

# The Origins of the Modern World

## *A Global and Ecological Narrative*

**Editor's Note:** A revised second edition of this book, which the author discusses in this review, was published in August 2006.

BY ROBERT B. MARKS

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REVIEWED BY ADRIAN CARTON

The question of the relationship between Asia and world history, or how best to incorporate Asia into the broader global history teaching curriculum, has been a vexed question for teachers and practitioners for some time. In 1999, *Education About Asia* ran a series of practical and innovative articles aimed at this very question, in an attempt to provide high school and college instructors with the tools to integrate Asia into the teaching of world history programs (Spring 1999, Vol. 4 No. 1). While the 'add Asia and stir' formula saw course material become more diversified, the question of Asia's place in the world survey was still perceived as either a 'stand-alone' section amongst a more comprehensive syllabus, or as an offshoot of the larger European and Atlantic experiences. However, world history surveys have changed since 1999 in important ways that require teachers to think beyond additive measures, and to address the methodological and historiographical challenges of what lies beyond the frontiers of 'area studies' in a global context.

As an environmental historian of China, Marks is eminently well-qualified to bring Asia to the front of the story about the origins of the modern world. He does so in a way that aims to challenge Eurocentric interpretations. *The Origins of the Modern World* is not concerned with tracing the "the rise of the West" or by looking towards European exceptionalism as the key to global economic and cultural change, but by looking at the ways China and India, in particular, lost their economic pre-eminence through circumstances that can be explained to students by looking back through the lens of the present. Like so many of the new world histories to be written in the shadows of both the so-called Asian economic 'miracle' and the events of September 11, 2001, it emerges from a contemporary context where the current concerns of economic and cultural globalization need to be placed in a longer historical genealogy.

Inspired mostly through the work of André Gunder Frank and Ken Pomeranz, Marks writes a world history survey that is very useful for locating the place of China and India in the construction of the modern world. Divided into five chapters organized in a manner well suited to support specialized research projects or to provide the structure for overview workshops, the book refutes the 'diffusionist'

notion that Europe's superior technology and culture facilitated the rise of a global economy dominated by the West. Indeed, a 'divergence thesis' is articulated: between 1800 and 1900, the fortunes of China and India reversed. These countries, whose wealth "accounted for little over half of the wealth in the world," fell to a position where "they had become among the least industrialized and the poorest" (123). An explanation of this "gap" is the main contention of the book: to situate the making of nineteenth century China and India as 'developing' countries in a broader historical narrative of the rise of global capitalism.

Starting the story in 1400 is significant in that it pre-dates the birth of the Atlantic world. Marks instead concentrates on polycentric world systems where Asia was very much the driving engine. This subverts the Wallerstein "world-system" thesis of European diffusion as well as the views of political economists as varied as Smith and Marx, who heralded the start of the global economy with the voyages of Columbus and da Gama. The book is therefore useful as a teaching tool to guide students through the various approaches to world systems theory and the ways in which Asian world systems, as seen in the work of Janet Abu-Lughod, provided the infrastructure through which Asian economies were able to create immensely strong trade networks that became globally dominant. Hence, chapter two of the book deals appropriately with the Chinese demand for external sources of silver to nourish and generate its domestic economy, aligning the story of American silver deposits to the European quest to get a ticket on the Asian train.

In terms of methodology, the book offers some interesting pedagogical angles by which to explain the industrialization of places such as Britain in comparison to the 'de-industrialisation' of India, or

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## BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

to explain the importance of cotton, coal, tea, and opium as commodities that re-shaped the global economic order to Asia's disadvantage. Marks does this throughout the book by employing the notions of contingency, accident, and conjuncture as historiographical tools to render the proposition that the global dominance of the West was a natural occurrence as obsolete. Nor was it an inevitable stage due to innate qualities. For example, in chapter three, the Industrial Revolution is situated not as a product of slave labor and fantastic sugar profits, or of superior European technology, but as a coming together of otherwise separate historical developments that were intimately enmeshed with Europe's dependence on Asian trade. This shifts the focus back on Asia as the context for a phenomenon so commonly taught in European history as peculiar to English inventiveness (96).

