

## CHAPTER 14

## The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor?

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Most Western historians writing about the rise of the West have treated that development as if it were independent of the West's relations to other high cultures. At first, thinking about this, I attributed it to ethnocentrism, pure and simple. But then I was struck by something else: Virtually all Western scholars, and especially those who had taken a global perspective on the "modern" world, began their histories in about A. D. 1400—just when both East and West were at their low ebb and when the organizational system that had existed prior to this time had broken down. By selecting this particular point to start their narratives, they could not help but write a similar plot, one in which the West "rose," apparently out of nowhere.

What would happen to the narrative if one started a little earlier?<sup>1</sup> Even more important, what would happen to the theoretical assumption that the peculiar form of Western capitalism, as it developed in sixteenth-century western Europe, was a necessary and (almost) sufficient cause of Western hegemony? What if one looked at the system *before* European hegemony and if one looked at the organization of capital accumulation, "industrial" production, trade and distribution in comparative perspective? If one found wide variation among earlier economic organizations, all of which had yielded economic vitality and dynamism, then it might not be legitimate to attribute Europe's newly gained hegemony to "capitalism" in the unique form it took in Europe. It might be necessary, instead, to test an alternative hypothesis: that Europe's rise was substantially assisted by what it learned from other,

more advanced cultures—at least until Europe overtook and subdued them.

It was to explore such questions that I began to study the economic organization of the world in the thirteenth century. At the start, I had no intention of writing a book, but only of satisfying my curiosity over this puzzle. In the course of my five years of research, however, I found no single book, or even several books combined, that gave me a "global" picture of how international trade was organized at that time. Interestingly enough the separate histories I did find all hinted, usually in passing, at the manifold connections each place maintained with trading partners much farther afield. I became preoccupied with reconstructing those connections.<sup>2</sup>

The basic conclusion I reached<sup>3</sup> was that there had existed, prior to the West's rise to preeminence in the sixteenth century, a complex and prosperous predecessor—a system of world trade and even "cultural" exchange that, at its peak toward the end of the thirteenth century, was integrating (if only at high points of an archipelago of towns) a very large number of advanced societies stretching between the extremes of north-western Europe and China. Indeed, the century between A.D. 1250 and 1350 clearly seemed to constitute a crucial turning point in world history, a moment when the balance between East and West could have tipped in either direction. In terms of space, the Middle East heartland that linked the eastern Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean constituted a geographic fulcrum on which East and West were then roughly balanced.

Thus, at that time, one certainly could not

have predicted the outcome of any contest between East and West. There seemed no *historical necessity* that shifted the system in favor of the West, nor was there any historical necessity that would have prevented cultures in the eastern regions from becoming progenitors of a "modern" world system. This thesis seemed at least as compelling to me as its opposite.

True, the "modern" world system that *might* have developed, had the East remained dominant, would probably have had different institutions and organization than the historically specific version that developed under European hegemony. But there is no reason to believe that, had the West not "risen," the world under different leadership would have remained stagnant.

Therefore, it seemed crucial to gain an understanding of the years between A.D. 1250 and 1350.<sup>4</sup> During that period, an international trade economy climaxed in the regions between northwestern Europe and China, yielding prosperity and artistic achievements in many of the places that were newly integrated.

This trading economy involved merchants and producers in an extensive (worldwide) if narrow network of exchange. Primary products, including but not confined to specialty agricultural items, mostly spices, constituted a significant proportion of all items traded, but over shorter distances in particular, manufactured goods were surprisingly central to the system. In fact, trade probably could not have been sustained over long distances without including manufactured goods such as textiles and weapons. The production of primary and manufactured goods was not only sufficient to meet local needs but, beyond that, the needs of export as well.

Moreover, long-distance trade involved a wide variety of merchant communities at various points along the routes, because distances, as measured by time, were calculated in weeks and months at best, and it took years to traverse the entire circuit. The merchants who handled successive transactions did not necessarily speak the same languages, nor were their local currencies the same. Yet goods were transferred, prices set, exchange

rates agreed on, contracts entered into, credit extended, partnerships formed, and, obviously, records kept and agreements honored.

The scale of these exchanges was not very large, and the proportion of population and even production involved in international exchange constituted only a very small fraction of the total productivity of the societies. Relatively speaking, however, the scale of the system in the later Middle Ages was not substantially below that in the "early modern age" (i.e., after 1600), nor was the technology of production inferior to that of the later period. No great technological breakthroughs distinguish the late medieval from the early modern period.

The book that resulted from my research, *Before European Hegemony*, describes the system of world trade circa A.D. 1300, demonstrating how and to what extent the world was linked into this common commercial network of production and exchange. Since such production and exchange were relatively unimportant to the subsistence economies of all participating regions, I did not have to defend an unrealistic vision of a tightly entailed international system of interdependence. Clearly, this was not the case. But it was also true in the sixteenth century. Thus, if it is possible to argue that a world system began in that later century, it is equally plausible to acknowledge that it existed three hundred years earlier.

