Introduction: Europe in the international economy 1500 to 2000

Over the last half millennium Europe has witnessed great changes in its political and economic history. But what stands out above all is Europe's striking rise in economic power from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, to a position of world dominance through to 1914, followed by the undermining of its position after the First World War. Since the Second World War, western Europe has regrouped and recovered much of its former importance and now looks to be on the threshold of moving towards a new and unified configuration for the first time since the Roman Empire. Even eastern Europe, sadly retarded under Communist ideology and Soviet domination, eventually began to resume its place in the capitalist system of Europe in the 1990s.

Europe's unique rise in world terms took place in the context of its relatively small area; it is the second smallest of the world's continents as conventionally defined by geographers, occupying about 8 per cent of the earth's surface. As a large peninsula of the Eurasian land mass, Europe's area was less than a quarter of Asia's, and a third of Africa's. However, the European littoral enjoyed very good sea access and the small area of the European land mass meant that much of the interior had good links with the sea. A high rainfall and a temperate climate sustained a system of broad, deep rivers which iced over only in the very north of the continent. Most of Europe enjoyed fertile soil and adequate rainfall. Only two mountain ranges, the Alps and the Pyrenees, were serious obstacles to movement.

From the time of the Roman Empire, Europe began to generate a degree of standardization in institutions and mentalities, through the Roman Catholic Church and feudalism. Economic development, however, did not occur evenly throughout Europe. By the later Middle Ages, northern Italy was the leading economic region. From the seventeenth century, the most striking developments were to take place in the north-west, in northern France, the Low Countries and England. It was within this region that modern industrialization was launched in the later eighteenth century, to be followed by imperialism in the nineteenth century.

Explaining its rise to predominance is certainly one of the important themes in European history, but it is by no means the only one. Equally important and interesting is the uneven incidence of its development whereby so much took place in the north-west corner of the continent, along with its overseas appendages, while eastern and southern Europe eventually lagged far behind. Moreover, this success did not happen overnight: the industrial revolution certainly changed the scale and scope of the whole exercise but it could never have happened without a long period of slow progress towards that goal. Late developers have often discovered to their cost that modern economic growth and high income levels cannot be had for the asking. It takes time and preparation before they can be achieved – centuries, in fact, in the case of Europe.

The regional dimension takes on another form apart from the contrast between the west and the south and east. Was the nation state the arbiter of progress or should we take a pan-European approach, as Pollard (1973) has done where development is partly oblivious to national frontiers and spills over into regional development blocs?

Finally, what of failure? The twentieth century has been a very turbulent one which at one stage brought Europe to her knees, only to see her rise again, like a phoenix from the ashes, not to pole position as in the previous century, but certainly to being a key force in global economic and political affairs. More recently, this seems to have been given added emphasis through the evolving organizational structure towards a federated Europe. But is big so beautiful? Past experience suggests that large empires or dynasties crumble in time, because they become too cumbersome, overcentralized, bureaucratic and lacking in internal dynamism. Of course there are many differences between the European Union and the great dynasties of the past, and the United States has been the dominant exemplar since 1945, but in a modern guise the EU may have some of the characteristics of former structures which could render it ill-equipped to meet the challenges of more competitive systems.

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The rise of the western world and the gradual extinction of the once glittering civilizations of the past have long fascinated historians. How was it that a large collection of small, feudal and often warring polities managed to consolidate and gain the upper hand, so that by the sixteenth century they were taking the lead in political and economic affairs? After all, in the early Middle Ages, when Europe was a mosaic of principalities, bishoprics, feudal lordships and city states with overlapping authority, 'nothing like a centralised state existed anywhere in Europe' (Tilly 1992,

39–40), and no one would have held out much hope for the future welfare of Europe, let alone foreseen an integrated continent.

We know of course that in western Europe at least the economic variables became distinctly more favourable as time went by: income levels, capital accumulation, trade volumes, productivity and human skills improved, albeit often slowly and erratically, so that the foundations of modern economic growth were being laid. But the obvious question is, why not elsewhere? Why was Europe, or to be more precise, north-west Europe, so unique in this respect?

