

The West and the Rest

The Great Debate

For nearly two hundred years, social scientists in Europe and the Americas have conjured explanations for the meteoric rise of the West, or what some recently have called the “great divergence.” They have asked—what is capitalism? What is it good for? Why did it first arise in Europe? And how and why did the West come to rule the world?¹ The century and a half after about 1750, so the story goes, saw not just economic growth but the associated rise of ideas of liberty and justice—the Age of Enlightenment, of democratic revolution, of liberalism, humanitarianism, progress, or what many simply call modernity. How, people have asked, did the West spread (or not) to the Rest?

Today we are beginning to recognize that this era was also catastrophically destructive. As one scholar has observed, the liberalism of a free market society—the dominant form of political organization and ideology in the West and an idea championed by Adam Smith and many others—has been “the most devastating for life on Earth.” And not only the obliteration of nature: this era was also inextricably tied to the violent subjugation of peoples—in short, slavery and empire.² Freedom, at least for some, came to rest on destruction, at the center of which was the burning of fossil fuels. Ironically, for many in the West, freedom also meant the freedom to look away from violence, ultimately to forget. But this is to get ahead of our story.

Until recently, teachers in secondary schools and universities tended to organize their teaching materials to explain and celebrate what makes the West distinctive. This effort reflected broader views underway about the uniqueness of the United States and the idealization of the ‘nation-state.’³ In the United States during the Cold War, courses such as “Western Civ” were common. Generations of college students listened to their professors lecturing on the virtues of

capitalism and liberal democracy. (Or they fell asleep, and only rarely protested.) These were the secular, twentieth century, peculiarly American equivalents of those “Three C’s” taught to the British and often used to justify imperialism in the nineteenth century: Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization.⁴

Many scholarly interpretations across multiple disciplines from history to philosophy emphasize the West’s uniqueness and internally driven processes, a global power rising first and then expanding outwards. These narratives are usually lumped together as variations of “Eurocentrism,” a contentious word in our current politically divided world. The sociologist Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (still widely read over a century after its first publication in German in 1905) argued that with the Protestant Reformation, hard work and profits became signs of being chosen by God; savings and reinvestment transformed wealth into capital. A more recent work has argued that the Catholic church’s marriage policies changed the way people thought about relationships and property and that this development explains the rise of the West. Another theorist has emphasized the failure to create large empires after the fall of Rome; what made the West unique, in this view, was precisely its fragmentation into weak and small states. One thousand or more years without an empire encouraged competition and innovation; China’s problem is that it has had an empire for far too long. Still another book, which has sold millions of copies, asserts the importance of Europe’s distinctive geography for its rise to prominence—its coasts and mountains determine everything.⁵

These arguments have influenced millions, and the stories they tell have had an impact on the lives of many more. They have shaped economic and foreign policy for generations. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, scholars across various disciplines from anthropology to political science, together with politicians across the ideological spectrum, juxtaposed modern

‘versus’ traditional societies. What came to be known as modernization theory posited how societies past and present made—or, more often, failed to make—the transition from backwardness to capitalism and liberal democratic cosmopolitanism. Scholars insisted on the distinctiveness of the West even as they aspired to make it universal.⁶

For some, this theory became a belief system and very nearly a religion. Over the decades, it influenced everything from development policies and views of the Soviet Union to how to bomb the Vietnamese as a way of preventing them from succumbing to communism and forcing them to become modern. (Throughout, many have confused the imperative to become “modern” with the notion of being Western and democratic.) Warfare, so this argument went, would create a progressive “American-sponsored urban revolution” that would “undercut” the Maoist domination of a countryside mired in backwardness, a neologism for primitiveness. Napalming rural Vietnam would force its people into the modern world. The United States dropped more bombs across Indochina than those released by all military forces combined during the Second World War.⁷

To many, the Vietnam War was a lifetime ago. But the same ideas that shaped US bombing during that conflict returned with a vengeance in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Led by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, among other politicians, these assumptions now form part of a broader effort to shed the state from any responsibility for its citizens beyond protecting markets and the free circulation of capital. Here, the issue was no longer the supposed absence of democracy; rather, there was now *too much* democracy—in the form of social welfare programs, whether in New York or Accra. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union, these ideas came to dictate the policies of economic “shock therapy” that many naively believed would catapult Russia into capitalist modernity and political democracy. The

result? Inflation soared to 2,500 percent, economic misery overtook the vast majority, and amidst the rise of oligarchs, Vladimir Putin achieved his ascendancy.⁸

