Making Sense of the Great Divergence. The Limits and Challenges of World History

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ABSTRACT

Dieser Beitrag diskutiert den Einfluss der Great Divergence-Debatte auf die Forschungen zur Weltgeschichte, insbesondere bezüglich der Potentiale und Grenzen für eine Schärfung der globalen Perspektive in der Sozialforschung. Dabei stehen vier Argumente im Vordergrund. Als gegenwärtig bedeutsamste Debatte in der Welt- und Globalgeschichte hat die Diskussion um die Great Divergence die schon lange existierenden Dispute um Konvergenz / Divergenz neu ausgerichtet und klar erweitert, indem sie neue empirische Forschungsfelder erschlossen, neuen Ansätzen Raum verschafft und neue Daten und Wissensbestände verfügbar gemacht hat. Die Dynamiken der Debatte treiben sie über ihre eigenen Begriffe und Fragestellungen hinaus, indem allgemeinere Interpretationen des modernen Kapitalismus überprüft werden. Globale Forschung zu Prozessen der Integration und Hierarchiebildung im globalen Kapitalismus machen eine systemische Mehrebenenanalyse notwendig, die Vergleiche und Verflechtungsanalysen, strukturalistische top-down- und akteurszentrierte bottom-up Ansätze (inklusive der Untersuchung von Frontiers) einschließt. Dies führt zu epistemologischen Reflexionen über die Great Divergence-Debatte in ihrem aktuellen Zustand und über die Grenzen bzw. Herausforderungen einer weltgeschichtlichen Perspektive.

1. Explaining the Great Divergence: From the West to the East and Back

World history took a different course after 1750. Great Britain and other industrializing nations made the successful transition from an organic to a mineral-based, fossil-fuel

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economy, releasing the Prometheus of technology-based and capital-intensive growth.[1] This pushed their productive and military strength to unprecedented heights, resulting in an unparalleled, worldwide economic and geopolitical dominance around 1900. This process has been coined in different iconic terms, including the 'Rise of The West', the 'European Miracle', and the 'Great Divergence'.[2] Soon after 1900, Max Weber wondered "to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value."[3] For a long time, the Weberian research program was framed within Eurocentric paradigms. Whether one researched the origins of the industrial take-off primarily in Western European societies, like Max Weber or Karl Marx, or found it in the imperial space that Great Britain commanded, like Eric Williams, almost all research started from and circled back to Europe. The problem with his approach was that it left many hypotheses regarding the technological, institutional, social, political or geographical conditions within Great Britain, Europe or the West unchecked. It lacked a genuine comparative and systemic framework that helps identify which conditions were, in retrospect, necessary or sufficient to set Europe on its perceived industrial *Sonderweg*. Recently, new tendencies in Global and World History have fundamentally altered the contours of and the dynamics within this vibrant research field. In this context, a lot of scholars have reoriented themselves, to use the expression of the late Andre Gunder Frank. They started looking across the Eurasian landmass in order to compare the European experience with that of China, East Asia or Southern Asia. The whipping debate about the remarkable rise of global inequalities in the last few centuries was, to a large extent, instigated by publications from the so-called 'California school'. The authors included Andre Gunder Frank, Jack Goldstone, James Lee, Kenneth Pomeranz, Roy Bin Wong, Robert Marks, and others. Although their views often conflict with and contradict each other, they generally agree on a rough comparability in economic performance between China and Europe (or between the Yangzi Delta, its most developed region, and Britain and Holland) until sometime in the 1700s. Some of these scholars have also argued that Western Europe's subsequent leadership owed much to its relations with areas outside Europe, which provided far greater relief from the ecological pressures created by early modern growth than East Asian cores could gain from their peripheries.[4] This intellectual return to the East is primarily motivated by the observation that the scientific and economic

1 D. Landes, The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present. Cambridge 1969; E. . Wrigley, Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England. New York 1988.

2 W. H. McNeill, The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community. Chicago 1992 [1963]; E. L. Jones, The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia. Cambridge 1981; K. Pomeranz, The Great Divergence: Europe, China and the Making of the Modern World Economy. Princeton 2000.

3 M. Weber. Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York 2003 [1930]. p. 13.

4 D. Little, Eurasian Historical Comparisons. Conceptual Issues in Comparative Historical Inquiry, in: Social Science History, 2 (2008), pp. 235-261

development of China in the centuries prior to the divergence makes it all the more puzzling as to why industrialization and the subsequent rise to global power took place in the West. The second trigger has been that since the late twentieth century, the economic and geopolitical dominance of Europe or the 'West' seems much less self-evident. The subsequent economic growth-spurts of Japan, the Asian tigers and China, combined with the latter's growing geopolitical importance, begs the question of whether we are witnessing 'The Rise of East Asia' and to what extent this rise also implies the 'Descent of the West'. Perhaps it points to a 'Great Convergence', a catch-up process in economic and political development between the two sides of the Eurasian landmass, or between The West and The Rest?

This general research interest has mostly been framed in economic terms: What are the causes of the wealth and poverty of nations? What induced the emergence of a new kind of sustained and substantial accumulation of wealth and growth? Why did this create new and unprecedented regional inequalities? In a recent overview of the debate, Peer Vries examined a wide array of explanations proposed by economic growth theorists and economic and global historians alike: natural resources, geography, labor, consumption, capital accumulation, trade, conquest, institutions, legislation, culture and religion, state actions, science and technology.[5] He stresses that none of the factors he studied can act as the one and only cause of the Great Divergence. There are just too many different factors acting in conjunction in different ways over time: "The Industrial Revolution and modern economic growth were neither foreseen, nor predicted or planned. It would be a major error to look at pre-Great Divergence history as a race between countries, which one would industrialize first."[6] Still, this begs the question: What is the historical story behind this remarkable global transformation? Was the great transformation mainly an internal European process with roots in its own history? Should the causes be sought in global shifts? Did coincidence play a major role? Moving beyond the discussions about the one and only 'prime mover', there is a growing opinion that the rise of the West was a 'contingent' (conditional, not required) process, a process that was not inevitable and could possibly not have happened. On the other hand, this change in the course of world history was not just random, it could not have occurred just anywhere. It was the result of a unique cumulative process, with roots inside and outside Europe.

