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Comments on Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*

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In the presence of such a powerhouse lineup of Asianists I think I will tiptoe off to the other end of Lieberman's Eurasia and presume on my unique qualifications in this company as having published over twenty pages for the general reader on the France of Louis XIV and fifteen on the Russia of Peter the Great. Also, I have a bee in my bonnet at the moment about how the world changed between 1770 and 1830, and will have most to say about what Lieberman offers on that period. I owe Jerry Bentley a review article on all this for the *Journal of World History*, because he got me a review copy of the large work of Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. I also got hooked by listening in on a fine conference at the Clark Library in Los Angeles in 2008, which led to *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*, edited by David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. A less recent book which I think is an under-appreciated breakthrough for this effort is Chris Bayly's *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830*.

The structure of parallel developments in highly diverse areas of Eurasia, which is elaborated by Lieberman in Volume 2 does powerful work. When parallels are shown, possible causes that might have produced parallel trends in, for example, Burma and Russia, emerge. When these parallels wobble, as they often do, causes of divergence emerge more clearly when the parallels are explicitly held constant. This is pretty much how empirical investigation is supposed to work in any realm; these two tracts of land have similar soils, rainfall, and air temperatures, but one faces north and the other south, so they get different amounts of sunshine and have different plant assemblages. And so on. Lieberman's project thus has a family resemblance to the social sciences and more distantly to the natural sciences. It sometimes is less adequate for themes, which might be called hermeneutic, that require attention to the *contents* of human consciousness and symbolic interaction.

Among his parallel cases Lieberman makes a powerful distinction between a "protected zone" and an "exposed zone" in relation to conquest and domination from Inner Asia. This fits nicely with an emergent trend in studies of Chinese history to take more seriously the effects of Inner Asian conquest on Chinese

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political and cultural history; Victor Mair made this point a center of his contribution to this symposium. It is perhaps a limitation of Lieberman's generally excellent account of Chinese political integration that themes in Chinese political culture, including the "Confucian" moral glamorization of the ministerial role and the unity of the written language, appear rather late (Vol. 2, p. 535); they are important to the whole set of political evolutions from the Warring States on and to an understanding of the very large area and population of the imperial Chinese state.

Lieberman's "protected zone" fits very nicely the cases he started with in Volume 1 on continental Southeast Asia. The other three "protected zone" cases are the most diverse in setting and timing of changes. Lieberman acknowledges this for Japan. He notes deep differences, nicely highlighted by the unexpected parallels, between the mainland Southeast Asian cases and France, with far more intensive urbanization and market integration and resources of political culture encouraging active citizenship and debate. (Vol. 2, pp. 272–273, 329–361) Russia is perhaps the most anomalous and superficially least parallel of his parallel cases, which makes the parallels he does find all the more striking and instructive. But his concentration on internal political consolidation, urbanization, and commercialization leave somewhat out of focus the really amazing anomalies of Russia's shifting frontiers. Lieberman makes a good argument that the Mongol threat peaked and waned early, so that Russia was not "exposed" in the same way as South Asia and China. But, as he points out, the conquests of Kazan and the Volga drainage in the 1500s opened the way to a chaotic expansion across Siberia. (Vol. 2, p. 214–217, 237) Here he does not notice Siberia as a great zone with little agriculture, small populations, but a great commercial resource in its furs and the profound strategic effect of the Russian fur-rush on Inner Asia, as the Mongols found themselves in a great vise between Muscovite power to the north and Qing to the south.

Lieberman does nicely the great expansion of settlement in the 1700s out of the meager agriculture of the northern woodlands onto the great black earth belt of what is now the Ukraine. (Vol. 2, pp. 287–288, 295) The expansion to the Crimea and the beginnings of the long confrontation with the peoples of the Caucasus come very late in the years he set out to cover but are very important, not least because as Russia made a huge contribution to the wars against Napoleon some of its leaders had great misgivings about the turn from the southern and eastern frontiers to the western. (This is made wonderfully clear in Dominic Lieven, *Russia Against Napoleon*, which was published only as Lieberman was going to press.)