It is important to recognize that *no system* is fully global in the sense that all parts articulate evenly with one another, regardless of whether the role they play is central or peripheral. Even today, the world, more globally integrated than ever before in history, is broken up into important subspheres or subsystems—such as the Middle Eastern and North African system, the North Atlantic system, the Pacific Basin or Rim system, the eastern European bloc (functionally persisting, even though its socialist orientation has crumbled), and China, which is still a system unto itself. And within each of these blocs, certain major cities play key nodal roles, dominating the regions around them and often having more intense interactions with nodal centers in other systems than with their own peripheries.

In the thirteenth century, also, there were subsystems (defined by language, religion and empire, and measurable by relative transactions) dominated by imperial or core cities, as well as mediated by essentially hinterland-less trading enclaves. Their interactions with one another, although hardly as intense as today's, defined the contours of the larger system. Instead of airlines, these cities were bound together by sealanes, rivers, and great overland caravan routes, some of which had been in use since antiquity. Ports and oases served the same functions as do air terminals today, bringing diverse goods and people together from long distances.

Given the primitive technologies of transport that existed during the early period, however, few nodes located at opposite ends of the system could do business directly with one another. Journeys were broken down into much smaller geographic segments, with central places between flanking trading circuits serving as "break-in-bulk" exchanges for goods destined for more distant markets. Nor was the world the "global village" of today, sharing common consumer goals and assembly-line work in a vast international division of labor. The subsystems of the thirteenth century were much more self-sufficient than those of today and therefore less vitally dependent on one another for common survival. Nevertheless, what is remarkable is that, despite the hardships and handicaps that long-distance trade then entailed, so much of it went on.

An analysis of the movements of such trade leads us to distinguish, for analytical purposes, three very large circuits. The first was a western European one that dominated the Atlantic coast and many parts of the Mediterranean. The second was a Middle Eastern one that dominated both the land bridge along the Central Asian steppes and the sea bridge, with a short intervening overland route, between the eastern Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. And finally, the third was the Far Eastern circuit of trade that connected the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia and China beyond. At that time, the strongest centers and circuits were located in the Middle East and Asia. In contrast, the European circuit was an upstart

newcomer that for several early centuries was only tangentially and weakly linked to the core of the world system as it had developed between the eighth and eleventh centuries.

These three major circuits were, in turn, organized into some eight interlinked subsystems, within which smaller trading circuits and subcultural and political systems seemed to exist. . . . In the section that follows, we take up each of these circuits and subsystems in turn, but our emphasis is on how they connected with one another. [ . . . ]

### THE EUROPEAN CIRCUIT

By the middle of the thirteenth century, three European nodes were forming into a single circuit of exchange. The counties of Champagne and Brie in east-central France hosted the rotating fairs of Champagne, which took place sequentially in four towns: the trading and production centers of Troyes and Provins and the smaller market towns of Bar-sur-Aube and Lagny. A second nodal zone was the textile-producing region of Flanders; where the city of Bruges became the most important commercial and financial capital and nearby Ghent served as the chief industrial town. The third node was in Italy, with the two most international trading ports located on opposite sides of the peninsula: Genoa facing westward and Venice facing east.

The growth of this European circuit was causally linked to the Crusades, which, from the end of the eleventh century, had put western Europe into more intimate contact with the Middle East and which had stimulated the demand for goods available only in the East. Such stimulation in demand, in turn, generated heightened productivity on the European continent—to manufacture goods that could be exchanged for the spices and cotton and silk textiles from the East.

To reconstruct this process, it is important to establish a benchmark for growth. In the second century A.D. the Roman Empire covered a vast territory that included all regions abutting the Mediterranean Sea. The

empire extended northward to encompass England and all of western Europe except Germany, eastward to encompass Greece, Anatolia, and the Fertile Crescent, and southward across the entire stretch of littoral North Africa. Rome's southern and eastern peripheral areas were in contact, via overland and sea routes, with sizable portions of the rest of the "Old World" as far away as India and, indirectly, even China. By that time, what might be called the first nascent world system had come into existence, although it did not survive the "fall of Rome."

Internal weakening of the overextended Roman Empire eventually made it possible for Germanic tribes occupying zones north and east of the Italian core—tribes that had formerly been blocked at the frontiers—to break through the Roman lines. The first waves of invasion occurred in the third century, but were soon spent; successive ones were not so easily repelled. Throughout the fifth century a series of more successful incursions culminated in the collapse of unified rule and the fragmentation of the western domains among the Gauls, Vandals, Visigoths, and, later, Lombards.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, much of western Europe underwent significant regression, initiating a period that in Western historiography is referred to as the Dark Ages.<sup>5</sup> Although it is true that much of the subcontinent's economic base retracted to highly localized subsistence activities, it is important to stress that in southern Europe this did not occur. Much of the Iberian Peninsula was under Muslim rule and its economy was thus inherently linked not to Europe's but to that of the thriving Islamic world. And at least parts of Italy, most particularly the port city-state of Venice, continued to prosper because it served as an outpost for the undefeated eastern Roman Empire, Venice's ally in Constantinople.

