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New Patterns in Global History

A Review Essay on *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830. Volume 2: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* by Victor Lieberman (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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If genius is the ability to create things beyond the capability of most ordinary mortals, Lieberman's two-volume global history surely qualifies as a work of genius. It is difficult to fathom the work that went into these volumes. The first builds on a lifetime of study of mainland Southeast Asia to detail patterns of political, economic, and cultural change and integration over a thousand years in the region from Burma to Vietnam. The second volume, which will be of greatest interest to scholars of global, European, Indian, and East Asia history, explores the degree to which the patterns identified in Volume 1 are replicated in other parts of Eurasia, focusing mainly on France, Russia, Japan, China, and India. In doing so, Lieberman displays an astonishing command of diverse secondary literatures. What one might expect to be a superficial tour of world history is in fact a penetrating, deeply informed, and unique discussion of overlooked themes, contrasts, and patterns that span Eurasian history and force us to view the whole in a new light.

I should add that one of the pleasures of reading this book is that Lieberman carries out this immodest ambition in rather modest fashion. He is always at pains to admit variations, differences, and unique elements in each case that qualify or depart from the overall patterns that he is seeking to establish. Moreover, Lieberman treats the work of other scholars, even those with whom he disagrees, with unflinching respect and fairness. Although Lieberman's range of reading and the scholarship he draws on is prodigious, one never feels browbeaten; the footnotes are clear and helpful, and despite the extraordinary length of the book (908 pp.) the narrative keeps moving so that the length seems a reasonable accommodation to the scope of the material. The bibliography – 127 single-spaced pages(!) – is helpfully provided on-line, rather than in the physical text.

In this review, I shall first outline Lieberman's argument, and why it is powerful and unique. The second part will then reflect on where Lieberman's

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argument fits into the larger debate on world history, and particularly the controversies over European exceptionalism and the onset of industrialized, technologically innovative, and liberal states.

Six Strange Parallels

Lieberman's argument is that the political systems of Eurasia – whether European states like France and Russia or Asian Empires like India and China or even Southeast Asian kingdoms like Burma, Siam, Cambodia, and Vietnam – all experienced a number of common oscillations and trajectories of economic, political and cultural development in the millennium from 800 BC to 1800 AD.

The first common pattern is territorial expansion and consolidation. Whether it was France extending out from the Ile de France to span the entire space from the Pyrenees and Alps to the North Sea, Muscovy spreading across Siberia and into the Caucasus, China absorbing Xinjiang and Tibet, India (under the Mughals, then the British) uniting the entire subcontinent, Vietnam filling the entire coastal plain from the Chinese border to the Mekong delta, Burma taking control of the entire Irrawaddy basin, or Siam occupying almost the space between Burma and Vietnam, most of the major states of Eurasia underwent uneven but long-term territorial expansion and consolidation in this era, at the expense of smaller dynastic or regional political units. Indeed throughout Eurasia, smaller political units tended to disappear or get swallowed up by larger states. Lieberman of course notes the huge differences in scale between, say, Vietnam and China, or France and Mughal India, and details the consequences of that difference. But the overall trend seems valid – all over Eurasia, *by local standards*, smaller political entities were disappearing and the major political entities were enlarging their territories across this period.

A second common pattern was administrative centralization. The larger political entities were not just loose confederations or tribute empires with fairly autonomous sub-regions. Rather, over this millennium political centers strengthened their taxing, legal, and bureaucratic capacities, administering justice, imposing order, and moving resources around on an ever greater scale. As a consequence, military capacities were strengthened as well, helping the major states to consolidate and maintain their territorial expansion.

The third common pattern was cultural integration, both horizontal (across various regions) and vertical (across elite and popular social strata). Again, whether looking at Southeast Asia, or Western Europe, or at the more central regions of Eurasia, we find an expansion in the use of vernacular languages that replaced the use of classical universal languages derived from religious and administrative sources (Latin, Sanskrit, Arabic, Classical Chinese) with local but nation-wide languages, such as French, Urdu, Japanese, and

Vietnamese. There were some interesting exceptions here – China retained a universal text as a basis for national communications even while strong and often mutually unintelligible dialects (Cantonese, Mandarin, Fukienese) became established – but in most cases the trend is clear. Moreover, the new vernaculars not only spread across subregions, but also breached the prior sharp linguistic divide between elites and commoners. Whereas in the earlier periods, only the elites enjoyed literacy, and wrote and spoke in the classical/administrative languages while ordinary people spoke only local tongues, by the later periods an increasingly large circle of ordinary people (from one quarter to one half) were literate and could converse in a national language, one that was also shared by elites and increasingly used as the vehicle for administration and literature.