This is one narrative that has shaped our current outlook on the world, often with devastating consequences. Another school of thinkers offered a new version of traditional Eurocentric histories but added a Marxist twist. They, too, separated what needed to be put together, retelling the rise of the West by turning concepts into actors, as if capital and labor were living, breathing, people engaged in mortal combat. So powerful was this ideology that for many decades a few thinkers remained inordinately attached to the Soviet Union, even trying to explain away the Stalinist reign of terror that killed between 10-20 million people and perhaps more. Others turned a blind eye to Mao's destruction of anywhere from 30-50 million people between 1949 and 1976. With Marxist theory as their tool, these historians explored how land and labor became commodities that could be bought and sold in an increasingly competitive market. Landlords, particularly in England, dissolved the social relations that had tied them to peasants, consolidating their property ownership and turning peasants into workers. In doing so, capitalist agriculture took off and established the basis for the much later rise of industry and a middle class devoted to all manner of manufacturing. The Industrial Revolution, in this version of history, was preceded by an agricultural one and would be succeeded by a class struggle and socialist revolution.⁹

From the 1970s onward, a variety of scholars in this tradition began developing global approaches. Some of the most important voices came from Latin America, at a time when many countries were mired in poverty and inequality and ruled by brutal authoritarian regimes. Other thinkers hailed from Africa, writing just a decade after many countries had celebrated their political independence from Europe and at a moment when the collapse of commodity prices had

catapulted the continent into economic misery. Most were influenced by events such as the Vietnam War and US intervention in Latin America, the student movements then sweeping the world, the Cold War, and the economic crises of the 1970s, or what many have called the “long downturn.”¹⁰

What did these thinkers have in common? Emphasizing the development of world markets from the sixteenth century onward, their arguments portrayed capitalism as the systematic underdevelopment of peripheral regions being brought into the world economy. Latin America, Asia, and Africa were not inherently poor or backward, in this view, but quite the opposite. They were *made* poor by their integration into global markets and the spread of commerce. Economic globalization, they insisted, was in the very nature of capitalism, one reason some argued for socialist models and economic independence and self-sufficiency across the Global South.¹¹

These writers, working within what came to be known as the dependency school, sometimes struggled to define and date capitalism in their accounts. For some, capitalism became synonymous with the expansion of long-distance overseas trade in the sixteenth century. Others, stressing the non-European world, downplayed Western distinctiveness at the same time that they were consumed with understanding and condemning its development. A largely homogenous West villainized the (also homogenous) rest.¹²

Emerging from these global approaches, one influential study comparing China and England has argued that the “divergence” (Western prosperity and Eastern, in this case Chinese, poverty) came quite late, beginning only in the second half of the eighteenth century, and then almost entirely by luck.¹³ England was facing a potential crisis of population pressure, declining productivity, and ecological collapse. According to this general hypothesis and its supporters,

none of the usual textbook arguments highlighting Western exceptionalism—the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Protestant Reformation and its ‘work ethic,’ the modern state—can explain the ‘rise of the West.’ There was nothing intrinsically special about Europe. In fact, other parts of the world—particularly Asia—were becoming capitalist too, if only Europe hadn’t beaten them to the punch.

These arguments turn the classic Eurocentric framework on its head. Proponents here argue that China (some make a similar case for India) was in some respects more advanced than Europe. And, in contrast to the dependency theory we noted above, the issue for these scholars isn’t markets or capitalism per se. Rather, what made Western Europe (and they usually mean England here) unique was its access to coal and its effective lottery win when it colonized the Americas (once indigenous peoples were pushed aside and settlers and slavery took hold, of course). Excellent coal plus cheap American resources thus helps explain Europe’s “great divergence.” In other words, an accident of history. Switch China and England around, and pretty much the same thing would have happened. China would have taken off instead of rising to global dominance two centuries later, while England would have stagnated, its people trapped in poverty and facing starvation.¹⁴

Where do these different versions of world history and modernity’s emergence leave us? The perspectives on the West I’ve outlined here haven’t unfolded sequentially or been supplanted as new theories arise. Rather, they all form part of a larger conversation—longstanding and ongoing—with discussions often amicable, sometimes bitter, and everchanging. Each narrative is trying to explain the unmistakable and extraordinary growth of wealth in the West, and the West’s relationship to the rest of the world, though few if any have

taken account of the dawn of global warming and the plight of animals. Each is trying to answer a basic question: How did we end up here?

