

## COAL, COLONIES AND THE RISE OF THE WEST

**Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)**

The question of what led to the “Rise of the West” and the concomitant “Failure of the East” is one that has troubled historians and scholars for decades. The traditional, and still dominant, European exceptionalist narratives that emphasize the uniqueness of the West have come under increasing fire from scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank who, decrying Eurocentrism, instead focus upon the superiority of Asia. This has led to a polarization of opinions that has frequently obfuscated rather than clarified this complicated problem. Kenneth Pomeranz, in *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000), has entered this fray with a work that, while adhering to the currents running against European exceptionalism, also rejects the Sinocentrism or Asian exceptionalism of some of the more polemical of the anti-Eurocentric texts.<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon decades of research and analysis, Pomeranz argues rather than assert the differences between China and Europe, historians should focus instead upon the similarities. The most developed regions of China and Europe, he maintains, achieved effective parity in the century surrounding 1800. Similarly, both faced ecological blockages to their further development. That sections of Europe were able to surmount these challenges lay not in any innate superiority, but rather in a combination of the resources from their colonies and easy access to coal that enabled them to avoid a more labor-intensive path to development.

In the first part of his work, Pomeranz systematically analyzes the European exceptionalist

arguments that suggest that European culture, technology or institutional superiority inevitably led to Western dominance. In particular, he dismantles Eric Jones’ assertion that Europe was already poised to rise by the nineteenth century due to higher accumulations of capital, including livestock and population, advantageous institutions and higher standards of living.<sup>2</sup> To the contrary, Pomeranz maintains that living standards in broadly similar regions of China and Europe were comparable. The Chinese of the Lower Yangzi macroregion, for instance, had life expectancies and calorific intakes comparable to the English.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, many of the factors Jones identifies as European “advantages” turn out to be illusory at best. While it is true that there was a higher *per capita* concentration of livestock in Europe, Pomeranz maintains that the Chinese offset their “disadvantage” with improved farming techniques and greater use of water rather than animal-powered transport.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that Pomeranz shows throughout his book a considerable subtlety of analysis. Rather than using “Europe” or “Asia” as units of investigation, he recognizes that such divisions are meaningless and contribute to exceptionalist arguments. Instead, he attempts to compare like with like, evaluating the developed, densely populated Lower Yangzi region with England. Similarities between these two, he argues, were far more pronounced than any similarities between England and Denmark or Eastern Europe, or between the Lower Yangzi and the far North West of China. This is in contrast not only to the

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Pomeranz, 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

European exceptionalists such as Jones who, in imagining “Europe” or the “West” as a singular unit are able to pick and choose evidence for their arguments, but also to those such as Frank who in analyzing “China” as a unit often appear to lose sight of the great differences within that nation and the consequences for development. In particular, in this nuanced analysis, Pomeranz argues that while China *as a whole* had considerable coal reserves, these Northern mines were so remote and inaccessible from the main industrialized region of the Lower Yangzi as to make it economically unviable to exploit them while any alternatives remained in the South.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, English coal reserves were proximal to the core industrial areas, making coal an increasingly practical substitute for rapidly diminishing forests. Moreover, the nature of English coal mines appears to have spurred technological advances, including the steam engine, that filtered into other industries and aided in the mechanization of the nineteenth centuries. Thus, Pomeranz argues, a measure of geographic luck rather than any economic or cultural advantage may have sent England down to the path to more rapid development than China.<sup>6</sup>

Pomeranz also rejects claims that European social and legal institutions were uniquely advantageous to development. Although some historians claim that rights to property in Europe were more firmly defined within the legal establishment, Pomeranz demonstrates that land in China was, in practice, as freely alienable as in Europe. Moreover, his evidence does not support any of the presumed bars to investment in China due to custom. Indeed, to the contrary, he notes that restrictions on consolidation and enclosure of land in France and Germany may have been more serious impediments to growth than any “problems” in Chinese land use.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, assumptions that the Chinese bifurcation of labor into male agricultural and female

household craft impeded growth are, he maintains, dubious at best. Close analysis of the evidence rather shows that Chinese households took part in the market as much, if not more, than households in Europe. Moreover, women in China were able to take part in the “industrious revolution,” producing more and increasingly valuable goods than European women. Further, the “corporate” structures of the urban economy, which Jones lauds as unique and important institutional developments, Pomeranz instead argues, hindered growth as groups attempted to maintain their monopolies.<sup>8</sup> The conclusion, he avers, is that China, especially the developed South adhered more rather than less to “Smithian” market ideals than any part of Europe. Thus, despite the claims of Eurocentrist scholars, Europe had no structural, cultural or economic advantages over China that would impel it upon a separate, more developed path. Rather, by 1800, the most developed regions of both Europe and China were broadly comparable. Neither had overwhelming advantages over the other, nor was either destined to inevitably succeed or fail.

Another strand to the European exceptionalist argument is that European consumption and the emergence of a “materialist” culture drove the development of capitalism within Europe. Development of uniquely European political and economic institutions further accelerated this change. However, Pomeranz asserts, examination of the evidence demonstrates that Chinese consumption was equal to, and often greater than, that shown in Europe. Where differences did exist – in the European obsession with “fashion” as a means of status acquisition and maintenance, for example – they did not translate into any definitive advantage in productivity.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, one critical distinction does emerge. While the Chinese were able to fulfill their demand for luxuries internally or through intra-Asian trade, Europeans increasingly

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 75.

