

# UC Berkeley

## Essays and Positions

### Title

Modernity's Histories: Rethinking the Long Nineteenth Century, 1750-1950

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2k62f464>

### Author

Burke, Edmund, III

### Publication Date

2000-05-25

# **Modernity's Histories: Rethinking the Long Nineteenth Century, 1750-1950**

**By Edmund Burke, III**  
**University of California, Santa Cruz**  
(a/o 5.25.00)

**Presented to "Modernity's Histories: The Long Nineteenth Century, 1789-1914"**

**A Conference of the University of California World History Workshop**  
**University of California, Davis, May 19-21, 2000**

Published in the World History Workshop e-Repository, June 2004.

## **The Long Nineteenth Century: The Stakes**

I'd like to use this occasion to propose that our Multi-Campus Research Group in World History consider undertaking a collaborative research project aimed at rethinking the history of the long nineteenth century in comparative world historical perspective. In what follows I suggest some reasons why demarcating a research area on this scale might be productive, as well as some broad topics within it that appear to me to be potentially of interest. These days for a variety of reasons we are suspicious of large scale historical narratives and the uses to which they have been put. But *faute de mieux*, we continue to frame our work in terms of the dichotomous division between the West and the Rest, often without our being aware of it. It is my contention that by neglecting the larger frames in which our work might be inserted, we deprive it of larger resonances that will enable us to connect with broader audiences. Whether we like it or not, big narratives will inevitably be invoked by readers as they seek to render intelligible our smaller scale histories. There is therefore a compelling need for a self-consciously comparative world historical approach.

Why the nineteenth century? Because it seems to me to be the piece that has thus far been left out of the rethinking of modern world history. Little noticed until now, the outlines a new world historical framework for the early modern period has begun to emerge. I'll briefly outline what seem to me the main parameters of this work a little bit further on. Similarly, I suggest the outlines of a global framework for the history of the twentieth century can be perceived (though here for a variety of reasons the crystal ball remains cloudier). As I'll explain below, despite major progress, both enterprises seem to me at the moment to be stuck, and unlikely to progress until the job of inscribing nineteenth century history into world history has progressed. The nineteenth century is key. Yet despite a lot of research we're still far from being able to devise a truly world-centered historical framework for the nineteenth century. Accordingly, it is time for scholarly energy to be focused on integrating this new work into a self-consciously world historical narrative framework.

Before turning to the nineteenth century, I'd like to begin first by reviewing the new framework for the early modern world history. Next I'll turn to a critique of what is still the framework around which the modern history narrative is organized:

Hobsbawm's concept of a "dual revolution." Then I'll propose a periodization for the nineteenth century as world history. I'll also critique the primary discursive obstacles to rethinking nineteenth century as world history: the West and the Rest model, and the concept of colonialism. Next, I will make some remarks about units of analysis and large scale histories and the task of comparative world history. I'll conclude with some remarks on the long nineteenth century in the perspective of Big History.

## Early Modern World History

As a result of the work of a scholarly generation, we can now begin to view the history of the early modern period in a comparative world historical framework. It began naively enough with the debates of the 1950s and 1960s over the "crisis of the seventeenth century." But then, somewhat as women's historians began asking: did women have a Renaissance?, historians working on non-Western regions began to wonder: did Asia have a seventeenth century crisis too? (A special issue of *Asian Studies* signaled this development).<sup>1</sup> Another stimulus was the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, which from an Asianist perspective was notably vague on how the rest of Asia fit into the story of the emergence of capitalism in Northwestern Asia (aka Europe).<sup>2</sup> The old question: did the West rise, or did the rest of Asia decline? has now been restated to recognize the extent to which the emergent world economy was until well after 1500 a multi-polar Asia-centered economy. Thus Andre Gunder Frank's *Reorient* (1998)<sup>3</sup> and Ken Pomeranz's recent *The Great Divergence*<sup>4</sup> (among other works) have reposed the question of the origins of the modern world economy in ways that seek to break us out of the straight jacket of Wallersteinian world systems theory, with its economic reductiveness of complex historical processes, its pre-Copernican universe of center, periphery and semi-periphery, and above all its eurocentrism and its presentism.

