

Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*

1. Instead of comparing nation-states or continents (as the title of his book would suggest), Pomeranz examines economic centers within Europe and Asia (England, China, Japan, India), comparing regions of comparable size and with economic and social similarities to one another. Pomeranz claims that all of these regions were marked at the end of the eighteenth century by rising populations and limited resources, and were each headed for a “protoindustrial cul-de-sac.” However, England industrialized first because of a lucky confluence of factors including (but not limited to) overseas colonies, deposits of coal in the right places, luck, and epidemics. Pomeranz’s claims are seductive, but I am not convinced that regional comparison is a useful way of thinking about why some countries industrialized and other didn’t. Industrialization does not happen on a regional level—it is connected to a convergence of forces which all circulate nationally (work force, economy, political structure, technological advances, trade...). Can we speak about regional industrialization? Is Pomeranz’s “reciprocal comparative method” of regions methodologically sound? Can we speak productively about the divergence of Asian and European economies by focusing on regional similarities and differences?
2. Pomeranz claims that the two greatest factors contributing to Western European (English) industrialization were coal and colonies. China, like England, had large coal deposits, and had mined them sporadically for several centuries, but coal mining did not spark industry in China as it did in England. Coal alone does not magically induce industrialization, and Pomeranz glosses over the technological advances, economic and transportation infrastructures that must be in place to support coal-run industry. Furthermore, China also benefited from the resources in Southeast Asian peripheries, but did not exploit slave labor and participate in long-distance trade as England did. Pomeranz suggests that China did not pursue imperialism as England did because China had no need or desire to do so, but does not provide any evidence that such a debate ever occurred or how it was resolved. Why did coal and colonies contribute to industrialization in England but not in China? Was it merely a matter of scale, desire, and “accidents of geography,” or is there more that needs to be explained?
3. In Chapter 2, Pomeranz claims that gender norms in Qing Chinese textile production were an impediment to industrialization. He draws heavily upon the work of Philip Huang, who asserts that textile production contributed to an “involuting” Chinese economy, in which female domestic labor was treated as “costless.” He also refers to Jack Goldstone, who argues that female domestic labor discouraged the creation of factories in China, and that while European women could work in factories, Chinese women were forced to remain at home. Yet Francesca Bray would certainly take issue with both Huang and Goldstone: in *Technology and Gender* she makes clear that domestic textile production was not devalued, but was enmeshed in the Chinese material and moral economy, and that female domestic labor remained so into the Qing dynasty. How would Bray’s understanding of Chinese textile production change the thesis that gender norms

kept China from industrializing as quickly as England? How, if at all, did gender affect Chinese protoindustrialization?

4. In her review of Pomeranz's book, Sucheta Mazumdar contests Pomeranz's thesis that coal was one of the primary factors contributing to British industrialization. She points out: "water mills and windmills rather than steam continued to provide the energy driving cotton mills well into the nineteenth century. The real innovation was a new spatial flow of production" (*Technology and Culture*, 44:3). Does Pomeranz take British industry's reliance on coal for granted? What would a "reciprocal comparative method" of the social innovations during Eurasian protoindustrialization (and contributing to English industrialization) look like? What social forces could have differentially contributed to industrialization?