The Colonizer's Model of the World

Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History

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Chapter 1

History Inside Out

The Argument

The purpose of this book is to undermine one of the most powerful beliefs of our time concerning world history and world geography. This belief is the notion that European civilization—"The West"—has had some unique historical advantage, some special quality of race or culture or environment or mind or spirit, which gives this human community a permanent superiority over all other communities, at all times in history and down to the present.

The belief is both historical and geographical. Europeans are seen as the "makers of history." Europe eternally advances, progresses, modernizes. The rest of the world advances more sluggishly, or stagnates: it is "traditional society." Therefore, the world has a permanent geographical center and a permanent periphery: an Inside and an Outside. Inside leads, Outside lags. Inside innovates, Outside imitates.¹

This belief is diffusionism, or more precisely Eurocentric diffusionism. It is a theory about the way cultural processes tend to move over the surface of the world as a whole. They tend to flow out of the European sector and toward the non-European sector. This is the natural, normal, logical, and ethical flow of culture, of innovation, of human causality. Europe, eternally, is Inside. Non-Europe is Outside. Europe is the source of most diffusions; non-Europe is the recipient.

Diffusionism lies at the very root of historical and geographical scholarship. Some parts of the belief have been questioned in recent years, but its most fundamental tenets remain unchallenged, and so the belief as a whole has not been uprooted or very much weakened by modern scholarship.

The most important tenet of diffusionism is the theory of "the
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autonomous rise of Europe," and sometimes (rather more grandly) the idea of "the European Miracle." It is the idea that Europe was more advanced and more progressive than all other regions prior to 1492, prior, that is, to the beginning of the period of colonialism, the period in which Europe and non-Europe came into intense interaction. If one believes this to be the case—and most modern scholars seem to believe it to be the case—then it must follow that the economic and social modernization of Europe is fundamentally a result of Europe's internal qualities, not of interaction with the societies of Africa, Asia, and America after 1492. Therefore: the main building blocks of modernity must be European. Therefore: colonialism cannot have been really important for Europe's modernization. Therefore: colonialism must mean, for the Africans, Asians, and Americans, not spoliation and cultural destruction but, rather, the receipt-by-diffusion of European civilization: modernization.

This book will analyze and criticize Eurocentric diffusionism as a general body of ideas, and will try to undermine the more concrete theory of the autonomous rise of Europe. The first chapter of the book discusses the nature and history of diffusionism. Chapter 2 analyzes the theory of the autonomous rise of Europe as a body of propositions about European superiority (and "the European miracle"), then tries to disprove these propositions, one after the other. Chapter 3 discusses world history and historical geography prior to 1492, attempting to show that Europe was not superior to other civilizations and regions in those times. Chapter 4 argues that colonialism was the basic process after 1492, which led to the selective rise of Europe, the modernization or development of Europe (and outlying Europeanized culture areas like the United States), and the underdevelopment of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Chapter 4 also argues that the conquest of America and thereafter the expansion of European colonialism is not to be explained in terms of any internal characteristics of Europe, but instead reflects the mundane realities of location. The chain of argument in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, as a whole, therefore, is an attempt to show that Europe did not have historical priority—historical superiority—over what we now call the Third World.

This may seem to be too ambitious a project for one small book. I am really making just one claim. I am asserting that a fundamental and rather explicit error has been made in our conventional past thinking about geography and history, and this error has distorted many fields of thought and action. I am going to present enough evidence to show that the belief in Eurocentric diffusionism and Europe's historical superiority or priority is not convincing: not well grounded in the facts of history and geography, although firmly grounded in Western culture. It is in a sense folklore.

THE TUNNEL OF TIME

If you had gone to school in Europe or Anglo-America 150 years ago, around the middle of the nineteenth century, you would have been taught a very curious kind of history. You would have learned, for one thing, that every important thing that ever happened to humanity happened in one part of the world, the region we will call "Greater Europe," meaning the geographical continent of Europe itself, plus (for ancient times only) an enlargement of it to the southeast, the "Bible Lands"—from North Africa to Mesopotamia—plus (for modern times only) the countries of European settlement overseas. You would have been taught that God created Man in this region: the Garden of Eden was mentioned as the starting point of human history in typical world history textbooks of the period, and these textbooks placed Eden at various points between the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the mountains of Inner Asia.

Some of your teachers would have also claimed that only the people of this region are really human: God created the people of other places as a different, nonhuman, or rather infrahuman, species. And all of your teachers of science as well as history would have agreed that non-Europeans are not as intelligent, not as honorable, and (for the most part) not as courageous as Europeans: God made them inferior. If you had asked your teachers why Europeans are more human and more intelligent than everyone else you would perhaps have been chastised for asking such a question. You would have been told that a Christian God created and now manages the world, and it would be both silly and blasphemous to suggest that He might show the same favor to non-Europeans, non-Christians, that He does to those people who worship the True God and moreover worship Him with the proper sacrament.

If you had been studying geography as well as history back in the middle of the nineteenth century, you would indeed have learned something about the non-European world. The people living in Africa and Asia would have been depicted not only as inferior but as in some sense evil. They are the people who refused to accept God's grace and so have fallen from His favor. Africans are thus cruel savages, for whom the best possible fate is to be put to useful work, and Christianized. Chinese and Indians for some unknown reason managed to build barbaric civilizations of their own, but because they are not Europeans and not Christians, their civilizations long ago began to stagnate and regress. And, for all their splendor, these never were real civilizations: they are cruel "Oriental despotisms." Only Europeans know true freedom.
Ideas of course change, and if you had gone to school some 50 years later, around the turn of the century, you would have been taught a much more secular form of history, and it would have had a strongly evolutionary (though not yet Darwinian) flavor. You would have learned that the earth is very old, that life is old, and that our species itself has been around for a long time. But everything important still happened in Europe (that is, in Greater Europe). The first true man, Cro-Magnon, lived in Europe. Agriculture was invented in Greater Europe (perhaps in the continent, perhaps in the Bible Lands, Europe’s self-proclaimed cultural hearth). You would have been told in world history class that the first barbaric beginnings of civilization occurred in the Bible Lands. There in the Bible Lands emerged the two Caucasian peoples who make all of history. The Semites invented cities and empires, and gave us monotheism and Christianity, but stopped at that point and then sank back into Oriental decadence. The Aryans or Indo-Europeans, freedom-loving though backward folk, built on these foundations, migrating from southeastern Europe or western Asia into and through geographical Europe, and creating the first genuinely civilized society, that of ancient Greece. Then the Romans raised civilization to its next level, and thereafter world history marched inexorably northward. If your school was in England you would have been told that history marched from “the Orient” (the Bible Lands) to Athens, to Rome, to feudal France, and finally to modern England—a kind of westbound Orient Express.

By now a secular picture of the geography of non-Europe had begun to be taught in European schools. Africans continued to be described as savages and Oriental societies as decadent and despotic. But important changes had taken place in the relations between Europe and non-Europe during the course of the nineteenth century, and by 1900 a particular theory about this relationship had become fixed in popular discourse and was now taught in schools as standard world geography. This was the theory (described later in this chapter) according to which non-Europeans can and do rise to a civilizational level, if not equal to that of Europeans at least near that level, under European tutelage, that is, under European colonial control.

Suppose we move forward another half century, to the history and geography taught around the end of World War II. There is not very much change. The first True Man is still the Cro-Magnon of Europe. Agriculture was invented in the Bible Lands; so too was barbaric civilization. True civilization still marches from Athens to Rome to Paris to London, and perhaps sets sail then for New York. Non-Europeans do not contribute much to world history, although they begin to do so as a result of European influence. (Colonial peoples learn from their tutors; Japanese imitate successfully, and so on.) Europeans are still brighter, better, and bolder than everyone else.2

We can sum all of this up with an image that will prove quite useful in this book. This is the idea that the world has an Inside and an Outside. World history thus far has been, basically, the history of Inside. Outside has been, basically, irrelevant. History and historical geography as it was taught, written, and thought by Europeans down to the time of World War II, and still (as we will see) in most respects today, lies, as it were, in a tunnel of time. The walls of this tunnel are, figuratively, the spatial boundaries of Greater Europe. History is a matter of looking back or down in this European tunnel of time and trying to decide what happened where, when, and why. “Why” of course calls for connections among historical events, but only among the events that lie in the European tunnel. Outside its walls everything seems to be rockbound, timeless, changeless tradition. I will call this way of thinking “historical tunnel vision,” or simply “tunnel history.”

The older form of tunnel history simply ignored the non-European world: typical textbooks and historical atlases devoted very few pages to areas outside of Greater Europe (that is, Europe and countries of European settlement overseas plus, for ancient history and the Crusades, the Near East), until one came to the year 1492. Non-Europe (Africa, Asia east of the Bible Lands, Latin America, Oceania) received significant notice only as the venue of European colonial activities, and most of what was said about this region was essentially the history of empire.3 Not only was the great bulk of attention devoted to Greater Europe in these older textbooks and historical atlases, but world history was described as flowing steadily westward with the passage of time, from the Bible Lands to eastern Mediterranean Europe, to northwestern Europe. This pattern is readily discernible if we notice the salience of places mentioned in these sources, that is, the frequency of place-name mentions for different regions at different periods. For the earliest period, place-name mentions cluster in the Bible Lands and the extreme eastern Mediterranean. For successively later periods, place-name mentions cluster farther and farther to the west and northwest, finally clustering in northwestern Europe for the period after about A.D. 1000: this is the “Orient Express” pattern to which we referred previously.

After World War II, however, history textbooks began to exhibit another, more subtle, form of tunnel history. The non-European world was now beginning to insert itself very firmly in European consciousness, in the aftermath of the war with Japan and in the midst of the intensified decolonization struggles, the Civil Rights movement in the United
States, and the like. Most newer textbooks enlarged the discussion of non-European history, and said something about the historical achievements of non-European cultures. Most textbooks gave a flavor of historicity, of evolutionary progress, to non-European history, thus departing from the older pattern, which dismissed these societies as stagnant and non-evolving. Asian societies were now described as having had an evolutionary motion, though a motion slower than that of Europe. Africa was still described as stagnant, history-less, prior to the colonial era. More salience was given to Asia. However, Africa and the Western Hemisphere still received little mention for eras prior to 1492. The pattern of place-name mentions in most (not all) texts and historical atlases still suggested a flow to the west and northwest, from the Near East to western Europe. And tunnel history dominated most textbooks in the most important matter of all, the question of "why," of explanation. Historical progress still came about because Europeans invented or initiated most of the crucial innovations, which only later spread out to the rest of the world. So the textbooks depicted a world in which historical causes were to be found basically inside the European tunnel of time, although historical effects were to be seen basically everywhere.4

Textbooks are an important window into a culture; more than just books, they are semiofficial statements of exactly what the opinion-forming elite of the culture want the educated youth of that culture to believe to be true about the past and present world.5 As we have seen, European and Anglo-American history textbooks assert that most of the causes of historical progress occur, or originate, in the European sector of the world. Textbooks of the early and middle nineteenth century tended to give a rather openly religious grounding for this Eurocentric tunnel history. In later textbooks the Bible is no longer considered a source of historical fact, but causality seems to be rooted in an implicit theory that combines a belief that Christian peoples make history with a belief that white peoples make history, the whole becoming a theory that it is natural for Europeans to innovate and progress and for non-Europeans to remain stagnant and unchanging ("traditional"), until, like Sleeping Beauty, they are awakened by the Prince. This view still, in the main, prevails, although racism has been discarded and non-Europe is no longer considered to have been absolutely stagnant and traditional.

Schools are always a little behind the time when it comes to teaching of newer topics and ideas. I wish I could report that the old notions about Inside and Outside are today just artifacts, still taught in some schools because of the usual lag between research and pedagogy, but which have been discarded by Real Scholars, those who pursue historical research and write the important and influential books on world history.

But this is not the case. In the matter that concerns us most, that of explaining the larger flows of world history, the views put forward by historical scholars today tend to be quite consonant with the theories projected in textbooks. We can set aside the fact that many of the most widely used textbooks, today as in the past, are written by prominent historical scholars. There are many complex cultural reasons why historical scholarship remains committed to Eurocentric explanations for most of the crucial developments in world history: we will discuss some of these reasons later in the present chapter and return to the question at various points throughout the book. Suffice it at this point to notice a very peculiar paradox. Historians have amassed a fine record of meticulous scholarship, and rarely indeed do we encounter prejudice or deliberate distortion in their work. Moreover, their judgments about historical causation are constrained by the same methodological rigor as we find in any other field of scholarship. It is only when we come to the larger issues of causation, matters of explaining historical progress over long periods and for larger regions, and matters of explaining profound revolutions in history, that Eurocentrism exerts an important influence on discourse, and often—as we will see—leads to the acceptance of poor theories in spite of a lack of supporting evidence.

Most European historians still maintain that most of the really crucial historical events, those that “changed history,” happened in Europe, or happened because of some causal impetus from Europe. (“Europe” continues to mean “Greater Europe.”) To illustrate this fact, I will list now, in historical order, a series of crucial Europe-centered propositions. All of them are accepted as true by the majority, in some cases the great majority, of European historical scholars. Some of them indeed are true, but that is beside the present point, which is to show that historical reasoning still focuses on Greater Europe as the perpetual fountainhead of history.

1. The Neolithic Revolution—the invention of agriculture and the beginnings of a settled way of life for humanity—occurred in the Middle East (or the Bible Lands). This view was unopposed before about 1930, and is still the majority view.

2. The second major step in cultural evolution toward modern civilization, the emergence of the earliest states, cities, organized religions, writing systems, division of labor, and the like, was taken in the Middle East.

3. The Age of Metals began in the Middle East. Ironworking was invented in the Middle East or eastern Europe and the “Iron Age” first appeared in Europe.
There is, however, a problem with the word “Eurocentrism.” In most discourse it is thought of as a sort of prejudice, an “attitude,” and therefore something that can be eliminated from modern enlightened thought in the same way we eliminate other relic attitudes such as racism, sexism, and religious bigotry. But the really crucial part of Eurocentrism is not a matter of attitudes in the sense of values and prejudices, but rather a matter of science, and scholarship, and informed and expert opinion. To be precise, Eurocentrism includes a set of beliefs that are statements about empirical reality, statements educated and usually unprejudiced Europeans accept as true, as propositions supported by “the facts.” Consider, for instance, the 14 propositions about Europe’s priority in historical innovation which we listed above. Historians who accept these propositions as true would be most indignant if we described the propositions as “Eurocentric beliefs.” Every historian in this category would deny emphatically that he or she holds any Eurocentric prejudices, and very few of them actually do hold such prejudices. If they assert that Europeans invented democracy, science, feudalism, capitalism, the modern nation-state, and so on, they make these assertions because they think that all of this is fact.

Eurocentrism, therefore, is a very complex thing. We can banish all the value meanings of this word, all the prejudices, and we still have Eurocentrism as a set of empirical beliefs. This, in a way, is the central problem for this book. We confront statements of presumed historical and scientific fact, not prejudices and biases, and we try to show, with history and science, that the presumptions are wrong; these statements are false.

How is it that Eurocentric historical statements which are not valid—that is, not confirmed by evidence and sometimes contradicted by evidence—are able to gain acceptance in European historical thought, and thereafter survive as accepted beliefs, hardly ever questioned, for generations and even centuries? This is a crucial problem for historiography and the history of ideas. To deal with it satisfactorily would take us well beyond the scope of this book, the main concern of which is empirical history and geography. Yet the problem cannot be avoided here. Libraries are full of scholarly studies that support the Eurocentric historical positions we are rejecting and refuting in this book. The sheer quantity of this work, and the respect that is properly owed to the scholars who assembled it, makes it certain that one cannot convincingly refute these positions with the factual arguments that can be presented in one book. No matter how persuasive these arguments may be, they cannot be placed, so to speak, on one arm of a balance and be expected to outweigh all of the accumulated writings of generations of European scholars,
textbook writers, journalists, publicists, and the rest, heaped up on the other arm of the balance.

So, in this book, we must make a sort of two-level argument. The main level is the empirical one: What did happen inside and outside of Europe in the medieval and early modern centuries, and what connections did take place between the two sectors in that period? At the second level, we will look at some pertinent aspects of the history of Eurocentric ideas and the social context surrounding these ideas. This will be done mainly in the present chapter, which analyzes the nature and history of diffusionist ideas and concludes with a discussion of the process of social licensing by which these ideas gain currency and hegemony, and in Chapter 2, which rather systematically examines the most important arguments for European superiority prior to 1492 and to an extent discusses their historical genealogies.

Scholars today are aware, as most were not a few decades ago, that the empirical, factual beliefs of history, geography, and social science very often gain acceptance for reasons that have little to do with evidence. Scholarly beliefs are embedded in culture, and are shaped by culture. This helps to explain the paradox that Eurocentric historical beliefs are so strangely persistent; that old myths continue to be believed in long after the rationale for their acceptance has been forgotten or rejected (as in the arguments grounded in belief in the Old Testament as literal history); that newer candidate beliefs gain acceptance without supporting evidence if they are properly Eurocentric; and that, most generally, the Eurocentric body of beliefs as a whole retains its persuasiveness and power. But there is more to the matter than this. Eurocentrism is, as I will argue at great length in this book, a unique set of beliefs, and uniquely powerful, because it is the intellectual and scholarly rationale for one of the most powerful social interests of the European elite. I will argue not only that European colonialism initiated the development of Europe (and the underdevelopment of non-Europe) in 1492, but that since then the wealth obtained from non-Europe, through colonialism in its many forms, including neocolonial forms, has been a necessary and very important basis for the continued development of Europe and the continued power of Europe’s elite. For this reason, the development of a body of Eurocentric beliefs, justifying and assisting Europe’s colonial activities, has been, and still is, of very great importance. Eurocentrism is quite simply the colonizer’s model of the world.

Eurocentrism is the colonizer’s model of the world in a very literal sense: it is not merely a set of beliefs, a bundle of beliefs. It has evolved, through time, into a very finely sculpted model, a structured whole; in fact a single theory; in fact a super theory, a general framework for many smaller theories, historical, geographical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical. This supertheory is diffusionism.

**Diffusionism**

When culture change takes place in a human community, that change can be the result of an invention that occurred within this community. Or it can be the result of a process in which the idea or its material effect (such as a tool, an art style, etc.) came into the community, having originated in some other community, in some other part of the landscape. The first sort of event is called “independent invention.” The second is called “diffusion.” Both processes occur everywhere. So far so good. But some scholars believe that independent invention is rather uncommon, and therefore not very important in culture change in the short run and cultural evolution in the long run. These scholars believe that most humans are imitators, not inventors. Therefore diffusion, in their view, is the main mechanism for change.

The scholars who hold this view are called “diffusionists.” Whenever they encounter a cultural innovation in a particular region, they are inclined to look diligently for a process of diffusion into that region from somewhere else, somewhere the trait is already in use. For instance, the fact that the blow-gun is traditionally used among some Native American peoples as well as some Old World peoples is explained by diffusionists as being the result of the diffusion of this trait from the Old World to the New: the New World people, they believe, probably did not invent the trait for themselves. Why? Because they probably were not inventive enough to do so. A larger form of this same diffusionist argument claims that the great pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas must be, ultimately, the result of transpacific or transatlantic diffusions, because these civilizations (agriculture, temple architecture, writing, and so on) were found much earlier in the Old World than the New, and Native Americans probably were not inventive enough to think up these things on their own. Some scholars, those who have been traditionally described as “extreme diffusionists,” believe that all civilization diffused from one original place on earth: some of them think that this original source of civilization was ancient Egypt, others place it somewhere in Central Asia (for instance, the Caucasus region—which scholars used to think was the original home of the “white” or “Caucasian” race). The debates between diffusionists and their opponents have been going on for more than a century in anthropology, geography, history, and all fields concerned about long-term, large-scale cultural evolution. The
antidiffusionists (often called “evolutionists” or “independent-inventionists”) have tended to level two basic charges against the diffusionists:

1. Diffusionists hold much too sour a view of human ingenuity: people are in fact quite inventive and innovative, so the possibility that new culture traits will appear as a result of independent invention is actually vastly greater than diffusionists admit. So investigators should consider the possibility of independent invention in any given case, rather than assuming a priori that a diffusion process explains the situation at which one is looking.

2. Diffusionists are elitists. Every diffusion must start somewhere. An invention must take place in some one community before it begins to spread (diffuse) to others. If we accept the quite fundamental assumption that all human groups are truly human in their thinking apparatuses, and therefore broadly similar in their ability to invent and innovate—this assumption is known as “the psychic unity of mankind,” a nineteenth-century label that is quaint but still in use—we would expect inventions to occur everywhere across the human landscape. But most diffusionists claim that only certain select communities are inventive. In other words, most communities change only as a result of receiving new traits by diffusion, but some places are uniquely inventive and are the original sources of the new traits. The people of these communities are more inventive than are people elsewhere. The psychic unity of mankind is denied: some people, or cultures, are simply smarter than others. They are permanent centers of invention and innovation.

This is spatial elitism. If we make a map of this landscape, we find that it has a permanent center and a permanent periphery. For the “extreme diffusionists” the entire world was mapped out this way, at least for the pre-Christian era: the permanent center of invention and innovation was thought to be Egypt, or the “Ancient Aryan Homeland” (a mythical place located somewhere in western Asia or southeastern Europe), or the Caucasus, or some other supposed navel of the ancient world. But the charge was leveled more broadly: diffusionists as a group tended to imagine that some few places, or some one place, was the primary source from which culture spread to all the other places.

It should be evident that diffusionism is very nicely suited to the idea that the world has an Inside and an Outside. In fact, diffusionism was the most fully developed scientific (or pseudoscientific) rationale for the idea of Inside and Outside. That idea, as we saw, postulates one permanent world center for new ideas; cultural evolution everywhere else results, broadly, from the diffusion of new ideas from this permanent center. This is simply the diffusionists’ map on a world scale.

We come now to a fascinating anomaly. The critics of diffusionism, in the nineteenth century and even in the twentieth century, failed entirely to grasp the full implications of their critique. None of them denied that the world has an Inside and an Outside. While criticizing the diffusionists for their rejection of the principle of the psychic unity of mankind, the antidiffusionists nonetheless believed that cultural evolution has been centered in Europe, and they therefore accepted the idea—explicitly or implicitly—that Europeans are more inventive, more innovative than everyone else.14 This is made explicit when they write about recent centuries, and particularly when they discuss the modernizing, missionarizing effect of European colonialism. It is also implicit in their writings about ancient times. These anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers, and historians of the second half of the nineteenth century and the present century do not focus on the Bible Lands, and their scholarly writings do not display any acceptance of religious assumptions. Yet Inside and Outside are explicit. They write about the Near Eastern origins of agriculture, of urbanization, and so forth. They then move smoothly to arguments about European origins of most of the rest of civilization.

My basic argument is this: all scholarship is diffusionist insofar as it axiomatically accepts the Inside–Outside model, the notion that the world as a whole has one permanent center from which culture-changing ideas tend to originate, and a vast periphery that changes as a result (mainly) of diffusion from that single center. I do not argue that the formal theory of diffusionism, as it was advanced and defended by scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, explains the Inside–Outside model, the mythology of Europe’s permanent geographical superiority and priority. Rather, the theory developed as a result of broad social forces in Europe, and entered the world of scholarship from outside of that world—from European society. Diffusionist scholars were, in essence, elaborating and codifying this theory in the realms of scholarship within which they worked: realms like archaeology, world history, and so on.

Before we proceed further I must post a warning: the word “diffusionist” has some ambiguities, and these should not be allowed to bring confusion into the present discussion. In any given debate as to whether a novel trait in a certain place was invented by the people of that place or was received from elsewhere by diffusion, those scholars who take the latter view are supporters of a “diffusionist” position, that is, they favor the specific hypothesis of diffusion as against that of independent
invention. This does not necessarily mean that they have a general propensity to favor diffusion as a causal formula. Sometimes the specific issue can be a very major problem. For instance, some scholars argue that important West African culture traits diffused across the Atlantic to America before 1492. Whether they are right or wrong in this matter, they are not arguing any sort of Eurocentric diffusionism, nor do they necessarily favor diffusion over independent invention in other contexts. But most scholars who are consistent diffusionists are also Eurocentric diffusionists.

Now I will describe Eurocentric diffusionism in somewhat formal terms as a scientific theory. That theory has changed through time, but its basic structure has remained essentially unchanged. I will describe what can be called the classical (essentially nineteenth-century) form of the theory, leaving until a later section of this chapter a discussion of the not very dissimilar modern form.

Diffusionism is grounded, as we saw, in two axioms: (1) Most human communities are un inventive. (2) A few human communities (or places, or cultures) are inventive and thus remain the permanent centers of culture change, of progress. At the global scale, this gives us a model of a world with a single center—roughly, Greater Europe—and a single periphery; an Inside and an Outside. There are a number of variants of this two-sector model. Sometimes the two sectors are treated as sharply distinct, with a definite boundary between them. (This form of the model is the familiar one. It is sometimes called the “Center-Periphery Model of the World.”) Another form sees the world in a slightly different way: there is a clear and definite center, but outside of it there is gradual change, gradual decline in degree of civilization or progressiveness or innovativeness, as one moves outward into the periphery. Another variant depicts the world as divided into zones, each representing a level of modernity or civilization or development. The classical division was one with three great bands: “civilization,” “barbarism,” and “savagery.”

The basic model of diffusionism in its classical form depicts a world divided into the prime two sectors, one of which (Greater Europe, Inside) invents and progresses, the other of which (non-Europe, Outside) receives progressive innovations by diffusion from Inside. From this base, diffusionism asserts seven fundamental arguments about the two sectors and the interactions between them:

1. Europe naturally progresses and modernizes. That is, the natural state of affairs in the European sector (Inside) is to invent, innovate, change things for the better. Europe changes; Europe is “historical.”
2. Non-Europe (Outside) naturally remains stagnant, unchanging,

traditional, and backward. Invention, innovation, and change are not the natural state of affairs, and not to be expected, in non-European countries. Non-Europe does not change; non-Europe is “ahistorical.”

Propositions 3 and 4 explain the difference between the two sectors:

3. The basic cause of European progress is some intellectual or spiritual factor, something characteristic of the “European mind,” the “European spirit,” “Western Man,” etc., something that leads to creativity, imagination, invention, innovation, rationality, and a sense of honor or ethics: “European values.”
4. The reason for non-Europe’s nonprogress is a lack of this same intellectual or spiritual factor. This proposition asserts, in essence, that the landscape of the non-European world is empty, or partly so, of “rationality,” that is, of ideas and proper spiritual values. There are a number of variations of this proposition in classical (mainly late-nineteenth-century) diffusionism. Two are quite important:

a. For much of the non-European world, this proposition asserts an emptiness also of basic cultural institutions, and even an emptiness of people. This can be called the diffusionist myth of emptiness, and it has particular connection to settler colonialism (the physical movement of Europeans into non-European regions, displacing or eliminating the native inhabitants). This proposition of emptiness makes a series of claims, each layered upon the others: (i) A non-European region is empty or nearly empty of people (hence settlement by Europeans does not displace any native peoples). (ii) The region is empty of settled population: the inhabitants are mobile, nomadic, wanderers (hence European settlement violates no political sovereignty, since wanderers make no claim to territory. (iii) The cultures of this region do not possess an understanding of private property—that is, the region is empty of property rights and claims (hence colonial occupiers can freely give land to settlers since no one owns it). The final layer, applied to all of the Outside sector, is an emptiness of intellectual creativity and spiritual values, sometimes described by Europeans (as, for instance, by Max Weber) as an absence of “rationality.”

b. Some non-European regions, in some historical epochs, are assumed to have been “rational” in some ways and to some degree. Thus, for instance, the Middle East during biblical times was rational. China was somewhat rational for a certain period in its history. Other regions, always including Africa, are unqualifiedly lacking in rationality.
Propositions 5 and 6 describe the ways Inside and Outside interact:

5. The normal, natural way that the non-European part of the world progresses, changes for the better, modernizes, and so on, is by the diffusion (or spread) of innovative, progressive ideas from Europe, which flow into it as air flows into a vacuum. This diffusion may take the form of the spread of European ideas as such, or the spread of new products in which the European ideas are concretized, or the spread (migration, settlement) of Europeans themselves, bearers of these new and innovative ideas.

Proposition 5, you will observe, is a simple justification for European colonialism. It asserts that colonialism, including settler colonialism, brings civilization to non-Europe; in fact the natural way that the non-European world advances out of its stagnation, backwardness, traditionalism.

But under colonialism, wealth is drawn out of the non-European colonies and enriches the European colonizers. In Eurocentric diffusionism this too is seen as a normal relationship between Inside and Outside:

6. Compensating in part for the diffusion of civilizing ideas from Europe to non-Europe, is a counterdiffusion of material wealth from non-Europe to Europe, consisting of plantation products, minerals, art objects, labor, and so on. Nothing can fully compensate the Europeans for their gift of civilization to the colonies, so the exploitation of colonies and colonial peoples is morally justified. (Colonialism gives more than it receives.)

And there is still another form of interaction between Inside and Outside. It is the opposite of the diffusion of civilizing ideas from Europe to non-Europe (proposition 5):

7. Since Europe is advanced and non-Europe is backward, any ideas that diffuse into Europe must be ancient, savage, atavistic, uncivilized, evil—black magic, vampires, plagues, “the bogeyman,” and the like. Associated with this conception is the diffusionist myth which has been called “the theory of our contemporary ancestors.” It asserts that, as we move farther and farther away from civilized Europe, we encounter people who, successively, reflect earlier and earlier epochs of history and culture. Thus the so-called “stone-age people” of the Antipodes are likened to the Paleolithic Europeans. The argument here is that diffusion works in successive waves, spreading outward, such that the farther outward we go the farther backward we go in terms of cultural evolution. But conversely, there is the possibility that these ancient, atavistic, etc., traits will counterdiffuse back into the civilized core, in the form of ancient, magical, evil things like black magic, Dracula, etc.

The main oppositions between the two sectors can be shown in tabular form. The following contrast-sets are quite typical in nineteenth-century diffusionist thought:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic of Core</th>
<th>Characteristic of Periphery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inventiveness</td>
<td>Irrationality, emotion, instinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality, intellect</td>
<td>Concrete thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract thought</td>
<td>Empirical, practical reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical reasoning</td>
<td>Body, matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mind</td>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adulthood</td>
<td>Insanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanity</td>
<td>Sorcery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Stagnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What I have described thus far is, of course, a highly simplified version of the diffusionist world model. We will add qualifications and modifications as we proceed, and in particular we will see that there are significant differences between the classical form of diffusionism and the modern form of the model.

So much for what diffusionism is. What does it do? In this book I will show in some detail how diffusionism has shaped our views of history, both European and non-European. Later in the present chapter and in Chapter 2 I will show some of the concrete influences of diffusionism on theories outside of history, some in psychology, some in geography, some in economics, some in sociology.

But this discussion will be more meaningful after a different question has been addressed. This is the question of how and why diffusionism became such a foundation theory in Western thought. To this question we now turn.

**THE COLONIZER’S MODEL**

Perhaps all civilizations have a somewhat ethnocentric view of themselves in relation to their neighbors, believing themselves better,
brighter, and bolder than every other human community and constructing empirical theories to explain why this is the case, and to explain away embarrassments. Perhaps we would find the seeds of diffusionism in all these beliefs: the idea that progress is natural and calls for no explanation in "our" society but is unnatural or at, any rate, less impressive in "their" societies; the idea that "they" progress by borrowing from "us" and imitating "our" ideas; and so on. But this does not add up to the theory of diffusionism, nor is it very important for an understanding of diffusionism. Diffusionism as I have been discussing it is a product of modern European colonialism. It is the colonizer's model of the world.

Origins

Diffusionism became a fully formed scientific theory during the nineteenth century. The origins of the theory, however, go back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe, where a belief system was being constructed to give some coherence to the new reality of change within European and colonial expansion outside Europe. The conception of a two-sector world, the diffusionist distinction between Inside and Outside, emerged from a very old conception of Christendom and the Roman imperial legacy (which meant, for most of western and southern Europe, a common source of legitimacy for the political and landholding elites). But it is certainly not true that medieval Europeans saw Christendom as a sharply defined space, naturally in conflict with surrounding societies. Nor did medieval European thinkers have many illusions about the relative power, wealth, and technological prowess of Christendom as compared with Islamic and Oriental civilizations. But certainly they had some idea, not of a collective identity, but of a distinction between the lands inhabited by Christians, given divine guidance and protection for this reason, and the lands of non-Christians. Nevertheless, it was only after 1492 that Inside acquired a sharp geographical definition, less as a result of medieval ideas than of colonialism in the early modern period.

European ideas about European progressiveness, Europe's somehow inevitable progress, are also essentially postmedieval. Obviously, these ideas were being discussed during the Middle Ages, and certainly there was hope, prayer, and struggle for betterment, but medieval folk tended rather to see their society as being in a relative state of equilibrium; their religion spoke of the Fall, and of the need to accept existing conditions (and rules), while the reality of medieval life (particularly fourteenth- and fifteenth-century life) was not one of perceptible forward progress for the mass of people. But European thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were coming to conceive of history—their own history—as a progressive process. Real progress (or at any rate accelerating change) indeed was taking place in the communities occupied by these thinkers, and the climate of ideas was changing in a complex but close association with the rise of capitalism, the expansion of opportunity for individuals in many regions, and the like.

One of the main problems confronted by these early modern thinkers, both secular and religious, was the need to establish a belief system, an ideology, that would convince conservative sectors of the European community to accept the idea that progress is inevitable, natural, and desirable, and thus to accept changes in the legal system which would permit more rapid and widespread capital accumulation, to persuade the landowning classes to treat land as a commodity and invest their real holdings in risk enterprises, to introduce laws and practices to mobilize labor for emerging capitalist activities at home and abroad, to persuade Europeans in general to accept the painful changes being imposed on them, and so on. Equally important was the need to explain progress in ways that accorded with religion. This was done by seeing God's guidance of (European) history, and by conceptualizing progressive innovations as being products of the European mind or spirit and thus ultimately products of the Christian soul. (We will go into these matters later in this book.)

Thus emerged the conception of Inside as being naturally progressive (diffusionist proposition 1), and as being progressive because of the workings of an intellectual or spiritual force, "European rationality" (diffusionist proposition 3). By the eighteenth century it had become the practice in secular writings to discuss causality in history and philosophy without referencing God and Scriptures, but the basic model of European progress as natural, as rational, remained unchanged in its essence; became, indeed, much fortified. In none of this thought was there any real suspicion that non-European civilizations might have had much to do with the earlier, medieval progress of Christian Europe, or much to do with its modern (sixteenth- to eighteenth-century) progress except in the purely passive role of provider of labor, commodities, and land for settlement, and, marginally, in some traits of technology and art. Nor was there very much awareness that colonialism and its windfalls—inflow of capital, intensification of intra-as well as extra-European trade, increase in employment opportunities in mercantile centers and in the colonial world, and much more—was an important cause of European progress. Then, as later, the European conception of its own dynamic society attributed dynamism not to external causes but to internal causes, and to God. This relatively constant blindness to the importance of colonialism,
nearly all parts of Asia and Africa were mainly matters of trade, with
dominance of long-distance maritime trade, small territorial footholds
here and there on certain coasts, and the like (see Chapter 4). Thus, in
the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the diffusionist
model of Outside which had been applied to Americans and to the groups
of Africans transported to America as slaves could not be applied to the
civilizations of the Old World.

For these Eastern Hemisphere civilizations a limited and somewhat
tentative form of the diffusionist model was accepted during this period.
These civilizations were indisputably rich and technically advanced.
Rationality in the sense of inventiveness was clearly present, or at least
had been present in the past, when the great and impressive innovations
(technology, architecture, banking, and so on) had occurred. What these
civilizations lacked was the moral component of rationality, because,
fundamentally, they were not Christians. These were “Oriental despot-
isms,” societies in which there was, naturally, cruelty, lack of freedom,
lack of a decent life for the common people (while the elite wallowed in
decadence and sin), etc. (We discuss this concept at some length in
Chapter 2.) The moral failing necessarily led to an inability of these
societies to progress in the present, the era when Europe is naturally
progressing, although Europeans could not deny, even though they found
it most puzzling, that these despotic civilizations had, indisputably,
progressed in the past. (At times the puzzle was resolved by declaring
that they had progressed in pre-Christian times, and had lost the Grace of
God through having refused to accept Christianity.) Only in the nineteenth
century, with the rapid colonisation of India, Southeast Asia, interior
Africa, and (as a kind of collective colony) China, did the diffusionist
propositions about Outside, and about the natural relations between
Inside and Outside, become generalized to all of non-Europe. It was in this
late period, I think, that the final diffusionist proposition, the notion of
counterdiffusion of evil and savagery and disease from Outside to Inside,
become fully developed. The bogeyman (from the Malay Buginese
people) came from Outside. So too did Dracula, whose homeland lay on
the edge of Asia.