Within a wide array of literature, three models of explanation can be discerned. The first, and clearly the most longstanding tradition, has a distinctly Eurocentric character. It chiefly evaluates the rise of Europe as a largely autonomous process, a result of internal changes. Since the 1990s a new school points to Asia's age-old predominance and recognizes many similarities between Western and Eastern societies until the nineteenth century. This model seeks an explanation for the divergence in a non-predestined and even accidental concurrence of circumstances. A third tradition distances itself both

5 P. Vries, Escaping Poverty. The Origins of Modern Economic Growth, Vienna 2013; see also J. Daly, Historians Debate the Rise of The West. London / New York 2015.

6 P. Vries, Escaping Poverty, p. 55.

from the classic Eurocentric and the (sometimes referred to as) Asia-centric explanations. It departs from an increased interaction between the West and the East, from which European countries were able to gain the most benefits after 1500. Thanks to several comparative advantages, this increased interconnection enabled them to strengthen their position in the areas of trade, knowledge and state power.

The founding literature about 'The Miracle of The West' sketches the rise of Europe essentially as an internal process. As a consequence of key differences in social and cultural life, Europe was able to break away from other regions in the world. Europe's position in the global system changed dramatically between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, when it became the absolute dominant power in the new global system. This important change is the result of a new internal dynamism within the European world, contrary to an assumed stagnant Eastern society. This explanation model relies on Max Weber's research program, which asserts that the West distinguishes itself via a steady and systematic rationalization of thoughts, actions and institutions. The differences between Europe and the non-West grew increasingly larger. Industrialization seems to flow automatically out of this Western dynamism. This vision is shared by disciples of Max Weber (rational state), Adam Smith (market economy) and Karl Marx (capitalist production relations) alike. For many who adhere to the Weber premise, culture makes the difference: the development of new, Western cultural patterns related to labor, discipline, freedom, knowledge, etc. The West was the first area to develop modern, rational institutions: a modern state-system, a modern bureaucracy, an efficient military apparatus while also promoting individual property rights, and a more or less efficient and 'free' market economy. Within this framework, strong arguments have been made for a range of prime movers, such as Europe's extraordinary drive for invention and innovation and openness to borrowing ideas from others (David Landes, Carlo Cipolla); the fundamental shift in European values, such as the rise of individualism (Allen MacFarlane) and the rise of bourgeois values (Deirdre McCloskey); the unique set of institutions and property rules (Douglas North); and an unprecedented marriage of science and technology (Joel Mokyr).

Within the last two decades, new and comparative datasets undermined the image of Europe's gradual lead in the centuries before 1800. According to these comparisons, the Asian continent created at least 60 percent of the world's wealth in the eighteenth century while containing 66 percent of the world population. According to some estimations, per capita income in East Asia (without Japan) was comparable with that of Western Europe around 1700. So the gigantic reversal of fortunes mainly occurred after 1800. Studies that distance themselves from a Eurocentric approach perceive the world until the eighteenth century as a place of major similarities. Due to China's dominant position in the early-modern world economy, comparisons usually concentrate on Europe versus China. Just like Western European countries, China developed productive arable farming and intensive industrial and commercial systems. The organization of property rights and markets was not inferior to Europe, nor was the political organization less developed. Like other commercial societies in those days, growth was limited by the boundaries of

organic agriculture systems. Assuming what they call a reciprocal comparative perspective, these authors made the compelling claim that it can no longer be taken for granted that centuries before the Industrial Revolution, European states experienced exceptional economic, legal, institutional and political frameworks, allowing for the formation, integration and operation of more efficient markets. Some authors have further minimized Europe's rise as a short-term interlude within the long-term dominance of Asian civilizations, due to a combination of sheer luck and downright violence (Andre Gunder Frank, John M. Hobson). Kenneth Pomeranz made the most compelling case not to consider the European path as a 'normal' outcome of history.[7] Commercial capitalism and the Industrial Revolution did not arise as the result of a long, progressive process; they arose from necessity. Contrary to China, which could profit from its large, united empire, the European continent gradually stalled in an ecological bottleneck: scarcity of energy and scarcity of raw materials. The responses to this bottleneck (coal and industrial technology; colonization) gave Europe a considerable advantage afterwards: more efficient technical knowledge and a network of colonies (an Atlantic trade system). Until the nineteenth century, models of social and economic development in the main centers of development around the world remained based on agrarian, organic-energy economies and they did not create huge regional inequalities. Why one eventually triumphs over the other is not the result of providence; it is a concurrence of circumstances in which coincidence plays a major role.[8]

Recent publications have labeled the revisionist image of the world before 1800 – a world of striking similarities – as too one-sided or even wrong.[9] They do not advocate a return to former Eurocentrism, but argue that major imbalances in economic and political power were not coincidental; they sprang from a different social organization in the West and East. In his recent book, Vries diverges both from neo-classical growth theories and the revisionist writings of 'the Californians': "Whatever the outcome of that debate, it simply is a myth that the economic history of early modern Europe would be the history of the rise of a Smithian market (…) Actually it goes for all major countries that ever took off." He adds: "The coming of modern economic growth was not a natural continuation of previous economic history, be it on a different scale: it was quite unnatural. It was not something that was bound to occur if only certain blockades would disappear." The revisionism of the Californian School is, in turn, "very salutary, but I think there are very good reasons to claim that revisionism went too far." Instead of a world of remarkable similarities, Vries sees "a world of striking differences".[10] The question remains, to what extent Europe's changing global position can be explained from an internal dynamism. Since the Late Middle Ages, contacts with the outside world changed Europe's position on diverse levels. First, its own capitalistic trade system gradually incorporated