The answer to this conundrum possibly lies partly in the differing political and institutional frameworks between east and west. The large empires and dynasties of the past, which had once shown so much promise, the Roman, Islamic, Chinese, Indian and Ottoman, eventually became too big and unwieldy, bureaucratic and militaristic, so that they stifled individual initiative and intellectual and political inquiry. 'Like parasites ... agrarian elites sapped their dominions in those areas where progressive economic behaviour was most likely, trade and capital accumulation' (Chirot, 1985, 183). Often they were little more than military despotisms bent on preserving or enhancing their power by exacting tribute from impoverished subjects who were left with little more than bare subsistence. The overhead costs of state to provide for the upkeep of large armies, administrative bureaucracies and parasitical elites were therefore heavy and tended to weaken the strength of the empires over time (Kahn, 1979,30–31). Furthermore, they rarely managed to retain control over an entire cultural region for very long since the very forces which brought the dynasties together in the first place were also those which made for their disintegration.

Of course, Europe itself was not immune from the stultifying effects of overweening empires from time to time: the Carolingian Empire which expired in the ninth century was an early example; the rise to dominance of the Habsburg Empire was of comparable stature, though one should bear in mind that the Habsburgs repulsed the Ottoman threat to Europe. But while they, in combination with the Ottoman Empire, managed to crush scientific progress, nonconformist religious thought, intellectual inquiry and middle class values in much of southern and eastern Europe, they failed, as Chirot (1985, 183) notes, to gain control of the north-west sector of the continent: northern Germany, the northern Low Countries, France, Switzerland and England. Significantly, it was these areas which spawned the initiative and vitality for the rise of the western world.

It may therefore be a blessing in disguise that a unified European Empire failed to materialize to dominate the whole continent, otherwise its history could have been quite different, if the experience of other large dynasties is anything to judge by. Fortunately, when mediaeval Europe, or at least the west, emerged from the fragmented control of individual rulers, it did not fall into the hands of monolithic dynasties and so avoided some of the pernicious features of the great Empires of the east. Instead western Europe crystallized into a number of distinct states which replaced the multiplicity of political units of the late mediaeval period with more organized and homogeneous nation states with fairly clearly defined boundaries. In this respect the history of Europe is unique since, as Cobban (1969, 30) points out, at no time had such a considerable group of nation states survived in geographical proximity and close association over a period of many centuries. It is true that mobilization for war continued to be a dominant activity among the new European states, but this has been seen as a major factor explaining why 'states expanded, consolidated and created new forms of political organization' (Tilly, 1992, 70, 74; Kennedy 1988).

What is important to note is that this new political configuration in the west was both more competitive and more liberal than its counterparts elsewhere. In brief, it provided greater economic security and a corresponding increase in the rights to property (P. Anderson 1974, 420, 429; J.L. Anderson 1991, 61). In time it removed or modified some of the more inhibiting characteristics of feudal society which helped to reduce market transaction costs and strengthen the links between effort and reward.

The importance of institutional change to economic progress has long been recognized. Cunningham (1904, 152–69, 261–2), for example, touched upon many of the key issues which were later elaborated in more rigorous form by the work of North and Thomas (1970; 1973; North, 1981). For economic enterprise to thrive it is important that the institutional and legal framework protects individual property rights, reduces the costs of economic transactions and facilitates resource flows. In addition, it should protect the economic agent from undue exactions on the part of a repressive state. Only in north-west Europe can it be said that a framework conducive to economic progress was gradually established from the late mediaeval period. Wherever else one looks, be it mediaeval Europe, the eastern civilizations, eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or the Third World today, this is not the case. Private property in mediaeval Europe was in constant danger of violation by plunder or expropriation on the part of both individuals and the polity; the same was true in nineteenth-century eastern Europe, where corrupt and despotic rulers matched those of many contemporary Third World countries today. The great dynasties of India, China and the Ottoman Empire were essentially feudal and regressive and provided little incentive for individual initiative and inquiry lest this undermined the basis of feudal power.

