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# Challenging or Reinforcing the Reigning Paradigm? The Paradox of Conventional Anti-Eurocentrism

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## abstract

Most “mainstream” accounts of the West-East divergence gain theoretical inspiration from Max Weber and/or Karl Marx, and have therefore traced the “rise” of the West to the unique social processes that apparently fostered capitalism in Europe. Critics have labelled these accounts “Eurocentric” insofar as they imply the inherent superiority of the West over the East,<sup>1</sup> and they have offered alternative “anti-Eurocentric” narratives which ostensibly avoid such analytical and normative pitfalls. These critics have succeeded in directing our attention to experiences in the non-European world. However, they have sought to validate these experiences by simply extending (in space and time), rather than transcending, the problematic concepts and assumptions that plagued the “Eurocentric” Weberian and Marxist accounts of the origins of capitalism. This paper argues that a truly non-Eurocentric approach requires a definitive break with these assumptions and the adoption of an alternative historical materialist understanding of the origins of capitalism pioneered by Robert Brenner. While not explicitly conceived as non-Eurocentric, Brenner’s concept of social-property relations offers the surest foundation for understanding “the great divergence” without doing violence to history or succumbing to European triumphalism.

## key words

Marx, Weber, Ant-Eurocentrism, Eurocentrism, divergence

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<sup>1</sup> See J. M. HOBSON, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

Although it has suffered from conceptual stretching,<sup>2</sup> Eurocentrism usefully describes at least two problematic practices within the social sciences and humanities. The first is a tendency to simply ignore, devalue, and understate the significance of non-Western experiences. The primacy of Europe or the West is established by neglecting “the Rest.” To the extent that non-Western experiences are considered, a second and more pernicious tendency is to take the Western achievement of capitalist modernity, liberal democracy and rationalism as the natural and most advanced path of historical development. In this case, Western primacy is established by suggesting that non-Western experiences are deviations from the norm, stemming from a number of “obstacles,” “blockages” or other barriers that prevent the non-West from proceeding along the garden path.

There is strong reason to agree with J.M. Hobson’s observation that Max Weber and Karl Marx, while appearing to offer sharply counter-posed theories of the rise of the West, promoted a common “Eurocentric discourse.”<sup>3</sup> This can be evidenced most clearly by examining their explanations for the origins of capitalism. Weber’s “culturalist” account is typically, and usefully, contrasted with Marx’s “materialist” one. But it crucially important to recognize that both proceed from a shared premise: that the development of capitalism was a trans-European (or at least a trans-Western European process). Marx and Weber are thereby compelled to search for those intrinsic and essential characteristics which “explain” the homogeneity of social outcomes in the West and the concomitant failure of the non-capitalist East. While seeking to historicize capitalism, Marx and Weber unwittingly naturalize both capitalism and Western ascendance through mutual reliance upon certain teleological narratives and ahistorical categories.

Weber is widely recognized, even by his sharpest critics, for displaying a truly global range of interests and knowledge, seeking to identify the specificity of Western civilization as one among many historical patterns.<sup>4</sup> Unlike many of his contemporaries, Weber highlighted underlying similarities between Western and non-Western social forms which could bring them into analytical equivalence. In his historical sociology all societies have specific constellations of distinctly political, religious, cultural and economic rationalities, such that Puritanism and Confucianism, for example, can both be considered forms of rational religious thought.<sup>5</sup> As a transhistorically distinct sphere of social life, economic rationality and action were by no means the exclusive preserve of the early modern West. Capitalist “entrepreneurs” and “undertakings,” defined as the pursuit of profit-making opportunities through market exchange, were ancient and “well-nigh universal.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Ellen WOOD, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), 27.

<sup>3</sup> See HOBSON, 6.

<sup>4</sup> See Ellen Meiksins WOOD’s discussion in *Capitalism versus Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 153-154.

<sup>5</sup> Max WEBER, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (New York: Free Press, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Max WEBER, “The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in Europe,” in W.G. RUNCIMAN (ed.), *Weber: Selections in Translation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 335.

