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Introduction

No issue in world history looms larger than coming to terms with the roles Europe has played in it. In the course of achieving – and then losing – dominion over most other parts of the earth between the sixteenth century and the end of the twentieth, Europe served as the chief agent of global unification, developing thicker and more extended webs of connection between distant points on the globe than had ever existed before, and making originally European ways of interacting with the world points of reference for cultures and peoples everywhere. These modes of practical and intellectual engagement included modern industry with its capacity to remake every corner of existence; a politics defined by concern with the sources, meanings, and limits of freedom and equality; the revolutionary reconceptualization of the cosmos and nature from Copernicus to Newton (and on to Darwin, Einstein, and beyond); and the evolution of contestable but still deeply influential modes of collective and individual self-understanding in the fields of history, anthropology, psychology, and the arts.

One does not have to be a follower of Karl Marx to think that he gave probably the best summary of the difference this compound of new powers and practices made, when he said of the metamorphosis taking place as European influence spread through the world in his lifetime (attributing it too narrowly to "the bourgeoisie") that it revealed for the first time "what human activity can bring about." He knew of course that people in other eras and places had established great empires, constructed populous and imposing cities, produced beautiful and useful objects of many kinds, as well as imaginative systems for understanding the world and themselves, but he had something else in mind: an increasingly palpable capacity to transcend all these achievements, to subject them to being constantly undone and remade. Whether or not Marx was right to locate the core of this power in the sphere of economic production and exchange, he understood that other domains made their contributions to it too. Suddenly rendered visible in the age of multiple revolutions that began in the last half of the eighteenth century, the human potential for ongoing transformation was giving birth to a form of life in which "all that is solid melts into the air, all that is sacred is profaned," and

"man" was forced to confront "his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind."[1]

To affirm humanity's power to remake its world in this way came easily to our nineteenth-century forbears, but it gives us pause today. One reason is that we have become so painfully aware of the dark side of unleashing it. The human potential to remake the world is also a capacity to afflict and deform it, run rampant in catastrophically destructive wars, in malign instruments of oppression and inequality, and in the appalling record of damage to our planet. Marx recognized this other side in his accounts of working-class immiseration and the dehumanizing suffering it brought, together with imperialist devastation of other cultures, as his far less radical teacher, G. W. F. Hegel, did by describing the history that spread the benefits of freedom as simultaneously a "slaughter bench," a repeated scene of violence and suffering. Europe has played a singularly large part in calling this dark side into being, and so strong has awareness of it become that one influential current in historical practice today is content to let Europe's positive role recede into the shadows, so as to make the negative one stand out. Such writing provides a valuable corrective to the many triumphalist accounts that long held the field, but no history of these matters can be adequate that does not keep both in sight at once, recognizing them as two faces of the same unchaining of human powers.[2]

The question of why Europe became so central to this release has been posed by many writers, a number of whom have come together around an answer that is also the starting point for the argument that will be pursued here. This is the failure, once Rome had fallen, to establish the kind of central authority that operated in the great empires with which Europeans came to have close relations – the Arab and Iberian lands dominated by a succession of Islamic dynasties, Mughal India, and Imperial China. Europe contained rulers and states that aspired to such dominion – Emperor Charles V in the sixteenth century, King Louis XIV of France in the eighteenth, Napoleon, Hitler – but their ambitions were never more than briefly realized, leaving the continent fragmented and divided, a field for the emergence of multiple centers of power and loyalty, destined to develop competitive and mutually stimulating relations with each other. Recent writers who follow this line include Walter Scheidel, in a remarkable book to which we will return in the last part of this one, who locates himself in "a long tradition of scholarship that has invoked fragmentation and competition as an important precondition or source of European development," and Peer Vries, in the best critical discussion we have of the many and diverse explanations proposed for the rise of modern industry, who points to the "non-monopolization but at the same time close interaction of the sources of social power, between and within states" as "the fundamental cause of the rise of the West in all its varieties." Others who have worked along similar lines in highly valuable studies include E. L. Jones, John Hall, David Landes, Jared Diamond, and Philip Hoffman.[3]