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of the disjuncture between east and west was in the way the legal framework changed in the latter in regard to market transactions and property rights. The rise of the nation state in the west was accompanied by the revival of Roman law, which is generally regarded by many observers as the most effective legal system for encouraging capitalist transactions. The main advantages of Roman law are that it allows the establishment of rights to property, provides a means of defining and enforcing contracts, and establishes a systematic and coherent framework for the purchase, sale, lease, hire, loan and transfer of goods and assets. The foundation of a firm legal basis for property rights and economic transactions, without which modern capitalism could not flourish, was first developed in western Europe (Tilly, 1992, 100). Elsewhere the legal basis was very poorly developed. Nineteenth-century eastern Europe lagged far behind, with many regions having progressed little from the pillage, plunder and corruption stage of earlier centuries. Likewise, the legal systems of the east, India, China and Japan, are not generally considered to be very favourable to economic enterprise and individual initiative (Caldwell, 1977, 54).

Such changes that did take place in western institutions and structures did not happen overnight. They evolved gradually and erratically over a long period of time to provide a framework that was conducive to economic transactions and entrepreneurial endeavour. Again one should stress that most of the advances were concentrated in the north-west corner of the Europe, the region that became the dominant core of the continent.

Yet how advanced was Europe by the eighteenth century? Views differ on this issue quite considerably. There are those writers who would argue that Europe did not have a clear lead until the early nineteenth century. Tilly (1992, 171) for example, doubts whether the European powers could claim to have led the world economically before the later eighteenth century. Ramirez-Faria (1991, 1) reckons that, up to the eighteenth century at least, Europe could not claim to have been more than *primus inter pares*, despite 'a towering but subjective sense of her own superiority.' Added weight to such views comes from Bairoch's quantitative studies of global income and levels of industrialization, which suggest that differences between countries and regions were quite small before the great upsurge in industrial development from the late eighteenth century onwards (Bairoch 1981; 1982; 1991). He claims that the gap between the richest and poorest country circa 1750 was probably in the range 1.0 to 1.6, and as low as 1.0 to 1.3 if broader regions such as western Europe and China are considered. In fact, the per capita income of China may have been marginally higher than that of the whole of Europe in 1750. Similarly, the data for levels of industrialization seem to confirm this picture.

It should be stressed that the figures for this period are highly conjectural, as Bairoch is the first to admit. Nevertheless, it does appear that the enormous gap between rich and poor nations with which we are familiar today did not exist in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, there is still reason to believe that western Europe had already stolen a march on the rest of the world. In fact Bairoch himself is prepared to concede that the richest parts of Europe (England, France and the Low Countries) had a 20 to 40 per cent income superiority over the average of that of the future Third World (Bairoch, 1991, 31). This would seem to have logic in the light of subsequent developments which are difficult to explain satisfactorily unless there had already been favourable movements in a whole range of economic variables, including capital accumulation, mercantile activities, technological changes, educational levels, urban development and, ultimately, the ability to surmount the dreaded Malthusian population barrier.

Indeed, many writers would argue that European advances can be located well before the eighteenth century and that there is little doubt that western Europe at least was well in the lead before the industrial revolution. Cipolla (1981, 300) for example, felt that global history after 1500 could not be properly understood without taking into account the impact of European culture, economy and technology. Landes (1969, 13–14) argued that western Europe was already comparatively rich before the industrial revolution by comparison with other regions of the world and it was this that made it ready for the breakthrough into modern economic growth. McNeill (1963, 653; 1979, 376) traced the roots of European dominance back to the sixteenth century and maintained that by 1700 the wealth and power at Europe's command clearly surpassed anything that other civilized communities of the earth could muster. Snooks (1996, 258) is even more emphatic: 'By 1500 Europe had equalled, if not exceeded, the technological achievement of any former or contemporary civilization.' Similarly, Jones (1981, 41, 183) argues that a decisive gap between Europe and Asia was emerging before modern industrialization. A wealth of detail on Europe's burgeoning industrial and technological capabilities from 1600 onwards is provided by Goodman and Honeyman (1988; see also Chirot, 1985, 192–3).

Such changes suggest that the springs of modern economic growth are to be located way back in time and quantitative estimates on incomes, however fragile, indicate that income growth was taking place, albeit slowly and erratically, for many centuries. This was certainly the case in England according to latest estimates (Persson, 1988; Snooks, 1990; 1996) and may also be true of other parts of western Europe (Landes, 1969, 14; Maddison, 1982, 6–7). The grim Malthusian picture painted by some continental historians may not be wholly consistent with what was actually happening in practice.

