CHAPTER 14

The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor?
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Most historians writing about the rise of the West have treated that development as if it were independent of the rest of the world. At least, thinking about this, I attributed it to rationalists, puritans, and pragmatists. But then I was struck by something else. Virtually all Western scholars, and especially those who have 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 lowebb and when the organizational systems 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? Even more important, what would happen to the theoretical assumption that the peculiar form of Western capitalism, as it developed in the late thirteenth-century western Europe, was a necessary and (at least) sufficient cause of Western hegemony? What if one actually looked at the origins of that 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 stability 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 is learned from other more advanced cultures—at least until Europe overtook and subdued them.

It was to capture 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 shared, usually in passing, at the methodology connections each placed on international trade and on the trading partners much farther afield. It became preoccupied with reexamining those connections.

The basic conclusion I reached was that there had existed, prior to the West's rise to prominence in the sixteenth century, a complex and prosperous predecessor—a worldwide trade and even "cultural" exchange that, at its peak toward the end of the thirteenth century, was integrating (not at high points of sophistication) towns in a very large number of advanced societies stretching between the extremities of northwestern 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, in terms of time, the Middle East heartland that linked various points along the routes, because this one, as measured by time, was calculated in weeks and months at best, and it took it would be a long time to traverse the entire circuit. The merchant who handled successive transactions the Indian Ocean assumed 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. These seemed no historical necessity that shielded the system in favor of the West, nor was there any historical necessity that would have prevented cultural transmission between the eastern regions from becoming an important part of a "modern" world system. This thesis seemed at least as compelling to me as its opposite.

Thus, the "modern" world system that might have developed, had the East remained dominant, probably would 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 "rose," the world under different leadership would have remained stagnant.

Therefore, it seemed crucial to gain an understanding of how the world was linked together between A.D. 1250 and 1350. During that period, an international trade econony existed in the region between northeast European and China, yielding prosperity and artistic sensibilities of all participating regions. I did not have to defend an unrealistic vision of a tightly integrated international system of interdependence. Clearly, that was not the case.

But it was also true in the sixteenth century. Thus, it is possible to argue that a world system began in that late 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 are articulated 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 sub-nations or subsystems—such as the Middle East and North Africa or the European Community or the United States or the Soviet Union. But each of these blocs, before major cities play key nodal roles, are extremely complex and often having more intense interactions with social centers in other systems than with their own neighbors.
In the thirteenth century, also, there were subsystems (defined by language, religion and politics) that were organized by a variety of transactions dominated by imperial or core cities, as well as mediated by essentially hierarchal-law trading exchanges. Their interactions with one another, although hardly as intense as today's, defined the contours of the larger system. Instead of actions, these cities were bound together by seascapes, 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, except through much smaller geographic segments, with central trading hubs acting as "break-in-bulk" exchanges for goods destined for more distant markets. Notable exceptions to this scenario 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 the modern-day ones and very rarely dependent on one another for common survival. Nevertheless, what remained visible, despite the hardships and hardships that long-distance trade entailed, was much of the same.

The growth of this European circuit was crucially linked to the Crusades, which, from the end of the thirteenth 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 to demand, through a greater marketing potential on the European continent—toward manufacturing goods that could be exchanged for the spices and luxuries from the East.

To reconstruct this process, it is important to recognize a benchmark both in the Middle East and second century A.D. the Roman Empire controlled a vast territory that included all regions aborning the Mediterranean Sea. The empire extended northward to encompass Egypt and all of western Europe except Spain (then left to its own devices), and the Fertile Crescent, and southward across the entire stretch of sub-Saharan Africa. Rome's southern and eastern provincial areas were in contact, via overland and sea routes, with sizable populations of the "Old World" as far away as India and, indirectly, even China. By the time, what might be called the first global world system had come into existence, although it did not survive the "lost of France.

