

Title—ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age

Author—Andre Gunder Frank

Year—1998

Categories: World History, Divergence, Economy

Place: The World

Time: 1400-1800

Argument Synopsis:

ReORIENT is another book that is a part of the world historical debate regarding the ‘rise of the west’ and the ‘great divergence.’ In other words, this book attempts to explain the state of the world on a macro-scale, much like McNeil or Wallerstein. Frank, in particular, aims to correct notions of European (Western) economic performance and predominance and to affirm Asian, especially Chinese, superiority in the production of material wealth. He also emphasizes his goal of establishing a global holistic perspective on world history. Frank identifies Asia as the center of the early world economy, and highlights China, whose huge population testifies to the productivity and wealth of the society, and India, the world’s largest cotton manufacturer, as the leaders within the region. Frank argues that for much of world history, especially the period from 1400 to 1800, Europe was poor and backward and had nothing of value to sell to the superior Asians. Thus, his book strives to answer the question of how Europe emerged dominant over Asia, and the rest of the world. He concludes that Europe was able to move ahead of Asia by extracting the treasure of the New World, through forced labor, and using it to buy cotton, silks, and other Asian products. Importantly, he posits that the European win is temporary, and it will not be long before a return to Asian dominance.

Frank claims that social development theorists always start at the wrong place, i.e. Europe, and that this is due to the wide availability of data in Europe more than any innate European superiority. His analysis is limited to the global economy from 1400 to 1800. Frank studies global trade by describing some of the trade occurring in different macro-regions of the world. He begins by examining the structure and flow of trade, starting in the Americas and moving East. Frank then turns to the role of money in the world economy as a whole and in shaping the relations among its regional parts. He discusses quantitative global economic dimensions, comparing some worldwide and regional dimensions of population, production, trade and consumption in order to demonstrate that Asia grew faster and more than Europe, as well as maintaining its economic lead over Europe in all those aspects until at least 1750. He concludes with an explanation for how and why the East declined and the West ‘won’ in the nineteenth century, arguing that it was not due to Asia’s weakness and Europe’s relative strength, but rather it was the effects of Asia’s strength that led to its decline. Interestingly, in contrast to many other similar histories, Frank does not agree that the advent of capitalism ~1500 constitutes a historical break. He notes that the beginnings of the twenty-first century seem to indicate the center of the world economy is shifting back East.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Industrial Revolution happened in Europe as opposed to Asia only because Asian labor was superior and cheaper, so there was no need to look for labor-saving devices in Asia
- Asia, especially China, dominated global trade and the global economy until 1800
- Europe’s ascendancy is due to a decline in Asia, as opposed to innate characteristics that inform European superiority