Much of Weber's work on ancient antiquity and China is therefore devoted to the problematique of explaining why these early capitalist forms failed to develop into mature capitalist societies<sup>7</sup>—what he terms “rational private enterprise econom[ies].” It is here where the teleological implications of Weber's sociology come into view. Early modern Europe became a pioneer of dynamic capitalist development because it came to possess “a specific type of ‘rationalism’”<sup>8</sup> associated with rational technology, rational law, and—crucially—a general “capacity and disposition” among men for practical rationality, *unhindered* by spiritual or religious concerns.<sup>9</sup> The true significance of Weber's famous “Protestant ethic,” then, is that it unshackled economic rationality *qua* capitalist activity—universally present across human history—from the myriad religious, cultural and political restrictions which had stifled its development in other civilizations, finally allowing it to assume natural prominence as the generalized and dominant form of rationality. In turning his gaze to non-Western civilizations, therefore, Weber tends to read history backwards from his interpretation of the European present, identifying the obstacles and impediments which ostensibly restrained the natural development of commerce and trade.<sup>10</sup> In Chinese society, for example, there were numerous institutionalised expressions of economic rationality, including well-developed cities, widespread trade and commerce, wealth accumulation, technological improvement, and population growth. But they never yielded a mature capitalism because they were hemmed in by various impediments which restricted urban autonomy and the formation of a true bourgeoisie, such as an extensive kinship system, a patrimonial state, and a Confucian privileging of “status” and familial obligations.<sup>11</sup>

On the face of it, Marx's materialist account of capitalism would seem to offer a compelling alternative, pivoting as it does upon a materialist rather than a cultural or ideational analysis. Yet what is widely accepted as the Marxist explanation of the capitalist transition, conventionally adopted by “mainstream” accounts, has much in common with Weber. Especially in his early works, Marx presented a theory of historical development which suggested a relatively linear progression through different stages of mode of production, propelled by a tension between the forces and relations of production. Although the exact constitution of the productive forces is disputed, in these early works Marx seems to suggest that the division of labour directly expresses the level of development of the productive forces, in turn determining social relations of class and property.<sup>12</sup> Thus the division of labour and corresponding level of technical development,

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<sup>7</sup> For China, see *The Religion of China*; for antiquity, see especially Weber's work *Economy and Society*. Fourth Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> WEBER, “The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in Europe”, 339.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>10</sup> On this point see WOOD, *Democracy versus Capitalism*, 172.

<sup>11</sup> WEBER, *The Religion of China*.

<sup>12</sup> See Robert BRENNER, “Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism,” in A.L. BIER, D. CANNADINE and J.M. ROSENHEIM (eds.), *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honor of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 272.

rather than a particular form of rationality, is the independent variable in the traditional Marxist account. The uniqueness of European society (and thus the root of its divergence from the East) therefore lies in its productive dynamism.

It seems, then, that the accounts of both Marx and Weber (and therefore many of their contemporary followers) at least partially adopt the “worldview which asserts the inherent superiority of the West over the East”<sup>13</sup> that Hobson takes to be the hallmark of Eurocentrism. In Weber, Western superiority is ultimately marked by the triumph of a unique rationality which alone guarantees passage to modernity; while in Marx, superiority is signalled by the dynamic development of the productive forces, which propels passage to higher (historically more progressive) modes of production. Lacking these markers, “the Rest” necessarily appears inferior in normative and analytical terms.

There would appear to be two routes to establishing a non-Eurocentric alternative to prevailing Weberian and traditional Marxist discourse. The first would be to accept the theoretical assumptions of these classical models, but to suggest that the classical authors (and those who have followed in their footsteps) erred in the historical detail. The anti-Eurocentrist is then charged with the task of demonstrating that non-Western societies, too, possessed, ingenious economic rationality, technological dynamism, and growing productive forces or a deepening of the division of labour. This is the strategy pursued by the “small band”<sup>14</sup> of influential anti-Eurocentric global historians and historical sociologists, most of whom have focused their attention on the “Great Divergence” in living standards and geopolitical power between Europe and Asia in general, and Western Europe and China in particular.<sup>15</sup> A second approach is to challenge the concepts, categories and assumptions offered by the classical authors, with the goal of formulating an alternative theory capable of assimilating and explaining historical detail and difference while at the same time refusing any notion that one development path is evidence or consequence of civilizational superiority. It is ironic that the kernel of such a theory has been provided by Robert Brenner’s analysis of intra-European social history.