The fourth common pattern was an increase in commercialization, monetization, and urbanization. Whether we look at Japan, China and Vietnam, or France, Russia and India, urban centers grew and took on more functions, while merchants became more numerous and engaged in wider circles of activity. Indeed, hand-in-hand with administrative centralization, trade expanded in scope and volume, generally providing more resources for taxation but also boosting the availability of foodstuffs for provisioning cities. Expanding trade contributed to cultural integration as well as larger numbers of literate and numerate trades made their circuits.

A fifth common pattern was ethnic politicization. As states became more centralized and professionally administered, with prevailing use of a vernacular tongue, more people came to use symbols of the state and the dominant culture to shape their own identities (either in support of or against the dominant cultural/administrative construct). Thus indigenous Burmese, Siamese, Vietnamese, Russian, French, and Chinese (Han) identities developed from what had been earlier mainly local or clan identities and relations of subjugation to particular rulers. Although Lieberman is clear to distinguish this from 19th century style European nationalism, he shows that many elements were similar, and that a sense of belonging to communities that identified with a particular state/cultural complex gained strength in all regions through this period.

Finally, a sixth common pattern was synchronous oscillations in the progress of territorial consolidation that also encompassed oscillations in population and economic growth. That is, the progress of territorial, population, economic, and urban expansion was regularly interrupted, and the pattern of such interruptions was common, across all of Eurasia. This is perhaps the most striking claim, but also the most readily demonstrated with hard data on the economic history and political development of major states and empires. Put briefly, from about 800 to 1250 AD, major states generally prospered, with urbanization, commercial expansion, above-average population growth, and territorial expansion and integration. In the West, we

are familiar with this period as the “Middle Ages” reaching a peak in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. But this was also the period of the consolidation of the Rus empire based in Kiev, the Delhi sultanate in India, and the Tang & Song empires in China. It was also, unknown to most historians of Europe, even a time of economic and political expansion in southeast Asia. But then from the mid 13th to the late 15th centuries, there followed a period of disorders and decay of imperial structures. In western Europe, population growth slowed and then dropped dramatically with the incursions of the Black death in the 14th century. Similar trends are visible across Eurasia all the way into the southeast Asian mainland. China, Russia, and India were affected by Mongol invasions; Europe and Southeast Asia seem to have succumbed mainly to disease and internal disorders. In all of these regions, a new phase of integration arose from roughly 1450 to 1600 or 1650, only to be interrupted by another, but this time briefer and less severe breakdown (what western historians describe as the “crisis of the 17th century.”) Then a new phase of imperial consolidation took hold, only to again be interrupted in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. However – and this is important as well – each succeeding interregnum or period of disorder in this span was less severe, and reconstruction of major states resumed faster and was succeeded by a new and greater round of expansion.

It is indeed remarkable how many processes across Eurasia seem to be temporally linked in this fashion. Lieberman not only documents these patterns, including quantitative data on the geographic expansion of major states, but makes them plausible in terms of global patterns of climate, disease, and the reinforcement of relations across regions through trade. That is, the Medieval warming anomaly in the northern hemisphere from roughly 800 to 1250 correlates well with the first expansion; the ‘Little Ice Age’ to the disruptions in the 14th and 17th centuries, and renewed warming to the post 1600 expansion. In addition, the Black Death – whose spread was likely linked to trade expansion and climate change – had similar effects across Eurasia. Periods of administrative consolidation also provided favorable conditions for trade and hence urbanization and overall population increase; but disruption and disorder not only reduced state control, they also created violence and trade contractions that further reinforced the negative conditions. “Synergies between climate, disease, trade, new social forms, and so forth” (p. 906) thus are woven together to explain oscillations in growth.

Lieberman does note anomalies in these patterns. Japan is one – it experiences no real territorial consolidation until the Tokugawa shogunate of the 17th century, which then maintains stability without a break to the 19th century. Japan is also an outlier in terms of population dynamics: its population apparently remained stable from 1720 to the 1830s, when everywhere else in Eurasia population was soaring. Lieberman attributes Japan’s demographic and political behavior to its extreme isolation from the

rest of Eurasia. Basically free of threats of external invasion, its central government was not under pressure to arm and centralize, and once it achieved a high level of population density and urbanization in the early 18th century, Japan's populace sought to simply maintain their numbers.

