



The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Environmental Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Century (World Social Change)

Robert B Marks

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This clearly written and engrossing book presents a global narrative of the origins of the modern world from 1400 to the present. Unlike most studies, which assume that the rise of the West is the story of the coming of the modern world, this history, drawing upon new scholarship on Asia, Africa, and the New World and upon the maturing field of environmental history, constructs a story in which those parts of the world play major roles, including their impacts on the environment. Robert B. Marks defines the modern world as one marked by industry, the nation state, interstate warfare, a large and growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest parts of the world, increasing inequality within the wealthiest industrialized countries, and an escape from the environmental constraints of the biological old regime. He explains its origins by emphasizing contingencies (such as the conquest of the New World); the broad comparability of the most advanced regions in China, India, and Europe; the reasons why England was able to escape from common ecological constraints facing all of those regions by the eighteenth century; a conjuncture of human and natural forces that solidified a gap between the industrialized and non-industrialized parts of the world; and the mounting environmental crisis that defines the modern world. Now in a new edition that brings the saga of the modern world to the present in an environmental context, the book considers how and why the United States emerged as a world power in the twentieth century and became the sole superpower by the twenty-first century, and why the changed relationship of humans to the environment likely will be the hallmark of the modern era the Anthropocene. Once again arguing that the U.S. rise to global hegemon was contingent, not inevitable, Marks also points to the resurgence of Asia and the vastly changed relationship of humans to the environment that may in the long run overshadow any political and economic milestones of the past hundred years."

The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Environmental Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Century (World Social Change) Details

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From Reader Review The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Environmental Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Century (World Social Change) for online ebook

Ashley Bogner says

What I expected from a world history class textbook: an overview of world history.

What I got from my world history class textbook: lengthy tangents about the author's opinions of climate change, over-population, and "what-if" scenarios.

Chris Cook says

I read this book for my world history seminar. It was okay; I would say no new ground was covered here, and some of the information is inaccurate, or not well thought out. But it was a relatively easy read.

Abhimanyu says

The author announces right at the start of the book that he has no intentions of looking at history from all perspectives in this book and indeed, wants to frame the history of the world of the last few centuries from a non-European perspective. He does it in this book from mostly Indian and Chinese perspectives.

The best part about this book is that it doesn't seek to explain the "rise of the West" with a generalized theory and instead, points out how the "rise of the West" is actually a collection of events that, while linked, were often unrelated and not environmentally inevitable. In doing so, it destroys the simplistic "geographic determinism" explanation forwarded by authors like Jared Diamond which doesn't explain colonialism in Asia at all. Indeed, a central idea that is stressed in this book is that despite the commonly-held belief now in European domination of the world since the 15th century, Europeans were not economically or socially dominant till about the early 1800s. The Spanish and the Portuguese, while more powerful than their European neighbors, were nowhere near as powerful as Ming China or Mughal India. Their primary role in world trade was to provide much-needed liquidity to Chinese and Indian economies through selling New World silver in exchange for manufactured goods from Asia.

There are quite a few novel arguments in the book that are well-supported by the author such as the absence of any role for science in the Industrial Revolution till well into 1880s, the responses to hitting the limits of the biological old regime in India, China and Britain, and how these responses, determined to a large extent by geography, triggered the start of the Industrial Revolution.

Even if you don't agree with all the arguments the author makes, the relinquishing of any generalized theory to explain the European-dominated world of the present affords readers the opportunity to look at history in totality and not feel pressured to fit every event into a restrictive theory ("Guns, germs and steel" and its variations) that falls apart outside of very specific circumstances.

Mallory says

His thesis, while definitely not Eurocentric, was definitely not individual-friendly. He proposes that the inventiveness of the individual had nothing to do with anything of the past 600 years. Really?

lifeofsadnan says

great overview of world history from the beginning of the mongols to the modern day. obviously it can't go into much depth (its only 200 pages), but the author does a fantastic job of explaining how the european powers colonized the entirety of the world, and addresses the sort of racist/elitist attitudes people subconsciously hold regarding this in today's age. if you're interested in history but don't know where to start, this is the place.

Rob Bauer says

This is an extended review of this short but very useful book of world history.

Wanting to tell the story of world history from a viewpoint that is truly global, Robert Marks has written *The Origins of the Modern World*. The inspiration for this book arose from two sources. Intrigued by the most recent scholarship concerning world history but dismayed by the fact that this most recent scholarship typically takes many years to enter the mainstream of university teaching, Marks used a year of sabbatical from Whittier College to research and write this story of how the world came to look as it does today. Realizing that, if his incoming students knew anything about world history, it was a version of the story putting Europe squarely at the heart of things as the primary actor in the events of modern history, Marks attempts to remedy that mistaken view with this short but insightful book.

