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How Big Should Historians Think?

A Review Essay on *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* by Ian Morris (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010)

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This is an extraordinarily ambitious book, both in the scope of what it tries to cover and in the extent to which it tries to unify its vast subject around a few basic propositions. Ultimately, it is not persuasive on most of its key points, but it still makes a number of interesting contributions. And because it is engagingly written, and selling well[1]—which is especially striking in view of its length—both its strong and its weak points are likely to have a wide impact, and inspire imitation.

Core Assumptions and Questions

At the heart of the book are a few extremely bold claims. First, Morris argues that we can meaningfully quantify what he calls "social development," which he defines as "societies' ability to get things done—to shape their physical, economic, social and intellectual environment (24)." Second, he argues that we can discern within the vast range of historical and contemporary societies two hugely significant and clearly separable sets of societies, perhaps best thought of as compound, or mega-societies: 'the East' and 'the West.' These categories have, for Morris, reasonably stable meanings that can be traced back to almost 15,000 years ago. The West consists of all the societies "that have descended (31)" from the so-called Hilly Flanks: the area in present day Turkey, Iraq, and adjacent areas where most archeologists believe humans first built year-round dwellings c.12,000 BCE, and first began domesticating plants and animals c.9500 BCE (86–91). The East consists of "all societies that descend from the easternmost (and second oldest) of Eurasian cores," where domestication seems to have begun about 2,000 years later (32, 120-123). This makes Morris'

[1] On September 15, 2011, it ranked #1 in amazon.com's subcategory of "History/ Civilization and Culture," #9 in "History/Social History," and #14 in "History/ Ancient/Early Civilization."

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geography rather distinctive: the Middle East, for instance is firmly within his 'West' though it seems to have slipped out of that category in very recent times. (See, for instance the map on p. 602.) Moreover, most of the world seems is neither East nor West for most of history, and the status of places colonized in the 19th century seems confusing. (Did Vietnam, for instance, become part of the West once it felt the influence of France? Did the Belgian Congo?) This causes serious problems for some of Morris' arguments, especially as he nears the present. But these categories meanwhile allow him to set up the organizing claims of the book:

1. that we can assess whether, at any given moment, the 'East' or the 'West' had greater "social development;"
2. that once we observe the long-term pattern of which mega-region was ahead at which points, we will also be in a position to understand why the location of leadership changed at particular points. In particular, we will understand why, starting about 1770, the West has not only "led," but "ruled": that is, it became able to exert powerful influence all around the globe in a way that nobody had ever done before;
3. that the patterns and dynamic principles discerned in (1) and (2) also enable us to see the probable future of human society, or at least to identify what the key issues are and the broad outlines of what should be done about them.

The intellectual problems Morris hopes to illuminate on this basis are fundamental ones. First, he frames the question of what is often called 'the rise of the West' as an argument between 'lock-in' theorists on the one hand—those who think that the West's current privileged status has been a foregone conclusion for many centuries, perhaps even many millennia—and 'short-termers' who think that this condition emerged only within the last 2–4 centuries, and did so at least partly as a result of highly contingent events. Full disclosure is in order here: Morris lists me as one of the leading 'short-termers,' and while I would accept that label as a first approximation, I do not think that either I or most of the other 'short-termers' rely as heavily on purely contingent explanations as Morris suggests.[2] Nor is the opposition between these camps as stark or as consistently polemical as Morris suggests on p. 21. Indeed, the most promising explanations tend to rely on the interaction of multiple factors playing out on different time-scales. As we will see later, Morris' insistence on searching for a single definitive timescale on which to consider these issues, rather than moving back and forth among multiple timescales, leads to some serious weaknesses in the book.

Second, Morris suggests that debate over how to explain the West's recent hegemony can be resolved if and only if we look at a much longer timescale

[2] See, for instance, Goldstone 2008; Lieberman 2009; Pomeranz 2000, 2002, 2009; Rosenthal and Wong 2011.

than even most 'lock-in' theorists have favored (160–171, 498). A 15,000 year perspective, he argues, shows that the East was ahead as recently as 1771, ruling out 'long-term lock-in' theories. However, it also shows that the West has led for 14 of the last 15 millennia (25), thus suggesting that it has long possessed some very important advantages, and that its current 'lead' is unlikely to be explicable largely by contingent factors. He thus denies what one might call the relative autonomy of early modern and/or modern history: the idea that, while the deep past certainly matters, there have also been changes in the basics of human life that are sufficiently fundamental to make the dynamics of the last few centuries (perhaps since the 14th century Eurasian plague, or the post-1450 creation of globe-girdling maritime connections, or perhaps since early industrialization) critically different. Since his own index has behaved radically differently in the last 100–200 years from the 15,000 before that, one wonders why he is committed to denying such a break. Morris also imagines a basic historical discontinuity, as we shall see, but he places it in our near future rather than in the moderately near past. Up to now, he says, little enough has changed that the 15,000 year perspective remains a better guide to understanding than any other.

In Morris' view, the West's enduring advantages are largely a matter of geography (26–31). He argues repeatedly that large forces ultimately derived from geography and biology have shaped history so powerfully that the stuff of much historical writing—cultural differences, individual decisions and achievements, chance events touching off a cascade of further consequences—have had minimal independent influence on the big issues. In this connection, Morris adds the obvious but nonetheless crucial proviso that while geography is more or less constant (on human timescales), its significance is not: human innovations have frequently changed the significance of living in areas with lots of rainfall, living atop particular kinds of mineral deposits, and so on. In his last section, in fact, Morris argues that contemporary trends will soon make geography largely irrelevant, while technology is already undoing long-standing biological constants. Thus, while projecting his trend lines shows that the East will catch up with the West in the next few decades, he argues that the real lesson of the past for the future is that East and West will cease to matter. We are headed either towards a kind of technological utopia (as predicted by the unprecedented and accelerating growth of the 'social development index' over the last 200 years) or for an ecological nightmare (as predicted by the past tendency of disaster to strike when social development hits a 'hard ceiling' and becomes unsustainable); either way, we will reach our (proximate) destination all together. It is small wonder that a book which claims so much—arguing that there is an overall meaning to history, and that it has strong (if not absolute)

predictive value—has stimulated both exceptionally high praise and considerable irritation.[3]

Measurement: The Social Development Index

Constructing a 'social development index' simple enough to be operationalized yet accurate enough to be useful is extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible; it is to Morris' credit that he provides considerable detail (mostly on a website) about how he has tried to do so. As he himself notes, many scholars would say this should not even be attempted, for reasons ranging from practical difficulties to the ethical problem of appearing to rank societies, and thus justify forcible alteration or even obliteration of 'inferior' ones. The latter concerns are not easily dismissed, but I am inclined to at least provisionally accept Morris' assertion that if we make sufficiently strong disclaimers about higher scores not indicating more morally worthy lifeways (which is more difficult than it sounds), then attempting to construct such an index can be a useful experiment. But for reasons that shall emerge later, I have doubts about whether any single index can be useful across all time—for comparing changes between the realms of Sargon I and Marcus Aurelius, on the one hand, and between those of Louis XIV and Dwight Eisenhower on the other. And as we shall see shortly, naming what Morris' index measures 'social development' seems to me inaccurate; it may also undercut his afore-mentioned effort to distance these scores from any claims that some societies are not just more powerful than others, but better. Without minimizing this last problem, let us focus for now on more concrete and practical ones.

