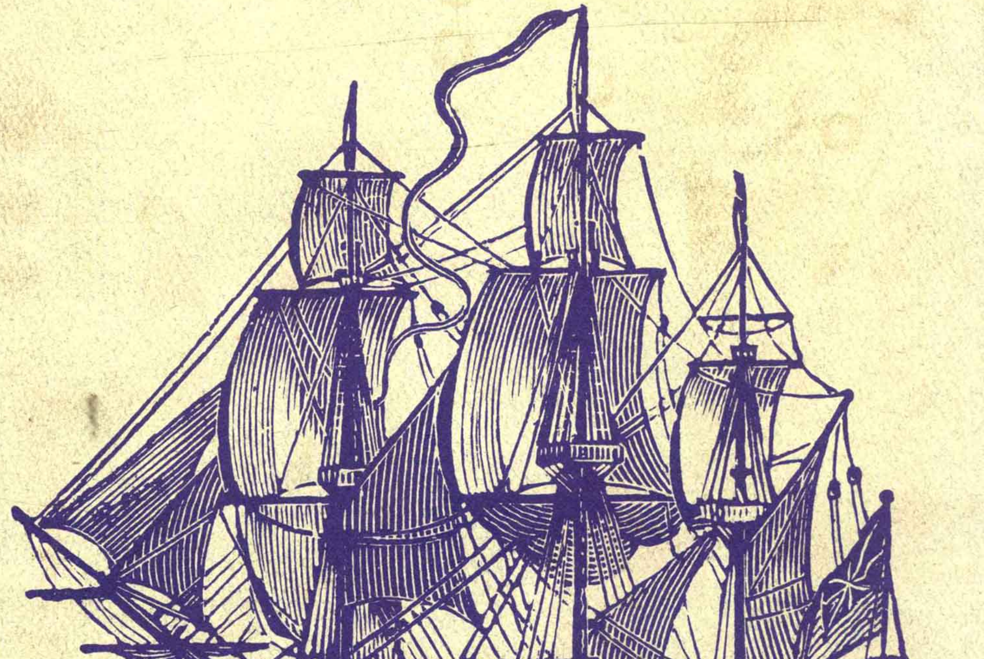
CREATING A WORLD ECONOMY

Merchant Capital, Colonialism, and World Trade, 1400–1825



Alan K. Smith

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Merchant Capital, Colonialism, and World Trade, 1400–1825

Alan K. Smith
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Westview Press
BOULDER • SAN FRANCISCO • OXFORD

Published in 1991 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, 36 Lonsdale Road, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7EW

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Smith, Alan K.
Creating a world economy : merchant capital, colonialism, and world trade, 1400–1825 / Alan K. Smith.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8133-1110-1. ISBN 0-8133-1109-8 (pbk.).
1. Commerce—History. 2. International trade—History. 3. Economic history. 4. Capitalism—History. 5. Colonies—History. I. Title.
HF479.S65 1991
382'.09—dc20 91-10221
CIP

Printed and bound in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PREFACE

This is the first part of a two-volume study on the development of the world economy. It deals with what is termed the first world economy, which is seen as an entity that was shaped by the emergence of merchant capital in early-modern Europe. The study ends in the early nineteenth century, when the world created by merchant capital was supplanted by a new world economy that was the response to the growing influence of industrial capital. In essence, the earlier period is viewed as one of gestation, during which the influence of the capitalist mode of production was first extended to diverse parts of the world. The latter period, which will be dealt with in the second volume, covers the maturation of the capitalist mode of production under the influence of industrialization and the consequent quasi-permanent impact it had on the world.

Whereas only a few years ago such a study might have been considered daring and novel, so many have recently appeared that books on the world economy are now quite commonplace. I can remember a roundtable conference at Columbia University in the late 1970s at which many of the participants, my own graduate students included, sat in awe of Immanuel Wallerstein and his audacity for even contemplating so brash an undertaking as a study of the modern world. Scarcely a decade later, a publisher could indicate its lack of interest in my project with the terse observation that the "last thing that the world needs" is another book on why it was only Europe that became wealthy.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the topic is sufficiently broad to allow for multiple interpretation, especially because many of those whom the siren has enticed to accept the challenge come from such diverse academic backgrounds that the same basic scenario is viewed in a multitude of different lights. Moreover, the subject matter is sufficiently important that if each study contributes only a few additional insights into the problem, ultimately the general fund of information will greatly aid in the overall understanding of the dynamics that dominate the modern world.