**Classical Diffusionism**

The nineteenth century was the classical era for colonialism, and the era
when Eurocentric diffusionism assumed what I will call its classical form.
After the Napoleonic Wars colonialism expanded and intensified with
remarkable rapidity. Between 1810 and 1860 or thereabouts Europeans
subdued most of Asia, settled most of North America, and began the
they had been there from the start, unless, that is, polygenists were right and some human groups had been created separately from, and perhaps much earlier than, Adam and Eve. This gave room for wide-ranging theorization about the way cultural differences had evolved. Paralleling this change was a general rejection of the literal biblical beliefs about the original nature of human society. Culture was now (after midcentury) quite generally seen as a product of evolution from very primitive beginnings, exemplified in the notion of a primordial “stone age.” (According to the Old Testament, humans had possessed advanced technology, including agriculture and the use of metals, in the days of Genesis.)

The reasons for the rapid crystallization of beliefs about non-Europeans are complex, but the most important underlying reason was the progress of colonialism. This produced two effects in particular. One was a flood of information about non-European people and places, such that, for the first time, a coherent—though highly distorted—description could be given in the European literature about non-Europeans, both civilized and “savage.” The second reason was a practical, political and economic interest in proving certain things to be true, and other things untrue, about the extra-European world and its people. The two processes were tightly interconnected.

Colonialism in its various forms, direct and indirect, was an immensely profitable business and considerable sums of money were invested in efforts to learn as much as possible about the people and resources of the regions to be conquered, dominated, and perhaps settled, and to learn as much as possible about the regions already conquered in order to facilitate the administration and economic exploitation of these regions. The nineteenth century was the age of scientific exploration—Darwin in the Beagle, Livingstone in Africa, Powell in the Rockies, and so on—but the sources of support for these efforts tended to be institutions with very practical interest in the regions being studied. Paralleling all of this was the great surge of missionary activity that supported some exploration (including Livingstone’s) but most crucially led to the gathering of important, detailed, information about ethnography, languages, and geography by hundreds of dedicated missionaries throughout the non-European world. Also of great importance were the detailed reports that colonial administrators everywhere were required to submit, reports providing information about native legal systems, land tenure rules, production, and much more.

Most of what was learned about non-Europeans came from these sources. It is not necessary for me to dwell on the fact that the people who supplied the information were Europeans with very definite points of
view, cultural, political, and religious lenses that forced them to see “natives” in ways that were highly distorted. A missionary might have great love and respect for the people among whom he or she worked but could not be expected to believe that the culture and mind of these non-Christians was on a par with that of Christian Europeans. A colonial administrator not only had cultural distortions but usually worked with economic interests and classes (European planters, mining corporations, zamindars, and so on) and consciously or unconsciously put forward views about common people, and about resources, that reflected the biases and concrete interests of these elite groups. Strictly speaking, missionaries and colonial administrators were in the business of diffusing Europe to non-Europe. Thus the entire corpus of information about non-Europeans that was gathered in this process has certain quite definite distortions. It was immensely valuable in spite of this fact, but the plain fact is that theories constructed from this information—and this includes the great bulk of nineteenth-century anthropological, geographic, and political-economic theories about non-Europeans—are systematically distorted. The distortions are, broadly, those of diffusionism.

But colonial interest added an additional kind of distortion, a matter of shaping knowledge into theories that would prove useful for colonialism. Scientific and legal theories were constructed in general by policymakers and by intellectuals who were either themselves policymakers or were close to policy. (In England, for instance, an extraordinary percentage of the influential historians, social theorists, even novelists and poets, had direct connections with the East India Company, the Colonial Office, and other private and public agencies of empire.) I include under the label “theory” a wide range of general arguments, including the larger constructs of history.

At the most general level, intellectuals were shaping theories of social evolution which were in essence demonstrations that the postulates of diffusionism are natural law. As we noticed previously, the nineteenth-century debates between those called “evolutionists” and those called “diffusionists” were essentially debates between two versions of diffusionism. A great range of theories in both camps were constructs aimed to assist in colonial activity, and to develop and strengthen the doctrine that European colonialism is scientifically natural, a matter of the inevitable working out of social laws of human progress (development of the family, law, the state, etc.). Also at the very general level, seminal works of the middle and later nineteenth century on ancient and modern history presented various sophisticated diffusionist ideas, mainly about the reasons for and the facts of Europe’s natural and persistent progress compared with other peoples, those now being colonized. These historical constructs were important in building support for colonial activities among European populations; and later, as colonial educational systems appeared, for convincing the natives that colonialism was natural, inevitable, and progressive.

In Chapter 2 I will discuss a number of these diffusionist theories which emerged, or became concrete, in the nineteenth century in the complex association of scholarship and colonialism, focusing on those theories that today underlie the myth of Europe’s historical and cultural superiority. Here I need only show how classical diffusionism arose in tandem with classical colonialism, and for this purpose a pair of representative theories can be singled out by way of illustration.

One such theory was the postulate that non-Europeans have not developed concepts of private property in important material resources such as land. The theory asserted that private property emerged from ancient European roots, notably Roman land law and various putative Germanic traits relating to individualism; that other civilizations, lacking this history (and, by implication, lacking the mental and cultural qualities associated with this history), remained in a stage of evolution in which true individual ownership could not be fully conceptualized. These people, therefore, needed to have capitalism imposed on them. In fact, the theory was developed mainly by lawyers and administrators in the European colonial corporations and colonial offices, and had one very concrete purpose: to establish the legal basis for expropriating land from colonized peoples, on the fiction that the colonized had no property rights to this land because they had no concept of property rights in land. Yet the theory became essentially an axiom in nineteenth-century intellectual thought. Even Karl Marx accepted it, and doing so produced a large theory about the evolution of private property—a major part of his theory about the origins of capitalism—in which it was argued (or rather assumed) that this evolution was peculiarly a European phenomenon, and that colonialism, for all its horrors, did at least bring about the diffusion of capitalism to the non-European world, a necessary though painful process for the non-Europeans. Thus even Marxism, perhaps the most antisystemic doctrine to come out of nineteenth-century Europe, was strongly shaped by diffusionism.

A larger form of this doctrine, the more general “myth of emptiness,” the diffusionist idea that a colonized or colonizable territory was empty of population, or was populated only by wandering nomads, people with no fixed abode and therefore no claim to territory, or lacked people with a concept of political sovereignty or economic property, had similar colonialist functions, and arose in a similar way. The same is true of a closely related doctrine, the theory of “Oriental despotism” (older in point of
origin, but developed fully in nineteenth-century diffusionist thought), according to which non-Europeans lack the concept of freedom, hence suffer despotic governments that stifle all progress—until Europeans bring freedom to them in the form of colonialism (which ironically is the purest negation of freedom). These and other theories that arose from classical diffusionism are still employed today to reinforce the myth of Europe’s historical and cultural superiority; we will discuss them in Chapter 2, which seeks to refute this myth.

The era of classical diffusionism was the era of classical colonialism, the era when European expansion was so swift and so profitable that European superiority seemed almost to be a law of nature. Diffusionism, in its essence, codified this apparent fact into a general theory about European historical, cultural, and psychological superiority, non-European inferiority, and the inevitability and absolute righteousness of the process by which Europe and its traits diffused to non-Europe. Diffusionism then ramified the general theory into innumerable empirical beliefs in all the human sciences, in philosophy, in the arts. And it applied these beliefs in particular cases, explaining and justifying the individual acts of conquest, of repression, of exploitation. All of it was right, rational, and natural.

Modern Diffusionism

The nineteenth century, or more precisely the interval between the defeat of Napoleon and the beginning of World War I, was a time of relative peace and relative progress for Europeans. Colonialism fueled this process with resources, markets, cheap labor, and lands for settlement by Europeans, and colonialism resolved many of Europe’s internal contradictions in the process. The idea that progress in European civilization and expansion of that civilization in space were different dimensions of the same historical force was the dominant idea of the time, and this was, of course, the central notion of diffusionism.

But all of this changed early in the twentieth century. The world is finite in size, so spatial expansion had to come to an end, and by 1900 all of the non-European world had been carved up into colonies, semi-colonial spheres of control, and territories of settlement. This change of conditions produced a change in thought: the essential problem now was exploitation and the maintenance of control in the face of native resistance. Thus it became a question not of expansion but of equilibrium. At the same time tensions among European powers—some of the tensions were connected to conflicts over colonies—boiled over into general war among the European powers. Soon after World War I came the Great Depression. Then, immediately, World War II. Between 1914 and 1945, then, the minds of European intellectuals were focused not on the idea of progress and expansion, but on the question of how to prevent disaster: how to maintain, or return to, peace and prosperity. The code word was “normalcy.”

The central notion of diffusionism did not fit this intellectual mood. The prevailing doctrines of this period were theories of stasis, of equilibrium, not theories of expansion. Economics dwelled on Keynesian ideas of equilibrium. In geography, the doctrine known as “regionalism” prevailed, the idea that the various parts of the world are stable, coherent, well-demarcated regions and tend to remain that way. Anthropology was emphasizing two equilibrium theories: “functionalism,” a model of social systems (and cultures) as stable and self-correcting systems, and “cultural relativism,” a doctrine that declared in essence that each culture has intrinsic worth. Anthropologists of course worked primarily among colonized peoples, and these two theories were closely integrated with colonial policy, mainly as a basis for policies designed to prevent native unrest while allowing European exploitation of land, minerals, and labor. Thus equilibrium doctrines were very widespread, probably dominant, in European thought throughout most of the first half of the twentieth century.

Diffusionism, in this period, seems to have gone into a partial eclipse. History and geography textbooks were still sublimely diffusionist, in an essentially nineteenth-century mood, emphasizing the beneficial spread of civilization to Africa, Asia, and Latin America (“where our bananas come from”), the teleological rise of “the West,” and so on. In social thought, the doctrines of “extreme diffusionism” (discussed earlier) were still being advanced, and still debated. And it should not be thought that the decline of diffusionism as a doctrine of cultural dynamics implied a decline in prejudice. The notion that non-Europeans are less rational, less innovative, and so on, was as intense as ever: perhaps even more intense since this was the period of Nazism and like doctrines, and since genetic racism seemed, in this era, to be science, not prejudice. We return to this matter in Chapter 2.

A new and modern form of diffusionism gained prominence after the end of World War II, in the period of collapsing colonial empires and an emerging “Third World” of underdeveloped but legally sovereign countries. This doctrine, generally known today by the title “modernization,” or “the diffusion of modernization,” arose in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Immediately after the Japanese surrender in 1945 it became clear that a number of colonies would gain independence immediately: liberation forces were now very strong and, in the wake of the world war,
all of the colonial powers except the United States were now quite weak. All of them wanted to hold on to their colonies, the sources of great profit in the past and presumably also in the future. Each of the colonial powers maneuvered in its own way to hold on to its colonies, sometimes resorting to forcible efforts to suppress independence movements, sometimes conceding political independence grudgingly but peacefully where continued colonial control seemed patent.

All colonies had been saturated during the classical colonial era with the ideological message that economic and social progress for the colonial people had to come through the diffusion of "modernization" from the colonizing power. "Modernization" meant the diffusion of a modern economy (with major corporations owned by the colonizer), a modern public administration (the colonial political structure), a modern technical infrastructure (bridges, dams, and the like, built by the colonizer), and so on. I call this an ideological message, but it was in fact believed in profoundly by the colonizers, who felt that their mission was, indeed, to diffuse their own civilization to the peoples who were under their "colonial tutelage," and the fact that this mission produced wealth for their own country seemed only logical (recall diffusionist proposition 6).

In the new situation the colonizers had to persuade the colonized that the "modernization" message was still valid. Doing so, they might convince the colonized to voluntarily relinquish the ideal of political independence in favor of the more pragmatic ideal of economic and social development under a wise and benevolent colonial rule. Or, if independence was insisted upon, this ideology would convince the people of the country now acquiring freedom that the only way to develop that country economically and socially was to retain the colonial economy, that is, to allow the colonizer's corporations and banks to continue their (profitable) work under the new regime: a system everyone today describes as "neocolonialism."

Now all colonial powers began a major campaign to intensify the process of colonial economic development. This should not be thought of as cynical or hypocritical: remember that diffusionism defined the colonial process as beneficial for the colonized as well as the colonizer, and the technical and other personnel involved in the new colonial development activities were utterly convinced that they were working for the advancement of the colonized people. At the same time, a parallel campaign was developed to further the same form of economic development in the independent countries, partly through agencies of the United Nations, partly through bilateral aid agreements. The United States, now the leading economic power, began to establish its own aid programs in countries throughout the underdeveloped world. Again, this should not be dismissed as cynical and political: there was, in this period, a tremendously euphoric ideology that saw the end of the world war as the beginning of an Age of Development, a time when the advanced nations would work to bring—that is, diffuse—prosperity and advancement to the poor nations.

Decolonization spread, and many liberation movements and newly independent countries refused to accept the neocolonial option, either ejecting foreign corporations (as did Indonesia) or opting for a specifically socialist society. This added a new impetus to the diffusion-modernization project. Efforts to bring about development through diffusion were intensified in hopes that their success would lead countries to reject the anticapitalist and antiforeign options. But the choice of either of these two options seemed to imply a political alignment with the Soviet Union and China, so the diffusion-modernization project now became important as a matter of foreign policy in the Cold War. In 1959 the Cuban revolutionary victory gave the project very high priority for the United States, which now treated modernization and economic development, particularly in Latin America, as a matter of the highest priority, calling for very large investment.

Modern diffusionism is the body of ideas which underlay, and still underlies, this new set of conditions in the Third World. The diffusion of modernization, as it is carried out by public policy makers and private corporations and theorized by intellectuals (at least in the metropolitan, formerly colonizing, countries), is considered to be essentially the process by which Third World countries gain prosperity by accepting the continuous and increasing diffusion of economic and technological plums from the formerly colonial countries, a process that now, as in the past, is supremely profitable for the latter. In the diffusionist belief system, it is profitable for everybody, and also is right, rational, and natural, just as it had been a century earlier.

The ideas of 1993 are of course very different from the ideas of 1893, so it would be wrong to think that modern diffusionism is the same as classical diffusionism. Biological racism is no longer part of the model (as we will see in Chapter 2), and few modern European thinkers believe that non-Europeans simply do not have the potential to develop eventually to the level of Europeans. Religious undertones are largely absent, and the notion that a Christian God began things with the putative ancestors of Europeans, in the Bible Lands, and thereafter guided Europeans, Christians, to persistently superior over all others, is no longer very popular. The historical greatness of some non-European civilizations is now fully conceded. (But with one vital qualification: less rationality, less innovativeness, than European civilization. We deal with this in Chapter 2.)
After about a quarter-century of blind faith that the diffusion of modernization would bring about economic development everywhere, European experts and scholars now qualify their belief in this model, and in particular draw back from their former naive faith that the diffusion of modern technology, particularly in agriculture, is the key to economic development, the key to what used to be called "the take-off into sustained growth."

But, all of this notwithstanding, the basic propositions of diffusionism remain in place. Europeans still believe that Inside has one fundamental cultural nature and Outside another, now admitting Japan into the Inside sector. It is still believed that Europe in the past displayed a progressiveness not found in any other civilizations, except in one or two places, at one or two moments of history. Although European scholars no longer insist that this fundamental difference between a progressive Inside and a stagnant or slow-moving Outside will persist into the indefinite future, most of them write and speak about the present and future as though this fundamental dynamic will continue (again qualifying the picture to admit Japan, and perhaps a few small East Asian societies, into the dynamic of Inside). But today, as we will see in the next chapter, there is a growing, though still small, group of European scholars, mainly responding to the newer ideas that now emanate from non-European scholarship in postcolonial societies, who question the overall diffusionist model, and who deny its historical conceptions about the superiority of Inside over Outside.

**WORLD MODELS AND WORLDLY INTERESTS**

Diffusionism is a poor theory. Diffusionism, as I argue in this book, is not good geography and not good history. Yet it exerts a tremendous influence on scholarship, and has done so for a very long time. How do we account for the fact that a bad theory can be so widely believed to be true, and for such a long time? We should briefly consider this question before we shift from the discussion of the nature and evolution of diffusionism as a theory to the discussion of empirical history, the topic of later chapters. It is important to understand how this (and every) theory interlocks with other ideas and responds to social interests.

*The Ethnography of Beliefs*

In this discussion we will look at ideas as cultural facts: we will look at them ethnographically, as beliefs held by human beings who belong to specific sorts of communities and categories. We will see that a study of ideas-as-beliefs is quite different from an inquiry into the validity or truth of ideas, and that the study of ideas-as-beliefs is in some cases the more important and more basic of the two sorts of inquiry. We will see, in addition, that scientific beliefs arrange themselves in larger structures, belief systems, and that belief systems (like diffusionism) have certain crucial relationships of compatibility to one another and conformity to the values or interests of the groups of people who hold them to be valid. Pursuing this ethnographic exploration of the character of ideas-as-beliefs we will, I think, discover why the theory of diffusionism has had a life history that is more clearly explained by the life history of European society, and more particularly European colonialism, than it is by any intellectual or social process within the scientific community.

Scientific ideas, and empirical ideas in general, can be examined in two ways. One is comfortable and traditional. It considers ideas in terms of their communicated meaning. Are they logical; that is, do they reflect an internally consistent argument? Are they valid in the sense that what they assert about the real world seems to have evidential support? This combination of logic, or structure of argument, and evidential basis is the kind of thing we look for whenever we evaluate scientific ideas—indeed all ideas that concern empirical reality. The second way of looking at ideas inquires about the people who believe a given idea, who communicate it to others as a belief, and about the people who listen and in turn accept the idea as a belief. The question whether a person believes in the validity of an idea is not at all the same as the question whether the idea is in fact a valid one. Questions about belief status are matters of ethnography: of finding out why beliefs are held by given people; how beliefs come to be accepted and rejected by these people; how given beliefs are connected in the minds of these people with other beliefs held by them; how new candidate beliefs are weighed and accepted or rejected; and how beliefs as such are connected to other parts of culture, including values, social organization, class organization, politics, and so on. What makes this kind of inquiry threatening is the fact that it can provide independent and reliable evidence that a given group of people holds a given idea to be true for reasons that have little to do with logic and evidence, for reasons grounded in culture.

Interestingly, we experience no discomfort and sense no threat when we read an account written by some anthropologist or cultural geographer about the beliefs, values, myths, and so on, of some small and obscure society in some far corner of the earth. Indeed, we expect an anthropologist to tell us more about the social or cultural reason why the "natives" hold to these ideas than about the validity of the ideas. In this
kind of context it is quite normal to have a description of ideas that distinguishes between the matter of their logical and evidential basis and the matter of their cultural binding. But when this ethnographic approach is applied to what are called “Western” ideas, in the realms of science, history, and the like, the results are disturbing and the enterprise itself seems somehow improper.

Ideas are, so to speak, surrounded by culture, and we can examine the surroundings and the way ideas are embedded in their surroundings. This is the ethnographic study of ideas. Now it happens to be a terminological convention in the field of anthropology to attach the prefix ethno- to a word designating a particular field of knowledge, such as medicine, botany, geography, and the like, when our purpose is to study that body of knowledge ethnographically. The study of “medicine,” for instance, is different from the study of “ethnomedicine.” The latter is an ethnographic field, asking what the medical beliefs are in a given culture, how these beliefs relate to the rest of that culture, and how to generalize cross-culturally about medical beliefs in all (or some set) of cultures. When we put together along with ethnomedicine all the other scientific fields prefixed by “ethno-,” we get, naturally enough, ethnoscience, meaning the ethnographic study of all sciences; more broadly, all fields of empirical belief. Ethnoscience is part of that. So, too, is ethnogeography.

The subject matter of ethnoscience is belief. Ordinarily we look at beliefs as they are enshrined in empirical statements, generally sentences that assert some predicate to be true about some subject. The fundamental, though not the smallest, unit of study in ethnoscience is the statement of belief and the person or group who makes—and holds to—this belief statement. For every empirical statement in social science there is an ethnoscientific question about its belief status and there is a profoundly different question about its truth status. The two questions do not forever remain separate, but they come together only at the conclusion of a long analysis. That analysis explains in the end why so many diffusionist statements in which historians and geographers firmly believe are really false.

The study of beliefs is also the study of belief-holding groups. Two very important points have to be made about belief-holding groups. A belief-holding group can be a group of any type. However, among the various types of belief-holding groups, the most fundamentally important are cultures, classes, and combinations that can be thought of as ethnoclasses. None of these types is an abstraction, except in the matter of defining units and boundaries. Cultures are highly variable from place to place and person to person, but the analytical unit itself is real and concrete. Its individual members also have concrete reality. There is no philosophical conundrum about the cultural whole “versus” its individual (human) parts in the matters we are discussing now. Thus there is an ethnoscience of each individual human being and also an ethnoscience of groups as collectives. Classes are a bit more problematic. However, most people accept the broad idea that there is a basic division between two class communities, one, the working class, the other an elite class, deploying political power and generally accumulating wealth. I will simply take it as given here that a rough class bifurcation exists in most societies of this and the preceding century, while conceding that it is not always possible to tell whether a given group in a given society belongs to the working (producing) class or to the elite class or to some ambiguous or uncertain grouping that does not fit comfortably in either of the two. One such problematic grouping that relates closely to the issues discussed in this book includes professors and others engaged in studying and writing about society and the environment. They are not members of the accumulating class, the elite, but scholars and writers are in most cases (not all) strongly bound to that class, and for all their intellectual penetration, discipline, and honesty, they tend to think, say, and write down ideas that are useful to the elite. This is true most pointedly for ideas of the sort related to diffusionism.

Culture and class intersect in ethnoclass communities. There is a crucial use in this book for the concept of an ethnoclass community. I will argue strongly that the elite groupings of European countries together, in spite of their cultural (and national) differences, are a basic and permanent belief-holding group, and that their beliefs form, to a large extent, a single ethnogeography and ethnoscience. This reflects the fact, that, for the period with which we are mainly concerned, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these elites have had a common set of interests in relation to the working classes of their own countries and of the non-European world, and they have together underwritten the production of a coherent belief system about the European world, the non-European world, and the interactions between the two. The most important proposition in this book, in fact, is the assertion that diffusionist ideas are at the core of the single belief system generated under the influence of, and for the interests of, the European elite. Although it should not be thought that the science and history produced under the stimulus of this ethnoclass is “biased,” nevertheless we will see that the entire body of ideas concerning geography, history, and social science are strongly influenced by their ethnoclass patronage. Overall,
and through the two-century-long flow of ideas, the product is a body of
diffusionist beliefs which persist, and continue to influence social
practice, although they are quite unscientific.

Beliefs assemble themselves into belief systems. The difference is not
exactly a matter of relative complexity. Most simple beliefs are just those
ideas that can be expressed in simple declarative sentences (although
some call for a poem or a painting), and which people do express as
assertions, with more or less confidence as to their veracity. We are
interested in three things about these belief sentences and the acts in
which they are expressed. They are empirical (not purely logical or purely
evaluative). They are expressed as true, or possibly true. And they are
thought of by the belief holders as cognitively whole or discriminable, as,
putting it crudely, “concept,” “ideas.” What makes such a hard-to-be-
precise-about unit important is the fact that individual humans do not
simply think up such ideas or concepts out of thin air or immediate
perceptual experience. These unit beliefs tend to retain their character as
beliefs through long intervals of time, often generations, and among large
numbers of people. Still more structure is to be found in a belief system
that consists of chains of statements connected together by implication
(“because . . .”). This kind of belief system I will call, unoriginally, an
argument. It simply needs to be noted that the chain of statements in an
argument may or may not proceed from simple to complex. A tighter
structure is to be found in those systems called theories. Simple beliefs,
then, are aggregated in various ways into belief structures, belief systems.
Each belief system, in turn, is assembled (psychologically) into various
sorts of higher order systems.

The highest level, comprehending all of the empirical beliefs held by
a given belief-holding unit—including some beliefs that contradict one
another—is the group’s (or individual’s) ethnosciences as a whole.
Included here are all of the beliefs held to be true, or possibly true, about
the external world, natural and social; beliefs about the self or person; and
beliefs about technique—the self’s capability to manipulate and influence
the world. The ethnosciences, in a way, is an encyclopedia.

How does it happen that a new belief is admitted into a belief
system? The question is not where new ideas come from but how they
become validated, that is, given a kind of social license that admits them
to the status of a belief, a belief that is at least accepted as a tenable
hypothesis, a “reasonable idea,” and at most accepted as fact. Three quite
distinct judgments—I think also distinct procedures—are involved in this
licensing process. One is a judgment of compatibility. The second is a
judgment of verifiability (the matter of empirical verification). The third

is a judgment of conformity (or value conformity). Scholarly conceits
to the contrary notwithstanding, verification is the least important of the
three.

All the belief systems held by a given group are in one way or another
interrelated. Some are tightly connected: one theory may seem to follow
directly from another, for example. Normally the relationship is much
looser. But all belief systems have one basic and common relationship
with all other belief systems held by a group. They are compatible. This
means that they can coexist peacefully in the same ethnosciences: they are
not cognitively or culturally dissonant. Although beliefs may occasionally
contradict one another, total lack of relationship is not in principle
possible: directly or indirectly, all beliefs held by a given belief-holding
unit or individual are somehow linked together, and some judgment of
their compatibility will be made more or less often. Typically, belief
systems reinforce one another: “If P is true, it is reasonable to suppose that
Q is true.” Or “If P is true, it follows necessarily that Q is true.” What
counts here, because this is an ethnographic scenario, is the fact that the
belief systems are judged to be compatible. The judgment of compatibility
is not simply a definition, an assertion to the effect that when the group
holds two or more beliefs at the same time they are merely labeled
“compatible.” Compatibility is the outcome of an important social
process. The process is most transparent when new candidate beliefs are
introduced: when some new hypothesis is proposed within a belief
holding group and must, as it were, apply for a license. One of the most
crucial tests it must pass is that of compatibility with existing beliefs.

Compatibility is the loosest of all relations among theories and other
beliefs within an ethnosciences. Compatibility is, in a sense, a bridge that
must be built over gaps in the overall body of thought. One sort of gap is
obvious: it is the incompleteness of knowledge. The other sort, less
obvious, is highly significant for the argument of this book. Here, the gap
among theories (and other beliefs) is actually filled, but not by argument.
In ordinary language, “it seems reasonable” to suppose that one theory
leads support to another, or one historical belief is explained by another.
This matter of “reasonableness” bears very close examination, because
“reasonableness” is that form of the relation of compatibility which allows
the most absurdly unreasonable ideas to pass for well-founded scientific
argument.

Broadly speaking, there are two important ways in which gaps are
bridged with “reasonableness” in place of—and disguising the lack of—an
explicit, defensible argument. One way calls for an insertion of value
statements in place of belief statements; we will explore this device in the
next section. The other device lies within the belief system itself. It substitutes, for an explicit argument, an implicit one. To understand how it works we have to distinguish between explicit and implicit beliefs.

Implicit beliefs are usually matters “too obvious to mention,” “beneath notice,” “obviously true,” “taken for granted.” They are ordinary beliefs (and theories) which tend not to surface in discourse. There is nothing mysterious about most implicit beliefs; they are not somehow buried in the unconscious, or deliberately hidden from view. Some beliefs simply tend to be more often thought about consciously and verbalized than others, for a variety of unavailing reasons. Those readily verbalized are explicit beliefs, those not, are implicit beliefs. There is no hard line of demarcation in a case of this sort, involving informal communication of belief.

But the demarcation is quite sharp in the case of formal, written and published, expositions of belief. The implicit beliefs are simply not written about. If they emerge in print at all, it is in the form of explicitly stated assumptions, or “axioms.” Here, the conclusion that terminates an implicit argument is exposed to view, but not the argument itself. Rarely is there any attempt to deceive or obfuscate. The writer merely takes it for granted that the reader holds the same set of implicit beliefs and is willing to accept the “reasonableness” of unsupported assumptions. Both share the same ethnoscience and the same value system.

Implicit beliefs, as we will see, are the weakest link in the diffusionist world model. Throughout this book we will encounter diffusionist theories that simply hang in the air, unsupported by argument and evidence. In fact we will find, for large chunks of the diffusionist world model, that most of the propositions which would be needed to make these areas of belief coherent and sound are simply missing. In other words, relatively few of the beliefs are explicit and grounded. And these few are not connected together, so the fabric as a whole is incomplete. It seems complete only to those who are prepared to take a great deal for granted, who fill in the gaps with implicit beliefs.

Verification is the matter of testing a candidate belief to see whether it fits the facts. There are various kinds of test and various controversies about the nature of verification, but such questions need not detain us. The normal sort of verification involves a search for evidence that would seem to support or contradict the new hypothesis, the candidate belief. The process is never complete: everyone, of every culture and community, has to be satisfied with partial confirmation (and disconfirmation) of empirical beliefs. For us the important point about verification is this: verification is never sufficient grounds for converting a hypothesis into an accepted belief. Nor is it even necessary.

The judgment of compatibility is more crucial than that of verifiability, and this holds true among social scientists as it does among all other groups of natives. Part of verification is itself a matter of judging compatibility. The words and procedures used in verification, the criteria on which a test is deemed adequate, and much more besides, are drawn from the stock of existing beliefs, and the test of a candidate belief is therefore only partly a matter of direct confrontation with new evidence. But this is not the main point. In any belief-holding group, a new idea, a candidate belief, tends to be judged more on the basis of the way it fits into the existing belief system than on the basis of its directly apprehended meaning.

The same thing happens in self-conscious scholarship. It has long been a truism that existing scientific beliefs tend to be defended in the face of new hypotheses that question them, and the defense is often fierce, bitter, and dogmatic. (Whitehead once called scientists “the leading dogmatists. Advance in detail is admitted: fundamental novelty is barred.”) The truism was popularized by Thomas Kuhn in a dramatic scenario that he called a theory of scientific revolutions: in essence, crucial scientific beliefs gain a position of suzerainty, their supporters gain positions of academic power, and so the beliefs become entrenched and hold sway for long periods of time, even after evidence against these beliefs has massively accumulated. Eventually there is a historic break: a “scientific revolution” which overthrows the existing ruling theory or paradigm and installs another one, which, in turn, holds sway for a period of time. But Kuhn’s frame of reference (in his Structure of Scientific Revolutions) was physical science, and we are told very little about the historic process by which beliefs gain, and retain, hegemony in social science, including history and cultural geography. In these fields the process is fundamentally different. For one thing, influential beliefs hold sway for reasons that reflect much more directly the interests of elite groups outside of the scholarly field itself, and the replacement of one theory by another reflects mainly these external interests, not a Kuhn-like intellectual revolution within the community of scholars itself. Secondly, in these fields it is much less easy to attack old theories with new evidence, in part because scientific methods here are usually very inexact and in part because the collecting of evidence itself is guided and sometimes determined by existing beliefs. Thus it is that large belief structures, like diffusionism, persist for generations, untroubled by “scientific revolutions.”

People have a tendency, sometimes slight, sometimes strong, to believe what they want to believe. Another way of putting this is to say that beliefs are influenced by values, or that cognition interacts with
though it is normal doctrine in ethnosience (normal, at least, when applied to natives other than ourselves).

But there is an even stronger proposition that I will defend in this book with concrete arguments and evidence: the proposition that our world-scale models, and many of our specific theories and factual truisms, are accepted mainly—and in some cases only—because of their conformity to the values of the European elites; that this has been the case since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and is true today. Many of these demonstrably false beliefs are built into the world model of diffusionism, and this is so because diffusionism is the central intellectual doctrine that explains and rationalizes the actions and interests of European colonialism and neocolonialism.

Conformity is really the crucial part of validation. This is not ordinarily a matter of the “establishment” suppressing free speech (although this happens quite frequently). The judgment of conformity is a complex binding process. At all times the dominant group (a class or ethnocracy) has a fairly definite set of concrete worldly interests. Some of these conflicts with others, but all tend toward the maintenance of the elite group’s power and position. Because of its power to reward, punish, and control, this group succeeds in convincing most people, including scholars, that its interests are the interests of everyone. These interests are social, economic, and political agendas, and it is a simple transformation to insert the word “ought” and turn them into values. Viewed statically, the interests are always clear, and the values derived from them cohere into a dominant value system that more or less mirrors these interests. Hence we have at all times a kind of environment of values, surrounding and influencing the ongoing validation process in scholarship.

The way this influence is exerted is very complex in our society today, but it was quite simple and transparent in the last century, when the main lineaments of diffusionism and other beliefs related to colonialism were being sketched in. In those days, not only was it true, as Marx said, that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class, but it was also true that almost nobody but the ruling class, and its subalterns, had the opportunity to render those ideas effective, in the form of publication, lecturing at influential schools and universities, and participating in policy formation and execution. Conformity, in those times and places, was accomplished largely through the social vetting process by which only those people who adhered to the dominant value system were in a good position to render hypotheses as candidate beliefs. I do not believe that the process is altogether different today, but it would take us far afield to...
discuss it here at length. We can simply take note of the background of most professors (very few of whom are the offspring of poor or minority families), the reward structure in universities and consultancies, and other elements that jointly produce this result: few professional social scientists want to propose candidate beliefs which do not conform. This explains why, in spite of the most rigorous adherence to scientific method and scholarly canons, our theories remain, to a large degree, conformal.

In sum, validation proceeds by subjecting any candidate belief to three tests: compatibility, verifiability, and value conformity. Of these three, perhaps only conformity is essential (and then only in relatively tranquil times). Verification can be waived on occasion, provided that the hypothesis is both conformal to interests and nicely compatible with existing beliefs, be they explicit theories or implicit beliefs emerging as stated or unstated assumptions. Strong verification is, in any case, pretty hard to come by in the social sciences (a methodological fact that is often mistaken for an epistemological verity). In these fields, a judgment of compatibility is always rendered—if not on the candidate belief then on the person who proposes it—and it is most unusual for a new hypothesis or theory to become accepted as a belief if it contradicts the corpus of accepted beliefs in its field. But it is always the case that society and its elite need to be supplied with answers to pressing problems confronting them. So there is an important countercurrent. New hypotheses that display a touch of the novel and hold some possibility of solving an already recognized problem are encouraged, indeed rewarded. They must be compatible but not completely so.

There is simply no way that a scholar, once installed in the profession, can prevent conformal values from creeping into his or her work. This in spite of the fact that nearly all are honest, careful, and competent. The reason why my argument seems, incorrectly, to be an attack on scholarship is because the problem is almost always seen in connection with explicit beliefs, and with consciously held attitudes. The fields that study human society are a weak infusion of explicit theory within a body of belief that is largely implicit. Scientific method prevents us from accepting the arguments of an explicit theory merely because we want to do so. But the main grounding for each such theory is its compatibility with other beliefs in the system, expressed as a matter of "reasonableness." It is "reasonable" to accept certain assumptions (reflecting certain implicit beliefs) and not others. One theory seems "reasonable," or plausible, because it is compatible with another, accepted theory, although no explicit chain of connection exists: most links in the chain are buried in the realm of implicit belief. Finally, it seems "reasonable" to seek verification for a hypothesis with certain observations and not with others.

It should be added that the disciplined work of social scientists usually prevents them from unwittingly validating a hypothesis on grounds of value conformity. The problem, and it is a severe one, is that, thinking that our explicit beliefs are not validated by value conformity, we let value conformity control our implicit beliefs. These then provide a bridge across gaps between explicit theories, rendering them compatible, or serve up the assumptions which provide the starting point for new explicit theories, formal and informal. Scientific and scholarly method demands rigor only for the explicit theories.

**Diffusionism as a Belief System**

The discussion thus far has been designed to lay the foundation for an understanding of three aspects of the diffusionist belief system: its structure, its binding to certain groups in certain societies, and its evolution, this last aspect including the important questions of why diffusionism became prominent and why it has persisted. It would not be much of an oversimplification to say that diffusionism developed as the belief system appropriate to one powerful and permanent European interest: colonialism. From 1492 to the present the wealth drawn into Europe—meaning, as in all of this discussion, Greater Europe—from the non-European world has been a vital nutriment for the elite classes of Europe: for their maintenance of status within their societies, and for their progress. Whether this statement can be generalized to include all classes within European society, whether, that is, colonialism was an interest of the nonelite classes of Europe in most times and places, is a contentious issue which I do not need to address. I am merely asserting that (1) Europe's elite depended on colonialism; (2) Europe's elite was tremendously influential in the evolution of European ideas and more specifically European scholarship; and (3) Europe's elite held a permanent social interest in the creation and development of a conformal belief system, a body of thought that would rationalize, justify, and, most importantly, assist the colonial enterprise. As that enterprise evolved and changed, so too did the body of ideas constituting diffusionism.