The first thing Marks does is to abandon the idea of Europe as the center of world history over the past 600 years. Rather than seeing the rise of Europe to world dominance as an event that was somehow inevitable and preordained, instead Marks sees Europe's rise to power as the confluence of three factors. The first of these is contingency, the argument that nothing preordained world history to turn out as it has. The second is the role of accidents in history. By this, Marks means things like changes in climate or coincidences of timing that are unpredictable and outside of human control. The final piece of the book's theoretical framework is that of conjuncture. Independent events sometimes come together to produce a situation of historical importance; the synergy of these separate events coming together produces a result with much larger implications than any of the events individually.

Chapter one sets the stage for all the arguments that follow. Occupying the center of this stage is the concept of the biological old regime. By this term, Marks is referring to the fact that until very recently in world history, humans everywhere existed as part of the natural environment and were in turn limited by that environment. The primary source of energy was the sun, and the ability of humans to increase production depended on their ability to harness its renewable energy. Marks also examines population and finds the Eurasian landmass holding about 70% of world population in 1400, as it does today. This fact, combined with the existence of eight large zones of trade connecting Europe, Asia, and East Africa, explains why

Eurasia dominated world trade while the biological old regime was in place. Interestingly, it also demonstrates that the idea of global trade is by no means a twentieth century invention. Finally, Marks demonstrates the power of his theme of conjuncture, using it to explain the Black Death. The disease that killed many millions in Europe and Asia originated in China, and the existence of the Mongol Empire, spanning most of the Eurasian landmass, provided the vector for transmission to Europe by maintaining overland trade routes across the Eurasian steppe. Burrowing rodents also lived along this trade route, and they became the carriers of bubonic plague. Italian traders in Europe frequented a second trade route, which overlapped with the Mongol route at the Black Sea city of Caffa. When the Venetians and Genoese sailed back to Italy in 1346, the Black Death sailed with them, with devastating consequences.

Other meaningful contingencies and conjunctures abound throughout the book. Portuguese sailors rounded the southern tip of Africa and entered the (largely unfortified) Indian Ocean just as the Chinese navy was withdrawing due to internal events in China. Had it remained to contest the navies of Portugal and other European nations, the European attempt to control trade routes in the Indian Ocean would possibly have turned out very differently. Similarly, without its colonies to provide the raw materials of industry, cotton especially, England would not have been able to industrialize as it did because the land base of the British Isles is far too small to provide the raw materials on its own and still grow food to feed the British population.

One of the most profound insights offered in *The Origins of the Modern World* is the momentous role of China and India in the world economy under the biological old regime. Indeed, the desire to access the markets of China and India was a primary cause of European exploration. Shut off from the old trade routes by the Islamic states controlling the Middle East, Europeans sought to find a way around the Muslim middlemen and gain access to the Indian Ocean trade for themselves. Even into the eighteenth century, the textile industry of India was vastly more productive than that of any European nation. Furthermore, it was the Chinese demand for silver that made trade with Europe possible. Under the biological old regime, the Chinese could produce everything produced in Europe, and at a lower cost. However, due to a decision in the 1400s to use silver as the basis of the Chinese monetary system, silver became the one trade item in high demand. By the mid-1500s, Europeans could supply this demand once they had located the Americas, plundered the Inca and Aztec Empires, and found further new silver deposits such as the one at Potosi.

How, then, did Europe manage to overcome its weak economic position relative to China and India? They were the first societies to escape the limits of the biological old regime. In 1793, American Eli Whitney invented a contraption called the cotton gin which made short staple cotton viable in the creation of textiles. This development, combined with the technology of steam power and easily-accessed coal deposits next to the places that needed them (an accident and a conjunction), allowed first England, then Europeans generally, to start down the industrial path. The ability to access stored energy through coal first and later oil provided the mechanism for Europe to escape the biological old regime and gain a competitive advantage economically and militarily over all others. Unfortunately, this economic advantage, when combined with imperialism and colonialism, had devastating effects in other parts of the world. One example is India. After Britain gained control of the subcontinent, they enforced “free trade” in India, forcing Indians to become consumers of British finished products, including textiles, effectively de-industrializing India and setting it on the road to third-world economic status. Small wonder, then, that Gandhi was able to use the symbolism of the spinning wheel to such effect in his efforts to gain independence from Britain.