In a sense, however, it is ironic that I should have undertaken the present study, as southern Africa, the area in which I specialize, is scarcely mentioned. That I should find myself so far from my academic base can be traced to the disillusionment that overtook a generation of idealistic

Africanists. Naively believing that postindependence Africa could live up to its promises of a new type of humanistic socialism, we were rudely awakened by the realities of the 1970s. It became obvious that the failures prevalent almost everywhere could no longer be rationalized by blaming them on aberrant personalities such as Idi Amin or the influence of a small number of manipulative compradors. Once nudged out of my insularity, I soon became aware that Africa's problems were not unique. Rather, they were shared by most other areas of the so-called Third World. The problem became to identify why this seemingly irreversible trend had been established.

The investigation began as a matter of personal curiosity. At every stage, however, the answer to each particular problem always seemed to be a little further removed in time and place. Understanding the processes that unfolded at any given point in history seemed to depend on understanding what had preceded. Before I realized it, I was seeking the answers to the problems of twentieth-century Mozambique in sixteenth-century Europe. More and more, these answers appeared to have been enmeshed in the phenomenon of the development of capitalism and the processes it set in motion. It was equally important to understand why capitalism developed where it did and nowhere else. Thus, I unwittingly undertook an investigation that took me far away from my roots but whose promise seemed worth the effort. Such an investigation, though, because of the vastness of the subject, will always be incomplete and imperfect. Yet, however imperfect the results may prove to be, the very centrality of the questions raised is justification enough to warrant their investigation.

So many people have provided help that to list them all would require another volume. Mention, nevertheless, should be made of many of my former graduate students who challenged me to think in somewhat untraditional ways. Members of the Department of History at Syracuse University have helped me at all stages of planning, especially in terms of bibliographical suggestions. Malcolm Valentine, Don Warren, Jim Newman, and Ed Steinhart read earlier drafts and contributed valuable criticism. Finally, my special thanks and gratitude to Rob Gregory; I could never have completed the project without his help.

Alan K. Smith

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INTRODUCTION

This volume represents an attempt to write history on a global scale. More specifically, it seeks to investigate the dynamics of the creation of what is referred to as the first world economy and to identify the component parts of that structure. The term itself refers to a vast economic system in which various regions played different roles. It is not, however, defined purely by economics. Rather, social systems both affected and were affected by the specific forms of participation assumed by each of the contributors to the overall system. Thus, the world is seen not as being composed of separate entities, each independently charting its own destiny, but every system is part of a larger whole, which presents certain opportunities and also imposes certain constraints on the direction that each may take.

A generation ago in Western literature, world history was interpreted as something quite different. The world was assumed to be virtually synonymous with Europe, although a sort of perverse cultural imperialism extended its frontiers to include Egypt and the Fertile Crescent. As is aptly pointed out by the title of Eric Wolf's recent study, the rest of the world was composed of people without history.[1] Even in university courses that carried the title "world history," India and China were given scant mention; the Muslim world emerged from obscurity only when Europe chose to crusade against it; and Africa, the Americas, and southeast Asia simply did not exist. Thus, for all intents and purposes, the history of the world began with classical antiquity, marched through the Middle Ages, and eventually erupted into the glory of the modern European nation-state.

More recently, however, some scholars have included the rest of the world in their world histories. This is especially true of the works of the prolific historians L. S. Stavrianos and William McNeill. Each devotes considerably more attention to other parts of the globe than Europe and successfully defuses any notion that such phenomena as invention, progress, and "civilization" were European monopolies. However, although this body of scholarship makes an invaluable contribution by highlighting many of the achievements of diverse cultures around the world, it does not seek to focus on the reasons for the relative success of Europe vis-à-vis the rest of the world.[2]

