation for why Europe and other parts of the world have experienced and continue to experience periods of economic growth, stagnation, or recession. Within Europe itself, he believes that as soon as any European state lost some of its cultural dynamism, another more dynamic European state quickly became dominant. He argues that early Spanish and Portuguese dominance declined as these societies became increasingly intolerant of religion and were superseded by the more dynamic Dutch and British. The Dutch lost their economic advantage as they became lazy. Landes follows this line of reasoning through to industrialization and the present day. Britain industrialized first because of a variety of institutional factors, but most importantly because of its dynamic culture and openness to scientific experimentation. The other parts of the world that soon industrialized -- France, Germany, the United States, and Japan -- did so because of their flexibility, cultural dynamism, and willingness to embrace change and copy British models. Spain, Italy, eastern Europe, and most of Africa, Asia, and Latin America -- states that did not rapidly industrialize -- were unable to embrace change because of despotic rulers or some element of cultural stasis or religious intolerance. Landes develops this basic argument into an explanation of why certain parts of the world today are rich and certain parts are poor. His advice to the poor parts of the world is to stop complaining about past injustices, work harder, and be open to change, which for him means being more European.

At 650 pages, Landes' book is too long to be used in high school or college-level world history survey courses, but it could be excerpted easily. He writes in a simple language that students can easily follow, and he uses engaging anecdotes to set up and support his arguments. Small excerpts of Landes would also be useful for illustrating the traditional Eurocentric explanations for the rise of the West. His third and fourth chapters are good summaries of the ideas of European exceptionalism and the despotic Asian empire. It would also be useful to excerpt parts of Landes' chapter 8 discussion of the plantation system in the Americas. He argues that the financial gain from plantations only affected industrialization by providing extra capital that sped up the process, but plantations were not necessary for industrialization. This section could be used in a class discussion of the connections between slavery, plantations, and industrialization.

Frank: Economic Explanations

After using a selection of Landes in class, it would be a contrast to present students with the diametrically opposed views of Andre Gunder Frank's *Reorient*. Frank's argument is that between 1400 and 1800 a polycentric, world economy existed that constantly shaped the actions of all states. He is also concerned with proving that Europe was not the center of the world economy in this period. Frank further argues that "the real world economy/system also cannot be squeezed into the procrustean structure of Wallerstein's European-centered 'modern world system,' for the globe-encompassing world economy/system did not have a single center but at most a hierarchy of centers, probably with China at the top" (328). Europe's participation in this world economy in 1400 was hampered by its limited ability to manufacture items that the rest of the world wanted. It was only with the silver wealth of the Americas that Europeans were able to "buy a ticket on the Asian train"(xxv). Europeans also used this silver wealth to surpass Asia and dominate the world economy after 1800, when Asia's position in the world economy began to decline. Europe's rise and China's decline revolve around economic cycles. Landes also speculates that following this pattern to the present day suggests that China will again rise to the top of the world economy. This strictly economic explanation for the rise of the West is what sets him apart from Landes' cultural explanations.

Reorient is a provocative book that challenges how we understand the early modern world, but it is difficult to use in the classroom. The main problem is that Frank frequently refers to the work of other historians and social theorists. Students might have difficulty separating Frank's rebuttals of these individuals and his digressions about theoretical implications from his own important arguments about the economic interconnectedness of the early modern world. More advanced students might be able to read selections from his conclusion, in which he concisely summarizes his main arguments. Teachers can best use this book to help them organize lessons on the structure and extent of trade in the early modern world and its influence on different regions.

Wong: China and Europe Compared

Bin Wong's *China Transformed* differs substantially from the works of Landes and Frank. Instead of trying to explain fully how the West surpassed China, he compares the political and economic developments of China and Europe over the last 1,000 years. He argues that in the late eighteenth century "China and Europe shared important similarities of preindustrial economic expansion based on Smithian dynamics. These included increased rural industries, more productive agricultures, and expanded commercial networks" (278). The important difference was that western Europe, and especially Britain, had access to large supplies of coal. Britain escaped from the constraints of an economy based on organic material by switching to a coal- and mineral-based economy in the late eighteenth century. Britain then entered into a period of intensive economic growth in the early nineteenth century. Although China and Europe were relatively economically similar until 1800, Bin Wong argues that they were substantially politically different since at least 1000. Europe had competing states. Within each state rulers also competed with elite groups over their claims on the states and the ruler's ability "to extract resources and make war" (281). European rulers developed political and economic policies and institutions that allowed them to maximize their power given their political constraints. In China, rulers had different political concerns. Because China was a unified, agrarian empire and elites had few institutionalized claims on the state, rulers developed policies and institutions that maintained the existing social order. These political differences contributed to significant differences in both the economic and political trajectories of China and Europe after 1800. Unlike Landes, Bin Wong does not make a value judgment about these differences. Europe's fragmented states were neither better than a unified empire nor the cause of European economic growth. But fragmented states were more easily able to adapt to economic growth and development. China's unified empire, on the other hand, was far more efficient in its ability to tax its people effectively and provide far more for its people's material comfort and education than Europe. Bin Wong's symmetric comparisons deemphasize the traditional Eurocentric understanding of economic and political modernization and replace it with a more objective understanding of modernization based on long-term economic, political, and political-economic trajectories. This reorientation allows us to better understand the reasons why Europe and China modernized economically at different times and why Europe, and not China, developed democracy. He also uses his more objective understanding of modernization to analyze and reinterpret the history of twentieth-century China.