The "ability to get things done" which the social development index tries to measure is extremely non-specific, and *not*—until, perhaps, very recently—equally applicable to all sorts of things. Early and early modern empires, for instance, could usually defeat stateless societies in war, but did not necessarily provide their people with a better material life. Even if we restrict ourselves strictly to large societies with recognizable states, it is not clear that Frederick II's Prussia or Alexander I's Russia, with gunpowder weapons that would surely have destroyed any Roman legion, were necessarily more or even equally prosperous.[4] Even in recent times—when the role of consumerist plenty in determining the outcome of the Cold War makes it tempting to think

[3] A number of positive reviews may be found on the book's Amazon webpage; the jacket features glowing praise from Jared Diamond, Niall Ferguson, David Landes, Anthony Pagden, and others. Strikingly negative evaluations from very different perspectives include those of the historians Peer Vries (forthcoming) and Ricardo Duchesne (2011), and the journalists Adam Gopnik (2011) and George Walden (2011).

[4] For the now classic expression of doubt about the welfare benefits of agriculture as opposed to hunting and gathering see Sahlins (1972). For a comparison of Roman and early modern European living standards, see Allen (2007).

that GDP has become an index of "ability to get things done," which applies to any task, examples such as the U.S. debacle in Vietnam and the failure of both superpowers in Afghanistan should remind us how weak any such claim is. In many earlier struggles, such as those between Song China and steppe nomads, prosperity, the ability to administer a populous society, and military prowess were even less clearly correlated.

Moreover, consider that even hunter-gatherers, who score extremely low on Morris' scale, may profoundly "shape their physical environment" (by burning, for instance); that relatively isolated societies may in fact shape their 'intellectual environment' more completely than those in frequent contact with others can; that societies of all sorts presumably manipulate the physical environment to pursue wildly diverse specific ends (keeping warm, displaying intra- and inter-societal social distinctions, pleasing deities); that the degree of impact on the physical environment is not always closely correlated with the degree of success in these endeavors; and that, as Morris himself reminds us, the ability to impact the environment often produces longer-term effects a society cannot control. Given all of this, I would argue that what Morris is measuring is really neither the "ability to get things done" nor effective control over a society's overall environment. To be truly effective, after all, control—as opposed to mere impact—must be sustainable over some period of time; having a big wrecking ball does not constitute control. (How long the control must be sustainable to count is, of course, up for grabs; but that is another matter, and another reason why I think the self-conscious use of multiple timeframes is better than the search for one 'perfect' one.) Morris' dependent variable might, therefore, more accurately be called 'power' than 'social development.'

This is much more than a semantic difference. For one thing, it has moral implications, since the forcible re-ordering or even destruction of a society that lags behind in 'social development' might seem to be an inevitable or even benign event; the destruction of a society inferior only in 'power' is a very different story.[5] It also matters for more purely intellectual reasons. In wars—

[5] Morris' own stance here is somewhat complicated. On the one hand he says "in the strongest possible terms" that his index passes no moral judgments (144); it measures something which may be good or bad, but is undeniably real (25) and so not to be avoided. This much seems to me correct, and to describe an agenda better served by choosing a descriptor like 'power' rather than 'social development.' And on the other hand, when Morris describes transitions from hunting and gathering to farming, he admits that they often did nothing for people's welfare, but continues "Yet for all the squalor**,** *this was clearly what people wanted* (101, emphasis added)": a proposition which can, in fact, only be conjectural. The point here is not to catch Morris in a moment of political incorrectness, but to see how easy it is for any of us to allow a semi-conscious "common sense" notion of progress, and thus inevitability, to pre-empt a properly skeptical inquiry into the actual causation of change—and in doing so, elide

the most straightforward kinds of competition over power—at least relative success and failure are much easier to gauge than the relative success of different societies in other areas, and the sheer physical ability to capture energy (central to Morris' index, as we will see) is probably a better gauge of relative capacity in war-making than in many other areas. Thus an index that really measures relative power is much easier to construct, especially without reference to culture, than one that truly measured social development would be.

Indeed, it is striking how often Morris' arguments about relative 'development' really become arguments about relative military capacity. It is revealing that the book's central question about East versus West is repeatedly framed by juxtaposing the real-world looting of Chinese palaces by Europeans in 1860 with an imagined history in which the Chinese sacked 19th century London, and asking why one scenario happened rather than the other (3–11); we hear much less about various other East-West comparisons (e.g. in life expectancies) or flows (e.g. adoptions of foreign technology and institutions) that would also show a fairly sudden lurch towards a Western advantage in the 19th century. This, too, suggests that what Morris is really measuring would be much better called 'power' than 'social development.' I am not, then, one of those whom Morris describes as opposed to constructing indices altogether: I do think, however, that it is very important to be as clear as possible about what they are indices of.

But having accepted the idea that a quantifiable index of power may be worth developing and applying to many societies—including some that were not contemporaneous with each other—I would also accept, at least provisionally, Morris' point that a crude first attempt at such an index is better than none. And while one can quibble about the four components of his index—energy use, size of largest city (as a proxy for organizational capacity), information technology, and capacity to make war (147–149)—they are not a bad place to start. Certainly it is hard to think of a different set of four quantifiable measures which would represent a clear improvement and for which we have meaningful amounts of data.

However, thinking that a scale might be useful is not the same as thinking that the same scale is useful under all conditions. For two of Morris' four variables—war-making capacity and information technology—all pre-industrial societies fare so poorly relative to contemporary large-scale societies that these scores have a negligible impact on the overall social development index. Morris has both East and West in the low forties on his scale ca. 1770 (compared to a contemporary Western score of 1000), but neither East nor West gets even one full point on the information technology or war-making capacity measure as of

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the horrible ways in which such 'progress' is sometimes imposed on people who do not want it.

that date.[6] This means that the comparison of social development in East and West prior to 1800 hinges almost entirely on the energy capture and urbanization variables—mostly the former. This has its advantages, as they are more readily quantifiable than the other two variables, but it also leads to problems.

