

Student B:

Overall, I found Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence* a logical and well-supported argument that manages to both present a new thesis about the early 19th-century split between East and West and incorporate a large body of previous work on the subject. Pomeranz' heavy use of statistics, specific examples drawn from multiple regions' histories to illustrate general trends, and above all economic concepts are both a net boon and curse -- though his arguments are strengthened, the reader (me) often becomes lost in the large shuffle of structures and conjunctures that Pomeranz treats. As such, my responses are on a relatively general level.

Apart from offering an explanation for the "great divergence", this book seemed most significant to me in that it illustrates a concrete framework for doing comparative 'global history' of any sort. When looking at parallel developments in different regions, the historian must be careful to treat all sides as equal, and use each in turn as a point-of-view through which the others are 'divergences'. At least in Pomeranz' description, doing so effectively is relatively rare in comparative work. In addition, the objects of historical study must be more precisely and carefully defined than in non-comparative study. When illustrating a hypothesis using one (or more) historical variables which differ between societies, it is necessary for a convincing comparison to choose parts of the compared societies which are as similar as possible in other respects. For example, in comparing 'The West' and 'The East', Pomeranz notes that the concept of 'nation' "does not carry well" (7) to East Asia and takes pains to identify regions of China, Japan, and India that can be compared with partial or whole European nations. To me this seemed an important development. All history is to some extent comparative in that comparisons are needed to test hypotheses, but the more 'comparative' the history the more important the objects of study are well defined for a convincing study. In *Roll Jordan Roll*, for example, it was unimportant for Genovese to define precisely what 'the slaves' were because in the American context it is clear (Southern blacks). In a comparative study with Russian serfdom, which lay somewhere between slavery and free labor, the possible relevance of exploited Blacks elsewhere in pre-Civil War America to a comparison would have to be addressed.

I found it interesting that Pomeranz' arguments have as a side-effect unequivocal moral condemnation of colonialism and slavery. If Pomeranz is correct that the slave trade and trade with the New World were crucial in letting Europe's economy and population break the "land cycle" and Malthusian constraints through the massive use of free labor in a land where the native inhabitants were wiped out by European diseases, European success was truly built on the back of non-Europeans. Colonialism cannot be viewed here as an anachronism or ultimately beneficial to the colonized -- Europeans crucially succeeded by exploiting non-Europeans in a one-way relationship, and since today's 'third world' economic patterns were set up in the process we can say that the non-Europeans ultimately lost in the process.

This leads to another point, perhaps similar to Kieran's -- Pomeranz is largely silent on the effects of colonialism and general European

hegemony to the extent that they existed pre-1800. New World trade, slavery, and even East-West contact to begin with were crucially products of Europe's rabid explorational bent, yet Pomeranz largely treats them as givens, on par with geographical and demographic factors. In Pomeranz' division of all roughly similar (Parts 1 and 2) or dissimilar (Part 3) aspects of East and west circa 1800, an abstract sense of global presence is an interesting omission. The West was far more extended than China, Japan, or India at this time. This could or could not be significant given that only India had begun to directly feel European colonialism, but is crucially not addressed. It is difficult to treat the possibility of China, for example, not becoming a labor-intensive economy when Europe already had some hold on every region which China would have needed to use to do otherwise. This seems a problem for Pomeranz' basic contention that things could have gone either way.

In general, Pomeranz' argument is built on the interplay of Annales-style structures and conjunctures, to great effect. Pomeranz skillfully entangles the interaction of economic, geographical, and social factors relevant to his arguments. But it often seems that a notion of human agency, roughly equivalent to Annales 'evenements', is missing. Pomeranz tries to abstract away from specific circumstances and agency by showing basic similarities between both East and West societies pre-divergence and between eastern societies post-divergence, regardless of circumstances particular to one country or region. But though a few disclaimers are given, Pomeranz largely treats the West's divergence as a consequence of the West's favorable position, without serious consideration of the Western political and social attitudes of circa 1800 through which it actually happened. Without a notion of agency, Pomeranz seems to be sketching a 'high probability' argument -- a divergence becomes very likely under some set of circumstances, which he illustrates. This model seems insufficient to describe the early fifteenth century grounding of the Chinese "Treasure Fleet", which could have colonized before Europe did and turned around the comparison Pomeranz makes, since China's anti-colonial elements at that particular time were crucial in scuttling the fleet. Pomeranz also omits discussion of Japan's eventual industrialization as a response to Perry and other East Asian nations' inability, despite valiant efforts, to follow suit. Surely the 'event' of Perry's ultimatum was significant, and agency played a huge role in Japan's subsequent industrialization? This omission is notable given his discussion of the effects of European interference on Indian industrialization.

I also read some of Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes*, a history of the "short twentieth century" of 1919-1994 (when Hobsbawm wrote). Overall this was much more popular than serious history, but it was also definitely 'global history'. At least for the period 1919-1945, Hobsbawm treats the course of world events as largely inevitable once certain bad decisions (the Treaty of Versailles, etc.) are made. This sort of 'high probability' history reminded me of Pomeranz' lack of discussion of agency, but Hobsbawm's arguments seemed to make sense regardless, probably because the events he describes are so familiar to me. Also significant is Hobsbawm's use of the standard nation-state units in describing world events in 1919-1945. Such a unit of comparison is appropriate in describing what (to Hobsbawm) was essentially European history, but contrasted sharply with Pomeranz'

inability to always use states as comparative units and strengthened (for me) Pomeranz' discussion of the important of choosing the right comparative units.