7 K. Pomeranz, The Great Divergence.
8 R. B. Marks, The Origins of the Modern World. A Global and Ecological Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-first Century. Lanham ²2006.
9 P. Vries, Escaping Poverty.
10 Ibid., 47, 401, 433.

other parts of the world in such a way that the fruits of this system chiefly served the core. Second, Europe created a unique knowledge system via accumulation, imports and adaptation. This knowledge system was the breeding ground of industrial acceleration in the nineteenth century. Third, Europe applied this knowledge and technology to the development of strong state systems and of unseen military strength. The result was near absolute political and military dominance in the nineteenth century. A wide set of explanatory stories have aimed to understand Europe's changing role within a global perspective and have stressed different external key factors: geography and climate, making Eurasia, and Europe in particular, the most favorably endowed regions in the world (Jared Diamond, Eric L. Jones); interactions among societies in Eurasia, instigating Europe's recovery since the Late Middle Ages (William McNeill, Janet L. Abu-Lughod); European imperialism enabling its states to dominate peoples and resources beyond their scores (e.g. the use of African labor: Joseph E. Inikori; Eurasian invasion of flora and fauna: Alfred Crosby; a globalizing Europe-centered division of labor: Immanuel Wallerstein). The 'Rise of the West' completely upset relations on a world scale. The convergence of internal societal transformations and external expansion beyond its old borders propelled Europe from the periphery to the center of global events. In the remainder of this essay, I will argue that the Great Divergence debate both enlarged and redirected the long-standing convergence/divergence dispute in social sciences (part 2) and that its dynamics push it to go beyond its own terms and to transcend its own limits by rethinking the history of global capitalism (part 3). I will conclude with two more general sets of epistemological reflections, one on the Great Divergence debate as it stands now, the other on the challenges of today's World and Global History (part 4).

2. Understanding Convergence and Divergence

Researching the Great Divergence has triggered a wide array of research, including different sets of data, different research strategies, different scopes, scales and units of analysis. The central question is whether these units – regions, states or the world economy – permit meaningful comparisons and to what extent the units of comparison are connected within broader webs or systems of interaction. Using multiple spatial frameworks has tended towards more narrative approaches, and trans-regional comparisons have retained spaces of varying sizes and definitions alongside nations and global systems as units of analysis. Regardless of how the Great Divergence debate fares in future research, it has influenced and stimulated work on various other areas and periods. This impact is clear in the way it avoids the sharp categorical distinctions central to other approaches within modernization and globalization studies. It does not a priori deduce a place's prospects from its location within global networks, it suggests the possibility of multiple paths of development, it stresses several continuous, rather than dichotomous, variables, and it

makes global ties influential, but not decisive by themselves. It stresses that regional units of various kinds and sizes remain important to the story of global economic history.[11]
This tension between diverging scales of analysis, between comparison and connection, prompts one of most fundamental debates within the field of World and Global History. How can we understand processes of regional convergence/integration versus divergence/hierarchy in the 'modern world' within a global framework? How do we relate tensions of divergence within a context of increased connections? This debate goes to the core of social sciences. Over the past two centuries, social sciences developed a dominant view that the modern world shows a pattern of more or less linear development in which all positive trends over time converge into a more homogenized world.[12] By and large, left and right shared the same belief in the inevitability of progress and the linear upward pattern of social processes. This ideology of ultimate, positive convergence of all states and peoples reached an apotheosis in the three decades after the Second World War. At the same time, a number of analysts began to contest this linear model, arguing that the modern world was also one of heterogenization and polarization.[13] When analyzing the social world, the linear versus polarizing models of historical development became a debate about whether the various zones or countries would converge to an approximately equal standard of economic, political and cultural structures. A global perspective shows that, despite the many ways in which there has been convergence, there has been simultaneous and strong polarization. Much of this can only be observed if different scales of analysis are interconnected, if regions are not analyzed as self-contained units, and if the global is not seen as an undifferentiated macro process. The need for a global and historical perspective instigated three, interrelated research strategies facilitating multilayered and multifocal frames of analysis. The first compares individual cases in 'a two way mirror', equating both sides of the comparison (reciprocal comparative analysis). The second strategy analyzes the interactions and interconnections between societies or systems, and how those patterns of contact shift (network analysis, translocal/transnational analysis). The third takes human systems in which various societies and their mutual contacts are given shape as the central unit of analysis. Examples include economic systems (the current world-system), migration systems, ecological systems (climate, disease), and cultural systems. Human societies are always linked together by several of these systems and act in reaction to these systems (systems analysis).
The debate about the Great Divergence has yielded large-scale comparative studies on differences in geography, ecology, population, resources, wages, institutions, state building, and so on. Key issues in comparative history are the questions: What is compara-

11 K. Pomeranz, Writing about Divergences in Global History. Some Implications for Scale, Methods, Aims, and Categories, in: M. Berg (ed.), Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the 21st Century, Oxford 2013, pp. 117-128.

12 I. Wallerstein (ed.), The World Is Out of Joint. World-Historical Interpretations of Continuing Polarizations. Boulder / London 2014.

13 R. Palat, Dependency Theory and World-Systems Analysis, in: P. Duara, V. Murthy and A. Sartori (eds.), A Companion to Global Historical Thought, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, pp. 369-383.