The feature that most immediately sets the discussion that follows apart from this existing literature is the latter's chief, in some cases exclusive, concern with the emergence of modern industry and the forces it unleashed. Such an emphasis is justified on the important ground that it was the West's greater material strength that allowed it to dominate and oppress other peoples over some four centuries, and that the new economic regime made the West far wealthier than any other region, providing a level of well-being for its population significantly above what had existed anywhere before. (That it also brought new forms of immiseration makes one uneasy with Peer Vries's titling his account of it *Escaping Poverty*.) But it is a chief thesis of this book that European distinctiveness needs to be understood in a broader way, extending to many other domains of activity, as the scope of the formula "what human activity can bring about" suggests. What taking this broader view will show, I think, is that much of Europe's history, both before the rise of modern industry and over a wider range of spheres, has been similarly distinguished by the release of previously obscured or occluded human powers, often unwelcome to established authorities and to most ordinary people as well. These spheres displayed, in their separate ways, a pattern akin to what Joseph Schumpeter (adopting a term first used by Werner Sombart) called the "creative destruction" brought by modern industry. That this release and testing of human powers occurred to some degree in many realms of activity gave European society as a whole an unusual spirit of openness to change that would nurture the imagination and ambition of those who initiated the turn to modern industry.

The book that follows is arranged so as to focus on four main arenas where Europe developed this capacity to give freer rein to human potentiality: politics, more specifically the politics of liberty, in Part I; culture, in the forms of religion, intellectual life, aesthetic practice, and science in Part II; imperial expansion in Part III; and the rise of the modern industrial economy in Part IV. In Parts I, II, and IV, major European ways of cultivating and managing these activities are compared with their counterparts elsewhere (no other world region having ever engaged in so far-flung a project of expansion and domination). In no case, to be sure, do I make any effort to deal comprehensively with these domains, focusing instead on what I argue were revelatory or decisive moments. In every case the absence of a central directing authority makes itself felt as the underlying ground out of which Europe's distinctiveness emerged, beginning with what I call the preoccupation with liberty that Europeans conceived during the Middle Ages, which has endured through its whole history, and which it transmitted to North America. To be preoccupied with liberty is not the same thing as to be in possession of it, and the liberties some Europeans celebrated and defended were often contested by powerful elites, limited or truncated by class and gender divisions, as well as betrayed and denatured by being made to provide justification for one or another form of

domination. All the same, this preoccupation meant that Europeans at many social levels cared about and pursued liberty to a degree unmatched anywhere else over many centuries, and its broad presence in European civic life makes our attempt to trace out some of its turnings in Chapters 2 and 3 into a kind of exemplary history of European politics between the Middle Ages and the era of the French Revolution. Experiences of liberty were by no means alien to peoples elsewhere, but (for reasons I will try to examine in Chapter 4) they seldom conceived of them as instances of liberty, so that it did not become a touchstone for social and political relations.

But Europe's ability to play its special role depended on a second distinctive feature of its history, beyond the region's freedom from effective central authority. This was the emergence there of spheres of activity characterized by a certain species of collective autonomy, akin to liberty, but not identical with it. In order to function coherently, any domain where groups of human beings carry on some common pursuit must be guided by a set of rules or norms; a sphere is autonomous, in the sense we use the term here, to the degree that the principles which regulate it are derived from the main endeavors carried on within it, and are intended to promote those efforts, as opposed to bringing them into harmony with some other, putatively "higher" set of norms. We name this second mode of organization "teleocratic," borrowing from the Greek roots *telos*, meaning a purpose or goal, and *kratos*, power. It denotes the situation that prevails when a sphere is regulated by ends or aims external to it, whether imposed by some outside authority or internalized by those who work within it, or both. The activities of a teleocratically regulated area are regarded as legitimate only to the degree that they support, or at least do not undermine, those externally defined aims. Autonomous spheres have a goal too, but it is the more open one of fostering and promoting the activities carried on within them; they are therefore more concerned with developing the means that sustain those pursuits, whether they be material, political, or cultural.[4]

Thus an economy is teleocratic to the degree that it is regulated so as to support, or at least not to undermine, an existing form of social or moral order, and autonomous when it is governed by principles (in Adam Smith's way, for instance) intended to promote production and exchange, and thus to sustain and improve the material well-being of the population it serves. Science has a teleocratic character when it is governed by norms derived from religion, tradition, metaphysics, or common sense, and autonomous to the degree that those who work within it are free to develop ways of understanding nature that are unrestricted by such limits, their work judged according to its capacity to acquire and improve the particular kind of knowledge they pursue. We will come to the forms autonomy takes in other domains later on. To be sure, just what these principles are can be contested, but to the degree that a sphere is

governed autonomously such arguments take place within it, not between it and some external one.

