

**BETWEEN THE
MIDDLE AGES AND
MODERNITY**

**Individual and Community in the
Early Modern World**

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Early Modern Europe and the Early Modern World

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IN THE EARLY 1960S HISTORIANS BEGAN to speak frequently of early modern Europe, meaning the period from the Renaissance to the French Revolution, as a distinct and coherent era of European history. Since the mid-1980s the notion has emerged that the period from approximately 1500 to 1800 formed a distinct and coherent era of global history commonly referred to as the early modern world. The constructions of these parallel and yet intertwined conceptions of early modernity are very interesting historiographical developments, and they reflect some ways in which changes within the community of professional historians have influenced understanding of the European and global past. While exploring these points, this essay argues that a coherent conception of early modern Europe presupposes a conception of a larger early modern world. It also sketches a vision of the early modern world not as a stable site defined by a set of static traits or specific characteristics, but rather as an evolving product shaped by a cluster of dynamic historical processes that promoted intense cross-cultural interaction and exchange. The essay holds further that these interactive processes did not yield a homogeneous early modern world. Rather, they brought quite different effects to the various lands that they touched. It is particularly appropriate to consider the notions of early modern Europe and the early modern world together in this essay because James D. Tracy, the honoree of this volume, has made conspicuous contributions to the understanding of both conceptions.

For the first hundred years of professional historical scholarship, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, professional historians generally adopted the periodization scheme advanced by Francesco Petrarca and

other Renaissance humanists, who divided time into ancient, medieval, and modern periods. This tripartite periodization guided the massive efforts of scholars in the early twentieth century to compile definitive works such as the Cambridge histories of the ancient, medieval, and modern eras.¹ It also shaped the agenda of the American Historical Association in 1931 when it sought to identify future research needs and convoked conferences of specialists in ancient history, medieval history, modern European history, and American history to address the matter.² The community of professional historians was able to embrace the tripartite periodization scheme partly because historians restricted their studies almost exclusively to the Mediterranean basin, Europe, and Europe's offshoots in the Western Hemisphere. Working under the influence of G. W. F. Hegel, they regarded Europe as the site of genuine historical development, dismissing other regions as lands imprisoned by tradition and mired in stagnation. Thus it did not matter much that the tripartite periodization scheme did not apply well to Asian, African, American, and Oceanic societies because professional historians mostly left those regions to the tender mercies of Orientalists and anthropologists until the mid-twentieth century.

While working within the tripartite periodization framework, professional historians nevertheless edged gradually toward the notion that the early modern era constituted a recognizable period or subperiod of European history. A search of JSTOR archives on the Internet will show that the term *early modern* made sporadic appearances, mostly in book reviews and conference reports rather than formal articles, already in the early years of the twentieth century. Most early occurrences of the term came in debates on economic history and the development of capitalism, but a few appeared in discussions of European history more generally. The vast majority of these references reflected casual and even loose usage, however, by which the term *early modern* simply referred to the early centuries of the modern era rather than a coherent period with distinctive characteristics.³

The earliest instance I have noticed in which the term *early modern* reflected a considered category of periodization in European history comes from a textbook published in 1926 by Lynn Thorndike. If 1926 seems precociously early for the deliberate invocation of an early modern construct, there is no mystery about the purposes terminology served in this work: Thorndike, the great medievalist, transparently adopted the term *early modern* with an eye toward debunking the notion that the Renaissance and Reformation were meaningful historical periods, or even significant historical movements. To emphasize the point further, in April 1927 he published two scholarly articles that again relied on the concept of early modernity to undermine the significance of the Renaissance and Reformation.⁴ Thorndike's incipient notion of early modern Eu-

rope thus had implications for intramural debates within the community of professional historians, particularly for their conceptions of the relationship between medieval and modern times. For the next quarter century, however, during an era of global depression and world war, historians seem to have found little time for debates over fine points of periodization.

About the mid-twentieth century, references to early modern Europe became more common among professional historians, particularly among those working in North America. William J. Bouwsma once suggested that the field of early modern Europe held special appeal for scholars in the United States because the era "roughly coincides with the colonial period of American history, when 'Americans' were still more or less Europeans."⁵ This judgment is plausible enough, but it is relevant to note also that the notion of early modern Europe found its following during an era of unprecedented expansion in North American higher education. During the late 1950s and 1960s, the leading graduate schools ramped up their production of Ph.D.'s to staff newly created positions for historians. With a rapidly expanding population, the community of professional historians embarked on a round of intense scholarly specialization. The notion of early modern Europe was a principal beneficiary of this specialization. Scholars like Garrett Mattingly, E. H. Harbison, Crane Brinton, Wallace K. Ferguson, Louis Gottschalk, John B. Wolf, J. H. Hexter, and others produced the scholarship that defined early modern Europe as a field of study. They also made the field a staple in both undergraduate and graduate curricula in history. Their students wrote dissertations that fleshed out the details of early modern Europe and established the field in colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada.

