

## CHAPTER I

# Introduction to Real World History vs. Eurocentric Social Theory

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*The really important lesson to be learned from Marx and Weber is the importance of history for the understanding of society. Though they were certainly interested in grasping the general and universal, they concerned themselves with the concrete circumstances of specific periods, and the similarities and contrasts of diverse geographical areas. They clearly recognized that an adequate explanation of social facts requires a historical account of how the facts came to be; they recognized that comparative-historical analysis is indispensable for the study of stability and change. In a word, it is these two extraordinary thinkers in particular, who stand out as the architects of a historical sociology well worth emulating; for both of them subscribed to an open, historically grounded theory and method.*

Irving Zeitlin (1994: 220)

*The expectation of universality, however sincerely pursued, has not been fulfilled thus far in the historical development of the social sciences. . . . It is hardly surprising that the social sciences that were constructed in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century were Eurocentric. The European world of the time felt itself culturally triumphant. . . . Every universalism sets off responses to itself, and these responses are in some sense determined by the nature of the reigning universalism(s). . . . Submitting our theoretical premises to inspection for hidden unjustified a priori assumptions is a priority for the social sciences today.*

Immanuel Wallerstein (1996b: 49, 51, 60, 56)

## Holistic Methodology and Objectives

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My thesis is that there is “unity in diversity.” However, we can neither understand nor appreciate the world’s diversity without perceiving how unity itself generates and continually changes diversity.

We all have to live in this one world in which diversity must be tolerated and could be appreciated in unity. Of course, I refer to toleration and appreciation of diversity in ethnicity, gender, culture, taste, politics, and color or "race." I do not advocate acceptance of inequality in gender, wealth, income, and power without struggle. Therefore, we could all benefit from a world perspective that illuminates not only the subjective immorality but also the objective absurdity of "ethnic cleansing" and "clash of civilizations," which once again have become popular in some circles today. This book proposes to offer at least some basis in early modern world economic history for a more "humanocentric" perspective and understanding.

The European but exceptionally worldly historian Fernand Braudel remarked that "Europe invented historians and then made good use of them" to promote their own interests at home and elsewhere in the world (Braudel 1992: 134). This statement is revealing in several important ways. First, it is not really true that the writing of history was invented by Europeans, not even by Herodotus and Thucydides. History had also been written by the Chinese, Persians, and others. Moreover, Herodotus himself insisted that "Europe" has no independent existence, since it is only a part of Eurasia, which has no real internal boundaries of its own. Perhaps Braudel had in mind a generation of historians who wrote long after Herodotus. Yet even they invented Eurocentric history long after Arab historians, chroniclers, and world travelers of such fame as Ibn Batuta, Ibn Khaldun, and Rashid-al-Din, who had already written Afro-Eurasian world history which was much less Arab- or Islamocentric.

Indeed, Europeans seem to have invented geography as well, for "Eurasia" itself is a Eurocentric denomination, albeit one invented on a distant marginal peninsula of that land mass. Before his untimely death in 1968, Marshall Hodgson (1993) denounced maps drawn according to the Mercator projection, which makes little Britain appear about as large as India; and J. M. Blaut (1993b) has shown how Eurocentric the mapping of the "march of history" has been. Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen (1997) refer to *The Myth of Continents*. One example is that against all geographical reality Europeans insist on elevating their peninsula to a "continent" while the much more numerous Indians have but a "subcontinent" and the Chinese at best a "country." The relevant geographical and historical unit is really Afro-Eurasia. However, that could more appropriately be called "Afrasia," as Arnold Toynbee suggested and the former president of the World History Association Ross

Dunn recently recalled. Even this syllabic order still fails to reflect the real orders of geographical and demographic magnitude and historical importance of these two continents. Europe, of course, is none of the above.

