

# Escaping Poverty?

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## 1 Introduction

Focusing on comparisons between Britain and China, with the occasional foray into India, Japan, and even Africa and Latin America, Peer Vries has produced a substantial and comprehensive review of the literature as well as a compelling answer to the problem of the Great Divergence. In a nutshell, he argues that what needs to be explained is the emergence of sustained or modern growth in Britain and then Western Europe in the period between 1689 and 1849. As he puts it: ‘With industrialization there emerged an economy in Great Britain that was based on minerals and on fossil fuel, with fossil fuels now also providing power, and in which technological and institutional innovation was sustained’.<sup>1</sup>

Innovation in Europe is, therefore, a critical piece of Vries’s story and he includes under that rubric technological change as well as institutional and organizational developments. For him, the state is the ‘institution of institutions’ and the competitive European state system contributed to the exceptional path of development in that part of the world. Culture also figures in the mix for him and, in the final analysis, may be the most critical factor in the Great Divergence. In the closing pages of the book, Vries writes: ‘Long-term substantial economic growth is impossible without and mainly driven by ‘the right’ institutional arrangements. It is very hard to imagine those institutional arrangements being able to persist effectively when they are incompatible with the culture of the society whose institutions they are. In that sense, culture, too, functions as an ultimate

<sup>1</sup> Peer Vries, *Escaping Poverty: The Origins of Economic Growth with Numerous Figures* (Vienna and Göttingen 2013) 23.

and some might claim even more ulterior cause of economic development'.<sup>2</sup> There is much to engage with in this book, but this essay will confine itself to three questions. First, the title of the book, *Escaping Poverty*, suggests that the pre-modern world was impoverished, but was this the case? And, related to this, is the assertion that modern economic growth was essential to the escape from poverty supported by the empirical evidence? Second, is the conception of early-modern science that Vries uses current among historians of science today? Finally, to move into the terrain of method, have global historians reached the limit of what is possible on the basis of extensive and thorough reading of the secondary literature?

## 2 Escaping poverty?

Vries writes, 'Over most of global history, poverty has been the normal state of affairs for societies'.<sup>3</sup> This is a widely held view, amongst both economic historians and the general public, but what is the evidence in support of it? A major source for this belief is the writings of the late Robert Fogel, who shares with Vries the view that until quite recently humanity had existed in a world of poverty. For Fogel, poverty was due primarily to inadequate nutrition and it was only overcome in the twentieth century when greater quantities of food became available, which was made possible by economic growth. This led to better diets, bigger bodies, lower mortality, and longer life spans.<sup>4</sup> Not everyone agrees with Fogel's approach. A number of economic historians argue that in northwestern Europe real wages were well above the subsistence level in the eighteenth century. Robert Allen, one of the most prominent exponents of this view, writes in a review of Gregory Clark's *Farewell to Alms* that in Britain 'workers (including manufacturing and agricultural laborers, building craftsmen, miners, soldiers, sailors, and domestic servants) earned almost three times subsistence'.<sup>5</sup> Craig Muldrew has also documented in great detail the abun-

2 Ibidem, 435.

3 Ibidem, 11.

4 Robert William Fogel, *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700-2100: Europe, America, and the Third World* (Cambridge 2004).

5 Robert C. Allen, 'A Review of Gregory Clark's *Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World*', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 46 (2008) 954.

dance of food available to many English workers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> In the prosperous regions of eighteenth-century India as well there were substantial numbers above the subsistence line. Although the issue is still hotly debated, at least some figures for Indian grain wages and consumption baskets would indicate comparability with levels in northwestern Europe, which means that if we accept the conclusion of Robert Allen for British workers, their counterparts in the Indian subcontinent were also above the minimum caloric basket necessary for survival.<sup>7</sup>

Fogel's argument that improvements in mortality, and thus wellbeing, were due to improved nutrition, and thus economic growth, has also been challenged from other quarters. Angus Deaton questions the binding nature of calorie deficits, whether in the present or in the past, and argues that once disease is included in the equation nutritional traps are much easier to comprehend, since exposure to bacteria can lead to malnourishment even when sufficient calories are available. Disease in general looms larger in Deaton's explanation for why mortality fell from the nineteenth century. He draws upon the writings of both historians of medicine and economists to argue that the mortality declines of the last 150 years emerged not primarily from improved nutrition but from better systems of public health such as sanitation and housing which reduced exposure to a variety of water and air borne pathogens.<sup>8</sup>

Deaton believes that these public health interventions were undertaken after the nineteenth-century discovery of the connection between germs and disease. However, in India sanitation systems were built long before the identification of the pathogenic sources of infectious illnesses. The city of Shahjahanabad, which was built in the early seventeenth century by the

6 Craig Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Industrious Revolution: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550-1780* (Cambridge 2011).