Lieberman notes use in the 1400s of the concept of France as a "res publica" facing the menace of England. (Vol. 2, p. 242) The French-English confrontation was a prime driver of the state-building efforts that interest Lieberman at many later times, and constantly and urgently from 1688 to 1815. The parallels and divergences of England and France in these years would seem to offer enormous

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opportunities for Lieberman's strategy. Lieberman has occasional masterful paragraphs on early modern England; my favorite is on Vol. 2, p. 277–278. I would not have asked him to take on England as a whole additional case for his parallel-seeking, but I don't think you can really grasp the place of Old Regime France in these global comparisons without more comparisons with England than he has given us. And it is the English case that is central to the rapidly shifting place of European commercial and military power in South Asia, in which Lieberman seems to lose interest in his account of that region, in the rest of maritime Asia, and of course in the Americas.

Lieberman notes in passing (Vol. 2, p. 129) the Gallo-Roman heritage that contributed to French political development. What I want and don't find adequately developed in this work is a sense of how the transformative developments and the diverging trajectories of ever more powerful national mobilization in France and England were rooted in a European political order which always had been competitively polycentric, and in which each proto-national unit had to search for more effective modes of mobilization of resources and human commitments. In so doing they tended to draw more and more on idioms of citizenship, competitive corporate solidarity, and politicized ethnicity that had roots all the way back to the slave-owning, shield-toting, voting citizens of Athens and Rome but up to this time had usually not had wider scope than a city or city-state. Fiscal and political stress on the Ancien Regime led to the literal decapitation of the old order, mass recruitment of huge armies, the first celebrity dictator . . . . *Aux armes, citoyens*. Roughly as in the need for some reference to the content of Confucian political culture, some "hermeneutic" attention to the content of political culture in this period seems to me indispensable. The question of continuity and break between Revolution and Napoleon is hugely complex, but it's enough for my purposes to see both as phases of unprecedented mobilization of human resources and commitments, and to note the echoes of Greek and Roman themes both in Revolutionary citizenship and in Napoleon's elaboration of the mystique of the Emperor. The scientific and industrial "revolutions" beginning in these years in both Britain and France owed quite a lot to the stimulus of the British-French rivalry, and to the singular discrediting — Galileo, Newton – of a traditional cosmology by the overreaching of a Roman Church that, in globally anomalous fashion, had no state power but claimed ultimate authority.

Lieberman remarks (Vol. 2, p. 93) that he decided not to get into the Ottoman Empire in Volume 2 in order to keep the project manageable — at a mere 460 plus 908 pages and a bibliography so huge that it had to be consigned to a website. No single approach can do everything. Lieberman gives us amazing riches. I would have asked him to do more to point out parenthetically some of the themes he could not include; he does this quite a bit, and he's very good at it. Despite his insistence that he includes both comparison and contact, he is more focused on comparison. Contact and conflict, especially the Anglo-French competition and its global dimensions from 1688 to 1830, need more attention. Short

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passages reminding readers of the riches and staggering variety of human consciousness he has encountered and culture and the vitality of hermeneutic accounts of them would have made the feast even richer.

Final proposals:

1) Every beginning graduate student in any form of history should be required to read this book, not just because it will almost certainly provoke new comparative and global interests but because it is such a wonderful example of clear agenda-setting and exposition.
2) Let's all go home and see if we can stir up a Lieberman round-table in our areas. In southern California, what if Lynn Hunt has read the book or can be persuaded to do so? Get her with Subrahmanyam and Pomeranz. . . . Hold tight.
3) Lieberman might spook our U.S. history colleagues; try them first on Armitage and Subrahmanyam or on Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*. I already see encouraging signs, at least for colonial America and early U.S. studies, of more globalized interests, starting from the now flourishing Atlantic studies but opening up to other oceans.

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