For reasons of space I will pass over urbanization here, except to say that I do not see why the size of a single largest city tells us more than overall urbanization rates. (The former barely rose—indeed, may have fallen in both East and West—between the first century CE and 1800; the latter clearly rose in both places.). Let us instead consider energy capture, which accounts for 75–90 percent of total development scores at most dates prior to the industrial revolution (627).

I have placed great emphasis on energy supplies in my own work, and if I were trying to construct such an index, I am sure this would be one of my variables. And nobody could seriously doubt that, say, the 43-fold difference in per capita energy consumption between the contemporary U.S.A. and Bangladesh[7] reflects a very real difference in ability to "get things done." But what of Canada's 2:1 edge over Japan? Or of North Korea, which is even with Moldova in energy capture and holds an almost 2:1 edge over the Philippines? Clearly a whole host of factors come into play here: the efficiency of energy-using technologies, the mixture of goods produced/consumed by a society (military-oriented heavy industry is extremely energy-intensive, and in relative terms, it has been so since at least the invention of metallurgy), climate, and culture. (Beef stew followed by ice cream uses far more energy than stir-fried chicken followed by berries, without necessarily being 'better' in any objective way). It is unlikely that these factors make very large differences in energy capture like those between the U.S. and Bangladesh deceptive, but when we deal with differences of slightly less than 2:1 (West's advantage over East, even as late as 1900, or West circa 1800 versus West c.1500 BCE),[8] not to mention the mere 6 percent difference Morris finds for East versus West in 1800, the many intermediate steps between consuming energy and "getting things done" might well swamp the significance of energy capture per se.

Moreover, energy consumption per capita has not changed nearly as dramatically during the last 200 years (six-fold per capita in the West, by Morris' measure) as the ability to store and transfer information, or to kill

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[6] See e.g. pp. 162-169 and 176 of Morris's on-line methodological appendix: http://ianmorris.org/docs/social-development.pdf

[7] All numbers in this sentence and the next reflect 2008 World Bank figures in kilograms of oil equivalent, as found at: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.USE.PCAP.KG.OE

[8] Numbers in the rest of this paragraph are either from Morris 626–640 or can be calculated from data on those pages.

large numbers of people; and each of Morris' variables is scaled to a maximum value of 250 that represents today's Western levels. Thus the Morris scores of pre-industrial societies for energy capture are much larger than those for war-making or information technology, or even urbanization; and thus small percentage differences between pre-industrial societies on this variable loom much larger in their total scores than even much larger relative differences in other variables. For instance, that six percent East-West difference in energy consumption per capita c.1800 represents a bit over 2 "social development points" (41.3 versus 39.1). It is thus worth more than four times as many points as the West receives for the entire increase in its war-making capability between 3000 BCE (well before chariots, or iron weapons) and 1800 CE (the world of Napoleon) and more than 6 times the difference between the points awarded the East for its gains in "information processing technology" between 1300 BCE (the approximate date of 'oracle bones' inscribed with early Chinese writing) and 1900 CE (by which date China not only had tens of millions of literate people, but huge printing industries and libraries, plus photographs, telegraph lines, and so on).

In short, because energy use changes so much more over all but the last century of Morris' time span than his other variables do—even though energy use has also changed more, by Morris' measure, in the last 200 years than the previous 14,800—it drives Morris index for almost all of his 15,000 year timespan. And since energy use is a very rough proxy for the even rougher concept of "the ability to getting things done," we wind up with an index that often does not seem very meaningful. The index seems especially problematic for comparing different societies—a bit less so, perhaps, in today's world of shared technological possibilities and convergent national goals (such as GDP maximization), but even now it needs to be used with caution. And it is probably not very useful for getting any but the roughest sense of long-term trends in a single society, either, since for almost all of history, it basically reduces to a measurement of how much fuel a society burned. Thus it seems preferable for scholars wishing to construct a numerical index of power not to try using the same set of variables across thousands of years of radically changed conditions, but to accept the reality of certain important discontinuities, and develop indices specific to medium-length periods. And if the value of Morris' book rested on the reliability of his index, I would advise readers to steer clear of it. Fortunately however, I think the book's narrative is more valuable than its statistics.

Explaining Past and Present: Narrative Argument and Methodology

For all practical purposes, the accumulation of power that Morris traces begins with sedentarization and domestications. Domestication, almost by definition,

meant more intensive human manipulation of at least selected species in the natural environment than hunter-gatherers had engaged in—though, as noted above, the distinction is not absolute. And because agriculture allowed for population densities that only a few non-agricultural societies (in especially favorable, fish-rich, environments) could match, it increased the potential for amassing greater power over humans as well. This first happened on a large scale around 9,500 BCE (during a period of global warming) in the Hilly Flanks: not, Morris emphasizes, because people there were any different from people elsewhere, but because geography happened to place there an unusually large number of both plants and animals that were relatively easy to domesticate (117–119). From that point on, in Morris' view, there was a distinct 'West,' composed of people who were influenced by this initial domestication: it includes both people who were conquered by agriculturalists originating in West Asia and people who imitated the West Asian adoption of farming. The imitators seem to have outnumbered the conquered, at least in Europe, where the data is best (110–112). Nonetheless, Morris treats both groups as equally influenced by the Hilly Flanks farmers—and thus all part of a single 'West.' (That many people may have turned to agriculture specifically in order to protect themselves against conquest by agriculturalists—early farming did not offer many other clear advantages, as Morris notes—might strengthen the case for seeing things this way.)

Thereafter, one of the central dynamics of Morris' account is the tendency for advances in 'social development' to be imitated by people in adjacent territories—as some people adopted farming when they saw and/or were threatened by other people who farmed. In the process, the new adopters often surpassed their predecessors, either because they had not yet depleted local resources or because, able to see the results of what had happened elsewhere, they could improve upon the technology or institution they were adopting; Morris, borrowing from Alexander Gerschenkron, calls this "the advantages of backwardness." Armed with their new capabilities, late-comers then often challenged the older core for political supremacy.

Thus the older core had to either keep increasing its 'social development' or else fall into decline. Further social development generally required further innovation, especially as negative side-effects of their earlier development placed them at a disadvantage in these contests, and as their very size and complexity rendered them more vulnerable to disruptions. But innovation was not always forthcoming, or of the right kind. (Morris has more to say about the former problem than the latter, which would likely require greater attention to cultural and political specificities.)

