Review

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Sufferers & Healers:
The Experience of Illness in
Seventeenth-Century England
reviewed by Timothy Kellogg

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written by Peter S. Gray
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_Sufferers & Healers:_
_The Experience of Illness in Seventeenth-Century England_
(Routledge: London, 1987)

_Reviewed by TIMOTHY A. KELLOGG_

Before modern medicine brought expectations of good health and an illness-free existence, people living in seventeenth-century England experienced health complications that interrupted their lives, causing discomfort, suffering, and premature death. Social historians of medicine commonly ask what healers and patients did and experienced when illness or injury struck. _Sufferers & Healers: The Experience of Illness in Seventeenth-Century England_, by Lucinda McCray Brier, examines this very question. Brier’s approach is neither quantitative nor epidemiologic. Instead, the author offers impressionistic conclusions regarding the experiences of illness in seventeenth-century England, a century fraught with civil war, political and social realignment, and recurring plague outbreaks. This book provides no demographic analysis on the types of illnesses present at the time, nor does it try to establish causal explanations to specific diseases or factors associated survival of newborn infants. Rather, the author’s purpose is to explore illness and the suffering caused by illness contextually. She does this by selectively examining the voices of those who lived during the period, thereby locating their opinions on ailments, treatments, and healers of the era. Moreover, Brier qualitatively describes popular attitudes on illness, the dynamic between healer and sufferer, and how medical decisions were made and who made them, all within the competing contexts of secular, religious, and supernatural approaches to healing.

In her analysis, Beier utilizes a variety of sources in documenting the illness experience of both sufferer and healer. The conceptual foundation of the book is laid down by classic secondary sources on social and medical historical. Such works include Lawrence Stone’s _The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800_ as well as Paul Slack’s _The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England_. Attitudes and opinions of practitioners and patients, principally from the upper and middle classes, come by way of the casebooks of physicians and surgeons who tracked the symptoms, therapies, and outcomes of their patients. Brier utilizes diaries and correspondence of prominent lay people during the time to offer accounts of those who were ill and who described their illnesses and their opinions of the medical practitioners who treated them. Popular and vernacular literature also provided the
author the social context of critics who set out to undermine learned or empiric medicine. Although this book is not a demographic study of mortality, Brier does use the London Bills of mortality and parish records to confirm outbreaks of infectious disease, such as the plague.

Beier outlines three separate arguments. First, the field of medicine in early modern England was not completely professionalized at the time, although governmental and educational institutions did issue official licenses to academically trained practitioners. Moreover, physicians and surgeons with official sanction represented only a small minority of healers in the marketplace. Amateurs, barbers, barber-surgeons, white-witches, magicians, folk healers, and apothecaries, all competed together in a very dynamic marketplace, offering services on a variety of illnesses, conditions, and injuries. Second, within this milieu, medical conventions did not exist. No medical consensus existed on how certain conditions were to be treated. Brier argues that lay sufferers tended to focus on self-diagnosis and treatment, stimulated by the broad range of healing knowledge available in the public sphere. This knowledge came from a wide spectrum of sources in the marketplace, without clear demarcation between traditional and learned medicine. Thirdly, Brier argues that this diffusion of knowledge made the healing process a very social affair, often involving family members, communities, and patrons beyond the private realm of doctor and patient. This social care network was particularly evident during childbearing.

The book follows a generalized structure that begins with an overview of the medical marketplace in seventeenth-century England. In the next several chapters, Brier turns to the individual experiences of practitioners, in an examination of the casebooks of prominent and ordinary surgeons and physicians, which provide a list of treated ailments and their outcomes. She also teases out practitioners’ opinions, both of others within their profession and of the patients they served. In the next several chapters, the author examines the personal correspondences, diaries, and autobiographies of English lay people, the very clients seen by practitioners within the medical marketplace. Beier’s examination of personal documents reveals the types and severity of illnesses, the expectations of the physicians, and the approaches they chose to illness management as seen from the sufferer’s point of view. In some cases, the sufferer assumed the role of healer themselves. Finally, in the last chapter, Beier provides a concluding discussion of individual illness, and its implications to a wider understanding of the social aspects of illness. That is, how does the experience of illness among individuals reach into the larger community? What were the natures of illness and caretaking networks? Brier ends the book with exploratory questions and offers some of her own explanations.

Drawing from specific, individual experiences of illness, the author distinguishes the healer and the sufferer as her two conceptual constructs. Brier is successful in describing the dynamic, but not centralized, marketplace in which
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Healers competed and negotiated their skills. Medicine as a profession was largely unregulated, without a consensus on treating illness. University-trained physicians did receive a license to practice a form of internal medicine, and were recognized by institutions like the Anglican Church and the Royal Academy. However, they were only a small minority, competing with surgeons (some licensed through guilds), barber-surgeons, grocer-apothecaries, mid-wives, traditional and magical healers, and even ministers who promoted Godly-inspired therapy. All in this marketplace claimed legitimacy. Many distributed their own medical pamphlets advocating certain therapies and methods, and exposed the methods of their competitors as unsound through a new genre of anti-quack literature. Licensed physicians of the time stood out by fostering a learned status through distinctive vestments and a university training in Latin and the humanities. Practically speaking, however, there was very little distinction between these learned physicians and other healers. Beier argues that other healers, such as barbers and apothecaries, also offered treatment for internal ailments. Brier also describes effectively the battles healers fought to gain an advantage over each other, in an effort to attract sufferers. Such efforts include everything from the publication of individual successes among physicians, to the condemnation of "empirics" by religious healers.

Despite her adequate description of the characteristics of the medical marketplace, Brier does not comment much on some of the emerging trends seen in the practice of medicine, even during the mid 1980s when this book was written. For example, the author excluded from her analysis the decline of magic and folk medicine as alternatives during the seventeenth-century, and the relegation of magic and supernatural healing to marginalized and persecuted activities in England by 1700. Also, despite claims of a wide-open market and a variety of healers, the majority of internal medical treatment focused on the medieval practice of humeral evacuation. Methods included bleeding, cupping, enemas, diuretics, and purging medicines. Moreover, empirical medicine, considered quackery by learned physicians trained in theology and humanities, continued to make strides during the traumatic seventeenth century, a time plagued by civil wars and revolts throughout the fractured United Kingdom. Wartime surgical skills and methods advanced considerably, culminating in standardized chiguries to treat and repair not only battlefield injuries, but also apostems, fistulas, and tumors of various kinds. Brier could have expanded her commentary on the medical marketplace to include the methodological differences among learned and empirical healers.

Beier concentrates her analysis on the opinions of healers who left traces of their work through notes and casebooks. However, the inclusion of only a few healers results in an inability to generalize beyond the activities found in these particular sources. Undaunted, Brier uses the cases of one "typical" surgeon from London to illuminate the how a healer conducted his practice. Joseph Binns practiced in London near St.
Bartholomew’s Hospital between the years 1633 to 1663. Brier concludes that Binns was probably typical of most London healers because he was a generalist. Brier lists sixty-seven different conditions in his casebook, and his treatments of both men and women. Specialists, on the other hand, tended to treat a single sex and only one condition that drew a large number of patients (fractured bones for example). Binns traveled extensively to the homes of his patients to personally assess the status of care, to perform procedures if unable to do so in his surgery, or to administer treatment. Brier argues that caring for a patient at home supported her contention that a healing network within the household was common. When the therapy required complicated procedures, like setting a bone fracture, or “tenting” a large wound, or if the patient required a long convalescence, then the family, servants, friends, patrons, neighbors, and ministers, as well as the doctor, all networked together to care for the sufferer. What little detail Breier offers on such networks tends to the obvious, such as ministers providing pastoral care, servants attending to sickroom duties, and so on. The nature of these roles cannot be ascertained from the surgeon’s casebook. Furthermore, care networks as suggested by Brier perhaps were more realistic in an urban environment, such as in London, where the individual attendants are in close proximity to the patient.

