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Review: The Long Nineteenth Century Is Too Short

Reviewed Work(s): *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* by C. A. Bayly

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## BOOK REVIEW FORUM

### The Long Nineteenth Century Is Too Short

JAN NEDERVEEN PIETERSE

Christopher Bayly's book, broadly canvassed and richly textured, offers ample fine detail of less-known episodes and reasonably new angles on familiar episodes. It also presents us with some immediate problems. It is a long read that revisits the most studied period in all of evolution: the nineteenth century, the great period of European accomplishment and Eurocentric narcissism. It is reasonable to ask what else we need to know about this time. It is inauspicious that the book comes with an endorsement by Niall Ferguson who calls it "A masterpiece of distance-annihilating synthesis. . . . At a stroke, all other general histories of the nineteenth century have become parochial." Coming from a historian who thinks the British Empire was a good idea and offers advice to Americans on how to run their empire better, one would think that for a new study of the nineteenth century this is a kiss of death. So despite the various endorsements from British sources that accompany it ("brilliant," "remarkable," "masterful") one enters this terrain with some foreboding.

Bayly revisits the nineteenth century equipped with familiar insights from economic history, anthropology, and sociology. Benedict Anderson on print capitalism, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm on nationalism and the state, the dispute between David Landes and

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*In this forum, we invited Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Gauri Viswanathan to explore issues raised in:*

**The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons**, by C. A. Bayly; pp. xxiii + 540. Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004, £18.99 paper; \$34.95 paper.

*C. A. Bayly was then asked to respond.*

AUTUMN 2005

Andre Gunder Frank on economic history, Arjun Appadurai on hybridity, Jürgen Habermas on the public sphere, all make appearances. Rather than industrial revolution Bayly posits industrious revolution or industrial evolution. This is what one would expect, the nineteenth century revisited in light of recent social science. Since this is history, not social science, it doesn't come with theoretical problematization but with historical problematization that measures ideas against historical sources and trends. Bayly's approach is multidimensional; he parts company with structural approaches such as world system theory and argues instead for an interactive account of political, economic, and cultural changes. This too is now common fare in social science. Fair enough. This is not the *raison d'être* for a new volume nor for the massive praise that accompanies it.

What distinguishes Bayly's book is that it offers a global history account of the nineteenth century. The author cautions that "world history is no more than one among many ways of doing history," and yet he also notes "all historians are world historians now, though many have not yet realized it" (468, 469).

This in itself is a paradoxical undertaking: why offer a global history account of precisely that period when Europe was center stage? Well, first, why not? A global history will be superior to a regional or parochial account. Yet, will not a global history merely confirm, in more roundabout ways, the cliché of European centrality and supremacy? Don't we already know the outcome—qualified Western supremacy—before the journey begins? The work comes with the tediously familiar maps of the nineteenth century world with the British ruled parts of the world colored in a different shade.

What is the added value of Bayly's approach? Interesting parts of the study are the many vignettes in which Bayly maps global parallels and connections in geographies wide apart, for instance: "Jews attracted violence just as did the *bania* moneylenders of India in 1857 and the moneylending gentry in Taiping China" (157). The American Civil War was an episode similar to the unification of Italy and Germany and the Meiji revolution in Japan (163). Of interest too are the occasions when he notes causal flows that do *not* invariably go from the West outward, for instance: "British industrialization was a response to efficient artisan textile production in other parts of the world, particularly in France and India" (174). "British embarrassments during the Indian Mutiny gave a great fillip to Irish radicalism in Ireland and North America" (160).

Attractive here is that Bayly, like other recent studies (e.g., Lieberman), avoids East-West dualism and seeks to portray trends *across* the zones that have been carved out in outdated compartmentalizations.

It is not enough to give an account of processes unfolding outside the West—welcome though that might be; the crux is *how* they are understood and portrayed in relation to dynamics in the West. According to Bayly “history writing is a matter of emphasis” (398), and indeed this book should be evaluated on its emphases. Here I think the book presents three problems. The first is that chapters 11 and 13 (the conclusion) offer a markedly different argument and flavor than the preceding text. While the book generally relates the history of the nineteenth century in terms of change and modernization, chapter 11 addresses the history of continuity and the reconstitution of social hierarchies. While the book generally offers a middle-of-the-road treatment with Eurocentric overtones, the conclusion espouses a multi-centric global history approach. Both chapters read like afterthoughts that are ahead of and not fully integrated with the overall text. This disconnect is reflected in two other problems. The book’s temporal boundaries, 1780–1914, make sense essentially from a Europeanist viewpoint. The title, *The Birth of the Modern World*, again reiterates a Eurocentric narrative that is at odds with a multi-centric perspective.