It is important to remember that the ninth century, when northwestern Europe was just beginning to emerge from its dark ages, was a civilizational highpoint both in the Middle East (under Abbasid rule) and in China (under the Tang Dynasty). These two central powers were establishing trade links with

one another via the Persian Gulf-Indian Ocean route, a connection advantageous to both. (This is the time of Sindbad the Sailor).<sup>6</sup> The overthrown Umayyads had relocated to Iberia and were united there with powerful North African dynasties. The tenth and eleventh centuries in both Asia and the Middle East were periods of technological advance<sup>7</sup> and increasingly sophisticated business and credit practices.<sup>8</sup> Most of the "social" inventions that the Italians were to use so effectively, when they later provided the institutional "glue" that integrated the European subsystem, they learned from their Middle Eastern counterparts.

Western Europe was decisively drawn into the preexisting world system through the Crusades, the first of which took place at the end of the eleventh century. It was only after this first incursion that the fairs of Champagne began to expand as the central meeting place for Italian merchants, who imported Eastern goods via the Levant, and Flemish merchants, who marketed the woolen textiles that Europe exchanged for the silks and spices of the Orient.<sup>9</sup> Flemish textile production was greatly stimulated by the Orient's expanding demand for their high-quality cloth. With later Crusades, European colonies were established in the Levant, where merchants handled the import trade on the spot.

The fairs of Champagne had a relatively brief period of prominence as the middleman-exchange center between Flemish textile producers and Italian merchants. By the end of the thirteenth century, Genoese ships were exiting the Strait of Gibraltar and sailing up the Atlantic coast directly to Bruges; this resulted in relocating the "international" market from Champagne to that city. The Venetians were forced to follow suit, although they never became as prominent in Bruges as the Genoese or the Piedmont Italians. This bypassing of France's central massif, combined with the subsumption of the counties of Brie and Champagne under the French monarchy in 1285,<sup>10</sup> spelled the decline of the fairs. Bruges's prominence, however, was short-lived. Gradually, the city's harbors, despite their successive relocation outward, silted up until deep-draft

vessels could no longer come directly into port. The Italians then moved their operations, and along with them the associated financial markets, to the better harbor at Antwerp.

During all this time, the Italians were increasing their control over the production and distribution of western European goods because it was their ships that came to control the shipping lanes in the Mediterranean. The Arabs withdrew from that sea, ceding to Pisan, Genoese, and eventually even more to Venetian galleys the task of ferrying goods back and forth between western Europe and the cores of the world system, still focused farther east.<sup>11</sup>

### THE MIDDLE EASTERN CIRCUIT

European ships made three landfalls in the Middle East bridge to the Far East. The one on the north passed Constantinople through to the Black Sea. From ports toward the eastern end of the Black Sea, goods were transferred to the overland caravan route to China. The one at midpoint was on the coast of Palestine, from which caravans set out to Baghdad and thence to the head of the Persian Gulf for the long sea journey or joined the southern caravan route across Central Asia. The one on the south was at the Egyptian port of Alexandria, from which connections were then made via Cairo to the Red Sea and, from there, farther eastward through the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

The Genoese and Venetians fought each other for dominance in the Mediterranean sealanes (their only rival, Pisa, was eliminated fairly early) and, by the thirteenth century, had reached some sort of *modus vivendi* in which Genoa gained hegemony over the northern route while Venice consolidated its virtually monopolistic relations with the Mamluks of Egypt and their Karimi merchants. Both lost out in the Levant when the Saladin and later the Mamluk sultan Baybars drove them successively from the Crusader kingdoms Europeans had implanted in Palestine.

These landfalls were the anchors of the three Middle Eastern subsystems that con-

nected the Levant with the Far East. The northern route crossed the Central Asian steppes and deserts that had been newly unified under Genghis Khan and his confederation of Mongol and Tatar tribes. The unification permitted the trading exploitations of such notables as Marco Polo and his uncles in the latter part of the thirteenth century and the establishment of small colonies of Genoese and other Italian merchants in Beijing and other Chinese cities (by then under the Yuan, or Mongol, Dynasty). And it was the greater safety and stability of this area that facilitated the marked expansion of overland trade.

The routes through Arab lands were more protected from European incursions. At Palestine, European merchants met the caravans coming from Central Asia or from the Persian Gulf, but seldom followed them eastward on the long sea journey to India, the Malay Peninsula, or China. And at Egypt the European merchants were stopped entirely. They were not permitted to cross from the Nile to the Red Sea and thus had to exchange with local Karimi (wholesale) merchants, under government supervision, all the goods they brought from Europe or other parts of the Mediterranean for the spices, textiles, and other goods they sought to buy from the East. Toward the end of the period in question, the connection between Venice and Egypt strengthened until it virtually monopolized the exchange between the West and India and parts east.