tively being measured and how? How does one avoid explanatory reductionism, methodological nationalism and analytical synchronism? Scholars of the 'Californian school' have made a strong case for the method of reciprocal comparisons, precisely to avoid approaching non-Western histories from the stylized facts of European history and to turn away from pre-determined world views.[14] The method of reciprocal comparison can give historical research more analytical rigor, by forcing researchers to formulate problems, ask questions, look for answers and develop explanations in a more structured and systematical way. The questions about methodology and sources remain intensively debated. Which units are fit for comparison and why? Which assumptions and models underlie any comparison with a global ambition?[15] Moreover, historians making comparisons often face the challenges of a lack of data and scholarly work to create comparable accounts from widely differing sources, compiled under very different assumptions and purposes.[16] Some collaborative networks responded to this challenge by compiling large-scale sets of quantitative-economic data over time and space, such as prices, wages, and estimates of GDP (The Global Price and Income History Project; The Madison Project). However, GDP estimates going beyond the nineteenth century are tentative at best, useless at worst.[17] Wage-based proxy for living standards remain perilous, since until deep in the twentieth century outside Western Europe wage labor was not representative of productive relations and took different positions in different societies. Still, if carefully contextualized in regional stories, these data can serve in reciprocal comparative analyses. For example, recent historical research on Asia has produced some partial and regionally-specific evidence to suggest that standards of living in Western Europe and maritime provinces of China and South India may not have differed perceptibly before the late eighteenth century.[18] Comparative research explicitly raises the question of spatial dimensions. By definition, world-historical research challenges conventional chronological and geographical frames. It stresses both areal integration and differentiation.[19] Much historical work continues to be done at a local, regional or national level in order to achieve control over information and sources. This tension can regenerate national

14 R. Bin Wong, China Transformed. Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience, Ithaca, NY, 1997; K. Pomeranz, The Great Divergence; G. Austin, Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling Conceptual Eurocentrism in the Study of Africa's Economic Past, in: African Studies Review, 50 (2007), pp. 1-28.; P. Parthasarathi, Comparison in Global History, in: M. Berg (ed.), Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the 21st Century, Oxford 2013, pp. 69- 82.

15 J. De Vries, The Great Divergence after Ten Years. Justly Celebrated yet Hard to Believe, in: Historically Speaking, 12 (2011) 4, pp. 10-25; id., Reflections on doing global history, in: M. Berg (ed.), Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the 21st Century, Oxford 2013, pp. 32-47.

16 M. Berg, Global History. Approaches and New Directions, in: M. Berg (ed.), Writing the History of the Global Challenges for the 21st Century, Oxford 2013, pp. 1-18.

17 P. O'Brien and K. Deng, Can the Debate on the Great Divergence be Located Within the Kuznetsian Paradigm for an Empirical Form of Global Economic History?, in: Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis, 12 (2015) 2 [= E. Vanhaute (ed.), Escaping the Great Divergence? A Discussion about and in Response to Peer Vries's Escaping Poverty. The Origins of Modern Economic Growth], pp. 63-78.

18 B. Li and J. L. Van Zanden, Before the Great Divergence? Comparing the Yangzi Delta and the Netherlands at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century, in: The Journal of Economic History, 72 (2012) 4, pp 956-989.

19 W. L. Lewis, "Geographies", in: J. H. Bentley (ed.) The Oxford Handbook of World History, Oxford 2011, pp. 36-53.

frameworks and essentialize features of a nation's history. This is clear in some efforts to resurge institutions as main drivers of unequal development. For Acemoglu and his associates, economic performance is largely explained by a country's institutions, and in many cases these stem from early colonial choices. While settler colonies, for example, usually created a liberal property rights regime that promoted growth, in other colonies Europeans reinforced or introduced coercive institutions. This 'reversal of fortunes' argument posits a single critical intervention and one dichotomous variable (good or bad property rights), ignoring any effects of subsequent global connections.[20]

A wide range of recent World History studies has favored a network perspective. Moving away from comparative histories brings up a whole new set of questions and subjects about connectedness, entanglement, reciprocity and circulation. New metaphors, such as flows, networks, webs, chains and new epithets such as trans, inter, cum and meta aim to translate the experience of border-crossing interconnections. This includes topics like human and labor migration, chains and networks of commodities, and long-distance trade, including methods of navigation, finance, tariffs and price movements, and price convergence. This angle explicitly questions spatial frameworks, creates decentering narratives, and gives agency to the parties involved. It can also favor horizontal stories of entanglement, which risk leveling out history.[21] Connections of whatever kind are created and redefined in a world that is not flat. Stratification and inequality define the direction and the impact of networks. Societal relations configure the world on different levels or scales. In order to understand how they influence each other, a global framework has to integrate connections and networks within (overlapping) scales and (overarching) systems. Over time, these societal systems have grown from small to large, from mini-systems such as chiefdoms, meso-systems such as civilizations, to the world-system of today. They have gotten larger, more complex, more hierarchical and more intertwined, reconfiguring connections and networks time and again.

Over the last two decades, cross-regional comparative and interconnective research has gained a wealth of new knowledge about the 'birth of the modern world'. In order to understand why processes resembled or differed, why interactions went one way and not the other, one needs to understand the systemic logics that combine those patterns. A systems perspective does not narrow the lens to the macro-boundaries, it aims to understand how the different scales or frames of time and space within the system tie together, forming a multitude of 'worlds'. A 'world' is not a constant; it is bound by nested human activity. It refers to social change that can only be understood in specific contexts of space and time. For that reason, no single delineation can be absolute. On the contrary, choosing a space and time perspective (where? when?) is linked to an intrinsic substantive choice (which social change?). Consequently, a global or world perspective cannot apply exclusive frameworks of space and time and cannot draw fixed boundaries. Neither do these worlds consist of fixed scales; they overlap from small to large. Interactions be-

20 D. Acemoglu and J. Robinson, Why Nations Fail. The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty, New York 2012.
21 P. Vries, Escaping Poverty.