Most of this book is devoted to a delineation and critique of diffusionist beliefs, so I do not need to review the nature of the belief system here. Suffice it to say, the doctrine ranges over all scales of fact, from world geography and world history to ideas about the qualities of individual human beings, European and non-European, and descriptions and explanations of particular local events. The scope of the diffusionist belief structure encompasses a fair share of European ethnosience. That is, a fair share of the licensed belief statements in European ethnosience
are used within the diffusionist belief structure, although they are also used in other structures. (Some examples to be discussed in Chapter 2 are: beliefs about demographic behavior, about intelligence, about the origins of civilization, about the fertility of tropical soils.) These statements range from modest assertions of evidential fact to complex and elaborate theories, both formal and informal. They enter the diffusionist canon through all of the licensing procedures for belief acceptance discussed above. Over time, all of them go through the screening process of conformity with the value or interest of colonialism, or go through the indirect screening process that accords them the status of being compatible with other beliefs which are themselves conformal. Over time, the belief system accretes new diffusionist beliefs and discards those that contradict the canon or that have lost their relevance in a changing world. Since colonialism, in various newer forms such as neocolonialism, remains an interest of the elite, and since implicit beliefs go unnoticed and uncriticized, the process of adding, subtracting, and modifying diffusionist beliefs continues in the present. Were this not the case, the multitude of beliefs about Eurocentric history which claim our attention in this book would long since have been discarded.

Diffusionist beliefs at the space–time scale that embraces the whole world and the whole of history, tend to form a rather tightly structured theory, as we saw earlier in this chapter. The theory, in brief, describes the essential processes that take place in an “inner,” essentially European, core sector of the world, describes those that take place in an “outer,” essentially non-European sector, and describes the modes of interaction between the two sectors, the most important of which is the inner-to-outer diffusion of innovative ideas, people, and commodities.

We can describe this world-scale space–time theory as the “diffusionist world model.” It is the colonizer’s model of the world.

The obvious question arises: what would we conceive to be a nondiffusionist world model? This would be a world in which the processes at work in any one sector are expected also to be at work in the other sectors. In essence, this model is driven by a concept of equal capability of human beings—psychological unity—in all cultures and regions, and from this argument it demands that any spatial inequalities in matters relating to cultural evolution, and more specifically economic development, be explained. Stated differently: equality is the normal condition and inequalities need to be explained. Diffusionism, in contrast, expects basic inequality between the Inner and the Outer sectors of the world—and of humanity. The uniformitarian principle is not one of uniformity; it is the principle of human equality.

At space–time scales smaller than the world, the diffusionist belief system is very diffuse, parts of it hanging together as formally elegant theories, parts of it floating around as compatible but weakly connected belief statements. It would take us far beyond the scope of this book to attempt a description of all of the parts, levels, and subsystems in the diffusionist model as a whole, ranging upward and downward from the world model to the level of particular space–time event descriptions. But we can make a start.

NOTES

1. In this book the word “Europe” refers to the continent of Europe and to regions dominated by European culture elsewhere, regions like the United States and Canada.

2. This quick survey of 150 years or so of world history textbooks is, of course, very schematic and impressionistic. Some further comments may be of use. In textbooks of the first period, around 1850 (plus or minus a decade or so), the original home of Man is flatly stated to be the Garden of Eden, which is located by different textbook writers in different parts of western Asia. For instance: somewhere east of Caspian and near Mesopotamia (Robbins, The World Displayed in its History and Geography, 1832, p. 13); somewhere in the “healthful” mountains between the Caspian Sea and Kashmir or Tibet (Müller, The History of the World to 1783, 1842, pp. 27, 43–44); perhaps near the borders of the Mediterranean Sea (Tytler, Universal History, From the Creation to the beginning of the Eighteenth Century, vol. 1, 1844, p. 17); in the Vale of Kashmir (Willard, Universal History in Perspective, 1845, p. 34); somewhere between the Caucasus Mountains and the Himalayas (Keightley, Outlines of History, 1849); in the Himalayas (Weber, Outlines of Universal History, 1853, p. 6); in Armenia (Collier, Outlines of General History, 1868). There seems to be a kind of median location of Eden near the Caucasus Mountains, which was also, by no coincidence, the supposed place of origin of the “Caucasian race.” Noah, of course, began postdeluvian history on Mt. Ararat, in Armenia (also roughly in the region of the Caucasus). Noah is supposed to have migrated then to Europe (Whelpley, A Compound of History, From the Earliest Times, vol. 1, 1844, p. 10), or Mesopotamia (Robbins, 1832, p. 20), or Palestine, or some other part of the Bible Lands. Noah’s three sons are supposed, then, to have dispersed and to have founded the branches of mankind—the first great diffusion process. In most textbooks of this period history tends to move west; some textbooks present the Hegelian notion that history proceeds inexorably westward, following the sun, with the implication that the United States, farther west still, will replace Europe as the next center of world civilization.

Such beliefs were widely held in this period that nonwhites were not truly and fully human. One version of this theory, the notion of “polygenesis,” claimed that God had created true humans in the Garden of Eden and other races—or at least the “black race”—in other places and times. This theory questioned the standard interpretation of the Old Testament (that everyone is descended from Adam and Eve), so, not surprisingly, it was not stated so truth at the textbooks I consulted. (I have not, however, looked at textbooks used in the antebellum South, and the theory of polygenesis was most popular in slaveholding regions, as an ideological grounding for the treatment of blacks as things rather than people.) Yet polygenesis was important
enough to be mentioned and then rejected—in favor of the view that all humans are descendants of Adam and Eve—in some textbooks, down to the end of the century (see, for example, Dew, A Digest of the Laws, Customs, Manners, and Institutions of the Ancient and Modern Nations, 1853; Fisher, Outlines of Universal History, 1885; Duruy and Grosvenor, A General History of the World, 1901). But polygenesis was not needed; the belief that nonwhites are inferior to whites is assertion in one way or another in all the textbooks I examined. The theory of "degeneration" served just as well as polygenesis. It was the notion that the descendants of Ham, and perhaps other biblical peoples, migrated away from the Bible Lands, eastward and southward, and degenerated from civilization toward savagery, or even lower, as they did so, because they had not accepted Christ, or because they migrated into inferior environments, or for some other reason. (See, for instance, Keightley, 1849, 5–6: "the savage is a degeneration from the civilized life," and Africans are near the apes.) Degeneration was asserted in some textbooks, but in most the simple fact of white superiority was stated and unexplained. The history of the world is, in general, the history of the white race, or the Semitic and Aryan peoples (see below). For times later than the Roman era, non-Europe is scarcely discussed, except as a backdrop for discussions of the Crusades, the building of colonial empires, and the like. (See Harris, The Rise of Anthropological Theory, 1968, for an excellent discussion of polygenesis and degeneration.)

Nearly all textbooks of the period around 1900 (give or take a few years) accepted the newer scientific theories about the age of the earth and the fact of biological evolution (though not the Darwinian theory of evolution). The biblical account of human history, however, was retained in many books, although fewer of them accepted the former standard Old Testament chronologies (for instance, that things began in 4004 B.C.). Books of this period tended to present the so-called "Aryan theory," a theory derived from philology but expanded into a theory of culture history. Earlier philologists had identified an "Aryan" or "Indo-European" language family, and also a "Semitic" family (which many authorities, including textbook writers, identified with Noah's sons Japheth and Shem, respectively). The white race consists of these two peoples. One branch of the Aryans supposedly migrated west into Europe (from the supposed "Aryan hearth," somewhere southwest or northwest of the Caucasus). These were progressive, energetic people, who founded European civilization mainly after they had acquired Christianity from the Semites, who invented the first barbaric civilizations and monotheism but then stagnated into a dreamy, decadent, unambitious culture and thereafter ceased to advance civilization. No other culture, apart from these two, had much to do with history. (According to Freeman, General Sketch of History, 1877, p. 2, history "in the highest and truest sense is the history of the Aryan nations of Europe"; see also Collier, 1868; Swinton, Outlines of the World's History, 1874; Gilman, First Steps in General History, 1874; Anderson, New Manual of General History, 1882; Steele and Steele, A Brief History of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Peoples, 1883; Fisher, 1896; Quackenbos, Illustrated School History of the World, 1889; Thalheimer, Outline of General History for the Use of Schools, 1883; Sanderson, History of the World from the Earliest Time to the Year 1899; Duruy and Grosvenor, 1901. Polets and Tillinghast presented this theory in Epitome of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern History, first published in 1883, in its many editions down to 1925 when, in an edition edited by H. E. Barnes, the theory was finally eliminated.) See Bernal's Black Athena (1987, 1991) for an insightful discussion of the Aryan theory and related topics in the history of European thought.

Because the Old Testament spoke of agriculture—Cain knew farming and

Abraham herded domesticated animals—the history textbooks tended not to address the problem of where agriculture was invented until very late in the nineteenth century, the period when science was beginning to deal with this problem. Some scientists and some textbook writers then began to speculate that, just possibly, agriculture was as old in continental Europe as it was in western Asia and Egypt. (From the point of view of science, see Joly, Man Before Mades, 1897.) But the idea that agriculture originated in the Bible Lands remained dominant although now it was viewed (by most) as an invention, not an artifact of original creation. The ethnographic fact that some tribal peoples (for instance, in Australia) did not practice agriculture was commonly explained, in the textbooks of the earlier nineteenth century, in terms of the theory of degeneration: their ancestors had somehow lost the art. Later in the century it became more common to use the diffusionist conception that agriculture had been invented by West Asian or (more convincingly) European peoples, then diffused outward over the rest of the world, and cultures that did practice it in modern times simply had not yet acquired it, either because of their isolation or because they were too stupid to take it up.

The Orient Express was a famous train that ran between western Europe and western Asia. Although various routes were used in different eras, the basic line ran from Constantinople (Istanbul) through Greece to northern Italy or Austria, then on to France, and (via Ostend) England. Most of the history textbooks write about world history as though it marched northwesterward, rather like the westbound Orient Express, with stations (so to speak) in Athens, Rome, Paris, and London. (See Chapter 2 for further discussion of the Orient Express model.)

3. In nineteenth-century world history textbooks, Turkey was given some attention because of its political involvement with European affairs. World geography, in contrast to world history, always covered the entire world, and textbooks as well as the great multivolume descriptive geographies (like Reclus's classic 19-volume Nouvelle Géographie Universelle, published between 1876 and 1894) gave considerable attention to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This should not mislead us, however. One of the primary functions of geography throughout this entire period was to teach European children what they needed to know about non-Europe in order to participate in their countries' imperial and commercial activities in these regions. See Hudson, "The New Geography and the New Imperialism: 1870–1918" (1977) and McKay, "Colonialism in the French Geographical Movement" (1943), on the close relation between geography and colonial activities.

4. The character of this newer approach can be seen if we look at two well-known modern university-level texts, one written by W. H. McNeill of the University of Chicago (A World History, 3rd ed., 1979), the other by J. M. Roberts of Oxford University (The Hutchinson History of the World, 2d ed., 1987; published in the United States as The Penguin History of the World). For pre-Christian-era world history, more than three-quarters of the place-name mentions in both books are places in Europe and the Middle East (including North Africa); less than one-quarter of the place-name mentions are places in other parts of the world and only about 1% are in Africa. For the Christian era to A.D. 1491 there is significant divergence between the two books. In Roberts's text, European and Middle Eastern places constitute about 85% of place-name mentions. In McNeill's text, European and Middle Eastern places constitute only 60% of the place names mentioned, a significant departure from the older tradition although still well out of proportion to this region's size in area and population. (Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 2% of mentions for the period
A.D. 1-1491.) In both books, therefore, the region I have been calling “Greater Europe” has considerably less salience for pre-1492 history than was typically the case in older world history textbooks. As to explanation, however, both books retain much of the traditional perspective. Roberts gives almost no causal role to the cultures and regions of the world other than Europe and the Middle East (including North Africa) for any period prior to 1492. McNeill gives considerable weight to East Asia and some to South Asia for certain historical periods, but almost all of the world history-making forces emanate from Europe, western Asia, and North Africa for the period before 1492. (An exception is the Black Death, which, according to McNeill, swept westward into these regions from farther Asia. On this matter, see also McNeill’s *Plagues and Peoples*, 1976.) Examples of the Eurocentric explanations offered by both authors will be given in Chapter 2 of the present book.

It is, however, insufficient to look only at those present-day textbooks that are clearly identified as “world history” textbooks. Quite frequently university courses covering the subject of world history use history textbooks that carry titles like “The History of Western Civilization.” (See, for instance, Lerner, et al., *Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture*, 1988; Kagan, et al., *The Western Heritage*, 1987; Chambers, et al., *The Western Experience*, 1987.) If such a textbook neglects the non-Western world, there can be no complaint that it is misleading: the title clearly specifies “West” not “World.” But if the course is designated as “world history” and the textbook is designated as “Western history,” then we have a problem. The worst scenario would be one in which world-history teaching continues to be Eurocentric history in disguise. I do not know of any research which tests the following hypotheses: (1) Given that, today, historians are sensitive to the need to avoid Eurocentric bias in the teaching of world history, do some of them simply change the title to “Western” so that Eurocentrism becomes, then, licit? And (2) is it possible that there is a trend away from the teaching of “World” history and toward “Western” (etc.) history and that this trend reflects a reaction (or adjustment) to present-day demands for nonethnocentrism and “fairness?”

5. A school textbook is a key social document, a kind of modern stele. In the typical case, a book becomes accepted as a high school (or lower-level) textbook only after it has been reviewed very carefully by the publisher, school boards, and administrators, all of whom are intensely sensitive to the need to print acceptable doctrine; they are concerned to make it certain that children will read only those facts in their textbook which are considered to be acceptable as facts by the opinion-forming elite of the culture. The resulting textbook is, therefore, less an ordinary authored book than a vetted social statement of what is considered valid and acceptable for entry into the mind of the child. For this reason, research on textbooks (including college textbooks, in which the same process is at work, though more subtly) is, in fact, ethnographic research. It tells us about the belief system of the opinion-forming elite of the culture as a whole. Therefore, geography texts in the United States are really ethnography documents. Likewise, history texts are really ethnohistory documents. They are probably as useful as cultural artifacts as any old postcard or inscription. See the final section of this chapter.

6. This argument is given much weight by Eurocentric Marxists, since class struggle, for Marxists, is the central force in historical evolution.

7. A form of political feudalism is sometimes conceded to have been developed earlier by the Chinese, but the great majority of European scholars, including most Marxists, believe that European feudalism was unique in representing a form of society that was a crucial, essential, stepping stone to modernity. See Chapter 3.

8. See Samir Amin’s *Eurocentrism* (1988) for an excellent discussion of this notion. The word “Eurocentrism” apparently was coined quite recently, to assemble “European ethnocentrism” into one word. However, I (like Amin) do not think of Eurocentrism as merely a species of ethnocentrism, as the following paragraphs will make clear.

9. I use the word “community” to refer to any social unit, of any size. In this discussion, for the sake of simplicity, the “communities” will be thought of as villages distributed across a rural landscape. I neglect here the cases in which culture change results from the combination of an independent invention and a diffusion event. See my “Two Views of Diffusion” (1977) and “Diffusionism: A Uniformitarian Critique” (1987a).


14. Often the antidiffusionist camp was labeled the “cultural evolutionist” camp, and the debate as a whole was labeled “diffusionism vs. evolutionism.” But, as I argue here, evolutionists were to some extent diffusionists and diffusionists were to some extent evolutionists. Moreover, I want to use the term “cultural evolution” in this book in a much broader and much less controversial sense, as indicating merely the search for explanation in larger questions of historical and cultural change. A problem that is “historical” becomes a problem of “cultural evolution” when we ask, broadly, “why?” Some scholars, of course, are not comfortable with this usage of the phrase “cultural evolution.” For some it carries baggage of economic determinism or environmental determinism or technological determinism, or it signifies the notion of an invariant sequence of cultural stages through which all human groups must pass—but I mean none of that. Most cultural geographers use the phrase “cultural evolution” just about as I use it here.

15. Both forms are sometimes combined; for instance, in the nineteenth century northwestern Europe was considered (by northwestern Europeans) to be absolutely civilized, Africa absolutely uncivilized, and all other areas (of the Eastern Hemisphere) somewhere in between. These matters are discussed later in this book.

16. Max Weber’s notion of “European rationality” is discussed in Chapter 2.

17. The varying conceptions of China, and also India, as seminational or intermittently rational or rational in some ways but not in others are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

18. The “bugeye” refers to the Buginese, a Malay people who fought fiercely against the Europeans and so were stigmatized in this way. The most famous fictional vampire, Count Dracula, came to England from Outside (a barbarous mountain region on the frontier of the Turkish empire).
19. On the history of the idea of progress in European thought, see, for instance, G. H. Mead, Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century (1936), Toulmin and Goodfield, The Discovery of Time (1965), Nisbet, History of the Idea of Progress (1980), and Bowler, The Invention of Progress (1989). It is true that the idea of progress as the normal condition was doubted by some thinkers during the nineteenth century (and especially in opposition to the idea of biological evolution), but this was a minor and intermittent countercurrent. See Stocking, Race, Culture, and Evolution (1987) and Bowler, The Invention of Progress (1989).


21. At times the notion was advanced that these civilizations had somehow evolved in antediluvian times and had not been wiped out in the Flood (see, for example, Keightley, Outlines of History, 1849). Haskel (Chronology and Universal History, 1846, p. 9) speculates that Noah migrated to China where he or his descendants founded the Chinese monarchy. "The early improvement and populousness of the east, seems to favor this idea."

22. From the mid-nineteenth century or perhaps earlier, the literature on the occult, on ghosts and monsters, and the like, tended to focus on extra-European origins or homes or sources of the witches, monsters, demons, zombies, walking mummies, evil spells ("black magic"), artifacts with supernatural powers, and so on, all of which have a tendency to diffuse into Europe as a kind of counterdiffusion, an undertow beneath European expansionism. See Brantlinger, Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism (1988).


25. Spencer, The Man Versus the State (1969). The complex interplay between individualistic and holistic theories of historical progress during the nineteenth century is discussed in G. H. Mead, Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century (1936) and Mandelbaum, History, Man and Reason (1971). I try to show in Blaut, The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism (1987) how most theories of nationality and national evolution emerge from one or the other of these intellectual streams, one essentially Kantian and psychological, the other essentially Romantic and Hegelian.


27. See Thapar, Ancient Indian Social History, Some Interpretations (1978) and "Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History" (1982), and B. Chandni, "Karl Marx, His Theories of Asian Societies, and Colonial Rule" (1981). We return to this issue in Chapter 2.

28. See in particular Marx's article, "The British Rule in India" (1979). In later work, Marx and Engels adopted a much more negative opinion about colonialism, developing to some extent the idea of colonial underdevelopment: see Blaut, The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism (1987) for a discussion.

29. See Chapter 2.

30. See Asad, Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter (1975), and Temu and Swai, Historians and Africanist History (1981).


32. Here I am of course rejecting the view, common among European scholars, that colonies were relinquished voluntarily. This view has been rejected almost universally by scholars in the formerly colonial world. It may conceivably have been true for a few small islands from which profits no longer flowed to the colonizing power, but even such cases are debatable. It is worth noting that the United States has not given independence to any of the colonies it held at the close of World War II; has not even formally conceded the right of full self-determination (including independence) to Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, the Marianas, etc. The other colonial powers would presumably have taken the same position, had they had the power to do so in the face of colonial pre-independence forces; in such cases as the Dutch East Indies, French Indo-China, Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, and so on, the colonizer tried to hold onto their possession by force of arms and failed. My view is set forth in Blaut, The National Question (1987), chap. 4, and Blaut and Figueroa, Aspectos de la cuestion nacional en Puerto Rico (1988).

33. Representative examples include "Operation Bootstrap" in Puerto Rico, the Colonial Development and Welfare programs in parts of the British Empire, the increased funding for colonial agriculture and health departments, the establishment of colonial universities, and so on. These programs, regardless of their underlying political purposes (often hidden from the technical personnel involved) were, overall, very impressive.

34. Often this work was a direct continuation of colonial technical work, often with the same personnel, now "foreign advisor" or "United Nations expert" rather than "colonial technical officer."

35. Thus the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, the elevated funding of technical and financial agencies of the Organization of American States, and the like.

36. On ethnoscience, see, for example, Conklin, "Lexicographical Treatment of Folk Taxonomies" (1969), Frake, "The Ethnographic Study of Cognitive Systems" (1969), Blaut, "Some Principles of Ethnography" (1978) and Spradley and McCurdy, Anthropology: A Cultural Perspective (1975). In my view, the categories "history" and "science" cannot be distinguished ontologically, although historiography is hardly an exact science.


The Myth of the European Miracle

Most European historians believe in some form of the theory of "the European miracle." This is the argument that Europe forged ahead of all other civilizations far back in history—in prehistoric or ancient or medieval times—and that this internally generated historical superiority or priority explains world history and geography after 1492: the modernization of Europe, the rise of capitalism, the conquest of the world. Most historians do not see anything miraculous in this process, but the phrase "the European miracle" became in the 1980s a very popular label for the whole family of theories about the supposedly unique rise of Europe before 1492. The phrase acquired its new popularity mainly from a book by Eric L. Jones which appeared in 1981, a book simply entitled *The European Miracle.*

The historians do not agree among themselves on the question why the miracle occurred: why Europe forged ahead in this perhaps miraculous way. Is it because Europeans are genetically superior? Are culturally superior? Live in a superior environment? Is it because one special, wonderful thing happened in Europe, or happened to Europeans at a special moment in history, giving Europeans a decisive advantage over other societies?

Nor do the historians agree about when the miracle occurred or began. Did it occur back in the prehistoric age in what some still call the "Aryan" or "Indo-European" culture? In the late-prehistoric "European Iron Age?" Did it begin with the Greeks? With the Romans? In the early Middle Ages? In the late Middle Ages? Did it happen continuously throughout history—a series of miracles—each pushing the Europeans farther and farther ahead of the rest of humanity?

The historians debate these matters, the questions "why" and "when," but not the question "whether"—whether a miracle happened at all. Or, to be more precise, they do not even consider the possibility that the rise of Europe above other civilizations did not begin until 1492, that it resulted not from any European superiority of mind, culture, or environment, but rather from the riches and spoils obtained in the conquest and colonial exploitation of America and, later, Africa and Asia. This possibility is not debated at all, nor is it even discussed, although a very few historians (notably Janet Abu-Lughod, Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, and Immanuel Wallerstein) have come close to doing so in very recent years.²

My task in this chapter and in Chapter 3 ("Before 1492") is to show that Europeans indeed had no superiority over non-Europeans at any time prior to 1492: they were not more advanced, not more modern, not more progressive. Then in Chapter 4 ("After 1492") I will show how colonial riches brought about the rise of Europe and led to Europe's ultimate hegemony over the world, showing also that Europe's internal characteristics do not explain 1492—do not, that is, explain the origins of colonialism.

There seem to be two basic ways to argue that the myth of the European miracle is wrong, that Europe did not surpass other world civilizations before 1492. The best way by far is to look at the facts of history, and demonstrate that the evolutionary processes that were going on in Europe during and before the Middle Ages were essentially like the processes taking place elsewhere in the world in terms of rate and direction of development. I will try to demonstrate precisely this in Chapter 3, which compares the medieval landscapes of Europe, Africa, and Asia, and shows how a transition from feudalism and toward capitalism was occurring in many parts of the Eastern Hemisphere just prior to 1492.

But the myth of Europe's unique "rise," its "miracle," is so deeply embedded in European historical thought that an ordinary argument from the facts probably would not be persuasive. As we saw in Chapter 1, the dominant theory has been defended by generations of historians, with practically no dissenting arguments; it is supported as well by many other ideas which are accepted as unquestioned truth in European culture; and it fits in with and supports the interests of European countries (and corporations) in their dealings with the non-European world. For these reasons, I have decided to use another kind of argument—to demonstrate the fallacies in the dominant theory—as a sort of ground-laying for the empirical argument.

In the present chapter I will examine the most common arguments used by historians today to support the theory of the European miracle, and
will try to show that they are unconvincing. This task is rendered somewhat complicated, for a small book like the present one, by the sheer number of different arguments currently in circulation and the number of historians who are writing books and articles on the subject of, and in support of, the theory of the European miracle. How, then, to proceed? I will advance by stages. First I will present a brief discussion of the ways in which historians have tended to argue the myth of the European miracle in recent decades, and I will show how a critical, revisionist point of view has begun to appear. Next I will lay out, in a kind of menu or classification or checklist, the most important arguments in support of this myth that are being put forward today, and I will try to show, for each argument in turn, how unconvincing it really is. In the third stage, I will summarize the empirical argument against the “miracle” position in two parts (the topics of Chapters 3 and 4, respectively): the evidence that Europe was not ahead of Africa and Asia (at a continental scale of attention) prior to 1492, and the evidence that colonialism after 1492 accounts for the selective rise of Europe.

**MYTHMAKERS AND CRITICS**

The idea that Europe was more advanced and more progressive than all other civilizations prior to 1492 was the central idea of classical Eurocentric diffusionism, as we saw in Chapter 1. Therefore we do not have to consider the origins of the European miracle theory: it is our inheritance from earlier times. However, after World War II the doctrine assumed a distinctly modern form. First of all, the racist arguments had been decisively rejected: no longer was it argued that non-Europeans are genetically inferior to Europeans and that it is this inferiority that explains why they lagged behind in history. Historians now generally accepted the idea that European historical advantages reflected facts and happenings of much earlier times. European superiority was a matter of prior arrival by Europeans at a stage of development that all other people could aspire to reach in the future: a matter, therefore, of priority, not innate superiority. Second, there was a rapid increase in historical scholarship concerning the non-European world after 1945, grounded in rather pragmatic political and economic interests, and emanating in part from government- and foundation-sponsored “foreign area studies programs,” but this scholarship nonetheless added greatly to the knowledge available in Western countries concerning non-Western history. The new knowledge was fairly quickly put to rather limited use: some of the wilder fables were discarded, but the basic ideas about the non-Western world did not significantly change. Third, and most importantly, the postwar world came to embrace the crucial new theory of “modernization,” the theory that the diffusion of European ideas, things, and influence would bring about the economic development of the non-Western world in the coming Age of Development. This theory had important effects on history writing.

**Modernization as History**

The theory of modernization addressed the present and the future but it was fundamentally historical. Its basic principle was the notion that whatever had led in the past to European superiority could now be diffused out into the non-European world and assist that world to more or less catch up. As we saw in the last chapter, this new doctrine went through two phases of development, the first in the post–World War II period of decolonization, the second—an intensification of the diffusion effort—after the rise of socialist countries in the Third World, and particularly after the Cuban revolutionary victory in 1959.

A number of historical works appeared in the 1960s as part of this intellectual process. Their central purpose was to show that the European pattern of development, including most particularly the development of capitalism, had been somehow the one, the natural course of human progress, and many of these volumes quite explicitly drew the ideological conclusion that the proper, natural course of future development in the Third World would be to follow this natural European pattern (but not, of course, slavishly). The most influential of these works was Rostow's 1960 volume, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. This book was a plain assertion that Europe's past formula for development, up to and including capitalism, was the only workable formula for non-Europe's future development. Rostow married world history to world development in a single diffusionist argument.3

But there was a problem. Precisely what had caused the unique rise of Europe? Now we must return for a moment to the classical diffusionist period. European historians of the prior century were unanimous (I think) in their acceptance of the fundamental idea that Europe has been naturally and uniquely progressive. For most of them the basic force underlying the process was unquestioned: some drew on their religious faith, others built on metaphysical ideas (like Hegel's evolving “spirit”), others appealed to a Smithian or Utilitarian idea of individual human activity and purpose, and still others invoked the natural environment, or demographic behavior, or class struggle, or something else, but I think it likely that all of them held a common conception of an underlying force of Progress, a basic directional force like the Solar Wind, in relation to which partial facts (economic, psychological, environmental, and so on)
were epiphenomenal or merely symptomatic. After World War II, however, a profoundly different set of basic beliefs became the norm. Now the problem of explaining the rise of Europe was seen as a total problem. That is, all of the phenomenon, including its most fundamental dynamics, required explanation, or, stated differently, had to be put into an explicit model in which explicit variables or "factors" were identified. There were, doubtless, many reasons for this new—or rather newly popular—approach, among them the maturation of the discipline of history itself, the loss of faith (in this age of chaos) in the idea of inevitable progress, the general secularization of European thought, and the development of social science disciplines. But whatever the overall explanation, what emerged was a set of historical models, some new, others (like Weberianism) refurbished, that explicitly tried to explain the "European miracle" in terms of specific causal factors. This was the signature of the modern form of diffusionist history. The effect of the modernization perspective was not, by any means, dominant in all of historical scholarship, but it was so in writings that sought to explain the larger transformations of European history, and particularly the problem of explaining the medieval changes that brought about the rise of capitalism and modernity—the "European miracle." We will review many of these explanatory propositions later in the present chapter.

The Critique

The modernization approach was quickly challenged because it gave no real role to non-Europe, past and present, save as an essentially passive recipient of diffusions from Europe. For the period before 1492, it claimed that the significant evolutionary processes took place in Greater Europe. For the period from 1492 to World War II, it claimed that evolutionary processes continued to effloresce mainly in Europe and that colonialism brought the fruits of this progress to non-Europe. For the present and the future, progress for non-Europe (the Third World) would consist of the continued spread of innovations, mainly through mechanisms basically inherited from the colonial era. These propositions were distinctly unpopular among intellectuals of the Third World, and the rapid development of Third World scholarship in this postcolonial period led rather quickly to the emergence of a critical, even rejectionist, body of thought, including a new historiography.

The basic thinking went about as follows: For the precolonial era, it was necessary to resurrect one’s own history and find out how it had contributed to the history of the world. (Colonialist history dismissed precolonial history for some colonies and distorted it for others. Therefore, as Amilcar Cabral said with deep irony, when the colonies gain their independence, they re-enter history.) For the colonial era, the belief that colonialism itself was the source of all progress was patently untrue and colonial history had to be rewritten to show how it had led to poverty rather than to progress. On a world scale, new models had to be developed to show that colonialism, far from diffusing modernization to non-European societies, had diffused a mixture of good and bad innovations, which, for much of the world, had been a process not of development but of underdevelopment. This body of thought came to be known as "underdevelopment theory" in Africa and Asia and as "dependency theory" in Latin America. Out of it came the first serious critique of Eurocentric historiography.

One can trace the origins of this critique to earlier writings by a small number of historians, most of them colonial subjects, often writing in exile. Their main theme was a documentation of the negative effects of colonialism on a particular place and people. Some of the writers—among them W. E. B. Du Bois, R. Palme Dutt, K. M. Panikkar, M. N. Roy, J. C. Van Leur, C. L. R. James, G. Padmore, and Eric Williams—developed arguments on colonial processes at a world scale, and on the role of colonialism in the postcolonial and modern rise of capitalism and Europe. James showed that Caribbean slaves had played a role in the development of capitalism not fundamentally different from that of the working class in Europe. Williams's work ultimately had the strongest impact on Eurocentric history. He showed that the wealth from slavery and the slave plantation had been the crucial factor in the amassing of capital for the Industrial Revolution in England. This argument was the first major demonstration that non-Europe had played a central role in modernization itself, and a sizeable literature has grown up among European historians arguing about, and generally trying to counter, what is now generally called "the Williams thesis." During and after the period of decolonization this critical historical literature expanded greatly, and a large number of scholars began a direct attack on the diffusionist history of the colonial period.

Much of this work will be discussed in later chapters. Here I want to make several concrete points about the critique. First of all, a number of historians from the European world (Bernal, Frank, Wallerstein, and others) joined Third World historians as central figures in the movement. Second, while the critique focused a good deal of attention on the pre-1492 period, showing that development had taken place in non-Europe—for instance, Sharma and Habib documented the development of feudal and postfeudal society in medieval India—for a long time very little scholarly attention, within this critical tradition, was focused on
pre-1492 Europe; the first major work that dealt with this problematic—from a non-Eurocentric point of view, that is—was Amin’s 1974 volume *Accumulation on a World Scale.* This is perhaps understandable since most of the critical historians were from the Third World, not from Europe, and European history was not often a major interest. Yet it was anomalous nonetheless. The core of the modernization doctrine in history was, after all, the argument that Europe had begun to modernize before other regions and before it established colonial control of other regions. Thus, to refute the basic thesis one would have to show (as I try to now in this book) that pre-1492 Europe was not uniquely progressive. Of course, part of this argument consists of demonstrations that other regions were progressive. But part of it must consist of refutations of the various “miracle” propositions, those that claim to find in ancient or medieval Europe some special quality of progressiveness.

There is another, quite curious anomaly in the relative lack of attention to pre-1492 Europe by historians in this critical tradition, the tradition associated with underdevelopment or dependency theory and the critique of colonialism. This has to do with the curious relation between Third World scholarship, much of which is Marxist, and the Marxist scholarship of the European world. European Marxists were among the main critics of colonialism and among the main contributors to dependency—underdevelopment theory. Marxist theory also inherited from former times a strong anti-colonial flavor and a profound skepticism regarding the theories propounded by nineteenth-century mainstream European historians. Yet, oddly, most European Marxist historians writing about pre-1492 Europe have tended to argue in favor of the uniqueness-of-Europe doctrine.

Mainstream European historians have also contributed to the critique of the central Eurocentric doctrine. This is not an anomaly. Scholars try to pursue the truth and accept it whether or not it accords with their ideological or cultural preferences. To some extent they succeed. Thus a number of European scholars specializing in non-Europe have uncovered some of the most important evidence against the Eurocentric model of pre-1492 world history. The work of the Dutch historian J. C. Van Leur in the 1930s, concerning the economic history of South and Southeast Asia is a classic example of this antisytemic scholarship. Another example relates to Chinese history. Half a century ago Duyvendak uncovered truly crucial facts about China’s long-range voyaging in medieval times. Later, Needham and his associates produced a series of studies about the history of Chinese science and technology that had a profound impact on the Eurocentric model and (as we will see) forced Eurocentric historians to abandon a large piece of their argument concerning the supposed uniqueness of medieval European technology. Other Western scholars, like Wheatley and Elvin, delving into the empirical history of China with indifference to ideological questions, have produced other sorts of evidence about China’s progressiveness in ancient and medieval times. All of this damages the miracle theory, although, as we will see later in this chapter, Eurocentric historians have found ways to repair most of the damage.

The critique of Eurocentric history is a very large subject, and our concern in this volume is with just one part of it: the critique of European miracle theories about the world before 1492, and related theories which treat early modern world history as though non-Europe, and colonialism, were merely marginal to evolutionary processes. On these issues the critique has not progressed very far. I will give a few examples of important recent contributions, and others will be cited throughout this book. Janet Abu-Lughod’s recent (1989) book, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350,* is a seminal study that demonstrates (I think conclusively) that Europe was not more progressive and not more advanced than other civilizations in A.D. 1350. Having made this demonstration, she offers only a tentative and partial explanation for the selective rise of Europe, and decline of the Orient, after 1350. She suggests that the divergence took place in the period between 1350 and 1492. (I argue in this book that the divergence occurred only after 1492, with the beginnings of massive accumulation in the Western Hemisphere, a windfall that did not accrue to non-European civilizations of the Eastern Hemisphere, and so gave Europeans their first and decisive advantage over these other civilizations. See Chapter 4 below.) Samir Amin has argued in various recent works that Europe was not more advanced than Africa and Asia at the end of the Middle Ages, but rather was more unstable: because of its marginal location at the edge of the hemispheric zone of civilization, medieval class society was less fully seated, less stable, less indurated in Europe than elsewhere, and so Europe changed toward capitalism more readily. This argument, although it does not grant any “miracle” to pre-1492 Europe, nonetheless allows one of the old beliefs to stand: that Europe was more dynamic than non-Europe during the Middle Ages. Martin Bernal’s new book *Black Athena* appears to have little connection to the subject of the present volume, yet his arguments are very closely connected indeed. Bernal shows that European historians have created a myth about ancient Europe according to which African and Asian origins and innovations are written out of history: the goddess Athena was African. Bernal’s work undercuts the still very popular theories about ancient Europe’s supposed uniqueness, and also exposes the ethnocentric and ideological roots of much of the European scholarship that underlies
views of Max Weber about Europe's supposed "rationality" and the like; indeed, most (not all) of these scholars can be thought of as Weberians and many of them define themselves in that way. I will discuss Weber's views later in this chapter, along with the views of some modern Weberian scholars, among them Michael Mann and John A. Hall.

In the next section of this chapter I will try to extract the most important of these newer views proclaiming Europe's pre-1492 "miracle," and I will try to show that these views are mistaken.

**THE MYTH**

The myth of the European miracle is the doctrine that the rise of Europe resulted, essentially, from historical forces generated within Europe itself; that Europe's rise above other civilizations, in terms of level of development or rate of development or both, began before the dawn of the modern era, before 1492; that the post-1492 modernization of Europe came about essentially because of the working out of these older internal forces, not because of the inflowing of wealth and innovations from non-Europe; and that the post-1492 history of the non-European (colonial) world was essentially an outflowing of modernization from Europe. The core of the myth is the set of arguments about ancient and medieval Europe that allow the claim to be made, as truth, that Europe in 1492 was more modernized, or was modernizing more rapidly, than the rest of the world.