Some modern scholars, however, have addressed the question of why only Europe was able to achieve sustained growth. Although this suggests tacit recognition of the existence of the rest of the world, it in no way acknowledges parity. In fact, in many instances, this new approach is as ethnocentric as that of the earlier generation, which had completely ignored the wider world. For although they were more aware of societies and cultures beyond the borders of Europe, they paid scant attention to the study of that world. Rather, they assumed that failure for most parts of the globe was preordained and natural. Thus, instead of sensing the need for in-depth comparative analyses, these authors continued to place themselves entirely within a European framework. As a result, their investigations are limited to locating the prime mover that enabled Europe completely to outdistance Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

A key example of this phenomenon appeared with the publication of *The Rise of the Western World*. Its authors, Douglass North and Robert Thomas, categorically state that "this book explains that unique historical achievement, the rise of the Western world." They continue that "we submit that the development and expansion of a market economy during the Middle Ages was a direct response to opportunity gained from the specialization and trade made feasible by population growth." Moreover, they take European superiority as a given. Seemingly with little investigation of the problem, they conclude that much of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, even in recent times, failed because of inefficient economic organization.[3]

In *How It All Began*, Walt Rostow addresses the same problem. He, too, is impressed by the genius of the West, although he sees a different source as being the prime mover in its success. Rostow argues that "the central thesis of this book is that the scientific revolution is the element in the equation of history that distinguishes early modern Europe." Moreover, even if his source material appears inadequate for the task, he does devote some attention to the wider world. Nevertheless, the conclusion is that "the decisive weakness in traditional societies was on the demand side: in the lack of innovators, of men moved by economic incentives or perceptions actively to seek changes in technology."[4]

Yet another scholar who was fascinated by the question of European hegemony was E. L. Jones. As might be expected, *The European Economic Miracle* discovers a different main catalyst behind the miracle. For Jones, European expansion overseas was decisive. "Europe," he observes, "discovered an unprecedented ecological windfall. Europe was sufficiently decentralized and flexible to develop in response. . . . This conjunction of windfall and entrepreneurship happened only once in history." Insofar as he believes that the process that led Europe to industrialization was achieved "by pure accident," his book lacks some of the disguised ethnocentricism of the other studies. Moreover, a significant percentage of the volume is devoted to the wider world. Unfortunately, these sections concentrate on the failures of these societies, virtually ignoring their impressive accomplishments.[5]

The most recent contribution to the literature was coauthored by Nathan Rosenberg and L. E. Birdzell. Like several other studies, *How the West Grew Rich* devotes scant attention to societies beyond Europe. In a fashion similar to Rostow, the authors place great emphasis on Western innovation and experimentation as being crucial in the development of capitalism. "The immediate sources of western growth," they contend, "were innovations in trade, technology, and organization." This was aided by decentralization, which served to prevent any single source from inhibiting this growth. Under these circumstances, European technology was able to improve rapidly. There thus emerged in Europe and, they imply, nowhere else a dynamic system propelled by the transition to capitalism.[6]

Capitalism is also the key variable in the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, whose two volumes on *The Modern World System* constitute the most controversial and most important of the contributions that seek to answer the question why Europe was relatively so successful. Although his background was originally that of an Africanist and one feels that he is more sympathetic to the societies of the wider world, the focus of his studies is also almost exclusively on Europe. He sees trade within Europe itself as having been particularly important because it allowed certain regions to specialize in commodities of higher value. Whereas others emphasize the importance of the decentralized nature of early-modern Europe, Wallerstein believes that the creation of strong state machineries, which were capable of underwriting economic advance, was crucial. Where these elements were prominent, the degree of skill in the labor force was advanced and economic growth was fomented.[7]

If *The Modern World System* is Eurocentric in its focus, it is very different in its deductions. More so than any of the other authors, Wallerstein sees the emergence of Europe as having contributed not only to its own advance but also to the development of a highly structured world economy. Consisting of a capitalist core centered in northwestern Europe, a rather nebulously defined semiperiphery, a periphery, and areas that were "external," this world economy formed a multiregional economic system, with each of the component parts contributing in different ways. One key variable was the form of labor control and specialization. As one descends the ladder from core through semiperiphery to periphery, one finds the transition from skilled to semiskilled to unskilled labor. Moreover, the amount of naked coercion required in the more advanced regions is much less than in the peripheries. Thus, even though Wallerstein concentrates on Europe, his major concern is with an entity, however ill-defined, that is much larger and constitutes an integrated whole.[8]