tween external boundaries or internal scales create zones of contact and interaction that we call frontiers. This is where different scales and social systems come together. Scales and contact zones or frontiers are central concepts of analysis in contemporary world history and global studies.[22] Rather than reducing an entity to the properties of its parts, a systems perspective focuses on the arrangement of and relations between the parts that connect them into a whole, creating a 'world'. Systems have a strong internal cohesion but are also open to, and interact with, their external environments, resulting in continual evolution. World-systems are open systems with operational closure, reproducing the very elements of which they are composed.[23] From the moment these patterns of reproduction have become irreversible (and the factors that can prevent its deployment have become too weak or are no longer present), a system is functioning and has replaced former systems. Systemic interactions between communities and societies are two-way, necessary, structured, regularized and reproductive.[24] 'Worlds' refer to these nested interaction networks, whether these are spatially small or large. Until recently, world-systems did not cover the entire surface of the planet. Only capitalism could transform itself from 'being a world' to 'the historical system of the world'. A comparative world-systems perspective is a strategy for explaining social change that focuses on whole, inter-polity systems rather than single societal units. The bulk of world-systems analysis has been engaged with the so-called modern world-system, historical capitalism.[25] Historical capitalism combines a globalizing economic unity (based on extensive trade and exchange relations and a hierarchical division of labor) with a multitude of political entities (states, bound together in an inter-state system) and a multitude of cultures (civilization traditions as world religions and state-bound, group-bound, class-bound and gender-bound identities, tied together by a universalistic geo-culture). Research into systemic processes of convergence and divergence should be based on three basic and interrelated questions. First: What constitutes the system? What are the factors of internal coherence and integration? Second: How does the system reproduce internal hierarchies and stratifications? Lastly: Where are the boundaries of the system? What constitutes its frontiers? A research strategy of incorporating comparisons turns away from the search for invariant hypotheses based on more or less uniform cases. Its goal is to give substance to historical processes through comparisons of its parts, conceptualizing variations across time and space.[26]

22 E. Vanhaute, World History. An Introduction. London / New York 2013; H. Cottyn, A World-Systems Frontier Perspective to Land. Unravelling the Uneven Trajectory of Land Rights, in: Journal of World-Systems Research, 2017 (forthcoming)..

23 A. De Wachter and P. Saey, Trajectories of Regions and Spatial Integration in the Worldsystem, in: Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie, 96 (2005) 2, pp.153-167, here 165-166.

24 Ch. Chase-Dunn, H. Inoue, T. Neal, and E. Heimlich, Global History and World-Systems, Paper Institute for Research on World-Systems, University of California, Riverside, 2014 (http://irows.ucr.edu/papers/irows86/irows86.htm).

25 I. Wallerstein, World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction, Durham 2004.

26 P. D. McMichael, Incorporating Comparison within a World-Historical Perspective: An Alternative Comparative

3. The Geometry and the Frontiers of Historical Capitalism

The Great Divergence is part and parcel of the chronology and geometry of historical capitalism. Capitalism, as a social system, developed as a complex of stratified time, stratified space and stratified social power relations. There is a persistent perception, in both scholarly communities and popular opinion, that the recent rise to power of an array of non-traditionally powerful countries is inverting an age-old trend of global divergence. This rhetoric of globalization and global convergence by and large obscures long-term global stratification, the reproduction of hierarchies in global power relations, together with the emergence of new inequalities.[27] A structural-historical view contends that the processes associated with globalization tend to reproduce stratification and hierarchy in the capitalist system and that 'globalization' as a concept mainly serves to legitimize neoliberal 'modernization'.[28] A global and historical systems-analysis reveals the insistent multi-dimensional nature of global capitalism. Cycles of global expansion contributed to the political upward mobility of a limited number of non-core countries, while states in the core remained politically and economically dominant.[29] A considerable body of academic research confirms that the stratified structure of the world-system has remained remarkably stable over time, despite (varying levels of) upward and downward mobility.[30] The processes associated with global growth do not benefit all countries equally. They contribute to the reproduction of hierarchy and stratification in the system.

In order to untie global processes of divergence and convergence, we need to map and understand the interaction between short-term fluctuations and long-term change in global capitalism. A dominant focus on 'massive and large-scale change' in the short-term still leads to a large body of scholarly research that disregards long-term continuity and stratification in the global system of power relations. Structural stratification remains

Method, in: American Sociological Review, 55 (1990), pp. 385-397; Ch. Chase-Dunn and Th. D. Hall, Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems. Boulder 1997.

27 M. Cox, Power Shifts, Economic Change and the Decline of the West?, in: International Relations, 26 (2012) 4, pp. 369-388; D. Flemes, Network Powers: Strategies of Change in the Multipolar System, in: Third World Quarterly, 34 (2013) 6, pp. 1016-1036; L. M. Jacobs, Shadows of the Future. A Network Analysis of the Structural Evolution of the Global Power System between1965 and 2005. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Ghent University, 2014.

28 G. Arrighi, B. J. Silver, and B. D. Brewer, Industrial Convergence, Globalization, and the Persistence of the North-South Divide, in: Studies in Comparative International Development (SCID), 38 (2003) 1, pp. 3-31; S. D. Sharma, "The Many Faces of Today's Globalization: A Survey of Recent Literature, in: New Global Studies, 2 (2008) 2, pp. 1-27; R. P. Korzeniewicz and Albrecht, Thinking Globally About Inequality and Stratification: Wages across the world, 1982–2009, in: International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 53 (2012) 5-6, pp. 419-443; E. Vanhaute, Historicizing Global Studies. About Old and New Frontiers of World-Making, in: Potentials and Challenges of Global Studies for the 21st Century, Global Europe. Basel Papers on Europe in a Global Perspective, No. 105, Institute for European Global Studies, Universität Basel, 2014, pp. 50-59.

29 R. Clark, World-Systems Mobility and Economic Growth, in: Social Forces, 88 (2010) 3, pp. 1123-1152; E. L. Kick and B. L. Davis, World-System Structure and Change, in: American Behavioral Scientist, 44 (2001) 10, pp. 1561-1578.