Of all four books, Bin Wong's book is probably the least usable in the classroom. His writing is dense and theoretical, and world history survey students would struggle in trying to understand his arguments. He also regularly uses concepts, such as "Smithian dynamics" and "Malthusian dangers." It is important that students know these concepts, and teachers should make it a point to explain them. Teachers would be better served to use Bin Wong's arguments to set up analytical frameworks for discussing the history of the developing world in the twentieth century and its process of political and economic modernization. It would also be possible to set up a lesson on twentieth-century China that compares Bin Wong's interpretation with David Landes' interpretation.

Pomeranz: Situating the "Great Divergence" in a Global World Context

Like Landes and Frank, Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence* attempts to answer the same question about why Europe industrialized before China, but he uses a theoretical approach similar to Bin Wong. Pomeranz is interested in comparing economic developments in Europe and China before 1800, but he does so within a larger world system perspective. In Part One he primarily focuses his comparisons on the core regions of England and the Yangzi River Delta, since these regions were roughly similar in size and development. Pomeranz also includes significant information from other parts of Europe, China, Japan, and even India where it helps to clarify distinctions between the core regions. In terms of their population controls, technological levels, capital accumulation, and functioning Smithian markets, Pomeranz argues that "the most developed parts of western Europe seem to have shared crucial economic features ... with other densely populated core areas in Eurasia" (107). The notable divergence is the presence of large and readily accessible coal deposits in Britain. Pomeranz also argues that Britain and China were roughly equal in terms of their consumption

of luxury goods, but European states, and especially Britain, were more aggressive in their tactics of trade. Europe's system of state-sponsored armed trading allowed it to gain control of the Americas and get a foothold in the Asian trade. Pomeranz also argues that both Britain and parts of China were reaching severe ecological crises in terms of their ability to support growing populations with limited resources. These Malthusian constraints led to China encouraging settlements in the peripheries of the empire and emigration to Southeast Asia and led to Britain colonizing the Americas and using parts of eastern Europe as source of resources, such as timber. The different ways that Britain and China exploited peripheries is important for Pomeranz's argument. China's periphery only supplied a limited amount of "breathing room," because eventually the region became densely populated and less dependent on the core regions of China. Because disease had wiped out the native populations of the Americas, there were far more available resources. Europeans in the Americas also set up plantations that only produced sugar, tobacco, and cotton. Plantations needed to import food and basic necessities like clothing, which benefited the British textile industry. The high mortality rate for slaves also ensured a steady demand for them. These conditions generated large and continuous profits for Britons involved in the Atlantic trade. Pomeranz argues that none of these factors alone would have led to British industrialization, but the combined effect of all factors allowed Britain to industrialize first.

Although Pomeranz's book is compelling, it is written in a dense style similar to *China Transformed*. Most students would struggle with the book, but it might be possible to use excerpts from the conclusions to Parts One and Two and Chapter Six. In these sections, he summarizes his arguments in a few pages that students might be able to work through in a class discussion. Teachers can benefit from this book as a tool for organizing classes on the Industrial Revolution. Pomeranz's numerous comparisons between Britain and China help highlight some of the key external causes of the Industrial Revolution. Pomeranz also places the Industrial Revolution in a global context, and this makes it the most important of these four books for teachers. Pomeranz is a model of ideal world history that places historical events in their proper global context. By showing that Britain's industrialization was dependent on external factors, Pomeranz also helps us to understand the long term development of the contemporary global economy. *The Great Divergence* and the other three books provide teachers with an excellent resource for organizing a world history survey course whose main theme is the origins of the modern world. The books present different interpretations of this issue and allow students to look at world history over the last 1,000 years from a global perspective.

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