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# Introduction

## *The Great Escape*

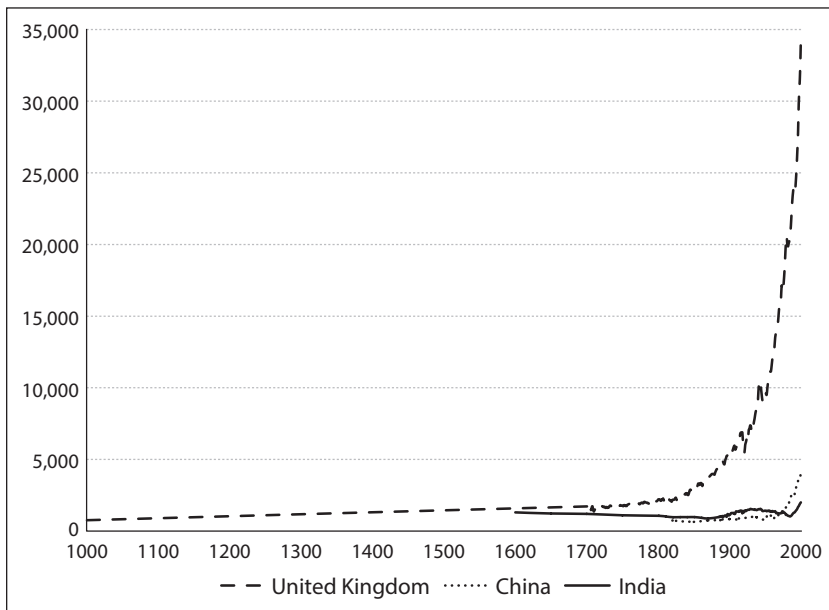
### WHAT?

WHAT WAS the Great Escape? It made it possible for me to write this book, and for you to read it—which we could not do if we were busy farming the land, or were illiterate, or had died in childhood. It transformed the human condition by making so many of us so much richer, healthier, and better educated than our ancestors used to be.<sup>1</sup>

This escape from sickness, ignorance, oppression, and want, which remains very much a work in progress in large parts of the world, was not made up of slow, gradual, and linear improvements. For the most part, it represented a radical break from the practices and life experiences of the past, a break that changed the world in the course of just a few generations.

Before the nineteenth century, a certain amount of intensive—per capita—growth in economic output had taken place over the long run, but on a scale so modest that this cumulative increase becomes almost invisible when it is set against the breakthroughs of the past two centuries. Much the same is true of growth in the stock of knowledge and our ability to fight disease. This discontinuity accounts for the fact that any graph that tracks economic performance, or human welfare in general, in those parts of the world where modern economic development took off first—in Britain and then in other parts of Europe and their various

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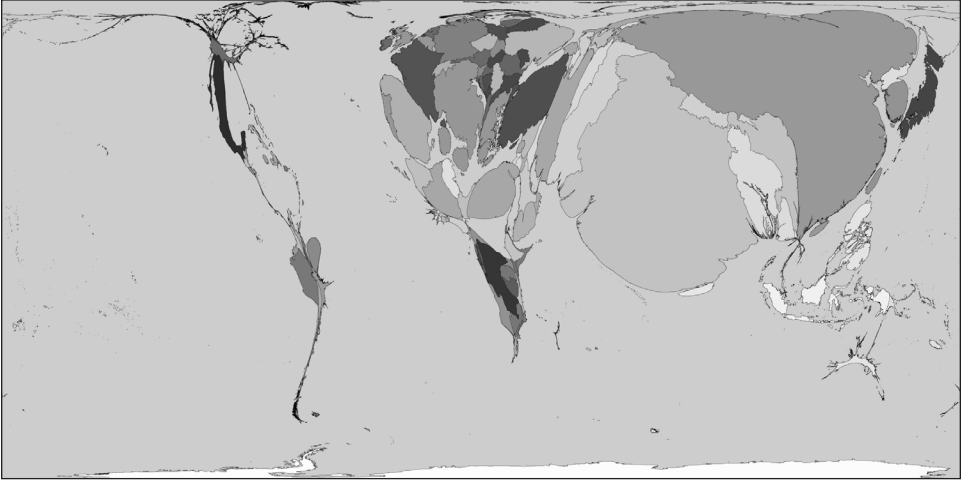


**FIGURE I.1** Per capita GDP in the United Kingdom, China, and India, 1000–2000 CE (in 2011 US\$). *Source:* Maddison Project Database 2018.

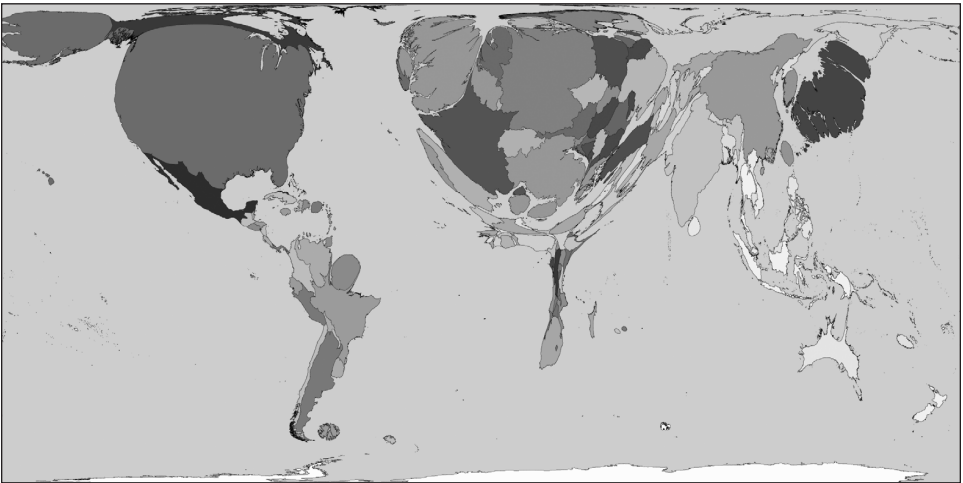
global spinoffs—is shaped like a hockey stick. This upward turn opened up a growing gap with most of the rest of the world that has only recently begun to close (figure I.1).<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to this divergence, population number ceased to be the principal determinant of aggregate regional output. Global production and consumption shifted from what had long been the most populous parts of the world—East and South Asia—and came to be heavily concentrated where this novel type of transformative development occurred: in Europe and North America, and later also in Japan (figures I.2–I.3).<sup>3</sup>

