Scott Sernau

Bound

Living in the Globalized World

Kumarian Press

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To my students in
International Inequalities and Development
and in World Societies and Cultures
for thinking deeply and for caring deeply.

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1

THE CALL OF THE WORLD

Origins of the Global System

> When the courts are decked in splendor
> weeds choke the fields
> and the granaries are bare.
>
> —Lao Tzu, sixth century B.C.

AT THE CLOSE OF THE twentieth century, few people who were not well versed in international economics could even identify the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—although they have been in existence since the end of World War II—let alone identify the recently created World Trade Organization (WTO). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Seattle has been rocked by mass protests and violent confrontations over a meeting of the WTO. Weeks later, the streets of Washington, D.C., were filled with local police, the FBI, the Secret Service, and even the National Guard as protests and demonstrations disrupted meetings of the IMF and the World Bank. In both cities, delegates from around the world were shuttled through clouds of tear gas and showers of bottles into closed door meetings on global economic policy. Out in the streets, speeches by labor leaders were applauded by demonstrators in whale costumes, and young people with monikers like "Star-flower" joined hands in songs of protest with seventy-year-old self-proclaimed "raging grannies." What has happened to the world we thought we knew?

Globalization has become the descriptor of the turn of the century. At the turn of the last century, theorists looking at the world saw industrialization. Industry was changing the planet, the steam engine was changing the face of the planet, the steam train was bringing us together, and everyone had better get on board. Now those places first on board are experiencing "deindustrialization" and are described as post-industrial. By the middle of the twentieth century, theorists looking at the world saw "modernization." Products were modern,

buildings were modern, people were modern, ideas were modern, and if they weren't, they needed to catch up. Modernization is no longer much in vogue either. A whole new school of thought describes everything from architecture to theory as "postmodern." The word of the hour is globalization. Production is global, styles are global, and we are called on to think globally. To economists, globalization refers to a particular pattern of transnational production and free trade. For most, however, the term has come to mean something more than that. It is the descriptor of our age—a time when the world is at our door. Just how new is this new state of affairs and what created it? Before stepping forward into this brave new world it may be helpful to take a quick glance back over our shoulder.

Robbing the Cradle of Civilization

Where did civilization begin? What made the modern world? My elementary school textbooks left me, and probably many others, with the impression that civilization began in Egypt, then moved west to Greece, then west again to Rome, then staggered through a few centuries of plague, darkness, and crusades, before following Richard the Lion-hearted back to England. From England it was transplanted to the United States, where it has been centered ever since. I supposed it was called Western Civilization because it kept moving westward until it finally reached California, where it either flourished or disintegrated, depending on one's point of view.

As superficial as that elementary school understanding may be, it has sparked debates (not always that much more sophisticated) across many U.S. campuses. My elementary school texts were steeped in an idea that goes back to eighteenth-century Europe. The idea is that the finest in civilized thought first emerged in ancient Greece and Rome, hence these are "classical" civilizations. These insights were lost for long while, hence "the Dark Ages," then Europe experienced a rebirth, "Renaissance," and in rediscovering the classics, Europe came out of the dark and experienced the "Enlightenment." Since this was a process ultimately fixed in Western Europe (where these thinkers resided), this was Western Civilization. As colonists took these ideas on to the United States, Canada, and Australia, they too became "Western." Scholars in this line of thought contend that if Americans are to understand their foundations they must steep themselves in the classics (Greece and Rome) and the great works of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, as well as the British and French enlightenment thought that influenced the nation's founders, or often "founding fathers."