Unfortunately, conversations can sour, and the dialogue I've summarized here has grown increasingly acrimonious in recent years. Many participants are no longer interested in listening to opposing or different viewpoints. Some would prefer to disavow the West's entire history of violence, insisting that free market capitalism is both moral and humane, the key to human progress. These thinkers often cherry-pick choice words from Smith's classic book or quote Ayn Rand, another apostle of capitalism popular among US conservatives. For others, the only distinctive thing about the West is its criminality—its racism and exploitation of the world. To acknowledge those Westerners who fought against slavery, capitalism, or environmental destruction, is, in this view, to dilute a greater and more fundamental Western guilt in a sea of liberal sentimentality. Nor should one dare to point out that there were critics of the Enlightenment as soon as the word was first coined in the eighteenth century—including those who questioned what the word even meant. And to suggest that populations outside the West had their own capacity for invidious distinctions, horrific discrimination, dehumanizing exploitation, and environmental destruction, is anathema in this framework: it invites censure. To acknowledge the contribution of non-Western peoples in the making of the world beyond their role as the oppressed is, here, to absolve the West of its sins and, worse, to blame the victims.

¹ The word “capitalism” arrived in English from French around the 1830s, becoming common within a few decades. Invariably, early definitions were highly critical.

² Geoff Mann, “It was Not Supposed to End This Way,” *Boston Review*, 13 Aug. 2019; Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry*, 35, 2 (2009): 197-222, and his *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, 2021). See also Onur Ulas Ince, *Colonial Capitalism*. Ince's arguments are important, though there are powerful silences on the environment, little discussion of racism and, in the end, a rather conventional depiction of primitive accumulation. See also Karuna Mantena, *Alabris of Empire* (Princeton, 2010); Uday

Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire* (Princeton, 2005); and Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, 2003). Pitts argues that by the 1780s, powerful liberal critics of empire were “widespread” (p. 1); by the middle of the nineteenth century this had disappeared under the weight, especially, of pseudo-scientific racism. As Ince notes, these works are remarkably silent on the material world. For a recent history of liberal empire and its hypocrisies, see Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence* (New York, 2022). Also see Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (New York, 2022).

³ Which harbored its own forgetting, as Ernest Renan wrote in the 1880s in his essay “What is a Nation?”

https://web.archive.org/web/20110827065548/http://www.cooper.edu/humanities/core/hss3/e_renan.html. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 2016).

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, quoting *The Standard* 23 Apr. 1833: “Whatever tended to paralyse British industry could not but produce corresponding injury to France; when the same tyranny of *capitalism* which first produced the disease would be at hand to inflame the symptoms by holding out promises of loans, &c.” For overviews, see Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation* (Cambridge, 2015), esp. 28-42. Debates about definition are ongoing, as are many others. Great minds have pondered these and related issues, beginning with Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx, Max Weber, and continuing up to today. What made the West unique continues to generate scholarship and debates. Careers were, and are, at stake here, even Nobel Prizes. Douglass North won one, in part for his work on the relationship between institutions and markets: Western institutions, so this argument posits, helped create the conditions for sustained economic growth, largely by protecting individual property rights which, in turn, allows markets to operate efficiently. Historians disagree about the role of international trade to the rise of the “West.” Or what, if anything, was unique about Europe: culture, politics, technology, geography, resources. Philip T. Hoffman, *Why Did Europe Conquer the World* (Princeton, 2015). For an excellent overview and original argument, see Joel Mokyr, *A Culture of Growth* (Princeton, 2017); see also Jack Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2004). Columbia University pioneered the Western Civ course, which then spread across the country. See also Niall Ferguson, *Civilization* (New York, 2012).

⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 2002); Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World* (New York, 2021); Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome* (Princeton, 2019). Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York, 1999). Scheidel (p. 502) dismisses globalist approaches as a kind of retreat into so much “colonialist victimization.” Another argument stresses consumption. Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution* (New York, 2008). See also Benjamin M. Friedman, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York, 2021) for the religious roots of modern economic thought.

⁶ A consistent problem has been the conflations and confusions of capitalism, modernization and Westernization.

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Bases of Accommodation,” *Foreign Affairs*, 46, 4 (July 1968): 642-56. Huntington would later write the best-selling and deeply polarizing book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World* (New York, 2011). See also Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development* (Princeton, 2011).

⁸ See Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018). Also see Katharina Pistor, *The Code of Capital* (Princeton, 2019); Janine R. Wedel, “The Harvard Boys Do Russia,” *The Nation*, 1 June 1998.

⁹ See Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital* (London, 2016); T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate* (Cambridge 1987). The original article is Robert Brenner, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe,” *Past and Present*, 70 (Feb. 1976): 30-75. Brenner and others struggle with forms of capitalism in which labor is not free. Malm offers an important environmental twist and emphasizes the transition to coal as a way of controlling the working class. For just a few of the Eurocentric classics, see Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London, 1947); Rodney Hilton, intro., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1985); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 2013); Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution* and the *Age of Capital*. See also Perelman, *Invention of Capitalism*. For a recent discussion of the industrial revolution and world economic history, see Patrick O’Brien, “Was the British industrial revolution a conjuncture in global economic history?” *Journal of Global History* 17, 1 (2022): 128-50, and responses. For a general overview, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* (London, 2002). Accusations of Stalinism followed Hobsbawm for much of his career. Richard Evans offers a measured appraisal in his *Eric Hobsbawm* (Oxford, 2019). Intellectuals associated with the French Communist Party struggled with their relationship to the Soviet Union, including Stalin’s Terror and the USSR’s 1956 invasion of Hungary.

