

The Rise of the West after Twenty-Five Years

WILLIAM H. MCNEILL
University of Chicago, Emeritus

HISTORIANS approach their subject from the moving platform of their own times, with the result that the past changes shape continually. Anyone who lives to re-read his own work long afterwards must therefore expect to recognize signs and hallmarks of the inevitable displacement that time brings to historical understanding. This truism was brought home to me by a seminar devoted to my magnum opus, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, at Williams College, where I was visiting professor in 1988. It was the first time I had read the book in twenty-five years, and the experience of revisiting an old friend—and incubus¹—was both humbling and elevating.

The book was a sudden, surprising success when it came out in 1963. Lavish praise from Hugh Trevor-Roper in the *New York Times Book Review* and the onset of the Christmas season briefly lifted it to the best-seller list; the book has remained in print ever since. A cheap paperback (\$1.25 for 828 pages!) sold out of an initial printing within a year, and cumulative sales of the full-sized book amount by now to more than 75,000.

In retrospect it seems obvious that *The Rise of the West* should be seen as an expression of the postwar imperial mood in the

¹ While writing *The Rise of the West* I walked home past an elm tree that had lost a large limb in a storm and was slowly covering its wound with an enormous weal of new growth. I used to wonder whether my book would be done before or after the elm tree healed itself. In fact, I got my manuscript to the printer a year before the tree died of Dutch elm disease, with its self-seal still incomplete, so I was never able to carry the completed book past the healed-over tree.

United States. Its scope and conception is a form of intellectual imperialism, for it takes on the world as a whole, and it tries to understand global history on the basis of cultural diffusion developed among American anthropologists in the 1930s. In particular, *The Rise of the West* is built on the notion that the principal factor promoting historically significant social change is contact with strangers possessing new and unfamiliar skills. A corollary of this proposition is that centers of high skill (i.e., civilizations) tend to upset their neighbors by exposing them to attractive novelties. Less-skilled peoples round about are then impelled to try to make those novelties their own so as to attain for themselves the wealth, power, truth, and beauty that civilized skill confer on their possessors. Yet such efforts provoke a painful ambivalence between the drive to imitate and an equally fervent desire to preserve the customs and institutions that distinguish the would-be borrowers from the corruptions and injustices that also inhere in civilized life.

A second corollary of the proposition that contact with strangers is the major motor of social change is that contacts among contemporaneous civilizations ought to be of key concern to a world historian, for such contacts can be expected to alter the assortment and expression of high skills each civilization possesses, and they thereby affect the local skill-diffusion pattern described above. Moreover, whenever one civilization, through some apparent superiority of its skills, becomes able to influence everyone with whom it comes in contact, then the grain of world history begins to run in a single direction, so to speak; and so by observing the reception of new skills and ideas in distant parts a historian can give shape and meaning to the confusion of detail that otherwise makes world history—quite literally—inconceivable.

In the years 1954 to 1963, when the book was being written, the United States was, of course, passing through the apex of its post-war capacity to influence others thanks to its superior skills and wealth. It follows that my vision of the world's past can be dismissed as being no more than a rationalization of American hegemony, retrojecting the situation of post-World War II decades upon the whole of the world's past by claiming that analogous patterns of cultural dominance and diffusion had existed always. (Of course the obvious rebuttal is to point out that the post-World War II era was part and parcel of world history, and conformed to precedent in a way Americans were not aware of at the time.)

No historian can deny that his views of the past reflect experiences of his own time, interacting with a tradition of learning that, in turn, bears all the marks of the times and places in which it grew. But I can at least say this: when I was writing the book I was entirely unaware of the way in which my method of making sense of world history conformed to the temporary world experience of the United States. In retrospect, it seems the warmth with which the book was received in the early 1960s did arise from this congruence in large part. But if so neither I nor the reviewers noticed it at the time. The hand-in-glove fit between my review of the whole of human history and the temporary world role played by the United States therefore operated, if it operated at all, entirely at a subconscious level for all concerned.

In view of the way historiography has moved in the intervening twenty-five years, a second reproach against my way of viewing the past seems even more obvious. *The Rise of the West* tends to march with big battalions, looking at history from the point of view of the winners—that is, of the skilled and privileged managers of society—and shows scant concern for the sufferings of the victims of historical change. This no doubt reflects personal idiosyncracies—family, ethnic, class, and other identities and experiences—that led me to value the fruits of humankind's accumulated capacity to control the natural and social environment and shape it to our wishes. Profiting from such skills, as everyone constantly does, including the poorest populations alive today, we must, I think, admire those who pioneered the enterprise and treat the human adventure on earth as an amazing success story, despite all the suffering entailed. The obvious ideal is a judicious balance in assessing the gains and losses inherent in each new human attainment. I did of course try to strike such a balance, but what seemed like a just balance to me is liable to strike others as a shabby sort of apologetics for those at the top (adult males) who ran things in each of the world's great civilizations.