Another somewhat anomalous case is India, which never quite settled into either a stable multi-state system, like Europe and mainland southeast Asia (the latter's main states being Burma, Siam (modern Thailand), Cambodia, and Vietnam), nor consolidated into an all-encompassing empire like China. Instead, major empires imposed by Turkic invaders unified the northern plains and penetrated south into the peninsula, but never fully integrated the still vital and distinctive Maratha, Tamil, and other south-Indian cultural/political units. It took the British invaders to finally consolidate political control over the entire subcontinent.

Lieberman in fact emphasizes these differences by discussing the differences between the 'protected' and 'exposed' zones of Eurasia. The 'protected zones' were those too distant from central Asia to be greatly impacted by nomadic invasions; these zones included Europe (including European Russia), mainland Southeast Asia, and Japan. The 'exposed zones' were those subject to repeated invasion by Turkic/Mongol nomads, namely China and India, whose history was deeply shaped by repeated nomad conquests. Lieberman skillfully shows how much that seems unique in China's dynastic cycling, and India's fragile and incomplete consolidation, can be explained by their exposed position and repeated conquest, while the continuously multi-state character of both western Europe and mainland Southeast Asia owe much to their protected positions. He also points out, and this is striking, that the exposed regions gave birth to the very earliest high civilizations, the Harappan (Indus) and Shang (Yellow River), while the 'protected' regions only produced the states that would become templates for modern societies – what Lieberman calls the 'charter states' of Kievan Rus, Capetian France, and medieval Burma, Siam and Vietnam – late in the first millennium AD.

Obviously, this summary oversimplifies what Lieberman spins out in nearly 1,000 pages of carefully weighed evidence and treatment of nuances, variations, and anomalies. But his points about substantial temporal and organizational parallels seem, to this reviewer, valid. I endorse Lieberman's own statement of his accomplishments, as no one else has advanced so many novel themes: "the distinction between protected and exposed zones; the concept of coordinated charter states; South Asia as intermediate between the protected zone and Chinese patterns; progressively milder interregna across both Asia and Europe; politicized ethnicity as a common European and Southeast Asian mobilizing device; sustained synergies between political, cultural, and commercial integration; the essential isomorphism of ever more complex commercial, political and cultural structures; and the coordinating

role of the Medieval Climate Anomaly and of parallel institutional experiments” (pp. 906–907).

One emerges from the book impressed with the notion that “Europe” and “Asia” have only limited usefulness as descriptions of organizationally distinct regions. In fact, Lieberman details interesting ways in which Russia and Vietnam were alike (elevation of borrowed cultural idioms), and still other ways (esp. limited bureaucratic integration of formerly feudal domains and the maintenance of warrior elites) in which France and Japan were similar and distinct from Russia and China (the latter having more truly absolutist rulers and bureaucratic service elites).

But most powerful is the skilful use of multiple examples throughout, as Lieberman draws knowledgeably on history from England and Holland to Java and the Philippines. Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East are set aside here (even genius has some limits), but compared to comparative histories which simply juxtapose Europe with China, or with south Asia, or focus on a particular region such as central Asia or East Asia, the scope of Lieberman’s comparisons are stunning and compelling.

Without qualifying Lieberman’s accomplishment, however, I would still differ from him slightly on how his work fits into the broader arguments on the origins of European exceptionalism and global history.

Why Europe?

Lieberman’s work obviously dramatically strengthens the claims by Ken Pomeranz (2000, 2002), Bin Wong (1997), Andre Gunder Frank (1998), and myself (Goldstone 1991, 2002, 2008) regarding the fundamentally similar demographic, economic, and political trajectories of major European and Asian polities up to 1800. Indeed, by adding mainland southeast Asian states to the examples of parallelism, and adding careful treatment of the apparent departures and exceptions, Lieberman assembles an overwhelming case that the attributes of ‘early modernity’ – administrative centralization under a state bureaucracy, consolidation of national vernacular languages, the emergence of politicized ethnicity through the influence of more powerful states using those languages, extensive commercialization and the growth of urban centers, economic and population growth – were pan-Eurasian phenomena, and in no way made European states distinctive.

Because all of Lieberman’s six major trends prefigured conditions *after* 1830, when the world became dominated by relatively compact national states with centralized bureaucratic administrations, dominant merchant/urban cores, and national cultures rooted in vernacular languages, he cogently argues that these trends constitute an ‘early modern’ complex that was global and thus laid the foundation for the modern world. The fact that European states briefly became more technologically advanced and politically dominant from

1750 to 2000 is treated as a minor concern, inasmuch as “Identifying reasons for this divergence is not particularly difficult” (p. 272).