Similarly the processes that gave rise to the modern state in early modern Europe (and subsequently everywhere else) have been re-imagined in a more global way. Bin Wong and Jack Goldstone have in different ways made notable contributions to our understandings of what is general and what is specific to Europe in the emergence of the modern state.<sup>5</sup> The so-called military/fiscal revolution of early modern times, which in the hands of Geoffrey Parker has sometimes seemed a celebration of the unique capacity of the West for armed mayhem, can now be seen as having its roots in China, where the destabilizing connections between the use of gunpowder weapons and government fiscality first emerged.<sup>6</sup> More clearly, we can see that the decision to use gunpowder weapons set societies on a steadily escalating

---

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Asian Studies* 24, 4 (1990).

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* 3 vols. (New York: Academic Press)

<sup>3</sup> Andre Gunder Frank, *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the making of the modern world economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) and Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Military revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

technology/cost curve, linked to the ability to fund these weapons (and all of the manifold administrative and cultural adjustments their use required as well).

Perhaps the biggest change has come in our understanding of the culture of the early modern world. Scholarly work on the place of religion in early modern Europe has largely overthrown the old modernizationist narrative, in which the inexorable progress of science and technology was the central theme, and religion was viewed as inherently fated for cultural obsolescence. The complex imbrication of “science” and “non-science” has been explored in detail from a huge variety of perspectives, as a result of which the borders between science and non-science, as well as science and religion no longer look so firm, and our sense of the cultural substratum of European society has emerged enormously enriched and transformed. Studies of the place of print culture in modern European culture have been another important avenue of study, instrumental, for example, in reevaluations of the French revolution.<sup>7</sup> A third area may also be signaled. Early modern European representations of and responses to the presence of the other, internally as well as external, have also significantly undermined previous understandings of how hard-won was the identity of Europe, and how drastic the policings of it (colonialism, witchcraft trials, the ethnic cleansings of Iberia, stigmatization by the state and religion of all forms of deviancy). Parallel investigations of cultural processes outside of Europe have enhanced a sense of the difference as well as the similarity of European culture to struggles going on elsewhere (especially in the other Asian civilizations) and their cultural hybridity. To summarize: as a result of the research of a scholarly generation, our understanding of the history of the early modern period has been dramatically transformed in all respects (even though this has yet to trickle down to the authors of textbooks).

From this rapid overview of the transformation of early modern history, what should we retain? First, that viewed from a world historical perspective, we have the beginnings of a dramatically new understanding of the Asian roots of the global economy and the modern state in the early modern period, as well as the cultural struggles within Europe (and to a degree outside it) which they occasioned. The new view represents both a change in perspective (Eurocentric to global), and a vast expansion in what is known about the history of specific regionally based societies. A second major result of this emerging literature is that the rise of the West has been to a degree de-naturalized, and can now be seen as one historical trajectory among many. A third related discovery is that the very deep historical roots of modernity not just in Europe, but also in the rest of Asia. What might be called the new early modern world history has overthrown the older eurocentric large scale historical narratives of the origins of the modern state and the modern world economy. More and more the early modern period has emerged for historians as an arena of trans-cultural interaction as well as a global field of power in which European hegemony was still largely one competitor among many. (Not until the mid-eighteenth century were Europeans able to effectively operate militarily against established Asian states). Almost as important in this re-evaluation as the persistence of Asian economic and political power, has been the change in our sense of the crucial importance of the conquest of the Americas in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The printing revolution in early modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Roger Chartier, *The cultural uses of print in early modern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and *The cultural origins of the French Revolution* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

narrative of early modern world history. In sum, there has been a very significant transformation in our understandings of early modern history over the last decade, even if no one has quite kept score in this way.