Although he also stresses the decisive nature of capitalism and also employs an avowedly Marxist analysis, Eric Wolf's approach and conclusions are very different. To begin with, his is the only volume in which more attention is devoted to the wider world than to Europe. In looking at non-European societies that were dominated by the tributary mode of production, he finds a crucial weakness in that they were dominated by the "competition between classes of non-producers for power at the top." Europe, on the other hand, was saved by capitalism, which (unlike Weber, Wallerstein, or Frank) Wolf sees not as a lineal development from the tributary mode but "as a qualitatively new phenomenon." This emergence of a new mode of production, in turn, was facilitated by overseas expansion. He observes that "the crisis of feudalism was solved by locating, seizing, and distributing resources beyond the European frontiers." In the process, producers in different parts of the world were drawn into a common web of exchange. By the era of the industrial revolution, capitalism, which he emphasizes must be capital in production, had taken root.[9]

Although an extensive critique of the various authors cited could be undertaken, it seems less appropriate than a general commentary on what remains to be done and the ways in which the approach I adopt here will be different from those that others have presented. Because the attempts of those who try to broaden perspectives by expanding their outlook far beyond their specialized bases are subject to attack from so many different directions, no particular benefit would be derived from emphasizing points of disagreement. Yet questions remain about the very questions that have been asked and whether an alternative approach can be suggested. One wonders if it is possible to write a history that is global, interpretative, and offers insight into the basic dynamics of the processes that prepared the world for its current shape.

One major deficiency of the literature, although to varying degrees there are exceptions, is the treatment of the wider world. In some instances it is totally ignored; in others, its history is either truncated or abused. This fault should be corrected not only in order to gain a better balance in the world-view of those who even consider the question of human development, but also to provide precious clues to the evolution of societies in general. For growth, which is interpreted to mean the increasing ability to master the material environment and to make it produce more, at one time or another proceeded at a faster rate on every other continent than it did in Europe. This fundamental observation should open some eyes with respect to the kind of questions that should be asked. So, too, should Peter Farb's harsh judgment that for most of the past ten thousand years "northern Europeans . . . live[d] in squalor and ignorance, producing few cultural innovations."[10] One task of this study, therefore, will be to take a look at the achievements of societies in the wider world, thus providing a better comparative background for an understanding of the forces that shaped Europe and subsequently a new world economy.

Equally important as the growth of the wider world was its inability to maintain its momentum. There are those who believe in natural cycles and therefore deduce that after a period of flowering of material culture in a given society, a form of decadence sets in. In one sense this is a comfortable theory because most of the great achievements of the past were overtaken by periods of decline. Yet this is a particularly unsatisfying answer in that it leaves to cyclical oscillation the intriguing question of why peoples who erect great monuments or produce fine textiles or harvest abundant crops should some centuries later live in poverty and squalor. A look at the wider world provides clues to the puzzle of the failure of continued growth and focuses on the challenges that were to face Europe as well. It will be seen that although some of the patterns that determined this decline were particularistic, others were more universal. Moreover, I will argue that almost everywhere the main problems were social in origin. Thus, rather than some mysterious traditional conservatism, it was the frailty of manmade institutions in the wider world that deflected growth. In essence the wider world fell victim to its inability to resolve the social question of the distribution of its resources.

Medieval Europe passed through cycles not very different from those experienced elsewhere. From humble beginnings in about the eleventh century, it started a lackluster growth that by the thirteenth century brought it to the technological limit it was capable of achieving under the constraints of its social structure. Ironically and crucially, Europe's date with destiny was postponed by a most unlikely source. This was the Black Death, which by suffocating so many people enabled the rest to breathe. Subsequently, technological improvements in Europe, buttressed by social change, would begin radically to alter its position vis-à-vis its material resources. This, however, was not the end of the story. How successfully a particular region within Europe was able to benefit from the new opportunities would be related to a class struggle unique to that region. Ignoring this fundamental dichotomy, scholars often speak of Europe as an entity, all parts of which made similar strides forward. This is a crucial misunderstanding, as a full grasp of the reasons for European failures is important for understanding the reasons for European successes.