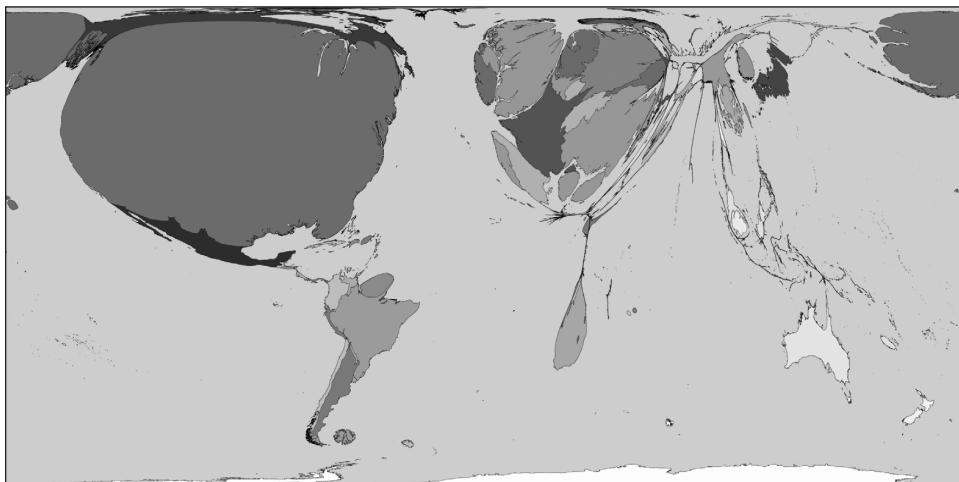
Even though many Asian countries in particular have been catching up, narrowing the extreme imbalance that existed a couple of generations ago, the impact of the original divergence has been very slow to fade. Thus, most of the world’s recipients of elevated incomes continue to be found in those regions that were the first to develop, with the United States and Western Europe maintaining a forbidding lead. While inequality also contributes to this pattern by boosting the standing of



**FIGURE 1.2** Distribution of global GDP adjusted for purchasing power parity in 1 CE. Sources: <http://archive.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=159> and <http://archive.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=162> (© Copyright Worldmapper.org / Sasi Group [University of Sheffield] and Mark Newman [University of Michigan]).



**FIGURE 1.3** Distribution of global GDP adjusted for purchasing power parity in 1960. Sources: <http://archive.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=159> and <http://archive.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=162> (© Copyright Worldmapper.org / Sasi Group [University of Sheffield] and Mark Newman [University of Michigan]).

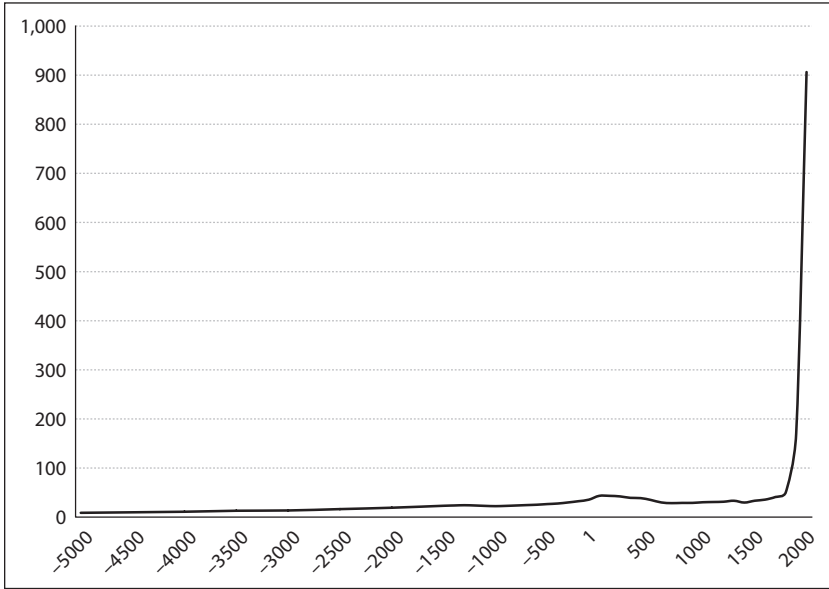


**FIGURE I.4** Distribution of people worldwide living on more than \$200 per day in 2002 (adjusted for purchasing power parity, by country). *Source:* <http://archive.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=158> (© Copyright Worldmapper.org / Sasi Group [University of Sheffield] and Mark Newman [University of Michigan]).

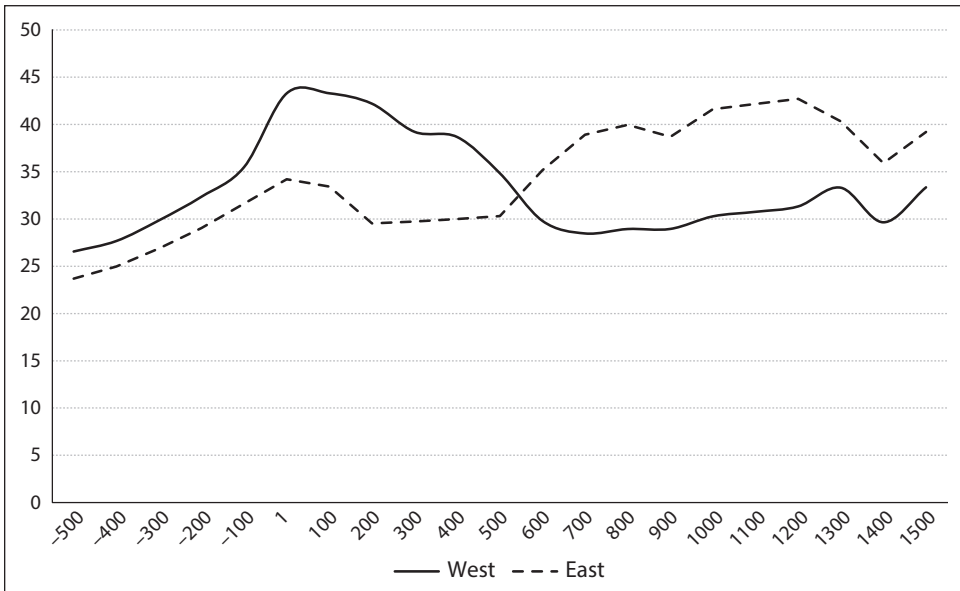
the United States, South Africa, and South America, the timing of modernization remains the principal determinant of these imbalances (figure I.4).<sup>4</sup>

Ian Morris's social development index is perhaps the most ambitious attempt to quantify this massive transformation. It seeks to (very roughly) quantify and compare overall levels of material development by tracking four key components—energy capture, social organization, war-making capacity, and information technology—over the very long term in the most developed parts of western and eastern Eurasia. For the former, this exercise produces the same hockey stick as before (figure I.5).<sup>5</sup>

For a long time, variation between East and West was mere oscillation, reflecting in the first instance the moderately beneficial effect of empire on social development. Large imperial formations were associated with somewhat higher development scores, and their collapse (or plagues) with lower ones: the Roman empire helped Europe, the Tang and Song empires China. In the late Middle Ages, China was hit by the Mongols and Europe by the Black Death (figure I.6).



