

Title—The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy
Author—Kenneth Pomeranz
Year—2001

Categories: World History, Economics

Place: The World

Time: 1500-1950

Argument Synopsis:

Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* attempts to craft an alternative narrative of modernization that does not rely on the belief in European exceptionalism, instead posing the argument that there were not fundamental differences between Western Europe and China, and in the eighteenth century both were on the precipice of maximizing economic possibilities. Directly differing from McNeil and Wallerstein, Pomeranz rebukes the notion that European industrial modernity was inevitable and could only happen in Europe. He claims there was no significant economic growth in Europe leading up to industrialization, which demonstrates the fallacy of believing European industrialization was inevitable and spatially bound to Europe. Although Pomeranz does not agree with Wallerstein's conclusion, his theory of world-systems influenced Pomeranz's methodology; the institutionalism approach, the offshoot of world-systems theory, in particular influences Pomeranz. Wallerstein's influence is abundantly clear in Pomeranz's discussion of core and periphery areas, terminology lifted directly from *Modern World System*.

To determine what the cause of Europe's divergence from Asia, Pomeranz focuses on ecological factors concluding that the rise of coal and New World production allowed Europe to prevent ecological collapse due to the land scarcity; the problem which Asia was unable to find a solution to. In his chapter "Shared Constraints," he surveys the similar ecological problems that faced China, Japan, and Western Europe during the eighteenth century, in particular fuel shortages and growing food needs. The significance of the New World in Pomeranz's analysis cannot be overstated, providing necessary relief to Britain and Europe on the eve of industry. The land-rich, market-oriented United States were a perfect complement to an increasingly densely populated and industrial Europe. Pomeranz logic follows that without the windfall of the New World, Europe would have continued down the same labor-intensive path as Asia.

Pomeranz succeeds in rethinking the problem of European economic divergence outside of the framework that posits that Europe is fundamentally different than Asia. He effectively demonstrates that European exceptionalism was not an intrinsic character of Europe that ushered in industry. Some find his reliance on ecological factors problematic, as it overlooks the role of political, social, and cultural factors that were also very influential. Although Pomeranz's conclusion differs from the staunchly Eurocentric world histories, his placement of coal and the New World as the essential difference between Europe and Asia falls into the same method utilized by these other histories.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The belief in European exceptionalism becomes harder to argue following a comparison between preindustrial Europe and other preindustrial economies
- Overtly concerned with the 'moment' when Europe overtook the rest of the world