This is a myth in the classical sense of the word: a story about the rise of a culture that is believed widely by the members of that culture. It is also a myth in the sense of the word that implies something not true. In the following discussion I will unravel the fabric of this myth and show that the strands of belief that compose it are very feeble.

The number of distinguishable belief statements that make up this myth are, I am sure, uncountable. One of the many reasons the myth is so durable is the fact that the basic generalization, the doctrine of the miracle, is supported by such a great variety of individual beliefs that historians of a given era can disprove some subset of these beliefs and yet the supporters of the myth can merely shift to other beliefs as grounding for the myth.

A more fundamental problem has to do with the way beliefs are licensed. Beliefs tend to gain acceptance if they support the myth, and are either rejected or denied attention if they do not do so. One part of this problem of belief licensing (and relicensing, delicensing, etc.) poses a particularly, perhaps uniquely, serious difficulty for efforts to critique the
miracle theory. Many of the beliefs that support this theory are implicit, not explicit; that is, they do not enter into the scholarly discourse of historians, and sometimes they do not enter even into conscious discourse in general. (Recall the discussion of implicit beliefs in Chapter 1.) Many of these beliefs we learn as children. Others seem evident "reasonable" because they accord with deep values of the culture, or with other, accepted beliefs (historical, practical, religious, and so on). Thus, the conviction that ancient and medieval Europe was more progressive than other civilizations is supported by explicit beliefs, but these lie in a matrix of implicit beliefs—unquestioned and usually unnoticed—about the progressive Europeans who "were our ancestors." By contrast, the matrix of implicit beliefs about historical non-Europe includes ideas of alienness, savagery, cruelty, cannibalism, deceitfulness, stupidity, cupidity, immodesty, dirtiness, disease, and so on—a matrix firmly supporting the general belief that non-Europe cannot have been progressive. Examples of these sorts of implicit beliefs, both positive and negative, will appear as we proceed.

One kind of explicit belief about European superiority will not be discussed here in detail. This is the openly religious statement, grounded in faith, that a Christian god will naturally raise His people higher than all others. Although we will refer to this view in various contexts, it is not the kind of argument that can be analyzed or criticized, because it is grounded in a faith that cannot be tested empirically; some believe it to be true and others do not, and that is as far as the matter can be taken. Sufficient to say at this point: the religious argument was so nearly universally accepted down to the nineteenth century that other arguments were not seen as necessary to many European intellectuals. Why, indeed, ask for the reasons that Christian Europeans are superior when we know that unbelievers will not go to heaven and, in this world, will not enjoy the grace of God? Unbelievers will naturally be rendered less intelligent, less fortunate, and so on. So long as scholars and educated people believed that religion underlies all things, including science, and that God intervenes to control human affairs, then it could simply be assumed that Europeans were superior because that was God's will. It is what you would expect a Christian god to do for Christians, particularly for those Christians who worship Him in the right way. By the middle of the nineteenth century, when Eurocentric diffusionism was at its height, when Europeans hardly ever doubted their superiority over everyone else, although the explicitly religious arguments were disappearing from scholarly discourse, they were still there implicitly, as implicit beliefs. I rather suspect that the great majority of arguments for the superiority of Europeans were finally grounded in a religious faith: if the European environment is superior, that

is because God made it so; if the white race is superior, that is because God made it so; if Europeans are more rational than everyone else and this has no explicit explanation, one can infer that it is the work of God; and so on. I do not know to what extent this kind of implicit appeal to the Deity is still present but unnoticed in the thinking of contemporary Eurocentric scholars, but I am certain that it quite often is so. We will from time to time discuss the ideas of scholars (like Lynn White, Jr. and K. F. Werner) who explicitly connect their views about history with their religious beliefs; in such thinkers the directionality of the causal arguments will be noted but not in any sense condemned. Sometimes a scholar makes such arguments unconsciously and implicitly. The only really disturbing cases are those that exhibit conscious hypocrisy.

**Biology**

Basically two sorts of argument have been used to explain the uniqueness, the superiority, of Europe and Europeans. One sort appeals to some noncultural force or factor as prime cause; the other finds the prime cause within culture itself. Setting aside the doctrine of divine intervention (which one would generally think of as a cause external to human culture, although the point is theoretically rather complicated), two kinds of noncultural, external causation are common. One appeals to human biology, the other to the natural environment.

**Race**

Biological arguments assert, in general, that Europeans are superior, biologically, to non-Europeans. The classical and typical form of this argument was biological racism, the idea that Europeans had superior heredity, and so were born with abilities greater than those displayed by non-Europeans. Europeans were brighter, better, and bolder than non-Europeans because of their heredity. Generally the descriptive category used was not "Europeans" but rather "members of the white race," but the distinction was not usually very important. Non-Europeans who were classified as members of the white (so-called) race were nonetheless believed to be inferior because they belonged to inferior subraces. Sometimes Europeans themselves were divided into superior and inferior subraces. Early in the nineteenth century it was widely, though not dominantly, believed that white people were not even of the same biological species as people of other races. This theory, "polygenesis," claimed to have both biblical and scientific support.19 Its primary
importance was its use as a rationalization for slavery: if Africans were not truly human, why, enslaving them could not be an evil act. This theory melted away during the course of the nineteenth century, mainly because it was offensive to liberal, modern, antislavery thought; what replaced it, however, was not much of an improvement. This was the doctrine we call classical racism, the belief that different human races have different endowments, just as different breeds of domestic animals have such differences—differences of intelligence, aggressiveness, courage, and the rest—and these different endowments are matters of biological inheritance. It was then argued, for instance, that Africans were endowed with lower intelligence than Europeans, so it was both natural and moral for Europeans to colonize Africa and make all decisions on behalf of the Africans who, themselves, either did not have the innate ability to make these decisions, to govern themselves, or were just sufficiently less intelligent than the Europeans that a period of European control and tutelage was necessary while these slow-thinking Africans learned how to govern themselves. Racism, in a word, had as its main function the justification of colonialism and all other forms of oppression visited upon non-Europeans, including minority peoples in countries such as the United States.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century racism acquired a pseudoscientific aura of apparent truth. Scientists claimed to have proof of the differences among races, particularly as to intelligence. Now, also, they were armed with Mendelian genetics, so it seemed eminently reasonable for scientists who were, themselves, racists, now to assert that they had proof of the truth of the racist theories in which they already believed. These so-called proofs were unmasked as pseudoscience in a slow process that continued down to World War II: indeed, even today there are more than a few so-called "scientific racists." What we need to notice about scientific racism is that it merely provided a new way of justifying something that was already almost universally believed to be true among Europeans. This meant, on the one hand, that it did not do much to intensify racism—which was in fact reaching a crescendo of intellectual and scholarly importance around the turn of the century for social reasons, having to do mainly with the growing importance of colonialism—and, on the other hand, that the disproving of scientific racism did not have much to do with the decline of racism's popularity in the present century. Racism emerged from pre-scientific roots and survived so long as it was useful, science or no science.

This is not to deny that scientific racism gave strong impetus to racist beliefs in society; in a time when science was acquiring great prestige and influence, scientific arguments were indeed important. And scientific racism helped in some special ways. One important example here has to do with supposed differences in endowment among the supposed subraces within the so-called white race. Anti-Semitism, along with anti-Muslim attitudes relating to colonialism in the Middle East, led to a proliferation of theories about the inferiority of the so-called "Semitic" subrace. ("Semitic," of course, should refer only to someone who speaks a Semitic language, such as Hebrew or Arabic.) This racist underpinning for anti-Semitism, then, became extremely useful for the general argument about the superiority of Europeans in history over all non-Europeans. Semitic peoples were acknowledged to belong to the white race. Now it could be argued that only Europeans belonged to the really superior subrace of whites. Semites were inferior. So were the non-Semitic peoples of western Asia (Persians, Turks, and so forth). Indeed, in certain situations it was even argued that scientific racism proved the inferiority of southern and eastern Europeans: the northern, British and Germanic stock was truly superior to Italians, Slavs, and the rest. One famous instance of this sort of argument was the series of pseudoscientific testimonials given before the U.S. Congress at the time it was debating the first important immigration legislation in the 1920s. Scientists solemnly assured the Congress that southern Europeans were inferior people, and so should be excluded from free immigration to the United States in order to maintain the high racial quality of American stock.

Today very few educated Europeans believe that there are genetic, inherited differences among the races as to intelligence or any other quality that might favor or inhibit social progress. Although a few people believe in the doctrine of classical racism, most of them are careful to keep their views to themselves, because today the doctrine is so thoroughly rejected, and viewed with such repugnance. If this were a book dealing with the history of ideas, we could go into the explanation for this transformation—the decline and fall of classical racism over a period of no more than two scholarly generations. During the 1920s the belief in the influence, major or minor, of inherited or racial differences was very widespread. After 1945 the theory was very rarely defended. Probably the key factor was Nazism. The Nazis grounded their ideology in this belief, claiming that the so-called Nordics were a Master Race, that inferior kinds of Europeans, inferior (so-called) subraces of whites—like the so-called Semitic race—and all other races as a whole deserved to be ruled by the Master Race. The Master Race, moreover, had the right to eliminate inferior subraces by genocide. Racism therefore was seen, and
still is seen, as a component of the horrible ideology of Nazism. It is true that a small and fanatic group still preaches classical racism, and that a very small number of academics still proclaim its validity. The need to fight against the doctrine has not entirely ended. But this no longer is the important issue when we talk about Eurocentric prejudices, because another doctrine has largely replaced classical racism and performs much the same function, rooting its argument not in genetics but in culture. This doctrine can be thought of as cultural racism.23

Classical racism was so pervasive, down through the 1920s, that it probably figured as an explicit or implicit foundation for most arguments about the superiority of Europeans in history. It is as though the scholars who asked why Europe had risen and other societies had not done so had part of their answer at the outset: Europeans began with a genetic advantage, large or small, and then, throughout later history, they were always to a greater or lesser extent favored by the influence of their genetic superiority in matters intellectual, giving them superior decision-making ability, inventive ability, and so on. Here was an important reason why it did not, in those times, seem crucial to ask the question, “Why?” At root, the answer was considered self-evident. Even moderate racists, such as Max Weber (whose views we examine below), could therefore assume that European superiority was carried along by a kind of subtle undertow of genetics, that this made Europeans at all times slightly more “rational” (Weber's favorite word), and, therefore, slightly more progressive. It is very interesting that modern scholars retain the notion of the superiority of European “rationality,” a notion derived from Weber and through him from all of nineteenth-century social thought, yet they vigorously deny that the source of this “rationality” is racial superiority. The intellectual contortions they have to go through to retain the one without the other will claim our interest when we discuss this matter.

Among the historians whose theories about the “European miracle” are at present widely supported, only Max Weber uses classical racist argument in a clear and overt way. But Weber was writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when classical racism was accepted by the majority of European scholars. Weber’s arguments are a rather mild form of racism. He did indeed write of the “hereditary . . . hysteria of the Indian,” a basis for his argument that Indian religion prevented Indian development.24 He considered Africans to be genetically incapable of factory work.25 Chinese have a “slowness in reacting to unusual [intellectual] stimuli,” a “credulity” or “docility” that Weber thinks are wholly or partly hereditary traits.26 And Europe’s greater “rationality” has a definite hereditary basis.27 But the fact remains that Weber gave much greater weight to nonracial factors. And Weber, for his time, was only a moderate racist.

Moderate racism is, today, a more serious problem in the world of scholars than is classical racism, because it is mainly an implicit theory. We noted that Weber believed in the significance of racial differences, but he referred to the matter very rarely; yet it must have been an unstated, perhaps implicit, part of many of his arguments about social evolution in general and the comparative evolution of Europe and non-Europe in particular. This was fairly typical of early twentieth-century scholarship, hence the racism in that scholarship often is too difficult to identify, and the arguments presented by scholars seem not to be racist when they do not explicitly mention race as a factor. But more serious still is the surviving influence of what I call very moderate racism. A great number, perhaps the majority, of mainstream scholars, in the period, say, of the 1920s, believed that racial differences were very slight and that the individual human being’s capabilities and potentialities would not be predictable from his or her race, that race differences only appeared influential on a statistical basis for large groups: for instance, a slightly higher average “intelligence quotient” for whites as against blacks. This belief was consistent with militant opposition to racial discrimination. But it was not much better than classical racism when applied to questions of social evolution and comparison between European and non-European history. This is so because the historical arguments did not need to postulate large racial differences. If whites, on the average, held a tiny advantage over nonwhites in, let us say, inventiveness, that tiny advantage, working out its influence over the centuries and millennia, would produce the result that whites built high civilization and nonwhites did not. In a sense, this very moderate racism was a more serious problem than ordinary racism, because it allowed scholars to take liberal positions in opposition to overt racial discrimination yet continue to believe that whites are superior genetically to nonwhites within the subject matter of their own fields—anthropology, geography, history, and so on. It did reduce the significance of race to that of one “factor” among many, but it did not eliminate racial explanations in the matter of Europe’s supposed superiority.

Probably it is unnecessary to say here that there is no credible evidence in support of the idea that races differ in genetic inheritance except in trivial matters like skin color. Even the idea of race is a vague abstraction and not really useful. For our purposes, the generalization that counts is this: racial differences explain nothing about culture or cultural evolution.28
Demography

Demographic behavior is usually considered the second important biological factor in explanations for the European miracle. Causality here is very murky. The specific form of theory with which I am concerned claims that Europeans, historically, controlled their population growth, whereas other peoples did not, so that Europe tended not to suffer overpopulation, and did not encounter what many historians call the “Malthusian disasters” that supposedly prevented forward progress in non-European societies. Malthusianism postulates, in its essence, that ordinary people do not control their sexual urges and so have more offspring than can be fed; a disaster of some sort ensues, with famine, pestilence, or war now reducing the population; and then people again breed more children than they should, and the cycle renews. Malthus considered this uncontrollable sexual urge to be general in the human species, although the educated classes could control themselves to some degree. Modern explanations for the “European miracle” modify this theory in a key respect: they assert that Europeans, historically, have had a cultural pattern of limiting the number of offspring whereas non-Europeans lacked this pattern; as a result, European population was maintained, throughout history, in rough long-term proportion to resources, in spite of periodic Malthusian crises, crises which were important in explaining various facts of European history but were vastly less significant than the supposed permanent grip of Malthusian forces—lack of demographic control and perennial overpopulation and misery—in non-European societies. Moreover, according to these historians, whenever technological advance or some other fortunate circumstance led to a rise in living standards, Europeans, unlike non-Europeans, did not allow their population to rise and thus eliminate the fruits of progress. We need to notice that this argument does not really center on the biology of reproduction but, again, on rationality: it is claimed or assumed that Europeans think about the problem of population and others do not. So demographic arguments for the superiority of Europe in history always return either to culture or to race: Europeans are more rational either because they have superior heredity or because they have superior culture. If non-Europeans have uncontrollable sexual urges, if they behave like the beasts in the field, this is either a sign of genetic inferiority or a cultural quirk. In the arguments most frequently encountered today, either culture is invoked or the matter is left ambiguous. Yet there is a paradox. Many historians believe that demography is an independent causal force in history. This belief is generally grounded in a quasi-biological argument: ordinary people have only partial success in controlling their sexual urges, and only partial success (or none at all) in controlling and spacing the birth of children. Many supporters of the miracle myth simply argue, then, that Europeans have greater, though still partial, success in controlling their behavior than do non-Europeans. For instance, Eric L. Jones claims that this is what he calls “the quality of Europeanness”:

Europe did not spend the gifts of its environment as rapidly as it got them in a mere insensible multiplication of the common life.

In other words, Europeans do not simply reproduce thoughtlessly, as non-Europeans do. Jones makes the same point in many different ways; for instance, he says of Chinese peasants that they preferred “breeding new people” to improving their economic and political circumstances. John A. Hall makes a similar point:

The expansion of the European economy did not occur [through expansion of cultivated acreage], as in late traditional China, because improvements in output were not eaten up by a massive growth in population. The ratio between population and [cultivated] acreage in Europe remained favourable ultimately because of the relative continence of the European family.

Europeans are sexually “continent.” Europeans, therefore, do not suffer overpopulation.

Another point worthy of notice: the historians have no difficulty invoking population growth as a positive factor in European history, as an indicator of progress—for instance, the growth of Europe’s population in the eleventh century and thereafter is seen as proof that medieval Europe was healthily advancing—whereas population growth in non-European societies is seen as negative, as the working out of Malthusian laws of “overpopulation.” We will encounter examples of this very one-sided form of argument as we proceed.

There is now abundant evidence that all societies practice population control. They seem to do so very effectively at the aggregate level: although individual family groups may or may not succeed in controlling the incidence of conception—because the methods of birth control are often rather hit or miss—the society as a whole seems able to encourage population growth or discourage it quite successfully. It is most unlikely that population growth takes place when the society would, in the long run, suffer as a consequence; or, to put the matter more precisely, the members of a society change their demographic behavior in the space of a couple of generations when it becomes clear to them, as they observe
changes around them in the probability of infants surviving to adulthood, and so on, that such change is desirable. The knowledge that all of this is indeed the case has only appeared recently. But this accumulating evidence really cuts the ground from under all Malthusian theories, historical and contemporary, European and non-European. The argument that population growth is an automatic, biological process, which occurs whether or not there is food enough to feed additional mouths, is simply wrong.

When the evidence began to accumulate that historic European populations did indeed practice population control, some scholars decided, appropriately, that the old Malthusian models do not make sense in Europe: family size was kept small, births were controlled, and so forth, back in the Middle Ages. This called for rejection of one traditional theory, the idea that there is a general pattern for all so-called preindustrial societies (or "traditional societies," or "peasant societies"), involving high and uncontrolled birth rates, large families, etc., and thus, inevitably, a Malthusian trend toward overpopulation. Most historians today seem still to be wedded to the Malthusian theory, and still believe that medieval social change in Europe was mainly, or at least partly, produced by Malthusian cycles of overpopulation. But some historians now reject this perspective: population, in essence, is viewed by them as a dependent variable, not an independent variable.

But only in Europe. This newer, essentially anti-Malthusian, theory was rapidly shaped into a new explanation for the European "miracle." It was simply asserted that European people, historically, controlled their population, and so, when they accumulated surpluses of food and commodities and wealth, these were not subsequently dissipated as population grew out of control and stole away the savings. This pattern, said these historians, was uniquely European and it was one important reason why Europeans were able to accumulate wealth and eventually rise into modernity and capitalism. Non-Europeans, by contrast, continued in their unmodern, traditional pattern, with overpopulation wiping out all benefits of forward progress. These Eurocentric historians, in a manner characteristic of tunnel history, did not notice that new scholarship on demography, some of it on historical demography—in various non-European parts of the world, from India to Barbados—was tending to overturn Malthusian notions as they apply to non-Europe just as readily as had been the case a decade earlier in European scholarship.

We will take up a related matter, theories about the uniqueness of the European family, at a later point in this chapter. For now, it is enough to say, simply, that the demographic arguments in support of the European miracle are utterly unconvincing. This holds true both for the theories grounded in the belief in baleful Malthusian forces and for those which assert that Europeans, uniquely, know how to avoid those forces.

**Environment**

Environmental determinism, the theory that the natural environment strongly influences human affairs and human history, is no longer a popular doctrine, but it is still used quite regularly in explanations for the European "miracle." The point should, however, be qualified: Environmental determinism, in the form it is used in these arguments today, is a "determinism" in a limited sense only. It does not claim that the environment explains everything, or that the environment is the most important explanatory factor. It is deterministic in the sense that it treats the environment as a separate, simple cause or "factor" not mediated by culture: something external to culture and influencing it from the outside. One finds each Eurocentric historian adding one or a number of environmentalistic arguments or factors to the mix, which, as a whole, explains the superiority of Europe. Even the historians who want to build their case mainly on social or political or intellectual foundations nonetheless manage (I know of very few exceptions) to throw one or more environmentalistic arguments into the stewpot, to give it body or flavor.

Environmentalistic arguments can be stacked into two piles. One consists of the set of claims about the superior qualities of Europe's environment and how they help to explain the rise of Europe. The other pile consists of arguments as to why the nasty environments of other places have blocked development there. The two sorts of argument are—perhaps surprisingly—very different in form. Let us begin with the latter.

Two classical environmentalistic theories have been used over and over again, and still remain in use, to explain the (supposed) nondevelopment of Africa and Asia. The first theory argues that tropical regions are innately inferior to cooler regions. This theory is used, for the most part, to dispose of Africa. The second theory argues that peoples in arid regions are held back from development because aridity necessitates irrigation, and irrigation along with related features of irrigated river-valley life leads, again necessarily, to the kind of civilization that is historically stagnant. This theory disposes of Asian civilizations, along with Egypt. (Most of Asia is not, in fact, arid.) I will discuss both of these theories, and more briefly a few other environmentalistic explanations for the backwardness of Africa and Asia.

**Nasty-Tropical Africa**

The idea that tropical climates are nasty, and inhibit the forward march of civilization, is a very old one in European thought. During the
nineteenth century this notion was widely used to show why Africans have (supposedly) remained uncivilized, and must naturally accept European colonial control; it was one of the core theories of classical diffusionism. It was routinely built in to theories about the uniqueness of Europe, the European miracle, although I must add that historians did not usually consider the reasons for Africa's nonrise worth bothering about: the matter was considered self-explanatory, and labors were devoted to the seemingly more important question why Asia (and North Africa) did not rise. And the tropical-nastiness theory is still quite regularly employed in historians' arguments. It is, for instance, crucial to Jones's argument in The European Miracle. It is also significant in a special arena: the debates among historians about African slavery, the slave trade, and the slave plantation system. By contrast, geographers, who in general know something about the natural environment and have long grappled with the theories of environmental determinism, do not, today, take the nasty-tropics theory very seriously.

The tropical-nastiness doctrine consists mainly of three distinct theories. The first concerns itself with the supposed negative effect of a hot, humid climate on the human mind and body; the second, with the supposed inferiority of tropical climates for food production; the third, with the supposed prevalence of disease in tropical regions. Down to the 1940s, or thereabouts, there was some ambivalence among Europeans as to the thesis that humans cannot labor as effectively in the humid tropics as in other climates. The majority opinion had been that Africans can labor under the hot sun—a convenient rationalization for plantation slavery—but that Europeans cannot do so, although some diffusionist arguments were built on the idea that tropical conditions induce sloth, indolence, etc., in everyone, and thus the need for control at a distance from temperate-climate civilizations. Eventually it became clear, from many sources of evidence including physiological studies, that human bodies of all sorts can labor as effectively in the tropics as elsewhere if the bodies in question have had time to adjust to tropical conditions.

Although the claim that people in humid tropical regions cannot think as well as people in temperate regions—the tropical sun "boils the brain"—was almost universally accepted by Europeans in the last century and was incorporated into some well-known theories about European civilizational superiority put forward (for instance by Huntington and Markham) in the first half of the present century, this theory, never grounded in evidence, is now rejected across the board. Eric L. Jones is one of the few present-day European historians who is unaware that this theory of "climatic energy" (as it was called in the old days) has been exploded. Not only does Jones accept it as valid but he gives it some considerable significance:

Civilizations had long been rising and falling in warm latitudes, although they appear to have been springing up farther and farther north. Such explanation as the literature offers for this shift is essentially climatic (Gillifan 1920; Lambert 1971). On the one hand it correlates mean temperature and the output of human energy, and on the other it claims that in warm regions man was subject to the build-up of endoparasitic infestation which caused each society there to reach a plateau of attainment and then stagnate.

It should be noted that "the literature" does not support any of this. The scholarly literature roundly rejects the theory of "climatic energy," which has not in fact been seriously defended since the 1950s. Climatic determinism as a whole is almost a dead letter. There has been no northerly "shift" of civilization (ancient civilizations were located from the equator to 45° latitude). The notion that tropical regions are so parasite-infested that cultures stagnate is false (it will briefly claim our attention later). Jones's general belief that hot climates are "debilitating" has little if any scholarly support, and does not in turn support the idea that Europe's climate led to a European miracle. There simply is no basis for arguing that midlatitude climates are superior to tropical climates in terms of psychological or physical effects on human beings.

The fruitfulness of tropical environments was much debated by nineteenth-century European scholars. Some argued that tropical regions are lush and bountiful, but used this proposition not as a basis for asserting high development potential but rather the contrary: tropical environments are too bountiful to offer what Arnold Toynbee might have called a sufficient challenge to humanity, and so progress did not take place except under colonial guidance. We deal with this thesis later in the chapter. Our concern now is with the exact opposite thesis, which asserts, quite simply, that tropical environments are miserably poor in their potential for agriculture and it is this that prevents tropical regions from developing. (The term "tropics," or more properly "humid tropics," refers to regions with no cold season and with moderate to high rainfall: roughly 750 mm. of rain or more per year. Most of sub-Saharan Africa falls within the humid tropics, as does most of southern and southeastern Asia and most of Middle and South America.) According to this thesis, little food can be produced on a given piece of land in the humid tropics.

Now this thesis—low agricultural productivity of tropical land—is hard to defend on the evidence, since population densities in the humid tropics range from very low (in parts of the Amazon Basin, for instance) to extraordinarily high (in Java, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Barbados, Rwanda, and many other regions). The argument is grounded, rather, in a theory about the nature of tropical soils. To put matters in perspective,
the scientific study of tropical soils is a very young field; few contributions of any consequence can be dated earlier than World War II if we exclude highly particular studies about the soils used for plantation crops like sugar-cane. The really crucial information, relevant to the proof or disproof of the traditional theories, was obtained in research carried out in a number of experimental centers in the late 1940s and thereafter, and then slowly disseminated to the world scholarly community. The result is that some historians (including some current writers about the "miracle") can still, today, make use of quite fantastic theories about the supposedly evil nature of tropical soils. Some of these theories were refuted quite recently; others are now, today, very close to refutation; a few others, hardly defensible, nonetheless still lie around in the scholarly literature, unrefuted. A brief, only slightly technical, comment on these theories is necessary at this point of the discussion.

The old standard theory about tropical soils runs about as follows: Because of the high heat and abundant rainfall in the humid tropics, these soils cannot accumulate organic topsoil, since organic matter decomposes rapidly and is quickly leached out as rainwater seeps downward in the soil. Tropical soils, therefore, are low in plant nutrients. Also, they are subject to severe erosion, partly because tropical landforms tend to have high average slopes, partly because high rainfall means high runoff and therefore much surface erosion.

These two basic physical propositions, about infertility of the soil and erosion respectively, were then married to a cultural proposition, in the following argument. Because of the low fertility and erodibility of tropical soils, farmers must practice what is called "shifting agriculture." (This is a farming system in which a field is prepared by clearing a piece of forest with the use of fire, and then, after one or more years of cultivation, is abandoned, another field being then cleared in turn and in its turn abandoned, in a continuous process of shifting fields.) The standard theory (as it was argued before the 1950s or thereabouts) then makes a series of sweeping generalizations about the combined effects of fertile, erodible tropical soils and shifting agriculture. It was claimed that farmers cannot return to the original piece of land after it has been abandoned and left fallow for some time, since the soils are too poor to regenerate and since burning the piece of land permanently damages the soil. Even where the environment is lush enough so that farmers can return and re-use each field, the production from each field will be less and less as the cycles of use and abandonment continue, and the soil will become more and more infertile until finally it is unusable. All of this implied that peasant communities would be unable to remain in any one region permanently; that the villages themselves would have to be moved as large expanses of forest land were used and then abandoned and the people needed to move elsewhere to find fresh, cultivable lands. The result would be grave indeed: a very sparse and highly mobile population with little or no chance of developing large-scale trade, cities, and stable states.

The entire argument was inserted at this point into world history and world geography. Most of sub-Saharan Africa is tropical. Therefore, shifting agriculture must be used there and no civilization can develop there. Or if civilization manages somehow to evolve to one extent or another, it must sooner or later collapse. (The decline of the classical lowland Mayan civilization was regularly used as the type example of this historical outcome; it is still so used by a few scholars.)

This traditional model of tropical soils and shifting agriculture was gradually softened as more information became available to students of tropical soils and tropical agriculture. By the 1960s it was generally known to the specialist community (though not yet to the majority of historians and social scientists) that shifting agriculture does not damage the soil under normal—that is, typical and widespread—circumstances. Almost never do shifting cultivators move their villages because of soil exhaustion. (It became known, also, that shifting cultivation had been widespread for many centuries in Europe, and there it had not apparently done any damage to the environment.) From this emerged a softer cultural model: if population densities are low, so that farmers can leave each abandoned field for the many years required for soil and vegetation regeneration, then shifting agriculture will remain an equilibrium farming system, and there will be no long-term deterioration of the environment.

But even this modification would not much alter the historical judgment about Africa and some other tropical regions: historians might still believe that any civilization arising in such a tropical area cannot be very complex under ordinary circumstances, because a low population density of food producers would not seem to provide the basis for a substantial complex of urban centers, religious centers, states, and the like. (As to the lowland Mayan civilization, some scholars continued to claim that shifting agriculture had destroyed the subsistence base of that civilization, while others claimed that the decline and abandonment of cultural centers like Tikal had been due to other sorts of processes.) In any event, the prevailingly Malthusian view of peasants led to the general assumption that population would grow out of control and regions of tropical shifting agriculture would never rise very high in places like tropical Africa, anyway.

The model in this form is still current among historians. It is
common in the European miracle literature, as the primary environmental basis for claiming that Africa could not have “risen” in the same way that Europe did. It is explicit in the work of some non-African Africanist historians.48

Evidence is now available to reject this entire theory, the notion that tropical soils are bad for agriculture and therefore somehow inhibit human history. First of all, we now know that tropical soils are not inferior. They are different. Because of the higher rate of chemical and physical weathering under humid-tropical conditions, soil production from the underlying rock is much more rapid than in the case in cooler climates. Therefore, soils maintain their fertility in considerable degree from the dissolution of minerals, and much less from the accumulation of organic matter. Erosion tends to be more serious, but regeneration tends to be more rapid. Tropical soils that have developed on rocks that are rich in plant-nutrient minerals are exceptionally fertile. Those developed on rocks that are not nutrient-rich are exceptionally infertile. There is no basis for comparing tropical and temperate “averages”: neither is better; they are different.

Evidence is also available now to reject the old view of shifting agriculture. Farmers practice it on poor soils, being careful not to let fires get out of control. They use a great number of techniques to assist the natural vegetation to regenerate, and to increase soil fertility in the cultivated fields, including green and animal manuring. When there is a land shortage, the shifting rotation is shortened, by the use of various techniques of intensification such as mounding or terracing, increased labor applied to such matters as weeding, adoption of different crops and different varieties, and many more.49 The correlation between shifting agriculture and low population density is a function of history, not ecology. In the Americas it reflects in part the post-Columbian depopulation. (The Amazon Basin, which today may have a farming population of perhaps one million, probably had seven times that number in 1492.50) In part also it reflects the often unnoticed fact that in most regions of the American tropics giant cattle ranches have pushed farmers off the better land, giving a statistical appearance of low population density: cattle have replaced people.51 The same process occurred in white-settled regions of southern Africa. Elsewhere in tropical Africa, most farmers practice forms of agriculture that should not be described as shifting agriculture except in marginal regions, like mountainsides and semi-arid wastes.52 Typically, they are sedentary or semisedentary farming systems, involving such things as semipermanent yam mounds and tree-crop farming, or irrigated farming, or mixed farming, or they are systems in which the period of cultivation exceeds the period of fallow, and fertility is maintained by many different cultural practices including the use of green and animal manure. But the most important generalization is this simple one: where there is soil degradation, and hunger, and poor farming, it reflects cultural causes from recent history or colonial history. It does not reflect inherent limitations of tropical agriculture and it does not reflect technological ignorance on the part of farmers.

A few variant theories about the low food production potential of the humid-tropical in general and Africa in particular are invoked by some historians. Some claim that Africans were unable even to farm in Africa’s humid-tropical regions until new technology, invented by non-Africans, diffused into the continent. One form of this argument claims that ironworking was brought into Africa a little over 2,000 years ago, perhaps by the Romans, and only then were Africans able to tackle the tropical forests.53 Since shifting agriculture was practiced with stone implements in ancient Europe, and since ironworking appeared in Africa—possibly after independent invention—around 800 B.C. or earlier, this theory is invalid.

An even more outlandish theory builds on the fact that some Southeast Asian crops diffused into East Africa two millennia ago. Some historians blandly assert that Africans could not farm in the tropical forests until these tropical crops, domesticated by non-Africans, became available for planting in the African forests.54 It has, in fact, been well known for a long time that Africans domesticated a great number of crops for humid-tropical regions, notably many varieties of the yam (Dioscorea spp.) the prime staple food there.55 Both of these diffusionist myths seem to be connected to an important colonialist belief—now important as an excuse for apartheid in South Africa. The belief is that advanced African cultures, with agriculture, trade, and states, expanded southward through the continent only very late in history, mainly because of the forbidding nature of the tropical part of the continent which held back their southward movement. According to this myth of emptiness (see Chapter 1), they had not arrived in (most of) South Africa when the Europeans took over that region, and supporters of white supremacy in South Africa claim, on this basis, that whites, having arrived first, have political and economic rights to own the land of South Africa.56 In fact, the expansion of agricultural peoples in Africa occurred thousands of years ago; recent archaeology has shown that rain forest regions were settled by farmers at least 3,000 years ago, and whites did not arrive first in South Africa.

Another variant of the myth of tropical nastiness as applied to Africa is the notion that rainfall variability in tropical Africa is uniquely and devastatingly high, such that agriculture could not, in precolonial times,
be dependably practiced and famines were frequent and widespread. This then leads into various arguments about African backwardness. For some historians (among them Philip Curtin) there was a basic tendency toward mobility of populations and internal slave trading; for others (notoriously Joseph Miller), there was savagery and cannibalism. These historians belong to what I will call the "absolutist" school of Eurocentric Africanist history, which absolves Europeans of most of the responsibility for slavery and the problems of modern Africa by finding explanations for such matters within Africa itself, often in the African environment. The European miracle historians make regular use of these arguments for purposes of comparison. It happens to be the case that rainfall variability is a serious problem in all semi-arid regions, including the Sahel zone south of the Sahara in Africa and also the Great Plains in the central United States, the steppes of Russia, and so on. Africa is not unique. The more humid parts of this continent do not have a peculiar problem of climatic uncertainty: this is a historians' myth, partly traditional, partly resurrected after the recent Sahelian-Sudanic famines. The latter did not reflect drought-proneness of the region. They reflected human problems, mostly inherited from the colonial period, which became disasters when ordinary rainfall cycles went through their dry phases.58

Much the same sort of argument applies to other parts of the tropics. In southern and southeastern Asia we tend, broadly, to find permanent, that is, sedentary, agriculture on lands with relatively high fertility, and shifting agriculture or tree crops on lands with low fertility. The experience of colonialism during the past two centuries or so has muddled that picture somewhat, since there have been major population movements and large population increases in some areas—with consequent distortions of farming systems in reaction to land shortage and other nonenvironmental pressures. Yet the generalization still holds in regard to the environment: tropical conditions do not carry the implication of poor agricultural potential.59

What of the opposing theory, that the tropics are lush and bountiful? Down through the middle of the nineteenth century this theory was very widely accepted, and also this corollary: Since the fruits of the earth are so easily obtained in tropical climes, humans do not have to exert themselves to make a living. And so they do not progress. The argument was then woven into many different theories. Buckle put forward one such theory.60 Marx put forward another, rather tersely, in a footnote in Volume 1 of Capital, asserting without discussion that tropical regions do not develop toward capitalism because here "Nature is too lavish... She does not impose upon [man] any necessity to develop himself."61 This brief comment seems to be the only occasion on which Marx raised the question why humid-tropical regions, including Africa, did not develop as Europe did.

The bountiful-tropics theory is still used today in some theories that try to explain the uniqueness of Europe's rise. I suppose that every European child of our own time has seen some version of the cartoon showing the native sitting under the coconut tree, waiting patiently for his food to drop into his hands. This is not merely a relic of oldtime thought or an implicit theory. Eric L. Jones uses the bountiful-tropics theory in The European Miracle. (In West Africa "living was easy."62) John A. Hall uses it.63 Occasionally it is used by Marxists, faithful to the letter of Marx's comment quoted above.64 Probably there is no need to explain why these bountiful-tropics theories are unacceptable, since this—as we have seen—is done time and again by scholars who insist that tropical regions are not bountiful; rather, they are barren and nasty. Neither the one view nor the other makes much sense. And note that both are used toward the same end: to show that tropical regions have inferior potential in history.

Finally, we come to the theory that tropical environments are so disease-ridden that historical progress there is slowed, stopped, or prevented. Some historians develop this argument specifically with reference to Africa. Some others apply it sweepingly to all tropical regions: for Eric L. Jones it is a major reason why both Asia and Africa remained backward by comparison to Europe. Like the tropical-nastiness theories discussed previously, this one is traditional in European thought, and this fact is critically important for an understanding of the survival of the theory down to the present and its use in the European miracle paradigm.