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, 99 and Pomeranz, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Pomeranz, 164.

looked to the colonies to supply goods such as sugar, tea and tobacco that could not be produced within Europe itself. In addition, they used silver to purchase manufactures from Asia. This led to a militarized, colonial-focused economy that was neither more developed than the economy of China, nor more productive, but that proved to be a crucial factor in the ability of parts of Europe to overcome ecological blockages that both China and Europe faced.<sup>10</sup>

By 1800, Pomeranz maintains that intensive use of the environment of both China and parts of Western Europe had created critical problems to further growth of either economy. Deforestation and consequential erosion, soil denudation and changes in weather patterns were beginning to have an impact not only upon land use but also upon labor patterns and productivity.<sup>11</sup> Further, in neither the Western European nor the Chinese “core” areas could Smithian economics provide complete relief from this ecological constraint. Thus Pomeranz argues that should Europe have used this blockage to impel it to technological advancement, as some historians argue, then as China had the same blockages and the same incentives but did *not* use technology as a solution, the blockages alone cannot explain Europe’s technological path. Rather, he maintains that parts of Europe had some crucial advantages from fortunate “global conjunctures.” Access to cheap coal in England, for instance, provided vital energy that depleted forests could no longer provide. In addition, access to resources from colonies proved vital. Bulk goods, produced by coercion and slavery in the colonies, could continue to supply industry without drawing upon increasingly scarce and fragile land in Europe itself. China, by contrast, had no such “ghost acreage” and raw goods for industry had to compete with food products for the use of land. As populations grew, production of goods such as cotton thus dropped relative to food products. Furthermore, in

those regions of Europe with colonies, especially Britain, labor remained free to move into industrial factories while in China, increased amounts of labor were necessary to glean as much productivity as possible from the land.

However, Pomeranz is careful to note that this labor-intensive solution to ecological constraints was not a Chinese phenomenon, created by Chinese “failures,” nor even an Asian one. He draws attention to the case of Denmark, a nation in Europe without the “windfall” of either cheap, plentiful coal or colonial resources upon which to draw. Denmark turned not to increased technology – as European exceptionalists would argue was predetermined by its European “rationalism” or institutional culture – but like China and Japan, to labor-intensification.<sup>12</sup> That Denmark, along with China, followed a path that ultimately led to a “cul-de-sac” until the twentieth century revolution in agricultural techniques is thus a powerful counterpoint to arguments of a “European” miracle. Instead, Pomeranz states, global discontinuities allowed some regions of Europe to become a “fortunate freak” amidst an ecological crisis that was threatening to “limit everyone’s horizons.”<sup>13</sup> This detailed and balanced argument eschews Eurocentrism and yet still provides an explanation for the nineteenth century economic flowering of some European nations relative to China. Its very specificity makes a more compelling case than Frank’s reliance upon Kondratieff cycles to underpin his narrative of the rise of the West.<sup>14</sup> Pomeranz does not however contradict the thrust of Frank’s argument but rather he does provide an explanation for the economic decline of Asia in the nineteenth century. As such, his analysis becomes more forceful.

Indeed, it is in conjunction with the works of other “California School” historians who counter the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 239.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>14</sup> Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 258

traditional Eurocentric arguments that Pomeranz is best appreciated. The focus of *The Great Divergence* is rather more narrow than Frank, for instance, temporally and geographically. By limiting himself primarily to the century surrounding 1800, Pomeranz does not cover the great differences between Europe and Asia in the centuries often considered critical by exceptionalists of either side. In essence, he appears to be arguing that however the Lower Yangzi or Britain reached that point, by 1800 they were more similar than different and that both had the same potential for success or failure. This is indeed an important point. Nevertheless, Frank's demonstration of the long-term success of the Chinese and other Asian cultures, especially within the global market, does more forcefully counter myths of inherent oriental systemic problems destined to cause Chinese economic failure. Similarly, John Hobson's illustration of Asian technological creativity better counters Eurocentric ideas of the innate mechanical genius of European science and technology.<sup>15</sup>

The geographical focus upon China and Western Europe, ignoring for the most part the Middle East, South East Asia and Africa, is regrettable, if understandable. Pomeranz leaves a critical lacuna in our understanding of world history that remains to be filled satisfactorily. Did formerly powerful nations such as the Ottoman Empire falter because of ecological constraints they could not overcome, or were other factors at play in such regions? Nevertheless, this focus does allow for the detail that enhances the argument Pomeranz does make. Furthermore, Pomeranz does address India, albeit more briefly than either China or Europe, evoking a rather more nuanced picture of complexities of South Asia than other authors.

*The Great Divergence* works best as a detailed, balanced analysis of why specific regions of Europe were able to pull ahead of the rest of the world in the nineteenth century. Despite having no advantages of

wealth, culture or productivity over comparable regions of China in 1800, global convergences – particularly the accessibility of coal and the resources of the colonies – allowed these regions to overcome ecological constraints without resorting to labor-intensification. This in turn allowed for industrial and economic growth beyond that of other less fortunate regions. Pomeranz has thus written an intelligent and powerful counterpoint to European exceptionalist arguments, backing his argument with considerable amounts of data. When read alongside such authors as Frank and Hobson, then, a compelling counter-narrative emerges with which historians must at least engage.

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<sup>15</sup> John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).