Through case notes and correspondence, Beier also touches upon the perceptions of learned physicians in contrast to the generalist surgeon Binns. The author chooses three provincial physicians outside of London. These physicians all sought to demarcate their position and role in society. They considered university training superior to the knowledge acquired by a frontline surgeon. Despite the apparent sense of superior high position of many physicians, Beier’s illumination of their casebooks shows that they had to compete with other physicians and healers even in the villages surrounding London. They also had to justify their treatments to their patients, hoping for vindication in their patient’s return to health. Although Brier does state this in a somewhat cryptic way, physicians (unlike other learned authorities such as ministers and lawyers) had to demonstrate their knowledge in a very concrete way—by curing people. This placed the physician at a disadvantage over other empirical healers, who did not claim superior knowledge, but apt prognoses based on their experience repairing individuals with similar illnesses.

Like healers, sufferers of illness were demographically, socially, and medically diverse. The experience of illness among laypersons ranged from mild ague to life threatening infectious disease like plague and syphilis. Prominent diarists like Samuel Pepys and Robert Hooke provided the author with interesting but very subjective material on the medical conditions they encountered in their lives. However, Brier does an effective job in detailing experiences that may have been typical to the average upper middle-class London dweller. Both men suffered from various ailments, including gout. Pepys had life-long urological problems that caused testicular swelling, as well as an

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ulcerated leg that probably contributed to his death in 1703. Brier notes that both men felt it important and a duty to visit ailing friends and family as a source of comfort. Conversely, both men expected visits from others when they were ill, even during very difficult procedures, as when Pepys "pass[ed] a very difficult stone." Such an analysis supports her argument that social care networks existed, and made the experience of illness more public than the modern, more private connection between sufferer and doctor. Brier's analysis might have benefited had she compared illness visitations with other, non-medical forms of social gatherings, to see if they were indeed different. The diaries of Pepys and Hooke do support Brier's assertion that a high degree of medical information permeated English society, although she does not expand on how diffuse and extensive this information was. Pepys and Hooke made clear that they sought information from colleagues and healers to help formulate their own diagnoses and determine treatment options.

Brier, a feminist writer, turns to the role of women as both sufferers and healers. For Brier, women's roles as sufferer included not only illnesses and injuries, but also the recurring cycles of female bodies—menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and menopause. As healers, Brier maintains that women assumed a greater role in the provision of care as sick nurses, midwives, and caretaking wounds of all types. While many seventeenth-century sources clearly indicate that women had active roles inside the birthing chamber, took charge of domestic ailments within the household, and were the principal dispensers of folk medicine, it is difficult to accept Beier's general claim that women were the principle healers in English society. Brier does not make clear the decision-making role of women in the general provision of care.

Overall, the book is successful on many levels. Written in 1985, when medical and social history began to merge, the accounts of early-modern healers are useful in elucidating opinions and expectations of those who healed and those who were ill. Brier's claims are interesting. The rise of the medical marketplace, the development of social networks to serve the ill, the influence of medical knowledge on independent healing, are all valid theories deserving of further study. Beier herself points to one intriguing expansion of independent healing, the rise of spa medicine and medicinal waters in later English society. The inclusion of biased and limited testimony is not a criticism of Beier, but rather an indication of the limitations of her sources. Certainly, those who had the education and leisure of writing about their experiences cannot be considered indicative, but only illustrative of their times. The only major flaw in Brier's work is the lack of a proper overlay with the political and religious turmoil of seventeenth-century England, and how such structural changes impacted illness and the provision of medicine.

Book Review
Is the Origin of Capitalism "Eurocentric?"
A Review of Recent Debates in Socio-Economic History

PETER S. GRAY

At the end of the twentieth century, there has been a movement among intellectuals against "Eurocentrism." This term is somewhat ambiguous, as its meaning can shift depending upon who is using it, but Eurocentrism generally means the privileging of European civilization over other civilizations based on some ascribed "superior" quality or qualities that it possessed and currently possesses. Critiques of Eurocentrism occur across a broad variety of topics. It is only natural that such critiques should include the debate about the origins of the modern world, since Europe is central to Eurocentric views on those origins. Capitalism is central to Eurocentric views of the origins of the modern world, because European social theorists since the nineteenth century have seen capitalism as a crucial aspect of modernity. In the 1990s, three major works appeared that mixed historical analysis with social theory, and that challenged in different ways Eurocentric views of the economic history of the world in the early modern period. These three works are Andre Gunder Frank's Reorient, R. Bin Wong's China Transformed, and Kenneth Pomeranz's The Great Divergence.¹ All three sought, in different ways, to challenge the Eurocentric view that Europe possessed special qualities that other areas of the world lacked, qualities that allowed Europe to develop capitalism and, thus, become modern. Instead, all three argued that Europe played a secondary role in a world economy dominated by Asia, specifically China, before 1800. None of these works challenge the idea that Europe dominated the world economy from the nineteenth century on, but they all challenge the notion that Europe achieved this dominance because its civilization had some superior quality or qualities inherent to Europe. While there are differences among these authors, they all argue that Europe became dominant in the world economy for other reasons.

These books have contributed greatly to our knowledge of the economic history of the world before 1800, synthesizing much work on non-European economic history and banishing old stereotypes about these economies, but they still contain misguided claims primarily due to the socio-economic theory they adopt: a Neo-Classical economics that has its origins in Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations.² While many Eurocentric arguments are false and even reprehensible, the Eurocentric argument that capitalism originated in Britain in the three centuries prior to 1800 and spread from there around the world is still fundamentally correct, though the societies that became capitalist after Britain (primarily the United States, Germany, France, Italy, and Japan in the nineteenth century) did so in manners different from that of Britain. Capitalism did not develop in Britain because Britain was racially superior, environmentally more favorable, more rational, had better

technology, or better institutions. Instead, capitalism was a unique outcome of
developments in British society and, in that respect, Britain was no different from
any country—all countries have unique historical developments. Britain’s
development brought about a new way of organizing the fundamental economic
relations of its society, a way that proved to be immensely powerful in the long run.
This is essentially the view that Karl Marx and Robert Brenner developed.
Marx’s and Brenner’s ideas will be compared below with those of Smith and his
epigones—especially Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz. Britain’s economic power was
evident to nearby observers at the time (and one far away observer—Japan) and
they sought in various ways both to create similar economic relations in their
countries and to prevent certain other countries from doing the same. This view of
the development of capitalism is not Eurocentric in any sense other than that it
maintains that capitalism began first in Britain and then spread to Europe and
Britain’s former colony, the United States. None of this is to deny that many have
used the English and European development of capitalism and the resulting
dominance by the West to justify notions of various kinds of innate European
superiority. Those arguments are clearly wrong, but because those specific
arguments are wrong, it does not follow that the British origin of capitalism is also
wrong.

A clarification is thus in order, as to what is not meant here by the argument
that capitalism arose first in Britain and then spread elsewhere. J.M. Blaut’s The
Colonizer’s View of the World maintains that capitalism was developing just about
everywhere in the world in the centuries before 1500. The European discovery of
the Americas and their subsequent appropriation of the wealth of the Americas gave
Europe the capital it needed to turn the tables in its favor in the world economy.
The first part of the argument—that non-European economies were capitalist and
thus not stagnant—is new and a main feature of all three primary works discussed
here. The second part of the argument is older, and a part of two of the three works
discussed here. It was traditionally called the “Williams” thesis since it was first put
forward by Eric Williams. Since it is an older argument, it has also been debated,
and the more so as it argues that the foundation of European development and
modernity was, in effect, theft. The role of the appropriation of the wealth of the
Americas is a continuing debate, most likely because how one feels about Europe’s
colonization of the Americas (or anywhere) is deeply embedded in one’s worldview
and clearly different worldviews are on show here. Frank’s book sides with Blaut on
this issue, while Pomeranz integrates the Americas into a wider argument, and R.
Bin Wong has nothing to say about the issue.