The Europe that emerged in the sixteenth century armed with a technology that made continuing growth possible also sought to intensify its contacts with the wider world. In a sense this represented a dramatic departure from the past. For it involved the unprecedented establishment of intimate contact between various parts of the world that paved the way for permanent interaction. The Portuguese, the Spanish, and the Venetians, pioneers in these endeavors, received strong support from their respective governments. While the Portuguese and Venetians competed for the spice trade of Asia, the Spanish began an intensive colonization in the Americas. Initially unchallenged by their northern counterparts, the aggressive Mediterranean fortune seekers began to tap the wealth of hitherto inaccessible or unknown sources. Although these European states glittered for a time during the sixteenth century, they ultimately failed to prosper from their windfall discoveries. The literature abounds with particularistic reasons why each failed to take advantage of its opportunities. In this study emphasis will be placed on how the experiences of these countries fit into a more generalized pattern, specifically showing that they suffered from the contradictions inherent in their respective social structures, which it seems no amount of wealth could have corrected.

The literature is equally aware that while the western and central Mediterranean were experiencing downward cycles similar to those previously undergone in the wider world, something new and distinctive was taking place in the northwestern corner of Europe. It has been named capitalism. When, why, and how it appeared has produced a voluminous and oftentimes contentious series of debates.[11] Many authors who have attempted to determine the reasons for European success have adopted one of the prominent positions in that debate. That is, they place misguided emphasis on the commercial revolution in late medieval Europe instead of focusing on the crucial social changes that took place in a few select regions.

For it is important to note that, quite by chance, well before the Netherlands and England emerged in their mature forms, unique modifications had taken place in their respective social structures. Minor though many of these changes may have seemed at the time, ultimately they would prove decisive in the transition to capitalism. Whereas elsewhere the social structure continued to be heavily weighted in favor of traditionalism, in the Netherlands and England new forces emerged that were capable of offering competition. That the Netherlands was ultimately unable to take full advantage of the opportunity whereas England was able to make continuous progress, demonstrates that the outcome was not inevitable. England, however, avoided the pitfalls that not only ensnared the Dutch but had also hindered social formations in other parts of the world. The crucial watershed must be seen as having been the English Civil War. Traditionalism was defeated, capitalism became entrenched as the dominant mode of production, and neither England nor the world economy would ever be the same again.[12] Thus for almost three centuries the northwestern corner of Europe would form the core of the first world economy.

The emergence of capitalism in northwest Europe facilitated the creation of peripheries. Unlike other global histories, this study will attempt to give a specificity to a term that is usually used in the most random ways. Although spatial location played a part in the creation of peripheries, the term as used here, has little to do with geography. Rather, it refers to certain regions whose social relations of production were transformed by their integration with the core of the world economy. Specifically, as a response to market opportunities that a growing Europe was creating and the structures that the mercantile capitalist mode of production was establishing, social change was being imposed in such diverse regions as eastern Europe, western Africa, northeastern Brazil, and many of the Caribbean Islands. Whether these changes took the form of a reemergence of serfdom or the implantation of chattel slavery, the periphery should be defined as those regions where the social system became dominated by coerced labor, which, in turn, reflected a response to the emergence of a world economy. The periphery, then, is not a vague notion but a category naming regions where a specific and concrete social order arose from and responded to the needs of capitalism.[13]

At the same time capitalism created the periphery, it also established dependencies. Whereas peripheries might exist either as independent entities or as colonies, a dependency derived its status from its colonial position. Although the two categories may have shared some superficial similarities, there were also fundamental differences between them. These stemmed from what was produced, the nature of the organization of production, and the resultant social relations. Thus, whereas production in the periphery required coerced labor, the dominant tendency of labor organization in the dependencies was in the opposite direction. Labor organization, in turn, reflected both what was produced and the priorities of the organizers of production. For example, because the commodities exported by the peripheries served as complements to the economies of the core, the organizers of production in each sphere had every reason to be satisfied with the basic structure of the system and hence tacitly to desire its perpetuation. Output in the dependencies, on the other hand, may have competed with metropolitan production, and therefore, at least at various times, the colonial power may have deemed it necessary to regulate or even to suppress colonial economic development. As a result, quite unlike the situation that prevailed in the peripheries, in the dependencies the organizers of production had less reason to be satisfied with the system and its continuation.[14]

As suggested by the existence of colonial dependencies, the colonial powers of Europe formed another important component of the first world economy. During the seventeenth century, the Spanish and Portuguese pioneers of overseas settlement were joined by the English, French, and, to a lesser extent, the Dutch. These additions contributed to the proliferation of the area of settlement. Frontier regions of Spanish America, the interior of Brazil, the eastern seaboard of North America, and the myriad of islands in the Caribbean all were colonized during this century. In many instances the colonies formed important adjuncts to the metropolitan economies. In fact, depression in the colonies or even a significant slump in trade could have an enormous negative impact in the metropolis. Thus fortunes on both sides of the Atlantic became increasingly intertwined.