**FIGURE 1.5** Social development scores in the most developed parts of western Eurasia, 5000 BCE–2000 CE. *Source:* Derived from Morris 2013b: 240–41, table 7.1.



**FIGURE 1.6** Social development scores in western and eastern Eurasia, 500 BCE–1500 CE. *Sources:* Morris 2013b: 240–43, tables 7.1–7.2.

## 6 INTRODUCTION

Very different mechanisms were required to generate more dramatic and self-sustaining progress. In the nineteenth century, development swiftly reached an unprecedented order of magnitude that made earlier fluctuations appear insignificant and defined the inflection point for the mature hockey stick.

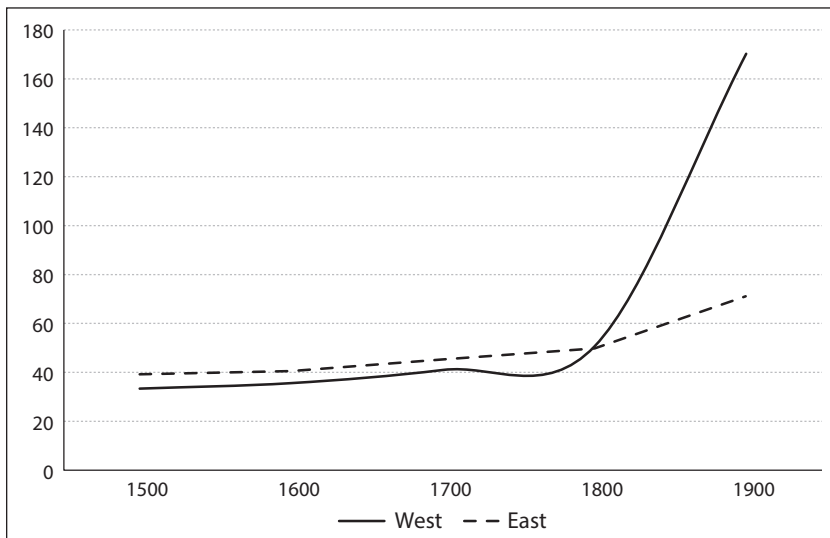
The resultant divergence—from the past, and between different parts of the Old World—was so great that we no longer have to worry about the problem of (gu)es(s)timating historical GDP or other poorly documented metrics: it far exceeded any plausible margin of error. This was when the world truly did change: in David Landes’s memorable turn of phrase, “The Englishman of 1750 was closer in material things to Caesar’s legionnaires than to his own great-grandchildren.”<sup>6</sup>

Energy capture per person accounts for most of Morris’s social development scores, from 100 percent back in 14,000 BCE—when there would have been no meaningful differences in social organization or military capacity, let alone information technology, across the globe—to around 80 percent in 1800 and between 60 and 70 percent in 1900. Thus, changes in energy capture drove the divergence shown in figure I.7. In Morris’s account, estimated per capita energy consumption rose from 38,000 kilocalories per day in 1800 to 92,000 in 1900 in northwestern Europe and on to 230,000 (in the United States) today.<sup>7</sup>

An alternative reconstruction envisions an even more rapid increase during the nineteenth century, from 33,000 to 99,000 daily kilocalories in England, all of which was sustained by coal. The transition from organic to fossil fuel economies was crucial. The former faced an iron constraint in their dependence on plant photosynthesis that converted a steady flow of solar energy into food, feed, and firewood that sustained human and animal labor and the processing of raw materials. The latter, by contrast, could draw on much larger accumulated stocks of fuel that had been built up over geological time, first coal and later oil and gas.<sup>8</sup>

Only in the twentieth century did war-making capacity and information technology, each of which grew by two orders of magnitude by Morris’s reckoning (thanks to nuclear weapons and computers), take over as the most important drivers of development. Both are the fruits





**FIGURE 1.7** Social development scores in western and eastern Eurasia, 1500–1900 CE. Sources: Morris 2013b: 241, table 7.1; 243, table 7.2.

of ever more sophisticated science and engineering that have kept deepening our break from the past.

What has all this economic growth and social development done for us? Most fundamentally, we live much longer. Life span is positively associated with economic performance, and as global average per capita output has risen about fifteenfold between the late eighteenth century and today, global mean life expectancy at birth has more than doubled from around thirty to seventy years. And we do not just live longer but also better. Poverty is down worldwide: the share of people subsisting on the real equivalent of about two dollars a day has declined from well over nine-tenths two hundred years ago to about one-tenth now. Its closest corollary, malnourishment, haunted half of the world's population in 1945 but affects only about one in ten people today.<sup>9</sup>

In the Western world, the original trailblazer, mature male stature rose by five inches between the late eighteenth and the late twentieth centuries. Overall, Westerners “are taller, heavier, healthier, and longer lived than our ancestors; our bodies are sturdier, less susceptible to

disease in early life and slower to wear out.” And once again, this trend has gone global.<sup>10</sup>

The world’s literacy rate is up from one in eight adults 200 years ago to six out of every seven today. Freedom reigns: the proportion of humankind that lives in countries that count as more democratic than autocratic has exploded from maybe 1 percent in 1800 to two-thirds today—and had China’s civil war in the late 1940s ended differently, the total could now easily be closer to five-sixths. On a scale from  $-10$  (all autocratic) to  $+10$  (all democratic), the average global score for major polities has risen from  $-7$  in 1800 to  $+4$  today. All this has made us measurably happier: GDP is linked to happiness and life evaluation more generally. Overall, even as economic inequality has been sustained within societies, and divergent development opened up a wide gap between rich and poor nations that is now only slowly narrowing, modern development has improved our life experience on many fronts, and has increasingly done so on a global scale.<sup>11</sup>

It goes without saying that we are hardly in a position to claim that the Great Escape has fully succeeded. Yet the painful truth that this same development has the potential to cause serious harm to us and our planet—through climate change, environmental degradation, weaponized pathogens, or nuclear war—merely reflects the sheer scale of this transformation: nothing like this had previously been within our reach. In both good and bad, we have far outpaced the past.<sup>12</sup>

## WHY?

Why has the world changed so much? All this development was rooted in initial breakthroughs that took place in northwestern Europe: hence the inflection points in figures I.1 and I.7. But what made it possible for that corner of the globe to launch a process that unleashed previously unimaginable productivity and human welfare by harnessing an ever-broadening range of natural resources from coal and the vaccinia virus to silicon and uranium?