These general considerations scarcely came up in the Williams seminar. Instead, by struggling through a chapter a week, variations in the quality of different chapters became rather painfully obvious. The low point came with chapter 4, entitled "The Rise of Cosmopolitan Civilization in the Middle East, 1700–500 B.C." After a brief introduction, this chapter undertakes to describe the military-political changes, administrative systems, social structure, and cultural conservation and advance across the twelve centuries and amongst the dozens of peoples and scores of states con-

cerned. The result is labored and fragmented, more confusing than illuminating, even for a persevering, patient reader.

Chapter 4 made the fundamental mistake of abandoning a chronological for a topical ordering of the material at the wrong place. It lumped together two eras that ought to have been considered seriatim: the bronze age of chariot warriors and aristocratic rule on the one hand, and the iron age of democratized warriors and culture on the other. There is no excuse for this clumsiness. New data has not much altered what is knowable since I wrote. Nor has any sort of contemporary experience since 1963 altered sensibilities toward the emergent cosmopolitanism of the ancient Middle East. It is a plain case of defective organization, cutting against the grain of things and thereby disguising a simpler, truer, and more adequate way of understanding the history in question. Moreover, the notion of successive bronze and iron ages was completely familiar in the existing literature; and in retrospect, I cannot imagine why I did not use that ordering to put the chapter together.

Another deficiency helped to spoil the architectonic of this chapter—a deficiency, which I shall argue, was also apparent in the later parts of the book. For *The Rise of the West* assumes that separate civilizations form real and important human groupings and that their interactions constitute the main theme of world history. But in this chapter I had to deal with the merging together of what had once been separate civilizations into a new cosmopolitanism that extended throughout the Middle East without erasing local differences. Those differences were very considerable, for after 2500 B.C., a cluster of interstitial and satellite societies, each possessing all the hallmarks of civilization, had arisen on the rain-watered lands around and between the floodplains of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

As a result, as long as I thought mainly in terms of separate civilizations, the historical stage became excessively crowded. Not surprisingly, the fragmented, choppy character of this chapter arose from an effort to say something about how each culturally distinct people expressed or exemplified each of the themes I had chosen to emphasize. Firmer focus on the cosmopolitan process itself was called for. I needed to think more carefully about the new sorts of activities that were binding the peoples of the Middle East together, and I should have highlighted these more clearly. But that required new assumptions and concepts that

I lacked at the time and have only haltingly explored subsequently.

A second, less embarrassing but more important failure occurred in chapter 10, which treats world affairs between A.D. 1000 and 1500. In this case, new scholarship since 1963 has pointed the way to a firmer and better understanding of what was going on in the Eurasian world, and it is therefore obvious why I missed the centrality of China and Chinese civilization in these centuries. Instead I concentrated on "The Steppe Conquerors and the European Far West," to quote the title of the chapter. My mistake is therefore entirely forgivable. All the same, it is clear in retrospect how emphasis on steppe conquerors and the rise of medieval Europe reflected the bias of my education. For the chapter looks at Eurasia from a naively western viewpoint. Turks and Mongols come galloping over the horizon from the east—suddenly, and, so to speak, mysteriously, though I did note the system of bureaucratic management that made Genghis Khan's armies so formidable. Nonetheless, I failed to connect the remarkable upsurge of nomad power with the fact that the new bureaucratic methods of military administration that the Mongols employed were a straightforward borrowing from Chinese practice. As a result, I overlooked the ultimate disturber of world balances in the era itself: that is, an efflorescence of Chinese civilization that raised China's culture, wealth, and power to a new level, far outstripping all the rest of the world for a period of four to five centuries.

Moreover, I gave undue attention to Latin Christendom, being eager to search out seeds and portents of Europe's rise to world leadership after 1500. That is legitimate enough, but it would be better located as a preface to the next chapter. The scholarship in the 1950s ought to have allowed me to see that, despite its vigorous new growth, western European civilization remained marginal to the ecumene and should have been given the same emphasis that I gave to the maturation of Japanese civilization in those same centuries. Instead, I treated Turkish and Mongol conquests and the rise of medieval Europe as of coordinate importance for world affairs. I even relegated China to second place among the civilized victims of nomad assault, treating the transformation of the Muslim world first and at greater length, largely because I knew more about it.

In retrospect it is fascinating to see how some of the material for a proper appreciation of Chinese primacy between A.D. 1000

and 1500 was available to me before 1963. In particular, I used Stefan Balazs's articles on the economic transformation of China in Tang times,² and I had seen the first volumes of Joseph Needham's monumental study of Science and Civilization in China as well. But until Robert Hartwell showed the scale of ferrous metallurgy and the sophistication of economic management under the Song,³ until Yoshinobu Shiba provided a portrait of the Song commercial economy as a whole,⁴ and until Mark Elvin set forth a bold and speculative interpretation of the entire Chinese past,⁵ the meaning of China's transformation about the year A.D. 1000 quite escaped me.

