

Reading Notes for Christian, Chapter 12, "Globalization, Commercialization, Innovation"

The first sentence tells you what this relatively long chapter is about. What are the three geographic levels on which it describes this 700-year-long period of preparation? (364-66)

Review again the list of factors that Christian contends are the most important determinants of rates of innovation. (366-67)

The bulk of the chapter is devoted to two main periods within the seven-centuries covered in it: (1) the "post-classical" period, from ca. 1000 CE to the mid-1300s, and (2) the "early modern" period, from around 1400 to 1700 CE. Why does Christian call these periods "Malthusian cycles"? (367; see also 403) How and why did the post-classical cycle end? (see also 370)

While you are reading this chapter, note that Christian will often refer to "revolutions" (agricultural, commercial, etc.). However, in his summary at the end, he states that "Nevertheless, no revolutionary changes occurred in this period." (403) How do you interpret this seeming self-contradiction? How is he defining revolutions? Are they technological, historical, or both?

Also note his constant emphasis on the ultimately global scale of "truly" revolutionary change: global changes caused "the rise of Europe" as a world power, rather than European-generated changes causing global ones. Christian stresses that this is a relatively new view of history (both European and global; see esp. 403-04).

What are some improvements in agricultural technologies in the post-classical period? (367-68; also 376) What are some important developments in population, urbanization, and commercialization? (368-69)

How was the Islamic world an important hub for the post-classical networks? Where was its center of gravity, and how did this shift during this period? What is "Southernization"? (371-72)

What is the effect of increasing commercially-generated wealth on political organizations (who constitutes the elite, how the state generates wealth for itself, how states interact)? (372-73)

Christian spends quite a bit of time describing China under the Song dynasty: why do you think he does this? What are some technological improvements made in China during this period? Why did China nevertheless retreat from global trade networks and fail to develop an industrial base? (374-80)

Christian then turns his attention to the early modern period. The defining and unprecedented characteristic of this period is the coming together of previously separate world zones into a single global exchange system. What things were exchanged? Why does the greater size of the exchange network increase its dynamism? its disparities between rich and poor? (380-84; see also 400)

Christian argues that despite the energy jolt of this new global system, beyond a few areas, technological innovation remained “sluggish.” How does he explain this? Which geographical areas were dominant during the early modern period? (384-86)

What are two ways in which societies become more commercialized in the early modern period? (386) Give some examples of ways that rural areas can be commercialized. (387-89)

In the next section Christian presents his analysis of reasons for Europe’s rise to dominance by the end of the early modern period. How did the creation of a global network of exchanges alter the “topology” of exchanges? In particular, how did the Atlantic basin become such a newly important hub? Christian looks back to the example of Sumer, ca. 3000 BCE, as another example of a world region that becomes a vital hub. How is this explanation different from ones that depend on “exceptionalism”? Does this analysis of emerging hub regions suggest how to interpret contemporary changes in the balance of international trade and power? (389-90)

If European societies were not exactly “exceptional,” they were still (Christian contends) “preadapted” to playing a leading role in the new global commercial system. What are two ways in which they were favorably disposed to do this? (391-92)

What are some of the kinds of information that were exchanged, with significant results, in the early modern period? Note the reference to Margaret Jacob’s work on this question. What are some intellectual and cultural characteristics of Europe that both contributed to and strengthened its new role as a sort of global clearinghouse for new information? (393-94)

As global exchange systems strengthened, how did this change the economic base and attitudes of the traditional elites who lived off “tribute,” i.e. rents for land? What are mercantilist policies? How did military organization change as states became more commercialized? (394-7)

Now we move to factors that began to break up human ways of life that had been taken for granted for thousands of years—most notably the expectation that most people would till the soil; that producing food to eat would be the primary form of labor; and that cultivation and pasturage would be the primary uses of the earth. How did these expectations begin to change? What were the sources of pressure making them change? (398-400)

What do you think of the electrical analogy attributed to Karl Marx to explain the way that capitalist systems changed behavior and attitudes in widespread and powerful ways? (400-401)

Christian now summarizes the significant transformations of the world during this 700 year period and also the limits on these transformations. How is the percentage of population “living on and off the land” a critical threshold? (401-03) When he concludes that “no revolutionary changes occurred in this period,” what does he mean?

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