Latter-day historians, it is true, have preponderantly gazed at their own European navel. That might be excused or at least explained by the social, cultural, political, and economic support they have received to do so. After all, historians received much support to write “national” histories in ideological support of European and American “nation-states” and to serve the ideological, political, and economic interests of their ruling classes. However, these historians also went beyond the confines of their own “nations,” to claim that “Europe” or “the West” was and is the “navel” (indeed also the heart and soul) of the rest of the world. If they gave any credit to anyone else, it was only grudgingly with a “history” that, like the Orient Express on the westward bound track only, ran through a sort of tunnel of time from the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, to the classical Greeks and Romans, through medieval (western) Europe, to modern times. Persians, Turks, Arabs, Indians, and Chinese received at best polite, and often not so polite, bows. Other peoples like Africans, Japanese, Southeast Asians, and Central Asians received no mention as contributors to or even participants in history at all, except as “barbarian” nomadic hordes who periodically emerged out of Central Asia to make war on “civilized” settled peoples. From among literally countless examples, I will cite the preface of one: “*The Foundations of the West* is an historical study of the West from its beginnings in the ancient Near East to the world [*sic!*] of the mid-seventeenth century” (Fishwick, Wilkinson, and Cairns 1963: ix).

Modern history, both early and late, was made by Europeans, who “built a world around Europe,” as historians “know,” according to Braudel. That is indeed the “knowledge” of the European historians who themselves “invented” history and then put it to good use. There is not even an inkling of suspicion that it may have been the other way around, that maybe it was the world that made Europe. Yet that is what I propose to demonstrate, or at least to begin to show, in this book.

This book sets itself a number of tasks. They are at once far-reaching and still very limited. The tasks are far-reaching in that I seek to challenge the Eurocentric historiography on which much of received “classical” and “modern” social theory is based. The intentionally set limits are even greater: I—and I hope the reader—will be satisfied with the bare outlines of an alternative rendition of the world economy between

1400 and 1800. It offers a basis for a now only very preliminary—but later hopefully deeper and wider—structural, functional, dynamic, and transformational global analysis and theory of the single world political economy and social system in which we all (have to) live together.

Quite possibly the limitations of this book are even greater than the ones I have set intentionally and so will prevent me from reaching even this limited goal. However, it is already exceptional even to attempt a review of the early modern global world economy and its structural characteristics in order to inquire how they impinge on its sectoral and regional parts. Most of the historical development of this world economy and its parts may receive shorter shrift than it requires and deserves. The attempt is not so much to write a world history of this period, nor even an economic history, which is beyond my present capabilities, as to offer a global perspective on early modern economic history. Although historical evidence is important, I seek less to challenge received evidence with new evidence than to confront the received Eurocentric paradigms with a more humanocentric global paradigm.

The principal intent is to show why we *need* a global perspective and approach, which we require not only on the history of the world economy itself, but also so that we can locate its subordinate and participant sectors, regions, countries, or whatever segments and processes within the global whole of which they are only parts. Concretely, we need a global perspective to appreciate, understand, account for, explain—in a word, perceive—“the Rise of the West,” “the development of capitalism,” “the hegemony of Europe,” “the rise and fall of great powers,” including formerly “Great” Britain, the United States, and the former Soviet Union, “the Third-worldization of Los Angeles,” “the East Asian miracle,” and any other such process and event. None of these were caused only or even primarily through the structure or interaction of forces “internal” to any of the above. All of them were part and parcel of the structure and development of a single world economic system.

A derivative observation is that Europe did not pull itself up by its own economic bootstraps, and certainly not thanks to any kind of European “exceptionalism” of rationality, institutions, entrepreneurship, technology, geniality, in a word—of race. We will see that Europe also did not do so primarily through its participation and use of the Atlantic economy per se, not even through the direct exploitation of its American and Caribbean colonies and its African slave trade. This book shows how instead Europe used its American money to muscle in on and ben-

efit from Asian production, markets, trade—in a word, to profit from the predominant position of Asia in the world economy. Europe climbed up on the back of Asia, then stood on Asian shoulders—temporarily. This book also tries to explain in world economic terms how “the West” got there—and by implication, why and how it is likely soon again to lose that position.

Another derivative thesis is that early modern Europe was neither more important in the world economy nor more advanced in any way than other regions of the world. This was not the case even counting all of its Atlantic outliers. Nor was Europe in any way “central” to or a “core” of any world-embracing economy or system. The “world-economy and system” of which Europe was the “core” in the sense of Braudel (1992), Wallerstein (1974), and others including Frank (1967, 1978a, b), was itself only a minor and for a long time still quite marginal part of the real world economy as a whole. We will see that the only real means that Europe had for participating in this world economy was its American money. If any regions were predominant in the world economy before 1800, they were in Asia. If any economy had a “central” position and role in the world economy and its possible hierarchy of “centers,” it was China.