### **The Dual Revolutions Thesis: Persistence of a Discursive Practice**

Thus far I have argued that the globalizing early modern history has made some important advances. If we examine nineteenth century history, however, there is much less evidence of the emergence of a new world history narrative, despite a great deal of wonderful work. Here the narrative continues to be shaped in important ways by Eric Hobsbawm's canonical *Age of Revolution* (1962)<sup>8</sup>, which was organized around the world historical importance of the "the dual revolution"—the industrial revolution and the democratic revolution. Hobsbawm posited the two terms of the dual revolution as a dialectically related, and explicitly world historical. The concept of the dual revolution has shaped (and to a considerable extent continues to shape) our understanding not only of the nineteenth century, but also of early modern history (where the strategy has been to track the sprouting seeds of capitalism, democracy and the modern state into the early modern period. Simultaneously the dual revolution has also provided the dominant paradigm for the history of the twentieth century, seen as the story of the unequal struggle between capitalism and democracy. Elements of the dual revolutions thesis continue to hang on in what we teach, and even, I would argue in what we write. (Check any textbook, if you don't believe me).

Viewed from the beginning of the twenty-first century, the dual revolution narrative appears less compelling. Both its intellectual and political foundations lie in ruins as a result of changes in the political and intellectual fields. Intellectually, the new cultural history has demolished the old class-based interpretation of the French revolution, while the new economic history has queried the canonical narrative on the Industrial Revolution.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the end of the Cold War and the transformation of the world economy have undermined confidence in the industrial and democratic revolutions (as well as the self-evident centrality of the modern state, always an under-developed aspect of the dual revolutions thesis). Writing in the 1950s Hobsbawm could plausibly claim that the democratic revolution was the driving force in the twentieth century: who could deny the importance of the Russian revolution, the Chinese revolution, the independence movements in the Third World, and the American civil rights movement? But viewed from the perspective of today's Russia or China, its salience seems much less clear. Now we ask: how much did it matter that there was a Russian revolution? A Chinese revolution? The answers are far from clear, though much of what we write and teach continues to be orchestrated by this progressive narrative.

We can now see that the dual revolutions thesis was a Cold War narrative, bi-model variants (non-Marxist and Marxist) of modernization theory, Whigishly if unproblematically ending in the Capitalist (or Communist) present (roughly the 1950s, minus the warts and blemishes). Depending on the political orientation of the historian,

---

<sup>8</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> See Jan DeVries, "The Industrial and Industrious Revolutions," *Journal of Economic History* (1994), 249-271.

this might be staged as a conflict-centered narrative in which social forces were the lead actors, or as a more bland process-oriented Rostowian narrative. Whatever it was (here is the second point) it was state-centered. In the dual revolutions narrative, the appropriate unit of historical study was unproblematically taken to be the nation state (in the case of early modern history the task was to plot the emergence of nation states in *ancien regime* European society). Third, it was internalist in the way in which it located the forces of change. That is, change was seen as endogenous, derived from distinctively European historical processes, rather than linked to the wider world. Finally, this version of modern history can be seen as derived from the grand narrative of the Enlightenment, in which the colonial was marked as the past of Europe, located along an evolutionary continuum of progress, culminating in modern Europe. The better to naturalize the colonial division of the world, history was conceived as having two speeds, with the West proceeding at one speed, and the Rest bumping along behind. (Or, in a bow to Wallerstein, some have imagined a three speed world system, with the semi-periphery running along in second gear).

For a long time the dual revolutions thesis was widely seen as compelling. Despite the new social history and the new cultural history, it has still not been dethroned. The West-centered narrative of the dual revolution is clearly obsolete. Its “pull-by” date has expired. If we wish to rethink modern history as a whole from a world perspective, we must begin with the nineteenth century.