### **Assessing the Chinese case**

J.M. Hobson, Kenneth Pomeranz and R. Bin Wong adopt the first route. They go beyond familiar world-systemic narratives (e.g., Dussell)<sup>16</sup> by insisting that a close examination of non-European experiences—particularly the Chinese—demonstrates not only the

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<sup>13</sup> HOBSON, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Useful recent contributions to the “Great Divergence” debate can be found in a special issue of the *Economic History Review*, 64:S1 (2011); a short summary and assessment of the debate is contained in Stephen BROADBERRY and Steve HINDLE, “Editors’ Introduction”, 1-7. David NORTHRUP argues that world history since 1000 CE is better conceived in terms of convergence rather than divergence. See “Globalization and the Great Convergence: Rethinking World History in the Long Term,” *Journal of World History*, 16(3) (2005): 249-267.

<sup>16</sup> Enrique DUSSELL, “Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism,” *Nepantia: Views from the South*, 1.3 (2000), p.472.

victimization of the East, but also the East's comparatively advanced and progressive economy and technology. It is for this reason that Hobson identifies Eurocentrism as a worldview asserting the inherent superiority of the East. Hobson does not deny that the West *did* make a "final breakthrough" to what he identifies as "modern capitalism" around 1800—the problem is that Eurocentrists have assumed that this divergence was a product of the East's *permanent* non-development. In fact, between 500 and 1500 CE the East was "the prime mover of world development," displaying ingenuity, progressive properties, and other characteristic values of modernity.<sup>17</sup> During this period of "oriental globalization," Western Europeans were "inferior" to many of the world's other civilizations.<sup>18</sup> Considerable "economic progress" was evidenced across the East, from the "rational capitalist investors" and "rational and progressive institutions" of the Islamic world to the industrial production and intensive (per capita) economic growth of Song China.<sup>19</sup>

In Hobson's narrative, the Europeans proved to be "neither sufficiently rational, liberal-democratic nor ingenious to independently pioneer their own development."<sup>20</sup> The West's breakthrough to modern capitalism therefore owed to its ability to acquire the advanced "resource portfolios" (ideas, technologies, and institutions) of the East through processes of diffusion/assimilation and appropriation. The "material" process of diffusion allows Hobson to explain why the West was able to catch up with the East despite its deficiencies--the diffusion of Chinese resource portfolios alone is credited with spurring an astonishing array of "European" advances, from the Renaissance to the British agricultural revolution.<sup>21</sup> Imperialist appropriation, which simultaneously enabled the plunder and exploitation of Eastern land, labour and markets as well as the "containment" of potential non-European economic rivals, explains why Europe was able to make the breakthrough to industrialism, first in Britain.<sup>22</sup> Although Europe was unique in constructing an imperialist identity, Hobson stresses that a "racist restlessness," rather than a "rational relentlessness," was its hallmark.

At first glance, Hobson's account might appear to offer a radical revision of conventional narratives. Yet what is most striking is the extent to which Hobson embraces classical (especially Weberian) assumptions about the nature of capitalist modernity as the pinnacle of human economic development and a product of rationality, ingenuity and progressive properties. It is entirely appropriate that Hobson concludes his work by likening world development to a relay race—the direction of the competition and the location of the finish line are given in advance.<sup>23</sup> The novelty of Hobson's narrative

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<sup>17</sup> HOBSON, 20-1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 297-8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 313.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 312.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 316.

consists in adding extra participants to the race, each of whom carries the baton for a portion of what is a "continuous process" of modernization.<sup>24</sup>