However, the very search for “hegemony” in the early modern world economy or system is misplaced. Europe was certainly not central to the world economy before 1800. Europe was not hegemonic structurally, nor functionally, nor in terms of economic weight, or of production, technology or productivity, nor in per capita consumption, nor in any way in its development of allegedly more “advanced” “capitalist” institutions. In no way were sixteenth-century Portugal, the seventeenth-century Netherlands, or eighteenth-century Britain “hegemonic” in world economic terms. Nor in political ones. None of the above! In all these respects, the economies of Asia were far more “advanced,” and its Chinese Ming/Qing, Indian Mughal, and even Persian Safavid and Turkish Ottoman empires carried much greater political and even military weight than any or all of Europe.

This observation also has relevance to the contemporary and future world development problematique. The recent economic “development” of East Asia is receiving much attention around the world these days, but it generates equally much bewilderment about how to fit the observed developments into the Western scheme of things. The problem is easily illustrated by considering the absurdity of reclassifying Japan as part of “the West” or of having called the Japanese “honorary

whites” in South Africa during apartheid. Beyond Japan, the focus shifted especially to the Four Tigers or Dragons of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. However, increasing notice is now also being taken of the other little dragons countries in Southeast Asia and of the big Chinese dragon looming on the horizon. Even the press sees that

in large ways and small, subtle and heavy-handed . . . China is making itself felt across Asia with a weight not seen since the 18th century. . . . Now that the dragon has stirred, it is altering issues from regional trade patterns to manufacturing, from the decisions Asian governments make. . . . [which] confirms a shift in the geopolitics of a region stretching from Japan and South Korea to the Southeast Asian belt. (Keith B. Richburg of the Washington Post Service in the *International Herald Tribune*, 18 March 1996)

To drive still further home the relevance of this point to the present argument, it may be apt to quote from the same paper on two successive days. Under the headline “America Must Learn to Respect Asia’s Way of Doing Things,” we learn that

Westerners have been accustomed to telling Asians what to do. That period is now coming to an end. Asian countries are becoming strong enough to assert their autonomy and maintain it. . . . Any further attempt to remake Asian countries on Western lines is not likely to succeed. It would carry the risk of bringing about another in the long series of conflicts between Asians and the West. . . . Westerners need to accept the equality of Asians, and their right to do things their own way . . . and asserting the validity of “Asian” values. (Bryce Harland, *International Herald Tribune*, 3 May 1996)

Under the subtitle “At Issue Is the Nature of the International System,” this same newspaper reported on the following day that

The conflict over China is a conflict about the nature of the international system, and its political, financial and trade agencies. By design or otherwise, China is aggressively pushing to shape an alternative international system friendlier to Beijing’s aims [which is] evident in the Chinese struggle to remake the WTO [World Trade Organization] rules for admission. (Jim Hoagland, *International Herald Tribune*, 4–5 May 1996)

Why is this so? Hill Gates (1996: 6) argues that it is because in the world only China has been exceptional in successfully resisting being

“reshaped by the pressures of capitalism originating in western Europe . . . [and] to have survived the Western imperialist remaking of the world in the past few centuries.” Others have sought and offered all manner of “explanations” for this Asian awakening, from “Confucianism” to “the magic of the market without state intervention.” Alas, the contemporary East Asian experience does not seem to fit very well into any received Western theoretical or ideological scheme of things. On the contrary, what is happening in East Asia seems to violate all sorts of Western canons of how things “should” be done, which is to copy how “we” did it the “Western way.” Too bad!

The implications of this book are that the “Rise” of East Asia need come as no surprise just because it does not fit into the Western scheme of things. This book suggests a rather different scheme of things instead, into which the contemporary and possible future events in East Asia, and maybe also elsewhere in Asia, can and do fit. This is a global economic development scheme of things, in which Asia, and especially East Asia, was already dominant and remained so until—in historical terms—very recently, that is less than two centuries ago. Only then, for reasons to be explored below, did Asian economies lose their positions of predominance in the world economy, while that position came to be occupied by the West—apparently only temporarily.