In fact, staving off the Malthusian demon may have been the crucial element in enabling Europe to make the transition to modernity. Though population grew very slowly in pre-industrial times in both Europe and the wider world (down to 1750, the world rate of change was 0.06 per cent a year, with little variation between continents), population pressures were experienced periodically by Europe and eastern civilizations (Livi-Bacci, 1992, 31–6). These were usually relieved by the famous Malthusian checks of war, pestilence, plague and famine, rather than by any permanent upward shift in the supply schedule to accommodate an enlarged population, hence the very slow growth in population over the long haul. Population changes could sometimes prove fatal to unyielding regimes, as Goldstone (1991, 476) explains: 'Population growth in the context of inflexible economic and social institutions is fully capable on its own of producing income polarization, élite conflict, and state breakdowns as the cases of Ming China and Ottoman Turkey demonstrate.'

In this respect it has been argued that western Europe was in a uniquely favourable position. It was never suffocated by the acute population pressures which afflict many Third World countries today or which faced some of the eastern civilizations in the past. Though pre-industrial Europe's population did sometimes outstrip the capacity to sustain it in the short term, the population problem never became so acute as to upset seriously the balance of the environment. And in the long term, western Europe was able to surmount the Malthusian trap.

This was accomplished in two ways. Western Europe was more successful in containing population pressure by virtue of its unique family life cycle pattern, whereby abstinence from marriage (high proportion of celibrates) and a late age of marriage for women combined to restrain fertility levels. This pattern seems to have prevailed in England, France, the Low Countries, Scandinavia, Germany and Switzerland, as also, significantly, in Japan. Thus western Europe was able to adjust its population more readily to the economic environment, whereas in most other parts of the world early marriage and high fertility rates had the reverse effect. Thus 'early modern Western Europe and Tokogawa Japan enjoyed certain advantages from the point of view of fomenting economic growth: a more favourable age structure; and less pronounced population instability' (McNeill, 1996, 25, 34; Laslett, 1988, 235-8).

On the other side of the equation, western Europe's supply capability improved steadily during the early modern period, to a point where it was possible to cope with population-driven expansion from the eighteenth century onwards (Komlos, 1989a, 247–8; 1989b, 204–5). There is evidence to suggest that in much of western Europe both the agrarian and nonagrarian sectors of the economy had been responding positively for some time, so that it became possible to support a growing population. By the eighteenth century, western Europe's agrarian system was capable of meeting additional population pressure when it came, not initially by raising overall living standards, but by preventing them from fading away as they had sometimes done in the past when confronted by somewhat less rigorous population changes (Bairoch, 1989; Mokyr, 1976, 23–4; Grigg, 1992, 2, 33).

Thus through a combination of restrained fertility and a long-run improvement in supply capability, western Europe was able to keep the Malthusian devil at bay. In other words, population never became a serious constraint to development as it has been elsewhere, especially in many Third World countries in the later twentieth century, with population growth rates at least twice those experienced by European societies at their peak in the nineteenth century. Early developers rarely had population growth rates much above 1 per cent a year, which seems to have been an upper threshold for successful modernization (Bairoch, 1975, 204).

A further indication of Europe's increasing pre-eminence is its role in trade. By the early nineteenth century, Europe was by far the dominant force in international trade, accounting for 69 per cent of world trade in 1720 and 77 per cent by 1800. The west European shares were 42 and 61 per cent, respectively, with Britain way out in the lead, followed by Germany, France and the Low Countries, in that order (Chisholm, 1982, 60). Although a significant proportion consisted of intra-European trade, it also reflected the active exploitation by European traders of the new opportunities for intercourse in both the Old and New Worlds from the sixteenth century onwards. The New World also had another role to play, that of providing Europe with an additional resource base and an outlet for surplus population. What Jones refers to as the 'ghost acreages' in the newly discovered lands served to improve man–land ratios and helped to stabilize population densities in the European core. By contrast, population densities in India, China and the Ottoman Empire, which were already high by European standards, tended to increase further between 1500 and 1800 (Jones, 1981, 83; Reynolds, 1985, 29).