### THE ASIAN SYSTEM VIA THE INDIAN OCEAN

The Indian Ocean trade, which long predated Europe's interest and persisted well beyond the European explorers' "discovery" of the New World as an unintended by-product of their search for an alternative route to India, was itself subdivided into three circuits, only one of which overlapped with the southern Middle East subsystems that connected the Red Sea and Persian Gulf with landfalls on the western coast of India. The ports at Gujarat (near current-day Bombay) and on the Malabar or pepper coast to

the south contained merchant colonies of Muslims<sup>12</sup> from the Middle East who served as intermediaries and who also spread their religion and business practices wherever they went.

Muslim Arab and Persian merchants were considerably less visible in the second circuit of the Indian Ocean trade, which was anchored on the Coromandel coast on India's eastern side. There, indigenous Indian merchants intermediated much of the sea trade that moved eastward through the Straits of Malacca and Sunda (between the Malay Peninsula and present-day Sumatra and Java) to Chinese ports in the third circuit. Although Persian and Arab ships also participated in this circuit, at that time Europeans had no ships in either the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea. The few Europeans (including missionaries and a small number of traders) who ventured into these regions traveled on Asian ships. It was not until Vasco da Gama's successful circumnavigation of Africa in 1498 that European vessels entered the Indian Ocean arena, and it was not until after the Portuguese men-of-war had destroyed the small Egyptian and Indian fleet defending the Arabian Sea in 1516 that Europeans began to control, although not supplant, the large Asian merchant marine.

In that Asian circuit, the Strait of Malacca (and as a very secondary alternative, the Strait of Sunda between southern Sumatra and Java) was absolutely crucial. All ships traveling between India and China had to pass through the "gullet" of narrow sea that separated Sumatra from the Malay Peninsula. Tomé Pires, the astute Portuguese merchant and author who traveled in the area during the first half of the sixteenth century, acknowledged the undisputed strategic significance of Malacca to world trade, noting that "whoever is lord of Malacca has his hands on the throat of Venice" and that "if Cambay [the port of Gujarat] were cut off from trading with Malacca, it could not live."<sup>13</sup> His phrases were apt. Malacca, the chief entrepôt on the strait after the fall of Savajaya,<sup>14</sup> served, like the fairs of Champagne, as the place where foreign merchants coming from different directions met to exchange goods, credit, and currencies.

But whereas the Champagne fairs owed their comparative advantage chiefly to political causes, the shifting ports on the strait (of which Singapore is simply the most recent manifestation) owed theirs to the weather. In the days of sailing ships, prevailing winds and monsoon seasons shaped the routes and timing of international trade. Because monsoon winds reversed at the Strait of Malacca, long layovers were required for boats traveling in both directions. Permanent colonies of merchants drawn from points throughout the Asian circuit coexisted in Malacca, giving to this port a cosmopolitan quality far beyond what local resources and institutions could have generated.

If the coasts of India were magnets because on them debouched the products of a rich and partially industrialized<sup>15</sup> subcontinent, and the Strait of Malacca was a magnet because sailors had no other options, China was a magnet par excellence in itself and for all. Through China, the overland subsystem that connected it to the Black Sea and the eastern sea subsystem that connected it to the Strait region and beyond were joined together in an all-important loop.

It is very significant that the entire world system of the thirteenth century functioned smoothly and to the benefit of all players when the connecting link through China operated well. It is perhaps of even greater significance that, as I later argue, the breaking up of the world system in the mid-fourteenth century was in large part due to the wedge driven between China and Central Asia by the Ming Rebellion (but more of this later).

China was by far the most developed civilization in the world and the world's leading technological and naval power until the late fifteenth century.<sup>16</sup> It did not merely sit complacently as (in its view) the "Middle Kingdom" of the universe, but actively conducted both "tribute" and "merchant" trade throughout its own waters and in the Indian Ocean and, periodically, up through the Persian Gulf. China had the world's largest and most seaworthy fleet,<sup>17</sup> capable of withstanding any attack and able to terrorize opponents into submission with flame-throwing weapons and gunpowder-driven missiles

that were the equivalent of later European cannons.