This attempt to challenge Eurocentrism by geographically and temporally expanding the applicability of its concepts carries severe historical and theoretical limitations. First, by measuring "progress" with a Weberian yardstick, Hobson is forced to obscure the historical complexity of both China and Europe. It is indeed notable that China exhibited a degree of "industrial" production and per capita economic growth, but simply characterizing them as indicators of "capitalism" does not explain their origins and limits. Likewise, Hobson's heavy emphasis on the diffusion/assimilation and appropriation of Chinese "resource portfolios" is not only highly exaggerated; it obscures the indigenous dynamics of European development and ignores the tremendous diversity of experience *within* Europe itself. Second, even if the empirical detail of Hobson's narrative were perfectly correct, he would still not succeed in providing an adequate basis for non-Eurocentric social theory. It may be possible to expand the number of civilizations that meet the Weberian criteria of superiority, but there will always be civilizations and peoples that do not fit. Hobson's framework permits two ways of dealing with them, both of which are inadequate: they can be sidelined as developmental failures, or the historical record can be strained and contorted to enable their inclusion among the ranks of the rational.

Unfortunately, historical obfuscation and theoretical incoherence attend the two other significant attempts to challenge Eurocentrism on the basis of the Chinese example. In contrast with Hobson, Pomeranz (and to a lesser extent Wong) explicitly recognize regional variation within Europe and China, suggesting that a comparison of their most advanced regions (England and the Lower Yangzi Delta, respectively) provides the clearest indication of civilizational similarity.<sup>25</sup> On this basis, Wong and Pomeranz argue that Britain and Europe evidenced symmetrical Smithian development paths, whereby an expanding population yielded increasing demand, encouraging increase in supply through specialization and growth of the division of labour.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, the two regions were roughly equivalent in many important respects, including in per capita income,<sup>27</sup> the composition of the capital stock and economic institutions,<sup>28</sup> core-periphery relations and "proto-industrialization";<sup>29</sup> and extensive factor markets.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 316.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth POMERANZ, *The Great Divergence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8; R. Bin Wong, "The Search for European Differences and Domination in the Early Modern World: A View from Asia," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (April 2002): 447-469.

<sup>26</sup> For a summary of this causal chain, see Robert BRENNER and Christopher ISETT, "England's Divergence from China's Yangzi Delta: Property Relations, Microeconomics, and Patterns of Development," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (May 2002), 610; and WONG, 454.

<sup>27</sup> POMERANZ, "Political Economy and Ecology on the Eve of Industrialization: Europe, China, and the Global Conjuncture," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (April 2002), 429.

<sup>28</sup> POMERANZ, *Great Divergence*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> POMERANZ, "Political Economy," 430; Wong, 450.



Like Hobson, Wong and Pomeranz suggest that aspects of “capitalism” can be traced back centuries in both China and Europe, but that the crucial breakthrough was to industrial capitalism after 1800.<sup>31</sup> Until that time both Britain and the Lower Yangzi were headed for a common Malthusian “cul de sac” because of shortages of land and energy.<sup>32</sup> A combination of technological inventiveness, imperial coercion, and luck enabled Britain to access new markets, lands and energy supplies and to organize new production in the colonial peripheries.<sup>33</sup> Western “breakthrough” therefore owed very little, if at all, to superior market dynamics and division of labour but instead to allegedly proximate and even accidental causes. Like Hobson, Pomeranz stresses the crucial role of Western imperialism—but since this imperialism was predicated upon “deviations” from Smithian dynamics they do not signify Western superiority.<sup>34</sup>

While more attentive to historical detail than Hobson and many others, their own reliance upon a classical framework does not enable Wong and Pomeranz to adequately interpret the detail they amass. For Wong and Pomeranz, an advanced economy is marked by the degree to which it has eliminated barriers to Smithian development, as indicated by the division of labour, extent of the market, and technological level.<sup>35</sup> The result is an approach which Joseph Bryant characterizes as “econometric historiography”—the cross-regional comparison of quantitative indicators with insufficient attention to the potentially very different social relations underlying the data.<sup>36</sup> Bryant, Phillip Huang, Robert Brenner and Christopher Isset have made many pertinent criticisms of Wong and Pomeranz’s research; but most central is their common observation that the Chinese experience was *involutionary*, marked by growth (of output) without development (of labour productivity).<sup>37</sup> Wong may still be correct to draw parallels with the “industrious revolution” that Jan de Vries observes in early modern Europe,<sup>38</sup> because involutionary growth allowed for greater output per unit of land, and