Blaut is helpful in his delineation of various Eurocentric arguments that are
either simply wrong or even morally reprehensible. He thus provides some
clarification of intention when this paper critiques the arguments of Frank, Wong,
and Pomeranz. Blaut explicates five types of arguments that are what he calls

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3 J.M. Blaut, The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric
5 Eric Williams, Capitalism and Slavery (London: Andre Deutsch, 1944).

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"Euro-myths:" biology, environment, rationality, technology, and society. Blaut notes that these arguments fall into two categories, cultural explanations and non-cultural explanations. In the non-cultural sphere, there are two types of biological arguments—racial arguments and demographic arguments—and an environmental argument. Racial arguments assert European biological superiority, and are essentially non-cultural. These arguments are not usually put forward anymore because of the disrepute that racial thinking has fallen into since the end of World War II. Europe has also been argued to be environmentally superior, which is a non-cultural argument. This argument posits that Africa and Asia had environments that negatively affected their economic development, Africa because of its tropical climate and Asia because of its arid climate. According to such arguments, Africa’s tropical climate had a severe effect on labor productivity and population growth while Asia’s arid climate led to the creation of despotic states that were required to undertake the massive irrigation-works need to farm in an arid climate. These despotic states proved to be a hindrance to economic dynamism and innovation. Demographic arguments assert that Europeans had a superior ability to control their population growth and thus avoided extreme Malthusian crises. Blaut’s identification of demographic arguments as non-cultural arguments is in error here, because such arguments become entangled in arguments about superior European rationality and institutions, particularly family structure, i.e. society and culture. Other arguments hold that Europe possessed superior technology compared to the rest of the world, accounting for its development as this technology accumulated over time and allowed Europe to achieve a higher level of productivity. Related to this argument is the idea that Europeans possessed a superior capacity for rationality apparently due to their cultural or ethnic background. This did not imply that non-Europeans were necessarily irrational, but rather that they were at a lower stage in the development of rational thinking. Finally, the existence of superior European institutions before the development of capitalism has been offered as a reason for the “European miracle.” These arguments usually focus on the state, the church, class, or the family. Institutional arguments are closely bound up with the argument that Europeans possessed a superior form of rationality. None of these arguments will be offered here. While an argument is made here based on conflict and class structures, it will not be argued that Britain’s class structure before the advent of capitalism was superior to or more rational than any other country’s.

All of these “Euro-myths” have been used to explain the superiority of Europe and thus justify its dominant role in the world since as early as 1500. However, in economic history there are really only two theories of the origins of capitalism. Both can incorporate the “Euro-myths” outlined above but neither relies fundamentally on any of them. This may not be apparent at first, but when the works by Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz are analyzed, the case for this statement will be made clearer. These two models are not only old (the first from the late eighteenth century and the second from the mid-nineteenth century), but they are also products of Europeans and the European tradition. It will be argued below that this causes a problem, be it slight or major, for the anti-Eurocentrists.

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The first of these two models was put forward by Adam Smith, and is usually called the commercialization model. This model has been and still is the dominant explanation for the rise of capitalism in Britain. As will be seen, it is the model adopted by Frank, Wong and Pomeranz, though each does so in different ways. The second model was put forward by Karl Marx, and is the main dissident model of the origins of capitalism (if one excludes the anti-Eurocentric authors discussed here, who consider themselves dissidents). In Marx, there are really two models of the origins of capitalism. In the early Marx of the Communist Manifesto and the German Ideology, the Smithian commercialization model predominates but it is articulated with Marx’s concerns with class (though it should be remembered that a concept of class exists in Smith’s model, albeit a different conception than Marx’s conception in the late 1840s). After his intensive study of economics and British economic history in the 1850s, Marx offered a different model for the origins of capitalism in the first volume of Capital, but elements also appear in the other two volumes of Capital and in the Grundrisse. Unfortunately, Marx did not systematize this model (Smith did not really systematize his model of capitalism’s origins either, but did a better job of getting his basic ideas across than Marx did). When this is combined with the fact that there are two models in Marx’s corpus, this created a great deal of confusion among later Marxists (and non-Marxists), who often did not recognize that there were two models. This was the problem with the Dobb-Sweezy debate of the 1950s. Dobb instinctively went with the account in Capital and Sweezy went with the commercial model in the German Ideology. None of the participants recognized that there were two different models in Marx’s thought. No wonder they eventually gave up—they were fundamentally confused about the theoretical issue in Marx’s writings to be explicated. By the 1970s Robert Brenner had realized the problem of the two models and offered a systematic version of the

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7 A recent well argued statement of it can be found in Keith Wrightson, Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
10 This is a result of a lamentable problem among Marxists that only the majority of present day Marxists have come to understand. Marx’s thinking developed over time and what he wrote in the 1840s is not always consistent with what he wrote from the late 1850s on. This issue arose with Louis Althusser in the 1970s, but there the issue was whether Hegel should be considered a fundamental influence on all of Marx’s thinking right up to the end or whether these was a “break” after which Marx definitively rejected all Hegelianism. That this had no affect on many Marxists way of writing about Marx is evidenced by the constant juxtaposition of a sentence from an early work and a sentence from Capital in the Marxist literature to prove a point. Sometimes this works because there are continuities in Marx’s thought, but many times it is a disaster.
Capital model. Since this is the most developed, systematic, and consistent statement of the mature Marxian model, some time will be devoted to explicating it below.

First, however, it is necessary to explicate these models. As for Smith’s model, this essay will offer it in abstract form. Called the commercialization model, it has been ‘updated’ to be more consistent with modern neo-classical economics. Thus this model leaves out such things as Smith’s labor theory of value and his rudimentary class analysis, both of which are anathema to neo-classical economists who usually try to pretend such things do not exist in Smith’s work. As for Marx’s model, this essay will limit itself in this part to some general considerations about the mature Marxian model. The full mature Marxian model will be laid out when Robert Brenner’s work is discussed later in the essay.

The Smithian commercialization model argues that human societies go through a series of stages of development with the highest stage being the commercial stage, an idea that originated with such ‘Scottish Enlightenment’ writers as Adam Ferguson. These stages are characterized by definite economic relations to which correlate the social, political, and cultural aspects of those societies (note the influence of Smith on Marx here). What causes the development of one stage into another is the development of commercial relations—relations and institutions of exchange, not production—and the development of internal and external markets. While the concept of commerce had a broader meaning for Smith in his overall thought, here his focus was on its economic aspect. The commercial stage represents the highest development of these commercial relations. For Smith, it was Britain and, to a lesser extent northwestern Europe, that had achieved this stage in his own time. However, that did not mean that other societies could not reach this stage, as the model is universal. It should be noted that when Smith wrote, the industrial revolution had not yet occurred. Britain in Smith’s day was overwhelmingly agricultural, with a healthy manufacturing sector of artisans, not individual wage workers. Smith did not call this society capitalist—Marx had the honor of naming the system.

Smith’s commercial model, replaced by a Neo-Classical model in modern variants of the theory, presupposes a Smithian conception of the market economy. This economic model assumes that market exchange, as explicated by Smith or the Neo-Classical economists, is a fundamental and natural part of the human condition. The basic logic of the market exchange dynamic is not a product of history, but rather operates with the force of natural law. Indeed, Smith modeled his conception of economic relations after Newton’s physics, which represented in his time the pinnacle of European scientific thinking. In Newtonian physics, physical laws do

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not have a "history." They do not develop over time. They were, are, and always will be present. In Smith's economics, the laws of market exchange are assumed to be much the same as Newton's physical laws. Even so, Smith recognized that human societies change, and so he argued that social, cultural and political conditions developed outside of the economic sphere. He maintained that this prevented the laws of market exchange from operating, as they naturally ought to. Thus, social, cultural, and political conditions represented a block on the progression of human societies to the highest stage of commercial society. Smith held that as of 1776, only Britain (and perhaps northwestern Europe) had successfully removed many but not all of these obstacles to the development of commercial society. The removal of these external constraints was crucial to Smith, because the development of exchange led to increasing specialization and an increasing division of labor. That, combined with technological improvements in the instruments of production, led to an increase in labor productivity, which increased the wealth of the nation.