Internal weakening of the overextended Roman Empire eventually made it possible for Germanic tribes occupying those lands and the Latin core—tribes that had never been held by the barbarians—to march through the Roman front. The first wave of invasions occurred in the third century, but were soon successful ones that were not so easily repelled. Throughout the fifth century, a series of more successful invasions culminated in the collapse of the Western Empire and the fragmentation of the Western Roman Empire into the Latin, Vandals, Veneti, and, later, Lombards.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, much of Western Europe underwent significant changes, including a period of Western economic growth, leading to a period of Western economic growth that was referred to as the Dark Ages. Although it is true that much of the continent's economic base was redistributed to highly localized subsistence activities, it is important to stress that in southern Europe and the Mediterranean, the transition to a more self-sufficient economy was not as clear-cut as in the rest of the continent.

The cities of the Mediterranean had a relatively brief period of prominence as the Mediterranean exchange center between Mediterranean textile producers and Indian merchants. By the end of the thirteenth century, Genoese ships were sailing the ports of Byzantium and taking the Atlantic coast directly to the East; this resulted in the "intermediate" role of the city of Genoa in the Mediterranean trade.

The Venetians were forced to follow suit, although they never became as prominent in the Levant as the Genoese or the Pisans. This bypassing of France's central market, combined with the submission of the cross and to the supremacy of the French monarchy, led to the French monarchies, which were long-lived. Gradually, the city's harbor business, despite subsequent economic downturns, continued until deep-shelf...
vessels could no longer come directly into port. The Iberians then moved their operations, and along with them the transshipment of financial assets, to thebetter harbor at Antwerp.

During all this time, the Iberians were increasing their control over the production and distribution of western European goodsbecause it was their ships that came to control the shipping lanes in the Mediterranean. The Arabians withdrew from that sea, sailing to Pisa, Genoa, and eventually even more to Venetian galleys the task of ferrying goods back and forth between western Europe and the core of the world system, still focused further east.11

THE MIDDLE EASTERN CIRCUIT
European ships made three landfalls in the Middle East, to the East Indies, to the East Africa. The one on the south passed Constantineople through to the Black Sea. From ports toward the north not from the Red Sea and then to Mecca. The long journey was on the coast of Palestine, from which caravans set out to Bagdad and thence to the head of the Persian Gulf for the long sea journey to India, Melaka Peninsula, or China. And then from there, the European merchants were stopped and they were not permitted to cross from the coastal areas of these countries. The route was then back to the Indian Ocean through the Straits of Malacca. Various voyages were made to these areas, but it was not until Vasco da Gama's voyage of 1498 that European vessels entered the Indian Ocean areas and it was just after that European man-of-war had destroyed the small Arabian and Indian fleet defending the Malacca Strait in 1516 that Europeans began to control, although not supplant, the local Asian merchant marine.

In that Asian circuit, the Strait of Malacca was a very secondary alternative, the route 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 connected Sumatra from the Malacca Peninsulas. Indeed, the Iberian Portuguese merchant and author who traveled in the area, wrote in the first half of the sixteenth century, that the "gullet" of Sunda was the only sea through which ships could pass from Arabia to China. The Straits of Malacca were indeed a very secondary alternative, the route 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 connected Sumatra from the Malacca Peninsulas. Indeed, the Iberian Portuguese merchant and author who traveled in the area, wrote in the first half of the sixteenth century, that the "gullet" of Sunda was the only sea through which ships could pass from Arabia to China.

