

*The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Environmental Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-first Century*. Third Edition. Robert B. Marks. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015. ISBN: 9781442212404

In *The Origins of the Modern World*, Robert B. Marks provides a pedagogical resource, which sheds light on history, the media, and wider society. How did the contemporary world come about, with its “nation-states and inter-state wars, a growing gap between the richest and poorest... and mounting human impacts on the environment” (14)? His answers to this framing question entail the rise and fall of centers of economic power in China, India, Europe, and the Americas from the year 1400 to the present. In the preface, Marks informs his readers that he has added environmental analysis to the third edition of the book. By emphasizing contingencies and accidents that worked together in combinations Marks calls “conjunctures,” which incidentally benefitted Europe, Marks provides an economic narrative of the origins of the contemporary world. Europe’s ascendancy did not fall from the sky, but emerged organically and has not been (nor need remain) a permanent state of affairs. While the book centers on economic and military history over philosophical and religious changes in the modern era, the third edition continues to provide a useful synthesis of recent historiographical analysis, particularly for survey classes and as a resource for non-specialists interested in the Early Modern period.

Reorienting early modernity outside of Europe in the broad context of trade patterns throughout Eurasia, Marks skillfully launches his recounting of the past six centuries. Recognizing the fact that the agricultural revolution occurred in Mesopotamia, Marks is quick to identify the limits of pre-industrial agricultural yields. Given the finite natural availability of arable land and water, as well as unpredictable weather and crop diseases, traditional agriculture placed limits on human populations. Marks calls the contingencies and geographical accidents

that established the parameters of traditional agriculture the “biological old regime.” In antiquity, tensions developed between city-dwelling farmers and nomadic hunter-gatherers that led to the rise of warfare and of empires (*e.g.*: Mughals, Chinese, the Mamluk Sultanate, the Persians and Romans), which protected farmland and the residents of their territories. Between the economic centers of Eurasia, trade goods, technologies, and ideas travelled over long distances. In this interconnected world diseases also spread, including the Bubonic plague, which entered western Eurasia in the thirteenth century via trade with the Mongol empire. The vast population loss from the Black Death had far-reaching consequences in subsequent years.

Turning to the expansion of trade and political influence, Marks highlights the importance of the Zheng He voyages (1405-1453), often lost in the prevailing emphasis on Christopher Columbus’ and Vasco de Gama’s travel at the turn of the fifteenth century. Admiral Zheng He’s voyages demonstrated the military, economic, and technological achievements of Chinese culture to peoples in Southeast Asia, India, and the eastern coast of Africa. Thus, China appeared as the first early modern economic powerhouse. In fact, Chinese influence over commerce extended to the Indian Ocean, which allowed several trade centers throughout Eurasia to operate. The Portuguese, however, through a “conjuncture” of firearm development, interest in spices, and their navigational advances, were able to take control of trade in the Indian Ocean, and exact tariffs from Indian, Chinese, African, and Muslim traders. Access to the Indian Ocean allowed the Portuguese to profit from the wealth of the East without overland trade through hostile Muslim territory. The Portuguese who sailed counted themselves among the survivors of the Bubonic Plague and had forged a new means to improve their lot. Marks observes that in spite of burgeoning Portuguese maritime trade, Islamic empires, “continued to limit what

Europeans could and could not do in the world” (64). Portuguese economic influence, as well as the Chinese demand for silver, would shape the next phase of early modernity.

Marks’s observations on the importance of early modern empires take into account imperial successes and failures. The Spanish empire expanded their territory throughout the Americas and even to the Philippines (not to mention ports in Africa). The silver and other natural resources the Spanish exploited in the Western Hemisphere opened doors to the goods of the East, which allowed Spain to also avoid dangerous and costly overland trade. However, the Spanish were unable to found an empire in Europe, which limited their economic influence in Eurasia. However, Spain’s inability to rule Europe (Christendom), coupled with their desire for Chinese silk and luxury goods, which led them to spend the silver and gold they extracted from the Americas on Chinese manufactured products and on expensive wars in Europe.

It is difficult to overstate the pivotal role of Spain in the making of the modern world, due to its prosperity, its application of various kinds of violence over a vast geographic region, and the legislative precedents resulting from their colonial project. In his treatment of Spanish expansion, Marks does justice to the tremendous loss of life among the indigenous peoples of the Americas and African slaves due to epidemic diseases the Europeans carried, the military invasion, and exploitative labor practices. However, Marks does not address how ecclesiastical writings and injunctions led the Spanish Crown to enact laws to restrain the violence of conquistadors. Spain did not establish a European empire, but served as the first nation-state that would distance itself from the larger Christendom (Europe as a geographical term did not take preeminence until the seventeenth century). Marks shows how that distancing led to the formation of competing nation-states, increasingly interested in gaining territory and expanding their economies. The book’s overall cursory treatment of the seminal role of the Spanish empire

neglects opportunities to emphasize Iberian connections with the rest of Eurasia. During the sixteenth century, Spanish nobility, soldiers, and ecclesiastics fashioned a network of enduring ideological linkages to the Roman Empire, Christendom, and even to Dar-Islam, all of which made the Spanish empire the inflection point between the ancient and the modern world. Marks' readers, particularly those new to the early modern era, may miss Spain's importance. All subsequent modern colonial empires to one degree or another, informed their policies with attention to the Spanish empire.