7 Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness in the Eighteenth Century: Britain and South India', *Past & Present*, 158 (1998) 79-109; Sashi Sivramkrishna, 'Ascertaining Living Standards in Ertswhile Mysore, Southern India, from Francis Buchanan's *Journey of 1801: An Empirical Contribution to the Great Divergence Debate*', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 52 (2009) 695-733.

8 Angus Deaton, 'The Great Escape: A Review of Robert Fogel's *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700-2100*', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 44 (2006) 106-114. For a classic statement on modern mortality decline from the perspective of the history of medicine, see Simon Szreter, 'The Importance of Social Intervention in Britain's Mortality Decline c.1850-1914: A Re-interpretation of the Role of Public Health', *Social History of Medicine*, 1 (1988) 1-37.

Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, contained a sophisticated system of canals and aqueducts for delivering water from the Jamuna River to the city's residents.<sup>9</sup> A parallel subsoil system carried human waste from the city to the Jamuna further downstream. The masonry conduits that transported human waste were also flushed periodically using river water.<sup>10</sup> While this was not ideal for the populations further down river, it kept the residents of Delhi free of their waste. This example shows that even before the germ theory of disease the relationship between sewage and human wellbeing was known. More importantly, for our purposes, modern economic growth was not a prerequisite for the creation of systems to segregate humans from their waste. The system that Shah Jahan built went into decline in the nineteenth century when British officials did not maintain it. The filthy Old Delhi emerged in modern times.<sup>11</sup> This leads to another problematic dimension of Vries's title, *Escaping Poverty*, which is that in India a persuasive case can be made that poverty is a product of the nineteenth century. So far from escaping poverty, the period of modern economic growth in Europe coincided with the creation of mass Indian poverty.

It is difficult to establish this with recourse to the numbers on wages and prices. Both these series are incomplete and difficult to interpret for any region of India. However, the heavy toll of famine mortality in the final quarter of the nineteenth century suggests that large numbers of Indians were impoverished. These famines killed between 12 and 29 million Indians, but, more importantly for our purposes, the famine wave had no recent precedent.<sup>12</sup> While India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was by no means famine-free, the toll of famines was much lower. The worst famine of the eighteenth century was the horrific dearth which struck Bengal in 1769-1770 and it is now estimated to have resulted in the deaths of some 100,000. This famine can be rightly seen as the first of the great deaths and die-offs of the colonial period, however. The new British rulers of Bengal failed to undertake the kinds of relief efforts that had maintained low levels of mortality during times of harvest shortfalls in the centuries before the establishment of British rule.<sup>13</sup> The severe famines

9 Stephen P. Blake, *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639-1739* (Cambridge 1991) 64-65.

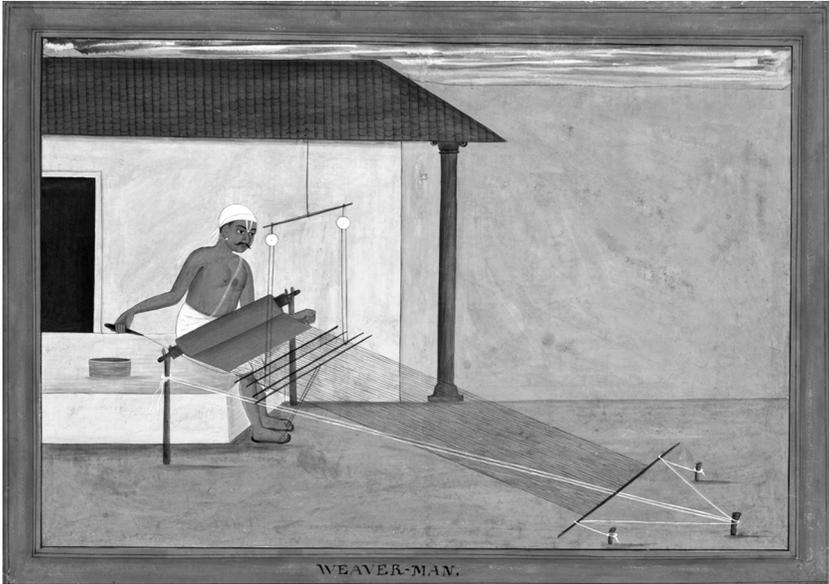
10 Michael Mann, 'Delhi's Belly: On the Management of Water, Sewage and Excreta in a Changing Urban Environment during the Nineteenth Century', *Studies in History*, 23 (2007) 9.

11 Mann, 'Delhi's Belly', 9.

12 Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London 2002) 7.

13 Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialisation in Rural Bengal, c.1760-1850* (Delhi 2000) 257-264.

of the late nineteenth century emerged from a combination of poverty and loss of entitlements. The latter, however, can be seen as a form of impoverishment. If poverty is viewed in terms broader than simple dollars and cents, the loss during the period of British rule of legitimate claims to resources that had guaranteed survival and even some measure of prosperity made many Indians poor.<sup>14</sup>



*Illustration 1: Painting; Gouache, A weaver, Tanjore, ca. 1770, Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

### 3 Modern science

Vries argues that Europeans were able ‘escape poverty’ because they had access to modern science. As Vries puts it, ‘There is simply no denying that modern science in the end emerged and ‘took off in the West’.<sup>15</sup> Drawing upon Jack Goldstone, he defines modern science as ‘an approach to knowledge (...) that combined experiment and mathematical reasoning’.<sup>16</sup> In *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not*, on the basis of evidence from

<sup>14</sup> On entitlements, see Amartya Kumar Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford 1981).