30 J. Kentor, Capital and Coercion: The Economic and Military Processes that have shaped the World Economy, 1800–1990. New York 2000; S. J. Babones, The Country-Level Income Structure of the World-Economy, in: Journal of World- Systems Research, 11 (2005) 1, pp. 29-55; M. C. Mahutga, The Persistence of Structural Inequality? A Network Analysis of International Trade, 1965–2000, in: Social Forces, 84 (2006) 4, pp. 1863-1889.

one of the – if not *the* – most defining features of the global system of power relations today.[31] The work of the Italian-American political economist and sociologist Giovanni Arrighi is a challenging attempt to reconcile the political economy of capitalism with the call of global history to understand convergence and divergence, integration and hierarchy beyond established core-periphery relations.[32] His work shows in a comparative, incorporated and historical way how modes of production, circulation, consumption, and distribution are organized, and how they created and transformed modes of reproduction. Since this perspective has no meaning outside the system-bound world-historical coordinates, it rejects both abstract localism and abstract globalism.[33] Internal logics and transformations are formative to the system as a whole: "The globalization of historical capitalism must instead be represented as involving fundamental structural transformations of the spatial networks in which the system of accumulation has been embedded."[34]

Since historical capitalism goes through cyclical phases of expansion and contraction, it continuously creates and recreates zones of contact or frontier zones. It is frontier-making through the recurrent waves of geographical expansion and socio-ecological incorporation of nature, land and labor. This coercion to put human and extra-human natures into the service of capital accumulation has gradually extended the zones of appropriation. These zones produce 'cheap natures' in the form of labor, food, energy, and raw materials in order to encounter capital's rising costs of production.[35] Capitalist incorporation and expansion had been fuelled by the opening of the 'Great Frontier', a metaphor for an interconnected set of shifting frontiers. Frontier expansion provided an astounding wealth of nature that reduced production costs and increased profitability for centuries to come. For example, each successive food regime "has particular conditions for cheap food, and each relatively stable set of relationships are expressed in a world price governing production, circulation and consumption of food (…). The food regime is premised on forms of enclosure across time and space. This dimension is critical because enclosure alters ecological relations: substituting world-extractive for local-extractive processes, thereby foreclosing local futures for a capitalist future driven by variable and unstable

31 G Arrighi and J. Drangel, The Stratification of the World-economy: An Exploration of the Semiperipheral Zone, in: Review (Fernand Braudel Center), 10 (1986) 1, pp. 9-74; Ch. Chase-Dunn and Bruce Lerro, Social Change: Globalization from the Stone Age to the Present. London / New York 2014.

32 G. Arrighi, The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of our Times. New York 1994; id., Adam Smith in Beijing. Lineages of the Twenty-First Century. London 2007; J. F. Abbeloos and E. Vanhaute, Cutting the Gordian Knot of World History: Giovanni Arrighi's Model of the Great Divergence and Convergence, in: Journal of World-Systems Research, 17 (2011) 1, pp. 89-106.

33 P. D. McMichael, Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions. Halifax / Winnipeg 2013, p. 12.

34 G. Arrighi, Spatial and Other "Fixes" of Historical Capitalism, in: Journal of World-Systems Research, 10 (2004) 2, pp. 527-539, here 538.

35 J. W. Moore, Transcending the Metabolic Rift: A Theory of Crises in the Capitalist World Ecology, in: The Journal of Peasant Studies, 38 (2011) 1, pp. 1-46; Id., "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis. Part II: Abstract Social Nature and the Limits to Capital" (2014), in: http://www.jasonwmoore.com/Essays.html; Th. D. Hall, Incorporation into and merger of World-systems", in: S. J. Babones and Ch. Chase-Dunn (eds.), Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis, London / New York 2012, pp. 37-55.

market, rather than socio-ecological needs".[36] Frontiers generate shifting sets of 'localized' activities to secure access to labor and land for 'globalized' commodity production (primarily agricultural, forest and mining goods). The sites where this happens become frontier zones. Frontiers connect the expansion of global commodity chains with the creation of unequal geographical and social spaces. As Beckert states in his fascinating story about global cotton: "The geographical rearrangement of economic relations is not just a noteworthy element of capitalism or an interesting aspect of its history; rather the shifting recombination of various systems of labor, and various compositions of capital and polities is the very essence of capitalism. (…) These frontiers of capitalism are often to be found in the world's countryside, and the journey through the empire of cotton reveals that the global countryside should be at the center of our thinking about the origins of the modern world".[37] Frontier expansion has often been associated with problems of social, economic and ecological sustainability. This results in the apparent need for these frontiers to be continually shifting towards new areas. Frontiers embody historical processes of both incorporation and differentiation that create and reorganize spatial settings. Frontier zones do not vanish after incorporation; they are permanently replicated by converging and dialectical processes of homogenization (the reduction of frontiers) and heterogenization (the creation of new frontiers).[38] Analytically, a frontier perspective can grasp the imbalances of incorporation processes, emphasizing the role of the margins and friction zones. Due to the incomplete nature of incorporation, frontier zones are the prime locus of negotiation processes about socio-economic commodification and socio-cultural assimilation. This frontier-focus requires research into similarities and differences, into connections and systemic changes. Frontiers determine exclusion and inclusion; they enforce new rules while giving space for resistance. Frontier zones have been the locus of both confrontation (war, resistance, lawsuits, intolerance, plunder, extraction, sabotage, ecological degradation, segregation) and cooperation (biological symbiosis, marriage, economic partnership, political bonds and treaties, celebration, conversion, gifts). Constant renegotiation forms a fundamental process in the shaping of ongoing, accelerating, retreating or stagnant incorporation processes. 'Peripheral' agents, such as peasant and indigenous movements, act within these 'fault lines'. Frontier processes create concrete spatial settings, structured by asymmetrical power relations.[39] It is not the finiteness of frontier processes, the prevailing idea of a homogenizing world (convergence), but their permanence, the constant reproduction of instances of heterogenization (divergence) that must be questioned in world history.

36 P. D. McMichael, Food Regimes, 9.
37 S. Beckert, Empire of Cotton. A Global History. New York 2014, pp. 440-441.
38 E. Vanhaute, World History; Hanne Cottyn, A World-Systems Frontier Perspective to Land.
39 S. Sassen, When the Center No Longer Holds: Cities as Frontier Zones, in: Cities, 34 (2013), pp. 67-70.