A sphere regulated autonomously is not necessarily more beneficial to the society in which it operates than one governed teleocratically, but it is likely to function more efficiently and open up more possibilities for those who work within it, including the potential to reorient the work its members carry on. Nor are people who operate in such spheres necessarily exempt from control by others; on the contrary, being regulated by principles is itself a restriction, and the social, generational, or gender-based divisions within a sphere are likely to impose others. The domains within which this kind of autonomy developed in Europe, beginning in the Middle Ages, all initially acknowledged some degree of teleocratic control over their activities, and because they did, they long remained – and in some degree still remain – mixtures of both kinds of principles, often in tension with each other. The spheres considered in Part II belong to the domains of religion, culture, and science, but the same distinction between autonomy and its opposite lies at the heart of the argument developed in Part IV, about why Britain alone provided the original site for the turn to modern industry during the eighteenth century.

I am not the first to employ the notion of autonomy to refer to the way certain activities are regulated, and the explicit definition offered here may only be an extension of what others haves implicitly understood.[5] But both Parts II and IV of the book employ the opposition between autonomous and teleocratic principles to construct an extensive and systematic comparison between developing European ways of understanding and organizing intellectual, cultural, and practical activity, and those that prevailed in other places; in some cases we pursue the same contrast, remembering that it is relative, within Europe itself. Proceeding in this way has two advantages: first, it helps to recognize the existence of similar developmental issues in arenas devoted to different concerns or pursuits – for example the Church and science, or the economy and aesthetics; and second, it aids in identifying the underlying conditions for establishing autonomy in any of them.

We will see that two such grounds favored the development of autonomous spheres in Europe. The first was the already mentioned absence of effective central control, which meant that individual domains were not impeded from evolving their own principles to the degree that their counterparts were elsewhere. Particular spheres were organized hierarchically, but their integration was much weaker than in China or the Islamic world, opening up the possibility that one domain could be played off against another. By the late seventeenth century this advantage was helping to give birth to a second: people with common interests who were seeking release from outside control worked to foster the emergence of horizontal connections that competed with the vertical ones that enforced traditional norms, and over which they could exert some degree of control themselves. These ties served as a means both to

further their shared pursuits and to seek support from interested outsiders. In both cultural and scientific spheres, this shift led to the development of a "public," to whom appeals were made to replace the judgments of traditional authorities (Newtonian science announced itself as explicitly "public," as we shall see). The corresponding development in the economy was the extension and thickening of market ties, creating networks of producers and consumers whose needs or desires could acquire more weight against the political and moral authorities that had long sought to regulate them, thus giving freer rein to the transformation of productive techniques. In these ways the spread of autonomous spheres became a chief distinguishing feature of Europe as a civilization. Making the coming of modern industry one instance of this larger phenomenon in no way lessens its overall importance, but the notion of autonomy will allow us to understand its emergence in terms that link it to the development of other spheres.

This book is also unlike other discussions of its subject by virtue of the more detailed attention given to the ways these activities were carried on elsewhere. I have tried to develop comparisons on this basis; first, in order to treat matters outside Europe with the respect all human cultures deserve; and second, to show that the ways of thinking and acting we describe as singularly European really were. Thus substantial effort is devoted to developments in China, India, and the largely Islamic areas that came under the dominion of the Ottomans. Africa also enters into our story at certain moments, but less prominently. It should be remembered, however, that this is primarily a book about European distinctiveness, and I do not claim to give equal attention to other parts of the world. My ability even to pursue these comparisons responsibly is limited by my having devoted my career until now almost entirely to European subjects, and by my lack of any of the languages necessary for a serious engagement with Asia or the Near East. Claiming no real expertise of my own, I have tried to draw on that of others, seeking to acquire enough knowledge and understanding to sustain the comparisons I try to pursue, and restricting their scope and aspirations in accord with the materials I am able to bring to bear on them.