The Western interpretation of its own “Rise of the West” has suffered from a case of “misplaced concreteness.” What should become increasingly apparent is that “development” was not so much “of the West” as it was of and in the world economy. “Leadership” of the world system—more than “hegemony”—has been temporarily “centered” in one sector and region (or a few), only to shift again to one or more others. That happened in the nineteenth century, and it appears to be happening again at the beginning of the twenty-first, as the “center” of the world economy seems to be shifting back to the “East.”

This idea is also cropping up elsewhere, but in rather dubious form. The book *Coming Full Circle: An Economic History of the Pacific Rim* (Jones, Frost, and White 1993) begins a millennium ago with a description of the economic growth in Song China. Yet Ming and Qing China and Japan are described as essentially isolated and largely stagnant, while the Pacific becomes first “a Spanish lake,” and then subject to “Pax Britannica” and “the American Century”; only after an alleged interval of five to seven hundred years and substantial intervening Western incursions are the Pacific Rim and its eastern shores rising again. On the other hand, Western incursions in Asia remain only superficial and marginal until the past two centuries, and the ascendancy of the West

is termed brief and fleeting in Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's 1995 study of the last millennium of world history. Nonetheless in his account, the present and possible future rise to dominance of China and other parts of Asia in the world only resurrects the Chinese economic and cultural predominance of the Song dynasty from nearly a thousand years ago. In my book, in contrast, I argue that that lapse in dominance lasted less than two centuries. Moreover, I seek to show how these shifts have also been part and parcel of a long cyclical process of global "development." This introductory chapter—and the concluding one—explore the implications of these historical observations for social theory.

### Globalism, not Eurocentrism

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"The West" has for some time now perceived much of the rest of the world under the title "Orientalism" (the pairing of the terms "West" and "Rest" comes from Huntington 1993, 1994). The Western world is replete with "Oriental" studies, institutes, and what not. This Western ideological stance was magnificently analyzed and denounced by the Palestinian American Edward Said in his 1978 book, *Orientalism*. He shows how Orientalism operates in the Western attempt to mark off the rest of the world in order to distinguish the West's own alleged exceptionalism. This procedure has also been denounced by Samir Amin in his 1989 work, *Eurocentrism*. Martin Bernal, in *Black Athena* (1987), has shown how, as part and parcel of European colonialism in the nineteenth century, Europeans invented a historical myth about their allegedly purely European roots in "democratic" but also slave-holding and sexist Greece. The Bernal thesis, apparently against the original intentions of its author, has been used in turn to support the idea of Afrocentrism (Asante 1987). In fact, the roots of Athens were much more in Asia Minor, Persia, Central Asia, and other parts of Asia than in Egypt and Nubia. To compromise and conciliate, we could say that they were and are primarily Afro-Asian. However, European "roots" were of course by no means confined to Greece and Rome (nor to Egypt and Mesopotamia before them). The roots of Europe extended into all of Afro-Eurasia since time immemorial. Moreover, as will be shown in this book, Europe was still dependent on Asia during early modern times, before the nineteenth-century invention and propagation of the "Eurocentric idea."



This Eurocentric idea consists of several strands, some of which are privileged by political economists like Karl Marx and Werner Sombart, and others by sociologists like Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber. The last named did the most deliberately to assemble, combine, and embellish these features of Eurocentrism. All of them allegedly serve to explain *The European Miracle*, which is the telling title of the book by Eric L. Jones (1981). However, Jones's book is only a particularly visible tip of the iceberg of almost all Western social science and history from Marx and Weber, through Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, to the spate of defenses of supposed Western exceptionalism since World War II, particularly in the United States.