Challenges to this line of thought are many. Feminists wonder what happened to the founding mothers. Native American revisionists point to the influence of the League of the Iroquois as a model for American government more

immediate than the Magna Carta. A particularly strong challenge has come from so-called Afrocentric scholars (see Asante 1987 for a strong statement of the idea; Early 1995 for a balanced critique). In his controversial *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal (1981) attempts to topple what he sees as the myth of Western Civilization by stressing the importance of Afro-Egyptian thought to the founding of Greece and Rome. A campus Afrocentric book sale includes posters of black Egyptian Pharaohs and pictures of Cleopatra looking more like Whitney Houston than Elizabeth Taylor (Cleopatra was, in fact, an olive-skinned Macedonian). Titles speak of Greek philosophy as "stolen" Egyptian philosophy. Spain is a backward western outpost until reached by the Moors, who are portrayed as black Africans (they were a multiethnic mix of Arabs and Berbers). Once Moorish civilization departs, Spain "grovels in darkness." Other accounts report new evidence of a host of global innovations having their roots in ancient African civilizations.

The debate between Afrocentric proponents and the proponents of Classicism and Western Civilization gets more interesting as new faces are added to the American campus. Middle Eastern students point out that the "dark ages" was a time of great flourishing in Baghdad and the Arab world, and suggest Europe's renaissance came from Islamic influences. Asian students point to the wealth of innovations first implemented in China. Anthropologists point to the genius of Native America, our "native roots" and the debt in foods, medicines, and more that we owe to "Indian givers" (Weatherford 1988).

The debate is invigorating in that it has added fresh voices and fresh ideas to a campus curriculum core that was fixed centuries ago. It is also at times a bit disconcerting as each partisan group brings out its own set of heroes and villains. Where is the real cradle of civilization and who are the impostors? Afrocentrism has delightfully reversed many of the older Eurocentric assumptions, but are the new contentions any more accurate? Why would any one place, east or west, north or south, be the source of all things bright and beautiful? Just exactly what is "stolen philosophy" in a world filled with exchanging ideas?

Those staking their reputations on this debate do so with such vigor because they realize that this is not just about history, but about our future. To understand what in the world is happening and where it is going, we must understand where it has been. To know where you stand it helps to know where you've been and where you've been headed. It also helps to have a sense of the big picture. I will contend throughout this book that this big picture does not lead to either Eurocentrism or Afrocentrism, but to a thorough-going geocentrism. Such a perspective forces us to relinquish a view of any one set of ideas and ideals, whether Western Civilization or American culture, as the ultimate savior or sinner; humanity itself is the problem and the solution.

The genius of humanity has always been born of the interchange of people and ideas. Many have been eager to claim their land or heritage as holding the cradle of great ideas, or of that elusive idea of civilization itself, but we have found that the world is filled with such cradles. Further, the most fertile marriages of ideas have been interracial and cross-cultural. Some have been love matches, others have looked more like capture and rape, yet it is from this passionate embrace of peoples that the world we know is born. The longing to explore, to meet, and to reach beyond is as old as the first human footprints striding out of Africa. What is new is the frequency and intensity of the embrace of peoples, and the way it regularly refashions the planet within our lifetimes.

Exchange: Highways of History

Innovation has been born foremost of the intense regional interchange among centers of power and between these centers and their hinterland, and secondly born of the seed of far-flung ideas carried by more intrepid travelers.

Long before the days of expanding empires and royal-sponsored expeditions people interacted over considerable distances. The North Trail along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains extends for thousands of miles between Canada and Wyoming (Stark 1997). Some think it may have been part of a network that ultimately connected northern Canada and the great civilizations of ancient Mexico in the original North American Free Trade Zone. This prehistoric NAFTA was certainly not a superhighway of commerce, yet it may have formed a thread in a web that bound the continent. It carried refugees: The Navaho and the Apache, those quintessential southwestern tribes, have their origins in northern Canada. It carried innovations: the bow and arrow was invented by hunters in the forest country of Canada and gradually diffused all the way to Mexico, while growing corn diffused north from central Mexico all the way to New England. It carried products: shell jewelry from the Pacific has been found buried in the Great Plains, obsidian from Yellowstone has been unearthed in the cache of a Hopewell chieftain on the banks of the Ohio. It carried social interchange: the ball game of ancient Mexico became various forms of lacrosse, played in inter-village rivalries across North America. Far to the south, the one large domesticated animal of the Americas, the llama and its cousins, was used to haul cargos over the incredible slopes of the Andes. Villages isolated by colossal mountain peaks were soon linked in networks of trade that would become the great Inca empire.