Meanwhile, the notion of early modern Europe attracted only limited interest in Europe itself. By the 1970s the concept of *frühe Neuzeit* had found a following among some German historians, but only after battling two decades of suspicion that it represented pernicious American influence. Elsewhere, European historians largely did without the term *early modern*, even as many of them made distinguished contributions to the understanding of European history during the centuries North American scholars considered the early modern era.⁶ Differences between national communities of professional historians no doubt help explain this uneven recognition of early modern Europe as a distinct and coherent era. Strong traditions of national historiography discouraged European scholars from efforts to explore a larger European past, while North American historians were more willing to construe larger patterns as they looked at European history from transatlantic distance.

In any case, for a term that captured the imagination of professional historians rather quickly and spread widely throughout the academic world, at least in North America, it is remarkable that the concept of early modern Europe for

a long time generated little critical discussion and no discernible debate on its coherence. For decades after its establishment as a commonly recognized period, historians made few efforts that I am aware of to reflect on the concept of early modern Europe in sustained fashion or to define its geographical and chronological boundaries. Still less did they subject the term to critical examination, interrogate its coherence, or question the limits of its usefulness. Rather, they simply took *early modern* as a term of convenience for a broadly construed postmedieval and prerevolutionary Europe, or some part thereof. Thus Garrett Mattingly dealt with European diplomatic history of the seventeenth century under the rubric "early modern diplomacy," but as one who worked by both habit and inclination in classic idiographic mode, he allowed historical data to drive his analysis and did not turn his attention to the abstraction of early modernity.⁷

To be sure, Mattingly and other historians provided thoughtful characterizations of early modern Europe, and their works communicated clearly enough their understanding of the early modern concept. In his popular synthetic work, for example, Eugene F. Rice Jr. treated the Renaissance and Reformation era as an age of early modern transition—not a transition from medieval to modern, but rather from medieval to "traditional" Europe, meaning prerevolutionary and preindustrial Europe.⁸ Even if this formulation begged some questions, Rice offered a nuanced analysis of the various continuities and ruptures that characterized early modern Europe, with particular emphasis on cultural and religious developments. Similarly, H. G. Koenigsberger had little to say about the concept of early modernity as such, but he provided a judicious synthesis, studded with insightful observations, of Europe from the Reformation to the French Revolution.⁹ Koenigsberger viewed early modern Europe basically through the lens of political organization, but he made generous space also for social, economic, and cultural developments in a succinct and pithy account. Herbert H. Rowen's detailed textbook for undergraduate survey courses also provided a meaty introduction that found occasion to stress the emergence and development of capitalism as a particularly salient feature of early modern Europe.¹⁰

So far as I am aware, the first careful discussion in the English language of early modern Europe as a historiographical concept appeared only in 1994. In the introduction to their handbook on early modern Europe, Thomas A. Brady Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy identified three main themes of European history from 1400 to 1600: the cycle of late medieval economic and demographic collapse followed by recovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the rupture of Christendom and emergence of sovereign national states, and the establishment of European seaborne empires that organized global networks of production and exchange. As the trio summarized

their argument: "Depression and recovery, Christendom and the states, Europe and the empires—these are three profoundly important changes specific to this era of late medieval-to-early modern transition."¹¹

Granting that this formulation reflects great learning and wisdom on the part of three distinguished scholars, it also bespeaks the difficulty of framing a vision of a coherent and bounded early modern Europe. The problem of geographical boundaries in particular raises questions. What were the boundaries of Europe in the early modern era? All three of the Brady-Oberman-Tracy criteria clearly imply that early modern Europe is comprehensible only in the context of a larger early modern world. The cycle of depression and recovery from 1400 to 1600 was not peculiar to Europe, after all, but rather was, to some greater or lesser extent, a hemispheric phenomenon in which Europe participated along with other lands. The consolidation and centralization of powerful states was also a hemispheric phenomenon, and European state building depended heavily on resources and technologies, such as silver and gunpowder weapons, that flowed to Europe from the larger world. Meanwhile, the creation of maritime empires eventually linked the experiences and fates of almost all the earth's peoples with their counterparts in distant lands. To the extent that the Brady-Oberman-Tracy criteria draw attention to some distinctive features of early modern Europe, it appears that any coherent conception of early modern Europe entails the notion of a larger early modern world.