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<sup>31</sup> POMERANZ, *Great Divergence*, 16; Wong, 467.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 22-4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 24. As Ricardo DUCHESNE has pointed out, POMERANZ is keen to calculate the precise ecological benefits that Britain ostensibly garnered from its colonies, but is strangely silent about the imperialist expansions of the Ming and Qing dynasties which involved the colonization and outright integration of non-Han lands. See “On the Rise of the West: Researching Kenneth Pomeranz’s *Great Divergence*,” *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 36:52 (2004), 76-77.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. POMERANZ, *Great Divergence*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> See the critique of POMERANZ in Joseph BRYANT, “The West and the Rest Revisited: Debating Capitalist Origins, European Colonialism, and the Advent of Modernity,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 31:4 (2006), 421. Note that this particular criticism is concerned with the meaning and implications that POMERANZ draws from his data, rather than the accuracy of the data itself. For a critique along latter lines, see DUCHESNE.

<sup>37</sup> See BRYANT, 423; Philip HUANG, “Review: Development or Involution in Eighteenth-Century Britain and China? A Review of Kenneth Pomeranz’s ‘The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy,’” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (May 2002), 512.

<sup>38</sup> R. B. WONG, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1997), 30-1 For de Vries’ explanation of the “industrious revolution,” see his “The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution,” *Journal of Economic History*, 54 (2) (1994): 249–270.

even per capita—but *not* per unit of labour. Thus, rather than embarking on a development path of productivity increase through specialization (as occurred in Britain), China experienced something of the opposite. Forced by population pressure to subsist on ever-smaller plots of land (while rendering hefty rents to landlords), peasants in the Lower Yangzi diversified their productive activities by engaging in new pursuits which, while requiring more intense labour, nevertheless allowed for higher incomes. The limits inherent in such a strategy conditioned the Lower Yangzi's descent into the Malthusian "cul de sac."

Wong and Pomeranz's neglect of structural factors also leads to a highly unsatisfactory explanation of British developments. As Bryant points out, technological innovations and industry seem to appear almost spontaneously (as they do for Hobson), without any preparatory process that altered the domestic social relations of production, yielded the capacity for advanced technology and manufacturing, or created the financial and exchange circuits required for sustained investment.<sup>39</sup> Eurocentrism is avoided, but only by refusing to undertake any serious historical explanation at all.

Finally, even if we assume that the accounts offered by Wong and Pomeranz are correct in their empirical detail, it is once again doubtful that any basis has been laid for anti-Eurocentric social theory. As Pomeranz notes, only three locations—western Europe, Japan, and China—were likely candidates for "a dramatic shift in economic possibilities," given their possession of certain Smithian attributes. Although this adds two members to the conventional Eurocentric roster, it necessarily excludes many others. How should the lack of Smithian development in Africa and the rest of Asia be interpreted, if not as developmental failure? As an empirically-minded historian, Pomeranz rightly distances himself from James Blaut's "uniformitarian" suggestion that basically all regions of Afro-Eurasia were undergoing transitions to "protocapitalism" before 1492.<sup>40</sup> However, Blaut's position is the only consistent way of maintaining a Smithian (or "Smithian Marxist") framework without implicitly constructing a hierarchy of civilizations.