### **The Long Nineteenth Century: A Proposed Periodization**

A collaborative research project that seeks to place the nineteenth century in a world historical context will need to provide a periodization. (The one proposed here is merely a place-holder for a more carefully refined periodization). However, since all choices (narrative as well as conceptual and analytical) have consequences for the argument one wishes to advance, historians need to be aware of what’s at stake in the choices they make. Which nineteenth century shall we choose? We first need to delimit its chronological boundaries: a short 19th century (1789-1878)? a long one (1750-1914)? or a super giant sized one (1750-1925)? Important arguments have been advanced for each. This done, it next seems useful to identify the global and conjunctural factors that distinguish each period as a whole, as well as to make some internal subdivisions.

The periodization proposed here draws eclectically upon work by Emmanuel Arrighi, Chris Bayly, Charles Bright and Michael Geyer). It is based on the notion that any world history needs to be based upon a world periodization. It seems useful to identify periods of conjunctural moments crisis that shaped the future context within which others necessarily had to operate. However, while noting when things happen in relation to the global context is crucial, we need also to pay attention to sequence and precedence. The following is one attempt to outline the periods of crisis that fundamentally reshape the context of future developments:

1. Chris Bayly has argued that a prolonged global crisis profoundly restructured the late eighteenth century world and made possible the rise of the British empire.<sup>10</sup> When the

---

<sup>10</sup> Chris Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: the British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

crisis ended, France had lost its first empire (including Haiti, Canada and India), and been transformed by revolution and empire. Britain had emerged as Number One, with a powerful base in South Asia. The U.S. and the Spanish colonies had become independent, and a revolution in St.-Domingue has destroyed slavery, setting in motion events that would lead to the transition from slavery to freedom in the Americas (although not, as Robert Holt has argued in his *The Meaning of Freedom*, unproblematically).<sup>11</sup> The old map of Europe was consolidated, and the old Asian empires (Russia, the Ottomans, Persia, China, Japan, perhaps Thailand) had entered a period of political and economic transformation.

2. Charles Bright and Michael Geyer have suggested a mid-century (1848-1863) crisis.<sup>12</sup> This includes Chartism, the revolutions of 1848, the Irish (and Polish) potato famine (assisted by several years of severe El Nino/La Nina activity), the Crimean war, rebellions in Russia and the Middle East, the Indian mutiny, the Taiping rebellion, the Meiji restoration and the U. S. civil war (among others).

3. A third crisis period was economically keyed. It began with the prolonged economic slump of the late 1870s and was followed by the intensification of market globalization in the 1880s. It led to major political and economic consolidation, including the US, parts of Northwest Asia (especially Britain, France and Germany), Latin America (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina) Algeria, South Africa, Egypt and the Ottoman empire, colonial India, Qing China and Meiji Japan.) Parenthetically, it seems in some ways interestingly like the present moment.<sup>13</sup>

4. Finally, the long nineteenth century foes ended with the crises that preceded World War I. It began with a period of intense labor unrest in the industrial countries and was followed by a wave of abortive revolutions in Russia (1905), Persia (1906), Turkey (1908), Morocco (1908) China (1911), and the Mexican revolution (1911). It concluded with the outbreak of World War I.

### Units of Analysis and Large Scale Histories

A central problem for the development of world history as a research field has to do with what I would call the generalized refusal of the macro level of historical analysis among practicing historians. There are many reasons why this should be so. On the one hand there is the disciplinary training and expectations of most historians, for whom large scale historical questions are suspect. Why should this be so?

One reason is because everything about a historian's training leads her/him to value facts as attested by documents over other possible sources. As professionals, we have been encouraged to develop expertise, that is, knowledge of relatively restricted fields of research, and to eschew wider questions as unanswerable, if not potentially

<sup>11</sup> Robert Holt, *The Meaning of Freedom : Race, Labor , and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, "World History in a Global Age," *American Historical Review*, Oct. 1995, 1034-1060.

<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century : Money, Power, and the Origins of our Times* (London: Verso, 1994).

radically threatening to hard-won expertise. Larger scale histories are viewed as lacking in professional rigor.