Such naval power did not often have to be invoked, however, since over the centuries the trading nations of the Indian Ocean had evolved a remarkably tolerant system of coexistence, unlike the rivalries that plagued the Mediterranean in the post-Roman era. K. N. Chaudhuri has drawn a detailed and graphic image of that coexistence in his seminal books on the Indian Ocean.<sup>18</sup> Although piracy was not unknown in Eastern waters, it did not lead, as in the Mediterranean, to a war of all against all, nor was it suppressed by a single thalassocracy, a naval power capable of eliminating all resistance. Instead, it was contained within the interstices of a larger collaboration in which goods and merchants from many places were intermingled on each other's ships and where unwritten rules of reciprocity assured general compliance. This system was not decisively challenged until the sixteenth century, when Portuguese men-of-war violated all the rules of the game by burning or boarding ships, confiscating cargo, and imposing their system of passes<sup>19</sup> on the numerous indigenous but unarmed merchant fleets of the area.

### The Fate of the Thirteenth-Century World System

Now that we have described the complex world system that existed before Europe's rise to hegemony, we are left with two basic puzzles. The first is why the thirteenth-century world system did not simply persist and continue to grow? The second is why the West "rose" when it did? Let us try to answer these questions.

Given the high level of sophistication reached and the widespread character of the contacts among the various participants in the thirteenth-century world system, it is natural to ask why it did not expand even farther and grow increasingly prosperous. After all, one of the laws of motion states that things in motion tend to remain in motion, if only because of the power of inertia, and this principle may also operate in history. (It is not until a trend is reversed that historians feel impelled to explain what happened!)

Yet we know that during the fifteenth century almost all parts of the then-known world experienced a deep recession. By then the "state of the world" was at a much lower level than it had reached in the early fourteenth century. During the depression of the fifteenth century, the absolute level of inter-societal trade dropped, currencies were universally debased (a sure sign of decreased wealth and overall productivity), and the arts and crafts were degraded. It is natural to look in the fourteenth century for clues to this unexpected reversal of fortune.

Such clues are not hard to find. By the third and fourth decades of the fourteenth century, one finds evidence of problems in Europe: bank failures in Italy and the cessation of port expansions in both Genoa and Venice; scattered crop failures throughout northwestern Europe; labor unrest in Flanders that was not unrelated to the decline in the quality of Flemish cloth, once Spanish wool had to be substituted for the higher-quality English wool hitherto used in production; and local wars and increased costs of protection, as "law and order" began to break down. Signs of weakness were also to be seen at various points in the Middle Eastern and Asian systems.

Whether these were normal fluctuations that historians might have overlooked if the system had regained prosperity sooner, or whether they were symptoms of some larger, endemic problems, cannot be determined from this distance in time. But certainly there were already weaknesses when catastrophic struck at midcentury.

Catastrophe came in the form of an epidemic so deadly and widespread that it has been singled out from all the regularly recurring epidemics of premodern times as the Black Death. It is obviously impossible to reconstruct the exact causes and course of this epidemic or even to tell whether plague outbreaks reported in the East had exactly the same medical descriptions as those in the West. But William McNeill, in his *Plagues and People*,<sup>20</sup> has attempted to reason backward from medical information today, and to combine this with known, but far from complete, "facts" from the earlier period.

He concludes that the bubonic plague

probably broke out first in the 1320s in a Mongol-patrolled area near the Himalayas and that infectious fleas were probably carried in the saddlebags of fast-moving horsemen into south-central China. Certainly, he presents evidence, culled from Chinese yearly chronicles, that from about 1320 on, outbreaks of epidemics were reported in a series of Chinese provinces around the zone of initial infection. From China proper, McNeill contends, infected fleas were diffused to the northern steppes of Central Asia, where they attached themselves to new hosts, the burrowing rats of the plains. Since the populations exposed to the plague had little or no natural immunities to this new disease, mortalities were extremely high, especially, it would seem, among the mobile Mongol soldiers.

From that point on, the story becomes clearer, and we can actually track the spread of the disease along the well-established paths of trade by plotting the dates at which the plague was first reported in various places. The strengths of the system were, indeed, its undoing. Host rats infiltrated the Genoese port of Caffa on the Black Sea, probably from the Mongol forces that were besieging the Italians there. The rats then boarded ships that were returning to the Mediterranean, leaving plague-infected fleas at each of their ports of call. By midcentury, the major centers of trade had all experienced very heavy die-offs, almost proportional to their importance.<sup>21</sup>

Wherever it struck, the plague had long-lasting effects, since outbreaks recurred throughout the rest of the century. But the effects on, and of, depopulation were not at all uniform. The plague stirred the pot of social change, but not in the same way everywhere. First, places that were off the path of international trade suffered lower casualties than those that were central to the trade. England and Scandinavia, for example, had lower proportional mortalities than China, Egypt, or Italy. Second, the mortality rates were higher in cities than in the countryside. These differential mortalities to some extent altered the future "life chances" of various countries and the relative "bargaining power" of peasants versus city folk.

The disturbance to local power structures also permitted political changes that might not have occurred in the absence of the plague, although the effects were not uniform. In Europe, it is acknowledged that the ensuing labor shortage strengthened the hands of workers and yeomen and decisively ended the remnants of serfdom. In contrast, similar die-offs in Egypt had no such effect; there was a change in regimes at the top, but the new set of Mamluk rulers never reduced their pressures on the peasants. In China, however, the political effects were dramatic and had wide-reaching consequences.