The glimpses we get of ancient Europe, Asia, and Africa repeat this pattern. Archeologists were thrilled at the discovery of the Austrian "ice man," a man preserved in Alpine ice from the day he fell to his death over seven thousand years ago. What was this man doing with his straw-stuffed boots, striding over

snowfields in the Austrian alps? He presumably was not on a ski trip. Evidence suggests he was carrying bronze-age goods between villages in the valleys of what is now Switzerland to the north and the Italian valleys to the south—a traveling salesman so motivated he was not going to be stopped even by the Alps themselves.

The creation of urban centers added new impetus to this interchange. In ancient Mesopotamia, gatherers harvested the wild grasses of the hill country, hunters sought the wild auroch, and fishers clustered along the river bottomlands. Over the course of centuries, out of the interchange of these growing populations came the domestication of the grasses (which we know as wheat, rye, barley, and oats), the taming of the beast we now know as cattle, and the harnessing of this now domestic ox to pull plows through the irrigated bottomlands that soon flourished in grains. The production was plentiful enough to support privileged classes who did not farm themselves, but clustered in growing cities with a taste for the finer things in life. To acquire both the prerogatives of power—fabrics and dyes for fine clothing and jewelry for adornment—and the means of maintaining power—such as metals for armaments—they looked ever further afield. The cities of Mesopotamia required a large hinterland of farmers, herders, and traders to bring them the best of their known world. This concentration of materials and human energy in turn created an explosion of innovation that moved far beyond their immediate region.

A similar pattern was followed on the opposite edge of the great Asian continent. As varieties of rice were cultivated in the plentiful water of southeastern China, a new civilization was born, one which in time would be even more populous and creative. In colder, drier northern China wheat was the preferred crop, and became the staple of yet another great society. North and south China would trade and interact for centuries before finally merging into a single dynasty, a society that is even today still divided by differences in dialect and custom. While China grew along the Yellow (Hwang Ho) and Yangtze Rivers, and Mesopotamia grew along the Tigris and Euphrates, elements of both centers found their way to the Indus valley, where a dynamic civilization incorporated elements of both in an explosion of creative energy.

To the southwest of Mesopotamia, across the desert and hill country of the Middle East, whose harsh expanses nonetheless bustled with herders, traders, nomads, and raiders, the fertile strip of the Nile attracted a larger, more settled population. Egyptian attempts to domesticate their wildlife, such as the zebra and the gazelle, met with limited success, but they soon borrowed the ox and the granary. The horse came with uninvited invaders. The Egyptian civilizations of the Nile combined the Mesopotamian innovations with those of their southern neighbors in the higher reaches of the Nile as far as the hills of Ethiopia, into new and fabulous forms. As better vessels were developed that could manage

the unpredictable waters of the Mediterranean, this sea, whose name means "between the worlds," became a lake of commerce and interchange. Phoenician sailors traded and settled the varied coasts and islands, maybe even circling the African continent and beginning an exchange of cultures that continued for centuries. We remember the great cities who each for a period of centuries sat at the nexus of this Mediterranean trade: Athens, Alexandria, Carthage, Rome, Constantinople, Venice. Each was proud of its glorious achievements—some insufferably so, but from the broader lens of time and space, the great achievement was this semi-sheltered trading ground afforded by the Great Sea between the worlds: a Mediterranean cradle of culture and society.