In the intellectual history of the origins of the modern discipline of history in the early twentieth century, some important trade-offs were made. When historians claimed the study of everything from the level of the nation-state on down (regions, towns, to the micro-historical level), the new disciplines of political science, economics, and sociology appropriated the large scale social sciences questions. It is time to reclaim larger scale questions for history.

Finally, for those who have made the linguistic turn, large scale histories are suspect for additional reasons as well. Essentially, it is because macro-narratives are seen progressive narratives tainted by Enlightenment thinking, and thus almost inevitably eurocentric and/or teleologically-driven in their premises. Or else they are held to be civilizationally-driven, and their purpose is to generate narratives that celebrate (or denigrate) the histories of particular civilizations viewed as the onward march of (fill in the blank): Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. For all these reasons, large scale histories have proved problematic to many if not most historians.

Given these impediments, on what basis might world history plausibly be developed as a research field? One answer, which we have represented in our program this weekend, is to reinvent the global narrative. Topics at this level include the making of the world economy, the emergence of the modern state, and the study of human migrations. Jose Moya's paper on the nineteenth century trans-Atlantic migrations takes up the latter theme. In different ways the papers by, Maria Gritsch and Chipasha Luchembe examine the role of intermediary elites in the incorporation of Venezuela and Zambia (respectively into the world economy). Capitalism, we learn was the joint creation of capitalists and proto-capitalists within Europe and outside of it. Nikki Keddie's paper comparing economic development in Japan and the Middle East is another contribution in this line. With our new understandings of the multi-polar and Asian dominated early modern world economy, it is especially important that there be systematic work in explaining the emergence of Britain as an economic giant in the nineteenth century. Rethinking the emergence of the modern state from a non-eurocentric perspective is another important task that waits.

Not all world history operates at the level of a global narrative. Indeed most of it is pitched at lower levels of generalization. World history does exist. It's just that we've been looking in the wrong places. Mostly world histories have taken the form not of narratives of global change (the emergence of the state, or the world economy), but of interactions below the global level. Thus, for example, as the US and European fields have developed, many historians have begun to conduct research that overlaps previous borders: the Atlantic world, the US/Mexican border, the Pacific Rim, maritime Asia.

Here I'd like to distinguish between comparative history and comparative world history? Instead of comparing (and contrasting) two or more cases from different times and cultures, the latter selects cases from the same world historical context. A comparison of relations between men and women in classical Rome and the Old South may be good comparative history, but it is missing the disciplining frame of a world historical vision. Similarly, George Frederickson's *White Supremacy* (a



comparison of racism in the U.S. South and South Africa) is flawed by the fact that the cases are in fundamental ways not comparable.<sup>14</sup> Only the common strand of white racism is common to the two societies. This is not to say that Frederickson's book is not useful – I've been teaching it ever since it came out. In contrast, Eric Foner's *Nothing But Freedom*, a comparative historical examination of emancipation in the Caribbean and the Old South because it focuses upon a slave societies faced by the common problem of emancipation is in the end a comparative world historical essay.<sup>15</sup>

In my courses on world history since 1750, which focus upon the impact of the dual revolution around the world, I have found it useful to develop the following comparative sets of societies: for example, the Old Monarchies, contested settler colonies, or pre-1800 India and Java. (The same comparative sets might be of little use for another topic). (1) The Old Monarchies -- agrarian bureaucracies not formally colonized (Russia, Austria, China, Japan, Thailand, Turkey, Persia, and Ethiopia). (2) Latin American societies; (3) pre-1750 India and Java; (4) uncontested settler colonies in which settlers vastly outnumber indigenes (the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand); (5) contested settler colonies in which the indigenes remain demographically significant (Ireland, Algeria, South Africa, Rhodesia, Israel among others); (6) slave societies transformed by emancipation in the nineteenth century (the Caribbean islands, the Old South, parts of Brazil); (7) exploitation colonies (three main categories here : Africa, Middle East, South and Southeast Asia).