### **Specifying capitalist development in Europe**

The dual problems of historical obfuscation and theoretical incoherence are not inherent in the anti-Eurocentric project. Instead, they stem from a misguided strategy of utilizing crucial assumptions and concepts of the classical model as the *basis* for assessing the Chinese experience. A compelling non-Eurocentric alternative can only be developed if the classical model is supplanted with new concepts adequate to the task of historical explanation. It may seem ironic that such concepts have been developed by historical materialist scholars, such as Brenner, who have focused on comparative European social history. However, a focus on difference *within* Europe demonstrates that the "economic rationality" peculiar to capitalism has its origins in the *unintended consequences of class struggles in England* between lords and peasants during the fifteenth and sixteenth

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<sup>39</sup> BRYANT, 411.

<sup>40</sup> See POMERANZ, *Great Divergence*, 27; and Blaut, 370.



centuries. In doing so he offered the first explanation of the origins of capitalism that did not confuse explanans with explanandum, and challenged the received Marxist models taken as reference points by the conventional anti-Eurocentrists.

Rather than conceiving of a forces/relations dialectic propelling historical change, Brenner instead points to the radical difference between capitalism and all previous forms of class-stratified society. While technique, organization and technology have varied across time and place, in all pre-capitalist societies the production of most goods assumed a basically similar form – peasants cultivated the land they held in some form of direct possession (but not ownership in the contemporary capitalist sense). Surplus appropriation (and therefore class exploitation) did not generally occur at the point of production as it does in capitalist societies, but instead through the exercise of political power and (at least implicitly) violence/coercion, after the agricultural product had been cultivated. In pre-capitalist class societies, therefore, political and economic powers were fused, and in fact indistinguishable. Modes of exploitation are then meaningfully distinguished from each other by their form of “social-property relations,” which Brenner defines as:

the relations among direct producers, relations among exploiters, and relations between exploiters and direct producers that, taken together, make possible/specify the regular access of individuals and families to the means of production (land, labour, tools) and/or the social product per se. The idea is that such relations will exist in every society, and define the basic constraints on – and the possibilities and limits of – individual economic action.<sup>41</sup>

In his discussion of European feudalism, Brenner sharply distinguishes between peasant and lordly relations of production. Peasants, he suggests, adopted a “produce for subsistence” rule. To guarantee immediate subsistence and generational security, they minimized productive specialization, had large families, subdivided their holdings, and encouraged early marriage.<sup>42</sup> Feudal lords, because they had minimal capacity to transform production, increased output and income only by “extensive growth”—carving out new lands, conquering new ones, etc.—as well as “political accumulation,” or investment in the means of violence.

In this light, the problem of accounting for the transition to capitalism is explaining how it was possible at all. Why would lords enclose on the direct producers who provide their wealth and security? Brenner’s answer, which has been given important elaboration by George Comninel,<sup>43</sup> is that capitalism emerged as an unintended consequence of class struggles in England specifically. The Black Death (c. 1348) and consequent depopulation occurred throughout the continent, jeopardizing the normal rules of reproduction that

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<sup>41</sup> Robert BRENNER, “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong,” in Chris WICKHAM (ed.), *Marxist History-writing for the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 58.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> George COMNINEL, “English Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 27(4):1-53.

once governed lordly accumulation. In France, peasant communities were able to secure rights of inheritance and fixed rents against their lords, even as new powers of politically-mediated appropriation were formed by tax-office absolutist states.<sup>44</sup> In England, however, a very different path was followed. Here, depopulation also turned the terms of class struggle against the lords, and attempts to re-impose feudal exactions failed. Whereas the serfs were once obliged to perform a certain amount of labour upon the lords' demesne, they were now relieved of labour-rent obligations and obliged to only pay money rents on their customary tenancies.<sup>45</sup>

This initial peasant victory set in motion a series of interconnected events which eventually yielded agrarian capitalism. Lacking traditional extra-economic powers of surplus extraction, in the mid-fifteenth century the lords began to rent their demesne land to the highest bidder, i.e., they established variable "economic" rents. Although this would have otherwise had no consequence for customary tenants, the English common law (absent in France) enabled the lords to gradually claim exclusive right to common lands. There thus began a process—largely "legal"—by which common lands and rights were extinguished, and lords increasingly asserted their right to enact variable rents on customary holdings as well.<sup>46</sup> Peasant access to the land (the means of subsistence) became conditional upon meeting a market-determined rent. For tenants, production for the market was now an imperative, rather than an opportunity—they had to specialize, innovate, and improve productivity just to ensure their self-reproduction. These capitalist social-property relations, therefore, induced a wholly new "systematic and continuous tendency or drive to transform production in the direction of greater efficiency,"<sup>47</sup> while also creating a new tripartite class structure of landlord, capitalist, and proletarian.