The Greeks claimed they sprung from the Greek soil but linguists trace their origins to the great early movements of Indo-European people that spanned from Ireland to India. For a brief moment, Alexander the Great united the eastern half of this expanse, eager to spread Greek culture as he went. Yet this culture was already an amalgam of hundreds of European and Asian influences. One of the cities that bore his name, Alexandria, Egypt, flourished with a great library that collected this immense reserve of human learning, and museum-laboratories that built upon this learning with constant innovation. An Alexandrian librarian, Eratosthenes, used basic trigonometry to accurately measure the circumference of the world, while a female mathematician, Hypatia, laid the foundations of modern algebra. Were these people Greeks, Africans, Egyptians, Carthaginians, Phoenicians, or something else? In truth, it is hard to know because Alexandria flourished as a multiracial, multicultural nexus of innovation that burst with ideas from across the traveled world. The library came to be ignored by powerful and suspicious rulers, fell into decline, and was burned. The organizational genius had since shifted westward to Rome and Carthage. To modern geography, one was "European" and one was "African," but they both grew as they incorporated the ideas and the products of an interconnected Mediterranean world.

At the peak of its growth, Rome was heavily dependent on the granaries of north Africa from the regions of Carthage all the way to Egypt, still growing those Mesopotamian grains. The Romans encountered the Chinese empire as Chinese trade officials established links in the second century B.C. This link, the fabled Silk Road, was always tenuous, however, for the road traveled through the central Asian steppe country controlled by Persia and its successors, who played centuries-long roles as trading middlemen. The two widely separated agrarian civilizations, the Roman Mediterranean and the Chinese empire, had to be content with the handful of products and rumors of one another that were relayed across the vast reaches of open steppe country. Yet these "empty lands" were hardly empty. They were traversed by nomadic herding peoples who also created a link between these world empires (Weatherford 1994). When

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scattered across the steppe, the settled civilizations despised these people as the barbarians. These were the Tartars, from the Greek Tartarus, literally the people of Hell to their settled neighbors. When a powerful and persuasive tribal leader decided to have a word with his haughty farm-bound neighbors about these designations and organized these people on the move—as did Attila with his Huns or Genghis Khan with his Mongols—settled people in both East and West trembled. But with either their short-lived empires or with their centuries of quieter wandering between moments of blood and glory, the herders of the steppe linked East and West.

The Chinese, like their Western counterparts, were sure that they were at the center of the world with all the answers worth knowing. Their Mongol conquerors held no such pretensions—perhaps they had seen too much in their travels. Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai, was more than willing to host that famous assemblage of traveling salesmen, Marco Polo and his uncles. The Polos could travel across great expanses in relative safety with passes provided by the Mongol emperor, and returned home with stories and ideas that would both anger and fascinate their Venetian countrymen. Some herders founded civilizations of their own. Inspired by Muhammad, nomadic Arabs founded an Islamic civilization that spread west across the southern Mediterranean, and east through the Persian hill country. They were later succeeded by the Turks, another herding people, originally pressed from central Asia. In fact, much of the history of Europe and Asia is the struggle between nomadic people of the dry center of the continent with their great herds and the settled farmers along its fringes.

The struggle between mounted herders and settled farmers continued through the centuries of what we have come to call the Middle Ages, until a Chinese innovation reached a divided and worn-torn Europe where it flourished: the mixing of gunpowder and the casting of cannon. With gunpowder, the Chinese could expel their Mongol conquerors. With refinements on gunpowder weapons, the Europeans were ready to become global conquerors.

Empire: Have Gun, Will Travel

The world of 1500 was divided into clusters of power linked only loosely by more intrepid travelers. China had built great ships to trade with, and dominate, the southwestern Pacific, but was more eager to build a cohesive land empire strong enough to resist any future invasions from the steppe country. India was a cluster of principalities in the south, but was dominated by Muslim rulers in the north—invaders from the steppe country who combined ancient Indian tradition with Islamic and central Asian organization, and created such monuments as the Taj Mahal. Africa was largely a village-based rather than a city-based network of cultures. A few grand kingdoms and sultanates held power

over sub-Saharan regions, but were isolated from the Mediterranean by Saharan sands. Great caravans crossed the desert through trading centers such as Timbuktu, maintaining a constant but fragile link between the Mediterranean and the African interior.