There are lots of different ways in which historians are already delimiting interactive zones for comparative historical study. At the largest we have zones like the Atlantic world, maritime Asia, the Pacific Rim, the U.S./Mexican borderlands. Historians are especially interest in tracing global flows and inter-connections within these zones: the migrations of peoples, the movement of commodities and ideas. The slave trade, nineteenth century European migrations, and the movement of labor throughout the British empire are all much favored topics. Histories of consumption and production (like Piya Chatterjee's study of the production and consumption of tea, Jason Ward's work on Mexican and Kongolese consumers or Susan Mann's interest in Asian women as producers and consumers, about all of which we'll hear later today) are another important place where research in world history is occurring. Jennifer Steenshorne's paper seeks to connect the parallel histories of two international exhibitions to the development of consumer culture. The flows of peoples, commodities and ideas may also be traced out at the global level. Jose Moya's paper on "Five Macro-Revolutions and Transatlantic Migration" (which we'll hear later this morning) is an example of a self-consciously non-teleological attempt to map the global determinants of these migrations.

It is possible to imagine other arenas for comparative and world historical research. The European colonial empires provide an obvious example. Recently historians of colonialism have begun to move from a model of the colonial encounter that sees it as a laying on of trips to one in which their were multiple cultural (and other) determinants of the ways in which European knowledges were implemented in

<sup>14</sup> George Frederickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981)

<sup>15</sup> Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).

specific colonial contexts. Ravi Rajan's paper on European forestry science and the ways it was transformed in the colonial Indian environment is an example of the flows of ideas across boundaries. In my own research I am presently seeking to track the complex emergence of a French sociology of Islam in the context of France and its colonial dependencies in the Middle East, the Maghrib, and West Africa. Doug Haynes' paper on Victorian medicine seeks to complicate the standard insular story by revealing the ways in which the empire helped shape the contours of British medicine.

Research on cultural encounter at the edges of Europe seems to be increasingly attracting historians, in part as a strategy for reinventing European history. Peter Sahlins's *Boundaries* used Andorra as a liminal space from which to study the ways in which identity in the Pyrenees happened in the nineteenth century. The joint paper by John A. Davis and John Marino on the Mezzogiorno and Modernity promises to have a lot to tell us about the ways in which modernity happened along the southern cultural faultlines of Europe. Historically a core area in the development of civilization, the Mediterranean in the modern era has shared a common fate characterized by weak states, agrarian backwardness, delayed class formation, and patriarchy. Against the background of deep historical and cultural similarities, it seems useful to ask: why and with what consequences did the Mediterranean come to modernity divided between colonizers and colonized, developed and underdeveloped states? How were these tectonic shifts experienced in cultural terms?

With this example, we can see that studies of historical interactions in the Baltic, the North Sea, the Black Sea, or the sub-Arctic zone would all seem to be ways in which European history might be rejuvenated. There are other arenas outside of Europe that have equal potential. Part of the attraction of studies of the Indian Ocean world is that they provide historians with a way of engaging the cross-border developments within this region that are otherwise little noticed in national histories. To the extent that they consider the larger-order contexts and frames within which the specific histories they recount unfolded, I would consider all such studies are world history.

### **Is Modernity Western?**

The question of "where is the colonial?" leads us to a reconsideration of modernity and of the place of the Enlightenment within modernity. The Enlightenment naturalized the nineteenth century world as one in which agency and progress were held to emanate from Northwestern Asia, while the colonial world slumbered unawares until awakened by the kiss of the West (what some have dubbed the Sleeping Beauty narrative). Thereafter the division of the world into two (the active, Western part and the passive, Eastern part) became an article of faith until the rise of nationalism disrupted this particular vision. In the 1950s modernization theory and the flourishing of area studies continued this basic perspective.