<sup>15</sup> Vries, *Escaping Poverty*, 312.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 315.

seventeenth and eighteenth century India, I questioned the uniqueness of European science and Vries cites my work. I do not want to rehearse those arguments here, but I do think it is of value to elaborate upon how historians understand modern science today. This understanding makes it more difficult to make easy claims for the exceptionalness of European science. Historians of science no longer view the rise of modern forms of knowledge of the natural world as something that happened purely in the realm of ideas but rather as a product of the hand as well as of the mind. This is captured in the phrase *mindful hand*, coined by Lissa Roberts and Simon Schaffer to capture the 'complex story of complicity between contemplation and manipulation' in the 'history of inquiry and invention' between 'the so-called Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution'.<sup>17</sup> The *mindful hand* is only one among a number of formulations that point to the importance of the artisan, the artisan's body, and so forth in the emergence of new thinking about the natural world. Such an approach to early-modern science greatly complicates its origins and makes it more difficult to draw distinctions between Europe and parts of Asia. In the case of South India, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century a number of European observers remarked on the sophisticated technical knowledge of Indian workers and artisans. Similarly, amongst Indian literate classes as well as political authorities, there was substantial interest in the workings of the natural world. Given this, the exceptionalism of European inquiry is more difficult to maintain.<sup>18</sup>

A 'scientific' gulf between Europe and India is also more difficult to maintain because historians of science have broadened their framework of how, where, and by whom early-modern science was done. Just as the '*mindful hand*' brought artisans into the picture of how knowledge of the natural world was formed, other groups, including sailors, merchants and travelers, as well as other locations such as even the distant waters of the Indian Ocean, have been brought into the story. Kapil Raj and Harold Cook, for instance, have traced the interactions between Indian and European 'scientific' men and documented the interchange of knowledge that

17 'How to Read this Book', in: Lissa Roberts, Simon Schaffer and Peter Dear (eds.), *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialization* (Amsterdam 2007), ix. Also see Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago 2004); and Pamela Smith and Benjamin Schmidt (eds.), *Making Knowledge in Early Modern Europe: Practices, Objects, and Texts, 1400-1800* (Chicago 2007), and Pamela Long, *Artisan/practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400-1600* (Corvallis Oregon 2011).

18 Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850* (Cambridge 2011) chapter 7.

created important elements of what has come to be taken to early European science.<sup>19</sup> The exchange of information between these groups of different backgrounds and languages relied upon brokers who served as interpreters, translators, and go-betweens.<sup>20</sup> The existence of such communication and intellectual exchanges suggests that there was a zone of overlap in knowledge and world view between Europeans and others, which made possible the interchange of information. Therefore, cutting edge scholarship in the history of science does not support the kind of disjuncture between European and other science that Vries maintains.

#### 4 On writing global history

Finally, issues of method. Vries is an early pioneer in global history. He was a founding editor of the *Journal of Global History*, which began publication in 2006. That journal emerged from the efforts of Patrick O'Brien and others, including Vries, who had worked for a number of years to develop the global history agenda. Those efforts have borne abundant fruit and global history is now well established both as an area of research and institutionally. The field has its own journal, as mentioned, and a number of centers have been established for the study of global history around the world. Peer Vries has played a major role in these developments. Given the maturity of the field of global history, it is appropriate to raise an important methodological question. Writings in the first generation of global history were typically grand works of synthesis, which drew upon extensive and deep reading of secondary sources. As we chart a future path for global history, we must ask if we have reached a limit of what can be achieved in this way and ask if the global turn needs to bring in archival research, which is at the heart of the historians' method.

History is revitalized in a number of ways, including asking new questions and approaching old questions from new perspectives. These are the stock in trade of global history, as much of it has been written to this point. History is also renewed through archival research, whether via the discovery of new sources or reading old sources in new and inventive ways. Up till now, since global history has shied away from intensive archival re-

19 Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Scientific Knowledge in South Asia and Europe* (Delhi 2006); Harold J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven 2007).

20 Simon Schaffer (ed.), *The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820* (Sagamore Beach Mass. 2009).

search, this last source of historical revision has not been available to it. It is time for global historians to take that path, for we may have reached a limit to what can be achieved with a reading of secondary sources alone, at least given the present stock of these materials. In another generation, new secondary works, themselves based on additional archival encounters, will provide global historians with new insights and new empirical materials for grand syntheses. But by then, archival research may be a staple of global history itself.

### About the author

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