

October 12, 2004

Questions for Pomeranz reading:

1. In *Great Divergence* Pomeranz utilizes an ecological metaphor for examining economic phenomena – population density/pressures and niche packing, life expectancy and caloric intake, sustainable versus intensive land-exhaustive agriculture (fertility of soil), etc. This provides a universal framework (through our shared biological needs and universal ecological principles) from which he can compare different cultural regions, arguably useful in developing a “world history” without cultural bias. Pomeranz’s method, however, leans on certain reductions (usage of “average” data, population density as a primary unit of analysis, or equating caloric intake with life expectancy, for example), which, in part, he acknowledges are due to limited data, but also arise from the issue of measurability. What is lost in these reductions?
2. Extending the ecological metaphor from question 1, it seems to me that the discovery of coal energy (to replace wood) in Britain, and the reliance on silver as a monetary unit in China represent, for Pomeranz, “keystone agents” in their respective socioeconomic ecosystems. Are there other such keystone agents that we could find, perhaps ones that are not only geographical but also cultural? (One possible example of a significant geographical difference between Europe and Asia is the greater prominence of sea waterways in Europe – this could explain advancements in European ships, which in turn played an important role in transoceanic voyages and empire building.) Why might the fortuitousness of these elements seem unsatisfying in searching for causes of later industrialization and colonization (is this perhaps Pomeranz’s intent)?
3. What are the modern day implications of Britain’s fortuitous discovery of coal energy, if that discovery is attributed to be the primary agent in permitting non-sustainable industrial growth rather than (human) innovation? Reevaluating the legacy of the “biological old regime”.
4. At several points Pomeranz alludes to cultural differences between China and Europe that take on economic proportions – e.g. Chinese predilection for wooden house-making, the Chinese’s stronger moral aversion to women working outside of the home. Pomeranz argues that these differences become trivial under market pressures, and ultimately obsolete. Could these cultural differences be viewed as a legitimate independent arena of competition/comparison? Or put another way, can these cultural phenomena be seen as additional environmental hurdles? (For example, language, written or spoken, might represent a cohesive, stabilizing force that is not easily reducible to economic terms.) If so, then how would such “cultural niches” confound Pomeranz’s largely economic model of market systems?