For Lieberman, the reasons are as follows: both technological and imperialist prowess in Europe was simply the result of ongoing competition among states in a ‘protected’ region of stable multi-state configuration, of the kind that only appeared in Western Europe and mainland Southeast Asia. The extensive imperial polities of India and China were too locally dominant to be driven to constantly improve their military/technical capacity. Rather, when administratively intact they easily maintained their borders and internal peace, and when undergoing administrative decay due to intra-elites struggles and administrative overstretch they were overwhelmed by nomadic invasions that forced them to retrench and reconsolidate their imperial systems.

In explaining why it was western Europe, and not the similarly multi-state southeast Asian mainland that was the technological winner, Lieberman follows Jan Luiten van Zanden (2008) in noting that Europe developed financial innovations that produced lower interest rates, a less labor-intensive agrarian regime that allowed more flexible use of wage labor, and superior mining and metallurgical skills. Geography mattered too; compared to Southeast Asia, where mainland regions of dense jungle and mountains meant much lower population densities than in Europe, only Europe could develop the full range of fortifications, artillery, armed infantry, and economies whose urbanization and specialization matched that of India and China. Finally, in southeast Asia, the strong, administratively centralized powers of the mainland were not deeply engaged in maritime competition; the maritime centers of the region were in the islands (the Philippines, Indonesia) and the Malay peninsula, which remained politically fragmented and open to external (first Muslim, then European) influence and conquest. If we think of England as analogous to Japan in its protected island position and distinctive identity, Holland as similar to Melaka as a regional trading entrepot, and France and Prussia as analogous to Burma and Vietnam, then for Europe to have acted as Southeast Asia would have required England to withdraw entirely from European competition and conflict, Holland to remain a loose federation without major naval or military power that it could project, and France and Prussia to focus entirely on continental conflicts. Instead, in Europe England, Holland, France, and Prussia remained deeply engaged in military and naval competition for centuries, developing their financial, technological, labor, and administrative capacities to a level superior to anything in central, south, eastern, or southeastern Asia. Thus it was in a “constellation of forces, rather than any single attribute, [that] Europe’s growing commercial and superiority probably resided” (p. 273).

Note that Lieberman has, in this argument, reconfigured what it means to be ‘modern.’ Most of the recent literature on global history (including, in addition to those mentioned above, Allen 2009; Mielants 2007; Mitterauer

2010; and Mokyr 2009) takes it for granted that Europe's technological innovations and economic productivity were key to its dominant 20th century position and are the crucial outcome to be explained, whether it is approached through individualism, or enlightenment, or the class and economic configurations sometimes described as 'capitalism.' For Lieberman, however, the crucial elements of modernity are the organizational and cultural configurations of the national bureaucratic-administrative state, as opposed to the loose autarchy of shifting regional polities or the punctuated equilibrium of vast and periodically conquered empires. Insofar as he finds trajectories toward that outcome to be widespread in Eurasia, 'modernity' is the outcome of those early modern trajectories, and not a major departure. Europe's technical and economic divergence from the rest of Eurasia after 1750 is just a particular outcome in one sphere of social life, like the synthesis that produced Zen Buddhism in Japan.

I cannot deny that in his own terms, Lieberman is correct; I just vigorously disagree with Lieberman on what it means to be 'modern.' Certainly, there are many aspects of the post-1830 world that are similar to, and clearly rooted in, prior trends. But are they the most distinctive aspects of the post-1830 world, the ones that make the 19th and 20th centuries 'modern'? Let me argue they are not by extending Lieberman's patterns even further back in time.

Lieberman starts his story c. 800 AD; that is reasonable as the period prior to 800 was one of extended disorders, whether we are looking at the breakdown of the Roman Empire or the period of disunion between the Han and Sui/Tang empires in China. But let us look back further. Most of the same trends that Lieberman sees – more extensive polities, more centrally administered states, with greater horizontal and vertical integration – can be seen in earlier periods as well. In the Mediterranean, the scattered kingdoms of Homeric Greece gave way to the more consolidated empires of Athens and Sparta, then to Macedonia, then to Rome (which swallowed up Etruria and Carthage and Greece). Even earlier, in the Middle East, the various kingdoms of the Hebrews, Canaanites, and others were displaced by Assyria, which later gave way to Babylon and Persia. And earlier still, in Egypt, the disparate northern and southern and upper Nilotic regions were gradually integrated into the centrally administered Pharaonic empire.

Each of these regions also saw oscillations of consolidation and breakdown (as in Egypt, separating the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms). And one could well argue that what happened linguistically in Rome was the emergence of a vernacular (Latin) as the new language of administration and literature to succeed the 'classical' language of Greece (the foundational language of religion and philosophy for Greco-Roman civilization), clearly evidenced in the importance of the Vulgate translation of the Greek New Testament. Indeed, Virgil's effort to create a national epic in Latin was as linguistically self-

conscious as Dante's efforts a millennium later to create a new epic (using Virgil as his guide!) in vernacular Italian.