Fernand Braudel's insight that the "gap" was the essential problem of the history of the modern world, however, is given fresh impetus by going beyond isolated material explanations and looking at the ecological contexts in which global inequalities have been framed. This is one of the clear advantages of using the book as a teaching tool. It offers the biological imperatives of a Jared Diamond or the energy-focused and networked analysis of a David Christian, but in a way that is both concise and compressed. What Marks refers to as the "biological ancient régime" is never far from the analytical surface, charting the ways in which China and India battled against ecological constraints such as increases in population, the need to devote more land and labor to food production, and the lack of proximity to readily exploitable sources of energy. Without coal or colonies, for instance, "the Chinese were forced to expend greater amounts of labor and capital in improving output from land, where the British were released from that constraint by New World resources and the ready availability of coal" (118).

The benefits of this Asia-centric approach are very useful in attempts to incorporate the region into world history surveys and to teach students non-Eurocentric methodologies so that they can appreciate the origin of the inequalities of the modern world. It addresses a profound imbalance in the teaching of the Industrial Revolution in Britain while addressing the agency of Chinese and Indian economic systems rather than partake in the image of them as 'despotic' and 'backward' in comparison to notions of European material progress. Marks writes a world history survey where Asia matters, in a way that students will find useful and teachers will be eager to adapt. Nevertheless, there are some limitations inherent in this approach. The first is in relation to the promise of a polycentric world view when the main argument clearly forwards an Asian-centric interpretation of the origin of the modern world that merely replaces a Eurocentric filter without fostering a 'bigger' framework of global connectedness. As a consequence, the Atlantic and European world systems are marginalized. As Geoffrey Gun points out in *First Globalization: The Eurasian Exchange, 1500–1800*, throwing Europe out with the Eurocentric bathwater does not help us to understand how internal intellectual transformations reshaped the logic of European expansion as part of the 'divergence thesis.' For example, why were Asian intellectual developments devalued when Asian innovation was so highly sought after?

The second is in relation to the retention of the orthodox geographical categories of 'area studies' where "Asia" is perceived to be

a distinct entity, while the polycentric system of multiple worlds demonstrates that Afro-Eurasia and Eurasia emerge as more suitable categories of analysis to explain hybrid fields of trade, cross-cultural contacts, and economic interactions. Seen more prominently in Silk Roads studies and research into Central Asia, recent attempts to connect Asia with world history have faced the problem of continental perspectives that hinder context-based paradigms. For example, the work of Victor Lieberman has demonstrated that we need to work 'beyond binaries' to fully overcome the kind of fragmentation that hinders the absorption of Asian perspectives into broader global frameworks.

Despite these two limitations, however, Marks offers a way of connecting Asia to world history in a way that reflects the concerns of contemporary globalization and students' increasing interest in the environmental and ecological underpinnings of historical processes. It is a clear, engaging, and useful reference that can be used for the long world history survey course as well as for advanced workshops on the dynamics of Asian deprivation in the early modern period. More than that, however, it retains its non-Eurocentric vision with its prognosis that the 'reversal of fortunes' for China and India is nearing its end. In fact, while the first edition of the book concludes in 1900 at the height of European imperialism, the eagerly awaited second edition (August 2006) rises to the challenge of this prognosis with the addition of not only a rewritten preface and conclusion, but also the insertion of a new chapter six called 'the great departure' where Marks addresses the economic and ecological implications of two major historical changes in the twentieth century. The first is the awareness that 'decolonization' in Asia and Africa and the rise of new nation-states was occurring in parallel with the shift in the location of global capitalism from Western Europe to the United States. The second, echoing William McNeil's work, is the proposition that the twentieth century marks something new under the sun. In tandem with unprecedented economic growth has been the near exhaustive use of fossil fuels and the extreme exploitation of the earth's resources by a small percentage of the world's population. While these changes may have caused some commentators to call this era the 'American century' for precisely these reasons, Marks asserts that this eclipses the importance of Japan, China, and India as the new players to benefit from global capitalism and industrialization. However, the ways in which a new 'Asian century' in the twenty-first century deals with the responsibility of such a ghastly ecological inheritance remains to be seen. ■

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