My excuse is that the historiography available a generation ago still reflected the traditional valuations of China's past, so that a regime unable to control the northernmost provinces of historic China was, by definition, inferior to those ages when China was intact and united under a properly virtuous emperor. Since the Song dynasty (A.D. 960–1279) never controlled the northern barbarians and lost China's northernmost provinces to them almost from the start, it followed that their era was not one of China's great periods, even though it had long been recognized that art and literature bloomed under the Song as never before. But that did not compensate for political failure; and no one before Jacques Gernet⁶ seems to have noticed how the ill-success that attended the Song armies on the steppe frontier arose from the fact that Chinese skills were spreading beyond the country's traditional borders, upsetting previous balances between China and its nomad neighbors and, as Ghengis Khan's career soon showed, throughout most of Eurasia as well.

In view of the way *The Rise of the West* is put together, my failure to understand China's primacy between A.D. 1000 and 1500 is particularly regrettable inasmuch as the book would have attained an elegant simplicity of structure if I had done so. As matters stand, the middle part of the book, entitled "Eurasian Cul-

² Stefan Balazs, "Beiträge zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte der T'ang Zeit," *Mitteilungen des Seminars für orientalische Sprachen zu Berlin* 34 (1931): 21–25; 35 (1932): 27–73.

³ Robert Hartwell, "Markets, Technology and Structures of Enterprise in the Development of Eleventh Century Chinese Iron and Steel Industry," *Journal of Economic History* 26 (1966): 29–58.

⁴ Yoshinobu Shiba, *Commerce and Society in Sung China* (Ann Arbor, 1970).

⁵ Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, 1973).

⁶ Jacques Gernet, *Le Monde Chinois* (Paris, 1972).

tural Balance, 500 B.C. to 1500 A.D.," is built around the idea that Mediterranean Hellenism (500 B.C.–A.D. 200), India (A.D. 200–600), and a reintegrated Middle East under the Muslims (A.D. 600–1000) entered upon successive periods of cultural flowering that assured each of them a period of primacy among the peoples of the old world. To follow that simple structuring of the past with a Chinese far eastern (1000–1500) and a European far western (1500–2000 ?) efflorescence and era of ecumenical primacy has a tidiness and precision that the facts seem to sustain,⁷ but my ignorance (and residual Eurocentrism) hid this from me in 1963.

This, indeed, is the central failure of the book. Of course there are many other passages where scholarship since 1963 makes the text obsolete, but these are almost always matters of detail. An exception is Africa, where the scholarship of the past twenty-five years has revealed a far more complex interplay of peoples and cultures than was accessible when I wrote *The Rise of the West*. Yet sub-Saharan Africa never became the seat of a major civilization, and the continent therefore remained peripheral to the rest of the world, down to and including our own age. Hence while the brief passages touching on African history are now antiquated and inadequate, the defect does not distort the overall picture of the past as much as the failure in chapter 10 to recognize China's era of world leadership.

In general, the assumption that reaction to contacts with strangers was the major motor of historical change still seems good to me, and the choices of what to emphasize, which derived from that assumption, still strike me as sound, with the exception of the failure to give China its due between 1000 and 1500. In that sense, therefore, revisiting *The Rise of the West* was an elevating, even exhilarating, experience. For all its defects, it is still a good book, and deserves to count as an important way station in the development of a more genuinely global historiography.

Yet on another level, it seems to me now that the book is flawed simply because it assumes that discernibly separate civilizations

⁷ Gunpowder, printing, and the compass, three critical factors in Europe's ascension to world leadership after 1500, were Chinese inventions, and reached the far west during the time when the political unification of northern Eurasia by the Mongols made movement back and forth across the whole continent unusually safe, frequent, and easy. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China: The Gunpowder Epic* (Cambridge, 1967), disposes of lingering notions of Europe's equality with China in developing early gunpowder technologies and traces their westward diffusion with new precision.

were the autonomous social entities whose interactions defined history on a global scale. Just what the term 'civilization' really means is left fuzzy, though I followed V. Gordon Childe⁸ and others in equating civilization with a society in which occupational specialization allowed the emergence of high skills—administrative, military, artisanal, literary, and artistic. That may be adequate to distinguish early civilizations from neolithic village societies, but it does not say much about geographical and social boundaries in subsequent eras when a multiplicity of civilizations arose, and when at least part-time occupational specialization extended very widely among peoples supplying raw materials to distant civilized consumers, yet who can scarcely be described as civilized in their own right.

This raises the question of who really belongs to a civilization. Newborn infants clearly do not earn membership until they learn their cultural roles. But what about the poor and unskilled, whose roles are limited at best? And what about those living at a distance, subjected, perhaps, to a superior force—at least occasionally—but otherwise alien? And how do all the different skills and habits and outlooks of sharers in a civilization fit together into a more or less coherent whole? I fell back on the expression 'style of life' in affirming the reality of that cohesion. But this metaphor, borrowed from art history, is only a metaphor and is all but useless in actual practice, since stylistic affinities are not nearly as easy to observe when one is comparing human habits and states of mind as when one is looking at works of art or other material objects.