Western Europe, along with its overseas appendages, was therefore in a much more favourable position than the rest of Europe or the eastern civilizations to accumulate a margin above subsistence through its strong mercantile connections, which also had an important social class dimension: they provided western Europe with a wealthy urban bourgeoisie which, according to Batou (1990, 464), was noticeably lacking in Asia, the Middle East and China, and for that matter in eastern Europe. The European instinct to accumulate capital over many centuries, in contrast to the more destructive properties of Eastern civilizations, is indicative of

the long-run origins of the development process, which emphasize the continuity of that process rather than the concept of a dramatic structural break (Komlos, 1989a, 203–5).

Not all writers would agree with the emphasis frequently placed on the uniqueness of the European environment for modern economic growth. In fact some have taken grave exception to the Eurocentric approach to world development and to the very concept of the 'European miracle'. One of the fiercest critiques of the diffusion thesis has rejected outright the previous notions of the long-term superiority of Europe (Blaut, 1993, 206). Modern economic growth, Blaut argues, could have happened anywhere, at least before 1492, since Europeans were in no way more modern, more advanced, more rational or intellectually brighter than the inhabitants of other civilizations. Nor were they necessarily more culturally disposed to economic endeavour than their counterparts elsewhere (though see Landes, 1998, for a different view). What gave Europe the upper hand was her geographic proximity to America and the immense wealth obtained there by Europeans and later also in Asia and Africa. Capitalism became centred in Europe, it is argued, 'because colonialism gave Europeans the power both to develop their own society and to prevent development from occurring elsewhere' (Blaut, 1993, 152–3, 206). Marxist writers have also made some very large estimates of Europe's gains from the plundering of other continents (Caldwell, 1977, 55).

Blaut's thesis is both stimulating and provocative and certainly deserves attention. There is obviously some merit in re-examining the Eurocentric emphasis on modern development which has permeated the literature and the textbooks for so long. No one would probably now take exception, in the light of modern research, to the notion that eastern civilizations were more advanced than Europe in the Middle Ages (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Smith, 1991; Landes, 1994; Hodgson 1993), but there is a big question mark as to whether they were able to maintain their earlier progress, and Blaut probably underestimates the advances made in Europe by the sixteenth century. According to Abu-Lughod (1989, 361), the crucial fact is that the fall of the east preceded the rise of the west. The disintegration of what she calls the Afro-Eurasian system after circa 1350 was followed by the rise of a new, European, system in southern and western Europe in the sixteenth century, as Europe filled the power vacuum in the east, first through the Portuguese, then the Dutch and finally the British. More to the point, the idea that the rise of Europe's predominance was largely a product of geographic accident, namely Europe's convenient location to the Americas which allowed her to exploit the resources of the New World, and subsequently those of Asia and Africa, does somewhat strain the reader's credulity. The more so in that Blaut does not demonstrate in any great depth the interconnections between colonialism and development.

There is no doubt that colonial expansion and the accompanying mercantile activity contributed to western development, as we have already acknowledged, but there is a danger of overemphasizing its role, as O'Brien and Prados de la Escosura (1998, 38) have recently cautioned: 'arguments that reify the expansion of western Europe overseas into the engine of its economic success compared to other continents ... should be resisted and severely qualified'. Colonial trade and investment accounted only for a relatively small part of aggregate economic activity even for the Netherlands and England (Musgrave, 1999, ch. 7). The long-term benefits of colonial endeavour were decidedly mixed. The Iberian peninsula eventually gained very little from it, nor did the Dutch for that matter, and for most countries that subsequently led the way in modern economic growth it was of minor importance, often costing more than it was worth. The British, and to a lesser extent the French, were the major beneficiaries. But there is no conclusive evidence to support the extreme 'dependency theory' view that the emergence of global income inequality was largely the product of western exploitation, even though the influence of the great powers was not always beneficial to the periphery (Ramirez-Faria, 1991, 261; Valerio, 1992, 131). That apart, it would be legitimate to argue that colonial expansion was largely a European phenomenon simply because the Europeans were more advanced and enterprising than their Asian and African counterparts by the sixteenth century.