By now, answers to this question not only fill shelf-loads of learned books and binders—or rather electronic folders—of academic papers, entire books have been written to take stock of all those books and papers that propose answers. Scholarly opinion is divided. Some take a long-term view, searching for causes and trends that go back many centuries. Others stress the role of more recent contingencies that enabled some pioneering—or, depending on whom you ask, particularly rapacious or just plain lucky—societies to pull ahead. Some accounts privilege politics and institutions; others overseas trade and colonization; others still culture, education, and values.<sup>13</sup>

I argue that a single condition was essential in making the initial breakthroughs possible: competitive fragmentation of power. The nursery of modernity was riven by numerous fractures, not only by those between the warring states of medieval and early modern Europe but also by others within society: between state and church, rulers and lords, cities and magnates, knights and merchants, and, most recently, Catholics and Protestants. This often violent history of conflict and compromise was long but had a clear beginning: the fall of the Roman empire that had lorded it over most of Europe, much as successive Chinese dynasties lorded it over most of East Asia. Yet in contrast to China, nothing like the Roman empire ever returned to Europe.

The enduring absence of hegemonic empire on a subcontinental scale represented a dramatic break not only with ancient history. It also set Europe on a trajectory away from the default pattern of serial imperial state formation—from the boom and bust of hegemonic powers—we can observe elsewhere. By laying the foundations for persistent polycentrism and the transformative developmental dynamics it generated over the long run, this rupture was the single most important precondition for modern economic growth, industrialization, and global Western dominance much later on.

I develop my argument in several stages. In the opening chapter, I establish the fact that as far as imperial state formation is concerned, Europe differed profoundly from other parts of the world that supported major complex civilizations. After the demise of the unified

Roman empire in the fifth century CE, the greatest powers in Europe never laid claim to more than about one-fifth of its total population, a far cry from the four-fifths or more that had submitted to Roman rule. Likewise, the greatest powers that subsequently existed in the geographical space once held by the Romans never controlled more than a similarly modest proportion of its later population.<sup>14</sup>

This pattern is striking for two reasons: it reveals a sharp discontinuity between the ancient and post-ancient history of Europe, and it differs dramatically from outcomes in other parts of the world that used to be home to large traditional empires, such as East Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East and North Africa region. The historically unique phenomenon of “one-off empire” in Europe is remarkable because regions that supported very large polities early on can reasonably be expected to have done the same later, and did in fact consistently do so elsewhere. In this respect, imperial state formation in South Asia and the Middle East—as well as in Southeast Asia, Central America, and the Andes region—had more in common with East Asia, the classic example of imperial persistence over time, than with Europe, which represents a genuine outlier.<sup>15</sup>

This raises four closely interrelated questions, which I address in Parts II through V of the book. How did the Roman empire come into existence—did its rise and success depend on rare or unique conditions that were never replicated later on? Why was nothing approximating the Roman empire in terms of scale ever rebuilt in the same part of the world? Can comparison with other parts of the world help us understand the absence of very large empire from post-Roman Europe? And finally, and most importantly, did the latter open a path to (much) later developments that eventually reshaped the entire world?

In Part II, I explain the creation of a very large empire that came to encompass the entire Mediterranean basin with reference to two principal factors. First, the Roman Republic managed to combine a culture of military mass mobilization of an intensity unknown among ancient state-level polities outside the Greek city-state culture and Warring States China with integrative capacities that enabled it to scale up military mass mobilization to levels unparalleled and arguably unattainable

elsewhere in western Eurasia at the time (chapter 2). Second, in its formative phase, Rome benefited from its position at the margins of a larger civilizational zone that had expanded outward from the Fertile Crescent region for several thousand years but had been exceptionally slow in drawing the central and western Mediterranean into the growing network of sustained political and military interaction at that zone's core (chapter 3). In addition, prolonged domestic political stability and a fortuitous concatenation of circumstances that allowed Rome to establish effective naval hegemony across the Mediterranean at a relatively early stage of its expansion further contributed to its success.

None of the preconditions were—or in the case of the second principal factor even could be—repeated in later historical periods. Rome's rule had greatly extended the boundaries of the original Middle Eastern political-military system all the way to the North Sea. Large-scale military mass mobilization did not return to Europe until the French Revolution. Never again—or at least not until Trafalgar or World War II—was any one power or alliance able to claim naval supremacy across the entire Mediterranean basin.

After identifying the key factors that underpinned Rome's unique success, I assess the degree of contingency inherent in this process by considering counterfactuals (chapter 4). I ask at which junctures Roman expansion could have been derailed by plausible, “minimal rewrites” of actual history. This exercise suggests that the window for substantially alternative outcomes was fairly narrow, concentrated in the time of Alexander the Great near the end of the fourth century BCE. From the third century BCE onward, Roman capabilities—relative to those of its macro-regional competitors—made failure increasingly unlikely. Roman state formation thus turns out to have been both highly contingent (in terms of its foundational preconditions) and highly robust (once these preconditions were in place).

In Part III, I make short work of the extremely popular question of why the Roman empire fell: after all, most imperial entities in history that did not eventually morph into nation-states disintegrated at some point. Instead, I focus on a much more salient problem that has received much less attention: Why did it—or rather something like it—never return?

Chapters 2 and 3 already highlighted the peculiarities and sometimes irreproducible context of the Roman experience. I now expand my analysis to trajectories of state formation in post-Roman Europe. I identify and discuss eight junctures between the sixth and the early nineteenth centuries at which similarly dominant imperial states might conceivably have been created: the East Roman attempt in the sixth century to regain large parts of what used to be the western half of the Roman empire; Arab expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries; the growth of Frankish power around 800; the development of the German empire from the tenth to the thirteenth century; the Mongol advance in Eastern and Central Europe in the mid-thirteenth century; Habsburg policies in the sixteenth century; Ottoman power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and French policies from Louis XIV to Napoleon, with World War II added as a brief coda.

I argue that on all these occasions, a wide range of well-documented factors decisively militated against the reemergence of anything truly resembling hegemonic empire in Europe. No plausible minimal rewrite of history was likely to lead to that particular outcome. I conclude that post-Roman polycentrism in Europe was a perennially robust phenomenon.

In Part IV, I address a question that arises directly from this last observation: Why did large-scale empire building in post-Roman Europe *consistently* fail even as it continued *serially* elsewhere in the world? I approach this problem by comparing trends in state formation in different parts of the Old World, with particular emphasis on Europe and East Asia. I focus on this pairing because the Chinese imperial tradition was unusually resilient by world historical standards and therefore constitutes an ideal-typical counterpoint to the abiding polycentrism of post-Roman Europe.