The Ming Rebellion, accomplished by 1368, deposed the Yuan Dynasty that had been established after the time of Mongol conquest and replaced it by an indigenous Chinese dynasty. I suspect that the timing was not unrelated to the high plague casualties among the "foreign" military troops that enforced Yuan rule. While the results may have been favorable for Chinese "home rule" and autonomy, they were less advantageous to the world system, since the success of the rebellion once again split off China from Central Asia. Thomas Barfield argues that throughout history there was constant tension along the shifting frontier between the tribal groups of Central Asia and the settled population of China. Only once were the two regions unified politically, and that was in the thirteenth century and first half of the fourteenth century, when China was ruled by the Mongols.<sup>22</sup>

I am tempted to conclude that the thirteenth-century world system had benefited greatly from this union, since it facilitated the free flow of trade in a circuit completed by the Chinese "loop." When this connection broke down, as it did after the Ming Rebellion in the late fourteenth century, its lapse further undermined the viability of the world system as it had previously been organized.

The change in the Chinese regime had one other consequence of great significance: the collapse of the Chinese navy,<sup>23</sup> although that did not occur decisively until more than fifty years later. Chinese attitudes toward trade and the importance of maintaining naval strength were subjects of heated debate in

the new dynasty. Some within the palace favored withdrawal from the world system to mend conditions internally. Others stressed the importance of maintaining an appearance of strength in the outside world. Among the latter was the admiral of the fleet, Cheng Ho, who from the early 1400s headed several expeditions of Chinese "treasure ships" (in convoys containing sixty or more vessels) that paraded through the Indian Ocean, stopping at all important ports.<sup>24</sup>

But these displays were eventually halted in the 1430s. After a few naval skirmishes had been lost, palace policy switched to Cheng Ho's opponents. Although the reasons for this reversal of policy remain shrouded in mystery and enigma, and scholars are far from agreeing on an explanation, the results were clear and disastrous for the prospects of continued Asian independence. The ships were ordered into port and deactivated. Within five years, according to Lo's careful research (cited earlier), the wooden ships had rotted and could not be easily repaired.

The significance of the Chinese withdrawal from the sea cannot be overestimated. The disappearance from the Indian Ocean and South China Sea of the only large and armed Asian navy left that vast expanse defenseless. When the Portuguese men-of-war, following the new pathway opened around the tip of Africa by Vasco da Gama's exploratory journey, finally breached the zone in the early decades of the sixteenth century and violated the "rules of the game" of mutual tolerance that had prevailed in that region for a thousand years, there was no one to stop them.

The rest is, as they say, history. The Portuguese proceeded to impose a harsh system of "passes" to extract protection fees from the unarmed Arab and Indian merchant ships that still carried the trade. Through their military arms, the Portuguese initiated the process of imposing a system of European hegemony over regions that had formerly been wealthy and vital. Successive European naval powers, the Dutch and then the British, followed along paths opened by the Portuguese to subjugate vast portions of the Indian Ocean arena and to establish their own

plantations and factories to produce the spices and textiles they had long sought from the East.

It should come as no surprise that Holland and England eventually became the new cores of the "modern" world system. My argument, put simply, is that the "fall of the East" preceded the "rise of the West" and opened up a window of opportunity that would not have existed had matters gone differently.

The second question we must address is whether the later success of western Europe in a newly reorganizing world system was exclusively caused by the particular form of capitalism that developed there, or whether capitalism, under the protection of militarily powerful and more centralized nation-states, was able to take advantage of the windows of opportunity created not only by the collapse of the East but by the chance to exploit the "free resources" available in the New World? There is no way to resolve this controversy, and many historians and social thinkers, beginning with Karl Marx and Max Weber, have expended enormous effort in their attempts to add voices to the ongoing debate.

In what follows I present my own position and indicate in what ways my understanding of the thirteenth-century world system has contributed to that position. I do not believe that the Western invention of a particular variation of capitalism predetermined European hegemony from the sixteenth century on. The fact that a highly sophisticated world system—one that was equally as advanced both in economic and social "technologies"—predated the "modern" one casts doubt on the unique contributions of European capitalism. Because no uniformity prevailed with respect to culture, religion, or economic institutional arrangements in that earlier system, it is very difficult to accept a purely "cultural" explanation for Europe's later dominance. No particular culture seems to have had a monopoly over either technological or social inventiveness. Neither a unique syndrome of psychology nor a special economic form of organizing production and exchange (*pace* Marx) nor any particular set of religious beliefs or values (*pace* Weber)

was needed to succeed in the thirteenth century. The fact that the West "won" in the sixteenth century, whereas the earlier system aborted, cannot be used to argue convincingly that *only* the institutions and culture of the West *could have succeeded*.