Perhaps a historian is not required to face these questions explicitly. If one insists on precise definitions of terms, discourse at once degenerates into epistemological debate, and is never likely to emerge from that labyrinth. Suffice it to say, therefore, that civilizations do seem real to me, and have in fact united many millions of human beings across millions of square miles and many centuries in significant ways. But they are not the only actors on a world historical scale; this I failed to emphasize sufficiently in *The Rise of the West*. Let me try to explain more fully my current view.

A shared literary canon, and expectations about human behavior framed by that canon, are probably central to what we mean by a civilization. But it is unheard of for all to have access to such

⁸ V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History* (Harmondsworth, 1943).

a canon. An upper class, educated to revere a body of literature that sets forth rules about how human beings should behave, is what in practice therefore delimits a civilization. The less privileged share such ideas in varying degrees, and no one fully embodies them—not even the holiest moral athlete. Conventional expectations allow for both individual and group shortcomings, while the lower classes and peripheral members of the society adjust and adapt their own, more local, moral codes and customary practices to make room for the ways of the upper class—deferring and obeying where they must, reserving zones of privacy and difference where they can.

But to keep a civilization together, there must also be a continual circulation of news and nuances of meaning, moving from city to city, region to region, and among diverse social classes and ethnic groups that make up the body social. Continual circulation of such messages is required to maintain sufficient cohesion across space and time to count as a single whole—a single civilization. Clearly there are degrees of cohesion, and shared characteristics shade off as one moves toward the frontier. Drawing precise boundaries on a map is nearly always arbitrary, but cultural slopes do exist, and when they become precipitous, the geographical limit to a given style of life may, indeed, become apparent enough for all practical purposes.

Obviously, modes of transport and communication are crucial for the circulation of messages within an established civilization; as they change, the boundaries and reach of the civilization will alter. This assumes a new dimension when, with the improvement of communication, diverse civilizations begin to impinge on one another more and more often and in increasingly urgent ways, since under these circumstances the autonomy and independence of the separate civilizations begin to shrink, and a new cosmopolitan entity—what Wallerstein calls a world system⁹—may start to take over as the key factor in further historical development. This process is what I handled so clumsily in chapter 4 and omitted almost entirely when treating the millennia of the Christian era until after 1850.

Thus, in addition to the problems in chapter 4, the central methodological weakness of my book is that while it emphasizes interaction across civilizational boundaries, it pays inadequate attention to the emergence of the ecumenical world system within

⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 vols. (New York, 1974–1988).

which we live today. Instead of organizing the book solely around the notion of a series of efflorescences, first in one, then in another separate civilization, I should have made room for the ecumenical process. How this might be done remains to be seen. Somehow an appreciation of the autonomy of separate civilizations (and of all the other less massive and less skilled cultures of the earth) across the past two thousand years needs to be combined with the portrait of an emerging world system, connecting greater and greater numbers of persons across civilized boundaries.

To make this a feasible enterprise, one needs a clear and distinct idea of the emergent world system as manifested first in the ancient Middle East and a second time in the modern world, and then one must reflect on how these two systems intersected with the more local civilizational and cultural landscapes they impinged upon. It does not follow that the two world systems were the same. Clearly, insofar as each depended on an expanding network of transport and communications, the technical base differed very markedly. And since each world system somehow arose out of political, military, and economic behavior, it is worth remembering that the institutional heritage of the second and first millennia B.C. were very different from those of the first and second millennia A.D.

If one thinks of the world since about 1870, when instantaneous communications and mechanically powered transport started to manifest their influence on a global basis, it is obvious that the modern world system rests on economic complementarities and exchanges in the first place, and secondarily on institutional arrangements—military-political primarily—and on flows of ideas, skills, and tastes that follow in the wake of changed economic and political behavior. One may, perhaps, assume that a similar primacy for economic exchanges existed also in earlier times all the way back to the earliest beginnings of civilization in ancient Mesopotamia, even though, for a long time, such exchanges were marginal in the sense of being confined to strategic and luxury items. It could scarcely be otherwise, since as long as transport was sporadic and subject to frequent interruptions, people could not safely depend on goods from afar to supply daily needs.

Nonetheless, cities constituted something of an exception to this generalization. All cities, of course, had to import food and often found it hard to find sufficient grain in the immediate hinterland. Long before a market system could be relied on to supply

cities from afar, a few great capital cities depended on food coming from relatively great distances in the economically unrequited form of tribute and taxes. Thus, the Chinese canal system was initially used to concentrate food and other commodities to support the court, the imperial army, and the hangers-on who clustered in the capital. Similarly, imperial Rome subsidized its proletarians with tribute grain from Egypt and north Africa; Mecca and Medina, the holy cities of Islam, also depended on grain subsidies from Egypt in the early days of the caliphate, and many other imperial and religious centers flourished and grew great on the strength of taxes and tribute in the form of food supplies coming from distant places.