The use and abuse of this kind of Eurocentric "theory" has been critically summarized with regard to Islam, although the same applies equally to other parts of "the Orient":

The syndrome consists of a number of basic arguments: (i) social development is caused by characteristics which are internal to society; (ii) the historical development of society is either an evolutionary process or a gradual decline. These arguments allow Orientalists to establish their dichotomous ideal types of Western society whose inner essence unfolds in a dynamic process towards democratic industrialism. . . . (Turner 1986: 81)

However, as the Islamicist and world historian Marshall Hodgson wrote,

All attempts that I have yet seen to invoke pre-Modern seminal traits in the Occident can be shown to fail under close historical analysis, once other societies begin to be known as intimately as the Occident. This also applies to the great master, Max Weber, who tried to show that the Occident inherited a unique combination of rationality and activism. (Hodgson 1993: 86)

Hodgson (1993) and Blaut (1992, 1993a, 1997) derisively call this a "tunnel history," derived from a tunnel vision, which sees only "exceptional" intra-European causes and consequences and is blind to all extra-European contributions to modern European and world history. Yet as Blaut points out, in 1492 or 1500 Europe still had no advantages of any kind over Asia and Africa, nor did they have any distinctively different "modes of production." In 1500 and even later, there would have been no reason to anticipate the triumph of Europe or its "capitalism" three and more centuries later. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

development of economic, scientific, rational “technicalism” that Hodgson regards as the basis of the subsequent major “transmutation” occurred, as he insists, on a worldwide basis and not exclusively or even especially in Europe.

Europeans and Arabs at least had a much more global perspective before it was suppressed by the rise of Eurocentric historiography and social theory in the nineteenth century. For instance, the Tunisian statesman and historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) evaluated and compared the “wealth of nations” before and during his time:

This may be exemplified by the eastern regions, such as Egypt, Syria, India, China, and the whole northern regions, beyond the Mediterranean. When their civilization increased, the property of the inhabitants increased, and their dynasties became great. Their towns and settlements became numerous, and their commerce and conditions improved. At this time, we can observe the condition of the merchants of the Christian nations who come to the Muslims in the Maghreb. Their prosperity and affluence cannot be fully described because it is so great. The same applies to the merchants from the East and what we hear about their conditions, and even more so to the far eastern merchants from the countries of the non-Arab Iraq, India, and China. We hear remarkable stories reported by travellers about their wealth and prosperity. These stories are usually received with skepticism. (Ibn Khaldun 1967: 279)

Even in the eighteenth century Father Du Halde, the most learned French publicist of matters Chinese (who never left Paris and used Jesuit and other travelers and translators as sources) wrote that in China

the particular riches of every province, and the ability of transporting merchandise by means of rivers and canals, have rendered the empire always very flourishing. . . . The trade carried on within China is so great, that all of Europe is not to be compared therewith. (quoted by Chaudhuri 1991: 430; for a longer version also see Ho Ping-ti 1959:199)

In a discussion of Du Halde’s work, Theodore Foss (1986: 91) insists that not only philosophical but also technological and other practical texts from China were translated and studied in the West with utilitarian interest. Indeed, Donald Lach and Edwin van Kley (1965—) have written volumes under the title, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (seven volumes so far have been published, with others promised). For a summary of this work, see the review article by M. N. Pearson (1996) or the “Com-

posite Picture” at the end of Lach and van Kley (1993: vol. 3, book 4). They observe for instance that “sixteenth-century Europeans had considered Japan and China to be the great hopes of the future”; by the end of the seventeenth century, they continue, “few literate Europeans could have been completely untouched [by the image of Asia], and it would have been surprising indeed if its effects could not be seen in contemporary European literature, art, learning, and culture.” Lach and van Kley support this observation with the fact that hundreds of books about Asia had been written, reprinted, and translated in the these two centuries in all major European languages by European missionaries, merchants, sea captains, physicians, sailors, soldiers, and other travelers. These included at least twenty-five major works about South Asia, fifteen about Southeast Asia, twenty on the archipelagoes, and sixty about East Asia, not to mention countless shorter works (Lach and van Kley 1993: 1890). The Indian empire was considered to be among the world’s richest and most powerful, but China remained its most impressive and the Europeans’ ultimate goal (Lach and van Kley 1993: 1897, 1904). Asian philosophy was admired, but arts and sciences less so; medicine, crafts and industry, and their respective practitioners were highly respected and oft imitated (Lach and van Kley 1993: 1914, 1593 ff.).