To varying degrees, these development-induced crises might be exacerbated by truly exogenous shocks, such as periods of drought, or by relatively predictable patterns of increasing (negative) returns. One of the most important of the relatively predictable forces was the recurrent tendency of

population growth and expansion out of agrarian cores to touch off invasions by nomadic (especially steppe) peoples; this was especially likely when a core first transferred technologies to nomads (perhaps unwillingly) and then became less able to overawe or buy off frontier peoples as population growth and other internal processes increased problems within the core. These recurring difficulties were often further exacerbated by the tendency of large migrations of any sort to spread epidemics (215–226). As these patterns played out again and again, individual societies suffered cyclical decline but 'the Wes' and 'the East'—defined as the most powerful current instantiation of each successorship at any moment—gradually increased their social development. This pattern also means that in Morris' story, both East and West grow geographically over time: older cores like Egypt or Northwestern China may cease to be centers of wealth and power, but they remain part of their respective formations. That the West led the East—where the core likewise moved around, though somewhat less—from 12,000 BCE until sometime in the first millennium CE was largely the result of the simple fact that it started the process earlier (175–279).

That this initial advantage proved so durable, in Morris' account, is also due to the fact that the stages through which he sees both East and West moving are essentially the same (e.g. 130). Farming, villages, towns, cities, states, empires, more centralized empires, and Axial Age thought (in Morris' view, generally a reaction against more centralized states, rather than a set of breakthroughs that made larger states possible [262]): all of these represent, in Morris' scheme, logical outcomes of similar people facing shared predicaments. Thus each important new development was more likely than not to emerge sooner or later in multiple places; there is little need to explore transmission between East and West (or from places outside both zones) and Morris gives such transfers little attention prior to modern times.

For the same reasons, Morris is inclined to emphasize similarities, rather than differences, both in intellectual traditions (e.g. 669 on Axial Age thinkers) and practical statecraft, especially in earlier times. He accords little independent significance to ideas in any case: each society, he says more than once, tends to get the thought it needs, based on the concrete problems it confronts (262–263, 481). Even what are probably the most important intellectual phenomena for understanding "Why the West Rules"—the 'scientific revolution' and its spin-offs, in areas ranging from technology to social theory—are, for Morris, the result of new intellectual needs generated by the rise of overseas colonization and the Atlantic economy. Without those developments, he argues, there would have been no reason for the antiquity-worshipping trend so important in Renaissance thought to be superseded by subsequent rejections of old paradigms; and had veneration of the classical past remained central, Western thought would have continued to develop along the empiricist humanist lines of the Renaissance, which were broadly

comparable to those of the "evidential research" movement that took off in late 16th century China (468–481). And since Europe's advantage in overseas expansion was largely the result of geographical luck (421–2), Morris again argues that neither "geniuses" nor "bunglers" (as he calls them) ultimately mattered much for the course of history (e.g. 565–577). He relaxes this stricture only for very recent times, in which technology makes it possible for single decisions to have a great impact so quickly that there is no time for broader forces to re-assert themselves. Clearly, Kennedy and Khrushchev could have changed the course of history in October, 1962 (616), for instance. Beyond that, however, Morris concedes very little to culture, individuals, or accident.

These arguments run very much against the inclinations of most historians, and have occasioned the harshest criticisms of the book of which I am aware.[9] But while I would not go nearly as far as Morris does in these directions, his attempts to simplify and streamline history in these ways seemed to me among the most thought-provoking features of the book. As someone who works mostly on the modern period, I found Morris' presentation of broad similarities in different cases of ancient state-formation particularly interesting: above all his discussions of military affairs and the role of frontier polities. It is also refreshing that he refuses to trace everything 'Western' back to ancient Greece (despite being an expert on the classical Mediterranean himself) or to insist that ancient Greece and it alone contained the embryonic core of modernity. As Morris emphasizes, Axial Age thought represented an overlapping range of views in both East and West (and in India), rather than one position that defined the essence of any region; and his claim that Axial Age thinkers as a whole are far more different from anything that we know of from earlier times (in Morris' view, because they represent a very different level of social development) than they are different from each other (260–263) seems quite reasonable. In contrast, historians have often tried to make a great deal flow from subtle differences among ancient thinkers, even though we often have only fragments of their thought, even less on their interlocutors, and less still on the reception of their ideas. In view of our limited knowledge—and of the fact that the kinds of problems these thinkers considered rarely have a single solution that is clearly superior in all contexts—Morris' skepticism about such arguments in general (and about a fixation on Greek exceptionalism in particular) seems to me quite logical. We might yet find that some intellectual differences from this period had verifiable and far-reaching consequences for comparative development; subtle differences can, indeed, snowball. But for now, a position consistent with Morris'—that these efforts each mattered in their own time and place, but without locking in long-run

[9] Vries forthcoming 2012, Duchesne 2011, Walden 2011.

'success' or 'failure'—strikes me as the better bet. At the very least, it is a useful thought experiment to see how far one can go with an explanation that does not rely on a reified 'culture' as a determining force, even though we may ultimately need to invoke cultural differences to explain narrower, more precise differences.

More generally, the search for relatively straightforward explanations based on geography that Morris favors will often prove inadequate, but it still seems to be a logical point of departure, preferable to immediately trying to assess the causal significance of complex institutional differences, the grass-roots operation of which are often only poorly understood. His observation that the fact that 90 percent of Roman subjects lived within 10 miles of the Mediterranean, while a far smaller percentage of Han subjects lived near the coast or navigable waterways, and that this was bound to have an impact on the scale of commerce (288–9) is one good example of such a useful simplification; while complex differences in attitudes towards commerce are no doubt also worth exploring, they seem a much less promising place from which to start seeking an explanation of differing degrees of commercialization. This is particularly true insofar as differences in culture turn out to not be matters of certain ideas being fully established in one place and utterly absent in another, but of degrees; once the question becomes one of some idea being very influential in one place and much less so elsewhere, it seems hard to avoid the sorts of material factors Morris emphasizes.

Nor is Morris alone is urging us to see common general directions in the long-run development of a number of widely separated polities that had little direct contact with each other: Victor Lieberman's massive *Strange Parallels*,[10] spanning 1,000 years across much of Eurasia, is a particularly important recent example of this new kind of comparative and synthetic history.

But Lieberman's argument is mostly one about parallel, often synchronous trends, rather than levels. He argues, for instance, that Burma and Russia went through cycles of state-building/breakdown and cultural integration/ divergence more or less at the same times, and with an underlying linear trend towards centralization and integration in both places, but he does not claim that these two societies had similar degrees of centralization at any given moment. Morris' book, on the other hand, is very much about comparing levels. And since he sees the West as having gained an early lead—and also sees the main (perhaps almost exclusive) motors of history in unchanging features of geography, biology, and society (557), he needs some explanatory mechanism outside of direct human agency to explain why the lead would change hands at certain points.