### **Eurocentrism or Multi-centrism?**

Given the book’s declared commitment to global history, the core challenge is: does it transcend Eurocentrism? In his conclusion Bayly opts for a multi-centric approach: “The origins of change in world history remained multi-centered throughout. We need not so much to reorient world history as to decentralize it” (470). But for most of the book we wouldn’t be sure. Bayly’s general approach to history is take postmodernism on board but don’t go overboard; take the critique of Eurocentrism on board but don’t go overboard. Typically Bayly opts for the middle way of triangulating between the conventional wisdom and the analyses of newcomers.

Thus, after discussing Western exceptionalism and Andre Gunder Frank’s counterarguments on the centrality of Asia and the marginality of Europe, Bayly notes: “Both sides of these arguments need to be rebalanced. . . . The argument for the ‘decline of the rest’ can be . . . pushed too far. We can go too far also in assailing the idea of the

exceptional nature of European development” (58-59). This leaves us precisely with the kind of middle-of-the-road account that can meander across 500 pages while leaving much unsettled. Bayly concludes: “This book has argued against Western exceptionalism, but also against complete relativism” (469). As if these are the only two options, either the West rules or anything goes; very strange options indeed for a multi-centric approach to history.

According to the conclusion, “The book argues that it is now possible to write a global history of ideas, one that also stresses the multi-centered origins of ideological production” (471). Yet the body of the work offers observations such as this: “Intellectual history remains very European- and American-centered. It is important to consider the ways in which Asians and Africans took up and used rights theories” (237). Here, in other words, Asians and Africans are accorded only the secondary role of *using* Western ideas.

The book repeatedly criticizes Eurocentrism in intellectual history and notes that the history of science is an exception; yet it vastly underestimates the influence of non-Western ideas in the West. For instance, Bayly doesn’t mention the influence of Islamic jurisprudence on European legal thinking and international law, or the influence of Confucian ideas in the Enlightenment (cf. Marshall and Williams; Hobson).

According to the conclusion, “I have followed those few historians . . . who have insisted on the multi-centric nature of globalization in the early modern world and its persistence into the nineteenth century and beneath the surface of Western hegemony” (470). But these historians are not few but many (cf. Nederveen Pieterse, *Theory*). Through the text the emphasis mostly falls on the side of Eurocentrism—qualified, short of triumphalism, at times subtle, but West-centric nonetheless. Consider for instance a passage on the mid-nineteenth-century world crisis:

There were distinct global connections between these upheavals. The reverberation of the Asian and African conflicts sometimes “bounced back” into the Western crisis and exacerbated it, as they had done between 1780 and 1820. In general, though, the flow of events was now more firmly from Europe and North America outward. Of course, non-Europeans continued to be active agents, appropriating, transforming and resisting the outside forces loosed on them. Yet the differentials of power and in the use of knowledge between the West and the rest of the world had

become even greater than they had been in 1780. They were to be at the greatest between 1860 and 1900. (168)

Note that “bounce back” is disposed of in a sentence (I devoted a book to just this theme; Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire*) and that the canon of Western agency is firmly reestablished. For several hundred pages Bayly leans over to crediting Western initiatives, occasionally accommodating new insights and as often pooh-poohing them. For instance, “the post-colonial polemicist Edward Said” (377) is an odd way to introduce the foremost scholar of Orientalism.

Bayly offers many accounts of global connections, yet there is no clear logic, theory, or overarching argument to his irregular shifts in emphasis. Or rather, the argument presented in the conclusion seems to be different in emphasis than the premises that guide the book. It is difficult to account for these discrepancies. Bayly is long on stories and short on theory; theory comes as an afterthought, at the end. The concluding chapter is not merely a wrap-up but rather a programmatic, agenda-setting chapter that reads more like an introduction, though not necessarily to this book. It is possible that Bayly is a historian of conventional leanings who originally set out to write a nineteenth-century history on the basis of his scholarship of imperial and South Asian history in order to *rectify* the postcolonial and other non-Western approaches and to fix and re-anchor the canon, but who in the final analysis became persuaded by the merits of the multi-centric approach. Yet more precisely, while the conclusion reads nicely it is also inconclusive: “This book has shown that it is possible to describe the world in the nineteenth century as a complex of overlapping networks of global reach, while at the same time acknowledging the vast differentials of power which inhered in them” (476). In other words, Bayly’s multi-centrism looks like multi-centrism and at times talks like multi-centrism but doesn’t walk like multi-centrism.

### **The Long Nineteenth Century**

A cut off in time of course is inevitable; yet this particular periodization of 1780-1914 implies and is driven by a Europeanist and West-centric narrative. It already contains and suggests several compelling narratives: the rise of revolutionary forces and their eventual undoing, culminating in the tragedy of world war; the rise of “the

modern world” along with the dark side of modernity. This powerful narrative, which is nonetheless a formidable cliché, is precisely what we get, along with caveats and sidelines.