Thus, commercial society is not so much something new but the culmination, once freed of social, political and cultural constraints, of these basic laws of economies, i.e., of this basic feature of humans and human society. It is a quantitative model of change rather than a qualitative model of change, as the development of commercial society is the outcome of the numerical expansion of the natural laws of economies throughout society, and the world. This model does not therefore see 'capitalism' (not Smith's term) as having any specific differences from other economic systems, except that different societies have different external constraints on the development of commercial society and have progressed at different rates (or not progressed at all) in removing them. For modern Neo-Classical economists and some economic historians, this means that the concept of capitalism is questionable insofar as it refers to a historically specific set of economic relations that arose at a specific time and place. When Smithians and Neo-Classicalists talk of capitalism, they mean the ever-present laws of market exchange, specialization, division of labor, and so on. These same economic laws have basically always been with us, with "imperfections" and "deviations" resulting from human interference with natural laws. Modern Smithians, some Neo-Classical economists, and economic historians often deny any meaning to the term "capitalism." Frank, the anti-Eurocentric, lists himself in their company.

The early Marx relied heavily on the commercial model. The details of his version of this model will not detain us here because, as explained above, his mature model is the more important one. Under the influence of Hegel, Marx always thought in terms of the history of social processes and qualitative change. Marx came to reject many elements of Smith, Ricardo, and their followers precisely because their economic theories were not historical, i.e., because of their assumption that the basic laws of economics never changed. Marx's fundamental argument was that systems of economic relationships, and societies as a whole, are historical and they develop qualitatively through time. Thus, the laws of the market postulated by Smith were not the same for all humans in all times and places. In his works from the late 1850s on, Marx made the distinction between capitalism and "pre-capitalism," with pre-capitalism subsuming all other economic systems. While it is
clear from the *Grundrisse* that Marx knew these pre-capitalist systems came in various forms, he never investigated any of them thoroughly. (Whether he could have, given the state of European knowledge about the history of non-European societies is another question). Marx’s concern was capitalism, and he took care to make the point that capitalism was a unique set of economic relations—different from those that preceded it in Europe, and different from those outside Europe. This concern led him to England, which European thinkers at the time considered to have been the birthplace of a new form of economy, and where this new form of economy was most developed as of the 1850s. For Marx, any discussion of any other part of the world was a secondary concern. He thought that the rest of the world only showed the distinctiveness of this new economic system, which he was the first to call capitalism. Later Marxists and even some non-Marxists have turned to short abstract statements by Marx, like the 1859 preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, to try to construct grand theories of non-European economic systems and their development, because of the absence of a systematic explication of non-capitalist economic systems in Marx’s writings. The best example of this is a theory of the economic history and development of India that was developed out of a few short newspaper articles Marx wrote in the 1850s. Marx never explicitly warned against this practice. How could he know that some would later treat everything he wrote as sacred text? Nevertheless, he never clarified the issue and thus bore some responsibility for the situation.

In contrast to Smith’s commercial model, the mature Marxian economic model rejects the argument that commercial society is created by the expansion of the operations of the market, in turn best stimulated by the removal of misguided human-created constraints on the market. Marx’s key point was that the expansion of commerce, i.e., the creation of wealth, was not the real factor in the origins of capitalism. He held that capitalism is neither the result of the previous accumulation of wealth or capital, nor the quantitative growth of market relations. This is why he referred to the notion of primitive accumulation as “so-called.” Marx argued that capitalism arose due to a fundamental transformation of economic relationships, especially class or social property relations, and this is what he meant by “primitive accumulation.” According to Marx, it was social relationships that changed, specifically economic relationships, and this is what created the new economic system. A key factor in this is the relationship between the direct producers of the economic surplus of a society and the expropriators of that surplus. Every human society with the exception of “primitive” communal societies had and has a specific form of relationship between these two groups. Marx provided a clear if abstract statement of this view in the third volume of *Capital*:


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The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labor is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it in turn as a determinant. On this is based the entire configuration of the economic community arising from the actual relations of production, and hence also its specific political form. It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers—a relationship whose particular form naturally corresponds always to a certain level of development of the type and manner of labour, and hence to its social productive power—in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the specific form of the state in each case. This does not prevent the same economic basis—the same in its major conditions—from displaying endless variations and gradations of appearance, as the result of innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural conditions, racial relations, historical influences acting from outside, etc., and these can only be understood by analysing these empirically given conditions.\footnote{Marx, \textit{Capital} vol. 3, 927-8.}

Marx’s views on what today we would call culture are relevant here. He wrote that “\textit{[i]n the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are all out of proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation, the skeletal structure, as it were, of its organization.}”\footnote{Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 110.} Marx did not adhere to an economic determinism, and to read the above as a “base-superstructure” model is clearly inaccurate. In capitalism, these relationships take the form of wage-labor and capital in the most abstract sense. However, this specific articulation of direct producers and exploiters was the foundation of a system of imperatives of competition and profit maximization, a compulsion to re-invest surpluses in the production process, and the relentless need to improve labor productivity and develop forces of production. This specific transformation occurred in the English countryside over the course of three hundred years, and was an outcome of class struggle between landlords and their tenants. This struggle created those fundamental aspects of the capitalist system in England and eventually led to England’s economic “take-off” and the industrial revolution.\footnote{Marx, \textit{Capital} vol. 1, 873-940.} Robert Brenner, who has given the most systematic argument for the Marxist view, explains how this happened, as will be discussed below. All three anti-Eurocentric authors under consideration here argue that the features of capitalism outlined above were not distinct to Britain or Europe, but were present in other parts of the world before 1800—most notably in China.

Two more theories need consideration before this discussion can turn to the books of Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz. The first of these is Immanuel Wallerstein’s

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development of the theory of the Modern World System, and the second is Rober
Brenner's development of a systematic Marxist explanation for the origins of
capitalism. Both of these theories were developed at roughly the same time and the
major statements of their views were published within a few years of each other in
the mid-1970s. Both have been influential, Wallerstein's more so, and both have
been heavily debated. Wallerstein needs to be discussed because he is crucial to
understanding Frank and Brenner, and because he is crucial for criticizing Frank,
Wong, and Pomeranz.

Wallerstein is a historical sociologist who started out studying Africa. His
work there led him to conclude that to study Africa, one needs to situate it within a
worldwide historical context. This led him to develop his notion of social systems,
and especially world-systems. A social system is defined by "the existence within it
of a division of labor, such that the various sectors or areas are dependent upon
economic exchange with others for the smooth and continuous provisioning of the
needs of the area. Such economic exchange can clearly exist without a common
political structure and even more obviously without sharing the same culture."22
Certain key terms should be noted here—"division of labor" and "exchange"—and
the absence of other terms—"class," "property," and "production." For most of
human history, what Wallerstein calls "mini-systems"—"an entity that has within it
a complete division of labor, and a simple cultural framework"—have existed, but
they have ultimately been supplanted by world-systems.23 A world-system is "a unit
with a single division of labor and multiple cultural systems."24 World-systems
come in two forms. The first form is a world empire, which is a world system with a
common political system. The second form is a world-economy, which is a world-
system without a common political system. A world-system need not necessarily
compass the entire globe. Wallerstein calls the major civilizations of pre-modern
times such as China, Egypt, and Rome world-empires, and argues that the
nineteenth century European empires were really "nation-states with colonial
appendages operating within the framework of a world economy."25

Wallerstein argues that redistributive economic systems characterized world-
empires, in that the state and its formal or informal representatives appropriated the
surplus of peasant producers and redistributed it in various ways. Merchants who
engaged in commercial activity existed in all world-empires, but they were a minor
d part of the local economy and engaged primarily in long-distance trade. This trade
was 'administered' in various ways and was not Smithian free-market trade. In no
way was market activity determinative of the development of a world-empire. This
changed only in the sixteenth century with Europe's creation of the modern world-
economy, in which market trade developed and became paramount. For Wallerstein,
this is capitalism. Wallerstein distinguished capitalism from redistributive world
empires and tributary states by defining capitalism as "production for sale in a
market in which the object is to realize the maximum profit. In such a system

23 Wallerstein, The Essential Wallerstein, 75.
24 Wallerstein, The Essential Wallerstein, 75.

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production is constantly expanded as long as further production is profitable, and men constantly innovate new ways of producing things that will expand the profit margin.  