4. Limits and Challenges: Can World History survive Success?

Up to now this paper has addressed three major arguments. First: the Great Divergence, the single most important debate in recent World and Global History, both enlarged and redirected the long standing convergence/divergence dispute in social sciences. It unlocked new fields of research, introduced new approaches and created new data and knowledge. Second: the dynamics within the Great Divergence debate push it to go beyond its own terms and to transcend its own limits. Perspectives and methods tested within the Great Divergence debate challenge more general interpretations of the history of global capitalism. Third: global research into the processes of integration and hierarchy of global capitalism need to adopt a multilayered systems-perspective. Systems-analysis incorporates comparisons and connections in an integrated, hierarchical frame, and it allows for a combined, structural, top-down (geometry) and agency-driven, bottom-up (frontier processes) approach. I will conclude with two more general sets of epistemological reflections, one on the Great Divergence debate as it stands now, the other on applying a global focus in social research.

The Great Divergence debate has sharpened the discussions on the potentials and limits of a global or world-historical perspective. It has opened up fixed narratives that universalize particular, space-time bound experiences. On the other hand, it risks recreating new, fixed histories embedded in regional specificities. The only way to avoid new, fixed master-narratives or re-emerging essentialist regional/national stories is to continuously query new knowledge with comparative, interconnected and systemic research. In this perspective, the Great Divergence debate has compelled us to rethink some fundamentals of historical research. It shows how a change of perspective can change the whole story.

1. World historians are forced to invent and reinvent geographical schemes, to question the limitations of regional frames, and to debate how to connect and integrate the various spatial scales. Regions in a world-historical perspective are not a given; that is why they lack a spatial precision as countries. They are also multidimensional and overlapping, from the big Afro-Eurasian ecumene, maritime regions, border areas and rim zones, to small-scale social agro-systems. Within a given region, people share clusters of traits or connections that are different from those that they have with people beyond that region. Interacting regional histories make the world economy; a developing world economy also re-makes regions.
2. Capitalism is not an invention of eighteenth century England; it has its origins on a world scale from its start in the long sixteenth century (recalling Marx's famous quote that "world market and world trade date from the sixteenth century and from then on the modern history of capital starts to unfold").[40] This change in the time/space perspective makes it clear that historical capitalism is something completely different

40 R. Palat, Dependency Theory.

from the expansion of a free, Smithean market economy. It developed, using Braudel's phrase, as an anti-market where exceptional profits are reaped and monopolies are safeguarded; it makes use of the relentless competition between states. Still, the image of 'striking similarities' in the Great Divergence debate departs from the (mostly intrinsic) idea that agrarian market economies all over the world have the intrinsic potential to develop into capitalist growth centers. Capitalism develops where new, transnational commercial-financial elites ally themselves with assertive, mercantilist states. The commercial-agrarian empires in the eastern part of the Eurasian continent were not built on such alliances between capitalist and political elites. The new world-system, dominated by a European center, disturbed the existing balances of power at the expense of former regional empires. As Ravi Palat stated, "Economic agencies in Europe operated on an ever increasing scale in contrast to those in societies based on wet-rice cultivation where the size of economic agencies tended to become smaller and more specialized over time. This was the crucial difference between interstate systems in Europe and Asia: the former was predicated on capital accumulation, the latter was not. Moreover, the expansion of trade networks generated by the intensification of rice cultivation and the spread of craft production also led to dense networks of trade. The very density of trade networks meant that no single person or agency could monopolize lucrative lines for any substantial length of time".[41]

3. Most participants in the Great Divergence debate probably agree that its roots need to be explored in all their complexity, in order to cover the enormous range of transformations and innovations that arose with the emergence of modern economic growth. Despite the call for more holistic methods of analysis, interpretation schemes in the Great Divergence debate tend to remain monocausal; they still focus on the 'why not' question.[42] For example, China's 'failure' to precipitate the world's first scientific or industrial revolution has been explained in a variety of ways: political centralization, the stifling cultural hegemony of the elites, and the lack of independent institutions (David Landes); technological stagnation from the fourteenth century (Joseph Needham, Joel Mokyr); the success and efficiency of the commercial-agricultural system dominating state policies (Kent Deng), causing a 'high equilibrium trap' (Mark Elvin) and keeping wages low (and thus preventing the search to labor-saving inventions) (Gunder Frank, Bob Allen). In addition, the growth limits of a world-empire, in contrast to a world-economy (Immanuel Wallerstein), and the lack of a colonial empire (Kenneth Pomeranz). Back in 2007, Arrighi argued that we need "a more comprehensive model", since "the really interesting question is […] how and why China has managed to regain so much ground, so quickly after more than a century of political-economic eclipse. Either way, a model of the Great Divergence must tell

41 R. Palat, Convergence Before Divergence? Eurocentrism and Alternate Patterns of Historical Change, in: Summerhill: Indian Institute of Advanced Study Review, 16 (2010) 1, pp. 42-58; id., Power Pursuits: Interstate Systems in Asia, in: Asian Review of World Histories, 1 (2013) 2, pp. 227-263.

42 J. Daly, Historians debate the Rise of The West. London / New York 2015.

us something, not just about its origins, but also about its development over time, its limits, and its prospects."[43]

4. The Great Divergence debate both enlarged and redirected the long-standing convergence/divergence dispute in social sciences. It unlocked new fields of research, introduced new approaches and created new data and knowledge. It has sharpened the discussion on the potentials and limits of a 'global' or 'world' perspective. It has opened up fixed narratives that universalize particular, space-time bound experiences. These dynamics within the Great Divergence debate push it to go beyond its own terms and to transcend its own limits. Perspectives and methods tested within the Great Divergence debate challenge more general interpretations of the history of global capitalism. In addition, it urges historians to contextualize, rethink and sometimes reject concepts forged within Western social sciences. This is illustrated by the unceasing debates about the nature of (capitalist) economy, nation-states and states, formal and informal institutions, useful knowledge, and so on. While some authors stress the need for a more genuine supra-regional perspective, superseding the disjuncture between European and non-European knowledge, others conclude that this urges us to retreat into more particularistic frameworks: "Two-way comparisons may prove inconclusive since each is liable to reflect back only the other. The danger is of treating their differences as if they were of universal rather than special significance. (…) and not concern ourselves so much with the Great Divergence between Europe and the very different circumstances of China".[44]