Indeed, by the time the Brady-Oberman-Tracy statement made its appearance, the notion of early modernity had already escaped European orbit and found its way to distant parts. The earliest published invocation of the term *early modern* in connection with the world beyond Europe that I have noticed dates to 1940, in the first edition of William L. Langer's *Encyclopedia of World History*.¹² Langer did not explain the periodization of his encyclopedia, nor did he attribute any distinctive features or characteristics to the periods he recognized. He simply established the early modern period as a category for events that took place between about 1500 and 1800 in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, as well as Europe. (Oceania did not appear in the early modern section of Langer's work, although it did draw attention in other sections.) It seems clear enough that Langer and his colleagues simply extended the writ of early modernity from European to global scale without fashioning a fully fleshed conception of a coherent early modern world: Crane Brinton, the distinguished historian of early modern Europe, was responsible for compiling and organizing most of the data in the encyclopedia's section on "The Early Modern Period."

By the 1980s historians and historical sociologists were beginning to generate deeper and more substantive conceptions of early modernity beyond Europe. When applied to the larger world, the notion of early modernity has

taken at least three distinct forms. One group of scholars has extended the notion of an early modern period to individual lands beyond Europe with historical experiences ostensibly similar or comparable to those of early modern Europe. Thus Conrad Totman devoted a very important book to early modern Japan, by which he meant the Tokugawa era. He did not explicitly justify his use of the specific term *early modern*, but processes like state building and urbanization that shaped Tokugawa Japan were certainly comparable to similar processes at work in early modern Europe.¹³ Similarly, working under the influence of the alternative modernities project, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and colleagues organized a special issue of the journal *Daedalus* around the theme "Early Modernities" that were noticeable in Asian as well as European lands, with special attention to the issues of civil society and the public sphere.¹⁴

While decoupling the notion of early modernity from Europe, this approach almost inevitably takes European experience as the starting point, if not the standard, for the analysis of early modernity. It represents a straightforward extension of European historical categories to the larger world rather than the construction of a more global notion of an early modern era that developed according to an identifiable set of historical dynamics. Thus it opens itself to the kind of critique recently articulated by On-cho Ng, who argued that traits associated with early modern Europe differed fundamentally from those noticeable in seventeenth-century China, hence that the notion of early modernity did not travel well beyond Europe.¹⁵

A second group of scholars has pushed the notion of early modernity beyond individual lands and envisioned transregional Eurasian orders in the early modern era. In his influential study on revolutions and rebellions, for example, Jack A. Goldstone argued that "robust processes" such as demographic growth, inflation, and social mobility influenced the experiences of societies throughout Eurasia during the early modern era.¹⁶ Similarly, Victor Lieberman argued that processes of territorial consolidation and political integration worked throughout early modern Eurasia, and he devised an elaborate program of comparative analysis to test his hypotheses.¹⁷ Some empirical studies lend support to the notion of a Eurasian early modernity. One salient recent example is Laura Hostetler's study of the Qing dynasty's methods of establishing colonial rule in southwest China. Hostetler argued that Qing agents relied on cartography and ethnography in the same way as their contemporaries in France and Russia, and moreover that the transregional circulation of cartographic and ethnographic techniques strengthened the hands of expansionist and imperialist powers throughout much of Eurasia.¹⁸ Another example is Stephen Frederic Dale's study of Indian merchants, whom Dale portrayed as representatives of a larger Eurasian commercial order.¹⁹

A theoretical statement on behalf of this second approach to early modernity beyond Europe appeared as early as 1985. This was the work of Joseph F. Fletcher, a prominent historian of central Asia and China, whose wide-ranging research encouraged him to understand historical developments in large, transregional contexts. In a posthumously published essay, Fletcher argued for an early modern Eurasia on the basis of what he called "interconnections" and "horizontal continuities." By "interconnections" he meant the spread of influences, such as trade items or religious ideas, via direct contacts that linked two or more societies. By "horizontal continuities" he meant parallel experiences of two or more societies that did not communicate directly with one another but that nevertheless participated in the same larger historical processes. Examples might be the growth of cities and urban commercial classes in the Ottoman Empire and Japan—lands that had little or no direct connection but that both responded to the larger rhythms of Eurasian history. Taking this approach, Fletcher suggested, it would become clear that "Japan, Tibet, Iran, Asia Minor, and the Iberian peninsula, all seemingly cut off from one another, were responding to some of the same, interrelated, or at least similar demographic, economic, and even social forces."²⁰

The logic of this argument points well beyond Eurasia, of course, and Fletcher himself made some tentative claims for its global significance. It is possible that, given more time, he might have developed his argument further and offered a fully fleshed portrait of an early modern world. As it happened, however, Fletcher's essay remained unfinished at the time of his death, so he had no opportunity to extend his analysis beyond Eurasian horizons. Several of the features Fletcher considered to be the hallmarks of early modernity—such as the rise of urban commercial classes, religious revival and reform, rural unrest and rebellion, and the decline of nomads—would seem to apply awkwardly to the world beyond Eurasia, and indeed would have little resonance at all in some regions. Furthermore, several features that would seem to be prominent characteristics of a global early modernity—such as the construction of global trade networks, global exchanges of biological species, and the organization of transcontinental migrations—make little or no appearance in Fletcher's essay. Even if he entertained the notion of an early modern world, the formidable scholar of central Asia and China sketched only the outlines of an early modern Eurasia. While arguing persuasively for the need to recognize larger contexts in which European and Asian histories unfolded, Fletcher did not have the opportunity to explore larger contexts of Eurasian history itself.

