

## THE BIG PICTURE

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# European Centrality and the Problem of Eurocentrism

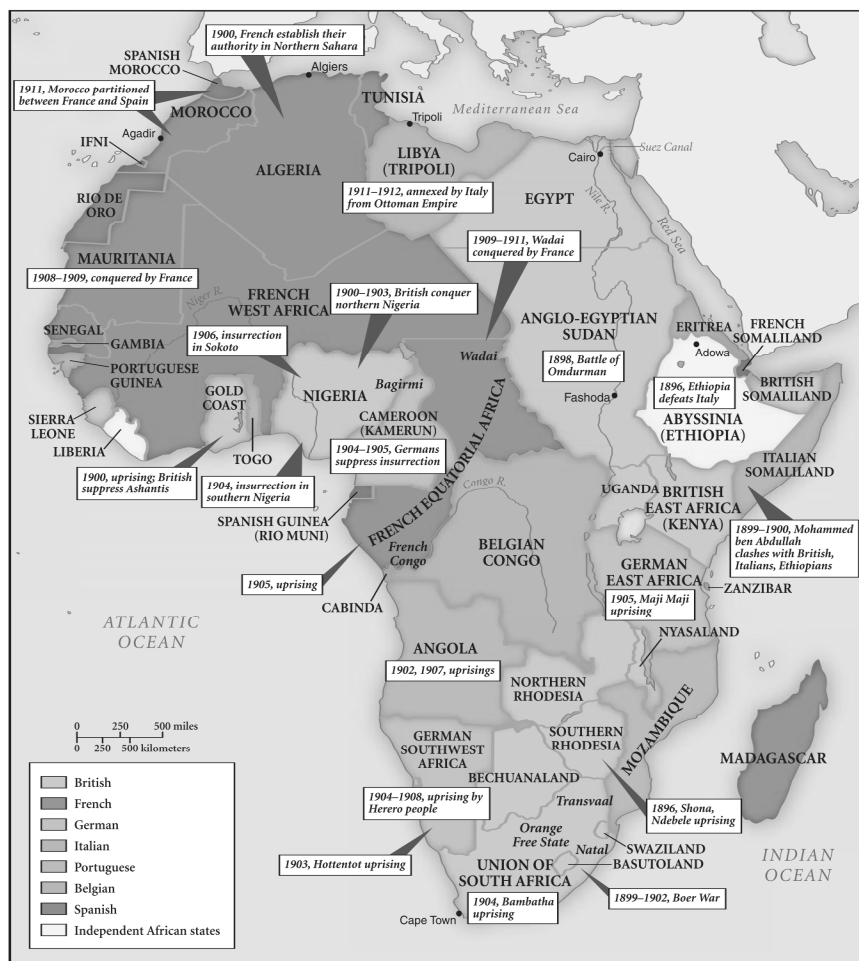
During the century and a half between 1750 and 1914, sometimes referred to as the “long nineteenth century,” two new and related phenomena held center stage in the global history of humankind and represent the major themes of the four chapters that follow. The first of these, explored in Chapters 17 and 18, was the creation of a new kind of human society, commonly called “modern,” which was the outgrowth of the Scientific, French, and Industrial revolutions, all of which took shape in Western Europe. Those societies generated many of the ideas that have guided human behavior over the past several centuries— notions of progress, constitutional government, political democracy, socialism, nationalism, feminism, and opposition to slavery.

The second theme of this long nineteenth century, which is addressed in Chapters 19 and 20, was the growing ability of these modern societies to exercise enormous power and influence over the rest of humankind. In some places, this occurred within growing European empires, such as those that governed India, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Elsewhere, it took place through less formal means— economic penetration, military intervention, diplomatic pressure, missionary activity— in states that remained officially independent, such as China, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and various countries in Latin America.

Together, these two phenomena thrust Western Europe, and to a lesser extent North America, into a new and far more prominent role in world history than ever before. While various regions had experienced sprouts of modernity during the “early modern” centuries, it was in Western European societies that these novel ways of living emerged most fully. Those societies, and their North American offspring, also came to exercise a wholly unprecedented role in world affairs, as they achieved, collectively, something approaching global dominance by the early twentieth century.