Indeed, what is noteworthy in the world system of the thirteenth century is that a wide variety of cultural systems coexisted and cooperated and that societies organized very differently from those in the West dominated the system. Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and numerous other sects, often dismissed as pagan, all seem to have permitted and indeed facilitated lively commerce, production, exchange, risk taking, and the like. Similarly, a variety of economic systems coexisted in the thirteenth century—from "near" private capitalism, albeit supported by state power, to "near" state production, albeit assisted by private merchants. Moreover, these variations were not particularly congruent with either geographic region or religious domain. The organization of textile production in southeast India was not dissimilar from that in Flanders, whereas in China and Egypt larger-scale coordination was more typical. The state built boats for trade in both tiny Venice and vast China, whereas elsewhere (and even at different times in Genoa, China and Egypt) private vessels were commandeered when the state needed them.

Nor were the underlying bases for economic activities uniform. Participating in the world system of the thirteenth century were large agrarian societies such as India and China that covered subcontinents, in which industrial production was oriented mainly, although not exclusively, to processing agricultural raw materials. There were also small city-state ports such as Venice, Aden, Palembang, and Malacca, whose functions are best described as compradorial. In places as diverse as South India, Champagne, Samarkand, the Levant, and ports along the Persian Gulf, their importance was enhanced by their strategic location at points where flanking traders met. Other important places contained valued raw materials unavailable elsewhere (fine-quality wool in England,

camphor in Sumatra, frankincense and myrrh on the Arabian peninsula, spices in the Indian archipelago, jewels in Ceylon, etc.) These resources did not account for the world system; they were products of it.

The economic vitality of these areas was the result, at least in part, of the system in which they participated. It is to be expected, then, that in the course of *any restructuring* of a world system, such as occurred in the sixteenth century, new places would rise to the fore. We have already suggested that part of that restructuring occurred in Asia and could be partially traced to a complex chain of consequences precipitated (but not "caused") by the Black Death. But, in the long run, the Europeans' ability to sail across the Atlantic must be judged even more important than their circumnavigation of Africa.

As we pass the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage, it is important to recall its ultimate significance. It displaced the Mediterranean decisively from a core focus of trade, thus precipitating a long-term marginalization of the Middle East, reduced the relative indispensability of the Indian Ocean arena, and provided the nascent developing nations of western Europe with the gold and silver they needed, both to settle the long-standing balance-of-payments deficits with the East and to serve as the basis for a rapid accumulation of capital. This capital accumulation process, deriving "free resources" from conquered peripheries, eventually became the chief motor of European technological and social change.

While this story lies beyond the period covered in this essay, it is an appropriate point on which to conclude this section. Capitalism, in the form that took shape in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, even more so, in the nineteenth, might not have "taken off" so dramatically had the shape of the world system not been transformed in the sixteenth century. That is why the study of the world system that preceded it is so important. It helps us to put the truly world-transforming developments of the sixteenth century in perspective and to give a more balanced account of the relationship between capitalism and the "rise of the West." [ . . . ]