¹⁰ Slowly, indeed very slowly, attention to the environment also began to grow. The term “global warming” only began emerging in popular discourse in the late 1970s. The environmental movement at the time was primarily concerned with chemicals, nuclear waste and fallout, and species lost to pollution. In the United States, many were profoundly influenced by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (New York, 1962). For an overview of the development of the field of environmental history see, for example, Alfred W. Crosby, “The Past and Present of Environmental History,” *American Historical Review*, 100, 4 (1995): 1177-89.

¹¹ Escobar, *Encountering*. See the now-classic works by the historical sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 1-4 (1974-2011). For one alternative, see Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (New York, 1989). For an earlier and still important critique, see Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), esp. 8-23. The classic work on the global expansion of the market is Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, intro. Fred Block (Boston, 2001). For a recent attempt emphasizing early patterns of trade in which traders intervened and dictated productive processes, see Jairus Banaji, *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism* (Chicago, 2020). Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (London, 2015) returns to the early modern period in developing his idea of the Capitalocene.

¹² See also John M. Hobson, *Multicultural Origins of the Global Economy* (Cambridge, 2021).

¹³ Andre Gunder Frank, an important thinker within the dependency school, argued that there was not “any kind of European ‘exceptionalism’ of rationality, institutions, entrepreneurship, technology....” Frank, *ReORIENT* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998), 4, also, 21, 324. See also Samir Amin, *Eurocentricism* (New York, 1989); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence* (Princeton, 2000), esp. 3-28, and below. Pomeranz is a leading member of what has come to be known as the “California School” of global history. His argument reaches back to the work of Eric Williams and his *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944), a book that has been resuscitated by Black Lives Matter and other movements demanding reparations. Williams was a Caribbean intellectual and politician from Trinidad and Tobago whose work has influenced generations of radical scholars. He argued that slavery and the slave trade made industrial capitalism possible and then, once it was ascendant, helped shape abolitionism. This reduction of

ideology to material interests created problems for the proponents of the Williams thesis, if only because slavery dramatically expanded during the Industrial Revolution, not the other way around; but the brilliance of his intervention was to draw attention to the importance of large-scale connections across world regions. See also Cedric J. Robinson, “Capitalism, Slavery and Bourgeois Historiography,” *History Workshop Journal*, 23, a (1987): 122-40. For a much different argument reaching further back in time and arguing for convergence across Eurasia and into Southeast Asia, see Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 2 vols. (New York, 2003 and 2009). See also Mary E. Hicks, “Captivity’s Commerce,” *Business History Review* 97, 2 (Summer 2023): 225-46.

¹⁴ Many Europeanists are not happy, for example, Scheidel, *Escape*, 425-8. Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, wants to insist on the “exceptional scale of the New World windfall, the exceptionally coercive aspects of colonization and the organization of production there [he means slavery as well as coerced labor in mining], and the role of global dynamics in ensuring the success of European expansion in the Americas.” The Americas, as a peripheral region tied to the European “core,” provided relief for an economically challenged England that was headed towards crisis. Various criticisms have emerged, from the nature of the comparisons, his depiction of China, to the distinctiveness and good fortune of British coal. Pomeranz de-emphasizes institutional and intellectual developments, including the idea that technology could be deployed to dominate nature, that might help explain European and American economic dynamism. There is also little sense of precisely how this happened, beginning with the interconnections linking the various histories of coercion. Violence does not even make it into his index. Equally seriously, Africa, which provided the slaves for the American plantation economies, barely figures in his discussion. Because the thesis entails a comparison of two places and reproduces the core/periphery distinction of earlier “world systems” approaches, Pomeranz entirely misses the meteoric rise of the United States, which took off roughly at the same time as England. For two important critiques, see Robert Brenner and Christopher Isett, “England’s Divergence from China’s Yangzi Delta,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 61, 2 (May 2002): 609-62; and Philip C. C. Huang, “Development or Involution in Eighteenth-Century Britain and China?” in the same issue, pp. 501-38. Brenner and Isett return to the classic model emphasizing the transformation of land and property relations and the rise of capitalist agriculture. Huang criticizes Pomeranz largely for his understanding of Chinese history.