### *Eurocentric Geography and History*

That unprecedented power included the ability to rewrite geography and history in ways that centered the human story on Europe and to impose those views on other people. Thus maps placed Europe at the center of the world, while dividing Asia in half. Europe was granted continental status, even though it was more accurately only the western peninsula of Asia, much as India was its southern peninsula. Other regions of the world, such as the Far East or the Near (Middle) East, were defined in terms of their distance from Europe. The entire world came to measure



Conquest and Resistance in Colonial Africa (p. 927)

of modernity. That Europeans arrived there first seemed to suggest something unique, special, or superior about them or their culture, while everyone else struggled to overcome their inadequacy and catch up.

As the discipline of world history took shape in the decades after World War II, scholars and teachers actively sought to counteract such a Eurocentric understanding of the past, but they faced a special problem in dealing with recent centuries. How can we avoid an inappropriate Eurocentrism when dealing with a phase of world history in which Europeans were in fact central? The long nineteenth century, after all, was “the European moment,” a time when Europeans were clearly the most powerful, most innovative, most prosperous, most expansive, and most widely imitated people on the planet.

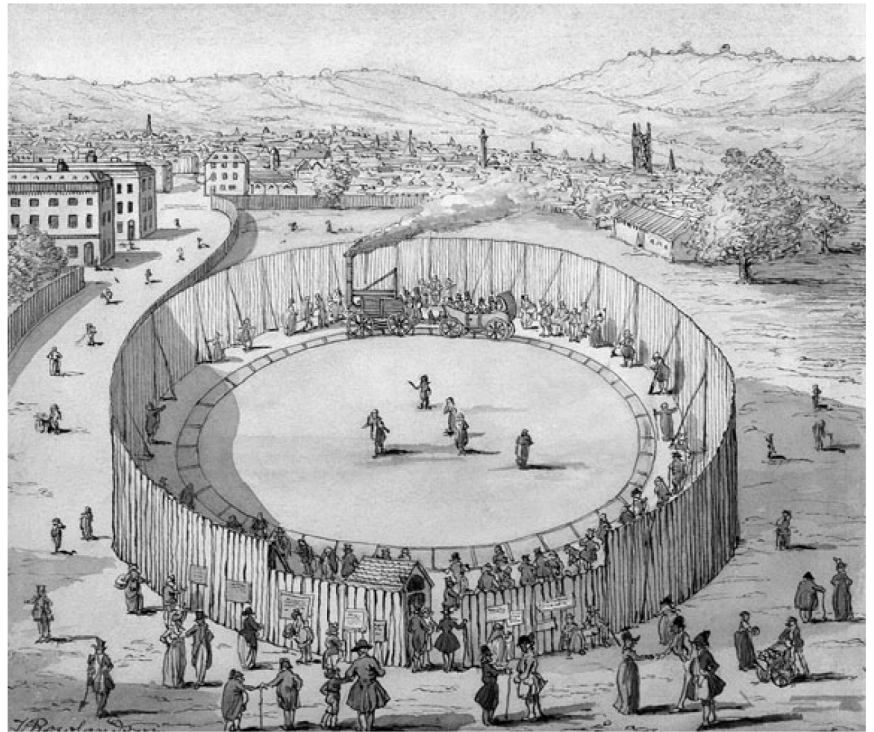
### *Countering Eurocentrism*

At least five answers to this dilemma are reflected in the chapters that follow. You may want to look for examples of them as you read. The first is simply to remind ourselves how recent and perhaps how brief the European moment in world

longitude from a line, known as the prime meridian, that passes through the Royal Astronomical Observatory in Greenwich, England.

History textbooks as well often reflected a Europe-centered outlook, sometimes blatantly. In 1874, the American author William O. Swinton wrote *An Outline of the World's History*, a book intended for use in high school and college classes, in which he flatly declared that “the race to which we belong, the Aryan, has always played the leading part in the great drama of the world's progress.”<sup>1</sup> Other peoples and civilizations, by contrast, were long believed to be static and unchanging, thus largely lacking any real history. Most Europeans assumed that these “backward” peoples and regions must either imitate the Western model or face further decline and possible extinction. Until the mid-twentieth century, such ideas went largely unchallenged in the Western world. They implied that history was a race toward the finish line

history has been. Other peoples too had times of “cultural flowering” that granted them a period of primacy or influence—for example, the Greeks (500 B.C.E.–200 C.E.), Indians of South Asia (200–600 C.E.), Arabs (600–1000), Chinese (1000–1500), Mongols (1200–1350), Incas and Aztecs (fifteenth century)—but all of these were limited to particular regions of Afro-Eurasia or the Americas.<sup>2</sup> Even though the European moment operated on a genuinely global scale, Western peoples have enjoyed their worldwide primacy for at most two centuries. Some scholars have suggested that the events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—the end of colonial empires, the rise of India and especially China, and the assertion of Islam—mark the end, or at least the erosion, of the age of Europe.