The Americas held two great centers of power. While Romans watched for northern "barbarians," the great cities of the Valley of Mexico had fought with each other, and each in turn had fallen to northern invaders from the desert country, peoples hardened and desperate like their Asian steppe counterparts, sometimes with borrowed technology such as the bow and arrow. In 1500, the latest of these barbarian invaders, the Mexica, people we know as the Aztec, ruled an expansive empire. In South America, dominance of a long stretch of coast and highland had recently fallen to the people who would be called the Inca. The great Mayan cities of Central America had already succumbed to wars, both foreign and civil, and returned to fiercely independent rainforest villages, yet these still provided a link between more powerful neighbors north and south.

Western and central Europe in 1500 was united, though not for long, by Roman Catholic Christianity, and divided by geography and politics into a host of competing kingdoms, duchies and principalities, independent city-states, and contested hinterland. The old dream of a revitalized Roman empire was not enough to politically bind together this divided land. The only counterpart Marco Polo could offer to the great Chinese-Mongol emperor was the Pope, who held prestige, but was always dependent on friendly kings and princes to wield power. As a great land empire was not attainable, it was apparent to a growing number of the powerful that power must again come from control of the sea. Venice had grown rich controlling Mediterranean sea lanes and trading with wealthy Constantinople, but mighty Constantinople had fallen to the Turks, recast as Istanbul, and Venice was in decline, literally as well as figuratively sinking into the sea.

Spain had culturally flourished as Islamic invaders from across the Mediterranean had added their culture to this historic crossroads. Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile were less than appreciative of their continuing contributions, however, and had eagerly pushed them out across the Mediterranean or into it. Finally in control of a semi-united Spain, they sought to establish their Christian kingdom, expelling all remaining Moslems and Jews. Yet trade was power, and Moslem Turks controlled the trade routes, so they listened eagerly to the ideas of an itinerant Genoan sailor who went by the name of Columbus. Columbus, a remarkably adept sailor and completely inept geographer, assured them by his calculations that he could get to China and the Spice Islands by sailing around a remarkably small world. Eratosthenes had measured the real circumference of the globe, but Ferdinand and Isabella did not have much of a

classical education and so they financed a voyage.

A poor strip of rugged land that had maintained its independence from slowly united Spain was Portugal. Its monarch, Prince Henry, knew that the only way Portugal could gain power was to look to the sea, no longer the Mediterranean but now the open Atlantic. First their voyages took them to the Canary and Azores Islands, some of the first European colonies. They continued south, bypassing the Saharan caravan routes to coastal West Africa. Once around Africa's southern tip they had the prized access to the Indian Ocean.

These longer voyages and ventures into open ocean required ever bigger and better ships and better navigation. Empires that sought to control the seas had always faced a problem: how to fight effectively from aboard a ship. The ancient Greeks destroyed Persian fleets in close quarters with rams, the Romans defeated Carthage with hooks and boarding planks, the Constantinople-based Byzantine empire perfected incendiary "Greek fire" for short distances. Each method was limited to close quarters and was most effective in narrow confines. As European powers competed to build bigger and better cannon, they faced the problem of moving large numbers of heavy cannon through muddy fields and over bad roads. Yet the two extensions of power complemented one another perfectly. Large, stable ships could transport cannon, lots of them, and cannon could allow ship-board commanders to attack ports, coasts, and other vessels with great power. Larger ships could also carry horses and guns to extremely distant points. Gunboat diplomacy was born and unleashed on the world with a vengeance.