In short, the trends that Lieberman documents so well for all of Eurasia can be found even more widely; they simply do not and cannot be extended as a matter of course to the formation of modern states. For example, consider China. Despite all the observed trends, by the middle of the 19th century China came apart again in the Taiping rebellion. Lieberman considers the Taiping mainly as an anti-Manchu revolt, hence as evidence for surging Han Chinese ethnic mobilization (pp. 593, 601). Yet the Taiping was actually a Christian-inspired movement that preached equality for women and opposition to the traditional Confucian/Imperial system, not merely anti-Manchu grievances. In order to defeat the Taiping, the Imperial state devolved power to local militia leaders who defeated the rebellion, but thus sowed the seeds for the dissolution of China into warlord domains after the fall of the Empire in 1911. It was only the Nationalist and Communist Revolutions – clearly based on 'modern' ideologies imported from the West, including not only nationalism and communism but also anti-Confucianism and the proto-Marxist student/worker May 4th movement – that produced a reunification of China. There is no doubt that modern China can trace its geographic and cultural roots to Imperial China, but that is not the same as saying that the trajectory of Imperial China's administrative and cultural development would have led to the modern Chinese state, the first Chinese state in two thousand years not based on traditional Confucian statecraft. The organizational core of modern China is something new, based on Western-style engineering and ideologically totalitarian schemes of social control.

I would argue that the trajectories and patterns that Lieberman identifies, though quite real, are logical developments in advanced pre-modern states. These are states built on what he calls a 'charter' entity, which is rooted in a classical tradition of sacred literature (not a modern secular constitution); authority derived from tradition and backed by religious/spiritual power; and economies that no matter how commercially active and urbanized remained limited by traditional knowledge of the world and productive technologies bounded by the energy available from wind, water, and muscle power. Such polities have considerable room for Smithian economic development, administrative centralization, and commercialization during periods of favorable climate, population growth, and pacification due to strong political control. Indeed, whenever such favorable conditions have appeared we see such trajectories develop – they certainly are not the product of characteristics unique to Western European societies.

What is uniquely modern, however, is for states to break the links to the charter societies on which they were founded – as the United States did from Britain, France did at the time of the French Revolution, Turkey did in the Atatürk Revolution, China did in its Nationalist and Communist Revolutions,

and India did under Nehru and the Congress Party. In all of these cases, a segment of the political elite decided to repudiate the basis of authority that had dominated the polity for centuries before. In place of traditional hereditary rulers backed by religious beliefs deriving from classical sacred texts, these societies all turned to rulers claiming authority by virtue of popular mobilization and explicit disavowal of prior monarchical/imperial forms and legitimation. Secularism, constitutions, and novel egalitarian ideologies took the place of state-religion, hereditary rule, and older bureaucratic/privileged elites.

What occurred was not just an incrementally greater level of urbanization and commercialization, or of technical and military capacity, within a basically similar organizational/cultural framework. Rather, modernization involved a mobilization and reorganization of society on the basis of cultural frameworks that explicitly rejected the fundamental precepts of the charter state. How such radical breaks with the past could occur seems mysterious, even inconceivable from Lieberman's trajectories. For Lieberman, modernization emerges incrementally out of long-standing trajectories of political, economic, and cultural development. For me, modernization emerges as a challenge and overturning of the basic social, political, and economic organization on which pre-modern societies were based.

No doubt it is too simple to treat modernization as 'either/or.' I would of course admit of many continuities and persistent strains linking modern states with their pre-modern predecessors; and Lieberman I'm sure would admit there are elements of modern states that break with the past. Yet his book has little to say about the latter, focusing instead on the continuities.

As we search for patterns in history, we thus need to be aware of both continuities and sharp breaks, or more formally, linear and chaotic changes. Lieberman has solidly established that administrative centralization, economic growth, commercialization, and proto-nationalist mobilization and cultural complexes did not first develop in Europe and then spread to previously unchanging and organizationally more primitive states. Rather, he has shown that these linear processes had clear and parallel trajectories in multiple Eurasian societies. But we now need to ask similar questions about the radical breaks, the chaotic changes that gave us the other elements of the modern world. Did they too have parallel roots? Or did they in fact have European origins and spread from that source? The old debates on European exceptionalism may now be settled in the negative with regard to administrative, commercial, political, and proto-nationalist trajectories. But they may still have life and need further exploration focusing on the radical breaks with the past that also constitute a key part of modernity.

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