[10] Lieberman 2009. David Christian's *Maps of Time* (22004) and Christopher Bayly's *Birth of the Modern World* (2003) also fit this historiographical trend, though no two of these books are much like each other.

Central to Morris' resolution of this problem is the idea that there are identifiable "hard ceilings" at certain points on the social development scale (168–9, 220–226, 607): points at which the negative feedback from earlier development is bound to outpace any further growth unless fundamental innovations occur. The sources of that negative feedback have already been discussed: difficulties in managing a more complex and extensive division of labor, development of rival power centers as core technologies diffuse to peripheries, population pressure/resource depletion, epidemics spread by increased long-distance contact, and so on. In some cases, unfavorable climate shocks have intensified these moments, but until now, the human role in changing climate was probably far too small for those to be endogenous to Morris' model;[11] and since he is interested in showing shared dynamics in East and West, but not synchronicity, he places less emphasis on climate than, for instance, Lieberman, certain world systems theorists, or some theorists of a global '17th century crisis.'[12]

It is not clear how one identifies a "hard ceiling" except by looking retrospectively at subsequent events and social development scores. The most important such ceiling for Morris' argument–perhaps even the only one–comes somewhere between 40 and 45 points. This level was reached by 1st century CE Rome, and by the Northern Song c.1050 CE, but was then followed by decline in each case, and not surpassed until the Industrial Revolution. I would argue, as does Morris, that this is not simply coincidence: that given the physical constraints of production processes before the widespread use of either fossil fuels or electricity, none of the elements of Morris' social development scale was likely to get very much higher than it did at those moments, and did again in both the Eastern and Western cores in the mid-18th century. (Morris has the West surpassing the East in exactly 1771, when both are at 43 points (434–5).) Still, we should remember that generalizing from two cases is a risky business.

For energy capture, by far the biggest component of total scores, this is almost tautological (though one could imagine some further gains in using wind and water power). For city size, one can also imagine some gains above the c.1,000,000 pre-industrial maximum that Morris observes—indeed some people have claimed that both Xi'an and Hangzhou may have hit 2,000,000 in their heydays, though the usual figures are closer to Morris' 1 million—but a

[11] Even this, however, needs to be stated cautiously. Some recent work has suggested that reforestation following the Great Dying in the Americas may have absorbed enough atmospheric carbon to contribute to the 17th century Little Ice Age (Powell 2011: 12), while other work suggests that large-scale deforestation in 18th century India and China may have contributed to droughts and other negative climate effects in the 19th century (Takata, Saito, and Yasunari 2009).

[12] E.g. Lieberman 2003, 2009; Gills and Frank 1993; Parker, 2008 .

city of, say, 5,000,000 does seem unimaginable without some form of mechanized transportation, large-scale production of energy-intensive construction materials (e.g. structural steel), and so on.

For warfare and communications, the issue is more complicated, and may be partly an artifact of features of the Morris scale I have already mentioned. If an army with thousands of nuclear weapons, spy satellites, laser-guided bombs, and instant communications represents 250 points, then it does seem hard to see how any army without at least iron-clad steamships, repeating rifles, and smokeless explosives could have reached even 1 point. But does it then necessarily follow that, for instance, a combination of the best 18th century naval technology with Qing land armies, or the application of French Revolutionary logistics in a polity the size of Russia, would have produced nothing of significance? Similarly, if the wired world of today's wealthiest societies represents 250 points, then it is hard to see how a society without at least telegraphs could get any significant number of points; but does that really mean that, say, doubling the literacy rate would not have made much difference to the ability of various pre-industrial societies to administer frontiers, sustain motivated armies, coordinate complex divisions of labor, and so on? In other words, is the likelihood that there was a cap on how much further any pre-industrial society could get on Morris' social development index the same as a rule that a society reaching that point had to either industrialize or devolve into crisis, unable to do anything that would keep it one step ahead of mounting negative feedback?[13] We cannot, of course, know for sure, and Morris has some anecdotal evidence to support the hard ceiling idea: he notes, for instance, that while 2nd century Rome, unlike 2nd century China, won its frontier wars, this only postponed for a while the empire's collapse in the face of invaders, disease, and disunity (308–317). For the time being, the best we can say is that Morris' hard ceiling is plausible; it is a long way from being demonstrated.

Actually, the idea of 'hardness' seems to have two parts, which are analytically separable. The first is that hard ceilings have a material basis, such as the energy bottleneck which some of us, including Morris, believe constrained economic growth in 18th century cores both East and West. Since the world arguably faces another such bottleneck today–not, this time, because we lack access to more energy supplies, but because the side effects of using them in our accustomed fashion are likely to be catastrophic —providing this kind of material basis for a ceiling is crucial for Morris' analogy between earlier moments and our own, and thus for making his vision of the past a crucial

[13] I have tried in my own work on this issue to distinguish between an 18th century resource bottleneck, making further improvement in living standards difficult without dramatic changes, and a full fledged Malthusian crisis threatening an imminent sharp decline in material welfare. See Pomeranz 2000: 211–242.

guide to the future. (For more on this, see the next section.) It is unclear, however, whether other kinks in Morris' graph have a similar basis: the c.1300 BCE stagnation followed by downturn (at about 24 points), for instance, seems to be a product of more purely social dynamics (223–6); and by saying that the Romans "ran up against the *original* hard ceiling in the first century CE" (607, emphasis added). Morris does seem to be saying that the only truly hard ceiling is the one at 43 points. And if there is really only one previous barrier—the one breached about 250 years ago, with the aid of fossil fuels–that is analogous to what we face, there is much less cause to believe that we need Morris' 15,000 year perspective to understand either how the West became globally dominant after 1750 or how to approach the problems that we face today. Perhaps revealingly, in Morris' conclusion, the only analogy he offers for the kind of innovation that we need today is indeed the post-1750 energy/industrialization breakthrough. (My point here is not, of course, to insist that the deep past is irrelevant, but to argue that Morris' case for a very long-term perspective as necessary and perhaps sufficient for understanding these particular questions does not work.)