One of the axioms of classical diffusionism, as we have seen in Chapter 1, is the idea that diseases and other evil things naturally counterdiffuse into Europe from non-Europe. It was therefore assumed by many scholars (including, for instance, Buckle) that non-Europe is both the source and the natural home of many—and the worst—maladies.65 That axiomatic belief is still with us: plagues from the Black Death to AIDS are still assumed—for it is always an assumption, whether or not reinforced by evidence—to come from the non-European world.66

This foundation belief was reinforced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the reports of upper-class European travelers about the, to them, dirty, disgusting, diseased communities they found outside of Europe. This was both a class phenomenon and a cultural one: alien lifeways necessarily seemed to be unhealthy. But the belief gained powerful reinforcement during the nineteenth century, when the growing wealth and modernization of (much of) Europe led to a dramatic improvement in health conditions, grounded in general improvement in
living conditions, improved sanitation, and, finally, progress in medicine. Europe, therefore, seemed to be somehow healthy, non-Europe, somehow unhealthy. This error is still very widespread. Underdeveloped countries are poor. With poverty comes ill health. But the ill health is thought, incorrectly, to somehow stem from the natural environments of these regions or from the cultures of their inhabitants, not from poverty. However disease-ridden India, Africa, China, etc., may have been in this period, Europe itself had been just as disease-ridden a century or so earlier (a fact known in part from the demographic facts about life expectancy of ordinary Europeans down to the eighteenth century).

In this same period European colonial territories were expanding, and it became evident that Europeans living in colonies tended to fall prey to various kinds of exotic diseases. The most extreme case apparently was West Africa, which was called in those times “the white man’s grave.” Here the insecurity of the quite small coastal settlements—colonial territories in sub-Saharan Africa did not really expand until very late in the nineteenth century—combined with the massive effects of the movement of slaves (many of whom died in these settlements) produced peculiarly unhealthy conditions, though the Europeans thought the source of the problem was the innate unhealthfulness of Africa itself.

Most of the important diseases of humans and their domesticated animals are not peculiarly tropical. Smallpox, typhoid, pneumonia, diphtheria, measles, bubonic plague, anthrax, and many other diseases are found across many physical environments, and their severity from place to place tends to reflect, more than anything else, conditions of human poverty, crowding, and the like. To some extent this is true even of the supposedly “tropical diseases,” such as malaria (which, in fact, used to plague extratropical areas, including New York). Some forms of malaria tend to be associated with stagnant water, and thus with irrigated agriculture, in a wide range of climates. Other forms, including some of the most serious ones, are associated with tropical forest conditions, the mosquito vector often breeding in bromeliad growths on the trees themselves. It is true that these forms of malaria are especially associated with shifting cultivation in the humid tropics. But farmers spend relatively little time in the forest, if indeed is forest. And they develop immunities such that malaria does not ravage their communities (as it does rave communities of foreigners in their midst: traders, colonial military personnel, and so on).

The question is: after all such matters have been taken into consideration, is there, then, a remainder that can be called “the innate unhealthiness of the tropics”? Probably the answer is no.

Although this generalization is now widely accepted, some historians clinging tenaciously to the idea that Africa is and always has been a uniquely disease-ridden place. This is given as one reason for Africa’s (supposed) marginal role in world history, at least in modern world history. (According to William McNeill, disease “more than anything else, is why Africa remained backward in the development of civilization when compared to temperate lands.”) In the view of some of the absolutist historians, notably Curtin, the disease-ridden character of West and Central Africa in and after the sixteenth century is a key part of the explanation for the complementary facts that this region became the source of slaves for the Atlantic plantation economy and that this region, instead of “rising” with the growth of the Atlantic economy, instead remained undeveloped. It is important to put this theory into perspective in terms of the confrontation mentioned at the beginning of this chapter between traditional European historians and the Third-Worldist, revisionist school. Traditional scholars (at least those of the absolutist school) claim that Africa in the sixteenth century had a rather small and mobile population, with little development of complex civilization and state organization, and with slave raiding and slave trading as important features of its society. Africa had not risen above this very low level of civilization mainly because of the prevalence of human and animal diseases—with other environmental factors of the sort previously discussed being added on as additional factors. Africa thus quite naturally became the prime source of plantation slaves, and, also naturally, the slave trade did not fundamentally alter the reality of African life.

Third World historians tend to dispute all of this. Africa was densely populated before the slave trade, and the slave trade utterly devastated the continent, destroying states and civilizations, depopulating vast regions, and leading, overall, to disastrous underdevelopment. The slave trade mainly reflected Europe’s power relative to coastal African societies in the seventeenth century and thereafter, in consequence of the immensely profitable American plantations and—as we discuss in Chapter 4—the fact that militarily and commercially powerful West African states were mostly located some distance from the coast. Disease increased in intensity because of the devastation caused by the slave trade: depopulation, the abandonment of large areas formerly cultivated and grazed (now turned to forest and scrub), wars, economic decline, and so on. One crucial example of this devastation has to do with the tsetse fly and trypanosomiasis or African sleeping sickness. Traditional scholars claim that tsetse fly infestation prevented Africans from developing extensive cattle herding in earlier times and in many other ways contributed to historical stagnation. The response is that trypanosomiasis, like anthrax, is a disease with many mammalian hosts. Depopulation led to the massive expansion
of wastelands, and of wild animal host populations, and thus to the spread of conditions in which the tsetse fly could flourish. This in turn changed trypanosomiasis from an endemic disease to which both humans and cattle had some immunity and exposure, which was kept in check by the relatively full occupation of lands into a devastating disease that, since the end of the last century, has instead prevented the development of animal husbandry in some areas of Africa. There is considerable evidence that the expansion of bushland led to the expansion of tsetse-fly-infested areas and thus to economic and social misery. Beyond this, there is little solid evidence either way about the history of health conditions in Africa and among Africans (not colonial visitors), and there are many reasons to doubt the inherited diffusionist assumptions and prejudices on this matter. In any event, one cannot make a case that disease was an independent force that “blocked” development in sub-Saharan Africa.

Abid, Despotic Asia

Asia is a large place and contains a large variety of environments. There is, understandably, a very long and varied list of traditional environmentalist arguments, most of them particular to some one part of Asia and inapplicable to other parts. Back in the early nineteenth century, a pious form of environmental determinism prevailed in geography, and it seemed sensible to invoke a single explanation for all of this variety: God had placed different natural obstacles in the paths of different Asian peoples—heat in one place, cold in another, drought in a third. Today it is more common to find, among historians writing about the “European miracle,” not a list of Asia’s environmental infirmities but rather a set of separate comparative judgments, each centered on Europe, and each referring to a specific period in European history. Europe, or some part of Europe, at some particular time, was superior to all of Asia in environmental qualities X and Y and Z. Or, more typically, the comparison will invoke environmental obstacles for one Asian region, political obstacles for another, religious obstacles for a third, and so on, in a very eclectic sort of argument.

For these reasons I will not review all the environmentalist theories as to why Asia supposedly remained backward in comparison to Europe. I will deal with the comparative judgments about climate, landforms, and so on, one by one, in the following section of this chapter (“Temperate Europe”).

There is, however, one very large and coherent theory that is used today, much as it was in the last century, to deal with Asia as a whole in one grand and sweeping judgment of inferiority. This theory has a number of variants which are known by various names, among them “the Asiatic mode of production,” “hydraulic society,” and “Oriental despotism.” The theory is not usually thought of as an example of environmental determinism, since it seems to start its argument with technology, claiming that irrigation-based (“hydraulic”) societies have certain highly distinctive characteristics that inhibit historical development. But one of the roots of this argument is environmental. It is the claim that aridity in Asia made irrigation necessary. One can properly ask how a theory of this sort can be applied to parts of Asia that are not at all arid. (It has even been invoked as an explanation for Stalinism in wet, cold Russia.) To understand this contradiction, and to understand accordingly why this theory is untenable in all its forms and variants, we must look briefly at the history of the doctrine.

European writers of the past half-millennium have tended to view Asia as a place where people are inherently unfree and society is inherently unchanging. It would take us far afield to go into the evolution of this belief, but by the eighteenth century it had become a significant part of the emerging doctrine of diffusionism. It was accepted as an axiomatic truth, rarely questioned, but efforts were made to explain this inherent “Oriental despotism” (as it came to be called) in terms of everything from theology to race to environment. The belief seems to have been applied mainly to the Ottoman Empire, which was in that period a political and military threat to some European societies and a commercial threat to others, until the late eighteenth-century expansion of direct European colonialism in India and Southeast Asia gave the theory new functions. Not only was the notion of Oriental despotism useful as a justification and rationalization for colonial expansion, but it became the basis for colonial legal doctrines that were being fashioned at that time. In Asia, it was decided, there is no private property in land because the ruler, despotically, owns everything. Therefore, when we Europeans depose the ruler, we own everything. And if we take over a despotic state, we acquire the rights of despotic rule over a people who were unfree to begin with. (But European rule, however despotic—colonies had no democracy—was described as bestowing “freedom.”)

The modern form of Oriental despotism was often connected back to the biblical “Orient.” When modern Asian societies were described as “stagnant,” it seemed fair to assert that they basically retained the character described for them in the Old Testament. (The Old Testament, we recall, spoke of the existence of great cities, empires, agriculture, etc.) While it was necessary to explain modern wonders like the Taj Mahal and great modern Asian states, it was not difficult to view these as relatively minor advances over the original biblical civilization, and to find
secondary explanations for the evident fact that Asian civilizations had advanced somewhat—but long ago they had ceased to advance, and so remained essentially biblical and essentially stagnant.  

I think it likely that the geographical connection between aridity and “Orient” comes partly from this source, that is, from the biblical images of arid regions like Mesopotamia and Egypt. Partly, no doubt, it comes from the fact that early modern Europe, down through the mid-eighteenth century, thought mainly of the dry western Asian regions, the Ottoman realm and the Persian-Inner-Asian region, as “the Orient,” because the farther Orient, from India to Japan, was still somewhat remote from European attention. In any event, early nineteenth-century geographers like the great Karl Ritter were describing one special type of geographical-cultural system, the type associated with Asian civilizations of the great river valleys of arid Asia and northeastern Africa, notably the Nile, the Tigris—Euphrates, the Indus, and smaller valleys of similar character, and ascribing the traditional Asiatic traits of despotism to regions of this type. They seem to have extended this model somehow to comprehend the river valleys of wetter parts of Asia, through a logical leap from the idea of irrigated river-valley civilizations in arid regions to irrigated river-valley civilizations in Asia as a whole.  

The general association of Oriental despotism with river-valley civilizations, from Egypt to China, was commonplace in the nineteenth century. Marx and Engels, however, took the idea a definitive step forward by advancing a theory that derived Oriental despotism from propositions about aridity and irrigation. In the 1850s Marx and Engels were, for the first time, seriously confronting the question of how their essential theory of historical evolution could be applied on a world scale. It needs to be said first that they were probably the most skeptical European thinkers of their time as regards all of the traditional and (as they insisted) elitist social theories then in vogue. But their skepticism had inevitable limits, since they were products of an elitist German education and since they knew almost nothing about the world outside of Europe apart from what they learned in the press, and in books and official papers presenting the colonial point of view with all its prejudices. Accordingly, Marx and Engels did not seriously question the prevailing doctrine that the Orient is in some sense despotic and to some degree historically stagnant and unprogressive. But their skepticism about European social theory, with its elitist foundations, immunized them from the usual explanations for Asian despotism and stagnation. Asians were no less rational than Europeans, and no less willing to struggle against economic exploitation. This reasoning led Marx and Engels to speculate that the cause of Asiatic despotism and unprogressiveness lay, not in human society, but in the natural environment. In Asia, it appeared, social evolution had not led to private property ownership: the ruler, despoticly, owned the land, except where it remained as original communal property. Hence this speculation from Engels:  

The absence of property in land is indeed the key to the whole of the East. Herein lies its political and religious history. But how does it come about that the Orientals did not arrive at landed property, even in its feudal form? I think it is mainly due to the climate, taken in connection with the nature of the soil, especially with the great stretches of desert which extend from the Sahara straight across Arabia, Persia, India and Tatars up to the highest Asian plateau. Artificial irrigation is here the first condition of agriculture. . . . An Oriental government never had more than three departments: finance (plunder at home), war (plunder at home and abroad), and public works.  

This theory was advanced very tentatively by Marx and Engels, and was modified in later writings; it appears that Engels rejected it altogether in his late writings. Our interest lies in the fact that the environmentalistic component remains influential today, even though it is now obvious that Marx and Engels were mistaken in the notion that Asia is arid. The theory nonetheless has had an effect on recent Marxist discussions about the European rise of capitalism and the (supposed) nonrise of capitalism in Asia. More crucially, it has been woven into the mainstream European miracle literature in an interesting intellectual sea change.  

Max Weber, early in the present century, and Karl Wittfogel, at midcentury, are probably the key figures in the transformation of this rather archaic doctrine into a modern environmentalistic argument for the European miracle. Weber had little to say about the natural environment per se. Drawing on various scholarly ideas which were in circulation in turn-of-the-century Europe, including Marxian ideas, he argued that the development of private property in Europe's Antiquity and Middle Ages was indeed one of the primary features of social evolution toward capitalism. He stressed what he saw as a fundamental difference between the rise of feudal (seigniorial) property, which was close to, and moving toward, full private property, and a contrasting form that he associated with the Asian river-valley civilizations (and ancient Egypt). He saw that social form as being associated closely with the need to irrigate in such environments, hence associated, inferentially, with the environment. These latter societies were, he said, despotic and land was not, in general, passed fully into the hands of officials, but rather lent to them on temporary tenure, on condition of service, as a means of providing them with rental income, men for military levies, and so on.
Irrigation required collective labor appropriation under despotic rule, for maintenance of canals and waterworks. In forested lands of Europe, such despotic rule over peasants had not been needed. Thus in Greece and elsewhere in Europe yeoman farmers, individualists, became the signature of rural society. Cities, instead of being mainly the seat of despotic power, became truly urban. Thus, in general, there was a peculiarly western trajectory, toward modern urban and capitalist society.

The crucial factor which made Near Eastern development so different [from Greek development] was the need for irrigation systems, as a result of which the cities were closely connected with building canals and constant regulation of waters and rivers, all of which demanded the existence of a unified bureaucracy. There was an irreversible character to this development, and with it went subjugation of the individual. On the other hand in Greece, the position of the monarchs declined, and so began a development which ended ... with an army recruited from yeoman farmers who provided their own arms. Political power necessarily passed to this class, and therewith started to emerge that purely secular civilization which characterized Greek society and caused capitalist development in Greece to differ from that in the Near East.

Weber's formulation of the difference between Oriental societies and Western societies has become one of the fundamental arguments of the miracle theory as it is put forward in our own time. But Weber did not put firmly in place one important part of the edifice. This is the matter of showing why irrigation societies acquired the special characteristics assigned to them: despotism and stagnation, and, beyond that, lack of private property, lack of full urban development, and so on. This essential technical and environmental elaboration of the theory was introduced in 1955 by Karl Wittfogel, in his book Oriental Despotism.

Wittfogel, an ex-Marxist who started his argument with the Marxian proposition which we have discussed, tried to show that societies grounded in irrigation, "hydraulic societies" as he called them, are necessarily despotic and must necessarily have the kinds of social and political properties that earlier writers had associated with Oriental despotism. The same is true of societies that somehow acquire at-a-distance the characteristics of hydraulic societies, by diffusion. (Hence, according to Wittfogel, non-hydraulic Soviet Russia became despotic.) Wittfogel's reasoning was environmentalistic, in a manner less ignorant of physical geography than Marx and Weber but nonetheless quite naïve. Wittfogel believed that irrigating a tract of land necessarily, deterministically, increases its productivity. Some societies will thus choose to adopt irrigated agriculture, and so the great river valleys of Asia were occupied. But, according to Wittfogel, irrigation requires major public works for the creation and maintenance of canals, and hence requires a command-type political structure—he says this was the origin of the state as a political form—which also functions to control the distribution of water.

Thus hydraulic societies are necessarily despotic. There are a number of fallacies in this argument, as many scholars have pointed out. Three of the fallacies concern the environmental proposition, the idea that irrigation necessarily increases productivity massively, and therefore leads to the development of complex social stratification, the state, and so on. First fallacy: irrigation increases productivity substantially only when the ecologically limiting factor on crop growth is lack of water; but quite often—in Asia as elsewhere—this is not the case. This means that the elaboration of great irrigation systems is not a natural response to the environment. Rather, a small-scale irrigation system in a river-valley can become enlarged into the great system as an effect, not a cause, of political and social inequality: pressure to deliver surplus pushes the process, enlarges the irrigation network, and leads, logically, to ever greater inequality. In other words, the large irrigation systems are preceded by, and explained by, existing despotism or social complexity, not by environmental mandates. (Wittfogel argues in roughly the opposite direction: the need to irrigate in a dry region leads a society to develop coercive command structures to manage the irrigation system, and hence leads to class oppression and the state—and despotic Oriental civilization.) The one ecological generalization that makes undoubted sense is the correlation of land productivity with population size and density, which is basic to the elaboration of social hierarchies and such things as religious ceremonial centers and states. But irrigation does not, magically, make land productive. Some land is highly productive without it. In the classical Mesopotamian and Nile cases we do not know whether the ruling classes forced increases in productivity, and this created the large irrigation systems, or whether the process worked the other way around. The second fallacy is the belief that the irrigation of truly dry river valleys made these valleys immensely productive, overall. Irrigation allowed agriculture to be practiced in lands otherwise desertic, but water was always in short supply and we know very little about crop yields. What we do know is that the really high productivity, and large social entities (in terms of population size as well as density), were found in wetter regions, mainly rice-farming regions, where elaborate irrigation systems usually were unnecessary for agriculture (and sometimes rainwater alone filled the paddies, as on the lower Irrawaddy plain and part of northern Luzon). Third fallacy: There is good reason to believe that some of the oldest civilizations were grounded not in irrigation, but in drainage, an
ecological response that does not ordinarily involve large-scale waterworks. Drainage systems seem to have preceded irrigation in the earliest Mesoamerican civilizations. It is quite possible that the earliest Eastern Hemisphere irrigation systems, in such places as the Nile, the Tigris–Euphrates, the Indus, the Wei, the Yellow, the Niger, etc., were originally drainage systems, opening up swampy riverine regions and perhaps elaborating politics long before the societies became committed to major engineering works and so became "hydraulic."

Wittfogel’s environmentalistic argument, bringing down to our own time the old ideas of Marx and Engels about aridity, irrigation, despotism, and stagnation, juxtaposed with Weber’s arguments about the difference between Oriental despotism and the rest, is seminal for many present-day European miracle historians, although most of them modify Wittfogel’s theory in important ways. The essential concept is the notion of hydraulic society, explicitly or implicitly seen as a natural product of arid Asian river valleys (and the Nile). The way this leads to “miracle” arguments in the writings of such historians as Eric L. Jones, Michael Mann, and John Hall deserves a moment’s attention.

Eric L. Jones, in The European Miracle, lays stress on what he conceives to be the fundamental difference between “rainfall-farming” societies of Europe and irrigating societies of Asia. Wittfogel, he says, was essentially right. Irrigating societies suffered the “political consequences of a society with a huge, manipulated peasant mass.”

European agricultural society was able to avoid a comparable history of authoritarianism—a kind of political infantilism—by virtue of an open-ended productive environment of forest land and rainfall farming. Jones then adds to all of this his theory that farmers who work in warm standing water become diseased—a fallacy, as we saw above, that confuses the consequences of poverty with those of ecological settings.

The fairy tale (for it is that) which associates marvelous social consequences with “rainfall farming” of the European variety will claim our attention shortly. Here it should simply be noted that all of the supposedly dire effects that Jones—like Wittfogel before him—attributes to irrigation societies are, in point of fact, the normal attributes of ancient class society and ancient civilization. That is, when these civilizations emerge, we find, as part of the process, reduction in peasant freedom, recruiting of masses of people for various purposes, and the like. The romantic image of free peasants is an image drawn from prefeudal, prefeudal times. After Franco-Roman colonization European peasants were as unfree as any peasants of the Asian river valleys or anywhere else.

And of course rainfall farming, along with forested frontiers, was characteristic of much of Asia.

John A. Hall, in Powers and Liberties: The Causes and Consequences of the Rise of the West, wants to distance himself from Wittfogel’s “fantasy” (as he calls it) about the inherently despotic nature of Oriental society. He then promptly absorbs a good part of Wittfogel’s theory into his own formulation of reasons for the European “miracle.” Hall, like most miracle theorists, tries to make use of the greatest possible range of traditional arguments for the miracle, then pushes certain arguments forward as supposedly the most important ones. He thinks that political forces and Malthusian demographic forces are the most important, although he sees as a deeper force the Weberian notion of European “rationality.” Hall does not accept the formula that leads to the generalization that Oriental states were despotic. No, he says, they were arbitrary, cruel, and unwilling or unable to encourage economic development, and they held Oriental society stagnant (or, much the same thing, going through repetitive cycles). But they were not despotic. By this he means that Oriental states were not truly strong, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. We will see, shortly, how he says that medieval European states had some sort of inner strength, an organic quality, with progressive change somehow teleologically prefigured in their medieval form. So, according to Hall, there was Oriental despotism but the despotisms were weak. Hall then introduces irrigation as another independent factor.

[In Europe] there was no need for irrigation. It is quite likely that this encouraged, or at least allowed for, a decentred agricultural civilization based on individual initiative.

Thus a “need” for irrigation in Asia, which must have been an environmental need. Thus, the old Wittfogelian equation of irrigation with despotism (as against “individual initiative”). Then Hall moves to other factors on his very long list.

Michael Mann is another contemporary theorist of the “European miracle,” and he too has a long laundry list of factors which, he thinks, contributed to the miracle. He tends to emphasize the importance of ancient Europe’s acquisition of political and especially military power. Mann takes pains to distance himself from Wittfogel, but in the end he incorporates most of Wittfogel’s model—perhaps I should call it the Marx–Weber–Wittfogel model—into his own theory. Like Marx, Weber, Wittfogel, Jones, and Hall, he accepts the characterization of ancient Oriental societies (from Egypt to China) as unfree and unprogressive. But he points out that the despotisms did not extend to true large-scale
politicomilitary power. And the ancient Oriental civilizations, although they were rooted in irrigation agriculture, also made use of other forms of resource use in areas adjoining the river valleys. Mainly for these reasons, Mann claims that Wittfogel "overextended his model." Ancient irrigating societies were despotic but they were not powerful, and this, for Mann, is what counts. Mann then rephrases the model and puts it, more or less entire, into his own theory. The distinction that counts is indeed, he says, the one between "irrigating" and "rainfall" farming societies. Asian societies are sweepingly categorized as the former, European societies as the latter. According to Mann, the fact that European farmers, starting with the ancient Greeks, used iron plows and farmed unirrigated ("rainfall") land, is the one most fundamental reason that Europe forged ahead of Asia and North Africa. This was the first great miracle. It put Europe ahead of all other areas, and Europe has remained ahead ever since.

Here, in brief, is Mann's argument. We start with the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, grounded mainly in irrigation. Conceding that irrigation was the innovation that caused these civilizations to rise in the first place, Mann argues that the irrigation base somehow "caged," or confined, the population; this metaphor is meant to convey the idea that these people were unfree, and also in some sense constrained from further social progress. (It is a metaphor and not an argument.) Around 1800 B.C., says Mann, "the Middle Eastern empires of domination were shaken by two immense challenges...from the north," from Indo-European invaders—this seems to be a version of the discredited "Aryan migrations" theory—who brought two revolutions with them, based in charioteer warfare and the use of iron tools and particularly iron plows. The "balance of power now shifted northward." Mann concedes in passing that these northern folk did not actually invent chariot warfare and ironworking (which came perhaps from Anatolia), but he passes without pause (or logic) to the thesis that the northern peoples, Indo-Europeans, acquired dominance in politicomilitary terms and in terms of productive power. From this point forward, Mann contrasts two civilizations, the "irrigating" ones of the Middle East and the iron-plow—using, rainwater-farming peoples of the north—Greece and, broadly, Europe. Mainly because the Europeans were iron-plow—rainfall-farming peoples, they acquired, initially in Greece, modern civilization, including democracy, classes, private (more or less) property, science, and a respect for human reason. Why?

The centerpiece of the model is the image of an individual peasant-farming family which is fundamentally independent. It gets its water from the skies, not from a despotsically managed irrigation system. Iron, says Mann, is abundant, so the peasant farmer does not depend upon cities and long-distance trade networks to acquire iron for plows and axes. This independent peasant, a true yeoman farmer (as Weber also had said), is the prototypical democratic, civilized, energetic, forward-looking European.

None of this makes sense. To begin with, it is geographically absurd to imagine that the Middle East was a region without plow agriculture, one basically of irrigated river-valley populations. Plows were used in irrigated farming. Rainfall-based farming was dominant, not in Egypt and Mesopotamia, but in most of the Levant, Anatolia, Iran, and of course much of Asia farther east, not to mention Africa. Iron working was not invented by Europeans and was used as much by non-Europeans as by Europeans. The same is true of the iron plow, which was as important in early China, for instance, as in early Europe. (It is an old myth that Indo-European speakers, Aryans, spread the use of the plow to, and only to, the regions they settled or conquered.) Workable-grade iron ore deposits are not as abundant as Mann thinks they are (except in certain special regions, such as some of the laterite deposits of the humid tropics).

But the silliest part of Mann's thesis is the environmental determinism. We have an image of an arid region fit for nothing but irrigated farming, which is assumed to be a tether on the progress of civilization. We have an image of an open region of good soil, forested, in which iron-using peasant farmers not only produce an unmatched abundance but also acquire from their ecology a democratic, bold, bright, form of society which marches forward then to modernity. Let me add just a word about each of these images.

Irrigation, in the eyes of many miracle theorists, is somehow unproductive. Jones, Mann, and others make the assertion that more food is produced per worker on rain-watered lands. This is not true. In fact, irrigation was developed to increase food production, whether or not the source of the process was the aspirations of village people themselves or the surplus requirements of a political or religious superstructure. When an irrigated district has reached the point where there is serious land shortage, that is, late in its social and geographic evolution (along one possible line of development), the productivity per person declines. This is obvious. It means, first of all, that farm workers spend more time during the year producing and have less time for nonfarming activities, including village cultural life and work on such things as monumental structures. Eventually this situation may lead to the collapse of the farming system, with salinization, and so on, and finally, perhaps, starvation. Contrast this now with nonirrigated agriculture. Normally, there is poorer nutrient status of soil (irrigation brings dissolved nutrients in the water, and alluvial soils tend to have good nutrient status). Normally, there is greater moisture deficit, given the dependence on unpredictable rains. Thus natural fertility tends to be lower on nonirrigated land, all other things being equal.
(which they often are not). Now it is true that early iron-age farmers, clearing forested land and making new farms, achieved high production on this fresh land, but that phenomenon is transitory, and in any case it did not have much effect in the semi-arid valleys of Greece. Early European farmers tended in fact to settle on alluvial lands and lowland terraces, and quite early they were using irrigation and drainage—because it enhanced labor productivity.

The notion that European agriculture was somehow conducive to independent living in a way contrasted with Asian agriculture is another part of this myth. Early European farmers were not to any great extent, as Mann depicts them, living in isolation from one another, surrounded by forest. In the cases where they did live this way it was, again, a frontier phenomenon, in Asia as well as Europe. Farmers mostly lived in social aggregates, villages, large or small, compact or linear, depending upon many circumstances. There is no reason to doubt that the upland farming communities of Asia were quite similar to those in Europe. We return to this matter later in the chapter when we discuss the myth of the unique European family. For now I will simply categorize as mythic the idea that early European agricultural communities were somehow more individualistic, more independent-minded, more progressive than were communities elsewhere.

The most fundamental error made by the nineteenth-century thinkers and Weber and now mechanically repeated by historians such as Jones, Hall, and Mann, is to believe, or assume, that one type of environment produces a particular type of society and the latter then persists down through history. You simply cannot contrast the very ancient irrigating civilizations of Asia and North Africa with the later nonirrigating farming civilizations of Europe—or indeed of Asia—and then suppose that two contrasting civilizational types have been, thereby, created so as to remain in place down through history. Culture changes. Farmers move from one environment to another. In many places farmers practice both irrigation and nonirrigated agriculture on different soil types when appropriate land is available to them. Thus the theory which asserts that arid Asian agricultural civilization produces a stagnant, despotic form of society down through later times, one which will not develop toward modernity, is purely a myth.

Temperate Europe

We have already seen how historians constructed a mythic model of “rainfall-farming” European society, supposing that rainfall brings benefits not associated with irrigation and that Europeans alone, in their hemisphere, practice “rainfall farming.” Historians like Mann, Jones, and Hall carry the argument farther along. Europe’s rainfall-based farming, combined with Europe’s supposedly fine and fertile soils, produced an environmental basis for agricultural production unmatched elsewhere. Although these historians give a lot of credit to the supposedly uniquely rational, inventive, European mind, they give much of the credit to Europe’s natural environment.

For example, Michael Mann draws a picture of a steady northwestward movement of European history—what we described in Chapter 1 as an Orient Express model—which he sees as an essential continuance down into the Middle Ages of the northwestward trajectory of that individualistic, creative, bumptious peasant society which, he thinks, emerged in the Iron Age with the uniquely European marriage of farming, iron, and rain-watered land. His model of the evolution of Europe’s society (its “miracle”) is much more complex than this, but a key part of that model is the inexorable, steady, historically pregnant geographical movement—what he calls a northwestward “drift,” with a permanent northwest “leading edge.” Eschewing philosophical determinism, he nonetheless gives the whole process a strongly Hegelian, teleological flavor.89 One of two main reasons for this northwestward movement is the beckoningly fine environment of northwest Europe. And the main reason why this environment is so fine is its “deeper, wetter, more fertile soils.”90

John Hall, similarly, extols the “northern European clay soils,” northwest Europe’s “deep and productive clay soils fed by rainfall” (“There was no need for irrigation”).92 Eric L. Jones, in The European Miracle, makes much the same claim, if slightly qualified. He writes of Europe’s “open-ended productive environment of forest land and rainfall farming,”93 of Europe’s “High, even rainfall and passable summers.”94 Jones (unlike Mann and Hall) recognizes the fact that Asian land supports a higher farming population, with the implication that the land is more productive, but he merely notes that Europe’s productive land comes in smaller, separated regions, and then he gives us one of the myths of Oriental despotism:

The very impracticality of hydraulic agriculture freed a fraction of European energies for other purposes. The rainfall farmers of Europe might be fewer in number than the farmers of China and India, but the former spent less time on all aspects of farmwork than the latter spent on water control work.95

The implication, of course, is that European peasant farmers didn’t have to spend much time at farm work in order to satisfy their needs and their quota of surplus, whereas Asians worked much harder for the same product. This is plainly absurd unless we abandon historical method and
try to compare Asian peasants under modern conditions of extreme land shortage with ancient European frontier conditions or modern European capitalist farmers. Stated differently, this makes no sense in terms of actual agricultural technique—irrigation is intended to increase productivity per worker, and usually does so—and in terms of any model of the historical European peasant as poor, oppressed, and overburdened.

The "wet soils" of which these historians speak are usually excessively wet: acidic podzols and gley soils that are difficult to work and infertile until heavily manured. The "high, even rainfall and passable summers" are in fact a climate so wet that solar energy is often severely limited, grain crops sometimes cannot do well (recall how important was the post-1492 introduction of the potato), and soils do not dry out until late in spring, if at all. I do not want to caricature the situation. It is merely the case that northwest European soils, across their entire range of variability, are not superior to the soils of many other regions. In ecological terms, the lands of warmer, drier regions that have either good rainfall regimes or possibilities for irrigation or drainage tend to be rather higher in productivity. My point is more limited. There is nothing about Europe's agricultural environment that explains the so-called miracle, or that might lead one to believe (as the authors I have cited believe) that European history throughout its course has been favored over Asian history by the European agricultural environment.

Europe's supposed environmental superiority is by no means limited to farming. I will close our discussion of environmentalism by briefly commenting on four other comparative judgments which are routinely made by present historians of the European "miracle."

First is the classical "capes and bays" argument, familiar to most European and Anglo-American schoolchildren. Supposedly, Europe's configuration of peninsulas and bays, and Europe's possession of navigable rivers, gave this continent a natural basis for communication, trade, and accessibility denied to other continents. This, then, is supposed to have had a lot to do with the rise of markets and eventually capitalism in Europe. Part of the argument, like the emperor's clothes, is transparently false when looked at directly. For instance, accessibility by sea along the coasts of the Indian Ocean and much of the South China Sea was considerably easier in the Middle Ages than it was in Atlantic Europe. (If monsoonal wind patterns posed a problem in the Indian Ocean, storms posed a greater problem in the North Atlantic.) Trading cities dotted the Indian coast, and trading vessels piled up and down this coast, and on to Indonesia and Arabia, carrying bulk commodities like rice and iron as well as high-value goods, long before Italian galleys inaugurated a regular commodity trade between the Mediterranean and the northwest Atlantic. I do not belittle the great seamanship of the Atlantic fishermen, the Iceland traders, and the Hanseatic League when I note, simply, that other regions were using the sea as effectively as the Europeans were at comparable times.

As to rivers, Europe's endowment of navigable rivers is impressive but not unique. It is not better than India's and China's. Interisland navigation in insular Southeast Asia was much easier than was navigation up and down the Rhine, say, or the Danube. Again it is a matter simply of reducing comparisons to reality. The "capes and bays" errors are normally followed by another error: the idea that Europe had, in early times, an advantage over civilizations that had to transport commodities overland. Many of the "miracle" historians repeat the theory that overland transport necessarily was much more costly than water transport. This is in fact a multiplicity of comparisons. When Mann and others quote the old formulas about draft animals consuming their weight in fodder over a limited distance (some say this takes place within 100-150 km), they ignore the fact that most draft animals graze or browse along the way: hence the great Inner-Asian Silk Road and the Sudanic caravans are easily comprehensible. Canals in China were much more effective than circuitous coastal shipping routes in Europe. And water transport—particularly upwind and upriver—may not have had advantages over land transport 1,000 or so years ago.

Eric L. Jones, in The European Miracle, makes the large claim that Asia suffered so much more than Europe from natural disasters of all sorts that Asian development was strongly inhibited by this presumed fact. He carries the argument to the point of claiming that the risk of natural disaster was so high as to frighten ordinary people into unusual demographic behavior, to close off trade possibilities, and more. Setting aside the fact that we have very little historical data on this subject, the main error is a simple matter of scale. Jones's "Europe" is really West and Central Europe. This region is roughly the size of the Indian subcontinent and perhaps one-fourth the size of the settled portion of Asia. So it might well have one-fourth as many natural disasters, ceteris paribus. It is true that floods are more serious in regions where people farm river valleys, but populations make adjustments which keep this one risk small enough so that it does not affect long-term development, and I suspect that winter-weather dangers in rural Europe were as great as flood risk in Asia, on a per capita basis. Hurricanes are no worse than the worst North Atlantic winter storms. The theory as a whole is unsupported by evidence and empty of credibility as an argument for the European "miracle."

The miracle historians point repeatedly to Europe's environmental differentiation, claiming that this leads to a unique potential for
interregional trade and thus, again, for capitalism.99 One need merely note that Europe does not possess an unusually large range of environments, and natural products, by comparison with other regions of comparable size. China, for instance, has roughly the same range of midlatitude environments plus a tropical south coast.

The last environmentalistic fable to be discussed here is the claim that Europe's topographic differentiation into many small "core regions," separated by mountains and forests, somehow led to a number of supposedly unique features of ancient and medieval European society, including even the development of a unique trading system and a unique system of moderate-sized states and the many benefits supposedly deriving therefrom. Since this issue ties in with the parts of the "miracle" literature that concern Europe's supposed uniqueness in economic and political development, I will postpone discussing the geography of the matter until later in this chapter. Suffice it to say now that this idea of "cores" is partly a myth, and insofar as it is valid the same sorts of "cores" can be found in other continents.

Rationality

We turn now to the theories about Europe's historical superiority or priority—Europe's "miracle"—which ground themselves, not in biology, not in environment, but in culture. First I will deal with theories which start from a conception of the superior "rationality" of Europeans. "Rationality" in such theories embraces many psychological attributes, always including inventiveness and innovativeness (or progressiveness), usually a capacity for abstract thought, and often a certain ability to make moral or ethical judgments. The issue is not whether such things are or are not fundamental causes in history; the issue is whether Europeans had more rationality, or higher rationality, than every other human community, and whether this was the principal reason, or at any rate one of the principal reasons, for the unique rise of Europe. The plain assertion that Europeans are smarter than everyone else seems to have a certain antique or Victorian ring to it, but this is deceptive: theories about "Western rationality" and the like are just as important today as they were for prior generations of scholars. Sometimes they are difficult to identify as rationality theories because they display other plumage. An explanation may focus on, say, technology, arguing that European technological innovations produced various forward movements in European history; looked at closely, however, the technological explanation usually dissolves into a theory about the inventiveness of Europeans, that is, their rationality. By the same token, an explanation may start with the state, or free markets, or the family, but usually (not always) it derives such structures from the more basic trait, rationality. Sometimes it works the other way around. Classical racist theories were rationality theories: to be white is to be more intelligent. Some (not all) Marxist theories are rationality theories: the defeat of feudalism released creative energies which then led to technological innovation, etc. Another complication is that superior rationality may be posited just for one crucial period and place, a magic key that started the whole process: Periclean Athens, Gutenberg's workshop, etc. I will try to sort these matters out by dealing first with the category "rationality theories" as such, then turning to other sorts of theories, technological and institutional, some of which are also rooted in the idea of European rationality.

