

Useful and Reliable Knowledge in Global Histories of Material Progress in the East and the West (URKEW).

(based upon the proposal submitted to the European Research Council)

This proposal originated as part of a broader academic offensive, proceeding on several fronts in systems of higher education in Europe, North America, Australasia, Japan and China. It can be read as a contribution to an international alliance working to restore a tradition in the teaching, research and the writing of meta-narratives in global history to the status it held during the Enlightenment. The alliance has been formed to respond to demands from a cosmopolitan generation of students now at university for greater engagement with big questions that are not only exciting to study and discuss but are clearly relevant to the geopolitical and moral concerns of their (and our) times of accelerated globalization.

Geopolitical and geo-economic challenges to higher education has been underway for some time and has already been assimilated into curricula for economics, politics, sociology, international relations and cultural anthropology. Advance in the construction and communication of historical perspectives for our colleagues in the social sciences and for our times is now gaining momentum. Nevertheless, departments of history (and national media devoted to the communication of national histories) have offered greater resistance to the construction and dissemination of universal narratives, unbounded by frontiers and unconstrained by established chronologies, as well as a reluctance (reinforced by postmodern philosophy) to engage with positivistic social sciences and converse seriously about the world as whole.

Although the conservative antipathies of some academic historians with interests vested in their scholarly expertise, methods of research and confined arenas for communication are being eroded by the rapid development of inter-connexions across frontiers and continents; predictably, the appearance of scholarly books and well publicized controversies among professional historians (exciting attention from governments and the media) will do more to make space in curricula than any amount of methodological discourse or eloquent advocacy for the reconstruction of negotiable meta-narratives in global history.

One grand narrative in which economic history has performed its traditional trans-disciplinary role as a bridge subject between humanities and the social sciences originated with Adam Smith's classical enquiry into the wealth of nations. That enquiry has been reconfigured by a wave of recent and widely discussed books based on the mega question of: when, how and why (after centuries of retardation) did the economies of Western Europe converge upon and then pull ahead of economies contained within the great agrarian empires of the east

This is by no means a novel question. Economies were investigated, rather superficially compared within wider enquiries into the qualities and possible superiorities of Islamic, Indian, Chinese and Japanese civilizations, by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Quesnay, Turgot, Robertson, Miller, the Gottingen School, Hegel and other thinkers during the Enlightenment; and more recently but again superficially by Spencer, Spengler, Toynbee and McNeill.

Apart from classical political economy, and particularly Malthus, the godfathers of systematic historical investigations into economic progress on a global scale over

long spans of time are Karl Marx and Max Weber. Their views that the states, legal frameworks, religions, cultures, property rights and commercial institutions of Western Europe provided exceptional conditions for the promotion of economic growth have been echoed in the most recent wave of comparative economic history (now located firmly in an academic discipline) from (Eric Jones, Nathan Rosenberg, Douglas North, Joel Mokyr, Depak Lal, David Landes and Angus Maddison) Their essentially neo-Weberian explanations for the convergence and rise of the west has generated a truly stimulating and ongoing controversy which has revived and popularized the study of economic history; and, furthermore, restored Marc Bloch's methods for the investigation of comparisons and contrasts across countries and regions to a position of greater clarity and heuristic value than was attainable in the programme that he established for historical research into the rather small and short lived differences that appeared across the economies of Western Europe.

For the times and the time being a renewed concentration on debateable meta-narratives in global history will allow room for historians to escape from the tyranny of detail, from the afflictions of fragmentation and the pursuits of research agendas that are little more than personal preferences and above all encourage collaboration with colleagues in repositioning hard won scholarship within frameworks that are for our times.

Thus controversies over divergence have opened up an ongoing debate between neo-Weberians on the one side and historians and sociologists grouped into two schools or traditions of scholarship on the other.

Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein and his followers in the World Systems School of Historical Sociology have insisted that the divergence of European economies from Asia is explicable (as Adam Smith suggested) in terms of the gains the former made from the discovery and exploitation of the Americas and (as Marx asserted) by way of the systematic use of naval power and colonization in Asia. The other, so called Californian School, (including Ken Pomeranz, Roy Bin Wong, John Marks, Jack Goldstone, Harriet Zurndorfer, Francesca Bray, Prasannan Pathasarathi et al – aided by that indefatigable polemicist Gunder Frank) have in effect deployed Bloch's methods of reciprocal comparison to lend really impressive support to the observation of that great scholar of Islam, Marshal Hodgson, who observed decades ago that "All attempts to invoke pre-modern seminal traits in the occident can be shown to fail under close historical analysis". Their monographs and writings on oriental economies, states, markets, commercial institutions, monetary arrangements, standards of living and welfare, overseas trade have seriously qualified neo-Weberian and neo-Marxist narratives about Europe's precocious transition to capitalism and commercial societies.

Many factors are involved in the exploration of divergence in economic growth between the west and the east. Nevertheless one significant area is currently moving towards the centre of this famous controversy and that is concerned with the discovery, development and diffusion of new technologies used for purposes of agricultural and industrial production. So far it has remained underexplored. Technological gaps and differences are not measurable, but histories of science and technology for the early modern world certainly sustain an impression that the flows of useful and reliable knowledge operating through tools, machinery, processes and the organization of production to raise the productivity of labour employed in agriculture, industry and services emanated increasingly (after say 1500) and

overwhelmingly (post 1800) from western locations. These histories pursued on a global scale implicitly suggest that the contexts, incentives, institutions, cosmologies and cultures surrounding the production of such knowledge are in need of urgent attention from economic historians who remain enthusiastic about opportunities to construct and debate meta-narratives analysing long run economic progress in the east and the west. That programme for research will also promote a necessary rapprochement between historians of economic growth and their colleagues working on histories of science, technologies, cultures, religions, states and urban life; as well as a trans-disciplinary engagement with the economics of institutions, cultural anthropology, historical geography and the politics of state formation.