Although the first world economy continued to grow and become more complex, many areas of the world still remained external to the new system. Eastern Africa, India, Ceylon, Indonesia, southeast Asia, China, Japan, and the Middle East all are included in this category. The criterion for determining membership was not whether a particular region engaged in long-distance trade with the core or other parts of the world economy. For in fact there was great variation in the degree to which the respective territories pursued overseas commerce, ranging from the limited participation of isolationist Ming China and Tokugawa Japan to the intensive export economies of Java and Mughal India. Rather, what distinguished the external areas from the other categories was that participation in commercial relations was discretionary and that, even where trade was fairly substantial and important, it seems to have had little lasting impact on the structures of the respective social formations.

By the eighteenth century the component parts of the first world economy were in place. Largely because of the maturation of capitalist relations of production in England, that small island nation was able to dominate world trade. Not surprisingly, the colonial powers of western Europe were envious of that supremacy. They were jealous not only of England's rule over a flourishing and diverse colonial empire but also of its ability to infiltrate rival colonies. The Continentals were not content with their situation. Convinced that England's overall supremacy stemmed from its economic base, they sought to emulate, duplicate, and even outdo their island rival. By adopting policies that have commonly been referred to as "mercantilistic," each independently set out to transform its economy and make it more productive. Nevertheless, despite sometimes significant state sponsorship of the efforts to promote growth, the results were disappointing. Although their respective economies grew at rates faster than in the seventeenth century, the gap between them and England continued to grow. The principal reason was that the traditional state of Europe could not compete successfully as long as its basic contradictions remained unresolved. To have done so would have required a similar conversion to capitalist relations of production. This, however, was not a viable option, as none of the Continentals had produced a class capable of challenging the existing order, and the forces of tradition and privilege were unlikely to preside voluntarily over their own demise.

Undeterred by their economic failures, the Continentals adopted a more direct challenge to England's hegemony. In essence, they chose warfare as a means to accomplish what they were unable to achieve by peaceful competition. Thus, throughout the eighteenth century, various combinations of powers sought to defeat England on the battlefield. They hoped that victory would enable them to win generous economic concessions. Because the constant warfare was fought in many parts of the world, the concerned parties felt the need to strengthen their colonies so that they could defend themselves against foreign interlopers. It was also perceived that it would be necessary to make them more dependent on the metropolis if it was to reap the benefits that it should derive from having colonies. What ministers in European capitals did not foresee was the extent to which the colonials would both resent and resist these new departures. When the various metropolises refused to back down, the colonials resorted to revolution. Although it would take fifty years before the process was completed, eventually every revolution succeeded. Yet the world economy into which they emerged was to be radically different from the one from which they had tried to escape.

Because the independence movements coincided with the gestation of the industrial revolution, the way was being cleared for the creation of a new world economy. Industrialization would generate new demands in the core, while it in turn sought to impose new conditions on the former dependencies, on the peripheries, and even on the external areas. Not only would there be a reshuffling of the roles played by the various component parts and an enlarging of the scope of the world economy, there would also be a redefinition of the terms of incorporation into the larger whole. Much of the nineteenth century would be devoted to this reorganization.

