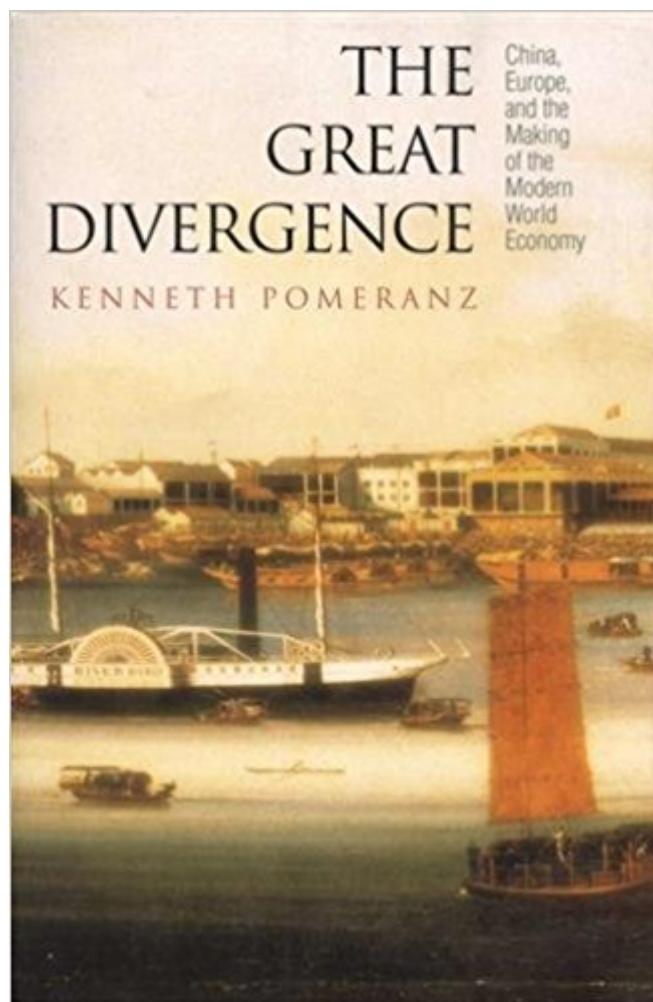


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# The Great Divergence: China, Europe, And The Making Of The Modern World Economy.



## Synopsis

The Great Divergence brings new insight to one of the classic questions of history: Why did sustained industrial growth begin in Northwest Europe, despite surprising similarities between advanced areas of Europe and East Asia? As Ken Pomeranz shows, as recently as 1750, parallels between these two parts of the world were very high in life expectancy, consumption, product and factor markets, and the strategies of households. Perhaps most surprisingly, Pomeranz demonstrates that the Chinese and Japanese cores were no worse off ecologically than Western Europe. Core areas throughout the eighteenth-century Old World faced comparable local shortages of land-intensive products, shortages that were only partly resolved by trade. Pomeranz argues that Europe's nineteenth-century divergence from the Old World owes much to the fortunate location of coal, which substituted for timber. This made Europe's failure to use its land intensively much less of a problem, while allowing growth in energy-intensive industries. Another crucial difference that he notes has to do with trade. Fortuitous global conjunctures made the Americas a greater source of needed primary products for Europe than any Asian periphery. This allowed Northwest Europe to grow dramatically in population, specialize further in manufactures, and remove labor from the land, using increased imports rather than maximizing yields. Together, coal and the New World allowed Europe to grow along resource-intensive, labor-saving paths. Meanwhile, Asia hit a cul-de-sac. Although the East Asian hinterlands boomed after 1750, both in population and in manufacturing, this growth prevented these peripheral regions from exporting vital resources to the cloth-producing Yangzi Delta. As a result, growth in the core of East Asia's economy essentially stopped, and what growth did exist was forced along labor-intensive, resource-saving paths--paths Europe could have been forced down, too, had it not been for favorable resource stocks from underground and overseas.

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## Customer Reviews

Pomeranz is a history professor at the University of California-Irvine and the author of *The Making of a Hinterland: State, Society, and Economy in Inland North China, 1853-1937* (1993), an academic study that investigated the role of steam-powered transportation (among other developments) in the growth of China's Shantung Province. He is also the coauthor of the more popularly accessible *The World That Trade Created* (1999). Now he looks at the question of why sustained industrial growth began in northwestern Europe but not East Asia. To even ask the question can bring charges of Eurocentrism, but Pomeranz acknowledges the role of colonialism in Europe's growth. He emphasizes, though, Europe's access to America's resources as one of two contributing factors to industrial growth, the second being the widespread availability within Europe of coal as a fuel. After challenging the convention that Europe held an edge before 1800, he traces with scholarly diligence the diverging patterns of growth between Europe and China. David Rouse

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Winner of the 2000 John K. Fairbank Prize, American Historical AssociationCo-Winner of the 2001 Book Prize, World History AssociationOne of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2000"The vast international disparity in incomes and standards of living between Western Europe and its offshoots on the one hand, and most of Asia, Africa, and Latin America on the other, is a striking feature of the modern world. Pomeranz's study is an important addition to the literature that challenges elements of every major interpretation of the European take-off."--Choice"A profoundly though-provoking book which will change the terms of the debate about the origins of capitalism, the rise of the West and the fall of the East."--Jack Goody, Times Higher Education Supplement"This book makes, bar none, the biggest and most important contribution to our new understanding of the causes and mechanisms that brought about the great divergence' between the West and the rest of China in particular. . . . An entirely new and refreshing departure. Although he makes new comparisons between Europe, China, Japan, India, Southeast Asia, Pomeranz also connects all these and more in a bold new sweep that should immediately make all previous and most contemporary related work obsolescent."--Andre Gunde Frank, Journal of Asian Studies"This book

is very important and will have to be taken seriously by anyone who thinks that explaining the Industrial Revolution . . . is crucial to our understanding of the modern world. . . . [A] book so rich that fresh insights emerge from virtually every page."--Robert B. Marks, American Historical ReviewExhaustively researched and brilliantly argued. . . . Suffice it to say that The Great Divergence is undoubtedly one of the most sophisticated and significant pieces of cliometric scholarship to be published of late, especially in the field of world history."--Edward R. Slack, Jr., Journal of World History