It is no exaggeration to say that the cultural splendor and military formidability of early civilizations depended on the concentration of food and other commodities at court and temple centers by dint of exercise of direct command. The very notion of separate, autonomous civilizations registers this early division of labor, whereby the many toiled in the fields while a privileged few consumed the yield of rents and taxes and experimented with all the arts of civilization. Yet from the start, this simple polarity between taxpayers and tax consumers was complicated by a few outsiders, exempt from the burden of ordinary rents and taxes, who nonetheless had an important role to play as merchants, that is, as purveyors of desirable rarities that could not be secured by command because they originated beyond the reach of the established authorities.

For those who wanted such goods, one possibility was to send armed expeditions in search of what was unavailable at home. Gilgamesh's visit to the forests of Lebanon offers an early literary example of such an expedition, and Sargon of Akkad's military campaigns (ca. 2350 B.C.) may have been aimed at capturing supplies of metal and other strategically valuable goods that were unavailable in alluvial Mesopotamia. But the direct exercise of force to collect strategic commodities from places lying beyond the reach of everyday administration and tax collection was a good deal less efficient than relying on exchange. In particular, accumulated stocks of luxury goods produced by specialized artisans for civilized temples and courts could be offered to distant potentates who could organize local manpower to dig ore, cut timber, or raise grain needed at the civilized center. In this fashion each early civilization created around itself a periphery of trade partners, whose appetite for goods from civilized workshops was

as elastic as was civilized appetite for raw materials and other rarities. Even in very early times, such connections ranged across many hundreds of miles. Regular use of animal caravans and of sailing ships for such long-distance trade dates back at least to the third millennium B.C., as does the establishment of special legal status for the merchants who accompanied the goods, and whose travels necessarily carried them across political and cultural boundaries.

As long as each civilization was thus surrounded by a network of suppliers who depended on sailing ships and animal caravans to carry rarities from where they were produced to where they were consumed, the notion of separate, autonomous civilizations provides an adequate model for historical understanding. Techniques and ideas were exchanged along with goods, of course, and from time to time barbarians from the periphery conquered civilized centers, since mistrust between rulers and ruled tended to counteract the superiority of numbers on which civilized peoples could always count.

In the ancient Middle East, the resulting interactions among peoples living in different landscapes, with diverse languages and other outward signs of civilized diversity, led to the emergence of a cosmopolitan world system between 1700 and 500 B.C. Unlike the world system of recent centuries, in the ancient Middle East the primacy of command was preserved within ever-widening boundaries of a succession of great empires—Egyptian, Hittite, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian. But the tax- and tribute-collecting bureaucracies that sustained these empires worked in symbiosis with caravan and shipping networks that antedated the political empires and whose zones of activity always extended beyond even the most far-flung political frontiers. Thus merchants flourished and sometimes even grew great in the cracks and crannies left by the rent and tax systems, supplying wants, old and new, and making a profit on market sales.

The result could be counted as a territorially enlarged version of the sort of separate civilization from which the evolution started. This is what I did in *The Rise of the West*. Yet that way of thinking overlooks the continued diversity of religions, languages, and moral systems that long survived the rise of new empires, and it minimizes the economic role of markets and of long-distance trade in holding the ancient Middle East together while connecting it with an ever-widening and politically independent periphery. Market relations, insofar as they arose from

uncoerced human choices, differed in a simple but important fashion from the older way of concentrating resources by rent and tax collection. People are more likely to work efficiently when they do so willingly. As a result, when they can buy and sell things at their own discretion, and satisfy at least some of their wants by doing so, the result is likely to be a general increase in wealth. This, it seems to me, was beginning to be discovered in the second millennium B.C. and became normal and expected in course of the next millennium, at least in the principal theater for this dawning of a commercially based world system, that is, in the increasingly cosmopolitan Middle East.

This is all adumbrated in *The Rise of the West* but not pursued. For example, I used the phrase “the great society” to refer to the way trade and markets entered into symbiosis with taxes and rents in Hammurabi’s Mesopotamia; but this idea was not used to organize the history of subsequent centuries, and simply disappeared from the rest of the book. Being too much preoccupied by the notion of civilization, I bungled by not giving the initial emergence of a trans-civilizational process the sustained emphasis it deserved.

There is a sense, indeed, in which the rise of civilizations in the Aegean (later Mediterranean) coastlands and in India after 1500 B.C. were and remained part of the emerging world system centered in the Middle East. Historians have always known that archaic Greeks borrowed wholesale from the more skilled peoples of Asia and Egypt. Something similar occurred also in northern India. All three regions and their peoples remained in close and uninterrupted contact throughout the classical era; and in due course Alexander’s armies overthrew the Persians and made Macedonians and Greeks into the rulers of the Middle East. Why, therefore, should the Greeks not be counted as one of the family of nations taking part in a common and increasingly cosmopolitan enterprise? No doubt the traditional answer to this question rests very largely on what happened later, and reflects the historic antagonism between Christendom and Islam, and between Hindu India and Muslim rulers of that land—though in these subsequent ages, commercial and other relations across disputed cultural and religious frontiers always remained lively and tended to increase as time went on.

