

Student A:

I thought Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence* was an interesting example of problem-focused history, in which historical data is used to answer a specific question about why societies developed as they did. The strategy of the book is to demolish, one by one, explanations for European dominance other than the two that Pomeranz prefers: coal and the New World. Thus the first two parts of the book are somewhat static, or negative (in the sense that they try to prove the absence of difference): we learn about the myriad ways in which Europe and Asia were almost exactly the same prior to 1800. Only in the third part does the argument start to move in a positive direction. The method is very Annaliste in its focus on long time periods and on the intersection of economics and geography.

Throughout the book, Pomeranz depends heavily on counterfactuals; we are asked to imagine what would have happened if England had not had easy access to coal, or if Europeans had not had diseases that decimated New World populations. Furthermore, he implicitly asks us to trust his decisions about which differences between Europe and the rest of the Old World were small and insignificant, and which were large and epoch-making; that is, which counterfactuals would lead to significantly different worlds, and which wouldn't. The risk in this is that we have to look at the past through the lens of the present. Certain differences might seem important to us because, in fact, they turned out to be important, while in another world, one in which, e.g., China conquered the New World, those differences might seem insignificant. Pomeranz himself identifies this issue in regard to Europe's inefficient hearths, which, in a world in which Europe's industrial revolution never happened, could be seen as the crucial obstacle.

There were a couple of issues I wish Pomeranz had discussed further. I was disappointed not to find a more detailed discussion of how coal was discovered and put to use in England. Pomeranz treats coal essentially as a substitute for land--so much coal replaces so many acres needed to grow so much wood--but there must be more to it than that. Does geography alone--abundant coal in humid mines located near waterways within easy reach of densely populated industrial areas--explain why Europe exploited its coal but China didn't? (Why would it have been harder for Chinese to develop machines for pumping air than it was for Europeans to develop machines for pumping water?) Why did English learn to exploit coal when it did, instead of a hundred years earlier or a hundred later--which would have made all the difference? I also wanted to know more about Europe's ability to conquer the New World and control trade with the Old World. Pomeranz takes Europe's military capacity as a given; nowhere (that I can remember) does he ask why Europe was so much more capable at long-distance navigation, arms manufacture, etc. than other parts of the Old World. But this seems just as critical as smallpox or the re-monetization of China's economy in silver to Europe's ability to translate its discovery of the New World into networks of trade that fueled industrial growth.

One small note in response to Keiran's point about Marx: Pomeranz does mention Marx, albeit very briefly, in an early paragraph on (so-called) "primitive accumulation" (p. 3). But he does so without a proper citation, and only to dismiss Marx's claim that primitive accumulation, the expropriation of agricultural land and labor by force, is a necessary first step toward capitalism. I saw echoes of Marx throughout the book, but Pomeranz seemed to want to speak more to the arguments of more recent writers, such as Braudel, Jones, etc. Like Kieran, I would be interested to know whether there are specific reasons that Pomeranz avoided mentioning Marx further (or even citing him properly!). Is Marx old hat in economic history, good for nothing but opening quotes and quick dismissals?

I did a quick Google search for Pomeranz and found a few useful references. His own website at Irvine is minimal: <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/history/faculty/pomeranz/>. There he says that one of his two main projects is "attempting to understand the origins of a world economy as the outcome of mutual influences among various regions, rather than the simple imposition by a more 'advanced' Europe on the rest of the world," which seems to describe *The Great Divergence* pretty well. A digital video of Pomeranz lecturing on the *The Great Divergence* (and related issues) is available online from Columbia University

(http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/vforum/03/kennethPomeranz_lecture/index.html). There is also an issue of the Journal of Asian Studies devoted to this issue, which unfortunately is not available online.