Because my reading in the rich body of secondary literature (along with translations of a few primary texts) has sustained my conviction that the trajectory of European development has long diverged significantly from that of any other world region, and that this contrast has made Europe the only site from which the list of singular contributions to world history (both positive and negative) given at the start could have emerged, a certain part of the discussion that follows is aimed at refuting the claims of those who seek to deny or minimize these differences. This confrontation is explicit in regard to the topics dealt with directly in the text: the uniqueness of what I call the European preoccupation with liberty in Chapters 2, 3, and 4; the distinctive institutional setting of European intellectual and cultural life and its consequences in Chapters 5 and 6; the similar situation of science in Chapters 7 and

8; and the social and historical preconditions for the beginning of modern industrial innovation in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century in Chapters 12 through 14. In all these instances, but especially in regard to science and industry, I offer specific reasons why we should not be persuaded by some recent writings which assert that other places, specifically China and India, were no less well prepared than Europe to bring about the transformations it initiated – had certain accidental circumstances not been present – so that Europe's primacy owed little or nothing to elements that gave a special quality to its form of life. It is just this special quality that I think we can understand by examining the contributions that the absence of effective central direction and the emergence of autonomous spheres of action made to it.

But the question of whether Europe possessed such a distinctive character has been called into question in broader and more general terms by an ongoing movement among historians that takes the name of global history or the "global turn." The designation does not refer simply to widening the subject of study – since attempts to write the history of the whole world are ancient and legion – but to a different perspective from which to approach historical subjects in general, including nations, regions, and localities. Whereas more traditional attempts to understand, say, China, India, France, London – or in the current case Europe – commonly begin from within their subjects, seeking to identify features specific to them and that in some degree have given shape to their development, and making comparisons with other entities on this basis, "global turn" historians emphasize the way different regions have all been affected by certain widespread conditions at the same time, and they sometimes employ a multilocal approach from the start, taking more than one area into view in order to highlight the similarities and interactions that make them all sharers in the life of a single planet. In this way no single country or region, and particularly not Europe, is able to occupy a central position in the story.

Thus one contributor to this school, David Motadel, points out that (at least since 1492) world regions have increasingly become hosts to animal and vegetable species originally confined to separate parts of the globe, that diseases such as plague and cholera attacked far-flung populations at nearly the same time, that migration between regions has long created mixed populations whose members both retained connections with their places of origin and became part of life in their new milieux, with the result that "European cultures, like all cultures, developed in relation to complex processes of appropriation, adaptation, and hybridization." European imperial expansion was sometimes facilitated by already existing conflicts between indigenous groups, so that non-European peoples were active participants in early modern globalization too, contributing to the situation in which the more powerful Europeans were able to impose domination and enslavement on others, and to

develop the racist thinking that justified their actions. Thus other peoples contributed to European expansion and the growth of worldwide commerce that was the setting for the industrial transformation that began in the eighteenth century, while also putting financial and political pressure on European states that contributed to the crisis that brought down the French monarchy, opening the way to the Revolution.[6]

Not all these observations are original to the global turn (nor do all who take it claim them to be), and this book will offer many reasons for questioning Motadel's assertion that European historians who do not take this turn are prone to regard their continent's history as "hermetically sealed." But first we need to recognize that the global turn has brought significant gains for historical understanding, of which the first has been to remind us of how provincial and unself-critical much traditional writing on Europe's place in the world has been. Most Enlightenment accounts of world history focused on Europe in a way that exhibited no doubts about its overall superiority to other regions. (However, it should be remembered that, as we will note later on, the earlier primacy of both Arab science and Chinese civilization was widely acknowledged and even celebrated, their subsequent retardation attributed in the first case to the loss of vitality that ensued as formerly enjoyed political liberties were taken away, and in the second to the oppressive burden of a deeply rooted and officially sponsored traditional culture, not to any innate or genetic inferiority.) And nineteenth-century historical writing developed in close connection with the rise of nationalism, state consolidation, and imperial expansion, leading much of it to take on a chauvinistic and sometimes racist character. (However, an unqualified emphasis on these connections risks casting a veil over the degree to which – as we will also note later – all these developments were contested and resisted, first by eighteenth-century assertions of the right of every human group to work out its own form of life in response to the particular conditions it faced, and then by liberal and socialist internationalists and anti-imperialists in the nineteenth century.)