The second crucial part of Morris' idea of the hard ceiling is adumbrated above: the idea that these represent points at which failing to break through the energy or other material constraint will inevitably lead not just to stagnation, but to devastating decline. Note that in the discussion above, I tentatively endorsed the idea that 18th century cores may have been nearing limits on per capita income, but suggested that this did not necessarily imply an imminent inability to handle other kinds of challenges. In part how one answers this question may depend on how one defines "imminent"—in other words, on timescale. If one assumes that sooner or later mediocre leadership and/or bad exogenous circumstances will come along, then perhaps a stagnant background level of "ability to get things done" does imply serious decline sooner or later. This seems to be what is suggested, for instance by Morris' formulation that without a breakthrough both the Song and the Romans were bound to face crises "within a few generations" (610). But if that is all that he means by a 'hard ceiling,' then there may have been any number of other potential 'ceilings' that we have not noticed, because while decline would indeed have ensued eventually, it did not come before organizational resources of some sort had again expanded. Conversely, it might appear that 'hard ceilings' were reached at certain moments not because the challenges that appeared at those times were exceptionally intractable, but because the folly or bad luck that turn bottlenecks into downturns came along sooner rather than later. (Again, remember that we have very few cases to work with for each 'hard ceiling.') In that case, it would be unclear how much help Morris provides either in identifying key moments or in helping us pick the right historical analogies to think our way through them.

And the question of just what a 'hard ceiling' is, like the earlier one about just what Morris' index measures, is more than just an academic issue. It becomes quite significant, for instance, when Morris tries to recommend policies to deal with our current energy/climate quandary. Noting quite correctly that many of today's people are still very poor, and that there are another 2 billion people coming by mid-century, Morris sees no way that reducing energy demand among the rich can solve our problem and keep 'social development' moving forward; he thus says that the solution (note the singular form of 'solution') must lie in finding environmentally acceptable ways to further increase our energy use (611–2)). Morris may be right that ultimately we will need new power sources that enable us to continue at least current levels of energy use, but given how pressing our climate crisis is, and that any new source(s) of green power will take decades to replace fossil fuels, is it really wise to dismiss any role for conservation measures? To put it back in Morris' terms, are policies that allow one to stretch a hard ceiling a bit, or stay relatively comfortable at the ceiling—i.e. to stave off disaster for a while even without making a dramatic breakthrough to greater "ability to get things done"—really irrelevant?

Returning to strictly historical issues—and putting aside, for the moment, the difficulties with operationalizing the idea of a 'hard ceiling' in a field that allows no repeat experiments—let us return to the ceiling that seemed to prevail until Britain industrialized, and the West began to 'rule' rather than just 'lead.' Morris adopts the widely (though not universally) held position that extensive use of steam power, based on fossil fuels, was decisive in enabling the West to break through a ceiling that had previously held firm at roughly 43 points. What is somewhat more novel is his argument that doing so depended on previously "closing the steppe highway" that had triggered multiple waves of nomadic invasions when the Romans (in the second century) and the Song (in the twelfth) had bumped up against this ceiling (459, 501). By thus "kill[ing] one of the horsemen of the apocalypse (459)"—i.e. making the 17th–18th century less traumatic for the West's European core than it would otherwise have been (though those years were hardly placid even without steppe invaders)—Qing and Romanov expansion (which squeezed and partially sedentarized the Mongols between these two empires) end up playing an important role in Morris's account of the rise of the West.

To the extent that Morris is right about this, he seems to me to have re-introduced an important role for contingency. After all, the campaigns that subdued the Mongols were at times a near-run thing,[14] and arguments based on deeper structural trends—e.g. that the rise of sea-borne trade greatly weakened the ability of nomadic state-builders to profit from long-distance

[14] See, for instance, Perdue 2005.

commerce—have recently been cast into doubt.[15] Without that argument it is hard to see how the decline of nomadic disruptions can be linked to processes endogenous to the Western European societies which, in Morris' story, were the principal beneficiaries of that decline.[16] Indeed, Morris' formulation suggests a deep irony, since in his telling, both China and Russia (not to mention those they conquered) paid dearly for providing this service to global social development. Focusing on landed expansion, as Morris sees it, kept the Qing (and presumably the Romanovs, though not to the same extent) within an intellectual world that did not demand a radical break from looking to the past for solutions, nor the new mechanistic thought that would lead to scientific and industrial revolutions; Western Europe, by contrast, was free to look away from these older issues, and was stimulated to new ways of thought by the new problems and much more radical difference that they encountered as they ventured onto vastly expanded "oceanic highways" (468–481). (In a less sweeping, but more easily confirmed argument, Philip Hoffman has argued that focusing some (in the case of Russia) or almost all (in the case of China) of their war-making on nomadic enemies, against whom gunpowder weapons were less useful than against sedentary societies, caused these two empires to invest less than Europeans did in developing these weapons and tactics to go with them—a deficit that would eventually have serious consequences for both the Qing and the Romanovs.[17])

This is a provocative idea, and potentially an interesting complement to separate arguments (by David Christian, Arun Bala, Simon Schaffer, and others[18]) that the changed topography of global trade routes in the early modern period helps explain why Europe broke more radically with its classical heritage in this period than other Eurasian cores. However, I am not sure how far one can push a causal link between the containment of Mongol power and the West's success at crashing through the 'hard ceiling.' After all, Western Europe—and especially Britain, where industrialism began—enjoyed a fairly strong protection from nomadic intrusions that went back considerably further in time—among other things, because it had relatively little suitable pasture. It is thus odd that Morris does not follow his own penchant for geographic explanations here. But the end of Mongol independence may be a good deal more important for the next topic to which Morris turns: the relatively successful response of East Asia to Western industrialization and imperialism.

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[15] See, e.g. Di Cosmo 2009; Lieberman 2009.

[16] It is also worth noting here that nomadic invasions did not end in the space between Morris's East and West: as witness Nadir Shah's sack of Delhi (1739–40) or the Wahabbi challenge to Ottoman control of the Arabian peninsula (1803–1805).

[17] Hoffman 2010.

[18] Christian 2004; Bala 2006, Schaffer 2008.

As already noted, Morris argues that every uptick in 'social development' in a core region leads to attempted imitation in peripheries, with successful imitation generally creating a power able to rival the earlier core. Prior to the 19th century, however, this is a process he sees going on largely within both East and West rather than between them.[19] It is, then, a reasonable extension of his argument to argue that once the West could and did exert military (and to a lesser extent, economic) power all around the world, this same logic should unleash attempted 'catch-up' and bring the 'advantages of backwardness' into play in areas well outside the West. From that perspective, as he notes, the emergence, over the last 150 years, of East Asian power centers able to hold their own with the West is exactly what we should expect (521).

But from another perspective, which Morris also notes, East Asia's resurgence is quite surprising. After all, the same Western technologies (and, to a lesser extent, institutions) adopted and adapted by East Asians have been—at least in theory—available to people in Latin America, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, but no comparably powerful challenges to Western hegemony have emerged there (522). This naturally raises the question of whether some aspect of East Asia's previous history can explain its recent gains relative to other regions.