Technically, this does not differentiate capitalists from merchants in world empires. What makes capitalism different is that the capitalist world system is organized around market exchange, and the redistributive tributary state ceases to exist.

Wallerstein argued that the modern world system came into being between 1450 and 1640. During this period, the “modern world economy” arose around Europe. Before this period most economies in the world had been based on world empires, which redistributed the surplus product collected either by trade or taxation, and which conducted only some long-distance trade. Europe instead developed a capitalist world economy, i.e., one based on market exchange and commerce, one which conformed to the above definition of capitalism. This change happened in Europe because there was a crisis in the late Middle Ages in its small tributary states. Wallerstein argued that this could have resulted in anarchy and contraction but instead, Europeans, starting with Portugal, expanded their political and economic control to the Americas and over time created an economic system based more on exchange than tribute or taxation. Western Europe also integrated Eastern Europe into these exchange relations at this time. Within the whole system, but especially in the new areas of expansion, Europeans developed new forms of labor control depending on the product and the area in which it was produced. These economic changes led to the development of strong state machines in the core states of the new world economy. These states certainly taxed their populations, but they were neither redistributive tributary states nor world empires. While there were bids to turn this system into a world empire, all failed.

Wallerstein has often been taken to be a Marxist, because his arguments were associated with the “Third World-ism” of the 1970s. In particular, his arguments were linked with the ‘underdevelopment’ school of thought. This school of thought blamed Europe for the underdevelopment of the rest of the world, arguing that Europeans had structured the world economy in such a way that massive amounts of wealth had been transferred to Europe from the ‘third world’ ever since the discovery of the Americas. It held that this wealth was the basis of the development of capitalism and, once capitalism had been established, capitalist profits. This association of Wallerstein’s thoughts with the underdevelopment school of thought has tended to obscure the fact that Wallerstein is essentially offering a variant of the commercial model. While Wallerstein was clear about the difference between the economics of the tributary states (and thus world empires) and the capitalist world economy, he still argued that there was market exchange in tributary states, albeit long-distance trade. Thus, one can argue that tributary states were a constraint on the development of commercial society. In Europe, the crisis of feudalism weakened these tributary states. The rise of the strong state in the core, and the failure of any of these states to turn the new economic system into a world empire, provided the basis for the expansion of commercial society.

26 Wallerstein, The Essential Wallerstein, 73.

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Not long after Wallerstein published the first volume of his *Modern World System*, Robert Brenner published two articles criticizing European historians who argued for the commercial model. Brenner also criticized the demographic model, which he considered a variant of the commercial model, and Wallerstein's adaptation of the commercial model. In these articles, he put forward a detailed Marxian argument derived ultimately from the first volume of *Capital*. Brenner is a European historian who also occasionally focuses on other sections of the world, but only when Europe is involved. This has earned him a place in Blaut's pantheon of "Eurocentric historians," but this is really name-calling rather than argument.28

Brenner's main argument against the commercial model, whatever its variants, is that the rise of market exchange in itself does not explain the origins of capitalism. One of his arguments has already been encountered, i.e., that the commercial model is a quantitative model of development and that what needs explanation are the qualitative changes in the European economy in late-medieval and early modern Europe. Brenner argued that commercial expansion does not in itself explain historical change. Instead, "it is the structure of class relations, of class power, which will determine the manner and degree to which particular demographic and commercial changes will affect long-term trends in the distribution of income and economic growth—and not vice versa."29 This argument comes straight from Marx. Brenner further argues that commercial activities can, in varying degrees be found in many different societies at different times and places with widely differing class structures, but none of them developed capitalism before the English. In fact, production for profit in the market, i.e. commercial exchange, is compatible with a wide variety of differing class structures. The widely varying developments of these societies show that something more than production for profit on the market is needed for capitalism to arise. Brenner argued for the basic correctness of Marx's argument that class structure and its development through class conflict is the key to the development of capitalism in England.

To support this contention, Brewer discussed European developments in the late-medieval and early modern period. He argued that the break through from "traditional economy" to relatively self-sustaining economic development was predicated upon the emergence of a specific set of class or social property relations. This outcome depended, in part, upon the previous success of a two sided process of class development and class conflict: on the one hand, the destruction of serfdom; on the other, the short-circuiting of the emerging predominance of small peasant property.30 Brewer continued, asserting that the economic developments of the late Middle Ages contained a:

contradiction between the development of peasant production and the relations of surplus extraction [which] tended to lead to a crisis of peasant accumulation, of peasant productivity, and ultimately of peasant

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subsistence. This crisis was accompanied by an intensification of the class conflict inherent in the existing structure, but with different outcomes in different places...depending on the balance of forces between the contending classes.31

These results were not predetermined, but were indeterminate and bound up with the historical specificity of the areas in question—especially the relative strength of the different classes in different areas of Europe, which were, in turn, the results of previous historical developments. It turned out that in Eastern Europe, the landlords were the victors and re-imposed an intensified serfdom. The situation was quite the opposite in England, where the peasantry was strong enough to break the feudal controls that had existed there. In the long term, peasants were unable to establish freehold control over the land and landlords were able to create large farms and to lease the land to tenants, i.e., the former peasants. Landlords preferred and cultivated tenants who could make improvements on the lands they leased, i.e. invest capital in improving the land. This new landlord-tenant relationship was a partnership of sorts. The tenant would receive a reasonable share of the revenue and not have it confiscated by the landlord, in return for the tenant investing in the land and increasing revenues. This encouraged all kinds of improvements in technique and technology, as the tenant had an interest in the productivity of the land—but technique and technology were driven by the logic of the new socio-economic system, and not the other way around. (Marx and Brenner are not technological determinists.) Additionally, this created competitive markets in agricultural produce as tenants had to compete with each other to increase revenues. This process did not happen over night; in fact, it would take centuries. This development in agriculture had effects outside of that sector. Over time, agricultural improvement made it possible for larger numbers of the population to leave the land to enter industry. Thus, the development of manufacturing into industry towards the end of the eighteenth century—and thus the opposition of capital and wage-labor—is the result of the establishment of this new economic logic. Agricultural improvement also provided a growing home market, which was crucial to the growth of industry in England. This was well under way before England acquired any colonies with significant wealth. Although Brenner offers a complete micro-analysis, he can be criticized for not including a macro-level analysis, i.e., an analysis of the economic policies of the British state during this period, which are extremely important. Nevertheless, his micro-analysis is still valid.

France represents a different case. Here, as in England, the peasants freed themselves from medieval feudalism but, unlike England, they retained effective control of the land. The landlords in France were never able to change this. In part, this was because of the development of the French monarchy. The French state did not side with the nobility against the peasants but instead saw the peasantry as a financial base. Thus, the state and property owners were competitors for the right to extract peasant surpluses. This meant that peasants were under relatively little pressure to operate their plots as profitably or effectively as possible because there

31 Aston and Philpin, eds., The Brenner Debate, 36.

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was no real competitive system among them. French peasants did engage in exchange, but the state and the landowners still appropriated their surpluses. They were not tenants competing for tenancies and then competing to keep these tenancies. French peasants were secure on their lands because the state wanted them to be. Consequently, France did not become capitalist before the nineteenth century.