Meanwhile, a third approach has extended the tentacles of early modernity beyond both Europe and Eurasia to genuinely global dimensions. James D. Tracy and Stuart B. Schwartz have both edited volumes that assumed a

recognizable early modern world on the basis of surging long-distance trade, increasing economic integration, and rampant cross-cultural interaction.²¹ John F. Richards has published a powerful analysis of global environmental history that takes increasing economic integration of the early modern world as its most basic assumption.²² Many other studies have supported the notion of a global early modernity, particularly from the perspectives of environmental and economic history, though without necessarily invoking the term *early modern* or drawing implications specifically for historical periodization.²³

Like the concept of early modern Eurasia, the notion of an early modern world has generated theoretical discussion. Richards has addressed the issue of periodization most explicitly by arguing for a coherent early modern era in world history during the period about 1500 to 1800 on the basis of six global processes: the creation of global sea-lanes and transportation networks; the emergence of a global economy; the consolidation of large centralized states; the doubling of world population; the intensification of land use, particularly on settler frontiers; and the global diffusion of powerful technologies.²⁴ If widely accepted, this vision of an early modern world, or a modified conception such as the one outlined below, would constitute a solid foundation for studies that seek to locate early modern Europe and early modern Eurasia in global context.

Even though it has made its way into numerous studies, the notion of early modernity is not without its critics. Jack A. Goldstone has lodged an objection against the concept, in both European and global contexts, largely on grounds of terminology. If the term *modern* refers to an era distinguished by traits such as religious freedom, mechanical industry, and constitutional government, Goldstone argued, then the centuries before 1800 were neither modern nor even an early stage of modernity. Rather, borrowing the formulation of E. A. Wrigley, Goldstone suggested the phrase "period of advanced organic societies" as a more apt characterization of the era.²⁵

Goldstone offered some cogent points in his critique of the specific term *early modern*, but many scholars would not likely agree to reduce all the complexity of modernity to religious freedom, mechanical industry, and constitutional government. If the presence of large Euro-American and African American populations in the Western Hemisphere is also a characteristic of the modern world, for example, then large-scale European and African migrations might well justify an "early modern" label for the period 1500 to 1800. Similarly, if the global exchange of biological species is a prominent feature of the modern world, then the Columbian exchange might well justify use of the term *early modern* for the centuries following 1492. If the creation of global markets counts as a salient characteristic of the modern world, then the pe-

riod 1500 to 1800 certainly deserves recognition as an early modern era. In any case, leaving aside the merits of the specific term *early modern*, what is perhaps more important is that Goldstone's critique applies to the term rather than the substance of the era that it refers to: Far from denying the notion that the period about 1500 to 1800 constituted a reasonably distinct and coherent era of world history, Goldstone himself explicitly recognized the fundamental integrity of that globally linked yet still preindustrial world.

Might there be sociological considerations that help explain the emergence of this concept of an early modern world? Genealogically, the idea of an early modern world clearly derived from the notion of early modern Europe. Yet the emergence of the new concept was not simply a natural occurrence in the normal development of historical scholarship. Rather, it reflected changes within the community of professional historians. Just as the notion of early modern Europe benefited from a round of intense scholarly specialization fueled by a rapidly expanding population of historians during the 1960s, so the concept of an early modern world also flourished in a particular scholarly environment. By the 1980s, when scholars were applying the term *early modern* to the world beyond Europe, several developments were influencing the substance of historical scholarship. For one thing, the accumulated results from several decades' worth of area studies scholarship were bringing a vast amount of information about the larger world to the attention of professional historians. Furthermore, the community of professional historians in North America, where the notion of early modern Europe was most popular, was becoming increasingly diverse, as scholars of African, Asian, and Latin American ancestry sharply increased their numbers in the North American academy. At the same time, offerings in the history curriculum were becoming correspondingly diverse, as scholars developed and deepened fields of study beyond European and U.S. history. Meanwhile, historians in North America and Europe were communicating much more closely than in earlier times with their colleagues in other lands, particularly with those in Asian and Latin American universities. Finally, world history was emerging as a distinct subfield in the larger discipline of history. In combination, these developments encouraged some historians to view the European and American pasts in larger contexts. As historians noticed historical parallels between Europe and other lands, they stretched concepts originally devised for Europe and applied them more broadly throughout Eurasia. As they became more aware of the numerous global links that served as avenues for cross-cultural interaction and exchange, they ventured even further and formulated conceptions of a distinct and coherent early modern world.