At any rate, without any real reflection about the choice, I conformed to precedent by organizing the history of western Eurasia in the first millennium B.C. around three separate and distinct civ-

ilizations: Middle Eastern, Indian, and Greek. Yet what happened might just as well have been described as the expansion of the Middle Eastern "great society" to embrace new regions and fresh peoples, with variable cultural characteristics of their own. From this ecumenical point of view, even distant China began to tie into the system after 100 B.C., when caravans connecting Syria with China began to travel regularly along the so-called silk road. Moreover, sea voyaging supplemented caravans, linking the Mediterranean world with India, and India with China at about the same time.

This ancient world system met serious setback after only two to three centuries of expansion, owing mainly to the way lethal diseases spread along the new trade routes and provoked catastrophic losses of life, especially in the Roman and Chinese empires. Demographic decay invited or allowed barbarian invasion and the resulting onset of the dark ages of European history. Similar though perhaps less destructive disruption also took place in China after the overthrow of the Han dynasty in A.D. 220. Long-distance trade across Eurasia thereupon dwindled toward insignificance due to the impoverishment and political insecurity that came to prevail at the two extremities of the ecumene. On the other hand, seafaring in the Indian Ocean and adjacent waters probably underwent no comparable decline, although information is so painfully scant that one cannot be sure.

Despite the dark ages, and the disruption of the earliest world system that ensued, revival soon became apparent, and in much the same way that long-range contacts revived in the Middle East after iron age barbarian invasions had disrupted the incipient cosmopolitanism of the bronze age. Moreover, when revival got underway, the Middle East, was, as before, the center; and it was helped by the fact that the domestication of camels had begun to put improved transport at the disposal of warriors and merchants alike. According to Richard Bulliet,¹⁰ domestication of camels was a long drawn-out process, beginning in southern Arabia, perhaps as early as 3000 B.C., but it attained decisive importance for the civilized world only between A.D. 300 and 500. During those centuries, camels displaced wheeled vehicles for transport purposes in the Middle East, and soon became the principal goods carriers in central Asia, north Africa, and adjacent regions as well.

¹⁰ Richard Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

Camels could cross deserts that were otherwise impenetrable. The geographical and cultural effect was analogous, on land, to the far better known opening of the oceans by European seamen after 1500. Places previously isolated now became accessible to camel caravans, and the reach of civilized trade nets extended accordingly. Arabia together with the oases and deserts of central Asia, the steppelands to their north, and sub-Saharan Africa were the regions most powerfully affected by this upgrading of caravan transport. They were all brought into far more intimate contact with the established centers of civilized life—primarily with the Middle East and with China—than had been possible before. As a result, between about A.D. 500 and 1000 an intensified ecumenical world system began to nibble away at cultural autonomy—a process registered more sensibly than in any other fashion by the spread of Islam into the newly opened marginal regions of the old world.

Indeed the rise of Islam and the revival of a world system reaching across civilizational and other cultural boundaries went hand in hand, and perhaps should be thought of as two aspects of the same process. Assuredly, in the first Muslim centuries, the community of the faithful subscribing to Muhammad's revelation was only one among a number of other religious communities that coexisted in the Middle East and adjacent regions. Religious and cultural pluralism was in fact institutionalized by the prescriptions of the Koran requiring Muslims to tolerate Christians and Jews. The civilization of the Islamic heartland therefore became a mosaic in which separate religious communities managed their own affairs within remarkably broad limits. Conquest and conversions after A.D. 1000, that carried Islam into India, southeast Asia, and across most of the Eurasian steppes, as well as into southeast Europe and a large part of sub-Saharan Africa, added far greater variety to this mosaic. Only at the extremes of the civilized world, in China, Japan, and northern and western Europe, did more old-fashioned social and cultural homogeneity prevail.

Persistent cultural pluralism within the realm of Islam was matched by the special restraints on political authority that Islamic law imposed. This meant greater autonomy for trade and market behavior than had been common in pre-Islamic times. Merchant communities were seldom completely self-governing in the Muslim scheme of things; but they were respected and could usually count on protection from Muslim political authorities.

After all, Muhammad had been a merchant before he became a prophet; and no higher endorsement of the mercantile mode of life could be imagined.

The next landmark in the history of this rising commercial world system arose out of Chinese borrowings from the Middle East, operating in a different natural environment and making use of a new and more efficient transport system. What the Chinese borrowed from the Middle Easterners was the array of customs, practices, and moral attitudes that sustained local and long-distance trade nets. Buddhism, reaching China along the trade routes of central Asia, served as the main transfer agent, implanting habits of mind and moral rules that accorded well with life as a trader. (Confucianism, by comparison, remained disdainful of commerce, viewing merchants as social parasites, who made a living by buying cheap and selling dear, without adding anything to the goods they handled.)