The proliferation of Global and World History in research and education over the last two decades has been impressive. This generated a swelling stream of publications on a wide variety of themes; some of them became bestsellers. World History has got out of the catacombs of Clio's realm, to become 'a house with many mansions' that will stand for a long time to come.[45] The global building has become a landmark; it arouses admiration and envy. It also creates confusion since its size and composition is constantly changing. How does its global design relate to the many parts of the building? When and why does the house accept new occupants? Who designs the new mansions? Does rapid growth affect the outline and stability of the building? Is it still clear what belongs under the roof of Global and World History? Nevertheless, having become a strong brand, Global History has made an impressive march through the institutions, creating associations, networks, journals, series, periodic conferences, educational programs, and professorships. This has generated ongoing debates about content, methodology, data

43 G. Arrighi, Adam Smith in Beijing, p. 32.

44 E. L. Jones, Peer Vries on the History of Economic Growth, in: Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis, 12 (2015) 2 [= E. Vanhaute (ed.), Escaping the Great Divergence? A Discussion about and in Response to Peer Vries's Escaping Poverty. The Origins of Modern Economic Growth], pp. 79-92.

45 P. Vries, Escaping Poverty.

and sources, scales and units of analysis.[46] I conclude with what I see as five central ambitions in current world-historical research.

1. A world history perspective deconstructs both theories with universal aspirations derived from the historical experiences of the peoples of Northwestern Europe and North America, and the assumption of the state as a basic, self-enclosed and self-evident unit of analysis. By doing so, world historians have opened new windows on the global past and constructed visions related to this past from twenty-first rather than nineteenth-century perspectives.[47] The past shows itself to us as a complex of stratified time, stratified space and stratified social power relations. It calls for a holistic systems perspective; it aims at creating new meta-narratives. Specialization is an inevitable part of the production of new knowledge, but since history emphasizes contextual understanding, new knowledge is of very limited significance without on-going attempts at integration and synthesis. Global thinking does not decentralize or resurrect new dichotomies ('clash of civilizations'); it links and combines; it questions existing hierarchies (time, space, social) without flattening out history.
2. A world history perspective questions self-evident causalities and stories of path-dependency. Patterns observed in a global frame are often as much the outcome of geographical and historical contingencies as they are of historical necessity. Much of our social theory is prone to teleology, seeking the roots of an inevitable present rather than exploring contingency of past experiences.[48] World History does not reconstruct a singular march of humanity toward modernity; it portrays messy worlds and a multitude of historical experiences. It constructs visions of that past that are capable of accounting for both fragmentation and integration on multiple levels (local, regional, national, continental, and global). It builds frameworks that permit historians to move beyond the issues that have been dominating social sciences since the nineteenth century: cultural distinctions, exclusive identities, local knowledge and the experiences of individual societies and states. It facilitates the study of large-scale, border-crossing comparisons, processes and systems.[49]
3. A world-historical perspective adopts multiple spatial scales; it does not erase regional frames, it reinvents them. Interacting regional histories make up the world economy; a developing world economy re-makes regions. We need more bottom-up, regionally-focused research, especially on today's 'global South'. The research must have global structures and dynamics as its objective. New research perspectives like reciprocal comparisons (regions as subunits), integrating comparisons (cycles as subunits) and

46 P. Manning, Navigating World History. Historians Create a Global Past. Basingstoke 2003; P. Stearns, World History. The Basics. London / New York 2011; A. Komlosy, Globalgeschichte. Methoden und Theorien. Stuttgart 2011; M. Berg, Global History. Approaches and New Directions.

47 J. H. Bentley, The Task of World History, in: J. H. Bentley (ed.) The Oxford Handbook of World History, Oxford 2011, pp. 1-16; R. Palat, Dependency Theory.

48 K. Pomeranz, Scale, Scope, and Scholarship.

49 J. H. Bentley (ed.) The Oxford Handbook of World History, Oxford 2011.

frontiers (processes of integration / resistance) allow for a more bottom-up oriented focus within global research.

4. A world-historical perspective encourages more inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches and alternative academic models based on teamwork, networks, collaboration and joint projects across the globe. In order to move world history to a new stage, it is very important that we remove the mental and material barriers that prevent the development of this kind of integrated research programs.
5. Last but not least, a world-historical perspective pushes for more cosmopolitan thinking; it questions old and new processes of integration, differentiation, adaptation and resistance. It creates emancipating stories; stories that connect human actions within a broader human-made world. It allows peoples to re-imagine their future. This is not a plea for legitimizing stories, but for a morally charged program. World History does not trade a national perspective for other exclusive frameworks, either global or sub-national. It does not essentialize new concepts like the non-West, the Global South or the subaltern. It tells us about the complexity of both the past and present worlds. It makes moral claims about the way in which the world functions today and how it could function tomorrow. Since differences and diversity are basic components of the human story, the global perspective shows that understanding and handling differences is an important moral skill. Claims, interpretations and evaluations cannot be made solely within the framework of our own known world; they must reflect the complexity of human history. With the global perspective, history strikes back. It integrates time and place, deals with interactions and the hierarchy of scales in the human world. This makes it a barrier against the threat of an undifferentiated multitude of new stories, and it advances the levels of ambition, time, place and themes, of questions and answers. Historicizing does not create a new, totalizing master-narrative, only a lack of historical knowledge can do that. A global perspective is, by definition, highly ambitious; it interrogates processes of 'world-making', of social change, in a broad time-space context. It compares, it connects, it incorporates, it systemizes. Global and World History deconstruct world-making processes and construct new world-making narratives. That is why the global perspective is inclusive. It includes outer worlds and outer times in our world; it includes 'us' in our narrative.[50]

50 This text is completed in Fall 2015.