Brenner's argument about Europe has been discussed in detail, in order to show what kind of argument it is. It is not based on any "Euro-myth" but rather on concrete historical evidence. It shows that each set of society's leaders governed by a specific socio-economic logic, which was the product of qualitative historical developments linked ultimately to class conflict but not excluding other factors. One can disagree with the theory underlying it, but then one would have to explain the fact that the three areas under consideration had the outcomes that Brenner delineates. No one argues any longer that neither France nor Eastern Europe were capitalist before the nineteenth century. Social position of French peasants, East European serfs, and English tenants ("yeoman farmers") are all accepted facts of the early modern period. More importantly, they all had expanding commercial relations not only within their countries, but also with other parts of Europe and even the world. If the expansion of market exchange leads to capitalism, why is it that only England became capitalist before the nineteenth century? It is important to note that while the outcome of class conflict in Britain led to the creation of a superior economic logic (from the standpoint of productivity and economic growth), this argument does not presuppose that British institutions were superior before these developments and that this superiority caused these developments.

Brenner has been discussed mainly in relation to Europe, but he also argued against Wallerstein, and against Frank in his early incarnation as a theorist of the "development of underdevelopment" (a position he has subsequently rejected). Brenner argued in an article devoted primarily to Wallerstein that Wallerstein essentially had adopted a Smithian model of economic development, i.e. the commercial model, as discussed above. This fundamentally means that Wallerstein had abandoned Marxism, and class conflict and structure, as an explanation for economic development. There are various areas of Wallerstein's work that Brenner criticizes, but two will be focused on here: Wallerstein's notion of "labor control" and the crucial use of "primitive accumulation" in his argument.

Brenner's basic argument against Wallerstein is that by adopting the commercial model, Wallerstein has mistaken the fundamental causal relationships. Instead of class conflict and class structure causing economic development or its lack, Wallerstein sees the expansion of the market and commercial exchange as causing economic development. In fact, the development of class structure in Wallerstein is an outcome of the expansion of commerce, i.e., changes in class structure depends on the expansion of markets. New forms of "labor control" emerge not from class conflict, but merely from the facilitation of market-induced processes of economic development and underdevelopment.32 Indeed, in Wallerstein's analysis, European capitalists impose different forms of "labor


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control” because the market dictates it. Wallerstein does not analyze whether there might have been class conflict in the establishment of new forms of “labor control.” Brenner argued that this was because Wallerstein essentially adopted a Smithian position—one that denied class conflict and structure in favor of a market composed of individual producers and consumers.

Another issue on which Brenner criticizes Wallerstein is the notion of primitive accumulation. Wallerstein essentially argued for a European primitive accumulation of wealth derived from its exploitative control over the Americas. To him, this massive transfer of wealth was vital to the economic development of Europe. Brenner argued against this view. He did not argue that there was no transfer of wealth to Europe, or that exploitation was not involved. Rather he challenged the notion that this transfer had any qualitative effects on the European economy. Brenner saw this whole issue rooted in problems in Smith’s analysis of the development of commercial society. Smith’s system essentially presupposed capitalist relations of production. Thus, Smith needed to find a source for the capital required for the operation of his model, and so he postulated a “previous accumulation” of wealth that served as the basis for the capital required by his model. More importantly, Brenner argued (following Marx) that even if one were to specify the origin of this accumulation, the very fact of its accumulation would not turn it into capital. It could just as easily have been merely consumed, and not invested in improving productivity. Brenner instead argues that capital comes into being under specific historical circumstances—“certain historically-developed social-productive relations.” The development of a specific set of social relationships allows wealth to become capital, and not the other way around. Wallerstein’s argument implies that no amount of transfer of wealth to Europe would have created capitalist economic relations there. These relations arose out of class conflict in England. This is not to deny that wealth was appropriated from the non-European world and that some of that wealth was transformed into capital. No doubt some of it was simply consumed. Nevertheless, while this transfer of wealth may have made life more comfortable for some Europeans, it did not create the “modern world system.”

There are important reasons for such a lengthy consideration of Brenner’s ideas. First, he offers a coherent account of the origins of capitalism in England, one that avoids all of Blaut’s “Euro-myths.” More importantly, Brenner’s ideas will inform subsequent discussion of Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz. Brenner stands as a forceful critique of Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz, even though his work precedes theirs by twenty years. Finally, this essay will culminate with some suggestions of how Brewer’s positive argument on the origins of capitalism can be applied to the whole world.

Although Brenner devoted most of his essay on the origins of capitalist development to Wallerstein, Andre Gunder Frank was another of the “Neo-Smithian Marxists” that Brenner criticized. Frank’s early work on the “development of underdevelopment,” which he has since repudiated, was nevertheless a most important influence on Wallerstein. In 1998, Frank published Reorient, which was a

33 Brenner, “The Origins of Capitalist Development,” 86-7

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conscious attempt to rewrite the history of the world economy from 1400 to 1800 from an anti-Eurocentric position. Frank did an impressive amount of research in secondary sources, work that is commendable for bringing much information together in one volume that before was only contained in specialist manuscripts. However, serious problems remain in Frank’s analysis.

Frank argues “there already was an ongoing world economy before the Europeans had much to do and say in it.” He derives two sub theses from this assertion, first that “Asia, and especially China and India, but also Southeast Asia and West Asia, were more active and the first three also more important to this world economy than Europe was until about 1800,” and second that Europe “used its American money to buy about a ticket on the Asian train.” Thus, Frank’s aim is to challenge Eurocentric models of the origins of the modern world system. In doing this, he rejects almost all nineteenth- and twentieth-century European historical and social scientific work on the subject, including that of Marx, Weber, Wallerstein, and Brenner. They all are Eurocentric in Frank’s opinion, because in one-way or another they all privilege Europe over Asia in the early modern period. However, Frank gives that other European thinker, Adam Smith, a pass on the issue because, as we shall see, Smith’s economic theory and one of his specific arguments are crucial to Frank’s own argument.

Frank argues that there was a world economy dating back thousands of years (though he focuses on the years 1400–1800), an economy characterized by regional trading systems linked together in a world system involving the Eurasian landmass and Africa. This trade was not just long-distance trade in luxury goods, but was also trade in staple goods. For Frank, this constitutes a true “world system” in that it incorporated the entire known world except the Americas (which Europe would integrate into the world economy after the 1500s). Wallerstein was explicit about what he considered a world system. He was clear that it did not literally have to encompass the entire world. At some point, Frank seems confused on Wallerstein’s definition of a world system, and thus he castigates Wallerstein for ignoring Asia in general and China in particular. Frank clearly has not understood Wallerstein here. Even so, Frank maintains one of Wallerstein’s central ideas—that a world system has a single division of labor. The underlying idea is the same, whether in the more geographically circumscribed Wallersteinian version or the global Frankian version. Frank further argues that the introduction of various forms of circulating money during this period integrated this world system and its single division of labor. Money was indispensable to the operation of this world system. The European conquest of the Americas gave them control over large amounts of silver and gold, thus allowing Europeans to buy goods from Asia that they otherwise could not afford, because Europeans lacked commodities Asians wanted.

Frank argues that in this world system, with a single division of labor integrated by money circulation, the Europeans were not the economic leaders, that they did not dominate the world economy. The Asian economies, particularly China and India, were the major economies in terms of population, production, trade, and

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34 Frank, Reorient, p. xxiv–xxv.
35 Frank, Reorient, p. xxiv–xxv.

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consumption. More significantly, European social scientists falsely classified them as stagnant economies. They were dynamic economies that "grew faster and more than Europe and maintained [their] economic lead over Europe in all these aspects until at least 1750." In fact, the Asian economies were the dominant economies in the world system before 1750. This is in part because Asia was in no way inferior to Europe in productivity, technology, and economic and financial institutions. It is commonly argued that the opposite was the case, i.e. that the "European miracle" was that of its superiority in these areas. Instead, Frank argues that there was a great deal of innovation throughout Eurasia and that, because of the international commercial links of the world system, these innovations were diffuse and adapted to local conditions. Frank argues the Europe benefited greatly from this diffusion. Unquestionably, many Europeans adopted and adapted non-European innovations, but European technological superiority is not the lynchpin of most arguments for European superiority.