A revealing historical sidelight is that the seventeenth-century German philosopher Leibniz was retained by a West German ruler who was rightly suspicious of the ambitions of his neighbor Louis XIV. So Leibniz wrote Louis to offer a piece of advice: rather than pursuing any possible ambitions across the Rhine, it would be much more politically economic for France to turn southeastward to challenge the Ottomans:

In fact, everything exquisite and admirable comes from the East Indies. . . . Learned people have remarked that in the whole world there is no commerce comparable to that of China. (Leibniz 1969: vol. 5, 206; the quotation was kindly supplied by Gregory Blue)

The French did not pursue this advice until the time of Napoleon, who probably not by accident also took the trouble to recover a copy of Leibniz’s letter when he invaded Germany. As observers like Lach and Said have noted, this European high regard for Asia did not really change until the nineteenth century, after the inception of European industrialization and colonialism, which then profoundly altered European perceptions and pronouncements, including their historiography and social science. Even today, Paul Bairoch acknowledges the greater economic and cultural development in early modern times of many

parts of Asia compared to Europe. This testimony is all the more significant because along with Patrick O'Brien (1982, 1990, 1997), Bairoch (1974) is one of the principal explicit disputants of the Wallerstein/Frank thesis that the relations of Europe with the rest of the world had an important impact on European development itself. Although this denial continues today—like O'Brien's (1997)—Bairoch (1997: vol. 2, 528, his dots) nonetheless acknowledges that "Riches and power . . . in fact we can consider that around the beginning of the sixteenth century the principal civilizations of Asia had attained a level of technical and economic development superior to that of Europe."

Indeed, Bairoch also points to the superiority specifically of China, India, Japan, Korea, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Ottomans; he calls Istanbul, at 700,000 inhabitants, the largest city in the world, with Beijing the second largest at only slightly fewer inhabitants. He also notes that Muslim North Africa was more urbanized than Europe: Paris had 125,000 inhabitants around 1500, whereas Cairo had 450,000 inhabitants and Fez had already declined from 250,000. Moreover, Calicut in India had 500,000 and even Pegu in Burma and Angkor in Cambodia had already declined from 180,000 and 150,000 inhabitants respectively (Bairoch 1997: vol. 2, 517–37). Curiously, Bairoch also asserts (on p. 509 of the same volume) that "with the sixteenth century began the European domination over other continents." That of course is the European gospel, which really began in the mid-nineteenth century as per Marx and company. This worldview is still so pervasive that when *LIFE* magazine employed two dozen editors, consulted scores of experts, and devoted months of stormy meetings to the compilation of a list of the 100 most important people and events of the millennium for its September 1997 issue, it came up with the following results:

Westerners . . . have done a disproportionate amount of the global moving and shaking. . . . All but 17 [of the 100] are of European extraction; only 10 are women. This reflects not the biases of *LIFE*'s editors and expert advisers but the sociopolitical realities of the past thousand years. (p. 135)

#### SMITH, MARX, AND WEBER

So it is not surprising that, among European observers of special interest for us, Adam Smith and Karl Marx also regarded these matters of great importance and interest. However, they did so

from the differing perspectives of their respective times. Smith and Marx both agreed and disagreed about early modern history and the place of Asia in it. Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776:

The discovery of America, and that of the passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest events recorded in the history of mankind. (Smith [1776] 1937: 557)

Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* follows with this observation:

The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development. . . . (Marx and Engels 1848)

Smith however—writing before the industrial revolution in Europe but echoing the philosopher David Hume, who wrote a quarter century earlier—was the last major (Western) social theorist to appreciate that Europe was a Johnny-come-lately in the development of the wealth of nations: “China is a much richer country than any part of Europe,” Smith remarked in 1776. Smith did not anticipate any change in this comparison and showed no awareness that he was writing at the beginning of what has come to be called the “industrial revolution.” Moreover, as E. A. Wrigley (1994: 27 ff.) notes, neither did the English economists Thomas Malthus or David Ricardo one and two generations later, and even John Stuart Mill writing in the mid-nineteenth century still had his doubts.