But whatever credit the global turn deserves for giving new emphasis to these limitations and defects, awareness of them did not begin with it, nor must one take this turn in order to escape falling into the pitfalls to which earlier writers succumbed. I believe that the pages that follow avoid such risks in three ways, none of them impeded by our initial focus on Europe. First, seeking the roots of European difference in the distinct structure of its political, socioeconomic, and cultural relations – the absence of effective central authority and the spread of spheres of autonomy – precludes attributing causal power to any supposed European genetic or biological superiority (faith in which has by now happily become the property mostly of fringe groups anyway), because rooting European distinctiveness in such differences implies that any world region whose overall form of life had been organized along the same lines would have been in a position to enable the same release of human energies. All

human groups begin with an equal capacity for such release; how and how far they develop it depends – to begin with – on the different ways in which their forms of life come to be organized.

Second, in contrast to many other attempts to understand European difference, the one pursued in this book does not attribute it to some set of distinct social or cultural values. I make no case for the causal significance of such ideals as Christianity (or "the Judeo-Christian tradition"), secularism, rationalism, Enlightenment, individualism, or democracy. To be sure all of these became significant elements in European life, and shaped its manner of distancing itself both from other peoples and from its own past, but they did so within a context where attempts to establish a unitary central authority or impose some single set of principles were stymied by the multiplicity of competing claims and agents. Had any one of these achieved the (albeit incomplete) degree of dominance that Confucian or Islamic principles did in their home areas, Europe could not have developed as it did. The deepest roots of the continent's ability to play the special role in world history we have been outlining here lay not in the ascendency achieved by some single value or set of them, but in the unwilled circumstances that stood against any of them attaining it. This blockage obtained no less in regard to the principles and practices of liberty and autonomy that figure so prominently in these pages than to the authoritarianism, monarchy, orthodoxy, tradition, and resistance to change that stood in opposition to them; because it did, the two opposing sets of values not only both survived, but found energy in struggling against each other, thus giving birth to modern conservatism and providing fuel for the emergence of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Nor should we forget that advocates of liberty and equality, put into positions of power, have established regimes that betrayed their principles too.[7]

The third way I think this book avoids the pitfalls into which earlier accounts centering on Europe sometimes fell is by the (already mentioned) expanded attention we give to other peoples and cultures. One purpose of this attention is, to be sure, to strengthen the argument for a certain kind of European singularity by basing it on an informed and responsible consideration of its "others." But I hope that fair-minded readers who follow the presentations here of Chinese artistic, scientific, and economic achievements, Muslim political culture and philosophy, or Indian aesthetics and artisanship, will recognize the degree to which these accounts affirm the high level at which these were carried on. The European distinctiveness for which these comparisons argue is never intended to suggest the inferiority of what people achieved elsewhere, but only the larger openings for "creative destruction" made possible by the singular structure and character of European life. In Part I no claim is made that Europe had any kind of monopoly on the liberty with which its inhabitants became so preoccupied. The "other liberties" examined in Chapter 4 were no less genuine, within their context, than European ones,

and in some ways more extensive (as some nineteenth-century European observers pointed out); what did not develop outside Europe, before its power and influence spread, was the highly elaborated and explicit concern for liberty that was so widely diffused there. In Parts II and IV, Chinese art and science, Arabic astronomy, and Indian craftsmanship all appear as anything but inferior to their Western counterparts; what they did not exhibit was the proclivity for questioning, undermining, and recasting their own culture's basic traditions and practices – the opening toward "what human activity can bring about" – that was Europe's distinctive mark.

Because human society and culture has been increasingly shaped by this capacity for questioning and remaking itself, and because Europe was the environment in which this potential first found palpable realization, I think we must not let our determination to acknowledge what Europe shared with other civilizations veil the productive import of its distinctiveness. It is not easy to achieve a balance between these two imperatives, and to highlight why I think the global turn is not the best way to seek it, I will end the discussion of this topic with a brief consideration of what is widely acknowledged to be one of the – if not the single – most distinguished of contributions to global history of recent times, C. A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World, 1750–1914*. A remarkable combination of seemingly borderless erudition and a passion to uncover unrecognized connections, Bayly's book ranges through all the continents and all the domains of human life. Shedding new light on the usual topics of industrialization, political transformation, imperialism, and ideological and cultural conflict, he shows how the world became increasingly integrated as powerful new technologies and changing forms of political organization accelerated the pace of change everywhere, drawing together formerly scattered networks of connection, making life in some ways more uniform, in others more complex and diverse. In both East and West, states dominated by military aristocracies existed alongside others controlled by royal bureaucracies, and reform movements in many places brought pressure for change, sometimes fomenting crises comparable to the one that laid the ground for the Revolution in France. Both commercial expansion and consumer desire for new goods gave vitality to Eastern economies, and Bayly argues that what Jan de Vries calls "the industrious revolution" – the growing involvement of worker and peasant families, especially in Britain and the Netherlands, in market-oriented work, in order to earn cash to buy personal and household goods – had counterparts in Eastern economies. In these and other ways central features of modernity whose roots have usually been supposed to lie solely in Europe appear in his book as global phenomena.