This result differed markedly from that of France, where enduring peasant possession of land ensured the maintenance of pre-capitalist rules of reproduction. There, a secular tendency of declining labour productivity set in as peasant families subdivided their holdings over generations. To subsist, many peasant families necessarily supplemented their income with wages and "proto-industrial" production; but "tenant farming and wage labor had changed little since the crisis of the fourteenth century...whereas capitalism had totally transformed the agriculture of England."<sup>48</sup>

This perspective does not simply replace Eurocentrism with Anglo-centrism in searching for the origins of a "new and higher mode of production," as James Blaut has accused.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Mike ZMOLEK, "Further Thoughts on Agrarian Capitalism: A Reply to Albritton." *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 29(1), 136.

<sup>45</sup> Larry PATRIQUIN, "The Agrarian Origins of the Industrial Revolution in England," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 36:2 (2004), 204.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, 206-8.

<sup>47</sup> Robert BRENNER, "The Social Basis of Economic Development," in John ROEMER (ed.), *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 24.

<sup>48</sup> George COMNINEL, *Rethinking the French Revolution* (London: Verso, 1987), 192-3.

<sup>49</sup> James BLAUT, "Robert Brenner in the Tunnel of Time," *Antipode*, 26:4 (1994), 361-2.

Rather, it challenges the very notion that capitalism should be conceived as a “higher” mode, suggesting that capitalist social-property relations were in no way a product of “superior” rationality, technology, productiveness, or depth of the market (none of which England possessed).<sup>50</sup>

A focus on social-property relations confronts the Eurocentrists empirically, by demonstrating that capitalism was not a *European* phenomenon; but, more importantly, it confronts them theoretically by providing an explanation of capitalism’s origin which does not imply that its absence elsewhere stemmed from developmental failure or blockages. Instead, societal actors in non-capitalist societies are shown to have engaged in patterns of political-economic action which, while certainly distinct from the “economic rationality” of capitalism, were nevertheless completely “rational” given the specific structure of social-property relations they confronted. Thus, Brenner and Isett forcefully demonstrate that the Lower Yangzi’s involutory growth differed markedly from the self-sustaining capitalist growth of England, but they do so by explaining how such a pattern was produced and reproduced through the actions of peasant producers struggling to meet subsistence needs with ever-diminishing plots and onerous fixed rents. Not only were such patterns of political-economic action “rational,” they were also similar in many respects to patterns existing at the same time in continental Europe, such as France.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, proto-industry and attendant commercialization often figured in peasant strategies of reproduction in pre-capitalist societies, in circumstances where partibility had been carried out to such an extent that individual plots can no longer meet basic subsistence needs.<sup>52</sup> When viewed through the lens of social-property relations, then, the story of early modern world history is not that Western Europe surpassed the “rest” (as Weber, Marx, and the traditional “wise of the West” literature would have it), nor is it that all of Europe and China were developmentally equivalent (as the revisionist anti-Eurocentric scholars suggest). Instead, Britain (and perhaps Holland) experienced a wholly new dynamic of self-sustaining growth through capitalist social relations, entailing unprecedented growth in urbanization, land concentration, population, and labour productivity.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the rest of the world—in continental Europe and Asia—ruling classes continued to rely upon various forms of extra-economic coercion to extract surpluses from land-holding peasants, allowing only for the familiar Malthusian cycle of involutory growth followed subsistence crisis. It is significant, in this context, that a recent quantitative comparison of living standards in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, China, Japan, and India concludes that “it was only England

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<sup>50</sup> See Robert BRENNER, “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism,” in T.H. ASTON and C.H.E. PHILPIN (eds.), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), chapter 10.