Ultimately, though, Frank has to address the eventual European dominance of the world economy, i.e. that something changed after 1750, making Europe the dominant region in the world economy. He first argues that Europeans were able to integrate themselves into this system by means of their appropriation of New World silver and gold, an argument he claims ultimately comes from Adam Smith. More importantly, he argues that cycles of growth and contraction both did and do characterize the world economic system and that, while the effects of each phase in the cycle are unevenly distributed around the world system, one can delineate general trends for the world system. He argues that the so-called "seventeenth-century crisis" was really a European crisis and not a global crisis. Thus, while Europe suffered a contraction, the world economy as a whole was still in its growth phase. By the end of the eighteenth century, though, Asia was entering a phase of contraction. Europeans, who had entered a growth phase at this time, were able to take advantage of Asia's cyclical weakness because they were by then integrated into the world economy.

This summary of Frank's argument excludes much about its theoretical underpinnings, though these are important. Frank is essentially a Smithian, Neo-Classical economist. However, he differs from his colleagues' position that no equivalent to the commercial society developing in Europe existed in Asia. Instead, he maintains that commercial society was already present around the world in 1400, and even earlier. Frank never talks of constraints on the rise of market exchange—when any economy is in a growth phase, market exchange increases. Frank is almost obsessively concerned with trade, especially international trade, and he never discusses the relations of production under which traded goods were actually produced. Even when he considers economic institutions, he discusses business organization and finance. The world of 1400-1800 was overwhelmingly agricultural and dominated by peasants, even in Europe, which affected the structures of its various societies and states. However, peasants and agriculture receive little or no mention, let alone analysis, in Frank's book.

36 Frank, Reorient, 35.

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Frank is so wedded to his Smithian view of economics and his anti-Eurocentrism that he even denies the very existence of capitalism. He suggests that capitalism is a Eurocentric myth designed primarily to differentiate Europe from the rest of the world, in order to assert European superiority. Frank thus argues that the same economic relations have operated in the world economy for hundreds or thousands of years, and that what happened between 1500 and 1800 in Europe and the world was nothing truly new. This places him firmly within the Smithian commercial model.

R. Bin Wong's goals are less ambitious than those of Frank, but he still seeks to downgrade Europe from its privileged position. A specialist on China, Wong wants to compare Europe and China to see how they were similar and different—but with the aim of dislodging "European state making and capitalism from their privileged positions as universalizing themes in world history."37 To do this, Wong analyzes both the economic history and the history of political institutions in Europe and in China. He argues that in the most advanced areas of Europe and China, their economic systems were largely the same and conformed to "Smithian dynamics"—"productivity gains accruing from the division of labor and specialization" with a "decentralized price system" that "widens the scope of the market and extends the advantages accruing from the division of labor."38 Wong’s basic economic argument is that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, China was economically no different from Europe. Both were pre-industrial, both exhibited Smithian dynamics, and both were subject to occasional Malthusian crises.39

Where they did differ was in their political systems. China had a unified state that, while not an oriental despotism, did not develop the representative institutions of European polities nor the European system of interstate competition. Instead, China was an agrarian empire with a different political logic than that of any European state. We should not expect European style institutions to have developed there. European states, apart from developing representative institutions in some areas and being in competition with each other, lacked the kinds of active promotion of popular education and morality, as well as a concern to promote the material welfare of its subjects, especially the poor and peasants, that were ancient features of the Chinese state. These differences are crucial for the economic developments of both regions. The Chinese state was concerned with static, not to say stagnant, efficiency and wanted to spread the best techniques available across a vast area. Its goal was to increase state revenue by encouraging the material improvement of its subjects. European states, on the other hand, sought competition and growth, not anticipating that this would result in the industrial revolution. Thus, the differences in Chinese and European development were the outcome of their specific historically developed state structures and their policies.

When Wong discusses the Chinese economy, he makes it sound as if it were solely a market economy for both peasants and artisans. This ignores the tributary nature of the Chinese state in this period. The Chinese state appropriated and

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37 Wong, China Transformed, 7.
38 Wong, China Transformed, 16.
39 Wong, China Transformed, 89.

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redistributed peasant surpluses in a manner quite different from what European states were doing during this period, although one must distinguish between this and the tributes the Chinese state received from its client states. This did not preclude peasants selling what remained in markets, but Wong glosses over the tributary aspect of the Chinese states and this is a serious omission. Further, Wong replicates, in a more palatable form, the Eurocentric argument that Chinese state institutions represented a block on economic development. The Chinese economy may have been dynamic and not stagnant, but Wong does not decisively refute the ‘Euro-myth’ of European institutional superiority.

Kenneth Pomeranz is also a specialist in China and a colleague of Wong. He, too, wants to challenge Eurocentric views. He argues “no matter how far we may push back the origins of capitalism, industrial capitalism, in which large-scale use of inanimate energy sources allowed an escape from the common constraints of the pre-industrial world, emerged only in the 1800s. There is little to suggest that Western Europe’s economy had decisive advantages before then, either in its capital stock or economic institutions, that made industrialization highly probable there and unlikely elsewhere.” Pomeranz argues that before the nineteenth century, high levels of capital accumulation, demographic patterns, and markets in general existed in Western Europe, China, Japan, and perhaps elsewhere. Consequently, these factors cannot explain why Europe industrialized in the nineteenth century, nor would they even suffice to explain a counter-factual Chinese industrialization. According to Pomeranz, technology cannot explain this either, because the real differentiation between Europe and Asia in technology occurred in the nineteenth century. Perhaps Europe had some advantage in international trade, but this was a difference in degree rather than in kind, and does not justify any claim that Western Europe had developed a “capitalist mode of production” or a “consumer society” which differentiated it from Asia by creating the industrialized society of Europe in the nineteenth century. Pomeranz further argues that by the end of the eighteenth century, a series of fundamental ecological constraints increasingly beset Asia. Increased trade within Eurasia and Africa would not ease these constraints. Fortunately for Europe, the conquest and colonization of the New World provided a way out. Since Europeans were able to structure their trade relations with their colonies—as opposed to free, consensual trade among Eurasians—Europe was able to transcend its ecological constraints. In the process, Europe created the world’s first modern “core” and “periphery,” which allowed Europe to build a unique industrial system upon an advanced market economy which itself was not unique in Eurasia.

There are some things to note here. First, Pomeranz presupposes Smithian economics. It is the only economic model and it is found everywhere. Even so, Smithian dynamics do not lead to capitalism. In fact, just as in Frank, Pomeranz denies the very notion of something qualitatively different called “capitalism.” Industrialization is what distinguishes Western Europe after 1800, a result of escaping ecological constraints. This, in turn, is a consequence of the conquest of the Americas, their colonization, and the transfer of wealth to Europe. In Pomeranz,

40 Pomeranz, The Great Divergence, 32.

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this wealth took the form not only of precious metals, but also of colonial products, especially various types of food products. Thus Pomeranz returns to a Wallersteinian theme, though he is critical of Wallerstein here and there. What are missing here are any fundamental qualitative changes in social relations in Western Europe leading to industrialization.

Some general criticisms of these works are in order. The first point to make is about how Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz actually characterize Asian economies during this period. As noted earlier, Frank has very little to say about peasants and instead is obsessed with trade. This is a serious flaw in his book. The vast majority of the world’s populations until the twentieth century were peasants, and peasant production was the main global economic activity until that time. Frank has practically nothing to say about this, and what he does say about peasant production has to do with merchants trading their products. Wong and Pomeranz do discuss peasants, but there is a curious absence in their discussions. One gets the impression in both books that Chinese peasants were akin to the small independent farmers found in the United States in the nineteenth century. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Chinese system integrated peasants into a tributary state that appropriated and redistributed a share of their production by essentially non-market means. Here, Wallerstein is correct in his analysis of China as a world-empire, though he vastly underestimates the amount of market exchange that existed alongside this tributary system. In order to make their arguments, Wong and Pomeranz have simply ignored this important aspect of the Chinese socio-economic system. This is a severe distortion of reality.