However, Smith also did not regard the “greatest events in the history” to have been a European gift to mankind—of civilization, capitalism, or anything else. On the contrary, he noted with alarm that

to the natives, however, both of the East and the West Indies, all the commercial benefits which can have resulted from those events have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned. . . . What benefits, or what misfortunes to mankind may hereafter result from these great events, no human wisdom can foresee. (Smith [1776] 1937: 189)

But by the mid-nineteenth century, European views of Asia and China in particular had changed drastically. Raymond Dawson (1967)

documents and analyzes this change under the revealing title *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization*. Europeans changed from regarding China as “an example and model” to calling the Chinese “a people of eternal standstill.” Why this rather abrupt change? The coming of the industrial revolution and the beginnings of European colonialism in Asia had intervened to reshape European minds, and if not to “invent” all history, then at least to invent a false universalism under European initiation and guidance. Then in the second half of the nineteenth century, not only was world history rewritten wholesale, but “universal” social “science” was (new)born, not just as a European discipline, but as a *Eurocentric* invention.

In so doing, “classical” historians and social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took a huge step backward even from European, not to mention Islamic, perspectives that had been much more realistically world embracing up through the eighteenth century. Among those who saw things from this narrower (Eurocentric) new perspective were Marx and Weber. According to them and all of their many disciples to this day, the essentials of the “capitalist mode of production” that allegedly developed in and out of Europe were missing in the rest of the world and could be and were supplied only through European help and diffusion. That is where the “Orientalist” assumptions by Marx, and many more studies by Weber, and the fallacious assertions of both about the rest of the world come in. To briefly review them, we may here follow not only my own reading but also, to pick one among many, that of so authoritative a reader as Irving Zeitlin (1994).

Marx seems to have been selective in the sources he drew on to characterize “Asia,” not to mention Africa. Among the classical political economists that influenced Marx, Smith ([1776] 1937: 348) had given “credit to the wonderful accounts of the wealth and cultivation of China, of those of antient [ancient] Egypt and . . . Indostan.” In this regard however, Marx preferred to follow Montesquieu and the Philosophes such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau as well as James Mill, who had instead “discovered” “despotism” as the “natural” condition and “model of government” in Asia and “the Orient.” Marx also remarked on “the cruellest form of state, Oriental despotism, from India to Russia.” He also attributed this form of state to the Ottomans, Persia, and China, indeed to the whole “Orient.” In all of these, Marx alleged the existence of an age-old “Asiatic Mode of Production.” He alleged that in all of Asia the forces of production remained “traditional, backward,

and stagnant” until the incursion of “the West” and its capitalism woke it out of its otherwise eternal slumber.

Although Marx noted that the Indian and Chinese purchasing power gave impulse to European markets, England was allegedly showing India the mirror of its future and the United States was bringing progress to Mexico thanks to its 1846 war against that country. Furthermore, Marx alleged that the “transition from feudalism to capitalism” and the “rising bourgeoisie” in Europe had transformed the world, supposedly since the genesis of capital (if not capitalism) in the sixteenth century—also in Europe.

For Marx, Asia remained even more backward than Europe, where “feudalism” at least had the seeds of a “transition to capitalism” within itself. In alleged contrast, “the Asiatic Mode of Production” would require the progressive benefits of this “transition” in Europe to jolt and pull it out of its built-in stagnation—even though he said that it was the Asian markets that gave impetus to those of Europe. The supposed reason for this alleged stagnation was the imagined lack of “capitalist relations of production,” which kept all of Asia “divided into villages, each of which possessed a completely separate organization and formed a little world to itself.”

But this division of Asia into separate little worlds had already been contradicted by Marx’s simultaneous claims, as well as those of other European writers, that Asia was also characterized by “Oriental despotism.” That was regarded as a form of sociopolitical organization necessary for managing these societies’ large-scale irrigation projects, which were of course themselves incompatible with the allegedly isolated villages. Karl Wittfogel (1957) would later popularize this “theory,” but then ironically as a cold-war ideological weapon against communism and Marxism. But never mind all these internal contradictions! As we will see throughout this book, all of these characterizations by Marx were no more than a figment of his and other Eurocentric thinkers’ imagination anyway, and had no foundation in historical reality whatsoever. This fallacy also extends to the obverse—the “capitalist mode of production”—which was allegedly invented by Europeans and has ever since been held to be responsible for European, Western, and then global development.

Indeed, in his excellent critique of Marxists such as Perry Anderson and others, Teshale Tibebe (1990: 83–85) argues persuasively that much of their analysis of feudalism, absolutism and the bourgeois revolution and “their obsession with the specificity . . . [and] supposed superiority