

Student C:

Reaction Paper - Kenneth Pomeranz, The Great Divergence

Kenneth Pomeranz's book sets out with a clear but complicated question: "Why is Europe not China, and China not Europe?" By announcing his question so clearly from the start of the book, he is able to carry out an incredibly ordered and structured comparative analysis of conditions in Europe and the Yangzi Delta. His posing of the question as reciprocal is aimed at breaking down conventional European-centered views of history, in which Europe is considered as the base-line and other regions as aberrations.

In order to answer his question convincingly, he identifies specific indicators (sugar, cloth, fuel, etc.), which he follows in his argument. However, I think that by commencing his argument in this way (i.e., by outlining his data in relation to his question) he runs the risk of teleology. We know that Europe expanded while China did not. This is given. Therefore, in attempting to trace the reasons for this separation, one might attribute too much meaning to certain events in order to develop a reason for this occurrence. It appears to me that Pomeranz is aware of this. His conclusion that ecological contingency played a huge role in the divergence suggests to me that his argument avoids teleological analysis. I am still, however, unsure on this point.

Pomeranz uses comparison in two related ways. First, he is trying to dispel myths that the divergence was a given, and that China was lagging behind Europe from the beginning. In this case, he uses comparison to establish a base-line for analysis. Secondly, Pomeranz examines different aspects of Chinese and European society and, by carefully comparing each of these factors to similar factors in the other region, reveals which factors were important in precipitating the divergence. This comparative method is a new one in the course readings. Pomeranz assumes that if two factors were similar in both China and Europe, then they were unlikely the key factors in explaining the divergence of the two regions. On the other hand, if they were different, the factors warrant a closer look. This method is shown in his resource and colonial analyses, which suggests that the available resource base for Europe, especially England, was larger than for China. Therefore, resources and imperialism were likely an explanation of the divergence.

One potential problem of world history seems to me to be the huge scale of analysis. Individual stories must be reduced in complexity and mapped onto national or regional stories. These large-scale stories might mask the small perturbations or events that could have large consequences. Braudel, for instance, in his discussion of the environment in *The Mediterranean*, always relates the large-scale to smaller scale trends and events. I missed this complexity of scale in Pomeranz. With a historical topic as large as the world, such reductions in complexity may be necessary. It is also true that the story that Pomeranz tells is considerably more intricate than the previous narratives of Chinese history, to which he is writing in response.

I think that Pomeranz is aware of this problem with world history. He is quite careful to locate his statistics and analyses in particular regions within Europe and China, and often highlights differences between regions within Europe and China themselves. However, in the end, his argument necessitates the distillation of a "big picture" from these cases.

Pomeranz is very thorough in disassembling outside criticisms of his premise and argument. He clearly situates himself in a debate. As discussed last class meeting, the ideas that Pomeranz suggests in *The Great Divergence* are new. They stood against the contemporary currents of western histories of China. If he is entering this book as an argument in a debate (as he seems to suggest in his introduction), I can understand why he is so methodical about engaging the other side. However, Genovese's ideas on slavery are also controversial, as are Ulrich's ideas about gender. Both go against mainstream ideas of history. Both, however, employ methods different than Pomeranz's to engage the participants of their particular historical debates.

Finally, Pomeranz's emphasis on contingency and luck was fascinating and disarming. Could the success of England really have been based largely on the good luck of the location of London coal seams? Was the development of Europe dependent on external causes? These ideas counter traditional notions of European industriousness and innovative power in an incredibly powerful way. Pomeranz argues that up until a relatively recent point, all things were fairly equal between China and Europe (and sometimes China was ahead). And then, rather than springing from some innately European drive, the divergence of the two regions was powered by chance and the expropriation of external resources. To me, this was more surprising than the previous section demonstrating the equality of conditions in China and Europe.