The Rationality Doctrine

At the beginning of this century most European scholars accepted the basic proposition that Europeans are more rational than non-Europeans. This was explained by a great variety of competing theories, biological racism being perhaps the most prominent, but I suspect that most Europeans accepted the proposition as indisputably correct regardless of the explanation. It was simply obvious that European countries had attained a higher level of wealth and civilization than other countries and had done so on their own, mainly through invention, innovation, and creativity. Europeans also now controlled the entire world and this, too, had to reflect some intellectual and probably also moral superiority. This was the heyday of the doctrine of classical diffusionism (discussed in Chapter 1), and few people doubted the doctrine's basic propositions: Europe develops; non-Europe does not develop or does so more slowly; Europe's development is based ultimately in some intellectual or spiritual principle; the normal and natural way for non-Europe to modernize and progress is by receiving the diffusion of rational European ideas, brought by European colonial administrators, settlers, planters, missionaries, and purveyors of commodities.

By this time most European thinkers had come to accept the doctrine of "the psychic unity of mankind," at least to the extent of agreeing that all of humanity shares a common ability to progress toward modernity. This doctrine crystallized into a theory, widely though not universally accepted in the early part of this century, that can be called the dualistic-developmental conception of human rationality. The elementary dualism was a distinction between the mentality of child and that of adult. The human mind has developed from a prehistoric condition which was mental childhood. European history is either to be explained as the fruit of human mental development or has been
intimately accompanied by such mental development, in a process that was fundamentally the same as the psychological development from childhood to adulthood. Europeans became more rational as history progressed, just as children acquire rationality in the course of ontogenetic development. Ancient people had been not merely less intelligent but also much more governed by emotions and passions than by intellect, just as is the case with modern children. With some modification, the same was thought to be the case for modern European women, who were less intelligent and more governed by emotion than men, that is, they were less rational than men. But women, too, would experience mental development, and would eventually be rational enough to vote, hold public office, etc.

Non-Europeans, within the same theory, were seen as psychically undeveloped, as more or less childlike. But, given the psychic unity of mankind, non-Europeans could of course be brought to adulthood, to rationality, to modernity, through a set of learning experiences, mainly colonial. (The phrase "colonial tutelage" was a signature of the doctrine, and this conception is encountered in most history and geography textbooks of the time.) It was not simply a case of "the natives are like children." The idea of non-European irrationality was a definite, putatively scientific principle, widely accepted: non-Europeans think somewhat like children, and will be led toward adulthood by Europeans. Non-Europeans were of course graded. "Savages" were mental children without qualification. Problematic peoples, like the Indians, Ottomans, and Chinese, were thought to be childlike in some respects and not in others. Indeed they were governed by emotion and passion much more than Europeans. (Colonial revolts were obviously irrational—were outbursts of childlike emotion.) As far as scientific and abstract philosophical thinking was concerned, the people of these cultures were clearly not up to full adult standards, but in some respects, notably in arts and crafts, they were perhaps gifted adolescents.

So we have a model which has, as its centerpiece, the Rational Modern Adult European Man. History is his progression to mental adulthood. He is contrasted with ancient European man; with modern European children; with modern European women; with modern non-Europeans. The contrast was often extended, also, to psychotics; in some schools of thought they were explicitly seen as having a developmentally arrested mentality and this was indeed used as a therapeutic principle. What needs to be emphasized is the fact that this was considered to be a scientific theory. Thus it was valid to exchange principles across these various dimensions of contrast. For our purposes, the most important of these principles was the attribution of mental development to European history and the attribution of mental nondevelopment to non-Europe, past and present; hence Europeans had naturally acquired a unique rationality.

It would be wrong to reduce to caricature the scholarly theories of a few generations back, and the model I have just described looks, on the face of it, like a caricature. Most scholars did not literally believe, say, that the American Indian was a mental child, or that ontogenetic mental development exactly recapitulates the mental development of our species. But the model was a dominant force in European thought in certain precise ways. The equation of child, ancient, and non-European was explicitly accepted in nonscholarly discourse (newspapers, Tarzan novels, and so on). American educational policy toward Indians and other colonials was explicitly grounded in this model, even if it was a smoothed-down version of it. A very large number of writings in history, geography, and all of social science made use of one or another part of the model. And several very widely accepted theories were really forms of the same model. Three examples will be helpful.

Most anthropologists accepted the idea that there are two distinct mental types, one being the so-called "primitive mind," the mind of tribal peoples just about everywhere (some added: peasants everywhere). The "primitive mind" was very explicitly described—the most famous description is found in Lévy-Bruhl's influential book, How Natives Think—as being incapable of higher theoretical and abstract ideas, as being emotion driven, and so on. Some anthropologists opposed this notion (Boas, Radin, and Mead perhaps most notably); most anthropologists accepted it with some qualifications; some accepted it literally. Lévy-Bruhl's rather stark form of the theory had great influence on psychologists and all of social science. Closely connected to this theory was the notion that there are "primitive languages," languages incapable of expressing higher theoretical and abstract thought. This old notion (which had been used in one form by William von Humboldt) was joined to the proposition that people cannot think beyond the limitations of their natural language, and so a primitive language entails a primitive mind. Beyond that, the old philological theory about the innate superiority of Indo-European languages still had many adherents, and this theory extended the notion of primitive language to most of the non-European languages of the world. The third example is a broad family of theories in psychology that made use of the idea that mental development in the individual is homologous to mental development in the species, and that modern primitive peoples have the mentality of children and ancients, sometimes extending the concept to the putative psychological makeup (and limitations) of non-European peoples in general. In the twentieth century this theory received
its most influential expression in the psychoanalytic viewpoint of Carl Jung and his followers. Jung swept broadly across non-Western cultures (Arabs, Indians, Africans, African-Americans, and others) declaring, basically, that only modern European man has fully developed an individual consciousness, an ego, an ability to think, even an ability to conceive of himself as an individual separate from the external world. Only European man is rational.\(^{104}\)

The doctrine went through some important changes as it became absorbed into the “modernization” paradigm, the body of ideas which, as we have seen, came to dominate European social thought in the 1950s and still does so to some extent today. “Colonial tutelage” gave way to “diffusion of modernizing innovations.” Non-Europeans no longer were “natives,” and no longer were described as “childlike.” In place of the notions of “primitive mind” and “primitive language” came the notion of traditional mentality. Non-Europeans are “traditional” in two senses: they lack “modern cognitive abilities,” that is, the ability to think theoretically and scientifically, and they lack “modern attitudes” of the sort that push a person to achieve higher things, to reject the old, and so on.

This appears still to be the primitive mind, but there is an important difference. “Traditional minds” are simply waiting to be awakened, to be modernized. The larger picture was one of a vast landscape of traditional societies, containing people with traditional mentalities, and modernization would set the drama into motion. Mentalities would change. Social structure would change. New ideas and technology would diffuse into the modernizing societies from the already-modernized European societies, and so on. Recall that the modernization doctrine is not only a concept of the spatial spread of European ideas, attitudes, and the like, in the present-day postcolonial world. It is also a historical concept: modernization as history. “Traditional society” and “traditional mentality” came to be used to describe early Europe, the rise of Europe was now seen as a modernization process, and the start of that process was a much debated matter of deciding when Europe began its “takeoff”—its rise from the level of traditionalism and toward modernity. History is appealed to for the basic causal principle: Europe modernized, and now non-Europe will follow—though not slavishly—in its path. We will come back to this point in a moment. First I want to comment on the main causal principles that are thought to lead in the other direction. I will show that schools have arisen in psychology, sociology, and other disciplines that claim to provide scientific demonstrations as to what, exactly, is the nature of the “traditional mind,” and the output from these scholars tends, then, to seep back into history, where it finds its way into the newer writings about the European miracle.

In psychology, the important figure is Jean Piaget. His basic theory of mental development postulated an invariant series of “stages” of development through which all children must progress. Piaget was influenced by Lévy-Bruhl and the primitive mind doctrine, and as late as 1971 he thought that it is quite possible, and this is the impression we have from known ethnographical work, that in many societies, adult thought does not go beyond the level of “concrete” operations, and therefore does not reach that of propositional operations which develop between the ages of twelve and fifteen in our milieus.\(^{105}\)

“Propositional operations” means, roughly, logic. “Concrete” is childish prelogical thought, unable to deal with the abstract and the theoretical. Now Piaget was a great psychologist, but he did not have, or claim to have, direct knowledge of non-European psychology. He was arguing from the traditional dualistic-developmental model that equates the child and the primitive. (And he was about 30 years out of date as to ethnography.) But many of his disciples, seeking to connect their theory with the modernization doctrine, took up the theme and began to carry out research to find out whether non-Western people (particularly Africans) do, indeed, have inferior cognitive abilities. It is no oversimplification to say that virtually all of these studies made the same mistake and came up with the same, predictable conclusions. They used the tests of cognitive ability that Piaget had used with European children and, scarcely modifying them, administered these tests to non-European children and adults and found, predictably, that these people do not have full adult cognitive abilities. By now the error has become well known, and most present-day Piagetian psychologists do not seem to assert that non-Europeans are cognitively childlike. Along with the Piagetian studies of the 1960s and 1970s, there appeared, in this era, many studies carried out by psychologists from other schools of thought (like the Heinz Werner school) which took the old primitive-mind doctrine as fact,\(^{106}\) along with studies carried out by white South African psychologists comparing white and black subjects, other Europeans studying other African populations, and a few Israeli psychologists comparing the cognitive abilities of Arabs and Jews. With few exceptions, the European psychologists found the non-European subjects to be deficient in cognitive ability, and so to be “traditional.”\(^{107}\) In nearly all of these studies the testing was such that the “natives” didn’t really stand a chance because the tests were European, administered by Europeans or their native assistants, in Europeanized settings. The error became so well
known that the entire field of “cross-cultural psychology” gained a bad name—as an apologia for ethnocentrism—until, in the 1980s, it changed direction. The point is that while most cross-cultural psychologists today, apparently, deny that non-Europeans are less rational than Europeans, they established a body of publications that are still used by others to make the opposite point.

The rationality doctrine was perhaps most influential in those parts of sociology and economics that were closest to the modernization doctrine, particularly among academics who were involved in making and implementing the policies being put into place in the 1950s and 1960s to develop the underdeveloped countries. As we saw in Chapter 1, this sphere of ideas was crucial to the politics of modernization for at least three reasons: First and most basic was the need to validate diffusionism. Second, development of the sort that involved only the spread of new ideas and new techniques was much cheaper, in principle, than development involving massive flows of capital, industrial development, and the like. And third, along the same lines, development at the level of ideas, of research, extension, education, and so on, was not threatening; it would not produce the dangers of revolution and counterrevolution implicit in efforts to change the relation of power groups, to effectuate land reform, and the like. For these reasons, scholars were encouraged, indeed were given lavish grants and were well paid, to produce analyses of modernization that would lead to workable policies for bringing about development mainly through an influence at the level of ideas.

Everett Rogers, a rural sociologist; David McClelland, a social psychologist; and Everett Hagen, an economist, provided highly influential contributions that I will describe briefly and with some caricature. Rogers was one of the leaders in a movement to sort out peasant mentalities into those that are prodevelopment (“cosmopolitan”) and those that are noninnovative and “laggard.” The crucial notion was the idea of the diffusion of rationality into rural non-European communities. The key to development (with some qualification) was the transmittal of new ideas to innovative “adopters.” The fact that most of the ideas were not, themselves, workable (thus were not rational), and that adoption of them would have required of peasants not more knowledge, but more power and landownership, was ignored. McClelland claimed that non-Western peoples in general have not modernized because they lack the proper “need-achievement” motivation. They will modernize when and if they acquire this need to achieve, which had been of crucial importance in earlier European development, from ancient Greece on up. Hagen produced an elaborate theory, based in no evidence whatever, that non-Western peoples, and particularly peasants, have a traditional mentality that resists change of all sorts. The model starts with a mythic peasant unconscious mind that is uncreative, submissive to paternal authority (and therefore oppressive of innovative children), and unwilling to change. All three of these scholars, and dozens of their acolytes, produced a general model of peasant mentality as defective in both cognitive and attitudinal (affective) characteristics, but, of course, not hopelessly so. One of many recent outgrowths of this doctrine is Stephen Marglin’s theory of the Western mental “episteme,” a marriage of the old “primitive mind” idea and the newer ideas about traditionalism, which argues, in essence, that the Western mind is, and historically has been, scientific, rational, and intellectually hardheaded—the “episteme”—while the non-Western mind is traditionally given to technique and art (“techne”) but not to science. Marglin’s new twist on this old doctrine is to say that some of the non-Western “techne” should be incorporated in development along with the Western “episteme” because “techne,” less intellectual but more feeling, is less likely to destroy the natural environment and cause less psychic damage to non-Western people, a distinction rather like the older duality between scientific thought and emotion-laden concrete thought. Marglin’s ideas provide an example of much theorizing in the economic development world (like Hagen, he is a development economist) about non-Western nonrationality.

It would take us far afield to examine the parallel arguments in all the other fields of social thought. The following should suffice: In geography, the diffusion-of-innovative-ideas approach has been important since the 1960s and remains so today. The same old assumptions about peasant and non-Western traditionalism are still dominant. Some geographers claim that non-Europeans are mentally not capable of using all available means of coping with natural hazards like drought and hurricane. One geographer, Robert Sack, has come up with a classically Eurocentric theory about spatial cognition: most non-Western people (primitives and most peasants) cannot think in spatial terms the way modern Western adults can. Among the authorities he uses—the argument is from authority, not evidence—are Lévy-Bruhl and Piaget. In the field of education in the United States the newer forms of the dualistic—developmental theory of (Western) rationality are highly influential in many areas, including testing. In the field of philosophy, there is a strong relationship between the stream of ideas about rationality, discussed above, and the resurgence of mind—body dualism, such as one finds in the Cartesian and Kantian traditions and particularly in the modern neo-Kantians. I do not suggest that the doctrine of non-Western nonrationality is
fully hegemonic in modern scholarship, or that the above formulations have not been challenged. In general, however, the doctrine remains somewhat dominant in all fields of thought except, perhaps, anthropology and economics. Anthropology in recent decades has, with some lapses, maintained quite firmly that primitive minds are not primitive. And some schools of economics need the principle of universal economic rationality so badly, as axioms for their theories, that they are willing to concede rationality to everyone.

Rationality and the European Miracle

The idea of European rationality is often called “Weberian,” because Max Weber made important use of the idea in various explanations for European social evolution and various negative judgments about the lesser rationality of other societies. The rationality doctrine was, however, widely held in early twentieth-century Europe when Weber’s important writings on this subject were published. But he codified the traditional doctrine and added something of his own to it, so the doctrine can indeed be called Weberian from the present-day perspective. It is also Weberian in another and perhaps more important sense: Weber placed European social evolution in a framework emphasizing the modernization process, and contrasting Europe’s modernization with the “traditionalism,” as he sometimes called it, of Asian civilizations. When the modernization paradigm locked into place among scholars just after World War II, Max Weber was the most obvious, and most logical, source of basic sociological doctrine for the paradigm. From that time on, scholars who wrote about the rise of Europe and chose to emphasize the individual trait of rationality, or social-level traits and institutions which Weber had treated as primary (and, in the main, as consequences of European rationality), were Weberians to one degree or another (even if they rejected some parts of Weber’s model). The importance of Weber for our discussion of present-day theories about the “European miracle,” is the fact that the most influential, probably dominant, school of thought concerning the “miracle” today is more or less Weberian. Weber’s views about rationality therefore require at least brief discussion.

Weber analyzed Western capitalist society of the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century epoch in meticulous detail and with great insight, although there were important limits to his insight. He held to the typical conceit of his time and place and class in thinking that contemporary European capitalism is the culmination of a process of social evolution that was, at root, an intellectual progression, an ascent of human “rationality,” meaning intellect and ethics, from ancient to modern society. (He had doubts about the likelihood of further ascent in the future.) At each stage of that progression people invented new social forms, such as higher forms of the state, the legal system, the bureaucracy, the economy, the city, and so forth, but these forms were, basically, products of evolving rationality rather than primary causes of progress in their own right. But the march toward ever more rational society took place in Europe, among Europeans. Outside of the European tunnel of time, all societies were in varying degrees traditional and in varying degrees irrational.

Weber said rather little about the question of why Europeans came to display this rationality in the first place, that is, as a basal cause. He invoked several factors, one of which, as we noted previously, was race and another, the natural environment. Others seem to lie deep within culture. Yet Weber rarely discussed causality at this basal level, that is, attempting to explain why Europeans have unique rationality, and have had it since a long time before the Protestant Reformation and modernity. One reason seems to lie in his view of social causality, with ideas and values, and the evolution of ideas and values, treated as prime causes of social processes, social structures, and social change. Given this conception, he would not be expected to look for nonideological-level causes for ideas and values. Doubtless there were other reasons.

Whatever Weber considered to have been the basic cause of the differences between rational, progressive European society and irrational, traditional Asian society (Africa and America were scarcely noticed), he delineated these supposed differences very carefully. The most crucial arguments are found in his General Economic History and The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. The development of rationality among Europeans—however that had happened—led to a special sort of “economic ethic,” a body of values, aspirations, and logical thought processes that emerged primarily in connection with the Reformation (and particularly Puritanism) but which, more fundamentally, produced capitalism. The important point here is that basal rationality produced both the “economic ethic” of capitalism and the Protestant movement: Weber is not (as some think) explaining capitalism and modernity in terms narrowly of religion. He does invoke religion to explain many aspects of the supposed traditionalism of Asians, but here too a primordial irrationality is seen as underlying religion. (He writes, for instance, of the “magical traditionalism” of Indians and Chinese.)

The superior rationality of Europeans produces other major historical differences between Europe and non-Europe. Europeans are basically freedom loving, not ground under by Oriental despotism; this devolves into a form of city that is much freer than the Asian city, the
latter being conceived by Weber as (in essence) merely a physical entity wholly controlled by the overarching empire, and the former as a truly new form of society, emerging in the Middle Ages and inaugurating modernity. (As we discuss in Chapter 3, Asian cities were not as Weber described them. Some were free city-states, others were virtually free under a loose imperial umbrella. European cities, on the other hand, were much less independent than Weber thought.) Landholding systems were also different because of differences in rationality: only in Europe, says Weber (here putting forward a purely traditional European view) does the concept of private property truly emerge. The feudal estate is almost genuinely private property. The Asian estate is seen as merely a temporary assignment of land as a source of revenue for dignitaries, a form of salary given for service and ordinarily returned to the state. But European feudal estates were also, legally and actually, granted on service tenure, and in both continents these sorts of estates tended in general to become hereditary and thus eventually private property (see Chapter 3). Of course, Weber talks about other supposed differences between Europe and non-Europe, but the examples given here will suffice to show his overall approach.

Weber did not originate most of these arguments, although he codified them and developed them in a brilliant way. Yet Weber is given credit overall, and “Weberianism” is now the most important form of theory in explaining the European “miracle.” The basic form can be summarized very simply. Rationality is the causal root. The effect of differential rationality is, in Europe, permanent progress, modernization, and capitalism. In non-Europe it is stagnation, traditionalism, and various irrational cultural attributes such as superstition. The model here is simple diffusionism: rationality and therefore modernization are permanent in Europe. Non-Europe does not modernize except by the diffusion of these traits from Europe.

The doctrine of “Western rationality” is widely used today in explanations for Europe’s unique rise, its “miracle.” No longer is the superior rationality of Europeans attributed, even implicitly, to racial superiority, but how the historians manage to assert the one without the other is not an easy question to answer. Generally, causality is consigned to the impenetrable mists of ancient history, with only occasional speculation about ancient free-living European peasants or the evils of Oriental despotism, or with a ritual citation of Max Weber. For many historians, I suspect, the idea of European rationality is simply axiomatic. Europeans, for whatever reason, are just built that way.

Eric L. Jones dwells very heavily on rationality as an explanation for Europe’s historical superiority in *The European Miracle*. His claim is that there is a fundamental lack of rationality among Asians and Africans. The assertions are laid on so thickly, and with so little attempt to account for this putative irrationality, that it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that Jones, perhaps alone among modern “miracle” historians, holds some deep prejudices. Africans are dismissed, in a brief discussion, as having had no significance in history. They are characterized in a way that suggests, not very subtly, that they are closer to the beasts than are other humans.

In Africa man adapted himself to nature. The hunter felt part of the ecosystem, not outside it looking in with wonder, and definitely not above it and superior. After all, there were large carnivores who sought man as a prey. The most evocative symbol of this ecological oneness may be the honey guides ... birds commensal with man. They fly, chattering loudly, ahead of bands of hunters, leading them ... to the tree hives of wild bees and feeding on the wax after the men have broken open the hives. (154)117

This is a Tarzan image. Most Africans were farmers, not hunters (we discussed this previously). The scavenging house sparrow is also commensal with humans in the suburbs of London, but Jones speaks of “commensalism” only for Africans. (Ethology, as we will see, is evoked somewhat similarly for Asians.118)

There was scant incentive or pressure for development or invention. ... Any pressure ... was apparently offset by the use of slaves instead of the improvement of methods. ... Otherwise wealth was spent on luxury items. ... [There was] pervasive insecurity as a result of conflict and slave-raiding. (155–156)

Africans thus were noninventive, were aggressive, were lovers of luxury, were slavers and slaves. And also hunters close to the beasts they hunted. So: it “is not clear what indigenous developments were possible” (156).

Asians do not think logically. There is “relative absence of the empirical enquiry and criticism of the Graeco-Judeo-Christian tradition” (161), and “lack of a crisp tradition of logical debate,” which may explain the “failure” of Asian science” (162). “The notion of a consensus in interpreting nature may have seemed absurd” (162)—that is, Asians may not even have had an ability to conceptualize scientific verification, to distinguish empirical truth from falsity. They were uncreative: “Asian institutions suppressed creativity or diverted it into producing voluptuous luxuries” (231).

Asians have attitudes and values that inhibit progress. “Oriental
philosophies [emphasize] emotions, values and cosmologies," at the expense of empirical thought (161). Orientals are lazy (163). They (like Africans) have a "love of luxury" (170), and they love to buy things like "kingfisher feathers . . . precious stones . . . drugs no modern pharmacopeia would own" (164). They have a "servile spirit," their armies lack "tough" petty officers (167). They are, as a rule, introverted, inward looking; they are "increasingly immobile societies undergoing 'curious experiences,'" given to self-imposed "isolation" (170), lacking an urge to explore (168, 177, 203, 231). They are given to senseless warfare (169, 188, 197), do not have a written legal system (164, 188, 197), and do not have a concept of political boundary (167, 194). There is much thievery and piracy (189, 199, 209, 229-30).

In most judgments of this type (of which I have given only a sample), Jones is referring to Asians in general and through all times in their history. Some judgments are more specific. Islamic society was for a time somewhat innovative, borrowing technology from other societies, and preserving ancient Greek sciences. (This is a standard Eurocentric belief: Arabs preserved Greek science during the Dark Ages and then handed it back to Europe for further development, something like an intellectual left-luggage office.) The Ottoman Empire (the single real example of Islamic culture discussed by Jones, with the imputation that it stands as symbol for Islam as a whole and at all times) stamped out original thought. It produced unreason, backwardness, and retrogression, a "mist of obscurantist thought" (183). Ottomans didn't even know "the elementary facts of geography" (184) and couldn't even make decent maps (179). (Jones himself doesn't know much about geography and maps.) Rulers were often "degenerates," "drunkards," "mental defectives," "lechers," ruling with despotism and terror (186-87), their "philosophy" being theft and despoilment, against which there was "no legal shield" (187-89).

Indian society was socially and psychologically "frozen" (192), with values that were deleterious to economic progress. Religion was invoked to sanction all acts, but the advice of religious counsellors was "malicious or random" (195). The Mughal rulers were, like the Ottomans, degenerates, running society for their own benefit, given to "voluptuous selfishness," harems, jewels, menageries, intrigues, treason (196). The state was purely predatory. Technology was "almost stagnant," not even copying from abroad (199). "No written legal code existed," says Jones in a quite bizarre misstatement (197).

China was technologically inventive and innovative until the early Middle Ages, when progress stopped. There was thereafter a "retreat" (203); some skills were even forgotten. Chinese became "inward-looking" (203, 216, 220). China "backed away" from technology, from trade, from exploration. Technological development stopped even in agriculture, and only the cultivation of new land, with irrational cutting of irreplaceable forests, and the fortunate, timely, arrival of New World crops such as maize and sweet potato, saved the Chinese temporarily from disaster, although cutting down these forests was "one of mankind's greatest acts of ecological stupidity," stupidity which led to "soil erosion, gullyling, silting and floods" (213). (Apparently the deforestation of Europe and North America was not "stupid.") Peasants were given to "envy and suspicion" (206), were stupid as farmers (212-217), and were stupid also in preferring "maximal reproduction" over "affluence" (218). The state was despotic, a "revenue-pump" for the rulers, providing no services (206). There was (again) a love of luxury, an attitude of "empty cultural superiority" (205), a corrupt, venal, parasitic ruling class. Chinese had "anti-social customs" (7) and were diseased.

Ethology, the science of comparative animal behavior, is invoked repeatedly by Jones in his characterization of Asians and Africans. Oriental courts were given to displays of "the dominance relationship" (109, 209). Multiple wives had "ethological significance," as also, perhaps, did the "amassing" of slaves for "display purposes." "Great attention was paid to submission symbols, kneeling, prostration, the kotow" (209). In India, a "similar calculus ... underlay human demographic behavior and veneration of the cow" (19). Recall the "commensalism" in Africa.

These beliefs about the intellectual and moral inferiority of non-Europeans are old colonial-era prejudices, which Jones merely recites. The fact that The European Miracle is taken seriously by some historians is partly, I think, a reflection of the degree to which these old prejudices still lurk within our scholarship as implicit beliefs.

Many other historians of the "miracle" try to insert European rationality at or near the base of their explanatory theories. Michael Mann can be taken as a typical representative of the genre. We have already discussed his contrived little theory about the marvelous Iron Age Indo-Europeans of the northern forests, uniquely individualistic, aggressive, freedom loving (all notions from nineteenth-century and earlier scholarship, none grounded in solid evidence for Europe or, comparatively, for non-Europe). Mann moves smoothly to ancient Greece, which he sees as the product of this earlier Indo-European root rationalism. The Greeks invented most things rational, from science to democracy to ethics (a respect for humanity). Other Mediterranean peoples contributed rather little by comparison with the rational Indo-Europeans who swept down from the north. (Even the Roman influence, which subjugated the
European peasant, is seen as vaguely “un-European.”120) History then moves northwestern as northern Europeans clear the forest and move what Mann calls the “leading edge” of European society forward toward what seems to be its foreordained goal, Britain.121 Early in the Middle Ages, around A.D. 800, a newer stage of rationality emerges, combining the old culture and the new Christianity. Europeans now demonstrate their “rational restlessness” and their unique inventiveness, producing a revolutionary agricultural system and much more. The explanation is the ancient rationality, the newer Christian rationality, and the marvelous European environment.122 This, for Mann, is the kernel of the European miracle. The only part of this construct that requires further comment is the theory of a medieval technological revolution; this we discuss in the following section.

Lynn White, Jr., contributed a very influential form of the rationality doctrine with his theory about the unique technological inventiveness of medieval Europeans, a theory we discuss in the next section. John Hall contributes another version, much like Mann’s except for its emphasis on the invention of rational politics by Europeans and its tendency to follow Eric L. Jones in various negative judgments about Asian history. Space does not permit me to review the way some other present-day historians invoke, and use, the theory of Western rationality as grounding for their theories about the European miracle. I should simply note that some of them are Marxists and near-Marxists. Perry Anderson, for instance, argues from ancient Greek rationality to European medieval progress. So does M. I. Finley. Robert Brenner contributes a very different Marxist rationality theory: there was no rationality until, quite suddenly, capitalism appeared among the English yeoman farmers, who promptly became amazingly inventive and started a technological revolution that has not yet ended.123

Technology

Among all of the narrow-minded ways of looking at history, technological determinism is the one most congenial to Eurocentric tunnel vision. It has the appearance, the illusion, of cold-blooded scientific fact. “X was invented here, on this date, and produced these effects.” In talking about matters of technology, one can deny that ethnocentrism enters the picture: “this is hard fact, indisputable.” And the significance of technology seems equally indisputable: a new tool does produce more food, a new weapon more casualties, whereas a new social form might have historical significance; then again, it might not. But technological determinism gets its greatest strength from the error known as “telescoping history.” When we travel, mentally, back to medieval Europe, we pass backward through the eras in which Europeans clearly were technologically superior to everyone else, and so we tend to expect that superiority to have been the state of things at all prior times. But Europe advanced technologically beyond Asia and Africa mainly after the beginning of the industrial revolution. Europe did not even begin to forge ahead of other civilizations in technology or science until the seventeenth century or even later. By telescoping history we impute the Middle Ages with the marvelous technological attributes of modern Europe. It is then but a small step to the conclusion that, since technology is so obviously a powerful cause in history, and since Europe has always been so technological, here is the root of the European miracle.

But tools do not invent themselves or reproduce themselves. If you invoke technological determinism, you must not only show that the technology appeared and had such-and-such effects, you must also explain why it was invented, and by whom. In nearly all (I think) technologically deterministic arguments made as part of some explanation for Europe’s historical progress, technological arguments end up being arguments about the inventors, not the inventions. They end up in some Weberian claim that Europeans are more inventive, innovative, “rational,” than non-Europeans. Technological determinism then differs from other kinds of tunnel-historical theories mainly in its claim that rational Europeans moved their society forward by inventing new technology, rather than doing so by inventing new political systems, new forms of social organization, new religions, or whatever.

Claims are made by Eurocentric historians that technology was a prime mover in all epochs from the post-Neolithic on down. Nowadays it would be hard to ignore the evidence that in ancient times the greatest technological innovations, in agriculture, transportation, and other spheres, entered Europe from the south and east, so technological arguments tend to begin with the Middle Ages. There are, however, exceptions. Michael Mann, as we noted previously, has revived the old notion that the invention of iron somehow revolutionized European peasant society in a way it did not do elsewhere, that it produced a wondrously inventive, acquisitive (etc.) type of society, rooted in iron-plowing Indo-European-speaking peasants, and he claims, in parallel, that Oriental despots of the ancient Middle East held back technological inventiveness, where peasants were supposedly held in tight control by the political system that irrigation technology necessitated. But this theory is contradicted by a great deal of evidence. So much is known about technological progress in the Middle East during this period (from the late Neolithic to the “Iron Age” and beyond) that the
notion of noninventiveness is unreasonable. But iron working was not invented in Europe. Probably it came from the Middle East, but there are hints from farther afield (including West Africa). Plows were used in Middle Eastern agriculture, irrigated and nonirrigated, as well as in European agriculture. Plows may have been used earlier in China than in Europe. So the technological argument put forward by Mann (and others) is unsound and the psychological and social deductions are fallacious.

Many other "miracle" historians are prepared to start with the ancient Greeks and define these folk as the original uniquely inventive Europeans, but the Greeks did not contribute more to technological progress than their neighbors did to the south and east, so arguments of this sort must revert to the abstract idea of "rationality," thus, of potentiality, not actuality, a point we have already discussed. The Romans, in turn, were moderately inventive, but so were their neighbors. In the European Dark Ages, as everyone agrees, technological progress was hardly impressive, and was in fact going on at a healthier pace in parts of Africa and Asia. I suspect that the majority of historians today are not willing to go along with Michael Mann and others who claim to find a unique technological progress in Europe prior to the Middle Ages, although this view was quite widespread until a few decades ago. Most would disagree with Eric L. Jones, in The European Miracle, that Europe has always been "a mutant civilization in its uninterrupted amassing of knowledge about technology" (p. 45), since there is nothing unusual about this process in human society.

It is with the Middle Ages that technological arguments come to prominence. It is here that the notion of a technological "takeoff to modernity" is most frequently encountered among historians of the European "miracle." The common argument form is about as follows: Northern Europeans indeed were rather backward folk until late in the Dark Ages, the early Middle Ages, when a kind of awakening occurred, and northern Europeans now suddenly emerged as the people we know—the most dynamic, most progressive, most innovative, most rapidly rising (etc.) people in the world—and the key to this rise was a set of early medieval technological innovations, based mainly, these historians claim, on European inventions, neglecting non-Europe and thus presenting us with a typical sort of Eurocentric tunnel history.

Lynn White, Jr., is an American historian whose book Medieval Technology and Social Change presents this kind of technologically deterministic tunnel-historical argument in perhaps its purest form. This book, published in 1962, has been highly influential; its arguments are built in to the theories of many "miracle" historians, including Mann, Jones, and Hall (who not only cite the book repeatedly in their writings but rely on it for many technological arguments they invoke in support of their theories). The book is an effort to show that technological invention and innovation was the central cause of the rise of Europe during the Middle Ages. White lists a series of supposedly European inventions, and shows, for each in turn, what marvelous effects it had on European history. Here, for starters, is an example. The early medieval invention of the iron stirrup had a "catalytic . . . influence on history." It permitted a new form of mounted warfare, created the phenomenon of the medieval knight, and produced feudalism (knights became manorial lords). And so, "The Man on Horseback, as we have known him during the past millennium, was made possible by the stirrup."124

But White's crucial arguments concern productive technology, and particularly agricultural technology. He claims that an agricultural revolution occurred in Europe (or rather in northern Europe) in the early Middle Ages, and this quite revolutionised European society and became a large part of the explanation for modernisation and the rise of capitalism. He believes that three European inventions were the crux of the matter: the heavy plow, the horse collar (and therefore the use of horsepower), and the three-field rotation.

The heavy plow, pulled by teams of (typically) eight oxen, is assigned, by White, a tentative central European origin in the sixth century; it then diffused quickly throughout northwestern Europe, and "does much to account for the bursting vitality of the Carolingian realm in the eighth century."125 White is correct in calling attention, as others before him have done, to the importance of the heavy plow as an agricultural innovation in the wetter and colder parts of Europe. It was highly advantageous in opening the deep, heavy soils of the North European Plain and the deep-working of soil was critical in view of northern Europe's moist weather. It was in fact necessary for the areal spread of farming into some of the wetter soils. Therefore, the heavy plow had much to do with the overall increase in medieval agricultural production. But the heavy plow was not in fact invented in Europe in the Middle Ages. Plows pulled by teams of 24 oxen were used in northern India before the time of Christ.126 Southern Europe used lighter plows, because the soils were generally lighter and drier, but the technology was not significantly different. It seems certain that the heavy plow was either diffused into northern Europe from elsewhere or was a local adaptation of a widely used tool-form. So this is not a European technological revolution. And the effects of the innovation in northern Europe probably should be attributed to the social forces that led to the introduction of the heavy plow, not to the technology itself. We know, for instance, that the growth of feudalism led to massive expansion of
cultivation, partly at the incentive of the lords, who wished to increase their wealth and power by expanding their demesnes, partly as a reaction by peasants to the persistently increased demands from the lords for surplus product, increments of demand which could not be met without endangering the subsistence of the peasant family unless the peasants found a way to increase their total production. It appears that whatever historical effects are attributed by White to the plow should rather be attributed to feudalism as a social system. And the effects claimed by him are indeed quite miraculous.

Thanks to the adoption of the heavy plow, says White, there was a tremendous growth in population. Then there was a changeover to the "open field" system of cultivation and this led, according to White, to the invention of "communal patterns" of human cooperation (as though communal life had not been known previously and was unknown elsewhere). This was a social revolution, a "reshaping of peasant society." It was "the essence of the manorial economy," ignoring the fact that the manors were owned by lords, not villagers. More important still, there came then "a change in the northern peasants' attitude towards nature and thus our own" (my emphasis). Why? Because many families had to collaborate to mount one plow team, and so their allotments now were proportional to their social contribution, not to their needs. ("No more fundamental change in the idea of man's relation to the soil can be imagined: once man had been part of nature; now he became her exploiter.")

But all of this is nonsense. Neither the technical arguments nor the social deductions make any sense. The Domesday Book gives household-to-plow-team ratios of between 2:3 and 3:5. The open-field system seems to be quite old and was widespread in Europe and known in Asia and North Africa in early times. Northern villages, using big teams and heavy plows, were no more cooperative than southern villages, using light plows. Communal ownership of fields in some societies implied greater cooperation than that found in the European open field system. The manorial economy was a social system, not a technological invention. And so on.