Bayly's decentering of Europe is far from total, however, not leading him to deny either its special role in world history or that long-standing features of its life underlay it. He warned that there are dangers in going "too far . . . in assailing the idea of the exceptional nature of European development," and

expressed a particular skepticism toward those historians, including some whose arguments we will consider in Part IV, who are unfazed by the improbability of explaining the "huge differentials" between East and West in productivity, power, and general well-being evident by the end of the nineteenth century on grounds that exclude any significant divergence in their starting points. Europe's advantages lay in "certain features of society and the state," rooted in "an economic and social context" that generated "significantly greater cumulative force for change than was the case in . . . the rest of the world," giving the transformations that occurred there "more staying power than those of Asia and Africa." The context for this difference was threefold, consisting, first, of "relatively stable legal institutions" that protected both intellectual and material property rights; second, of sophisticated forms of financial organization (such as the Bank of England) that provided material support at once for the state and for the private economy, aiding the development of both; and, third, of the push given to the simultaneous development of financial and productive resources by the recurrent conflicts between states, a condition not present in the same way in the empires to the east. These conflicts fed both an ongoing search for better weapons, materials, and transport (together, to be sure, with a rising and often-employed ability to inflict violence on enemies), and a move to greater efficiency in all the activities that contributed to it, notably mining and metallurgy.[8]

Despite these qualifications, however, the overall tone and argument of *The Birth of the Modern World* remains firmly anti-Eurocentric, and a chief thing that keeps it so is the book's denial that Europe owed these advantages to any singular feature or features that made them all aspects of a recognizably different form of life, or that a general contrast between such forms was responsible for the diverse impacts that the similar phenomena he finds in European and extra-European contexts made in each. "Europe's temporary and qualified 'exceptionalism' was to be found not in one factor, but in an unpredictable accumulation of many characteristics seen separately in other parts of the world." Questions about whether there was anything distinctive about (for instance) the British economy or French political culture that made each of them play so singular a role in modern history never arise, an absence that serves at once to keep at bay the specter of one or another kind of "centrism," and to obviate the question of whether the diverse and widely separated phenomena he describes really were similar. But this question needs to be faced.[9]

The "industrious revolution" that Jan de Vries identified was important in Europe because it helped prepare for the more famous industrial one before any of the innovations that enabled the latter were on the scene. The large numbers of modest people, women in particular, who devoted more time to work outside the home in order to have cash to acquire desired personal and household articles, made in traditional ways and offered for sale in various

markets, added energy to the economy and provided a ready-made consumer base for industrial products once the new mechanized techniques were in place. The same cannot be said of the "fine handicrafts," elegant wooden furniture or porcelain objects purchased by middle and lower Chinese officials, or the precisely honed swords and ceremonial armor Samurai bought from Japanese artisans (all to be sure objects with claims to greater distinction than pots and pans or socks and underwear). Bayly himself recognizes the differences between the two cases, providing two pages on the "internal and external limits of Afro-Asian 'industrious revolutions,'" but by attaching the term to them he assigns them a capacity to diminish the distinctiveness of the European case that could only be justified had they been like their Western counterparts in preparing the ground for industrial transformation. This they were not.[10]