This comparative perspective allows me to identify several factors that favored serial imperiogenesis in East Asia and obstructed it in Europe. At the proximate level of causation, fiscal arrangements and the characteristics of the post-Roman and post-Han conquest regimes played a major role (chapter 7). At the ultimate level, geographical and ecological conditions influenced macro-sociopolitical development

(chapter 8). Among these environmental features, the degree of exposure to large steppe zones appears to have been a crucial determinant of the likelihood of imperial state formation, not merely in Europe and East Asia but also in other parts of Afroeurasia. In addition, though not necessarily fully autonomously, the nature of religious and secular belief systems as well as more general cultural properties reinforced divergent trends at the opposite end of the Eurasian land mass (chapter 9).

In all these respects, conditions in post-Han China differed profoundly from those in post-Roman Europe and help account for persistent long-term differences in the scaling-up and centralization of political and other forms of social power. I call this post-ancient divergence in macro-social evolution—centered on the sixth century CE—the “First Great Divergence.”<sup>16</sup>

I conclude by proposing a taxonomy of features that were conducive or antithetical to empire-building on a large scale, which suggests that Europe—and Western or Latin Europe in particular—was a priori less likely to be brought under the control of such entities than were other regions. While East Asia experienced conditions that were favorable to iterative universal empire, South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa region occupied an intermediate position. This comparative analysis reinforces my findings in chapters 2 and 3 that the rise of the Roman empire depended on highly unusual circumstances. From this perspective, Rome’s success was a greater anomaly than were later failures of imperial projects in Europe.

In Part V, I argue that what is now commonly referred to as the “Great Divergence,” broadly understood as a uniquely (Northwest-)European and eventually “Western” breakthrough in economic and cognate capacities, was intimately connected with and indeed deeply rooted in the political “First Great Divergence” between Roman and post-Roman Europe (Parts II and III) and between Europe on the one hand and East Asia and intermediate regions on the other (Part IV)—a divergence between the enduring disappearance and the cyclical re-creation of hegemonic empire.

This is the case regardless of which of the competing explanations of the modern “Great Divergence” and the Industrial Revolution(s) we

accept. Leading contenders include institutional developments from feudalism, church power, and religious schism to the creation of communes, corporate bodies, and parliamentarianism; social responses to perennial warfare, and more generally the overall configuration of the main sources of social power; the contribution of New World resources and global trade, and of mercantilist colonialism and protectionism; the emergence of a culture of sustained scientific and technological innovation; and a shift of values in favor of a commercially acquisitive bourgeoisie.

Drawing on these different types of explanations in turn (chapters 10 through 12), I show that all of them critically depend on the absence of Roman-scale empire from much of Europe throughout its post-ancient history. Recurrent empire on European soil would have interfered with the creation and flourishing of a stable state system that sustained productive competition and diversity in design and outcome. This made the fall and lasting disappearance of hegemonic empire an indispensable precondition for later European exceptionalism and thus, ultimately, for the making of the modern world we now inhabit.<sup>17</sup>

The transition to modernity was therefore a product of trends that played out over the long term: even if it only “took off” in the nineteenth century, it had very deep roots indeed, far beyond earlier signs of modernizing development that had appeared in the previous two centuries (and which I discuss in chapter 10). When it comes to the underlying dynamics, the long road to prosperity reached back to late antiquity. Europe’s breakthrough was not a highly contingent process that might just as readily have taken place elsewhere: a protracted buildup was necessary—or at least sufficient—to make it possible, though by no means inevitable.<sup>18</sup>

From this developmental perspective, the death of the Roman empire had a much greater impact than its prior existence and the legacy it bequeathed to later European civilization. This may seem a bold claim, and I devote an epilogue to Monty Python’s famous question, “What have the Romans ever done for us?” The afterlife of Roman cultural traditions, from language and (Christian) religion to law and elite



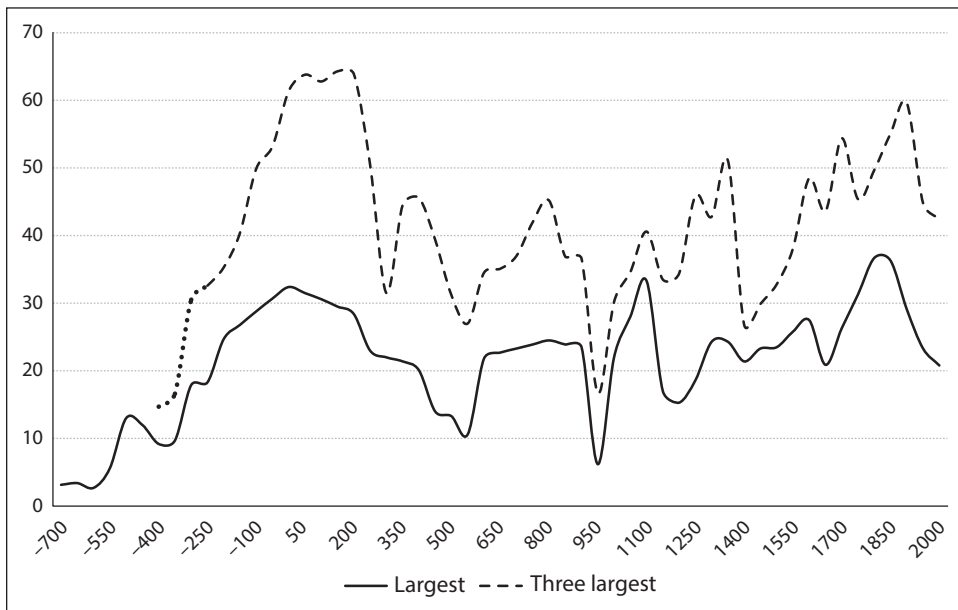
culture, undeniably mediated the long-term consequences of the collapse of Roman imperial power. Specific elements of this legacy may indeed have provided a vital counterweight to the traumatic fractures of intensifying international and domestic competition, allowing productive exchange of people, goods, and ideas across a thicket of political and ideological boundaries.

This raises a final question: Was the actual historical scenario in which a monopolistic empire first created a degree of shared culture but subsequently went away for good more conducive to an eventual European breakthrough than a counterfactual scenario in which no such empire had ever appeared in the first place? Engagement with this problem pushes us well beyond the confines of defensible counterfactual reasoning and toward runaway conjecture but is nevertheless worth considering: Are there reasons to believe that the complete lack of Roman foundations would have derailed our tortuous journey toward the modern world?