White's second revolutionary advance is labelled "the discovery of horse-power." Horses had been around for some time, of course. The essential innovation, for White, was the modern horse collar, which he thinks was probably developed in the Occident some time before the ninth century. According to White, the horse collar transformed agriculture and grain transport in northern Europe by permitting horses to replace oxen in pulling plows and wagons. Horses pull about the same weight as oxen but do so about 50% faster. From this fact White draws awesome conclusions. There was, he says, a large increase in agricultural production. Commerce became intensified because transport by horsepower was vastly cheaper than by ox power. Villages became much larger, almost townlike, because now there could be a larger radius of travel from home to field. The enlargement of villages yielded the "virtue of a more 'urban' life," permitting the village to have a church, tavern, school (now boys "could learn their letters"). And now there could be "news from distant parts." A transformation, overall, of profound importance. It "urbanized" the village, giving peasants the "psychological preparation" for "the change in Occidental culture from country to city." All this and more from one innovation: the horse collar.

But the horse collar was widespread in Eurasia from an early date, and probably was invented for harnessing not horses but camels. And the presumption that horses held advantages over oxen in plowing and transport is widely disputed: the horse was more efficient, but more costly in upkeep, and generally required that cropland be devoted to feed crops. In England the horse did not replace the ox. Village size had nothing to do with horsepower. In many parts of the world where horses were not used, villages were much larger than they were in northern Europe. In countries like China, long-distance grain transport was often by canal, much more efficient than horse-drawn wagons. And so, again, neither the technical arguments nor the social deductions make any sense.

Finally, White attributes equally marvelous effects to the introduction of the three-field system. Part of this argument is familiar to every European schoolchild, who learned that the three-field rotation was a great advance over the older two-field system because (mainly) it reduced the proportion of the land in fallow from roughly 1/2 to 1/3. But White adds a cornucopia of additional blessings. Oats could now be planted widely, hence there was greater use of horsepower. In a section of Medieval Technology and Social Change, "The Three-Field Rotation and Improved Nutrition," he claims that the three-field system somehow permitted farmers now to grow legumes, and this vastly improved the European diet, which, in turn, "goes far towards explaining... the startling expansion of population, the growth and multiplication of cities, the rise of industrial production, the outreach of commerce, and the new exuberance of spirits which enlivened that age." In short, says Lynn White, Jr., "the Middle Ages were full of beans."

But none of this (least of all the pun) can be taken seriously. There is no basis for White's argument that population was held down by an unbalanced diet (overloaded, he says, with carbohydrates, undersupplied with proteins). Farmers using the two-field system were not protein-starved, because legume cultivation long antedated the three-field system,
grains also contained proteins, and fruits, animal products, and so on, were widely consumed. The three-field system was not a technological revolution. First of all, even more intensive rotations, including fallowless systems, were in use in many parts of the world long before the Middle Ages, and I suspect were common in parts of Europe (such as portions of the Po plain) where deep, nutrient-rich soils and good soil–water relations were found. Second, the two-field system was preferred, and was not supplanted, in many ecological situations, and in areas where fallow was needed for grazing. The picture is complex, but the generalization is clear: the three-field system was neither a technical revolution nor a fountainhead for social change. And it had close relatives in other continents, so it cannot be said to have been something uniquely European.

In *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, White says little about the causes of the revolutionary technology. He does so elsewhere, however, and we find that his basic argument is really quite Weiberian. Technological determinism dissolves into an ideological determinism, focused on the inventiveness—the rationality—of Europeans. This White attributes, basically, to religion: in part to “the Judaic-Christian teleology,” and in larger part to “Western Christianity.” The former underlies European’s unique “faith in perpetual progress,” which leads to a faith in the virtues of inventiveness and technology. The latter produces “an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature”—that is, the separation of Man and Nature. To a Western Christian, nature is inert, valueless. It is blasphemy to “assume spirit in nature.” This gives the Western Christian a desire and right to manipulate, use, transform nature—to invent new technology. The errors here are glaring. First, there is ignorance of the teachings of religions other than Christianity. Second, White resurrects the ethnocentric myth that ancient pagans and followers of modern non-Christian religions somehow are unable to fully separate Man from Nature and share the primitive view that spirits reside in all things. Actually, medieval Christians did perceive spirit in all things. (It was God’s way.) They did not treat humans as absolutely separate from nature. This dualism is a product of modern times, mainly of the commoditization of nature with the rise of capitalism. Dualism is a doctrine of post-Cartesian thought, not something residing deep in “Western Christianity.” Medieval Christians believed that the world is one, a plenum, an uninterrupted chain of being. Medieval folk did not, in general, believe, as White claims they did, in “perpetual progress”: they believed in the Fall, and they believed, on the whole, that Creation had been perfect and complete. White is simply telescoping history in order to claim that modern European attitudes about technology and technological change are actually basic and ancient attributes of the culture of Europeans, and only Europeans. His central thesis is basic tunnel history: Europeans are uniquely inventive, so they create unique technology, so they progress.

I believe that all of the claims for European technological superiority in the Middle Ages can be countered, and eventually disproven, in much the same way. I think it will become clear that all of the civilizations of the hemisphere were inventing new technology and sharing it around; the “sharing” being the usual mechanisms of diffusion as they operated in two spheres of reality: agricultural techniques passed from farmer to farmer and other techniques (including some of those involved in commercial agriculture) moving through the mainly urban network of trade and transportation, or occasionally (as with some military technology) moving around the map along with conquest. Thus I see a rather even building up of technology in Europe, Africa, and Asia. It was only after 1492, with its utterly revolutionary consequences, that European technology acquired the beginning of an edge over Asian and African. Did medieval technological evolution produce, as cause, the major medieval social changes? I leave the answer to that question to others. My purpose in this book is not to defend any one theory of social change, merely to show that the processes were not uniquely European.

In Chapter 3 I will discuss this matter further, showing how technological and economic surfaces emerged in medieval Europe, Africa, and Asia, and that processes of change in all three continents were—as to technology and economy—quite similar.

Before we leave the subject of technology, something must be said about one fascinating issue: what I will call “the China formula.” Since the end of World War II a great deal has become known about the history of technology in China, much of it through the work of Joseph Needham and his associates. In prior times, the European miracle theorists were prone to ignore Chinese technological achievements. (Weber did so less than most.) The usual pattern was to admit Chinese priority for some innovations but claim that, overall, the main technological advances took place in Europe and the Mediterranean. Where there were truly notable Chinese inventions, it was often claimed that the Chinese invented these things in a ludic vein whereas the Europeans put these things to work. (The paradigm, of course, is gunpowder, which the Chinese were supposed to have invented merely for fireworks.) One could bundle such propositions into a classical diffusionist model of the Chinese: they had, in prior ages, progressed somewhat, but then they slowed to a stop, starting up again only when Europeans brought new ideas.
It is now known beyond doubt that Chinese technology was on a par with that of the western part of the Old World, in some ways superior to it and in other ways inferior, during and before the Middle Ages. This new knowledge is devastating to many of the European miracle theories, those that claim that ancient and medieval European progress in technology was a crucial cause of the "miracle." (If the Chinese were doing the same things at the same times, the argument about Europe's uniqueness just crumbles.) The result has been a general modification of many of the miracle theories to take these newly known facts into account. Typically, the formula runs as follows.

1. "If indeed the development of technology in medieval China forces us to ask why China did not, then, have its own miracle, we can at least assert that China was the only civilization outside of Europe about which such questions arise." In other words, European superiority over everybody else is not put into doubt. This is convenient for those, for instance, who want to show that India, Africa, the Middle East, and so on, had no potential for development.

2. "Whatever technological advances took place in medieval China, the important point is that they stopped." In the formula, this argument is expressed in different ways for different spheres of technology, but the central argument is fairly standard: something characteristic of Chinese medieval culture forced it to cease developing and so to stagnate. In other words, what is plugged in here is the old doctrine of Oriental stagnation. Most typically, Weber is used to make this point: just about all of the Weberian claims about the reasons for Chinese lack of progress are regularly paraded at this point. Some historians balk at using Weber's thin argument about the stultifying effect of Confucianism. Others prefer not to notice Weber's ethnocentrism when he describes Chinese personality traits. But Weber's arguments about the city, landowning, bureaucracy, and empire are still quite regularly employed. The Chinese city was not "free" and did not have a real bourgeoisie. Chinese landowning was not close to private property. The Chinese bureaucracy and the Chinese imperial state were not "rational" and so held back the society from progress.

One can respond to this argument in two steps. First, as Purcell has pointed out, the important question really is how and why these Chinese advances happened, not how and why they stopped happening (if indeed they did stop). In other words, historians must explain how China came to be such a technologically innovative society that it outstripped other civilizations in many spheres of technology for many centuries. Weber doesn't help in this process one bit. The whole Weberian scheme is an explanation for stagnation, and what we are talking about is impressive progress, not stagnation.

The second step in the argument requires a focus on the precise period when, according to European miracle historians, the Chinese advance is supposed to have stopped. According to Elvin, broad-spectrum technical advances in China ended after the early fourteenth century. China at this time had perhaps the most advanced and most highly commercialized agriculture in the world. Chinese industrial technology was unexcelled in such fields as textile manufacture. Mechanical clocks were well known. Chinese merchant ships were plying throughout Southeast Asia and into the Indian ocean. Chinese guns were unexcelled. Canal technology was impressive. And so on. Broadly, the changes associated with the rise and travails of the Ming dynasty are associated with the slowing of technical advance, although advances continued to take place in some spheres of technology (shipbuilding, cannons, printing with movable metal type—invited circa 1400, in Korea—and much more). But Europe at this time was not experiencing a major technical advance either. After 1350 Europe stagnated both economically and technically. There is little evidence that European technology was advancing prior to 1492. The Renaissance was not a technological revolution, as historians have long realized. After 1492 important European advances began again in some technical spheres (notably shipbuilding). Whether truly revolutionary technological change really began before the eighteenth century is a matter of contention among European historians.

What does this say comparatively about China? It suggests that there is no problem of "stagnation." There was, instead, a slowing of progress during two centuries, in a scenario well known in all human cultures, because uneven progress is the norm. It suggests, rather, a problem that Third World historians focus some attention on but European historians tend to ignore. As a result of the European commercial expansion in the sixteenth century—we argue in this book that the year 1492 was the real birthdate of this process—aggressive European merchant communities began competing and trading with the Chinese in various places, notably Manila and some South China ports. Why did the Chinese merchant community not assert its dominance in this trade? Why did the commercial advantage steadily move in the direction of Europeans, not Chinese (and other Asians)? In other words, there is no stagnation to be explained. There is, rather, a problem as to how and why Europeans gained substantial control of long-distance trade in Asia after about 1600. Anticipating the discussion of later chapters, I will comment simply that this process does not reflect any internal cultural "blockages" in any Asian civilizations.
Rather, it reflects the tremendously rapid increase in the profitability, scale, and organization of European enterprise overseas after 1492, which nobody else could really take advantage of, because of the constantly increasing flow of New World bullion into European mercantile coffers (a point we will discuss in some detail in Chapter 4).

During the first half of the fifteenth century, a number of Chinese fleets of combined military, diplomatic, and merchant character were sent into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Some of the ships held hundreds of men; some were so large that vegetable gardens were placed on the decks. We will discuss the significance of these great voyages in the next chapter; my point now is to notice the way European miracle historians try to accommodate these facts into their theories about Chinese nonprogress. The standard comment is: “But they stopped.” In fact, the last voyage died around 1440. But the purposes of the voyages had been accomplished. Chinese merchant ships continued to trade in Southeast Asia. Nothing stopped. It is true that the emperors banned Chinese shipping for a time (mainly the early sixteenth century), but such bans were a means of extracting bribes (in effect easements) and they were not, in any case, enforced. For the “miracle” historians, the fact of the imperial ban is proof that China had stopped progressing, and that only Europe contained the potential for the “miracle.” This does not accord with the facts.

Chinese may have invented guns; in any case, they were as advanced in firearms technology as any other culture down to the end of the Middle Ages. Typical of the way European miracle historians deal with this sphere of technology (as with others) is Carlo Cipolla’s account of the process in his well-known and influential book Guns, Sails, and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phase of European Expansion, 1400–1700. He concede, to begin with, that “Chinese guns were at least as good as Western guns, if not better, up to the beginning of the fifteenth century.” But when the Portuguese appeared off Canton and fired off their cannon in salute a century later (1517), the Chinese had, magically, retrogressed:

The roar of European ordnance awoke Chinese... to the frightening reality of a strange, alien people that unexpectedly had appeared along their coasts under the protection and with the menace of superior, formidable weapons... How to deal with the “foreign devils”? To fight them or to ignore them? To copy and adopt their techniques and give up local habits and traditions or to sever all contacts with them and seek refuge in a dream of isolation? To be or not to be... a dilemma that was tragically unanswerable.146

Thus does rhetoric replace fact in the mythology of Asian stagnation and the European miracle.

The “Chinese formula” seems to be losing credence. But I have no doubt that an “Indian formula,” an “Islamic formula,” an “African formula,” and so on, will be contrived to shore up Eurocentric history as we learn more about Indian, Middle-Eastern, and African technological development prior to 1492.

Society

In Chapter 3 we will take a look at medieval European society and compare it to medieval Asian and African society in terms of those social categories that seem to be important in the process of change toward capitalism and modernity. Among these categories (forms, facts) are class, the state, landholding, trade, and urbanization. Our present task is the more modest one of criticizing theories that claim that one or another social category somehow led Europe to rise above all other civilizations before the end of the Middle Ages, before 1492. For this task we can select a few of the categories that present-day historians of the European miracle claim as favored candidates for this role of historical leadership, of causal motor propelling the so-called “take-off to modernity.” The favored ones seem to be the state, the church, class, and the family. Most frequently these categories are, themselves, explained in terms of supposedly more basic forces: European rationality, European technology, European demographic uniqueness, or European environmental superiority. These have been discussed at sufficient length already. The following discussion, therefore, will be brief.

State

A typical sort of argument begins with a model of the modern European nation-state, the kind of medium-sized, well-integrated, moderately democratic state that emerged after the rise of capitalism, after modernization, after the French and American revolutions. Nobody denies that this form is unique. But European miracle historians tend to make one of two claims about this state form: either it appeared very early in European history, early enough to play a causal role in modernization, or it was somehow immanent in European culture, a state form that was created, naturally and rationally, by freedom-loving, individualistic, antidespotic Europeans of medieval or earlier times. Sometimes both claims are made: a reduction to European moral rationality and, at the same time, a holistic argument at the level of the state itself.
Eric L. Jones, for instance, does precisely that in *The European Miracle*. Europe's medieval political system, says Jones, was near "the heart of the European miracle." Here the argument combines the traditional prejudice about Europe's innate and unique love of freedom with some very odd environmentalistic arguments. First the latter. Jones takes the familiar argument that Europe in early times had a number of fertile core areas, each of which became the hearth of a regional culture, and he turns it into a curious argument to the effect that Europe's ecological core areas naturally led to a pattern of medium-sized states, unlike, he says, the "imperial" pattern of Asian societies. Empires, in Jones's view, are intrinsically despotic, and innately given to interfering with the development of the economy. Europe's geography saved it from this fate. If a number of Europe's modern states have ecological "core areas," most do not, and rather few of these core areas became states. The model is environmentalistic and invalid. In any case, comparable core areas are found in many other parts of the world. Medium-sized, separate units of productive agricultural environments are, for instance, typical for Southeast Asia, including the rather discrete mainland cores, like the Irrawaddy and the Chao Phraya basins, the middle Mekong, and the Red River, and even more so the insular region, with cores in Sumatra (two or three), Java (three), Bali, Lombok, Sulawesi, Luzon, and so on. India and China too are moderately dissected in this way. Distinctive cores in Africa include the Middle Niger, Chad, and Congo, among others; in western Asia, Mesopotamia, the Iranian Plateau, and so on.

Next, Jones builds the image of these natural European *Ur*-states as somehow naturally forming into what he calls "a states system," a grid of roughly equal-sized independent states. These, in the Middle Ages, acted toward one another as though they were Hegelian individuals, competing yet cooperating, and marching forward, together, as a kind of members' club, toward modernity. Thus Jones discerns deep in the Middle Ages what amounts to the modern nation-state and the League of Nations. Telescoping history, he imbues the medieval European polities with all the virtues of the modern state: they provided public services, they encouraged the free development of the economy, they were incipiently democratic, and so on. All of this because of their environmental basis and because freedom-loving Europeans lived in them. In reality, the kind of state, and state system, that he describes does not appear until roughly the seventeenth century. Jones finds political characteristics of already-modernizing Europe, falsely claims that these were present long before—some, being environmental, were always present—and so claims to have proven that Europe's modern democratic political system was, somehow, always present in Europe (and nowhere else). In fact, medieval Europe was a hodge-podge of semisovereign feudal political units, a map so confused that states as such were not always identifiable, and with few of the modern state characteristics attributed to these polities by Jones.

But to understand the absurdity of this model of political history, we must notice the way Jones talks about the supposedly barbaric, despotic states of non-Europe. In non-Europe, a natural irrationality combines with environmental disadvantages to produce the opposite of the wonderful European state and system of states: the huge Oriental empire. Why did Asia not develop politically as Europe did? The political "infantilism" of Asia is explained by Jones in terms of (1) a psychological deficiency, consisting of irrationality in matters of intellectual vitality and innovativeness and a sort of moral failing in attitudes relating to the desire for progress, resistance to domination, will to forego animal pleasures, and the like, and (2) an inferior natural environment. The effects of these failings (and some lesser ones), and thus the effective reasons for Asia's political nondevelopment and nonprogress, are (1) uncontrolled population growth, and (2) bad government, "Oriental despotism" or, as Jones prefers to label it, *empire*. Throughout *The European Miracle*, the main argument supporting the theory about how Europe's system of states favors development is Jones's countertheory about the evil nature of the Asian imperial state. Yet, in the end, the countertheory turns out to be as empty as the theory. Jones does not, in fact, give any credible explanation as to why such large empires exist in Asia and not in Europe. But neither does he give a credible argument as to why large states are worse for progress than medium-sized or small ones. (And he is blind to the very real progress that occurred in Asia, and to the many nonimperial states in Asia.) When we examine Jones's theory about Asian empires, then, we find that it has nothing to do with size or kind of state and everything to do with a conception about the basic nature of politics in non-European societies. This is nothing more than the old idea of "Oriental despotism." Asians, and indeed all non-Europeans, naturally suffer nasty, despotic, capricious, irresponsible, evil governments. Only Europeans understand and thus enjoy freedom.

This is not an atypical theory among historians who wish to argue that European political processes and forms were causal forces leading to a medieval "miracle." The basic form of the theory is traditional. It consists mainly of three propositions: Europeans have an old, deep-seated rationality that impels them toward modern, implicitly democratic, political forms (or, less directly, toward individualistic economic behavior and thus a preference for a minimalistic state); non-Europeans suffer gladly and naturally a despotic, imperial form of state, sometimes powerful but always arbitrary; and Europe's natural environment gives political
modernization one or another sort of unique boost (ecological cores, fertile soil, capes-and-bays accessibility, or whatever). Other propositions figure in most arguments, but these three seem to be the most widely used.

They combine with a methodological principle of great significance: whatever causal forces were at work, they were at work early—that is, they set the process of modernization in motion long before the end of the Middle Ages. This, of course, is the crux of the matter. In the present book I argue that modernization (or whatever you want to call it) was indeed going on in medieval Europe, but not only in medieval Europe. Thus the events after 1492 did not start modernization but enabled European changes to increase in magnitude and effect and eventually produce a uniquely “rising” society. Therefore we argue from the uniformitarian hypothesis that Europe had no potential greater than that possessed by non-Europe during the Middle Ages. The fact that there were forces pushing toward democratization and the modern state in medieval Europe tells us nothing about European uniqueness.

John A. Hall uses the basic Jones model, emphasizing what he calls the “blockages” that prevented China, India, and the Islamic Middle East from developing modern state forms. In brief: China suffered under caste (and so had no politics whatever). Islamic-region politics reflected tribalism. Hall describes very old and not really typical forms for each of these civilizations, assuming them to be frozen and permanent, contrasts these with late postmedieval European forms with the inference that these too have been present at least in embryo for a long time, and then builds an argument that non-Europe always lacked the potential for a “miracle,” while Europe always had it.

Michael Mann addresses himself to the abstract entity “power” instead of the more visible “state,” but his argument is not fundamentally different. Mann, like a number of other “miracle” historians, tries to interpret the political chaos of early medieval feudalism, with its fragmentation of polities and sovereignties, into an argument for incipient modernity. The smallness of these politicosocial units implies, somehow, that they were more “intensive,” more meaningful, more pregnant with development potential, than the supposedly vast imperial polities of non-Europe. Mann’s notion of “intensiveness” is basically a notion of value, not of fact. In this context we may recall the Magna Carta myth: devolution of power from king to barons is traditionally described as a movement toward democracy, even though the barons in those times were hardly democratic, and poor people preferred to be able to appeal above their heads to the king. (And later the rise of royal power is described as a further step toward democracy, except that you can’t have it both ways.) Jean Baechler uses roughly the same model—although, unlike Hall and Mann but rather like Jones, he downplays the role of Christianity in political evolution—with one additional argument: Baechler believes that the medieval European aristocracy (originally an Indo-European “warrior aristocracy”) was itself the original source of democracy, claiming, in a curious reading of history, that aristocrats not only dealt democratically (respectfully) with one another, but they also respected the rights of their peasants.

Yet there was no democracy in the Middle Ages: European states were as despotic as any found anywhere else. Just as we noted with regard to the ancient Greeks, political forms found in Europe had counterparts elsewhere. If city—states were (perhaps) the closest to democracy—some of them were republican, and were in essence merchant-oligarchies—one need only note that city—states of many sorts lined the coasts of the Indian and Pacific oceans. Nor was the republican form unknown in Asia and Africa.

Church

Many theories assign one or another causal role to the church as a social institution in the modernization of Europe and the rise of capitalism. (Many other theories assign such a role to Christianity itself, but I will not comment on these.) Of course, the church did have such a role. The problems lie elsewhere. Most of them concern the question whether the church (or churches) provided Europe, and Europeans, with something that was not provided to non-Europeans by their own religious institutions or by other institutions in their own cultures. For instance, the claim has been made that the Catholic church in the Middle Ages unified Europe in cultural terms, to a degree not found elsewhere. But elsewhere comparable or parallel processes were at work. For instance, the much—maligned empires, such as the Chinese empire, provided unity in many ways, while the Islamic religion provided it in the Muslim world. It has also been argued that the medieval church compensated for the political fragmentation of Europe, allowing pan-European development to take place in spite of the lack of a clear pattern of strong states. True. The question is comparative: did the church thereby give Europe some developmental advantage over other civilizations, in which, quite often, there was political unity throughout most historical epochs? I think the answer must be that the church did not give Europe some special cultural quality, lacking in other civilizations, such that Europe could thereby leap into the forefront of social evolution.

Therefore I see no basis in fact for suggestions that the medieval church led to European historical superiority in a way that other religious
institutions, in other civilizations, did not do. John A. Hall, for instance, asserts that "Christianity provided the best shell for the emergence of states." Michael Mann claims that the medieval church "encouraged a drive for moral and social improvement even against worldly authority"—a statement that one might question not merely as a comparison, but also as a factual assertion about the role played by the church in Europe. For H. E. Hallam, "the medieval Latin church was the seed-bed of the early modern idea of capitalism." K. F. Werner maintains that "the European miracle [took place] ... because of the existence of a Christian world dominated in the west by Catholic doctrines." Such statements fail as comparisons with other religions, and other civilizations; but they also fail because the postulated rise of Europe did not take place in the Middle Ages but somewhat later. That Christianity helped in that eventual rise is not at all in question.

It is not necessary to discuss Max Weber's celebrated argument about the role of religion in the rise of Europe, or his celebrated argument about the special role of the Protestant Reformation in the rise of capitalism. Weber of course held the views that I criticized above. But the causal role of religion is not at issue in this book, the concern of which is a uniformitarian view of European and non-European civilizations and their dynamism.

Class

Three kinds of argument concerning class are relevant to our discussion. The first of these is a two-tiered argument for Europe's ancient and medieval historical superiority that can be summarized as follows: (1) Classless (or "preclass") regions and peoples are simply irrelevant in the matter of explaining Europe's superiority and the world's historical progress, because classless societies are necessarily both unprogressive and primitive. (2) Therefore, the real problems calling for explanation concern the question why some class-stratified societies (the European ones) are progressive while others (principally Asian) are stagnant and backward. Africa below the Sahara is then declared sweepingly to be classless and thus irrelevant to world history. This argument is still widely used, in some analytical works (among them Eric L. Jones's The European Miracle), in some world-history textbooks (as we noted in Chapter 1), and in some (probably most) modern atlases of world history. (Many of these atlases have no maps of Africa for the whole of history from the Upper Paleolithic to 1492.) In place of an extended discussion of this issue I will just offer these comments: Africa was not classless in 1492 (a point to which we return in Chapter 3), classless societies are not stagnant, and the historians who make this sort of argument about classlessness quite regularly contradict themselves by declaring that the classless European peoples of ancient and medieval times—the "barbarian tribes," Germans, Celts, Slavs, etc.—were very progressive: after borrowing the idea of classes and a few other things from the Romans, these primitive but supposedly progressive, innovative, aggressive, inquisitive, achievement-oriented Europeans than surged forward to modernity.

It is customary and quite proper to examine the class structure of a society in history and ask how the different classes acted to favor or resist change, and in which directions. In the absence of such an examination, we usually get an analysis with a bias toward ascribing causality solely to kings and other sorts of elites. Eurocentrism becomes a problem only if the assertion is made that a given class did something historically efficacious in Europe but that this class did not exist in civilizations outside of Europe. This kind of argument is very common in the European miracle literature. Although especially favored among conservative historians, it is also found quite often among those Marxists who cling to the old formulas about the "stages of class society." Fairly representative of the latter is Padgett's argument that a slave mode of production, in its pure form—with slavery dominant in commodity production and with implications for economic progress, the development of private property, and class struggle—existed in ancient times only in Greece and Rome, and that lack of this feature in Asia accounts in part for the tendency of Asian societies to "stagnate." (Roughly the same argument is then used by some Marxists to assert that the slave-plantation system of later times was not properly capitalist because the workers were slaves, not wage-earners. We deal with this point in Chapter 4.) This issue is important, but I will set it aside after one comment: I believe that those scholars who assert that the slave class was more important in the classical Mediterranean than Asia make a very elementary error, perhaps easiest to do if one is not a geographer. It may just be a question of geographical scale. The Athenian empire was perhaps one-hundredth the size of the Ch'in empire. In small, highly developed regions of China, slavery was very likely as important as it was in Attica or in the plantation regions of Roman Italy.

Jean Baechler, a French historical sociologist, has argued that one uniquely European class, the medieval aristocracy, was the central causal force in the European miracle. He dismisses Africa out of hand, then asks why it is that modernity arose in Europe and not in Asia. Accepting many of the standard arguments as partial explanations, he argues that the most important reason the miracle occurred was the existence in Europe of a true aristocracy. Baechler describes an ancient
Indo-European society characterized by its warrior aristocracy. In India, the aristocracy became corrupted, but not so in Europe. He carefully defines the medieval aristocracy and its special social quality, "feudality," in such a way as to distinguish it from a mere landlord class, or a class of landlords with added seigneurial powers. The aristocracy was a band of comrades, equals joined by bonds of feudal loyalty, a democracy in its own right. It did not, he says, hold the political power in society, and this was a key to its unique character. Elsewhere, either the aristocracy was ground under by the (imperial, despotic) polity, or it became corrupted into a caste form, as in India; in such cases there was to be no modernization. The European aristocracy had a special sort of private power, one original source of capitalist power. (Baechler contradicts himself here, since in the feudal era the aristocracy was indeed the political power. He simply notes that there was a time of political chaos, and passes on to other matters.) In sum, the aristocracy invents democracy and incipient capitalist property. The European peasants are also incipient capitalists from early on. Baechler casts aside the idea that Europe's peasantry was an unfree, oppressed community in the Middle Ages and gives it quite remarkable qualities: The peasant village was self-governed, a kind of "republic," with characteristics reminiscent of urban life. "A peasant is an entrepreneur in miniature." By the fourteenth century this incipiently capitalist peasant is the real peasant of Europe. The peasant village is a little democracy. The peasants are autonomous decision-makers. Baechler simply ignores serfdom, ignores, likewise, the importance of the fact that the lords owned the land, exploited the peasants, and controlled their lives. Feudalism becomes a kind of democratic society in which the aristocrats play a democratic role and the peasants live as free people. Moreover, these peasants, deep in the Middle Ages, had all of the attributes of the capitalist farmer that we associate with the eighteenth century and thereafter: investment, profit orientation, capital accumulation. (And they were smart enough, Baechler says, to avoid the extended family.) All of this is fantasy. It is a simple telescoping of history, pushing the modern world (and particularly the modern capitalist farmer) back into the Middle Ages.

Baechler contrasts all of this with India. His depiction of India is bizarre. India had no aristocracy throughout history, as a result of the caste system, and this is the "deepest cause" for its failure to develop throughout history. (India did have a very formidable aristocracy.) Indian society had no political dimension: "The polity . . . is not a reality in India." Therefore "the sense of identity in India could never be political"—not to say democratic. (Nonsense.) Caste was invented to take the place of the missing polity. (More nonsense.) India didn't have a peasantry, it merely had "agricultural workers." How can this be true? Because real peasants were entrepreneurial decisionmakers, something supposedly absent in India (but in reality no more so than in Europe). Baechler thus uses a mythical India as a counterpoint to his basic argument: In Europe, aristocrats and the free society created by them (and their allies the peasants) were the principal source of the "miracle." But Europe's aristocracy and peasantry did not have these romanticized qualities, and, more crucially, comparable classes existed in many other regions in the same period, as we will see in Chapter 3.

In Marxist theory, the concept of class is part of a larger and more consequential notion, that of class struggle. For all class-stratified societies, said Marx and Engels, class struggle is the motor of progress. Most present-day Marxists consider cultural evolution to be very much more complex than this, but they continue to emphasize the idea, and process, of class struggle. Again we must notice that there is nothing inherently Eurocentric about this concept unless one argues that genuine class struggle, or some phase or form of it, occurs only in Europe. But many Marxists argue precisely that way. According to Maurice Godelier, for example, the West displays "the purest forms of class struggle" and "alone has created the conditions for transcending . . . class organization." Probably the most influential recent formulation of this sort of argument is Robert Brenner's theory about the rise of capitalism. Brenner tries to demonstrate that the rise of capitalism prior to 1492 was a result of class struggle, but class struggle only in Europe. Then he uses this argument as evidence against what he calls "Third-Worldism," the belief that non-Europe has been of great importance historically and is so (politically) in the present. This conclusion has strongly influenced not only Marxist but also conservative thought in history, geography, sociology, and economic-development theory. Certainly the Brenner theory deserves our attention in this book. And it is not at all a complicated theory.

According to Brenner, class struggle between serfs and lords, influenced by depopulation, led to the decline of feudalism in northwestern Europe. (Brenner does not mention non-Europe and scarcely mentions southern Europe.) In most parts of northwestern Europe, the peasants won this class struggle and became in essence petty landowners, now satisfied with their bucolic existence and unwilling to innovate. Only in England did the lords maintain their grip on the land; peasants thus remained tenants. The peasantry then became differentiated, producing a class of landless laborers and a rising class of larger tenant farmers, wealthy enough
to rent substantial holdings and forced (because they had to pay rent) to commercialize, innovate technologically, and thus become capitalists. (Brenner thinks that serfs, lords, and landowning peasants did not innovate, and that towns, even English towns, had only a minor role in the rise of capitalism.) English yeoman tenant farmers, therefore, were the founders of capitalism. Stated differently: capitalism arose because English peasants lost the class struggle. In reality, however, peasants were not predominantly landowners in the other countries of the region; capitalism grew more rapidly in and near the towns than in the rural countryside; and the technological innovativeness that Brenner attributes to fourteenth and fifteenth century English farmers really occurred much later, too late to fit into his theory. More importantly, commercial farming and indeed urban protocapitalism were developing during this period in southern Europe and (as I will argue) in other continents. Brenner’s theory is simply wrong.  

Family

There is nothing new about the belief that the European family is in some fundamental sense more rational and more civilized than the family types found elsewhere. When the modernization doctrine became dominant, this belief seems to have faded into the background; there was now a near-consensus among social scientists that differences in family type should be strung along the continuum from “traditional” to “modern” or, as a variation, from “folk” to “urban.” Traditional families, it was argued, have tended to reflect strong kinship ties at a scale larger and wider than the nuclear family; they have tended to form large, extended-family households; and they have tended to be associated with high birthrates. In the absence of much evidence concerning the medieval European family and household, it was rather widely assumed that earlier European families had conformed to the traditional model, which was seen as the “preindustrial” family, contrasted with the modern, post-industrial-revolution nuclear family, forming a small household, with looser kin ties beyond the household, and with fewer children. This transformation was thought to be associated with what was called the “demographic transition,” the process of change from a “traditional” demographic pattern, with high birthrate and high deathrate, characteristic of preindustrial conditions, to a “modern,” postindustrial demographic pattern, with low birthrate and low deathrate.

In the modernization theory of the family, the non-European world of underdeveloped countries would go through essentially the same transformation as it modernized. Extended family households would be replaced by nuclear family households. This would instill modern prodevelopment attitudes: people would have fewer children (thus combating overpopulation), and they would tend, now, to think more individualistically and thus entrepreneurially.

All of this was a bundle of assumptions. There was no evidence of a causal link between birthrate and size of household (or strength of kin ties beyond the nuclear family); there was merely a correlation within rich, modern societies: both nuclear families and lower birthrates were characteristic of these societies. (One leading demographer pointed out that nuclear families might, in principle, be likely to have more children per couple than extended families.) In addition, the idea that an adult breadwinner would be more entrepreneurial, more prone to accumulate capital, more competitive, and so on, if he (assumed to be male) was working only for his wife and children and not for a large family including his parents, cousins, and other relations, was a tenuous assumption. Large, tightly knit families had proven to be powerful accumulators, for instance, among many immigrant groups engaged in commerce. Why, indeed, should an adult want to work harder only for spouse and children, and not for parents, sisters, and so on? (One can in fact construct an argument to the effect that an extended family with multiple working adults has definite economic advantages in a developing economy.) As the modernization doctrine itself developed, after about 1960, these ideas began to dissipate. It became clear that various forms of social organization can be equally modern, and that the root causes of change and nonchange do not lie in the family structure.

Rather dramatically, in the mid-1960s, the notion of a peculiarly European family pattern was reintroduced into historians’ common discourse, partly as a result of an influential paper by John Hajnal. As we noted at an earlier point in this chapter, in the discussion of demographic arguments for the “miracle,” historical demography was at that time uncovering evidence that preindustrial Europe (or part of Europe) had a lower birthrate than one would expect of a “traditional society.” It seemed that Europeans had been marrying later in life than would be expected in a traditional society with Malthusian controls and therefore maximum birthrate. Instead of scrapping the Malthusian model itself, and arguing instead that all human societies actively control their population dynamics by using such tactics as adjusting the age of marriage, these historians began to assert, simply, the uniqueness of Europe. Other preindustrial societies exhibited the “traditional” pattern, with high and uncontrolled birthrates (and therefore superrapid population growth when mortality declined in the “transition”). Preindustrial Europe, in complete contrast, had a rational family system, with rational population control. It was then argued, without evidence,
that preindustrial Europe had a higher level of living and a lower mortality rate than non-Europe, from which it was deduced that Europe kept its birthrate down in proper, rational, adjustment to its lower deathrate, mainly using the mechanism of delayed marriage. Those who put forward this argument simply failed to consider the possibility that families in other societies have acted pretty much the same way. Evidence to this effect was beginning to appear from a number of non-European societies. Some societies had much lower birthrates than would be expected from the classic model. Other societies had demonstrated major shifts in birthrate, either upward or downward, in response to changes in economic and other conditions.177

Hajnal began his 1965 essay with this flat statement:

The marriage pattern of most of Europe as it existed for at least two centuries up to 1940 was, as far as we can tell, unique or almost unique in the world. There is no known example of a population of non-European civilization which has had a similar pattern. The distinctive marks of the “European pattern” are (1) a high age of marriage and (2) a high proportion of people who never marry at all.178

Hajnal’s argument was in some ways very careful and in others very casual. He noted carefully that the evidence for late marriage and (somewhat) low marriage frequency in Europe for periods before the seventeenth century was inconclusive, and that the “fragmentary” evidence for the European Middle Ages suggested a “non-European pattern.”179 He introduced absolutely no historical data for non-European regions, casually comparing historical Europe with twentieth-century non-Europe. The theoretical constraint is very clear: non-European patterns are “traditional” and permanent, hence a comparison of seventeenth-century Europe with mid-twentieth-century Asia or Africa is perfectly acceptable.180

This proposition about the unique European pattern of later marriages and lower marriage frequencies was widely and quickly incorporated into the broader theory of Europe’s historical “miracle.” Without much supporting evidence, the proposition was firmly pushed backward into the Middle Ages. According to Lawrence Stone, writing in 1977, “it has now been established beyond any doubt” that over most of northwest Europe the middle and lower classes “married remarkably late, certainly from the fifteenth century onward. . . . This custom of delayed marriage is an extraordinary and unique feature of north-west European civilization.”181 Here one notices particularly the word “remarkably.” This is “remarkable” only if there is something to compare it with; yet non-European historical data are not given or even sought. Michael Mann derives the pattern from the Iron Age Indo-European peasant society. Patricia Crone speculates that it is perhaps an ancient Germanic trait. Eric L. Jones thinks that it goes back three or four thousand years. Macfarlane thinks that it has its roots in “a particular amalgam of Christianity and Germanic customs.”182 And so on. In a word: the pattern is very old in Europe.