Morris is hardly the first to ponder this question, which has spawned a cottage industry of 'why China/Japan/East Asia' theories. Nor are his conclusions in this part of the book particularly novel. He points out, as various others have, that areas that were never fully colonized by Europeans (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, Thailand) have tended to fare better in the 20th century than those that were, and that those with "high social development" prior to the 19th century have also done better (522). (Morris does not provide social development scores for other parts of the world, but tells us that India scored lower than East Asia, and Africa lower than either—which, given the components of his index, seems likely. Parts of Latin America, however, might pose a more interesting challenge to this claim.)

Unfortunately, Morris does not probe much further into this two-pronged explanation, since one can imagine many ways of understanding this correlation. One possibility would be that his two factors can be collapsed into one: that areas with 'high social development' (or as I would put it, considerable power) were not directly colonized precisely because of that development: because their relatively strong states made them more difficult (though probably not impossible) to conquer, and/or because their relatively commercialized economies and strong property rights made conquest

[19] He does make an exception by noting the diffusion of Chinese technologies such as gunpowder and compasses to late medieval Europe; he does not mention a number of other examples (paper, printing, etc.) perhaps because they would blur his chronology too much.

unnecessary for European powers whose interests in Asia were primarily economic.[20] But such a suggestion still has to deal with a number of issues.

One issue is empirical: given how Morris's social development scores are computed, what do they actually tell us about intra-Asian comparisons? For instance, since the index is primarily driven by energy consumption pre-1900, how much would the difference between China and India—both of which were overwhelmingly rural at that date—simply reflect climatic differences (making needs for domestic heating smaller in India)? To what extent should Taiwan—a frontier with very little urbanization when Japan seized it from China in 1895—get 'credit' in 'its' development score for the size of either Beijing or Tokyo?

A second issue is conceptual. Why was it apparently so advantageous not to be directly colonized—or to put it in more familiar terms, exactly how did Western colonialism hurt colonized societies, and why was informal imperialism perhaps less harmful? True, colonies were often governed in the interests of the metropole, but what were the relevant features of that governance that distinguish colonies from semi-colonized locales, or from areas subjected to non-Western empires? Few colonies made direct fiscal transfers to their metropoles larger than the indemnities that China paid for lost wars (the Dutch East Indies would probably be one exception[21]); and post-1840 East Asia, just as much as many formal colonies, was forced into 'free trade' with countries far more industrialized than they were. While no place in Morris' East suffered Western violence and plunder on a scale comparable to various parts of Africa (or to indigenous people in the Americas and Australia), it is not clear that many colonized parts of Southwest, South, or Southeast Asia were any more affected than China. Nor is it clear, given Morris' emphasis on the advantages gained when peripheral societies apply technologies and institutions pioneered in cores, why he does not think that direct rule had some advantages over what, even in Japan, was only a partial imitation of Western institutions. One might argue that hybrid institutions had an easier time taking root than colonial institutions that represented a wholesale imposition of Western ideas (e.g. the property law imposed on parts of India by the British), or, conversely, that colonial rulers often preferred to be guardians of what they thought were local 'traditions' (as epitomized by Lord Lugard in Nigeria). But those are two very different positions, with very different implications. Thus, Morris needs to say more about why he is so certain modern colonialism inhibited development when he often treats other colonialisms as agents of 'social development' (albeit often brutal ones); and he needs to sort out more clearly what the coincident geographies of social

[20] For various arguments along these lines see Sugihara 2003; Cain and Hopkins 2002; Arrighi 2007.

[21] Maddison 1989: 651–3.

development on the one hand, and the limits of colonialism on the other, actually explain.

From Present to Future

However one explains it, Morris is on relatively firm ground descriptively as he moves toward the present-day outcome of his story. Within the West, a long series of struggles for hegemony eventually produced U.S. military and economic predominance which continues (in somewhat diluted form) today. Within the East, China enjoys increasing military supremacy, limited more by the U.S. presence at various points around its perimeter than by any other Asian power; it is also increasingly central in a trans-national production chain that has made it the world's factory floor. As of now different measures yield wildly different answers about the comparative strengths of 'East' and 'West': for instance Chinese GDP per capita and ability to project military power are still a fraction of the U.S.A.'s, but total economic output is converging quickly, and the average baby born in Shanghai has both a longer life expectancy and a better chance of attending college than one born in Washington D.C. But however one assesses the current situation, it is hard to see a future in which one can speak of the West ruling the world in the same way that this made sense c.1850–1950 (or perhaps even 1990).

Indeed, many political scientists seem quite enamored of the idea that the U.S./Chinese relationship should be thought of as one between a declining global hegemon and its principal challenger, and are drawn to historical analogies as a way of thinking about this. Unfortunately, the range of analogies in play will probably strike most historians as far too narrow: while optimists invoke the relatively harmonious transfer of global supremacy from Britain to the U.S over the first half of the 20th century, pessimists are inclined to cite the unsuccessful and horrifyingly destructive challenge to British supremacy posed by Germany during the same period.[22] Given the many ways in which both of those common framings seem far from apt, it is hard not to welcome Morris' insistence that history is indeed relevant for thinking about the future of global power relations, but that one needs a much broader set of historical references. I am not persuaded that his framework is sufficient either, but it is good that he is trying to re-orient the conversation.

[22] See for instance Jia Qingguo and Richard Rosecrance 2010, and the more popular versions (though by academics) provided in Ferguson 2009 and Nye 2011. A very similar approach, though with the focus on challenges by Germany, Japan, and the U.S.S.R. to U.S. rather than British hegemony form the background for the debate between John Mearshemer and Zbigniew Brzezinski in *Foreign Policy*, January 5, 2005.

As Morris sees it, three generalizations derived from his sketch of the past are crucial for understanding the future. The first is the rapid and accelerating upward trend of social development: as he sees it, the index, having taken 15,000 years to get to 1,000, is on track to reach 5,000 by the end of this century (590). Morris admits that this implies things that currently seem unimaginable—cities of over 100 million, information technology so effective that it could essentially duplicate human minds and connect them to each other—but argues that such things may indeed be on the horizon; here he relies heavily on the inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil's idea of an approaching 'Singularity' in which biology and technology essentially merge (593–596). The second lesson he extracts from history is the advantages of backwardness: this suggests (as do projections of trend lines for GDP and other indicators) that the East, with more room left to increase its efficiency by implementing state of the art technology and other learned practices, will surpass the West somewhere in the middle of this century.