• • •

My book stands in a long tradition of scholarship that has invoked fragmentation and competition as an important precondition or source of European development. It differs from existing work in that for the first time, it develops a much more comprehensive line of reasoning to establish once and for all a fundamental axiom: without polycentrism, no modernity.<sup>19</sup>

Empire was an effective and successful way of organizing large numbers of people in agrarian societies. Large, composite, and diverse, comprising multiple peripheries loosely held together by an often distant center whose dependence on local elites belied grandiose claims to universal rule, traditional empires were kept afloat by their ability to concentrate resources as needed without intruding too much upon their far-flung subject populations. Empire's adaptiveness is made strikingly clear in the fact that for more than 2,000 years, with primitive technology and under enormous logistical constraints, a very large share of our species has been controlled by just a handful of imperial powers (figure I.8).<sup>20</sup>



**FIGURE 1.8** The population of the single largest empire and the three largest empires in the world as a proportion of world population, 700 BCE–2000 CE (in percent). *Source:* Scheidel in press-a.

Yet from a developmental perspective, traditional empire failed in three ways, all of which mattered greatly for the making of the modern world:

- in the specific sense that the Roman empire released its grip on Europe and gave way to a very long period of polycentrism of powers both international and domestic;
- in the broader sense that near-monopolistic empire failed to be reestablished in Europe; and
- in the most general sense that empire, as a way of organizing people and resources, consistently failed to create conditions that enabled transformative development.

My focus is not on empire per se, a phenomenon increasingly studied from a global comparative perspective, most recently in the seventy-odd chapters of the *Oxford World History of Empire* that I have had the pleasure to edit jointly with Peter Bang and the late Chris Bayly. Even as

I repeatedly refer to specific characteristics of traditional empires—most notably in China—in the following chapters, I use them primarily as a foil to conditions in the post-Roman European state system to help cast the latter into sharper relief. For me, it is the escape that matters: not only what it was from, but how it came about.<sup>21</sup>

The productive dynamics of a stable state system were key: fragmentation generated diversity, competition, and innovation, and stability preserved gains from what worked best, rewarding winners and punishing losers. Empire contributes to this story insofar as it prevented both: monopolistic rule stifled competition, and the waxing and waning of imperial power rendered polycentrism intermittent and curtailed its cumulative benefits. Thus, traditional empires did not need to maintain hegemonic status all or even most of the time in order to derail modernizing development: sporadic “imperiogenesis” on a large scale was enough. Only the persistent absence of empire allowed polycentrism and its corollaries to flourish.

I do not track our entire journey from fracture to fracking. This is resolutely an analysis of origins. My emphasis is on foundational features, from the Middle Ages up to what is known as the First Industrial Revolution in England around 1800. I do not progress beyond that point because the First Industrial Revolution cannot be judged on its own, but only in terms of what it led to, far beyond cotton-spinning, iron-making, and the stationary steam engine. It was the Second Industrial Revolution, a great acceleration in macro-inventions and their widespread application from the last third of the nineteenth century onward that was driven by systematic scientific study and engineering, and concurrent progress in medicine and public health, the fertility transition, and political and institutional reform that accounted for most of the Great Escape: but once the door had been opened, a path of promise had been set. To quote Landes one more time, “The Industrial Revolution has been like in effect to Eve’s tasting of the fruit of the tree of knowledge: the world has never been the same.”<sup>22</sup>

Instead of taking the narrative forward in time, my book extends in the opposite direction, in order to gauge the true depth of the underpinnings of these much later developments. I do so not only because of

my own professional interest in deep roots but also and indeed primarily because I am concerned with the robustness of historical outcomes. How likely was it that Europe would shift far enough toward a viable escape route? If post-Roman polycentrism was the norm, the very existence of the Roman empire was anomalous; otherwise it would have been the other way around.<sup>23</sup>

In the end, outcomes appear to have been overdetermined: just as the “First Great Divergence” can be traced to multiple factors, so scholars have linked the “(Second) Great Divergence” to a variety of features that have only one thing in common, namely, that they are predicated upon productive competitive polycentrism—or, in other words, the fact that in Europe, Roman power had remained unique.

In this respect, the story of modernity is also a story about Rome: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was right to exclaim in 1786 that “an diesen Ort knüpft sich die ganze Geschichte der Welt an”—“the whole history of the world attaches itself to this spot.” It does indeed, if only thanks to what Edward Gibbon two years later famously called the “the decline and fall of the Roman empire; the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene, in the history of mankind.” Yet when viewed from a great distance, it was not that awful after all: quite the opposite, in fact, as it ushered in an age of open-ended experimentation. It is for that reason alone that it deserves to be thought of as “the greatest scene in the history of mankind.”<sup>24</sup>

The making of the modern world had a clearly demarcated beginning, forbiddingly remote as it may seem to us today. Europe had not always been fragmented and polycentric. It was not for nothing that its erstwhile rulers bequeathed to us the word “empire.” They owned Britain, a belated afterthought of an acquisition, for about as many years as have now passed since Charles I lost his head. The last self-styled Roman emperor, the Habsburg Francis II, did not abdicate until August 6, 1806, twenty months after Napoleon Bonaparte had crowned himself emperor of the French and only about a year after the latter had shelved his plans to invade Britain, where the first steam locomotive had recently been displayed and steady improvements to the power loom kept the patent office busy.

But that would-be master of Europe, however revolutionary in appearance, was merely the last hurrah of ancient designs. The Roman empire remained unique, and the long shadow it had cast was just that. Europe had well and truly escaped, ensuring our collective release into an unexpected future.

In the heyday of Roman power, a certain Lauricius, otherwise unknown but probably a Roman soldier, carved a graffito on a rock in a desolate corner of what is now southern Jordan: “The Romans always win.” This sentiment, which curtly echoed Virgil’s famous and more eloquent vision that Jupiter had given the Romans “empire without end,” held true for a very long time, well beyond actual Roman history. Empires in general did tend to win, at least for a while, before they fell apart only to be succeeded by others: in that sense, they were indeed without end. For untold generations, they imposed tributary rule and prevented stable state systems from forming and building a different world. Our lives today are different only because in the end, “the Romans”—the empire builders—did not, as it happened, *always* win, even if they came close.<sup>25</sup>

Their failure to do so may well have been our biggest lucky break since an errant asteroid cleared away the dinosaurs 66 million years earlier: there was no way to “get to Denmark”—to build societies that enjoy freedom, prosperity, and general welfare—without “escaping from Rome” first.<sup>26</sup>

## HOW?

How can we substantiate this argument? The search for the causes of the (modern, economic) “Great Divergence” is of immense importance for our understanding of how the world came to be the way it is, yet it has largely been abandoned by professional historians. In an informal but hardly unrepresentative sample drawn from my own bibliography, only one in five of some forty-odd scholars who have made significant contributions to this grand debate have earned an advanced degree in history. Social scientists have been at the forefront of this line of

research: economists led the pack and sociologists come in second. By contrast, political scientists have hardly been involved at all.<sup>27</sup>

It is true that quite a few of these economists effectively operate as historians, either by holding academic positions in economic history or, more commonly, in terms of their primary interests. Nevertheless, the limited commitment of—for want of a better term—“professional,” that is, credentialed, historians is striking: judging from the age distribution in my sample, it cannot simply be waved off as a function of a turn away from economic or macro-history to cultural or micro-history, even if those trends may well play a role.