Throughout the book, Marks also considers the implications of Europe’s nation-state system. He finds that military competition encouraged the rise of polities with large cities that allowed for capital accumulation, backed up by large rural hinterlands to provide manpower for standing armies. These strong states favored industrialization in their efforts to expand and project their military power. Areas of the world unable to

create strong states, or colonized by the strong states, were destined to remain in the biological old regime, exporting materials to allow the European states to continue their economic and military dominance.

Several aspects of *The Origins of the Modern World* elicit praise. The attempt to demonstrate that world history was not completely a European-driven phenomenon is a much-needed addition to scholarship. Though other scholars have addressed this issue, this effort at a comprehensive retelling of the story is still refreshing because of its attention to other regions of the world. Careful readers will find that Marks has indeed incorporated many aspects of recent scholarship, as demonstrated by his description of the state of the Inca and Aztec empires immediately before their conquest by the Spanish. Designed for an introductory level college classroom, it is very readable without sacrificing the complexity of the discussion. Finally, a useful collection of maps demonstrates the evolution over time of political entities throughout the world.

Because of its attempt to describe such an immense topic in only about 200 pages of text, this book does leave itself open to a few minor criticisms, the foremost being that the need to abbreviate parts of the story leaves the interpretations open to debate in a few cases. A bit more detail at times would help alleviate this problem and clarify the reasoning behind many of the author's points without extending the book unnecessarily. Along the same lines, Islamic empires and states feature prominently in the first half of the book, but quietly fade away after that with no clear explanation of why they have fallen out of the narrative. They appear only occasionally in the second half of the book. The title is a bit misleading as well; the narrative is ecological only in the broadest sense. The concept of the biological old regime, and how it influenced economic choices and possibilities, is the main ecological insight of the work, though it is a powerful one. However, despite these small reservations, this book remains an interesting read with many useful insights and, considering its length, the reader will get a quality overview of modern world history without investing the extensive time usually necessary in books of world history. At the very least, it provides open-minded readers with a great deal to ruminate on, and that is no small achievement.

Kaitlyn says

I had to read this for school during a period of three days- not cool. I t was hard to follow and only recommended if you have time to take it all in.

John says

This book serves its purpose perfectly well, it just isn't something to really recommend as a read. This is for assigning to undergrads and grad students as the first reading in a world or global history class. Marks is attempting to get away from a Euro-centric model of recounting world history; he wants to re-orient world history to the...orient...sort of. He basically is arguing that the Indian Ocean world was the first place where all kinds of cultures came together to trade, and this is where world history can really be said to 'begin'. The Chinese and the Indians were really the drivers of history at this point, as they were simultaneously the big producers of goods and the big markets. But Europe was desperate to get in on the action, so they accidentally discovered America, developed nice new guns and boats, and started their long, illustrious history of pushing everyone else in the world around. Now we are reaching a point after several centuries where China and India are heading towards regaining their rightful thrones as the cruxes of the world. I also get a sense that you can read this book and basically understand what Pomeranz is arguing in *The Great Divergence*, as Marks cites him at length, and I think he's making the same or a similar argument.

So anyway, this is for students to read and then they can come to class and argue about getting away from being Euro-centric and about whether this is just switching from Euro to China-centric and why did some countries industrialize before others and etc.

Scott says

Marks offered a concise world history from the 1300s to the present, focusing especially on the changing ways that human beings relate to the environment. As a China scholar and a critic of historical narratives that focus on and/or justify the rise of Western dominance as the main story of the modern world, he purposely starts with China as the great power of the early modern world, and he also notes the wealth on the Indian subcontinent too. This gives a different perspective on the roots of Western dominance that focuses much more on warring states and contingent factors that drove Britain rather than China to industrialization, rather than innate strengths within European culture that drove it to dominance. The environmental focus gave this interpretation a different twist from most other history books. It was certainly thought-provoking, and I hope to weight its claims against other world histories.

Orde says

This book owes much to McNeill's *Something New Under The Sun* as well as Pomeranz' *The Great Divergence*. It takes a look at the global - as opposed to the Eurocentric view - history of the emergence of the modern world that we live in. As its title already gives away it also includes environmental aspects that have an impact on the unfolding story - an aspect, to be sure, that is not to be underestimated. It weaves together the ecological perspective with the global involvements of Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas into a brief and accessible narrative.