In his recent and often controversial study, Musgrave (1999, chs 5, 7) not only questions the primacy of Europe *vis-à-vis* Asia but also raises doubts about the conventional thinking regarding the leading position of north-west Europe. He argues that it was Europe, rather than Asia, that was underdeveloped in the early modern period, and that the Europeans came to Asia as marginal players and utilized the highly developed commercial structure already there. He also takes issue with the traditional notion that western Europe, or rather northern Europe in his north–south divide, was at the cutting edge of development, claiming that, until well into the eighteenth century, Europe's industrial heartland was still located in the south, which looked nearer to an industrial revolution than the more backward north. The problem with this interpretation is how to explain why the roles were suddenly reversed. Musgrave's answer is the series of heroic and risky gambles in technology which tipped the scales in the north's favour.

War is often seen as an important catalyst, but whether for good or evil is a matter for debate. We are still a long way from being able to draw up a final balance sheet of the costs and benefits of war (O'Brien, 1996). On a broad view it would appear that the best economic performance has occurred during periods when there has been an absence of major conflict and with a hegemonic core state dominating the system: for example, much of the nineteenth century after 1815, when Britain was the leading nation, and the period 1945–73, when the United States held sway. Most other periods experienced multi-centre competitive systems and were inherently unstable. Twentieth-century experience tells us that war can be totally destructive, leading to a serious loss of growth. Similarly, the 300 or more years down to the Congress of Vienna were rarely free of conflict, dynastic struggles, balance of power conflicts and commercial rivalries among the major European countries (Bergeson and Schoenberg 1980, 244–6). No doubt they produced a spur to military technology and arms production but, since the greater part of state budgets were gobbled up by war, resulting frequently in serious public finance problems, it is debatable whether any net benefit accrued. However, Tilly (1992, 70–74) argues that the major mobilizations for war were the means by which states expanded, consolidated and created new forms of political organization. Military rivalry therefore underlay both the creation and ultimate predominance of European national states which eventually became the prototype for the whole world.

Whatever the ultimate reasons for the rise of the west, the fact remains that Europe, along with its overseas appendages, was the driving force in economic development from the sixteenth century through to the First World War. But if Europe's rise to greatness took many centuries to reach full maturity, it was squandered very quickly in the first half of the twentieth century. Within little more than a generation, war and depression had brought Europe to its knees. Statesmen and policy makers must also shoulder some of the blame for the disintegration, since they failed to create a viable European structure after 1918. Perceptive observers at the time were all too aware of Europe's political and economic weaknesses, but statesmen and others in high office, imbued with the glories of the past, failed to recognize or chose to ignore them. As Thomson (1966, 601) noted, they 'failed to appreciate that modern war is a revolution, and that the economic world of 1913 had already passed into history as much as had the Habsburg and Romanoff Empires'. The League of Nations made a similar point in their study of inter-war commercial policy published in 1942 (League of Nations, 1942,154–5).

Though self-generated flaws contributed to Europe's collapse in the first half of the twentieth century, allowing the United States to become the world's dominant economic and political power, Europe was spared the ignominy of total eclipse. A new lease of life began soon after the Second World War, at least for western Europe. Partly through her own exertions and partly by dint of American military and economic involvement as a result of the Cold War, western Europe experienced a spectacular revival. Some world systems analysts would see this as a mere extension of the former modern Eurocentred world system, by which the United States enabled the old core 'to preserve by economic means the privileges it forfeited through decolonization' (Abu-Lughod, 1989, 370). One may question the veracity of the colonial disconnection, given that its beneficial aspects were fast disappearing anyway, but the revamped hegemony of the west was all too apparent. The question is how stable is this unicentred system; will the balance eventually swing back to the east, with the rise of Japan, East Asia and, latterly, China? Or will it become a bipolar system, as under the Roman and Han Empires? Alternatively, with the emerging new configuration in Europe and the continued resilience of the United States at a time when the economies of East Asia are becoming more unstable, the hegemony of the west may be preserved for some time to come. Much will no doubt depend upon the success or otherwise of the European integration process, and especially whether the poorer outlier territories of southern and eastern Europe can be accommodated into what has been for so long a rich western club.

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