Then again, the glass is not only half empty but also half full: the relative lack of interest among historians has been more than offset by economists and sociologists’ eagerness to tackle a big historical problem. Their engagement accounts for much of the continuing vigor of the debate, which cannot fail to benefit from genuine transdisciplinarity.

I approach this topic in the same spirit of openness. I am, by training and employment, a historian of the ancient Roman world whose interests have increasingly branched out into wider reaches of history, from the comparative study of ancient empires, slavery, and human welfare to the applicability of Darwinian theory to the past and the long-term evolution of economic inequality. I have long been following the literature about the origins of the British/European/“Western” takeoff, and especially the controversy between proponents of long- and short-term perspectives.

As a historian primarily of the more distant past, affinity for the long run might well seem a professional hazard. Not so: my initial intuition was that ancient legacies need not have mattered nearly as much as my immediate colleagues often like to assume, an issue that I take up at the very end of this book. Over time, however, it became clear to me that the many competing and complementary explanations of this takeoff did in fact have something in common that anchored them in developments that commenced a very long time ago—developments that were not limited to positive contributions that shaped later opportunities and constraints, but also included a massive absence. Yet even that absence—of hegemonic empire, from post-Roman Europe—needed

to be explored, given that it was not a constant but had been preceded by an equally massive earlier presence. These entanglements made me a “long-termist” almost against my will.

Made in a rather different context, Garth Fowden’s astute observation captures the scale of the challenge inherent in this project: “The ultimate goal of the Eurocentric historian (‘modernity’) is remote from, yet conceived of as standing in a relationship of dependence toward, the First Millennium. To depict such a relationship convincingly is a very difficult enterprise in itself.” My own approach is therefore eclectic, by necessity (even) more than by inclination.<sup>28</sup>

In trying to explain why the Roman empire rose to such preeminence, I have to wear my Roman historian’s hat. In trying to explain why it never came back, I need to survey different periods in a brutally reductive way, shunting aside infinite nuance in the search for those factors that mattered most for particular outcomes. The resultant account is both parsimonious—perhaps to a fault, as fellow historians would say—and, despite its considerable length, tightly focused on my key theme.

In chapter 1, I look at the Old World as a whole to establish how different Europe really was, and in chapters 7 through 9, I need to do the same as I seek to identify the underlying causes of that difference. In chapters 10 through 12, I address a large body of scholarship, much of it produced by social scientists whose work has driven the debate, and with whom I engage on their own terms. And at the end, I return once more to antiquity, to see which if any of its legacies can be salvaged to play a role in an explanation of the transition to modern development.

Throughout my discussion, I employ two specific approaches to build my argument: a comparative perspective, and explicit recourse to counterfactuals—“what-ifs.” Both of these are means to the same end: to improve our sense of causation, of why different societies turned out the way they did.

Historical comparison promises various benefits, only the most important of which merit mention here. Comparative description helps “clarify the specific profile of individual cases by contrasting them with others.” I pursue this goal in the opening chapter by establishing contrasting patterns of state formation.<sup>29</sup>

Comparison has an “alienating . . . effect”: it defamiliarizes the deceptively familiar—deceptively familiar, that is, to the expert of a particular time and place: “The chief prize is a way out of parochialism.”<sup>30</sup> Thinking about the Roman empire without considering what happened later on in the same geographical space, or how other empires developed elsewhere, blurs our vision for what may have mattered most for the rise and fall of Rome: comparanda help explain the specific.

Comparison also helps us transcend peculiarities of evidence for a particular case or the dominant academic tradition thereon. “Analyses that are confined to single cases . . . cannot deal effectively with factors that are largely or completely held constant within the boundaries of the case (or are simply less visible in that structural or cultural context). This is the reason why going beyond the boundaries of a single case can put into question seemingly well-established causal accounts and generate new problems and insights.”<sup>31</sup>

A closely related benefit is the fact that “analytically comparison can help to refute pseudo-explanations and to check (or test) causal hypotheses.” Parochial familiarity will favor factors that are prominent in the source tradition and/or the research tradition of a particular subfield. How can we tell how much weight to put on taxes, or religion, or geography, if we do not consider alternative cases? Such single-case explanations need not be pseudo, but they are at the very least local and thus run the risk of failing to capture significant relationships. The post-ancient “First Great Divergence” in particular is impossible to understand without comparing configurations of circumstances in different environments.<sup>32</sup>

I am primarily interested in explaining one particular phenomenon, the path to modernity in parts of Europe, and not in offering a comprehensive survey of different societies and outcomes. This renders my comparative perspective, in Jürgen Kocka’s term, “a-symmetric”: “a form of comparison which is centrally interested in describing, explaining and interpreting one case . . . by contrasting it with others, while . . . the other cases are not brought in for their own sake, and . . . not fully researched but only sketched as a kind of background.”<sup>33</sup>



In the present case, I draw on the experience of China and—in less detail—other parts of Asia and North Africa in order to account for European development. This approach has a long pedigree, going back most famously to Max Weber’s attempt to understand the emergence of capitalism and modern science in the West by probing Asian societies for contrast. I also apply this technique more superficially in contrasting the rise of Rome with the failure of later European states to follow suit. In Part V, I compare the effects of imperial persistence in China (and to a lesser degree in India and the Middle East) with those of Europe’s post-Roman fragmentation.<sup>34</sup>

Chapters 7 through 9 offer a more symmetric treatment: in trying to account for the “First Great Divergence,” I give equal weight to post-ancient developments in Europe and China up to the end of the first millennium CE, which represent the most divergent outcomes within Afroeurasia in that period. This approach is known as “analytical comparison” between equivalent units. It helps us identify variables that can explain shared or contrasting outcomes—in this case, the characteristics of conquest regimes and fiscal arrangements, ideation, and ecological conditions.<sup>35</sup>