The attacks on modernization theory in the 1970s under the impact of the nationalist "disenchantment of the world" led to a deep questioning of Western social science. Scholars became aware that formerly colonized peoples had agency too. The search for the roots of nationalism in the Third World coincided with the new social

history and resulted in a radical change in perspective on the past of non-Western societies, one that made it possible to link them up within a larger world historical perspective. But unfortunately it did not lead to a conceptual break in the way in which world history has been envisioned. As I have argued elsewhere, the discourse of nationalism did not conceptually challenge the imperialist progress-oriented narrative. It merely turned it inside out, recoding as positive all the colonial negatives. (Thus for example Muslim fanatics were repositioned by nationalist discourse as heroic resisters and precursors of nationalism). These orientalist dichotomies (west/east, male/female, active/passive, etc.) continued to hold sway. Despite the force of his critique in *Orientalism*, Edward Said failed to break epistemologically with the West and the Rest model.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, despite a laudable attempt to imagine the lives of subaltern classes through reading colonial sources against the grain, the Subaltern Studies group, at least in their earlier incarnation, remain stuck in the same epistemological space. Other attempts to take Foucault on the road and track the emergence of modernity in the colonial world as the imposition of a hegemonic western discourse of power also leave us stuck with a West and the Rest model. (Think of Tim Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt*, for example).<sup>17</sup> Underlying the persistence of the West and the Rest narrative is the continued influence of the nationalist counter-narrative. Until we find a way to escape the shadow of nationalism, we are condemned to repeat the same clichés.

Since the so-called linguistic turn, a huge amount of scholarly work has been devoted to defining modernity and specifying its connection to Western imperialism. Is modernity Western? Is colonialism the discursive form in which modernity was imposed on non-European peoples? The burden of much recent work is that it is. Recently some have floated the idea of alternative modernities. I am not sure this resolves the difficulties. While recent efforts to theorize and specify modernity as an historical project have significantly reshaped how we understand the modern world as culture, less energy has gone into locating it in a comparative world historical perspective. The debate over modernity and the Enlightenment owes more to the particular phase of the political and intellectual culture of our time than it does to a sustained historical inquiry. For this reason, there has been an important disconnect between modernity viewed as the product of social structural world historical change and efforts to write the history of western modernity as a discursive practice. One place to start the rethinking is to conceive of modernity as both social structural and discursive elements, in which the latter is the arena of contestation and struggle over the institution of new practices.

If we take seriously the recent efforts to see the modernity in world historical terms, then we need to modify our characterization of it as Western. From the perspective of the deep structural history of Northwest Asia was throughout most of human history an outlier to the cultural interactions of the regionally based societies of the rest of Afrasia. Put another way, the line that connects the Greeks to the Renaissance to modern times is in world historical terms, an illusion. The major point of the new early modern world history is simply that Europe's economic rise was predicated upon the high level of commercialization and monetization generated by the maritime Asian economy c. 1450 (to which Europe was weakly integrated when the bell

---

<sup>16</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

for the start of the early modern period sounded). To sharpen the point, the modern world economy is the joint product of the prior history of humanity.

The same is true for the modern state (the other great agent of social structural change). The modern history of the state lies not just in Europe but also in the cumulative history of the intercommunicating societies of Eurasia. Well before Europe, the Chinese, Mughals and Ottomans employed gunpowder weapons. Though all encountered the same steeply sloping technology / cost curve, their divergent responses to the adoption of gunpowder technology were in part determined by their different regional locations and different histories. The Ottoman empire remained a formidable force until the end of the seventeenth century. Europe, although a late-comer to the party, again profited from the prior stages in the military / fiscal revolution elsewhere in Asia. As we've seen above, historians have made significant progress in tracing the impact of the military / fiscal revolution across the early modern world.