Indeed, from the larger perspective of world history, the period roughly 1500 to 1800 was an age of cross-cultural interaction on a previously unprecedented

scale. Increasingly during these centuries, cross-cultural interactions and exchanges influenced the ways peoples led their lives and organized their societies in almost all parts of planet earth. It was most certainly not the case that cross-cultural interactions had their origins in the early modern era: Peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere, the Western Hemisphere, and Oceania had all crossed political and cultural boundary lines since the early days of human presence on the earth, although before 1500 there was limited interaction between the world's largest geographical regions. Yet the early modern era brought almost all the world's peoples into frequent, intense, and sustained interaction with one another. The early modern age differed from earlier eras in that networks of cross-cultural interaction and exchange extended well beyond the boundaries of the Eastern Hemisphere, the Western Hemisphere, and Oceania to embrace the entire world. It also differed markedly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—the age of national states, mechanized industry, and global empires—when European and Euro-American peoples dominated world affairs through political, military, technological, and economic power. Thus by the term *early modern world* I mean the era about 1500 to 1800, when cross-cultural interactions increasingly linked the fates and fortunes of peoples throughout the world, but before national states, mechanized industry, and industrial-strength imperialism decisively changed the dynamics governing the development of world history.²⁶

In this conception of things, the early modern era was a genuinely global age not so much because of any particular set of traits that supposedly characterized all or at least many lands, but rather because of historical processes that linked the world's peoples and societies in increasingly dense networks of interaction and exchange, even if those interactive processes produced very different results in different lands. As I see things, three primary global processes drove the development of the early modern world, while several spinoff effects of the three primary global processes also exercised their influences on large transregional scales. The three primary global processes that drove the development of the early modern world included the creation of global networks of sea-lanes that provided access to all the world's shorelines, global exchanges of biological species that held massive implications for human populations as well as natural environments, and the forging of an early capitalist global economy that shaped patterns of production, distribution, consumption, and social organization around the world. These three processes did not unfold separately and independently, but rather overlapped and reinforced one another. Indeed, they all stemmed from the largely European impulse to establish long-distance trading relationships. Since they unfolded in different ways and on somewhat different schedules, however, it is useful for analytical purposes to consider them as distinct processes.

At least seven large-scale developments followed from the three primary global processes: demographic fluctuations, large-scale migrations, intensified exploitation of natural environments, technological diffusions, consolidation of centralized states, imperial expansion, and global cultural exchanges. These spinoff effects affected different lands in very different ways, but they nevertheless reflected the participation of the world's peoples in larger global processes of interaction and exchange. As in the case of the three primary global processes, these seven subsidiary effects were not separate and distinct developments. Rather, they overlapped, influenced, complicated, contradicted, and reinforced one another in myriad ways: Early modernity was a messy affair. Nevertheless, in combination, the three primary global processes together with their various spinoff effects constituted a cluster of historical dynamics that profoundly influenced the development of individual societies and the world as a whole. The early modern world was the evolving and ever-changing product of the interactive processes driven by this cluster of historical dynamics.²⁷

It is clearly impossible in short compass to trace the workings of the three primary global processes and the seven spinoff effects just mentioned, but the following paragraphs will attempt to outline in sketchy fashion their operation in the early modern world. The establishment of global networks of sea-lanes providing access to all the world's shorelines was a precondition for the other large-scale processes of early modern times. Without reliable maritime highways, it is self-evident that intense and sustained interaction between the peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere, the Western Hemisphere, and Oceania was impossible. After the opening of the world's oceans, relatively cheap transportation and communication facilitated interactions between peoples from distant parts of the earth. Two sets of considerations help to explain why European mariners were most active in establishing global networks of sea-lanes. First, Europeans had stronger incentives than most other peoples to explore the world's oceans. Their motives included the prospect of prospering from direct participation in the hemispheric economy centered on the Indian Ocean basin as well as a powerful missionary impulse and a desire to establish connections with Christian communities beyond Europe. Second, through a combination of borrowing, adaptation, tinkering, and outright invention, Europeans accumulated a remarkable tool kit of maritime technologies. By the mid-sixteenth century, their nautical hardware was the most effective, their naval armaments the most formidable, and their navigational expertise the most reliable in the world. By the end of Captain James Cook's voyages in the late eighteenth century (1768–1779), European navigators and cartographers had compiled a reasonably accurate understanding of almost all the world's shorelines, excepting those of the polar regions, and European vessels were routinely calling at ports around the world.