Railroads (p. 832)

Second, we need to remember that the rise of Europe occurred within an international context. It was the withdrawal of the Chinese naval fleet that allowed Europeans to dominate the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century, while Native Americans’ lack of immunity to European diseases and their own divisions and conflicts greatly assisted the European takeover. Europe’s Scientific Revolution drew upon earlier Islamic science and was stimulated by the massive amounts of new information pouring in from around the world. The Industrial Revolution, explored in Chapter 18, likewise benefited from New World resources and markets and from the stimulus of superior Asian textile and pottery production. Chapters 19 and 20 make clear that European control of other regions everywhere depended on the cooperation of local elites. None of this diminishes the remarkable—indeed revolutionary—transformations of the European moment in world history. Rather it suggests that they did not derive wholly from some special European genius or long-term advantage but emerged from a unique intersection of European historical development with that of other peoples, regions, and cultures.

A third reminder is that the rise of Europe to a position of global dominance was not an easy or automatic process. Frequently it occurred in the face of ferocious resistance and rebellion, which often required Europeans to modify their policies and practices. The so-called Indian mutiny in mid-nineteenth-century South Asia, a massive uprising against British colonial rule, did not end British control, but it substantially transformed the character of the colonial experience. In

Africa, fear of offending Muslim sensibilities persuaded the British to keep European missionaries and mission schools out of northern Nigeria during the colonial era. Even when Europeans exercised political power, they could not do so precisely as they pleased. Empire, formal and informal alike, was always in some ways a negotiated arrangement.

Fourth, peoples the world over made active use of Europeans and European ideas for their own purposes, seeking to gain advantage over local rivals or to benefit themselves in light of new conditions. In Southeast Asia, for example, a number of highland minority groups, long oppressed by the dominant lowland Vietnamese, viewed the French invaders as liberators and assisted in their takeover of Vietnam. Hindus in India used the railroads, which had been introduced by the British, to go on pilgrimages to holy sites more easily, while the printing press made possible the more widespread distribution of their sacred texts. During the Haitian Revolution, examined in Chapter 17, enslaved Africans made use of radical French ideas about “the rights of man” in ways that most Europeans never intended. The leaders of a massive Chinese peasant upheaval in the mid-nineteenth century adopted a unique form of Christianity to legitimate their revolutionary assault on an ancient social order. Recognizing that Asian and African peoples remained active agents, pursuing their own interests even in oppressive conditions, is another way of countering residual Eurocentrism.

What was borrowed from Europe was always adapted to local circumstances. Thus Japanese or Russian industrial development did not wholly follow the pattern of England’s Industrial Revolution. The Christianity that took root in the Americas or later in Africa evolved in culturally distinctive ways. Ideas of nationalism, born in Europe, were used to oppose European imperialism throughout Asia and Africa. Chinese socialism in the twentieth century departed in many ways from the vision of Karl Marx. The most interesting stories of modern world history are not simply those of European triumph or the imposition of Western ideas and practices but of encounters, though highly unequal, among culturally different peoples. It was from these encounters, not just from the intentions and actions of Europeans, that the dramatic global changes of the modern era arose.

A fifth and final antidote to Eurocentrism in an age of European centrality lies in the recognition that although Europeans gained an unprecedented prominence on the world stage, they were not the only game in town, nor were they the sole preoccupation of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern peoples. While China confronted Western aggression in the nineteenth century, it was also absorbing a huge population increase and experiencing massive peasant rebellions that grew out of distinctly Chinese conditions. The long relationship of Muslim and Hindu cultures in India continued to evolve under British colonial rule as it had for centuries under other political systems. West African societies in the nineteenth century experienced a wave of religious wars that created new states and extended and transformed the practice of Islam, and that faith continued its centuries-long spread on the continent even under European colonial rule. A further wave of wars and state formation in

southern Africa transformed the political and ethnic landscape, even as European penetration picked up speed.

None of this diminishes the significance of the European moment in world history, but it sets that moment in a larger context of continuing patterns of historical development and of interaction and exchange with other peoples.

Directions: On a separate piece of paper, in detail, explain the following:

1. Define: Eurocentrism
2. Why do some people believe Europe and Western civilization is the dominant player on the world stage?
3. What are the difficulties with Eurocentrism?
4. What other points-of-view can there be?