The matter of dates, or age, is certainly crucial. Western Europe was undergoing major transformations from the seventeenth century onward, and a delayed and lower marriage rate could well be explained by a number of the newer facts: mobility, loss of holdings due to enclosures, urbanization, and, later, the well-understood demographic and social effects of the industrial revolution. Even the sixteenth century was somewhat chaotic in western Europe. But if the marriage pattern emerged before 1492, a date before these disruptions began, then one can speak of a definite “European pattern,” not merely a “preindustrial” or “traditional” pattern. And one can begin to build a general causal theory for the subsequent changes—the “European miracle.”

Additional propositions were added. It had long been known that nuclear family households and neolocal residence (the married couple establishes a household well separated from those of the parents) have been characteristic of western Europe during recent centuries, and this is to be expected as a feature of modernization. It fits with standard modernization theory: the process is supposed to lead from extended family to nuclear family. But the European miracle historians now argue that nuclear families and neolocal residence are part of a unique “European familial system” (Laslett).183 And again they locate its origins far back in history. And again they sweepingly assert that non-Europeans lack these patterns. In fact, there is good evidence that nuclear-family households were common in many parts of non-Europe. Taeuber, analyzing Buck’s data, found that more than 60% of peasant households in China were nuclear in the early twentieth century.184 These are not historical data, but the point is that China is supposed, according to modernization theory, to be especially “traditional” as regards family and many other things; indeed, there is common confusion between the notion of the Chinese lineage or “sib”—made famous by Weber—and the idea of the extended family. Larger, extended families are uncommon in Latin America. In India, as well as in China, the notion of an extended family is ambiguous because of the ambiguity of the notion of “neolocal residence” (in a cramped village, house-building space can be a problem), and the association sometimes found between neolocality and available land upon which to begin a small holding. Further confusion is added
over the association between extended (and/or joint) family and inheritance rights, power, mobility, and more. Meanwhile, back in Europe, the model of a supposedly characteristic nuclear—neolocal pattern is subject to very serious questions for the Middle Ages. (For even earlier times the idea of a unique pattern is speculative, and belongs with other old and suspect ideas—discussed earlier in this chapter—about the ancient Germanic tribes and their unique individualism, progressiveness, and the like.) Medieval marital residence patterns may sometimes have reflected manor rules (such as assignment of holdings) rather than cultural residence rules in circumstances of serfdom and insecure tenancy, and a distinction has to be made between different types of rural regions, such as the areas with off-farm employment (like woolen areas of southeastern England), those with "frontier" characteristics, and so on. There is even reason to question the notion of a persistent west European marriage pattern. But even granting the generalization about western Europe, there is no basis for considering the European pattern to have been, historically, unique.

Finally, the model is embellished with some rather gaudy ornamentation. It is claimed that the unique European pattern is not merely a matter of neolocality, nuclear households, and age and frequency of marriage. West European marriages were grounded in love. Elsewhere, marriages were arranged. (But arranged marriages seem to have been the rule in premodern Europe, prior to the periods of high mobility and social disruption. The notion, regularly invoked here, that non-European couples are strangers to one another prior to their being shoved into marriage is colonial-era prejudice supported by a few unusual cultural situations. Romantic love in this argument is considered an attribute of European rationality. Non-European couples are certainly as loving as European couples.) It is claimed, next, that the unique European family, because it is nuclear, produces a unique European personality type. The theory is that the small (European) household leads inevitably to individualistic, competitive, acquisitive, yet caring behavior. Mann and Jones, as we saw earlier, put forward the image of an ancient peasant household, a Hansel and Gretel house deep in the forest, as the historical source of this individualistic pattern. Macfarlane, who presents perhaps the most extreme form of this theory (and is chided by some of his colleagues not for his theory but for his claim that it applies mainly to the English), argues that the early medieval English family produced a person with the psychological and behavioral traits of (in essence) Weber's capitalist personality, that the causal chain runs from tribal customs and religion to family, from family to personality, and from personality to the beginnings of capitalism (a point we return to below). This argument is advanced mainly by erecting a model of what Macfarlane considers to be "peasant society," with a peasant family and peasant mentality. Early English rural folk don't fit this model. Therefore they were not peasants, and did not have the traditional traits of peasantry, like a traditional family type and traditional mentality. As many have commented, Macfarlane's notion of "peasant" is a straw man, uncharacteristic of modern non-Europe, much less of historical non-Europe, and his view of the medieval English farm folk as nonpeasants is historically invalid.

The theory of the unique European family is an important part of the European miracle theory as it is being propagated today. It is used in two distinct arguments. The first of these combines the family theory with Malthusianism. The argument runs as follows: Humans in general are not rational enough to control their sexual behavior and limit the number of offspring to suit the prevailing conditions of food supply and the like. Therefore, ordinary humans experience permanent, or periodic, crises, in which overpopulation leads to famine and war and pestilence, after which the now-reduced population begins again to overproduce offspring. The root axiom is irrationality. People behave not intelligently, but (as Malthus said 200 years ago) rather like barnyard beasts. The historical result of this process is to prevent development. Any improvement in, for instance, productive technology merely leads to population growth, to crisis, to depopulation, and thus back to the status quo ante—a cycle of stagnation. This is one and perhaps the crucial cause of the nondevelopment of non-European societies in general. Europeans, by contrast, have always (or perhaps for just a millennium or so) exhibited rational behavior in all matters relating to population. This includes decisions about marriage and about childbearing. The unique European late-marrying, nuclear, neolocal, companionate family is the crucial institution in which this rational decision-making process takes place. Thus the European family has permitted Europeans (or west Europeans, or northwest Europeans) to check population growth, and thereby accumulate material wealth that would otherwise be dissipated in the feeding of excess babies. This primordial accumulation underlies the permanent progress of Europe. This theory, in one form or another, is advanced by many of the historians whom we have been discussing, among them Crone, Hall, Jones, Laslett, Macfarlane, and Mann. Hall expresses one form of the theory in the following comment (part of which we quoted earlier):

[The] European family has long been small, late marrying, nuclear and notably sensitive to Malthusian pressure. ... The expansion of the European economy did not occur laterally, as in late traditional China, because improvements in output were not eaten up by a massive growth in
The colonizer's model of the world

population. The ratio between population and acreage in Europe remained favourable ultimately because of the relative continence of the European family. 192

The Malthusian theory reduces humans to beasts. But even for those scholars who accept Malthusianism, the notion that the European family staves off the Malthusian disasters is hardly credible.

The second way in which the "unique European family" theory is used in arguments for the European "miracle" is a matter of deducing ways that the European family produces various sorts of uniquely progressive attitudes and actions on the part of Europeans, attitudes and actions that then lead toward the miracle. A very widely used form of this argument is expressed thusly by Laslett:

[The] European familial system may have been responsible for a whole series of features conducive to economic progress, and perhaps innovation. The conditions laid down for marriage and procreation imposed on all individuals . . . the necessity of saving, accumulating . . . [The] European familial system fostered the spirit of hoarding and parsimony. 193

The family thus generates the personality traits of an incipient capitalist, and does so deep in the Middle Ages. This, too, is hardly credible and hardly in accord with the realities of life (and psychology) before 1492. Laslett, like Macfarlane and many others, makes the false assumption that a typical medieval European family does, in fact, have choices permitting saving, hoarding, accumulating, and so on. This argument requires that the peasant family be a substantial landlord, or at least a tenant with firm security, such that capital accumulation can take place and not be bled off by master or landlord. There is much dispute about the degree of landownership in late-medieval western Europe, but it is certain that family behavior of the sort described by Laslett could not have been common under serfdom and, after the decline of serfdom, could not have been common in places where peasants did not own the land. And this seems to have been the rule, not the exception. 194 It appears that this argument is, again, a telescoping of history. The entrepreneurial yeoman farmer of, say, the eighteenth century, is pushed back into the Middle Ages, and an effect becomes a cause.

Many other European-family-to-European-miracle arguments are common in present-day scholarly discourse, but space permits me to give only one additional example, from Lawrence Stone:

There are several consequences which must have followed from the late marriage pattern. . . . It is reasonable to assume that for many young men

this delay involved considerable sexual denial at a time of optimum male sexual drive . . . If one follows Freudian theory, this could lead to neuroses. . . . [It] could help to explain the high level of group aggression, which lay behind the extraordinary expansionist violence of western nation-states at this time. It could also have been a stimulus to capitalist economic enterprise . . . stimulating saving in order to marry, and generating activist social and economic dynamism. 195

Again:

The sublimation of sex among young male adults may well account for the extraordinary military aggressiveness, the thrift, the passion for hard work, and the entrepreneurial and intellectual enterprise of modern Western man. 196

Europeans conquered the world because their young men were sexually frustrated.

Space does not permit us to list and discuss all of the other common or garden-variety explanations for the so-called European miracle. Some additional explanations will be mentioned in various contexts at later points in this book. But I hope that the discussion in this chapter has sufficiently made the point that no characteristic of Europe's environment, Europe's people, or Europe's culture, at any time prior to 1492, can be convincingly shown to have had anything to do with the fact that Europe developed while other civilizations did not do so.

I will try, in the next two chapters, to show that the whole question must be phrased in a different way and answered in a different way. Europe did not rise, relative to the other civilizations, prior to 1492. When Europe did rise, after 1492, this reflected, not some special quality of "Europeanness," but the immense wealth which came into Europe as a result of colonialism in the sixteenth century and thereafter.

NOTES

1. Although Eric L. Jones's 1981 book The European Miracle popularized the phrase "the European miracle," it had been in use for a long time with the same essential meaning: the unique rise of Europe before or during the Middle Ages. Not every historian would describe this as a "miracle," but the term has wide acceptance, as evidence the fact that an international symposium entitled "The European Miracle" was held at Cambridge University in 1985.

2. Apparently my 1976 article, "Where Was Capitalism Born?" was the first publication to reject the "miracle" theory absolutely, that is, without qualification. In 1990 Samir Amin, commenting on a later paper of mine, indicated his basic
agreement with this rejectionist position. (Amin, "Colonialism and the Rise of Capitalism: A Comment," 1990; Blaut, "Colonialism and the Rise of Capitalism," 1989; also see Blaut, "Fourteen Ninety-Two," 1992; and Amin, "On Jim Blaut's 'Fourteen Ninety-Two,'" 1992.) A few other historians have taken positions approaching this one; their views are discussed later in this chapter.

3. Another seminal work was Cyril Black's *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History* (1966). Other such works in various fields will be discussed later in this chapter.

4. Perhaps one reason was the maturation of the discipline of history itself. Another was the influence, not entirely salutary, of positivist scientific method on history, which led to an attempt to specify variables and "factors," and, if possible, quantify each of them. Another reason was the loss of faith in the nineteenth-century idea of inevitable progress: after nearly a half-century of chaos and war, progress definitely did not appear to be something natural and inevitable; it had to be explained and also produced. Still a third reason was the general secularization of European thought, including history, such that human events could not be assumed to reflect guidance of a higher power. Another reason, possibly a very important one, was the general development of academic disciplines, and their involvement in (and nutrition from) international and domestic policy. This implied that each discipline, seeing the world with some degree of bias in favor of its own subject-as-factor (for economists, the market factor; for psychologists, the motivation factor; for sociologists, the demographic factor and the social-structural factor; for geographers, the resource factor; etc.) tended to argue in favor of historical models that treated our factor as crucial and those of others as secondary. Since many social scientists wrote history in this process, this led to some special pleading.

5. I do not mean to imply that all of this was a dominant theory for the discipline of history as a whole. The great majority of historical scholars worked on smaller problems, carefully delving into events and developing limited explanations for those events. The modernization perspective influenced some of the smaller generalizations, for instance proliferating explanations in which the factors most supportive of modernization were favored—factors like population, technology, and the like. And there were some areas of research where lack of attention to the history of non-Europe was a critical source of error (most notably, as we will see, in studies of the history of European technology). In addition, there were (and are) many different points of view in the vast and diverse field of professional history, so it would be questionable to characterize a particular historiographic period as being dominated by a particular governing theory (or "paradigm"). I suspect that my own concern with the body of literature relating to the "European miracle" problem probably leads me to overemphasize the significance of the modernization view on history as a whole. It should also be noticed that most of the prominent writers about the specific problem of explaining the unique rise of Europe were specialist historians—economic historians, historical sociologists, and so forth—and not historians of the standard breed.


7. As to the present and future, Third World intellectuals tended to make two arguments. Those who supported the idea of a capitalist form of development argued that economic development must consist of the defense of native capital against the corrosive diffusion into one's country of the economic and political dominance of European countries and corporations. For socialists, influence and dominance by international capitalism quite obviously had to be rejected. Both groups tended to accept "dependency theory" or "underdevelopment theory," which was a theory both of history and of modern social processes and development. A relatively small minority of Third World intellectuals, usually reflecting the thinking and interests of the very wealthy and very right-wing sectors, welcomed the idea of economic domination by foreign capitalist interests. Since the wealthy social sectors dominated most Third World societies, this minority point of view often determined policy. Also, it received much more prominence than it deserved in the journals of the First World.


15. Mention should also be made of Eric Wolf's 1982 book *Europe and the Peoples Without History* which provides a useful and important survey of the history of both European and non-European civilizations and shows how unconvincing is the theory that non-European civilizations, historically, were stagnant and unprogressive (that they were "peoples without history"). Wolf, however, stops short of questioning the truly crucial Eurocentric belief that Europeans were more progressive than non-Europeans in several ways that are crucial to the "European miracle" theory, and so he does not directly confront that theory. (It should be noted that most mainstream historians no longer argue that non-European civilizations are, or were, totally unprogressive, totally "unhistorical," argue instead about slow rates of change, "blockages" inhibiting change, and the like—a difference of phrasing which, as we will see, is not always a difference of argument.)

16. It is always risky to try to explain broad changes of fashion in scholarship, especially when the changes are still underway, so this interpretation cannot be more than a hunch, or hypothesis. Scholarly attitudes toward the Third World were very positive in the period of anticolonial and civil rights struggles. After the late 1960s the mood changed. Not only did more conservative views come to dominate the Western world, but rather unexpected difficulties emerged in the Third World itself: national conflicts, failure of development programs, and more. Western scholarship had never really abandoned the traditional view of Europe and its relations to non-Europe, including the diffusionist view of colonialism. It appears that this older paradigm never abandoned, simply became, once again, thoroughly dominant. Certainly the attention that had been paid previously to dependency theory and related views fell away among mainstream scholars. Among Marxists the process was even more dramatic, because it was less expected. In brief, Eurocentric Marxists who dismissed the role of the Third World both historically and in the present now became virtually
the only Marxists within the academic world to pronounce upon issues related to the Third World. It became quite fashionable to insist, once again, that only the working class of the advanced capitalist countries can bring about socialism because each stage of history commences in this part of the world (inside) before it spreads to the rest of the world (outside). In the conservative camp, not only did Eurocentric views regain their hegemony, but one began, now, to hear whispers of views not far distant from racism: views about Third World peoples not having the potential to develop.


18. I will discuss only the more important beliefs, perhaps neglecting a few of these. And I will give just enough evidence to show that these beliefs are not self-evidently true. Much fuller evidence is given, to dispute some of the beliefs, in Chapters 4 and 5.

19. See Chapter 1, note 2.


25. "[The]... negroes long ago showed themselves unsuitable for factory work and the operation of machines; they have not seldom sunk into a cataleptic sleep. Here is one case in economic history where tangible racial distinctions are present" Weber, General Economic History (1981, p. 379). Although Weber says here that this is merely "one case" of racial influences, note that the case is crucial for Weber's analysis both of "rationality" and of modernization; the "racial distinctions" here separate out Africans in a fundamental way: a clear case of moderate yet crucial racism. In the same vein, "it was found that the American Indians were entirely unsuitable for plantation labor" (p. 299).

26. Weber, The Religion of China (1951), pp. 231–232. Weber considers these to be "racial qualities of the Chinese" (p. 230) although cultural factors may be involved.

27. Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1958), p. 30. Weber says here that "it would be natural to suspect that the most important reason" for the rationality of the Occident lies in "differences of heredity," and "the importance of biological heredity," he thinks, is "very great" (p. 30). But we do not yet know how to measure its influence, so our attention should focus mainly on the cultural factors (pp. 30–31). This was typical moderate racism (as I call it) for the time the work was published (1904–1905).

28. I have not discussed the question whether biological racism remains important today as a genuinely implicit theory, that is, one still accepted but not consciously so. I suspect that it does. Some Eurocentric historians hold to positions regarding individual differences between Europeans and non-Europeans that are so extreme, and so bigoted, that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at least a few of them may hold to an implicitly racist, perhaps unconscious belief that is that the inferiority of non-Europeans is genetically determined.


30. The idea that demographic behavior is not fully under social control, is a primordial biological fact or factor, seems to underlie the thinking of most Eurocentric historians (conspicuously Eric L. Jones, Michael Mann, and John Hall). The basic proposition seems to be that population will necessarily grow beyond the rational limits, and so overpopulation must result unless societies find non-demographic solutions, notably by increasing food supply to feed the inexorably increasing population. See, for instance, Michael Mann, The Sources of Social Power, vol. 1 (1986): If agricultural yields had not increased in medieval Europe, "the continent would... have experienced a similar Malthusian cycle every century or so—and would not have generated capitalism" (p. 402). This view is even encountered, occasionally, in the radical and feminist movements. Note the following view put forward by a Marxist–feminist: "We assume (given the ubiquity of the sex drive...) that the total number of conceptions in a population will tend to exceed those desired within a given incentive structure, and this unintended surplus will be greatest, the more imperfect the means at hand... A given fertility pattern then is taken to be "rational"... even for a small but variable excess of births," Seccombe, "Marxism and Demography," (1983), p. 31. The context is a discussion of European medieval social evolution, but the argument is given mainly in support of Brenner's theory about the strictly European rise of capitalism. Most radicals and feminists reject Malthusianism and would reject Seccombe's view as Malthusian.


34. As F. Hassan points out, "Among human populations the practice of population control in one form or another is universal." ("Demographic Archeology," 1978, p. 71.)

35. Some families will of course have more conceptions than desired, and others fewer, because birth control techniques are imperfect, but the average for the larger group will be broadly in line with the group's values and population targets. The techniques run the gamut from variable age of marriage and variable dowry or bride price, to complexity of marriage rules (defining who, in a kin system, is eligible to be one's spouse), to timing of sexual relations, to the use of antifertility and abortive devices, to infanticide, and other practices.

36. Much of the scholarship comes from India, where colonial ideology used to claim that poverty is a result of people having too many children. Now demographers and other social scientists have disproven this myth. See, for instance, Mandani, The Myth of Population Control (1972), and Nag, How Modernization Can Also Increase Fertility (1980). For Africa, see, for example, Kituchi, "Proto-Industrialization and Demographic Change" (1983); Swindell, "Domestic Production, Labor Mobility, and Population Change in West Africa, 1900–1980" (1981); Cordell and Gregory, the introduction to African Population and Capitalism (1987).
connected with the arrival of new food-crops from Asia . . . . This suggests once again the important limiting factor of the African environment. Most of the continent's history is the story of response to influences from the outside [including iron-working and new crops] (pp. 511–512). African farmers, like farmers in Europe and many other regions, practiced agriculture with stone tools before iron arrived, and continued to do so afterward whenever and wherever iron was hard to obtain. On the age of ironworking in tropical Africa, see, for example, Wai-Andah, "West Africa Before the Seventh Century" (1981) and Sinclair, "Archeology in Eastern Africa" (1991).

54. See, for example, Roberts (note 53 above); also Irwin, "Sub-Saharan Africa," in Garraty and Gay, eds., The Columbia History of the World (1981), p. 299.
55. See for instance Irvine's classical work, A Textbook of West African Agriculture (1934); Couressay, Yans (1967).
56. According to Jones, The European Miracle (1981), "the Negro peoples . . . were still pushing east and south into the territories of the pygmies and the bushmen when the Boers undertook the Great Trek north from the Cape in the 1830s," (p. 155). Also see Roberts The Hutchinson History of the World (1987), p. 178.
57. Curtin, Economic Change in Pre-Colonial Africa (1975); Curtin, The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex (1990); Miller Way of Death (1968).
59. The same arguments apply, with no need for qualification, in Western Hemisphere agriculture. In relatively limited parts of the South American rain forest the ecosystem is so fragile, as a result of local geological conditions (rocks forming inferite kaolinite clay soils in some areas, almost pure sands in other areas), that cropping systems must employ shifting agriculture (or tree crops). But such areas are the exception within the present-day distribution of rain forest environments. In general, the great sweep of Amazonian and Guianan rain forest is a zone of nonsedentary agriculture because of cultural-historical factors, notably depopulation and the massive increase in cattle ranching. It is not in cattle ranching, and not shifting agriculture, that leads to agriculturally caused long-term environmental degradation in the rainforest region, because (1) ranchers burn forest to the maximum extent possible and without control, in order to expand the area of pasture, and (2) the resulting pasture leads to steady soil degradation because coarse pasture grasses do not maintain the soil ecosystem as does the original forest. Shifting cultivators, by contrast, burn only under controlled conditions, burn small areas only, and carefully encourage the regrowth of forest. If the forest disappears, their livelihood disappears. Shifting agriculturists should not be blamed for deforestation anywhere in the humid tropics. See Hecht and Cockburn, The Fate of the Forest (1989); Blaut, "The Nature and Effects of Shifting Agriculture" (1963).
62. Jones in fact manages to use both of the opposing theories toward the same end. In wetter regions of Africa "living was easy," in drier areas "agriculture was not productive." Jones, The European Miracle (1981), p. 154. Also see Jones, Growth Recurring: Economic Change in World History (1988).
63. "In Africa the bountifulness and extent of the land makes for a mobile peasantry, necessarily therefore poor material on which to build states. Something like
this is probably true of all slash-and-burn agriculture," John Hall, *Powers and Liberties* (1985), p. 27. ("Slash-and-burn agriculture" is shifting agriculture.)

64. Laibman, "Modes of Production and Theories of Transition" (1984), p. 284. However, Laibman's overall argument is not at all Eurocentric.

65. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (1913), p. 93: "The great plagues by which Europe has at different periods been scourged, have, for the most part, proceeded from the East, which is their natural birthplace, and where they are most fatal. Indeed, of those cruel diseases now existing in Europe, scarcely one is indigenous; and the worst of them were imported from tropical countries in and after the first century of the Christian era."

66. The theory that the HIV virus which causes AIDS in humans is another one of these African plagues descending upon the Western World may very well be just the newest myth in this old diffusionist tradition. Whether or not this virus originated in Africa, which has not been proven, the myth has already taken on ugly overtones, as in the completely unfounded (yet classical) belief that AIDS was transmitted from monkeys to humans because of some strange sexual practices in some obscure African tribes. (This myth is naively reported in Shannon and Fyle, *The Origin and Diffusion of AIDS*, 1989. See the critique of this paper by Watts and Okello, *Medical Geography and AIDS*, 1990. Also see R. C. and R. J. Chitimuta, AIDS, *Africa and racism*, 2nd ed., 1989.)


71. Similar judgments are still commonly made by theorists of the European miracle. For instance, John Hall, *Powers and Liberties* (1985), p. 12: "Chinese society was stuck in the same stage for over two thousand years, while Europe, in comparison, progressed like a champion hurdler."


73. This idea, too, had its forerunners. Possibly Marx got the idea from Karl Ritter, his professor of geography at Berlin.


75. Marx and Engels considered other factors as well, and it is fair to say that their analysis remained speculative. I believe that Engels withdrew from the idea of "Oriental despotism" in late life. See the discussion of this topic in P. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolute State* (1974); Blaut, "Colonialism and the Rise of Capitalism" (1989); and B. Chandra, "Karl Marx, his Theories of Asian Societies, and Colonial Rule" (1981).


78. Weber, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (1976), pp. 157–158. Also, on p. 84: "The basis of the economy [in Egypt] was irrigation, for this was the crucial factor in all exploitation of land resources. Every new settlement demanded construction of a canal . . . Now canal construction is necessarily a large-scale operation, demanding some sort of collective social organization; it is very different from the relatively individualistic activity of clearing virgin forest. Here then is the fundamental economic cause for the overwhelmingly dominant position of the monarchy in Mesopotamia [and] Egypt."


86. The fact that Mann attributes the ancient European takeoff mainly to chariot warfare and iron-plow rainfall-farming, yet concedes that both innovations were initiated by Middle Easterners themselves, suggests to me that Mann's fundamental causal reasoning centers on the notion of European rationality: regardless of who invented these things, the Europeans put the things to work. That this Weberian notion is indeed basic for Mann will be demonstrated later in this chapter.


95. Jones, *The European Miracle* (1981), p. 8. Jones makes the common error of assuming that productivity per worker is low in irrigated agriculture in comparison with unirrigated agriculture. This is not the case. Even with draft animals, medieval peasant production per worker was not high. And draft animals are used in irrigated farming, abundantly so in some Asian wet-rice farming systems.

97. Mann, The Sources of Social Power (1986, chap. 5). Mann in fact builds a theory of ancient warfare upon the basis of this sort of calculation, here also ignoring the fact that armies then as now provision themselves and their animals on the route of march.


100. Occasionally "the criminal mind" was seen to reflect another dimension of contrast.


102. See, for instance, Boas, The Mind of Primitive Man (1938); Radin, Primitive Man as Philosopher (1927); M. Mead, Growing Up in New Guinea (1930).

103. Stocking, Victorian Anthropology (1987), p. 59; Bowler, The Invention of Progress (1989), p. 66; Whitman "From Philology to Anthropology in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Germany" (1984); Bernal, Black Athena, vol. 1 (1987); Said, Orientalism (1978). A recent expression of this type of theory came in a Soviet debate about "Oriental despotism" (Lelekov, "Round-Table: State and Law in the Ancient Orient," 1978). L. Lelekov, a historian, claimed that words meaning "freedom" and "right" were basic in the original Indo-European language or languages but not in Near Eastern languages, and asserted that this must have affected "social thinking" (p. 190). This contention was refuted by the philologist V. Ivanov (p. 193).

104. See Dalal, "The Racism of Jung" (1988). In Jung's work, see in particular Psychological Types (1971) (for instance: "If we go right back to primitive psychology, we find absolutely no trace of the concept of the individual," p. 10); Memories, Dreams, Reflections (1963), and "The Dreamlike World of India," in Civilization in Transition (1927). See also the 1954 work by Jung's disciple Erich Neumann, The Origins and History of Consciousness (for instance: "The evolution of consciousness as a form of creative evolution is the peculiar achievement of Western man ... The creative character of consciousness is a central feature of the cultural canon of the West ... In stationary cultures, or in primitive societies where the original features of human culture are still preserved, the earliest stages of man's psychology predominated," pp. xviii–xix).


106. See, for example, Werner and Kaplan, Symbol Formation (1964).

107. See the first 16 volumes (through 1985) of The Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology for a great many examples of this phenomenon. For this period something like one-tenth of all the empirical articles in this U.S. journal were studies by white Southern Africans purporting to show the cognitive inferiority of black Africans.

117. Numbers in parentheses are page numbers in _The European Miracle_.
118. The ecologists' term “commensalism” refers to a form of tight interspecific cooperation between animal species, but hardly ever is it applied to humans.
119. Typical of Jones's method is to find some objectionable feature of very early Asian society, compare it with some pleasing feature of modern, post-industrial-revolution European society, and then treat both features as though they were permanent characteristics of the respective societies, giving a picture of awful primitiveness to Asians and marvelous modernity to Europeans thereby.
120. “Frankish feudalism, in many ways proto-typical of later feudalism, was...a mixture of the very, very old, deep-rooted drift of 'European' peasant society and of the brand new the opportunistic, the 'un-European,' " Mann, "European Development" (1988), p. 16.
130. Orwin and Orwin, _The Open Fields_ (1967), chap. 3; C. T. Smith, _An Historical Geography of Western Europe_ (1967), chap. 4.
136. White, _Machina Ex Deo_ (1968). See in particular the essay—quite a famous one—called "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (chap. 5).
140. Some historians today simply ignore this evidence and repeat the old notions about China's lack of technological prowess. See, for example, Roberts, _The Hutchinson History of the World_ (1987), pp. 493–495, 502.
141. The terms "Middle Ages" and "medieval" are conventionally used for most or all parts of the Eastern Hemisphere.
142. Needham et al., _Science and Civilization in China_, vol. 4, part 2 (1965), chap. 27.
144. See, for example, Lopez, "Hard Times and Investment in Culture" (1953), Thorndyke, "Renaissance or Renaissance?" (1943).
148. Among the modern states that do not surround such simple ecological core areas: Spain, Italy, Germany, Poland, Greece, Sweden, Russia, etc. Prior to the 20th century, perhaps only parts of Great Britain (southern England) and France (the Paris Basin) came close to fitting this highly abstract model, a model that is useful for some purposes but not for the purpose of explaining the political history of the continent. Some of these core areas are nuclei of states; others are not. In modern Southeast Asia, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia fit the model as well as any European case.
149. In this connection, see Dirks, _The Hollow Crown_ (1987).
152. This is not the only example of the way arguments centering on the European state have a way of contradicting one another. The Roman state is said, on the one hand, by Hall among others, to have been a crucial innovation, the source of many political features characteristic of, and only of, Europe. On the other hand, the Roman state is dismissed by others (including Mann) as just another "imperial state," like the despotical Oriental states; Europe supposedly innovated politically by avoiding the imperial form of state and developing instead a kind of smaller and somehow more democratic state.
158. K. F. Werner. "Political and Social Structures of the West" (1988), p. 172. This German medievalist argues that the central force underlying the "miracle" was Christianity. He refers here to the Catholic church, to the body of doctrine (Catholic and later also Protestant), to the social and political institutions that were influenced both by church and by doctrine, and to the faith of European people, which, in Werner's opinion, had much to do with their innovativeness, their sense of "restlessness," their rationality. Werner acknowledges that many causal factors were at work in bringing about the rise of Europe, and he does not hesitate to claim a role for the natural environment. But it is clear that his theory is primarily based on
religion. And beyond this, one senses that this scholar himself may see the hand of a Christian god in the rise of Christian Europe.

Werner first of all makes a strong case to the effect that European history maintained a continuity of institutions, and of progress, from the time of the Roman Empire down through the Middle Ages, and that the late Empire established both ecclesiastical and lay institutions which continued down through the Middle Ages and gave that era its character. Chief among the institutions is the Catholic church. Werner wishes to depict the church as having a determining influence on history from the time of its founding. He sees the rise of Europe as a process that was guided throughout by the Christian religion, as institution and doctrine. If Werner were simply presenting a theory of history that accords religion a dominant role, I would not be discussing his views in this book. I would agree that its role has been underemphasized by historians, conservative no less than Marxist. The reason I deal with Werner's views is that he makes clear his belief that it is not religion in general but the Christian religion which played the historically efficacious role in the European "miracle." Werner's views are distinctly Eurocentric. Perhaps the key comment is the following:

[If we had to choose one word that, by itself alone, were capable of expressing an essential factor in what we understand by the "European miracle," we would choose the philosophical term... "unrest"... "restlessness"... "Ruhelosigkeit"... Whilst Asia and its wisdom and, in its train, the great religions and philosophies, strive toward the art of... seeking out the centre of the soul and of the world, and of resting in God, of having arrived, the European of the European miracle is a man who is always ready to take off once more, after he has arrived... But where must be sought the cause causes of this mentality? The spur to anxiety is to be seen in the pan of sin... in the search for pardon and grace. The importance of the deliverance of the soul gave that hitherto unheard-of prominence to the individual, independent of his social rank, the individual who... does not abandon himself to destiny... The sense of responsibility seems to me to be one of the strengths of the Europeans that are to accomplish the "miracle" (p. 185).

Thus: Europe's religion, Christianity, instills a kind of mentality in "European man" which explains the basic source of the "European miracle."

The objection to this is the same one we put forward to all of the notions about Europe's supposedly unique "rationality." Whether that putative trait comes from religion (Werner) or from the post-Neolithic European tribes (Mann) or from any other source, the basic objection is: how can you really justify a statement that makes Europeans brighter, better, bolker than non-Europeans, if you accept the fundamental axiom that all human communities have the same ratio of mind as all others? It is one thing, and indeed an unexceptionable thing, to credit the human mind with prime causality in culture change, through the innovation of social, technical, and purely intellectual things. But it is something quite different, and quite suspect, to credit the minds of human beings from some communities—and not others—with all of these qualities of innovativeness, restlessness, sense of responsibility, intellectual eagerness, respect for others, and so on, qualities usually summed up in the word "rationality." Europeans are rational but so too are non-Europeans.


163. Baeckler, in "The Origins of Modernity" (1988), p. 39, suggests that we should "juxtapose the barbarous Europe of the Halstatt period [about 600 BC]... and Africa on the verge of colonization in the nineteenth century [A.D.]."

164. Baeckler finds a true aristocracy also in Japan but believes that Japan failed to emulate Europe for various other reasons.

165. Baeckler considers it quite unmistakable that the political chaos of the Dark Ages gave way smoothly to strong states in Europe. "Naturally" there will be the "reconstitution of larger polities" (Baeckler, "The Origins of Modernity" 1988), p. 50. But it is equally inevitable for India that the political chaos of 1000 years ago will not be cured and permanently, thereafter, the "polity... is not a reality in India" (p. 45).


173. In my opinion the popularity of this thin theory is due principally to two things. First, put forward as a Marxist view, grounded in class struggle, it proves to be, on inspection, a theory that is fairly conventional, if somewhat rural in bias. It seems to follow that class-struggle theories lead to conventional conclusions. And secondly, Brenner uses his theory ("The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism," 1977), pp. 77–92 to attack the popular "Third-Worldist" perspectives of dependency theory, underdevelopment theory, and in particular three other neo-Marxists—Sweezy, Frank, and Wallerstein—who argue that European colonialism had much to do with the later rise of capitalism. Brenner is a thoroughly Eurocentric tunnel historian: non-Europe had no important role in social evolution at any historical period. Unaware that colonialism involves capitalist relations of production—see Chapter 4 below—he claims that the extra-European world merely had commercial effects on Europe, whereas the rise of capitalism was in no way a product of commerce: it took place in the countryside of England and reflected class struggle, not trade. See critiques of Brenner collected in Aston and Philip (1985) by Hilton, Crook and Parker, Wunder, Leroy, Ludrige, Bois, Cooper, and others. Also see Torras, "Class struggle in Catalonia" (1980) and Hoyle, "Tenure and the land market in early modern England: Or a late contribution to the Brenner debate." (1990).


175. (1) If only one family member is a waged worker, loss of employment is a disaster. If several are waged workers, normally some will be earning an income when
others are laid off. (2) If we assume an ability to save a certain percentage of income, multiple income earners will provide a larger absolute amount of savings, that is, capital; and the absolute amount of capital can be critical in entrepreneurship. (3) Having kin to borrow from is useful for small-scale entrepreneurship. (4) Kinfolk can supply unpaid labor. These principles are well known in Third World communities.

176. Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective” (1965), pp. 101–146. This paper is one of the most widely cited publications on the subject of demography in the European literature.

177. See note 37 above.


180. Hajnal concedes that he has only contemporary data for non-Europe, but merely suggests that historical data would prove his point even more clearly because modern non-European family patterns, in his view, are changing in the direction of European patterns: are being Europeanized. And when “all the qualifications about the data have been made, there can be no doubt that our original generalization remains” (“European Marriage Patterns in Perspective,” 1965), p. 156.


187. For instance, G. Lee, “Comparative Perspectives” (1987), p. 65 points out that “[M]any scholars contend that the majority of families in any society are and always have been nuclear, regardless of the cultural elements favoring extended families.”


190. “[I]t seems likely that [primitive peoples'] patterns of behavior in ... respect [to fertility and mortality] bore a strong resemblance to those which can be observed in many animals,” Wrigley, Population and History (1969), p. 37. Wrigley is writing about present-day hunting-gathering-fishing peoples. A “description of the relationship between animal social conventions and the regulation of animal population numbers” is “a convenient point of departure for the study of primitive man” (p. 37).