<sup>51</sup> See BRENNER’s discussion of French agricultural production in *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> For further analysis of peasant reproductive strategies in the Yangzi delta which also highlights their gendered character, see Etienne CANTIN, “Modes of Production, Rules of Reproduction and Gender: the fabrication of China’s textiles manufacturing workforce since the late Empire,” *Third World Quarterly*, 30(3) (2009):453-468.

<sup>53</sup> See WOOD, *Origin of Capitalism*, chapter six.

and the Low Countries that pulled ahead of the rest. The rest, in this context, includes not only Asia but also much of Europe.”<sup>54</sup>

That France and other Western European countries made a transition to capitalism in the nineteenth century must then be explained not on the basis of civilizational rationality/productiveness or pure contingency, but as a process by which state elites forcibly imposed the capitalist form of social-property relations first (unintentionally) developed in England centuries earlier. For if capitalism originally emerged in England as an unintended consequence of agrarian class struggle, its subsequent institution in Western Europe and beyond was very much *intended*. Basing himself on Brenner’s social-property approach, Benno Teschke has persuasively argued that the spread of capitalism was a *geopolitical* process in which pre-capitalist state classes had to design counterstrategies of reproduction to defend their position in an international environment which put them at an economic *and* coercive disadvantage. More often than not, it was heavy artillery that battered down pre-capitalist walls, and the construction and reconstruction of these walls required new state strategies of modernization.<sup>55</sup> Absolutist “rules of reproduction” came under increasing strain from the geopolitical competition imposed by Britain’s uniquely dynamic and productive capitalist economy. The international expansion of capitalism is therefore best understood as a geopolitically combined and socially uneven process, whereby pre-capitalist state classes had to design counter-strategies of reproduction to survive in an international environment. These strategies were not uniform, and were always refracted through pre-existing domestic class relations. The transposition of capitalism to the West European continent and the rest of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was therefore riddled social conflicts, from civil and international wars, and revolutions and counter-revolutions.<sup>56</sup> This lays the basis for explaining the “rise” of the West and the “achievements” of the Rest in terms which neither obfuscate the historical record nor ascribe superiority to any particular developmental experience.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

The conventional anti-Eurocentric accounts—represented here by Pomeranz, Wong and Hobson—have made a significant contribution to knowledge by uncovering non-European experiences long neglected by social scientists and historians. A focus on imperial China’s comparatively extensive market relations and dynamic technological development carries the potential to challenge Eurocentrism. However, these anti-

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<sup>54</sup> Robert C. ALLEN, Jean-Pascal BASSINO, Debin MA, Christine MOLLI-MURATA, and Jan LUITEN VAN ZANDEN, “Wages, prices, and living standards in Chin 1738-1925: in comparison with Europe, Japan, and India,” *Economic History Review*, 64:S1 (2011), 31.

<sup>55</sup> Benno TESCHKE, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003), 265.

<sup>56</sup> TESCHKE, 266.

<sup>57</sup> For further elaborations, see Hannes LACHER, *Beyond Globalization: Capitalism, Territoriality and the International Relations of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and TESCHKE. On Chinese socialism as a distinctly non-capitalist path to modernization, see Lin CHUN, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), especially chapter one.

Eurocentric assessments have sought to validate and interpret the Chinese experience by adopting many of the key concepts and assumptions of the classical paradigms they seek to undermine, most centrally Weberian and Smithian (including "Smithian Marxist") conceptions of capitalism. In awkwardly attempting to pigeonhole Chinese developments, these authors have fail the task of historical explanation; in upholding classical notions of what constitutes historical "progress" and "advance," they fall far short of developing a genuinely non-Eurocentric social theory. An effective alternative to Eurocentrism can only be developed by challenging, not reinforcing, the theoretical bases of the reigning paradigms. By identifying social-property relations as the key determinant in structuring historical processes, Robert Brenner provides a theoretical basis for explaining historical similarity and difference in a way that radically undermines any notion of civilizational superiority.

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