In the long nineteenth century, for reasons it would be important to specify, the multi-polar Asian-center world economy devolved into one dominated by British economic power. In order to rethink the nineteenth century economy in world terms, we'll have to draw upon the perspective of the new history of early modern world economy, notably the world distribution of factor endowments, as well as the ways in which conjunctures and periodic crises opened new opportunities for individuals, regions and states to participate in the world economy, and closed off opportunities for others. What's clear is that the industrial revolution (as envisioned by Hobsbawm) cannot unproblematically be extrapolated forward to the rest of humanity. While modernization theory has proved to be a poor predictor of the future, but in some ways it was a worse world history, it is difficult to argue that colonialism was simply (or only) a siphon of wealth from the periphery to the core. In sum there's a great deal that still needs to be done to rethink the history of the world economy of the nineteenth century.

A comparative history of the transformation of the modern state in the nineteenth century is also needed. Rather than starting with Foucaultian assumption about the totality of Western power, a lot of the newer writing on the histories of different regions of the world in the nineteenth century has emphasized the role of local elites in shaping the particular bargains by which their societies were incorporated into the world economy, and the specific forms the modern state assumed. One strategy for beginning to get beyond the West and the Rest model is to focus on the local elites in China, Mexico, Morocco and Japan (examples picked somewhat at random). In each setting there were partisans of integrating the world market, and opponents, as well as proponents of the modern state and opponents. The particular dynamics varied (and certainly changed over time). But there is nonetheless a family resemblance among them. The struggles in Porfirian Mexico over reform (political and economic) look much like those that occur in China, Morocco and Japan, even if the strength of the different factions may vary along with the outcomes. We can also look at colonial societies this way: local elites were divided in their support for and opposition to colonialism throughout the world. A comparison of India, Egypt or parts of Africa would quickly bear this out. Which brings us to the next move: to compare colonized and non-colonized societies.

## The Long Nineteenth Century in the Perspective of Big History

In conclusion, a few words about a final approach to world history: that of the very long term. Scholars like Jared Diamond and David Christian have recently popularized the subject of very long term history.<sup>18</sup> There is after all no fundamental difficulty in switching lenses to larger orders of magnification. Only when viewed from the vantage point of very long term history of humanity, are we able to perceive certain singularities of the history of the long nineteenth century that otherwise remain obscured. One of them is the familiar Braudelian theme of the weight of numbers. Consider for example the following global statistics. In 1750, there were 728 million people on earth. By 1900 their numbers had grown to 1.6 billion. (At the present moment there are c. 6.3 billion people on this planet). Hosbawm's influential narrative sees the century as one of the dual revolution, but it misses the cumulative impact of demographic increase, and especially of their enormous environmental impacts. In general we tend to ignore the cumulative impact of demographic change when it comes (for example) to assessing the viability of particular political or economic strategies. In the light of the massive increases over the long nineteenth century, this clearly will not do. The ability of states to develop more successful ways of controlling, disciplining and fostering larger and larger populations is truly remarkable. So too are the ways in which the world economy has widened and deepened, drawing all of us into greater involvement with one another. Both these trends have been seldom remarked by historians, assumed rather than queried. But their implications are enormously far-reaching. The history of the very long term has much to teach us about how to reconceive the ways in which we do modern histories.

These statistics raise major questions about how we understand the long nineteenth century. Hosbawm's influential narrative sees the century as one of the dual revolution, but it misses the sheer demographic increase, and especially of their enormous environmental impacts. It also misses the extent to which we can think of this period as being one of "the war against the peasants" – a war so successfully prosecuted up to the present that fewer than 50% of all people alive today are peasants, whereas in 1800, that percentage would have close to 98%. We are only beginning to become aware of just how crucial the history of the environment may be for the ways in which we think about history of modernity. (Especially since the trends I've just mentioned drastically accelerated in the twentieth century). The truly long term perspective of Big History has important things to teach us about what constitutes a pattern or a trend. Seen from this vantage point, the history of long nineteenth century (and the history of modernity) looks very different indeed.

---

<sup>18</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns Germs and Steel* (New York: Norton, 1997) and David Christian, "The Case for Big History," *Journal of World History* 2, 1 (1991), 223-238.