But what gave special importance to the spread of commercial habits and outlook to China was the fact that a canal network already existed, connecting the valley of the Yellow River with the even more extensive valley of the Yangtze. Barges and canal boats could easily move to and fro on those canals, and with almost complete safety, while carrying comparatively enormous loads. China's canals had been constructed for agricultural and tax collecting purposes across many centuries. Then in A.D. 605, when the Grand Canal linking the two great river basins was completed, China's network of internal waterways became capable of connecting regions with contrasting and complementary resources. As a result, the scale and importance of trade and commerce could escalate within China far beyond anything possible in the Middle East or elsewhere. Old ceilings on interdependence and regional exchange were broken through. A new range for the market integration of human effort came on stream, whereby ordinary people, even poor villagers, could safely depend on buying and selling to pay their taxes and even to provide themselves with food and other items of everyday consumption.

One must not exaggerate. Not all peasants bought rice so as to be able to specialize on raising silkworms, for example, and most of them still provided most or all of the food they consumed. Nonetheless, when specialization proved capable of paying off in the form of even slight improvement in standard of living, Chinese peasants and townsmen began to specialize on a scale never

before approached by a civilized society. The result, of course, was improved skills and a great increase in wealth for society as a whole. One register was a near doubling of China's population under the Song dynasty. Another was the fact the Chinese artisanal skills began to surpass those of the rest of the world. Silk, porcelain, gunpowder, and shipbuilding were among the more important examples of Chinese superiority, but there were many others. Busy chaffering in innumerable marketplaces and an enormous flotilla of canal boats kept goods in circulation and allowed surpluses of one region to be exchanged for surpluses produced elsewhere with a reliability and efficiency that had never been possible before.

The effects of China's commercialization were never confined by political borders. Instead, caravan trade intensified across all of China's land frontiers and a greatly magnified sea commerce soon developed as well, taking Chinese goods to the Indian Ocean and across the sea to Japan in far greater quantity than before. The world system, previously centered in the great cities and bazaars of the Middle East, thus acquired a new and far more powerful productive center and, not coincidentally, expanded its reach into remote western Europe and other previously marginal areas like Japan.¹¹

Medievalists have long recognized the importance for Europe of the rise of towns after about A.D. 1000 and the role of the spice trade that tied European consumers with producers in islands of the distant Indies. But historians have not yet gotten used to the idea that this was only part of a larger phenomenon—the expansion and intensification of an emergent world system that now embraced almost all of Eurasia and much of Africa as well. Nor have European and Islamic historians yet realized that the rise of medieval European civilization after A.D. 1000 coincided with an eastward shift of the world system's center from the Middle East to China. That is not surprising. Given the past preoccupation of our medievalists with the national histories of England and France—implicitly retrojecting upon the entire human past the circumstances of the late nineteenth century, when the French

¹¹ William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago, 1982). Chapter 2 sets forth my understanding of China's commercialization and its leading world role between 1000 and 1500, with far fuller footnotes than I have reproduced here.

and British empires did cover most of the globe—it requires a real leap of the imagination to recognize China's primacy, Marco Polo to the contrary notwithstanding.

The next great chapter in the rise of the modern world system is, of course, far more familiar, and indeed, the scholar who made the phrase famous, Immanuel Wallerstein, once believed that it only began in about 1500 with the European oceanic discoveries and the rise of capitalism. The discoveries certainly did change the pattern of world trade and world cultural relations, bringing the Americas and innumerable oceanic islands into the vortex of the expanding world system. Within surprisingly few decades, the most active center of innovative activity shifted from China to the Atlantic face of Europe. Before 1500, capitalists achieved remarkable autonomy within the walls of a few Italian and north European city-states; and even after that political framework decayed, some few of the new monarchies and emergent national states that supplanted urban sovereignties in Europe continued to give merchants and bankers almost unhampered scope for expansion of market activity, whereas in China, and also in most of the Muslim world, regimes unsympathetic to private capitalist accumulation prevailed. In the name of good government, Asian rulers effectively checked the rise of large-scale entrepreneurship by confiscatory taxation on the one hand, and by regulation of prices in the interest of consumers on the other. This left large-scale commercial enterprise, and presently also mining and plantation agriculture, more and more to the Europeans. Consequently, the rise of the west to its world hegemony of recent centuries got underway.

Scholarly investigation of what happened in China and why the Ming dynasty chose to abandon overseas ventures after the 1430s remain very slender by comparison with the abundant literature on European exploitation of the new worlds their navigation opened to them. Comparative study of the dynamics of Chinese and European expansion before and after the tip point that came about 1450 to 1500 offers an especially intriguing topic for historical inquiry today, poised as we are on the horizon of the twenty-first century, when, for all we know, the displacement of the far east by the far west, that took place in the sixteenth century, may be reversed.