The methodological problems of exposing, analysing and giving due weight to contrasts in cosmologies, cultures and institutions that through human agency influenced trajectories for the accumulation of useful and reliable knowledge are formidable. Clearly some attention must be paid to particular regions and urban sites and the formation of skills among different workforces. But this proposal is already wide and deep enough, and the team will concentrate upon contrasts in the mentalities of political and economic elites towards innovation and innovators. My hypothesis is based on the plausible assumption that their propensities to patronize and foster innovation were to some (alas unmeasurable) degree formed by the views that this important group held about possibilities for the manipulation the natural world to achieve faster rates of material progress. Furthermore these attitudes were often consolidated intellectually during a brief rite of passage through contrasting institutions and the curricula then offered to study the natural world to young men for higher education in the east compared with the west.

In short the proposal is predicated upon an expectation that a systematic and historically based investigation into the variety of institutions and curricula for higher education in the occident and the orient before the era of the great divergence in their standards of living will expose (as Max Weber and Joseph Needham anticipated) major contrasts in the prospects and potential for technological progress that may turn out to be a significant and missing chapter in histories of the great divergence. Bibliographies of secondary as well as primary sources to explore this proposition are available. The team recruited to read and mediate their ways through them will require credentials in relevant languages, expertise in the study of histories and cultures of particular areas. Ideally the team of young research fellows recruited for the project should also embody several approaches to the study of history derived from natural science, economics, geography, sociology, politics and cultural anthropology. Their research needs to be focussed on a well specified mission statement and be carefully coordinated. They should be sympathetic to working within a group and responsive to advice from experts invited to participate in the project on a regular basis.

Above all they must grasp and hold onto the notion that this research project is collaborative and will not only generate a set of interrelated publishable monographs by research fellows about cosmologies and cultures as displayed in systems of higher education in Europe, Islamdom, China, India and Japan but, their work should give rise to a nuanced thesis about contrasts between the east and the west of the kind anticipated by Weber and Needham. Hopefully it will (when located and weighted) become highly significant for the debate about economic histories of divergence between the east and the west.

A Provisional and Tentative Work Plan

1. Prior discussions with experts in this field.
2. Recruitment of the team
3. With the team and invited experts revise the mission statement in the light of the qualifications, credentials, reading and early suggestions from the research fellows.
4. Preliminary reading and early discussions of that reading between the team, the PI and experts in the department.
5. Research and reading proceeds throughout year 1 and will be discussed at monthly seminars that will include members of the department and visiting experts.
6. First workshop towards the end of year 1 which will include survey presentations related to the grand narrative and assessments of the sources available to investigate the cosmologies and cultures of Europe, China, India, Islamdom and Japan
7. Year 2: the fellows continue reading and conduct comparable field work on the systems of higher education of their respective areas. The last three workshops of the year will be a review of sources and a survey of preliminary findings in front of a panel of academic visitors and expert advisors.
8. Year 3: Research, reading and monthly seminars continue. The end of year final conference will include all participants in the project including academic advisors and range of experts with interests in useful and reliable knowledge. We will discuss the overall findings of course but will also reconsider the original mission and the adaptations made en route as well as the problems of undertaking comparative histories.
9. Post-project Period: By the end of the project the Research Officers will have begun writing their monographic case studies and the PI will be constructing the overall meta-narrative which will be read by each team member and by academic advisors.
10. As and When: The books come into print and they will be properly advertised and disseminated as contributions to global economic history. At this stage the department will review and elaborate upon the lessons learned from participation in large-scale projects in collaborative global histories of this period.

A Provisional List of Questions and Tasks

One viable way to expose and analyse the cosmologies and cultures that shaped the potential supply and proclivities of elite groups involved with innovation is to study the secondary sources and records of institutions for higher education in Europe, Islamdom, India, China and Japan in the early modern period. The risks of not finding sufficient secondary and an abundance of primary sources are negligible. Each case study will utilize standard historical methods and quantification, wherever relevant, and address common questions which will be refined and supplemented as research proceeds. I simply list a set of questions and tasks already in the frame:

1. Define, count and describe institutions offering higher (post-school forms) of education at regularly spaced intervals of time.
2. Ditto for the populations of students attending these institutions.
3. Elaborate upon: (a) the curricula on offer, (b) the content of curricula analogous to natural philosophy offered by western institutions, (c) the status

of that part of the curricula, (d) the share of student populations engaged with the study of subjects and texts concerned with the celestial, terrestrial and biological spheres of the natural world.

4. The governance of higher education including the establishment and control of curricula for higher education.
5. Teachers and teaching:
 - a) appointments system
 - b) credentials and remuneration
 - c) styles of teaching and examinations
 - d) space for speculation and disputation
6. Reforms and debates for the reform of the governance and curricula of institutions for higher education.
7. In addition the investigations and comparisons will look into and attempt to form validated historical and comparative impressions concerned with the range and volume of literature in circulation available to be read about the natural world and spheres of production.

Methods

No claims could be made that the methods deployed to conduct reciprocal comparative economic history on a global scale are unfamiliar and have not been extensively discussed by historians and philosophers (vide J Moses and T.L Knutson *Ways of Knowing. Competitions, Methodologies in Social and Political Research*, Palgrave 2007). What is rare in history is collaborative research by teams attempting to fill gaps in metanarratives and to “push” agendas for future research; in this case in two directions: first towards a history for our times of globalization; and secondly (now that most other features and claims for “western exceptionalism” have undermined, or at least seriously qualified) by investigating the institutions, cosmologies and cultures promoting Europe’s precocious transition into modern science and technology.

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