THE ASIAN SYSTEM VIA THE INDIAN OCEAN
The Indian Ocean trade, which long distinguished Europe's interest and persisted well beyond the European explorers' "discovery" of the New World as an unimportant product of their search for an alternative route to India, was itself subdivided into three circuits, one of which over the northern route with Venice consolidated its virtually monopolistic connections with the Mediterranean and its Karakonti merchants. But the other route, the Levant to the East where Vasco da Gama and later the Mamluk sultan Baybars drove them successfully from the Crusader kingdoms, the crusaders had employed in Palestine. This landfall was the schooners of the three Eastern Mediterranean subsystems that connected with the Levant with the Far East. Then the northern route crossed the Central Asian steppes and overland routes and also shared its business and business practices whenever they were used. Add to them the Arab and Persian merchants were always a larger force in the second circuit, the Indian Ocean trade, which was used to the Great Corridor on the coast of India's eastern side from the Malay Peninsula and beyond that Malay Peninsula south to Java, to the east ports in the third circuit. Although Arab and Persian ships also participated in this trade, as that time Europeans had an ext inext, European merchants over the east coast of Africa, of the Indian Ocean, of the Persian Gulf, and steered on the long sea journey to India, Melaka Peninsula, or China. And then from there, the European merchants were stopped and stopped, they were not permitted to cross from the coastal areas of these countries. The route was then back to the Indian Ocean through the Straits of Malacca. Various voyages were made to these areas, but it was not until Vasco da Gama's voyage of 1498 that European vessels entered the Indian Ocean areas and it was just after that European man-of-war had destroyed the small Arabian and Indian fleet defending the Malacca Strait in 1516 that Europeans began to control, although not supplant, the local Asian merchant marine.

China was by far the most advanced civilization in the world and the world's leading technological and naval power until the late sixteenth century. It did not merely support a military or naval or trade system, it was also a military or naval or trade system, it was also a vast economy that was sustained by the large goods, silk, and cotton.

But whereas the European powers used their comparative advantage chiefly to political causes, the shifting ports on the strait (of which Singapore is simply the most recent manifestation) owed their wealth to the winds. In the days of sailing ships, prevailing winds and monsoon seasons shaped the routes of trade. Because monsoon winds revolved around the Strait of Malacca, long voyages were required for boats traveling in both directions. Permanent colonies of merchants drawn from ports throughout the Asian circuit coalesced in Malacca, giving to this port a metropolitan 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 subcontinent, and the Strait of Malacca was a magnet because it is a magnet for the products of the rich and partially industrialized subcontinent, it is a magnet for the products of the rich and partially industrialized subcontinent. Whether the two were at the East Indies, the East Indies, the East Indies, or China.

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that were the equivalent of later European armadas. The shattered naval power did not soon have to be invoked, however, since over the centuries the trading nations of the Indian Ocean had evolved a remarkably sophisticated system of existence, unlike the rivalries that plagued the Mediterranean in the post-Roman era. K.N. Chaudhuri has drawn a detailed and graphic image of that existence in his seminal books on the Indian Ocean. 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 kept in check by a league of collaboration in which goods andหวนนาเดิม labors were exchanged, and trade was not monopolized on one another’s ships and where unwritten rules of reciprocity assured general cooperation. The thalassocracy of Venetian republics was rendered extremely difficult until the sixteenth century, when Portuguese men-of-war violated all the rules of the league, putting into a port the goods that were confiscating cargo, and imposing their system of taxes 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 possibilities. The first is why the thirteenth-century world system did not simply persist and continue to grow? Yet we know that during the fourteenth century almost all parts of the then known world were interconnected. The "state of the world" was at much lower level than it had reached in the early thirteenth century. During the disintegration of the thirteenth century, the absolute level of intercontinental trade dropped, currencies were universally debased, in some sign of losing strength and overall productivity, and the seas were less navigable. It is nature’s normal look in the fourteenth century for climes unprecedented ever before, when such changes are not hard to find. By the third and fourth decades of the fourteenth century, one finds evidence of problems not seen before: the overexpansion of the peasant population, the disorganization of port expansions in both Genoa and Ancona, the scattered crop failures in the northeast European, labor unrest in Flanders that was not unrelated to the decline in the quality of Flemish cloth, and economic or political transformation. For the first time, the system was exposed to threats, as "law and order" began to break down. Signs of weakness were also to be seen at various points in the Eastern and Asian systems.

Yet little better were normal theo...
the new dynasties. Some within the palace feared withdrawal from the world system would lead to isolation conditions. Others stressed the importance of maintaining an appearance of strength in the outside world. Among the latter was the edictal of the first, Cheng Ho, who from the early 1400s headed several expeditions of Chinese “treasure ships” (in convoy containing sixty or more vessels) that pardoned through the Indian Ocean, stopping at all important ports.