## NOTES

- As every economist knows, in cyclical events it matters very much where one starts the data series and for how long one plots the data entries. Selecting the lowest point of a given "trend" as the initial entry cannot help but show "improvement," whereas on a longer trend this might appear as a small blip on an otherwise long-term downward secular trend. I began to suspect that there had been an unconscious bias that to some extent made the uniqueness of the miracle of the West an artifact, especially with respect to the past, albeit not with reference to the future.
- In the course of my five years of research, I traveled to almost all the areas that were of central importance to what I came to define as the thirteenth-century world system in order to examine sites and explore local documentation. I also consulted a voluminous body of published primary and secondary sources. While, ideally, such a study should have taken a lifetime of scholarship, I saw my project as creating a synthesis of existing materials, albeit from a different perspective, in the hope that other scholars would not only fill lacunae in our knowledge but reevaluate their own findings in the context of the world system.
- My conclusions were eventually incorporated into Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Several articles appeared somewhat before the book was completed: a preview of the thesis written in 1986, "The Shape of the World System in the Thirteenth Century," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 22 (Winter 1987-88): 1-25; as well as "Did the West Rise or Did the East Fall?" paper presented at the 1988 meetings of the American Sociological Association. The book was followed by "Restructuring the Premodern World-System," *Review* 13 (Spring 1990): 273-86, which critiques a mechanical application of world systems theory and tries to take it a bit further by making it a variable, rather than a constant. Four distinct "cycles" of world-system organization are set forth: a classical period one, between roughly 200 B.C. and A.D. 200; a medieval period, between roughly A.D. 1200 and A.D. 1450; a modern period, between roughly 1500 and 1914; and the "postindustrial" period in which we now find ourselves.
- The following section of this essay depends heavily on portions of my larger and more detailed text, but it cannot substitute for the complete work. In this brief summary it is not possible to include the complex evidence presented in the complete version, to which the reader is referred.
- For an excellent study of this period, see Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: Verso, 1974; reprinted 1978).
- See, for example, the work of George Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).
- The iron and steel production of the Sung Dynasty in the eleventh century exceeded that of England during the early industrial age. See Robert Hartwell, "A Revolution in the Chinese Iron and Coal Industries during the Northern Sung, 960-1126," *Journal of Asian Studies* 21 (1962): 153-62; and his "Markets, Technology, and the Structure of Enterprise in the Development of the Eleventh-Century Chinese Iron and Steel Industry," *Journal of Economic History* 26 (1966): 29-58.
- An amazing account of the sophisticated business practices of Arab producers and traders (especially in Baghdad) can be found in Abraham Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). It is clear from this document that many of the innovations in credit, corporate organization, risk equalization, and legal contracts that are usually invoked to compliment western ingenuity and the "genius" of the Italians were actually learned from their Arab trading partners after the Crusades had put the two in closer contact.
- Europe traditionally ran a trade deficit with the more-developed economies of the Middle East and India, a deficit it met by exporting silver and even gold bullion. The deficit existed because Europe demanded more goods from the East than the Orient wanted from Europe.
- One of the comparative advantages the fair traders had hitherto had was that they could offer "special" arrangements to traveling merchants; once they came under monarchy control, they lost this right to extend special privileges.
- The finest study of this period is Frederic C. Lane's wonderful book, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). The sources on Genoa are less rich, but see E. H. Byrne, *Genoese Shipping in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1930), for a fine account of Genoese skills in shipbuilding and financing.
- Jewish trader families from Baghdad and Cairo had early on figured prominently in this trade, but by the thirteenth century, their Muslim compatriots had essentially displaced them. The work of S. N. Goitein is particularly relevant on this point. See, for example, his "From Aden to India: Specimens of the Correspondence of India Traders of the Twelfth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 22 (1980): 43-66; as well as his "Letters and Documents on the India Trade in Medieval Times," *Islamic Culture* 37 (1963): 188-203.
- Both quotations appear, along with their citations, in Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p. 291. The original source is *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, ed. A. Cortesão, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944).
- Srivijaya was a purported "kingdom" whose exact nature and location (probably on Sumatra) remain surprisingly opaque and mysterious. Without offering a coherent alternative description, most scholars now discount what were earlier considered to be the definitive works by O. W. Wolters. See his *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins of Srivijaya* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967) and *The Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970). Before the founding of Malacca in the fourteenth century by a putative "prince" from Palembang, the latter was Srivijaya's capital and presumably the most important port in the strait. Long-standing connections between India and both Srivijaya and Indonesia are obvious from the nomenclatures and are supported by epigraphic and archaeological evidence.
- India's gossamer cotton textiles had been much sought after in classical Rome and continued to draw customers throughout the Middle Ages. Since, traditionally, others had wanted Indian products more than India had markets for their exported goods, the balance of payments was always in India's favor. Gold from elsewhere, therefore, tended to accumulate in India and remain there. The best sources on this eastward flow of bullion are Artur Attman, *The Bullion Flow between Europe and the East, 1000-1750* (Göteborg: Kungl. Vetenskaps-Och Vitterhets-samhället); and the more accessible John F. Richards, ed., *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1983). The rapid inflation in Europe during the early modern period has been attributed to this imbalance of payments in international trade.
- See, for example, William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), which makes a stunning case for China's preeminence in the premodern world system.
- The studies by Jung-Pang Lo prove this conclusively. See his "China as a Sea Power, 1127-1368," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1957, as well as related articles that summarize his thesis: "The Emergence of China as a Sea Power During the Late Song and Early Yuan Periods," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 14 (1955): 489-503; and "Chinese Shipping and East-West Trade from the Tenth to the Fourteenth Century," in *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce en l'orient et dans l'Océan Indien* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1970), pp. 167-74.
- See K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), as well as its companion volume, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), which, alas, appeared too late for me to use in preparing my 1989 book.
- One can think of "passes" as written proof that protection money had already been paid to the Portuguese. A "pass" gave a ship presumed immunity from confiscation or destruction by the Portuguese, which sounds like extortion to me.
- William McNeill, *Plagues and People* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1976).
- The only area for which I was unable to locate documentation about a particularly virulent epidemic at that time was India. Whether this is because scholars have not yet found the evidence or whether the Indian population already had gained some immunity from prior outbreaks cannot be determined.
- Thomas Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1990).
- See, inter alia, Jung-Pang Lo, "The Decline of the Early Ming Navy," *Extremes* 5 (1958): 149-68, for information on the early decline and eventual precipitous collapse of the Chinese fleet.
- On Cheng Ho's expeditions, see Paul Pelliot, "Les grands voyages maritimes Chinois au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle," *T'oung Pao* 30 (1933): 235-455, a careful work based on primary sources.