First to feel its effects were the Americas. The two great landmasses of the world—Eurasia-Africa, "the old world," and the Americas, "the new world" (terms obviously coined by Europeans and not native Americans)—had been largely separate realms since the glaciers of the last age retreated. Speculation has abounded about contacts with Phoenician, Chinese, or even West African sailors. If they existed, they were not enduring. Norse sailors reached the Canadian coast via Iceland and Greenland. They, however, arrived in a sense too early. They had good ships and steel weapons, but no horses and above all no guns. They faced a native population proficient in the use of the bow and gave up in despair. They had the navigational knowledge to establish contact, but not the force to establish control. As seekers of land rather than trade, they turned elsewhere.

Columbus arrived seeking spices and silks and found an exotic land filled with new products—in time new world cotton would be far more important than Chinese silk, and new world foods would change the diet of Europe far more than Indonesian spices. The Spanish sea of boundless opportunity was now no longer the Mediterranean but the Caribbean. The Spanish tentatively explored the mainland coast encountering, like their Norse predecessors,

considerable local opposition, especially among the independent and battle-seasoned Maya. Yet the inhabitants of the lands between north and south America, "Mesoamerica," had two profound misfortunes.

One is that contact between peoples can spread disease as well as ideas and products. The deadliest weapon that the steppe people ever unleashed on Europe was not the Mongolian bow but the Bubonic plague. In this Europe's misfortune became its fortune in the New World. Eurasians had been in close contact with one another, and with rodents, ever since the Mesopotamians started growing and storing grain. The depredations of the diseases that went with this contact probably kept rising populations in check for many centuries. At the same time, the close proximity to animals that came with their domestication brought other diseases, most notably influenza and the "poxes." Chicken pox really is related to a disease of fowl, and the far deadlier smallpox was related to a disease of livestock known as "cow pox." Farmers, herders, and travelers in Europe, Asia, and to a certain extent Africa, had shared these diseases with one other for centuries, acquiring partial immunities by a process of deadly selection—the survivors were the ones most resistant. The Americas, in contrast, were much freer of infectious disease. A smaller land area with more dispersed people who were less in contact with rodents, livestock, and their fleas had fewer plagues—until the Europeans arrived. The native population was decimated, later to be replaced by European settlers and African laborers.

The other great disadvantage was that the Mesoamericans and South Americans were proficient workers of gold and silver and not of steel and lead. New world precious metals—scattered veins of gold and an incredible abundance of silver—turned every poor kid in Seville and Granada into a would-be explorer, adventurer, and conquistador. With horses covered in armor, swords of Toledo steel, and an array of firearms, accompanied by allies resentful of the still-new "barbarian" empires, and preceded by an army of plagues and poxes, the New World quickly fell to the old. What was often taught in elementary school as a story of discovery is really a story of contact and conquest, but also a story of exchange.

The native American empires were always on a precarious footing because they lacked a reliable food supply large enough to feed great cities. They had corn, which under their cultivation became one of the most resilient and adaptable plants anywhere in the world. They combined corn with beans, which together make a complete protein source for humans, and with many varieties of squash, which adds needed vitamins. In South America, they had the potato, another remarkable source of starch and vitamins. They were very well suited to feed a village, but not a city. They had no plows. The problem was not that they were not clever enough to invent one, but that they had no way to pull it. Likewise, it has been said that they never invented the wheel. In fact, they used

wheels as symbols and toys, but had nothing to pull a wagon. Horses and camels first developed in the Americas but had long since fallen to extinction from changing climates and prehistoric hunters (probably human). The only beast of burden in South America was the lama, a member of the camel family, and like its old-world cousin, better suited to carrying than to pulling. In Mexico they had turkeys and small dogs. They understood a great deal about cultivation but no one was going to get a turkey to pull a plow.

With the Spanish came plow agriculture. They brought donkeys, mules, and oxen. They brought herd animals, sheep, and goats. And of course they brought the horse. This animal facilitated farming in Mexico while freeing other groups from the farm. Native farmers in the southwest and the fringes of the plains hunted buffalo when available, but depended on their gardens of corn, squash, and beans to survive. With the horse, they could now match the speed and range of the bison and again become primary hunters. This was not a step "back" as was sometimes suggested, for they were not "simple" hunters, but sophisticated herders of horses and, increasingly, raiders, traders, and warriors. The Apache, those northern hunters who had never much taken to bean farming, were the first to capture and tame the feral horses. Others soon envied, or feared, their new lifestyle and followed suit. An American plains culture flourished momentarily, before further European encounters would crush it.