But these displays were eventually halted in the 1430s. After a few naval skirmishes had been lost, palace policy switched to Cheng Ho’s opponent. Although the reasons for this reversal of policy remain shrouded in mystery and enigma, and scholars are far from uniform in their conclusions, the results were clear and disastrous for the prospects of continued Chinese independence. The ships were sold off 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 state of war, following the death of their king, decided to invade the coast 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 nominal tolerance that had prevailed in the region for a thousand years, there was no one to stop them. The rest, as we now know, history. The Portuguese proceeded to impose a harsh system of “passer” to extract protection fees from the weakened Arab and Indian merchant ships that still carried the trade. Through this service levy, the Portuguese initiated the process of imposing a system of European hegemony over regions that had formerly been weaker. Successive European naval powers, the Dutch East India Company, the British East India Company, followed along paths opened by the Portuguese to subjugate vast portions of the Indian Ocean area and to establish their own plantations and factories to produce spices and textiles they had long sought from the East.

It should come as no surprise that Holland and England eventually became the rear of the “modern” world system. As the 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 latter success of western Europe in a newly coagulating world system was exclusively caused by the particular form of capitalism that developed there, or whether capitalism, under the protection of military power and centralised national-states, was able to take advantage of an existing context 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 opinion and indicate in what ways my understanding of the sixteenth-century world system has contributed to this position. I do not assert that the Western invention of a new form of accumulation—capitalism—resulted in the society of the sixteenth century from which we have emerged.

The fact that the Western “wonders” in the sixteenth century, whereas the earlier system seemed, cannot be used to argue consistently that only the institutions and culture of the West could have succeeded. Indeed, what is noteworthy in the world system of the sixteenth century is that it was a variety of cultural systems contained and cooperated with and the societies organised quite differently from those in the West dominated by the Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, Confucianist, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and numerous other sects, often dissolved as pagans, all seem to have permitted and indeed facilitated freely commerce, production, growth, exchange, risk-taking, and the like. Similarly, a variety of economic systems operated in the sixteenth century—from “fear” private capitalism, albeit supported by state power, to “state” state production, private enterprise. Moreover, these variations were not particularly progressive in a geographical region or religious domain. As we have already seen, these were not sufficient but were sufficient. The world was still in a formative stage, where the circulation of wealth and production in Southeast Asia was not disintegrated into as it has been in China, whereas elsewhere (and even at different times in Genoa, China and Egypt) private enterprise was undermined when the state tended it.

Not least were the underlying bases for economic activity uniform. Participating in the world system of the sixteenth century were many agrarian societies such as India and China that covered subcontinents, in which industrial production was in essence, through not exclusively, to processing agricultural raw materials. There were also small state ports such as Venice, Aden, Malacca, and Makassar, whose functions are best described as commodities in places. In places as diverse as South India, Champa, Siam, Sumatra, the Levant, and ports along the Persian Gulf, their importance was enhanced by their strategic location at points where trading routes met. Other important places were founded valued raw materials, such as the sixteenth century, as well.

The economic vitality of these areas would 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 emerge to seize the place. We have already suggested that part of that restructuring occurred in Asia and would be partially traced to a complex chain of consequences precipitated (but not caused) by the Black Death. But, in the long run, the European 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 significant consequences. It displaced the Mediterranean decisively from a core focus of trade, thus precipitating a long-term marginalisation of the Middle East, reduced the relative indispensability of the Indian Ocean area, 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 same accumulation process, deriving from the resources found, was eventually become the chief motor of European technological and social change.

While this story lies beyond the period covered in this essay, it is an appropriate place on which to conclude this section. Capitalism, in the form that took shape in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, even more so, in the nineteenth, might bear a “total” in so dramatic that 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 much broader account of the relationship between capitalism and the “rise of the West.”