Nonetheless, as Marks insightfully observes, Iberian expansionism generated the nation-state model of territorial sovereignty. The crucial conjuncture between the nation-state political organization, and industrialization in effect founded the globalized world. By the nineteenth century, this combination of secular government, and industrial production had allowed Britain to take the economic lead over Spain, France, and even China. With perhaps his most effective argumentation in the book, Marks traces the causes of the rise of Britain as a military power, and the ebbing of Chinese influence in the east. Britain's carefully chosen alliances, regional coal deposits, use of slave labor (following the Portuguese and Spanish), protectionist trade regulations, and vast markets for cotton, tea, and opium transformed the small island in the North Sea into a military and commercial force. Meanwhile, China was not able to industrialize manufacturing rapidly, depended on human and animal power for labor and transport, and began to consume opium in large quantities (purchased from Britain). These factors culminated in the Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-60) between Britain and China: Britain's victory opened China up to international trade as never before, and confirmed Britain as the chief economic power among the European nation-states.

Britain's ascendancy illustrates broad tendencies of the nineteenth century, as Marks's overview continues. A great reversal in the fortunes of the world had occurred: China and India became agricultural producers for the industrialized nations of Europe. Only four hundred years earlier China and India stood as virtually the sole producers of manufactured products throughout Eurasia. Marks provides compelling evidence that "among the requirements for industrialization was a strong state determined to create the material prerequisites for powerful militaries" (139). Indeed, industrialization and militarization have gone hand-in-hand since the sixteenth century. Nonetheless, the West's nineteenth-century prosperity came at a high price. As smokestacks transformed skylines in European cities, human health and the environment sustained the harmful effects of heavy unregulated industry. Deleterious social ideologies emerged as well. Growing industry and military in Europe and North America led to a wave of popular nationalisms comingled with Social Darwinism. Scientists, social theorists, and governments touted the notion of a "scientific explanation for the rise of the West" and the falling behind of the rest (159). To this day persistent Eurocentrism and racism echo misplaced confidences of the nineteenth century. Yet Marks reminds us that the reversal of the fortunes of China and India came about by a series of contingencies ultimately beyond Europe's control.

Marks continues tracing the paradoxes and dangers of high industrial output on into the twentieth century and beyond, with particular attention to the World Wars and the Cold War. The military industrial complexes of nations in the global north have promoted divisions among peoples and impacted the environment in unprecedented ways. Humanity moves along through uncharted territory. Our "great departure" from the biological old regime has led to a new age of environmental impact, which Marks calls the "Anthropocene" (123-24; 201-206). How can humanity provide "a decent standard of living" for a growing global population, while at the

same time stopping and correcting the negative environmental effects of “twentieth-century models of industrial development” (205)? Marks remains optimistic about humans’ good will and ability to balance their needs with environmental limits. In the conclusion section of Chapter Six, useful to instructors and students alike, Marks reviews the four waves of globalization that the book has presented (Spanish, British, Cold War, and US-led capitalism). He then ventures a series of conjectures about the “shape of the future,” the most salient of which is a tentative prediction of the economic ascent of China.

While Marks presents the book as an overview of modern economic history, from another point of view, the book provides a history of secularism. Scholars and students of the history of ideas may thus be disappointed at the book’s relative silence on pivotal moments in early modernity including the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Revolutions. For all his deft examination of the ways in which wars shaped economics, Marks provides little context for the religious motivations for the disintegration of the feudal system and of Christendom. Similarly, he ignores the linkage between the rise of warfare and the secularization of Europe: the removal of former restraints on violence, including the chivalric code, made possible a level of carnage that eclipsed even the bloodiest episodes of the Middle Ages, as the Jacobins of the French Revolution, Nazi atrocities, Stalin’s gulags, and the Khmer Rouge have all demonstrated. In addition, Marks’ analytical approach of emphasizing conjunctures gives way at times to passages devoted to musing about hypothetical historical trajectories. In the end, understanding the way history “would have been if x, y, or z had been different” does not shed light on the causal relationships between past events as they have occurred. Other content that similarly falls out of step with the main arguments of the book, the environmental analysis come as paragraphs appended to sections that explain the contingencies that led to the economic rise of Europe.

Thus, the added environmental analysis has the effect of a veneer, and is not woven into the fabric of Marks' otherwise compelling arguments and evidence that critique the essentialization of the West as an historical entity, as set forth in the first two editions.

Even with the foregoing reservations regarding the book's content and flow, Marks has provided a concise, well researched, and accessible guide for understanding economic and political developments in the modern age. The complexity of the time period notoriously eschews facile and uniform explanations. Hence, in order to present a more comprehensive picture, courses on early modern history can use this book along with materials that present the cultural and intellectual history of the period. Considerations of curriculum notwithstanding, first and foremost Marks' insightful treatment of the historical relationship between Britain and China gives useful contextualization of contemporary living conditions and collective human experiences. The book also provides myriad opportunities to introduce other discussions in history, including Euro-centrism, Empires, the Nation-State, Eco-critical approaches, Dependency Theory, Colonialism, Mercantilism, and Industrialization, to name only a few. The clear visual aids, especially the maps and charts, have a uniform and attractive layout, which drives home the recent rise of the nation-state as the dominant political and territorial model. On a more profound level, *The Origins of the Modern World* exposes the smoke and shadows in discourses today reminiscent of nineteenth-century ideologies, which posited the superiority of a single nation-state or people. Marks correctly avers that an Anglo-centric perspective of history continues to hold sway in education and in commonplace assumptions. Whatever the global future may bring, the task for instructors here and now certainly includes encouraging empathy in our students for the challenges and values of peoples across time and around the globe.

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