The problem is similar with Bayly's notion that because some reformers and intellectuals in the early modern East made reform proposals and engaged in correspondence with each other about them, "the fabled 'Republic of Letters' of eighteenth-century Europe had analogues elsewhere." Here too Bayly recognizes the limits of the analogy, admitting that the early modern West developed "a density of civic institutions outside the state" unmatched elsewhere; but he does not take note of the specific features of the Republic of Letters that its Eastern counterparts lacked – that its activities crossed national or state borders (the Eastern intellectual linkages he cites were all within a single country, China or Japan or what became Saudi Arabia), that it conducted its exchanges by way of widely circulated periodicals and not just private correspondence, giving it a singular public presence and stability, and that (as we will see later on) it explicitly sought to become a site for undermining local or national prejudices and a vehicle for pursuing generally recognizable truths.[11]

In making these points, I do not mean to detract from the high quality of Bayly's work (I rely heavily on his accounts of Indian history in what follows) or diminish his achievement, but to suggest that his determination to question the distinctiveness of Europe's role draws him perilously close to the trap Raymond Grew identified as set for itself by anti-Eurocentric global history, namely, that the desire to emphasize commonalities over contrasts may create a temptation to "privilege any evidence of interconnectedness, no matter how bland, over distinctiveness, no matter how creative."[12] I think that some of the juxtapositions proposed by other global-turn historians, including some cited a few pages ago, also constitute bait for this trap.

One final issue raised by these historians, but also worthy of attention on its own, has to do with just what it means to speak about Europe as an object of study. Like many other terms in the everyday language used by most historians, it does not always mean the same thing, referring sometimes to a geographical space (whose boundaries are not always subject to agreement); to the human environment – roads, buildings, cities, agricultural installations – constructed by

the peoples who inhabit it; sometimes to those peoples themselves or the institutions, values, or qualities thought to characterize them; and in each case either to the whole or only some part of what constitutes Europe in each of these senses – all depending on the particular context. Recognizing this fluidity can become grounds for skepticism about whether "Europe" can be identified or studied at all.[13]

Such doubts might be well founded in the case of an attempt to write the continent's whole history, since the many choices to be confronted could be bewildering, and the weight of all the relevant materials crushing. But hardly anyone writes history of this sort today, and similar doubts might be raised for many other entities – countries, cities, even universities. The particular subject of the current book is not Europe as a total entity over time, but European distinctiveness, considered in relation to the singular release of human energies that (I argue) it made possible. It is not necessary for the purpose of this inquiry that the features I posit as creating this distinctiveness exist in equal measure in every part of Europe, only that they were sufficiently present in enough places to enable the changes I try to describe. That they were more present in the western part of the continent and that more of the story the book tries to tell took place there, in contrast to the Russian Empire where neither was the case, explains why Britain, France, Germany, and Italy bulk large in our story while Russia seldom appears in it. Another way to say this would be that the Europe that is the chief subject of this book is a historical phenomenon, not a geographical one, just as are all the extra-European places that figure in the story, each one constituted by the interaction of the people who inhabited it with the conditions that both made and were made by them. For similar reasons, the book has no clear chronological boundaries, homing in at widely separated moments when the themes and issues at its center make some kind of significant appearance.

I admit that I think there is much that is positive, and even something heroic, in Europe's revelation of "what human activity can bring about," but there is at least as much of tragedy in it, since the same unleashed energies that brought liberation from the bounds of traditional life also powered the already mentioned catastrophes of unprecedentedly destructive wars, environmental degradation, and imperialism. For this reason, I think there may be no better metaphor for the pages that follow than the ancient figure of Icarus, the mythical Greek who tried to soar into heaven on man-made wings but melted them by flying too close to the sun, fell into the sea, and drowned. So did Europe overreach itself and humanity pay the consequences. But inside the sad tale of Icarus's fall lies a second story. His flight was enabled by his more inventive and prudent father, Daedalus, a great architect and sage who was the designer and maker of the devices on which the pair soared upward. He neither yielded to the temptation to seek impossible heights nor perished on the flight, surviving to carry on his work in later days.

The Greek myth is a cautionary tale about how the powers humans discover in themselves can undo them, but both the capacity that made the flight possible and the vistas revealed by it remain as part of the story too. So also for the powers that Europeans let loose into the world. By recognizing the tragic and yet still generative quality of Europe's impact on world history, I hope to provide an alternative to two other narratives that shape much discussion of it today: the triumphalist one that merely celebrates Europe's achievements, and the anti-Eurocentric one that promotes the marginalizing of a story whose centrality to what the world and humanity have become we can only deny by closing our eyes to it.