In the same context, specifically in chapter 8, I move farther toward a more ambitious goal, that of “variable-oriented” “parallel demonstration of theory”: I argue that proximity to the steppe was such a persistent precondition for empire formation that it allows us to subordinate individual outcomes to a broader normative prediction. This makes it possible to identify cases that are outliers, most notably the rise of Rome, which in turn helps us assess the relative robustness of historical processes and outcomes over time, in this case the failure of hegemonic empire to return to post-Roman Europe.<sup>36</sup>

My interest in robustness and contingency accounts for the relative prominence in this book of another tactic, overt consideration of counterfactuals. In a very basic sense, counterfactual reasoning is a necessary ingredient of any historical account that seeks to rise above the level of bare description: there is, after all, “absolutely no logical way to make causal inferences without simultaneously making assumptions about

how events would have unfolded if the causal factors we consider crucial had taken on different form.” Thus “we are all counterfactual historians”—and that “we” covers pretty much every person, not just professional historians.<sup>37</sup>

Even so, historians all too rarely highlight counterfactual reasoning in their research. This is a great loss. Explicit counterfactuals force us to confront the weaknesses of deterministic as well as revisionist assumptions, however implicit they might be: the notion that deviations from what happened might have proven short-lived and some approximation of actual outcomes would have happened anyway, or, conversely, that minor contingencies could have produced massive divergences from observed history. Merely to think about this makes us more careful about causal inferences. Just like comparative history—of which counterfactual history is a more exotic variant—“what-ifs” are a valuable means of assessing the relative weight of particular variables.<sup>38</sup>

The key question must be this: How little change would have been enough for history to have taken an alternative path—in the nontrivial sense of altering outcomes enough to be visible and to make a difference in developmental terms? Procedurally, this question calls for adherence to what has been called the “minimal-rewrite rule”: the least amount of tweaking of actual history and avoidance of arbitrary intervention.

Ideally, the direction of a counterfactual change should preserve “consistency with well-established historical facts and regularities, consistency with well-established generalizations that transcend what is true at a particular time and place, and consistency with well-established laws of cause and effect.” This does not rule out recourse merely to space aliens and asteroid impacts but also to historical actors that display anachronistic or contextually implausible behavior. The closer the change hews to what could well have happened at the time—the more informed the counterfactual scenario is by what actually did happen—the more reasonable it is.<sup>39</sup>

In devising counterfactuals, it is essential to be clear about putative connections—to specify antecedents and consequents—and to ensure that connecting lines are logically consistent. One problem in particular is difficult to avoid in practice: counterfactuals inevitably generate

second-order effects that complicate the prediction. The more they add to the complexity of counterfactual scenarios, the lower the overall probability these scenarios will be compared to that of any given link within them: the whole exercise becomes more tenuous and frail. Although the problem of complexity can be a function of design—if, for instance, we introduce multiple changes at once—more commonly it is simply a function of time: the farther we project ahead of actual history, the less we are able to control the thought experiment. Counterfactuals work best in the short term.<sup>40</sup>

I follow best practice in identifying critical junctures at which things either might well have gone differently or would have needed to have gone differently in order to generate significantly different long-term outcomes (that is, before a particular trend had become firmly locked in). Unlike much of the existing literature, however, I do not start with some ostensibly plausible change to explore its likely ramifications. Instead, I ask, as I must, how much would have had to go differently at a certain point to bring about change on a large scale—in this case, either the abortion of Roman expansion (chapter 4) or the restoration of Roman-style empire in post-Roman Europe (chapters 5 and 6).<sup>41</sup>

That these are very substantial divergences from actual history makes it easier to judge their plausibility because they often tend to be incompatible with the dictates of the minimal-rewrite rule: if it is not feasible to obtain dramatically different outcomes without straying far from what might plausibly have happened at the time when the counterfactual change is made, historically observed developments are revealed as having been fairly robust. This robustness helps contain the ever-present risk that we design counterfactuals that support our own preconceived notions of what was likely to have happened.<sup>42</sup>

The odds of Rome's failing to build a mighty empire steadily declined as time went by: whereas early changes could have derailed it from this trajectory, at later junctures it becomes more challenging to devise plausible pathways to a significantly alternative reality. The same is true for post-Roman Europe and the ascent of modern development in terms of economic growth and scientific and technological progress: trends that up to 1500 might quite readily have been aborted became more

difficult to change during the following two centuries. In the eighteenth century, this exercise would require even more dramatic rewrites, and it becomes well-nigh impossible in the nineteenth. The real question is just how much this trend owed to compound and reinforcing effects, and how far these effects reached back in time: my own answer, of course, is that their roots were very deep indeed.<sup>43</sup>

Comparison is essential for establishing the European anomaly (chapter 1) and for explaining it (chapters 7 through 9) and its developmental consequences (chapters 10 through 12). Counterfactuals are essential in testing the robustness of what happened (chapter 4) and what did not happen (chapters 5 and 6) in Roman and post-Roman Europe, respectively. The epilogue takes the counterfactual approach even further, sharpening our appreciation concerning what exactly it is the modern world owes to the ancient past.

• • •

The final result is a book that is quite varied in content and perspective, moving as it does back and forth between ancient history, modern history, comparative historical sociology, and history that did not even happen. For this and other reasons it is bound to irritate: classicists and humanists of all stripes for giving short shrift to the (positive) legacy of the classical world; culturally and microscopically inclined historians by focusing on the big picture of state formation and economic development; even more historians by foregrounding the influence of ecology and geography; and most historians by being irremediably “reductive.” I might even be taken to task for eschewing conventional indictments of the “West,” or indeed of the very concept—a label for which I have little use. For balance, I also expect to annoy social scientists by dredging up proverbial ancient history and by relying on a great deal of qualitative reasoning.<sup>44</sup>

This is exactly as it should be. While it may be rare for such diverse elements to be brought together between two covers, that is the whole point of the exercise—to forgo business as usual and to experiment. Those challenging my argument will have to do so by drawing on a similarly broad canvas—or better still on an even broader one, or by

showing why the canvas is too broad, or the wrong one. Any such critique will inevitably have to wrestle with a familiar conundrum: how to go about addressing the Very Big Question of why the world has turned out the way it has (so far). The more productive disagreement my book arouses, the better it will have done its job.

Yet needless to say, disagreement is not what I am after. I wrote this book to establish, as firmly and comprehensively as I could, two simple points: that interlocking forms of productive fragmentation were of paramount importance and indeed indispensable in creating the specific set of conditions that gave birth to modernity, and that the divergences that precipitated this outcome in only one part of the world but not in others were highly robust. In the end, only Western Europe and its offshoots fit the bill: had our “Great Escape” not begun there, it would most likely not have happened at all.

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