Before one considers the stages of evolution of the first world economy, however, one might make a few observations concerning the degree of interaction and integration among various parts of the world prior to the fifteenth century. Only by taking this into account can one appreciate how much this system departed from the conditions that had previously prevailed. Eric Wolf provides one approach to the problem. Perhaps because of his anthropological background, in the introductory sections of his volume Wolf seeks certain unifying factors. To this end he identifies ecological zones that horizontally crisscross the globe. Whatever the continent, he notes, peoples who lived in environments of the same basic makeup made remarkably similar adjustments. The forest dwellers of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, for example, found solutions to their problems that shared a great deal of resemblance. Likewise, desert peoples coped with their harsh environments in similar ways. Thus Wolf concludes by emphasizing the case for the unifying factors in the human historical experience.[15]

The social and political institutions developed by peoples in different parts of the world also bore striking similarities. Because it raises such crucial questions concerning the development of capitalism in Europe, one such system that merits elaboration is feudalism. Historians of the European experience have applied the term to the setting of the later Middle Ages. Its component parts are said to consist of a subject peasantry, service instead of salary, the supremacy of a specialized class of warriors, ties of obedience and protection, fragmentation of authority, and a natural economy. When these scholars compared European institutions with those of other societies, they generally concluded that those of Europe were unique and that the term *feudalism* could be applied with accuracy only to the European experience.

A minority of scholars, however, denied that feudalism was a uniquely European institution. Edwin Reischauer, for example, wrote that "feudalism is not merely a chance array of facts in early European history, but is a fundamental . . . form of human organization."[16] For when one looks at the core institutions of feudalism rather than superstructural trappings such as chivalry, one sees that they fall into the wider category that has been broadly defined as the tributary mode of production.[17] What all feudal systems had in common was the supplanting of a previous state or kinship structure by a class of seigneurs as the dominant force in society. The new ruling seigneurs established the right to extract by extra-economic coercion the surplus of the producers. In addition, they proceeded to arrogate the right to administer arbitrary justice. The producers, however, retained rights, the most important of which was continued access to the means of production as long as they met their obligations to their overlords. As will be seen, these conditions prevailed in many parts of the world as well as in medieval Europe.

In addition to broad similarities in their cultural evolution, migration connected various regions of the world. Often movement was so gradual as to be almost imperceptible. Thus, in the Americas, after crossing the land bridge that was formed in the Bering Strait during the last ice age, humans slowly meandered southward until they reached the southern tip of South America about 9000 B.C. It is reckoned that this represented an advance of only eighteen miles per generation. On the other hand, the dispersal of populations could be fairly rapid. This occurred in Africa, where between roughly the third century B.C. and the third century A.D., peoples speaking Bantu languages occupied the southern half of the continent.[18]

Migration was equally important in Asia. For millennia the Indian subcontinent served as a magnet to groups of migrants and invaders from the northwest. It is estimated that approximately two thousand years ago Indians became an important influence in southeast Asia, where many elements of Hindu culture were bequeathed. In this region they encountered populations that millennia before had migrated from the northern interior of China and Tibet. In fact, southward migration appears to have been the dominant tendency in much of east and southeast Asia. Thus, Chinese-speaking peoples gradually permeated southward from the Yellow River to the Yangtze and south China, while Burmans migrated southward along the Irrawaddy, the Thais descended the Chao Phraya, the Khmers moved down the Mekong, and the Vietnamese followed the Red River. Similarly, Indonesia, Polynesia, and Australia were settled by people who originated in Malaya.[19]

Often, seemingly without the aid of large-scale migration, knowledge of various kinds circulated over vast distances. Whereas it was once fashionable to assume that abstract ideas about such institutions as kingship were transferred over long distances, most modern scholars believe that the independent evolution of these notions is the more likely probability. The transfer of techniques concerning material culture, however, is a much stronger possibility. Although scholars agree that there were more sites of the independent invention of agriculture than had previously been believed, in many areas both the knowledge of cultivation and the introduction of new crops came from outside influence. An even stronger case can be made for metallurgy, as the techniques are often so esoteric that they are unlikely to have had multiple origins. This is especially true of the production of iron, which was so similar in so many parts of the world that it probably originated in only a few areas.

Most of the world was also linked by commercial exchanges. This often involved remarkably long distances and extremely arduous journeys. Both the passage over the Great Silk Road at tremendously high elevations from China to the Middle East and the crossing of the Sahara Desert from the Western Sudan to North Africa were just such grueling undertakings. The readiness of traders to embark on lengthy journeys shows that few areas were untouched by the phenomenon of long-distance commerce. For example, it has recently been postulated that by the tenth century direct links, probably by sea, had been forged between North and South America.[20] Despite the ubiquity of trade, however, the Indian Ocean remained the