I stumbled upon this book after reading Harari's bestseller propaganda-piece for global harmony that draws on Marks' *Origins*. Other than the optimist trajectory of *Sapiens* this book (being also a bit more modest in its aspirations than the former) seems to have a firmer grasp of reality.

Elliott says

This book isn't that great for World history. It's short, takes a Eurocentric view most of the time, and isn't very detailed. You're better off getting a World history perspective and knowledge reading the McNeill's *The Human Web*.

Bryan Schwartz says

In the preface to his book, Robert Marks notes that he has “no intention of providing a balanced story, one that spends an equal amount of time (or ink) on anything and everything.” And, indeed, he doesn't. Though Marks is, unlike Geoffrey Parker, upfront in noting the limitations of his short survey, I am not convinced that this declaration afforded him the right to gloss over quite so much material as he does in his short history on the origins of the "modern world".

First, It seemed to me that the environmental parts of his "ecological narrative" were divorced from the rest of the argument. When such instances are explicitly mentioned within the text (I suppose the reader is supposed to make these connections on one's own) it appears only to emerge in specific paragraphs with rather poor transitions or tacked on to the bottom of longer vignettes. In a similar vein, though Marks often cites Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, I found it odd that he never once mentioned "geographic determinism". Given his stated desire to write a short history, it seems to me that he might have employed the term, explained it, cited it, and saved himself a great deal of trouble.

Second, it seemed to me that discarding the entirety of the "scientific revolution" as a "rediscovery of old technologies" was a bit extreme. Though he is certainly justified in noting the rediscovery of ancient (Muslim, Greek, et. al.) thought during the scientific revolution, he should not underestimate the production of original work in the 18th century, which subsequently added fuel to the Industrial Revolution. The Lunar Society of Birmingham (the focus of a great monograph by Jenny Uglow) was responsible for countless contributions to modern science in a variety of disciplines that had little, if any, link to the work of ancient scholars.

Finally, Marks often dances around the point in the final sub-chapters but he never openly accuses the Soviet Union and/or the United States of establishing their own version of empire. In fact, Marks goes so far as to claim that "empire", as a concept, can now be relegated to the dust bin of history. It seems to me that the opposite is true. Empire may not be so readily apparent today as it was in the "Age of Imperialism", but the Cold War divided much of the world into two ideological "empires" largely determined by "spheres of influence" claimed by the United States and the Soviet Union. Though control may not be administered on a micro-political level as it was before, the competing ideologies of capitalism and socialism and their primary proponents held (hold?) great influence in both world politics and economics for most of the 20th century.

These criticisms aside, Marks' efforts were not entirely in vain. His focus (perhaps too sharply) on the entangled histories of Europe and Asia are compelling and sorely lacking in most surveys of world history.

Ben Sweezy says

Okay so I read this book again in 2009. The most obvious "review" sort of thing I can say is that it really trails off halfway through. When it gets into the 20th century the author ceases to offer anything new or interesting.

Otherwise, it still is pretty effective at getting its point across that China, India, and Europe all basically were at parity in 1700 and only began to diverge from there. He also really doesn't like the British.

I think some of his numbers may be a bit curious, including those that he uses to demonstrate the parity between the different world regions in 1700. I hope to look into this more.

I love revisionist history. The premise of this book is "quit attributing all progress to the inevitable Rise of the West because of its sweet western character!!!!!" It discusses the distortions in collective history of the world which enhance the ascendancy of "the West." It also highlights the importance of Asia and its historical strength.

Does get a little whiny.

Otilia says

My first question when I put it down was "Why didn't I have to read this in high school?" Clear, easy to read overview of often under-taught [or in US public schools, at least, taught from a perspective that leaves out a lot] parts of world history.

Alex Zakharov says

It is hard being a historian and a justice crusader, you end up with tainted history and unmoved justice. Marks' self-proclaimed goal is to provide a narrative for the development of the modern world (1400-1900) which is meant to 'correct' the Eurocentric view of history. Sadly he overshoots and instead paints an explicitly anti-Eurocentric view which suffers from the obverse set of biases relative to the ones he set out to correct. Luckily the book is pleasantly short and the sections where he sticks to straight history are succinct, well-structured and informative.

As far as bias mitigation there are much better options for non-Eurocentric histories of development – from Jared Diamond (who wrote his best-selling 'Guns...' before Marks btw) to more recent Ian Morris or Acemoglu&Robinson. At least those guys have theories of the world that one may agree or disagree with, but the insights they are offer are genuine, attempt to be objective, and are worth considering.