I enjoyed reading this provocative work, which certainly expanded my understanding of China's economic history and development. But I found the central argument unconvincing. Pomeranz sees the most developed areas of the world being basically equivalent and technology and living standards as late as 1800, so to explain the European take-off must involve late-acting factors. The first problem with that is by 1800, Europe already dominated the Americas, much of coastal Africa, India and was settling Australasia. This suggests some crucial earlier divergence prior to the Industrial Revolution. In agrarian societies, the land/population ratio dominates standard of living. Pomeranz wants to argue that NW Europe and the Yangtze valley essentially had equivalent standards of living yet the Europeans also had the great advantage of the Americas -- which thus becomes crucial but not significant. There is a contradiction here. One can see reasons why the Americas might be much less significant than one expects. First, New World products spread throughout the global trade networks (Pomeranz makes a point of emphasizing Chinese take-up of New World products). Second, the export of the Eurasian disease pool so depopulated the Americas, the Europeans massively imported labour to exploit the new territories. The 9 million African slaves imported may have been paid at subsistence levels, but they still reduced the land/population ratio. Third, the Atlantic itself was also something of a barrier (Pomeranz notes the expense of moving). Finally, sudden expansions in land/population ratio experienced by other societies did not have take-off effects (such as the Qing's expansion of China's borders). The most obvious example of the last point being that the resources of the Americas were mostly controlled by the Spanish and Portuguese, who certainly did not achieve any notable economic breakthrough (the "poor Portugal/rich Switzerland" problem is a perennial in "the overseas colonies did it" explanations). This points to institutional divergence of NW Europe from other regions as a key factor. Moreover, the later one wishes to push the divergence, the more problematic the Americas become as key factor, since Britain lost most of its North American colonies by 1783, Spain its Latin American ones by 1820, Portugal by 1822. If the issue then becomes trade access, that just

reinforces an obvious crucial difference dating back to the C16th -- that China was a key part of global trade networks but not a global trader, unlike the Europeans. It begins to look like a "you have to be in it to win it" story. Pomeranz also nowhere deals with Japan being much more successful in dealing with the Western challenge than China. Since Japan was the non-European societies whose institutions (and institutional history) was most like NW Europe, this is surely suggestive. Given that other regions later industrialised without colonies, and the colonial states became richer after they lost or gave up their colonies, Pomeranz is also postulating a big difference between the first industrialisers and later industrialisers. The big change in Europe was it moving from an adaptor civilisation to an inventor civilisation. If one locates the shift at about 1000AD, then one is looking at medieval origins. If one puts it later (as I would: the medievals were excellent adaptors, doing so on a much broader basis than the Graeco-Romans, but not notable originators), then the Scientific Revolution seems crucial. Learning how to learn is surely a crucial step in creating a continuing pattern of new forms of capital, particularly fixed capital (the Industrial Revolution achievement). As Europeans increasingly interacted with the entire globe directly, that gave them a further advantage in being exposed to other people's good ideas and techniques. But this is a very informative and useful work which I recommend as a contribution to grappling with why the dramatic economic take-off from 1820 onwards happened.

I was taught in high school that the Industrial Revolution came about in England through technological innovation, which led to a fundamental reordering of British society, with old cottage industries overtaken by factories and with country laborers drawn into new, large, cities with perennial grey skies. Later on in lower division history survey course, I was taught that the depletion of English forests to supply the Royal Navy meant that those forests had to be protected and forced Englishmen to look elsewhere for fuel, namely underground, and that the struggle to keep the coal mines from flooding and to transport the coal long distances led to the development of the steam engine, which could then be put to a variety of labor-saving industrial tasks. This book doesn't address these issues so much. What it does do is provide international context to the Industrial Revolution, comparing the economies, laws, natural resources and social structures of Britain and China and Japan, and occasionally India or a few European nations to try and answer the question: Why England, or more broadly, which is what Pomeranz asks: Why Europe? To put, for example, China and Britain into context, he includes Britain as part of Europe, because it makes more sense to compare to large landmasses with large populations, some broadly shared cultural traits to each other. After all, he points out, while China's external trade paled in comparison with European trade

in the 19th century, the nation's INTERNAL trade was just as robust as Europe's. Certain persistent myths about the Western cultural foundations of Capitalism should be thrown out-- in 1750 it was easier to buy and sell land on the private market in China than in England, which in retained more feudalistic social and economic structures later than did China. What Pommeranz suggests is that the great economic (and indeed political) lead that Britain and other western powers took on the world stage only occurred in the very late 19th century and lasted relatively shortly. Furthermore, he argues that it was not inevitable that only Britain (or other Europeans) would have developed the Industrial technologies that allowed for so much of European imperial successes, but that other countries (specifically China and Japan) very well could have produced similar technologies given the time or correct . Basically, it was not a matter of cultural determinism à la Weber that the Industrial Revolution occurred, but rather largely through more proximate factors. The subject itself is interesting, but the evidence at times can be yawn-inducing. Charts and tables on productivity and the like aren't exactly page-turners for me. This is a must-read for anyone interested in the formation of Industrial economies and in the shaping of the modern world, assuming you have the patience to wade through the economic data. Pommeranz offers a compelling, if non-traditional, view of the Industrial Revolution. In history, context is everything, and this book helps provide that.

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