This absence is a product of the adoption of Smithian economic theory, refracted through Neo-Classical economics. To bring up the Chinese tributary system (which should not be confused with these authors’ discussions of “tribute” received by the Chinese state from countries in its sphere of influence) is to undermine the Smithian argument that Wong and Pomeranz want to make. None of the three authors seriously consider alternative economic theories. When Marx is discussed, his ideas are dismissed. Frank is most vociferous about this, spuriously arguing that Marx’s analysis of the origins of European capitalism is intimately tied to his belief that Asian economies were stagnant and their political systems despotic, preventing economic dynamism. Certainly, Marx considered England the place where capitalism arose, and never considered any other area as a candidate for this development. However, Marx’s limited analyses of India and China are not justification for the dismissal of his arguments about England. By the end of the 1850s, Marx was the expert on the English economy and its development, and his analysis did not rely on other parts of the world being stagnant. His arguments are about England, what had happened there, and how its economy worked at that time. The same holds true for Brenner, who is the major modern proponent of the Marxian view of the origins of capitalism. None of the anti-Eurocentric authors seriously consider Brenner’s arguments, because they have already made their choice for Smith and against Marx. This means that class is not a category of analysis for any of these authors. Thus, they derive no meaning from Brenner’s claim that class conflict leads to changes both in class structure and in the economic logic governing the economies of the different European states. This is already

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evident when Pomeranz tries to pair Brenner with Douglas North, a Neo-Classical economic historian, stating that they essentially reach the same conclusions. However, the gulf between Marxism and Neo-Classical economics is immense. That Brenner and North can be seen as kindred spirits shows either that Pomeranz does not know Marxism (the rest of the book shows he knows Neo-Classicism), or that he simply does not care.

Historians should prefer Marx to Smith, because Marx offers a thorough historical explanation for the development of capitalism, right down to the level of the very "laws" that govern the operation of an economic system. Smith and the Neo-Classicists do not go this far, and instead posit their basic economic models as operating at all places and times, something akin to the laws of Newtonian physics. Marx argued that the economic sphere is just as historical as the social, cultural, and political spheres—that, in fact, the economic sphere is itself social, and should not be separated from society. Neo-Classical economists tend to do just that, when they are not trying to reduce society to the model market. Humans have devised different economic systems throughout their existence—different at the most fundamental level—and these systems have changed over time. For Marx, the motor of change is class conflict, arising from the development of a socio-economic system that in itself is the result of earlier class conflicts. This class conflict is not mechanical or deterministic. Circumstances, unintended consequences, and other factors influence the outcome of a class conflict. Many historians are uncomfortable with the notion of class as a prime mover of historical development. One does not need to adopt this aspect of Marxism to agree with another aspect of Marxism, outlined above, that the laws governing economic activity change qualitatively over time. One does not have to be a Marxist to use class as a category of analysis. Max Weber, generally taken to be the most sophisticated alternative to Marx as a social theorist, had no problem using a concept of class.

It is not surprising that orthodox economics has influenced Frank, Wong, and Pomeranz, given the generally anti-Marxist climate found in the United States and elsewhere. In rejecting the thoroughgoing historicism of Marx in favor of Smith, all three thus reject the very idea of capitalism, in one way or another. As we have seen, Smithian/Neo-Classical thinking essentially maintains itself to be the basic model for all economic activity. Any deviation from it is the result of human interference, which usually turns out badly. Since the basic logic of economics is the same everywhere and at all times, it makes no sense to talk of capitalism if one means by that term some sort of different form of economy. If by capitalism one means the Smithian model of the economy, then, by this theory, capitalism has always been present in one form or another. For this reason, Neo-Classical economists usually avoid the term capitalism altogether.

The anti-Eurocentrists have another reason to avoid the term. To talk of capitalism is to grant some validity to nineteenth-century European social science and historical writing—especially Marx, who created "capitalism" as a category of historical and socio-economic analysis. Consequently, anti-Eurocentrists are keen to deny any validity to the term as it relates to notions of European difference and superiority. When confronted with undeniable European economic difference, these authors talk of industrialization rather than capitalism. This is because they believe

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that industrialization neatly fits into the parameters of the Smithian model. However, industrialization post-dated Smith, who really only knew an economy based on agriculture and incipient factories.

There is another problem with this anti-Eurocentric line of thinking. European thinkers did not develop the concept of capitalism to denigrate non-European people. Rather, they wished to explain the rapid changes taking place in Europe and especially in England, changes to which Marx gave the term capitalism. Marx was the first thinker to offer a truly historical view of the problem. He realized that previous economists, Smith and Ricardo in particular, did not think in historical terms, but instead took ahistorical Newtonian physics as the model for their theories. The anti-Eurocentric historians, in trying to de-privilege Europe by eliminating the concept of capitalism, are essentially going back to this ahistorical model. Thus, no matter how detailed their historical research, the model within which they articulate their evidence is fundamentally flawed.

There is a further irony in this choice as well. Smith was European, and the Smithian model is a product of European thought. Smith may have said a positive thing about China here and there (and Frank is quick to point these statements out, though not as interested in some of the more negative things Smith said about China), but this does not change the fact that Smith's model is based on European thought and experience. What Smith knew of the rest of the world came from accounts written by Europeans, some of whom had been to the places they wrote about, some not. In this, Smith was no different from Marx and Weber. Yet somehow Smith escapes the charge of Eurocentrism, despite the fact that he clearly thought that Europe had reached the highest stage development. Smith's implication that the commercial stage was open to all nations does not change anything. In fact, Smith is Eurocentric in arguing that Europe had best removed constraints on the development of commercial society. Surely, this makes Europe special—even superior in some sense. Anti-Eurocentric historians thus essentially continue to rely on European derived theories and categories, calling into question their claims of being truly anti-Eurocentric. R. Bin Wong is aware of the problem, claiming he tries to avoid it, but his work is firmly rooted in European social science. There is a strange contradiction here which is unacknowledged by these authors.

The European roots of a Marxian approach to this issue do not share this problem, just because it is not trying to deny capitalism or the European origins of capitalism. Marxism does argue (without privileging Europeans for any of the reasons that Blaut offers) that changes in European society lead to Europe being more advanced than the rest of the world, in terms of both economic structure and thought about the nature of that structure, for examples. However, nothing in Marxism denies other societies the ability to develop capitalism, or even something entirely different. Instead, Marx argues that societies change qualitatively over time and that the main factor in such change is class conflict, which changes both class structure and the overall economic logic of the society in question. That England developed capitalism first is an accident of history—the result of a particular set of circumstances in a specific place and time. It could have happened somewhere else,

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41 For some negative comments on China in Smith see Wealth of Nations, 95, 462, 644-5.

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or it could have not happened at all. Capitalism did not arise first in Asia, and when it did arise there, e.g. in Japan in the late-nineteenth century or in China in the last two decades of the twentieth century, it developed in a different manner.

It is possible to use the Marx-Brenner model on a world scale. While the model denies that the expansion of commerce caused the rise of capitalism, it does not deny that there was commerce among societies, nor does it deny the importance of that commerce. Societies trade with each other and have always traded with each other. This is, in fact, a main way that technological and other innovations spread throughout the world. A Marx-Brenner model of economic world history since 1400, for example, would focus on tracing the internal development of class conflict and class structure (and how those created different economic logics in different societies of the world), while also paying attention to how world developments such as trade affected the development of those class conflicts, structures, and logics. An ideal Marxist account of the world economy since 1400 would integrate a variant of the world systems approach (i.e., one without the commercialization model) with a detailed analysis of the various class conflicts, class structures, economic logics, and the social and political formations arising from them around the world, and would also consider how these two levels interacted both vertically and horizontally. Such a task is most likely beyond the ability of any single historian, but a collective endeavor could achieve it.

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