It is, nonetheless, worth noting that just as China's rise after A.D. 1000 had depended on prior borrowings from the Middle East, so Europe's world success after 1500 also depended on prior bor-

rowings from China. And if Japan's post-World War II economic record turns out to be the presage of further triumphs for the Pacific rim, it is no less clear that this success, too, will depend on prior borrowings of European (and American) skills. This looks like one of the clearest patterns in world history. It is also something to be expected inasmuch as no population can overtake and then surpass the rest of the world without using the most efficacious and powerful instruments known anywhere on earth; and by definition such instruments are located at the world centers of wealth and power—wherever they may be. Thus any geographical displacement of world leadership must be prefaced by successful borrowing from previously established centers of the highest prevailing skills.

The fluctuating growth of this sort of world system, with shifting centers and a great multiplicity of peoples and cultures caught within it, seems to me now to be a part of world history that largely escaped my attention when writing *The Rise of the West*. Even for the centuries after 1500 I was intent on using the civilizational envelope to organize my remarks; only after 1850 did I suggest that the autonomy of the separate civilizations of Asia had broken down, yielding to a new global cosmopolitanism. But autonomy had been eroding long before 1850, long before 1500, and even long before 1000. The process, I now think, dated back to the very beginning of civilized history, and ought to have been presented as such, alongside the history of separate civilizations and their interactions.

Exactly how a narrative could combine both aspects of the human past is not easy to specify. Only by making the attempt can the possibility be tested, and this ought now to become the agenda for serious world historians. Cultural pluralism and differentiation is a dominating feature of human history; yet beneath and behind that pluralism there is also an important commonality. That commonality found expression in the rise of a world system that transcended political and cultural boundaries because human beings desired to have the results of the operation of that system. In other words, they wanted access to rare and valuable goods that could not be found close at hand, and presently they also desired the enrichment that market exchanges helped to provoke and sustain by rewarding efficient producers. In proportion as more and more individuals spent more and more of their time on activities connected with market exchanges, the world system grew from its initial marginality toward the remarkable central-

ity it enjoys in our own time. Yet this sort of interchange and interdependence remains entirely compatible with cultural diversity, and, at least so far, also with political pluralism and rivalry. All three belong in a proper history of the world—somehow.

Finally, there is another level of human experience that deserves historians' attention: to wit, our encounters and collisions with all the other organisms that make up the earth's ecosystem. Agriculture is one chapter in that story. So is the shifting incidence of disease. And the recent rise of scientific understanding and the extended control that such understanding sometimes allows is yet a third dimension of this story. As hinted above, disease affected the history of the world system of exchange in the first Christian centuries, and again, more briefly, in the fourteenth, when the black death ravaged China, the Middle East, and Europe. More importantly, civilized diseases regularly acted to break down the cultural morale and independence of peoples newly exposed to their ravages. The disaster that struck native Americans after 1492, when they were suddenly exposed to European and then African diseases, is the most dramatic but by no means the only example of this phenomenon.¹² The spread of crops, of domesticated animals, and of unwanted pests and infestations is another side of ecological history about which historians are as yet quite ill informed.¹³ Yet these, too, clearly impinged on economic and political history in much the same way that epidemic diseases did, by allowing some populations to flourish while penalizing or even destroying others.

These dimensions of human history therefore also deserve a place in any really satisfactory account of the past; they, too, ought to be woven into the narrative of the rise and elaboration of separate civilizations and cultures and viewed as ecumenical processes comparable in importance with the rise of a world system of economic complementarity and cultural symbiosis.

Such an agenda for world historians is perhaps daunting. Yet anything less is plainly inadequate to the complexities of the human condition as we now understand it. Nor does it strike me as impossible—however ambitious. Data exist; what is needed is

¹² William H. McNeill, *Plagues and People* (New York, 1976), is still the best general survey of the subject. A shorter essay, William H. McNeill, *The Human Condition: An Ecological and Historical View* (Princeton, 1980) offers a preliminary overview of the intersection of ecology with history as more usually understood.

¹³ Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1988) is a truly remarkable effort to overcome that ignorance, but constitutes only a beginning.

to gather and bring them to order and then construct a clear and elegant discourse with which to present the different facets and interacting flows of human history as we now understand them. Historians always face exactly this task, even when writing about comparatively small numbers of people and limited periods of time. Information is almost always overabundant; intelligibility comes only with selection and ordering, somehow embodied in a flow of words to provoke a portrait of the past in readers' minds. It is an art that historians have always cultivated, and we are now in a position to apply that art to the whole of the human past with a precision, richness, and accuracy beyond anything previously possible, simply because historical scholarship has explored the whole of the globe as never before, while the evolution of historical concepts has arrived at a level of sophistication that makes older efforts at world history, even one as recent as mine, seem fundamentally outmoded and obviously in need of replacement.

This journal, therefore, has much to accomplish and many questions to address.