Once European mariners established transoceanic connections, a largely unplanned process of biological exchange began to unfold. The Columbian exchange—the global diffusion of agricultural crops, wild plants, domestic animals, feral species, and disease pathogens that took place over newly established sea-lanes—was much more massive and consequential than earlier processes of biological exchange.²⁸ The Columbian exchange resulted in the transfer of numerous food crops and animal species—including sugar, wheat, vines, cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, dogs, horses, rabbits, and others—from the Eastern Hemisphere to the Western Hemisphere and Oceania. Meanwhile, American crops like maize, potatoes, sweet potatoes, manioc, tomatoes, peppers, beans, peanuts, and tobacco also crossed the oceans en route to new homes in African and Asian as well as European lands. In combination, newly introduced food crops and animal stocks enriched diets and helped to fuel population growth from east Asia to Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Yet biological exchanges were not always kind to human populations: In the Americas and Oceania, the most dramatic effects of biological exchange were the firestorms of epidemic disease sparked by introduced pathogens that brought about the disastrous collapse of indigenous populations.

While the Columbian exchange sponsored global diffusions of biological species, the creation of an early capitalist global economy helped to structure societies and economies by influencing patterns of production, distribution, consumption, and social organization around the world. A well-known list of commodities circulated globally: silk and porcelain from China, spices from Southeast Asia, pepper and cotton from India, and sugar and tobacco from the Americas. The crucial role of silver in the early modern global economy has recently received a great deal of scholarly attention. It is now clear that American silver not only provided European merchants with the resources they needed to trade in Asian markets but also lubricated Asian economies themselves.²⁹ Much of the early modern era's long-distance trade was in the hands of European merchants, who profited handsomely from their efforts, particularly after the organization of chartered trading companies like the English East India Company (founded in 1600) and the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC (established in 1602). Yet the global flow of commodities had deep implications also for lands beyond Europe. The production of textiles, porcelain, spices, cash crops, and other commodities in quantities sufficient to meet the demands of world markets was possible only because of changes in local social and economic organization. In many cases these changes involved the expansion or intensification of existing practices: increasing the numbers of Indian cotton weavers, for example, or establishing new facilities for the production of Chinese porcelain. In other cases, however, changes involved wrenching social adjustments and brutal coercion of labor

forces, as in the organization of mining operations in Mexico and Peru or the establishment of plantations to produce cash crops in the Americas and the islands of Southeast Asia.

These three primary global processes had numerous ramifications. One spinoff effect was dramatic fluctuation in world population. The human population of the world as a whole approximately doubled between 1500 and 1800, from about 450 million to about 900 million—an increase due partly, though certainly not entirely, to enhanced diets that followed from the Columbian exchange of food crops.³⁰ Yet demographic experiences differed sharply from one region to another. While Asian and European populations surged, and while African population also expanded despite the Atlantic slave trade, the indigenous peoples of the Americas and parts of Oceania experienced severe depopulation due mostly to the epidemic diseases sparked by the Columbian exchange of pathogens. Differential demographic experiences help to explain a second spinoff effect of the three primary global processes—migrations during the early modern era of about 2 million Europeans and 12 million Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Western Hemisphere. Thus demographic fluctuations help to account for the establishment of European colonies and African diasporas in the Americas. Meanwhile, the general global surge of human population resulted in sharply increased pressures on the natural environment: John F. Richards has recently documented the intensification of land use on environmental frontiers, the explosion of commercial hunting, and the increasing scarcity of energy and natural resources that characterized the early modern world.³¹

Further and somewhat differently related spinoff effects of the three primary global processes included technological diffusions, the consolidation of centralized states, campaigns of imperial expansion in several world regions, and global cultural exchanges. Numerous technologies moved around the world, including printing, nautical technology, and agricultural methods that accompanied food crops and animal species transported across biological boundary lines. The technological cluster that arguably had the most significant immediate impact, however, was that of gunpowder weaponry, which reinforced state-building efforts that were already underway while also supporting campaigns of imperial expansion in the early modern world. Because of their expense, large cannons strengthened the hands of central rulers who could build arsenals that subordinates and potential rivals could not easily afford or readily match. Gunpowder facilitated the consolidation of states and imperial expansion in Asia, Europe, and the American regions dominated by Europeans: Ming and Qing China, Mughal India, the Ottoman Empire, Muscovite and Romanov Russia, the Habsburg Empire, the Dutch Republic, and the first English Empire all depended on gunpowder technologies. Tokugawa

rulers also relied on gunpowder weapons to unite Japan, then banned them in order to deny effective weapons to potential rivals. Toward the end of the early modern era, gunpowder even enabled conquering chiefs to consolidate centralized kingdoms in the Hawaiian Islands, Tahiti, and Tonga.³² Finally, alongside biological species, trade goods, migrants, and sophisticated technologies, ideas and religious beliefs also circulated throughout the early modern world, promoting a round of intense global cultural interaction. In many cases interactions continued processes already underway long before early modern times and so featured little if any European involvement. Muslim merchants and missionaries, for example, continued to attract converts to Islam, especially in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, like their predecessors since the eighth century. Since European peoples were so prominent in global trade, however, it is not surprising that they also played conspicuous roles in global cultural interactions of early modern times, particularly in their efforts to spread Christianity around the world.³³