Let me illustrate the implications of this framing with a sentence from the chapter on the world of arts: “A century which began with the Spanish painter Francisco Goya’s lurid nightmares of war ended with Japanese sculptors modifying the style of the French master Auguste Rodin, while Indian modernists borrowed Japanese techniques of color and brushwork” (366).

Obviously a broad stroke sentence such as this could have been crafted in many different ways; its sweep suggests a century in which European influence increased while parallel East-South influences were also at work. But surely the century “starts with Goya” only from a Eurocentric point of view and in the frame of a given narrative. To sketch the emergence of “modern” imaginations and representations I would think it far more appropriate to “start” with art forms outside the West, particularly in eighteenth-century Japan where the Ukiyo style emerged as a popular art form outside the world of the courts and later, through *Japonisme*, exercised a powerful influence on European artists. The point is that bourgeois sensibilities found iconographic expression in Japan earlier than in Europe and Japanese popular art was modern before European art was (Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture* 78).

Singling out this particular time segment and studying global connections during it marginalizes or conceals from view global connections *before* this time. In general, history writing (not in regional histories), the rule of thumb is the later the period the more West-centric the perspective: the fifteenth century *grosso modo* privileges the Renaissance; the sixteenth century, the world market and modern capitalism; the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Enlightenment; and in the nineteenth century, industrialization and European imperialism are the focus of attention. On the other hand, the longer the time frame the stronger are the global connections in which Europe and the West are on the receiving end.

The literature on Oriental globalization (Nederveen Pieterse, *Theory*) shows that the nineteenth century too cannot be properly understood without reckoning with the enormous influence of especially Asian economies and technologies on the West. Bayly does concede that technological change “was multi-centered and global right from the beginning” (174)—but what is the beginning? This

point, which fundamentally unsettles Eurocentrism, is not substantiated, and its ramifications are not spelled out. A global history of the nineteenth century should be framed and informed by ample knowledge of and reference to the preceding millennium. Only then can statements such as technological change was “multi-centered and global right from the beginning” make sense and be substantiated. Only then can Bayly’s numerous references to East-West “hybridity” make sense; without it they are only skin deep. Only then can the changing balance of forces in the course of the nineteenth century—in production, military power, and cultural self-confidence in the West—be properly appraised.

Bayly displays a broad view but lacks a long view. The result is a cramped nineteenth century, with plenty of global connections but no wider framework to assess their character or direction: to understand adequately the “long nineteenth century” requires a yet longer time frame.

In the first chapter Bayly introduces the notion of *archaic globalization* in contrast to *early modern globalization*. It appears that in Bayly’s time frame the archaic refers to the sixteenth century and the early modern period to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. General principles underlying archaic globalization, he argues, are universalizing kingship (with the Spanish Empire and the Manchus as examples), the expansive urge of cosmic religion (i.e., Christianity), and certain moral understandings of bodily health (42). Early modern globalization includes the emergence of the European-Atlantic economy and 1760–1830 as the period of the “first global imperialism” (44). This is a strange periodization because most scholars nowadays time *early globalization* much earlier, with varying time frames and accents: 500–1000 CE (Hobson); 1250 (Abu Lughod); or 1400 centered in China and India (Frank; Pomeranz; Gunn). The shallow time frame of Bayly’s “archaic globalization” is quite out of step with global history. This casts light on Bayly’s general approach which, in Europeanist fashion, is generally preoccupied with the post-1500 period; arguably it is the “long sixteenth century” of Eurocentrism and world system theory that prefigures Bayly’s “long nineteenth century.”

Bayly’s “general principles of archaic globalization” are odd also in the sense that the dynamics of globalization generally concern long-distance trade and trade routes, the diffusion of technologies, and migrations and diasporas, broadly in that order. Centers of hegemony



matter and so do changing subjectivities, but to put them at the head of the list as Bayly does, suggests an oddly state-centric and culturalist understanding of globalization.

### The Modern World

The third problem stems from Bayly's title, *The Birth of the Modern World*. Let us agree that this is a colossal cliché. This uninspired title duly echoes the treasured Eurocentric claim of giving birth to "the modern world," which obviously clashes with a multi-centric perspective. ("The modern world" is also the main fare of university history courses; the way this book is presented by the publisher also suggests that it is a bid for a major new textbook.)