Morris' third lesson, however, is the paradox of social development, which suggests that development always generates strains which, especially if not well managed, can lead to social collapse. Morris imagines various ways in which current trends could lead to catastrophe. The two most likely, he suggests, are catastrophic climate change fueled by our ever-increasing energy use—and leading to everything from crop failures to mass movements of refugees and huge epidemics—and/or large-scale war. The worst possibility he imagines is a U.S-China conflict over global leadership, probably dragging in Russia as well; but various other political scenarios could also lead to catastrophe (605–6).

Consequently, Morris argues, the impending shift to Eastern leadership, though interesting, is of secondary importance unless it triggers a major war. The bigger point is that the East/West distinction is becoming irrelevant. Either we will achieve something like the global techno-utopia of the Singularity (with resulting levels of innovation that will solve problems such as clean energy), or we will fail to manage our ecological problems and the tensions accompanying the end of Western dominance and descend into eco-catastrophe. Either way, the whole world will share the same fate (619–20). What matters in the twenty-first century, as Morris sees it, is that we (a) avoid all-out nuclear war and (b) slow down climate change, mostly by finding sustainable energy sources (608–9); if we can do those two things, he suggests, then technological progress can indeed bring us all to the Singularity (613).

Here, I think, Morris is seriously misled by his elision of the world beyond Europe, North America, and East Asia. There is, after all, an enormous "South"—if one insists on geographic labels—that is much worse off than either Morris' East or West, and not converging towards them. Whether or not Shanghai and Beijing surpass New York and Washington as centers of global influence is not likely to matter very much to people in Mogadishu, much less

to people in villages 100 miles outside Mogadishu. And while the people in these places are by no means strangers to the transformations wrought by information technology—millions of them use cell phones to keep in touch as they migrate, and even those who do not have cell phones can be greatly affected when currency traders make instantaneous transfers of capital—there is nothing to suggest that they or their children will be full participant-beneficiaries in the emergence of Kurzweil's universal human-machine network. Nor are such people a 'shrinking remnant' of humanity. Most models suggest that virtually all of the world's net population growth in the next 50 years (probably 2 billion people, perhaps more) will take place in or near the tropics:[23] in places well outside both the Eastern and the Western cores, and likely to face many of the worst effects of climate change.

And if huge numbers of people seem likely to be left out of any coming techno-utopia, it seems equally true that some will fare much better than others in the event of eco-catastrophe. Granted, one can imagine some nightmare scenarios so awful that the whole world would suffer more or less equally. But it seems likely that here, too, current inequalities will continue to matter. Flooding related to climate change threatens New York and Amsterdam as well as Calcutta and Dhaka, but the resources available for mitigation are so much greater in the former than the latter cities that they will probably not share the same fate.

Of course, an all-too-likely intensification of global inequality is bound to mean a large increase in global migration. As Morris notes, even current levels of migration already seem threatening to many people in the rich countries (and, one should add, in many not so rich countries, which receive millions of migrants from even poorer countries nearby). Without himself endorsing anti-immigrant reactions, Morris notes that "Global warming threatens to make even the most lurid fears of anti-immigration activists come true by the 2020s" (603), suggesting that climate refugees (or others in motion) may be the vectors for horrible pandemics, or otherwise "reviv[e] the kind of problems that the steppe highway used to present" (603).

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[23] See the list of projections by country (from the U.S. Census Bureau and CIA) complied at People Facts and Figures http://www.os-connect.com/pop/p2a.asp?whichpage=9&pagesize=20&sort=Country. The United States, China, Mexico, and Afghanistan which are mostly in the temperate zones, will experience significant population growth (in absolute terms) but that is about it for temperate zone countries, and this will be largely balanced by declines in Europe, Russia, and Japan. See also "World Population to Increase by 2.6 Billion in Next 45 Years, With All Growth Occurring in Less Developed Regions," United Nations Population Division Press Release, February 24, 2005, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/pop918.doc.htm

If fears about the impact of greater immigration can be channeled into efforts to spur action to prevent climate change, rather than remaining focused on promoting harsher treatment of migrants—which I suspect is what Morris hopes to do with those sentences—far be it from me to complain. Yet here, too, I think Morris' picture of a 21st century in which we are all saved or damned together ignores medium-term trends that will not soon become irrelevant. In fact, the percentage of human beings who live outside the country of their birth today is not dramatically higher than it was in 1913.[24] This is astonishing when one considers that the costs of travel have dropped dramatically since that date, especially relative to the differences in average incomes between the richest and the poorest countries; that migrants can much more easily keep in touch with home than a century ago; that information about distant opportunities is more readily available; and that there are vastly more sovereign states than in 1913, so that billions of people would not have to move as far to be outside the country of their birth as they would have in 1913. The reasons why migration has not risen much more than it has are no doubt complicated, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that states still matter, and that while those that want to restrict either entry or exit miss an awful lot of people, they are also quite effective at deterring and blocking even more potential migrants. It seems unlikely that that this capacity will disappear, or be so overwhelmed by numbers that which societies are rich and powerful today (in Morris' shorthand "geography") will become truly irrelevant to how their people fare a century from now.

In his last two paragraphs (not counting the methodological appendix), Morris invokes Jared Diamond. Clearly, like Diamond in *Collapse*,[25] Morris hopes that calling attention to the successes and failures of various past societies—especially the consequences of failures in environmental management—can contribute to better decisions and outcomes this time around. One can hardly object to that project. Morris is also right to emphasize that history has cyclical elements, in which growth can lead to crisis (his "paradox of development"), meaning that those doing well today cannot assume they are immune from decline. Surely he is also right that history has some linear elements (his "social development") which have vastly increased the power of (some) humans, and thus the consequences of failing to avert crisis. I can only applaud his insistence on driving home these points.

But agreeing that these are important dynamics is quite different from treating them as the only important dynamics, or arguing that the growing necessity of thinking globally means that framing issues on that scale is

[24] Gozzini 2006: 330 has the comparison for 1965 and 2000; and 1965 came towards the end of a long period of particularly restrictive immigration policies in most of the world's key receiving countries.

[25] Diamond 2005.

sufficient for understanding the forces likely to shape them. Here, then, it may be Morris—rather than the scholars he criticizes early in his book for objecting to all theories of "social evolution" (140–142)—who is letting a humane political agenda rule out necessary inquiries into hard realities of power. Particularly if, as seems likely, we are headed for a highly unequal world that lies somewhere in between 'Singularity' and 'Nightfall,' rather than one or the other, more regionally specific and distinctly modern dynamics—and the vastly inequalities of wealth and power they have bequeathed us—would still seem to have a considerable importance. Morris' 15,000 year perspective (and his global geographic scale) can be illuminating, but I remain unconvinced that it offers the best lens for viewing either the present or the future—much less the only lens we need.

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