The three primary global processes and their various spinoff effects intertwined and influenced one another in multifarious ways during the early modern era. It would take a long book rather than a short essay to trace their interdependence, interconnections, and interrelationships. Nevertheless, it is clear enough in general terms that long-distance voyaging over newly established sea-lanes expedited cross-cultural trade and biological exchanges, for example, while cross-cultural trade facilitated both technological diffusions and cultural exchanges, and expansive gunpowder states sponsored large-scale migrations as well as cross-cultural trade. Similarly, it is clear in general terms that biological exchanges had implications for differential demographic fluctuations and migrations, while European migrations promoted imperial expansion and African migrations played crucial roles in the creation of a global economy. Again, it is clear in general terms that population growth in some regions combined with the creation of global markets to place unprecedented pressures on natural resources and natural environments, while these pressures themselves encouraged ambitious rulers to embark on campaigns of state consolidation or imperial expansion. There can be no question of reducing the early modern world to any set of particular traits, specific characteristics, or even any simple historical dynamic operating in mechanical fashion. Rather, the early modern world was a messy and ever-changing affair, a constantly evolving product shaped by a cluster of powerful, intertwining, interactive historical processes combined with human agency in the forms of individual wills and collective efforts.

European peoples were certainly among the most prominent actors in this early modern world. European merchants and mariners linked the world's various regions, and they both launched and sustained many of the processes

that shaped the early modern world. By virtue of their participation in far-flung global networks, European peoples were in position to take best and most immediate advantage of economic and political opportunities that arose during early modern times. By establishing offshoots of their societies in the Western Hemisphere, they gained access to American resources and wealth that financed constantly increasing European intervention in the larger world. In many ways the fruits of this activity strengthened European societies and contributed to the construction of the historical formation that historians call early modern Europe. By no means did European peoples dominate other lands and peoples as they did in a later age when national states, mechanized industry, and industrial-strength imperialism gave rise to a new set of dynamics driving world history. During early modern times, outside Europe itself and European colonies in the Western Hemisphere, European peoples pursued their interests mostly on sufferance of local authorities and largely on terms set by others. It may well be the case, as several scholars have recently implied, that European experience in the early modern era was crucial for the later development of national states, mechanized industry, and global empire.³⁴ Yet to the extent that it is possible to recognize early modern Europe as a distinct and coherent historical formation, it is clear that early modern Europe itself is only conceivable because of European participation in the affairs of a much larger early modern world.

Notes

1. J. B. Bury et al., eds., *Cambridge Ancient History*, 12 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923–39); *Cambridge Medieval History*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911–36); John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton et al., eds., *Cambridge Modern History*, 13 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902–12).

2. American Historical Association, *Historical Scholarship in America: Needs and Opportunities* (New York: American Historical Association, 1932).

3. See the results for the term *early modern* using the search function at www.jstor.org. If the search embraces the field of economics as well as history, thus it will turn up additional uses of the term, mostly in reviews of books on economic history.

4. Lynn Thorndike, *A Short History of Civilization* (New York: Crofts, 1926). Thorndike gave part seven of this work the subtitle "Early Modern Times." On no less than four occasions he referred to "the so-called Italian Renaissance": 186, 295, 386, and 434. At several other points he conspicuously aired his view that the Renaissance and Reformation were backward-looking movements that did not inaugurate a new historical era: See especially 295–97 and 348–49. See also Thorndike's essays "The Survival of Mediaeval Intellectual Interests into Early Modern Times," *Speculum* 2 (1927):

147–59; and “The Blight of Pestilence on Early Modern Civilization,” *American Historical Review* 32 (1927): 455–74.

5. William J. Bouwsma, “Early Modern Europe,” in *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 78.

6. See Wolfgang Reinhard, “The Idea of Early Modern History,” in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley (London: Routledge, 1997), 281–92; and Randolph Starn, “The Early Modern Muddle,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 6 (2002): 296–307, especially 300–301 on the fortunes of the concept of early modernity in Europe.

7. Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), 181–256. For another example see Sir George Clark, *Early Modern Europe from about 1450 to about 1720* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), who also did not find it useful to explain or examine the term *early modern*.

8. Eugene F. Rice Jr. and Anthony Grafton, *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460–1559*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1994), especially xiii–xiv. This work builds on Rice’s first edition (1970) under the same title.

9. H. G. Koenigsberger, *Early Modern Europe, 1500–1789* (London: Longman, 1987).

10. Herbert H. Rowen, *A History of Early Modern Europe, 1500–1815* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

11. Thomas A. Brady Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy, “Introduction: Renaissance and Reformation, Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Era,” *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas A. Brady Jr., Heiko Oberman, and James D. Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 1994–95), xvii. The intention of this chapter was not to deal with early modern Europe as a whole, but rather to focus attention on the transition from late medieval to early modern Europe in order to seek alternatives to the categories of Renaissance and Reformation in analyzing the earlier stage, as it were, of early modern Europe.