While we are well schooled in how the Europeans changed America, we often know much less about the profound changes in Europe that came with American contacts. Most significant were the incredible plant resources. With fewer domestic animal resources, the Americans had been extraordinary cultivators of plants—more foods and medicines come from the plants of the new world than from the much larger land area of the old world. Corn, what most of the world calls maize, circled the globe as a hardy and drought and disease-resistant staple in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Potatoes remade whole societies in northern and eastern Europe. Producing far more calories per acre, withstanding harsh climates, and hidden underground when marauding armies swept over, they became the peasant's salvation. Haitians call their many potato varieties "the poor man's friend" and the poor of Ireland, Germany, Poland, and Russia all agree. American cotton, longer and more suited to mechanized cloth production, helped usher in the first phase of the European industrial revolution. American gold and silver flowed in to make money abundant enough to finance it all. The greatest exchange since the Ice Age utterly remade both "worlds."

Not all explorers came west. Once the Portuguese had turned the corner on the tip of Africa at the Cape of Good Hope, they could now envelop the Indian Ocean. Portuguese cannon-wielding ships quickly brushed aside the Egyptian fleet and Arab traders to dominate markets in Africa and India, and in time, the Indies and Japan. There are riches in exchange, and the well-poised middleman

can claim the greatest portion in profits. Tiny Portugal could not dream of an old-style land empire that would encompass the millions of Africa and Asia, but they now had something better—a trade network, an economic empire. Local powers could enforce order in the interior and the Portuguese galleons could be left to maintain a profitable order on the seas.

Profits always bring rivalries, and the two Iberian powers, Spain and Portugal, now not only breathed down on one another on their common neck of the European continent, but met halfway around the globe in their race to encircle its markets. Spain had pushed across the Pacific expanses to the Philippines, and their ships plied three oceans in a trade that linked Madrid, Mexico, and Manila. To avoid what might have been the first world war between these two Roman Catholic European powers, the Pope simply divided the world. One half belonged to Spain, the other to Portugal. No one else need be consulted.

We can only imagine what the Chinese emperor thought of such vanity. We know what the newly Protestant northern Europeans thought. Undisputed power no longer came from the Pope but from the gun port. The tiny Netherlands, newly independent from Spanish masters and Spanish Catholicism, and busily building dikes to keep from sinking into the sea, had, like the tiny swamp of Venice before it, no option for power, prestige, and privilege but to turn to the sea. With slightly better ships and much better bankers, by the 1600s the Dutch came to dominate the seas and the trade routes. Only a few ports were needed to anchor their ships and a vast commercial empire: Cape Town in South Africa, Malacca in what became the Dutch East Indies, and later a few outposts in remote islands and coast lands such as Guyana, Aruba, and Manhattan. In time, the British built still better ships and still bigger banks, and by the 1800s the British empire came to eclipse all others.

This was not, however, exactly like the empires of old. The imperial idea was as old as the ancient empires of the Middle East, but the goal of the British was not to control the land but the terms of trade. British products needed markets and the homeland needed materials to make yet more. Ideally, exchange between the colony and any other rivals, most notably France, was to be curtailed. This required some delicacy: this policy too brazenly imposed in the American colonies led to a revolt, not surprisingly aided by the French. The British learned carefully from this experience, finding better ways to control the governments and the guns, and maintained an empire that endured through the second world war. The decades following World War II saw the dismantling of the old empires and the creation of a new world economic order, yet one with the centers of wealth and information still concentrated in the imperial centers and the former colonial world struggling to overcome persistent poverty.

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