Part I, titled "The End of the Old Regime," and ten chapters chart the rise of the modern world. Then in chapter 11 Bayly changes course and relates, following Arno Mayer's work on the persistence of the old regime, the continuities and reconstitution of social hierarchies. The conventional history of the nineteenth century as the great revolutionary and modernizing era, the century of change and dynamism, contrasts with newer studies that stress continuity rather than change. Bayly questions the conventional social science account of the nineteenth century as the modernizing century, the century of modern capitalism, industrialism, urbanization, the nuclear family, modern bureaucracy, growing suffrage, and working-class movements and parties. Rightly and competently Bayly qualifies most of these changes: they came about far more slowly and much later than is usually assumed. Chapter 11 is a good read.

But the argument of this chapter raises the question: what then is modern about the modern world? This is the largest question this book poses in view of its title, its multi-centric claims, and the question how we come to terms with the continuities during the "modern era." Bayly's answer is that in the course of the long nineteenth century, while social complexity generally increased, yet "the variety of social, economic and ideological systems across the world was significantly curtailed" (478). Thus, by the early twentieth century the world showed a much greater uniformity in the organization of states, in the claims of religions as doctrines and arbiters of practice (more clearly delineated, more authoritative), in the professions, and in the world economy, with expanding capitalism and growing cash crop production and animal-

producing regimes and accelerated industrialization. These trends can surely be qualified, and Bayly does. In fact, they match the conventional account of growing “rationalization”; the main difference is that they make their impact some fifty years later than in the conventional view of the nineteenth century. What difference then does global history make? Doesn’t it also require a rethinking of modernity? Bayly acknowledges the idea of multiple *modernities*, but he does not elucidate how the singular of his title rhymes with the plural in modernities. Bayly’s conventional and untheorized notion of modernity is at odds with his global history claims.

Bayly’s middle-of-the-road course leaves matters of status and influence more or less where the conventional wisdom was. On balance Bayly rejects the views of Frank and others, and he misrepresents Pomeranz.<sup>1</sup> In the end the distinctive feature of Bayly’s new-and-refurbished Eurocentrism is that it comes with moral reprobation:

It [the book] concludes that northwestern Europe was, in some significant areas, more economically, intellectually, and politically dynamic than the rest of the world at the end of the eighteenth century. Its “great divergence” from Asia and Africa after that date was not simply the result of the “failure of the rest,” or even its access to coal and the Americas. It also resided in an egotistical buoyancy of philosophy, invention, public debate, and, more dismally, efficiency in killing other human beings. (469)

Thus “egotistical buoyancy” and “efficiency in killing” become the hallmarks of the revised Eurocentrism. The old Eurocentrism was powerful and virtuous; the new Eurocentrism is powerful and bad. The common denominator between the two is power. Power, if we follow Bayly’s reasonings, is why multi-centrism takes a Eurocentric turn: “it is possible to describe the world in the nineteenth century as a complex of overlapping networks of global reach, while at the same time acknowledging the vast differentials of power which inhered in them” (476). Note again that according to Bayly “the multi-centric nature of globalization in the early modern world and its persistence into the nineteenth century” occurs “beneath the surface of Western hegemony” (470); in other words, multi-centrism is but an undercurrent that doesn’t affect the overall logic of power and hegemony.

Power is the solvent, the *deus ex machina* of Bayly’s nineteenth century. Power is why Bayly’s multi-centrism ends up as Eurocentrism. I agree with an emphasis on power.<sup>2</sup> But let’s note that *per se* the

emphasis on power is a relapse to the classical view that dwelt on states, politics, and leaders. Bayly doesn't offer a critique of power other than a moral critique and doesn't provide an understanding of the dialectics of power. Bayly remarks on power dialectics only briefly and in passing (477-78) and anti-colonialism and decolonization are given relatively short shrift in his treatment.

Bayly rightly notes, "It is of little use to separate out capital, the state or rationalistic ideology as the 'prime mover.' . . . Instead, it is the concatenation of changes produced by the interactions of political, economic, and ideological change at many different levels that provides the key" (473, 475). Yet, abdicating from these emphases also involves abdicating from these lines of criticism, notably Marxism and postcolonial theory. Then, what criticism remains? Bayly offers several interesting criticisms, notably of postcolonial theory, which he says is a description rather than an analysis (475-76). But generally this is not a critical book. In the end one is underwhelmed by what this book communicates. It doesn't work and doesn't do justice to the global history literature to reproduce the powerhouse of Eurocentrism in time, the long nineteenth century, and in theme, giving birth to modernity, and to tag on global history as a patchwork of assorted flows without definitive consequence for the powerhouse itself.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The point of Pomeranz's *Great Divergence* between East and West is that there was no great divergence, but Bayly refers to his title as if Pomeranz suggests there were.

<sup>2</sup>I also agree with his notion of "hierarchical cosmopolitanism" (238) and use similar notions to account for contemporary globalization: hierarchical integration and asymmetric inclusion (Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization or Empire?*).

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