12. William L. Langer, ed., *An Encyclopedia of World History: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, Chronologically Arranged* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940). Subsequent editions of this work retained the early modern category. The work that served as a foundation of Langer’s encyclopedia did not refer to an early modern era. Rather, it recognized three main historical eras—ancient, medieval, and modern—and subdivided modern history into five chronological periods, of which the first two (1492–1648 and 1648–1789) corresponded roughly to Langer’s early modern era. See Karl Julius Ploetz, *Ploetz’ Manual of Universal History from the Dawn of Civilization to the Outbreak of the Great War of 1914* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915) and subsequent editions.

13. Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993). See also Totman’s more recent book *A History of Japan*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), especially 143, 174, 203–314.

14. See especially Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter, “Introduction: Paths to Early Modernities: A Comparative View,” *Daedalus* 127 (1998): 1–18; and Björn Wittrock, “Early Modernities: Varieties and Transitions,” *Daedalus* 127 (1998): 19–40, as well as other essays in the same issue.

15. On-cho Ng, “The Epochal Concept of ‘Early Modernity’ and the Intellectual History of Late Imperial China,” *Journal of World History* 14 (2003): 37–61.

16. Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), especially 50–62.

17. Victor Lieberman, “Introduction: Eurasian Variants” and “Transcending East–West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas,” in *Beyond Binary Histories: Re-imagining Eurasia to c. 1830*, ed. Victor Lieberman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 1–18 and 19–102, respectively. See also the other essays in this volume, most of which test Lieberman’s model against the experiences of individual lands. For Lieberman’s more recent synthesis, see his *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), with a second volume to follow.

18. Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

19. Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

20. Joseph F. Fletcher, “Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800,” in *Studies on Chinese and Islamic Inner Asia* (Broomfield, VA: Variorum, 1995), p. 3.

21. James D. Tracy, “Introduction,” in *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350–1750*, ed. James D. Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1–13. See also James D. Tracy, ed., *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

22. John F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

23. A recent synthesis lending support to this view is J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird’s-Eye View of World History* (New York: Norton, 2003). For works that substantiate the notion of an early modern world on environmental grounds, see Richards, *The Unending Frontier*, and two books by Alfred W. Crosby: *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972) and *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For works that substantiate the notion on economic grounds, see Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Robert B. Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

24. John F. Richards, “Early Modern India and World History,” *Journal of World History* 8 (1997): 197–209. This view informs Richards’s more recent environmental history of the early modern world, *The Unending Frontier*.

25. Jack A. Goldstone, "The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41 (1998): 249–84.

26. For a periodization that places the early modern era in the larger context of world history, see Jerry H. Bentley, "Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 749–70. See also the response by Patrick Manning, "The Problem of Interactions in World History," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 771–82.

27. So far as I am aware, there is no scholarly work that discusses the early modern world in quite this same way. One approach that is congenial, however, is that of McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*. World-system scholars have of course treated the global political economy of early modern times, albeit from a somewhat narrower perspective: see especially Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 vols. (New York: Academic Press, 1974–89); and Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982). The vision of the early modern world sketched here draws inspiration from several works mentioned earlier, particularly the essays of Fletcher, "Integrative History," and Richards, "Early Modern India and World History." Yet it differs from earlier views in both substance and organization, and rather than seeking to identify some particular set of distinctive traits or characteristics of early modernity, it seeks to bring focus to the interactive historical processes that drove development of the early modern world.

28. The best guides to this process are Crosby's two volumes: *The Columbian Exchange* and *Ecological Imperialism*. The largest round of biological exchange prior to early modern times was probably that associated with the Islamic green revolution. See Andrew M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World: The Diffusion of Crops and Farming Techniques, 700–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

29. See especially two articles by Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giráldez: "Born with a 'Silver Spoon': The Origin of World Trade in 1571," *Journal of World History* 6 (1995): 201–221; and "Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 13 (2002): 391–427.

30. Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1978), 349. Like Richards, "Early Modern India and World History," I have revised the McEvedy and Jones figure for 1500 up to adjust for the authors' low estimate of the American population.

31. Richards, *The Unending Frontier*.

32. On this cluster of issues, see especially William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since 1000 A.D.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Arnold Pacey, *Technology in World Civilization: A Thousand-Year History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); and Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

33. For a sampler of recent essays, see Schwartz, *Implicit Understandings*. For an imaginative essay arguing for the circulation of ideas and mental constructs in early modern Eurasia, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a

Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," in *Beyond Binary Histories: Re-imagining Eurasia to c. 1830*, ed. Victor Lieberman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 289–316.

34. See especially Frank, *ReOrient*; Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*; and Marks, *Origins of the Modern World*.