



## A Grand Tour of Exotic Landes

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*Review Essay*  
A Grand Tour of Exotic Landes

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CHARLES TILLY

DAVID LANDES'S LUCID, LEARNED, OPINIONATED, BREEZY, and often pugnacious *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* challenges historians at three levels: meta-historical, world-historical, and national-historical. Meta-historically, Landes forces us to think whether and how, in principle and in practice, anyone could ever establish and explain a historical phenomenon so complex as the relatively rapid increase of per capita wealth in Europe and its extensions over the last two centuries as a whole. Have we any hope of identifying coherent phenomena at that scale, much less explaining them?

World-historically, Landes requires us to weigh competing explanations of European advantage during those same centuries, as well as possible grounding of that advantage in earlier historical experiences. Once we have properly established the extent, character, and timing of European distinctiveness in regard to wealth and productivity, does one line of explanation offer a more credible account than others? Do Landes's own arguments coalesce into a viable vision of economic change at the world scale?

National-historically, Landes summons us to assess his description and explanation of differing trajectories over the last millennium among regions that have figured as distinct countries in our own time, including Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, England, India, China, and Japan—but most of which have fluctuated sharply in identities and boundaries over the millennium. Do his repeated comparisons of England with China or India, for example, hold up to historical scrutiny? Do they identify valid principles of country-to-country variation?

At each level, Landes energetically defends an account centering on interactions between culture and technology against attacks from two flanks: on one side from economic modelers who regard market connections and resource endowments as the critical determinants of economic success or failure, on the other from relativists and political economists who regard any such analysis of Western superiority as an exercise in neo-imperialism. He defends his analysis from the first attack by insisting that others such as the Chinese failed to take advantage of opportunities similar to those seized by Europeans. He rebuffs the second criticism by urging recognition of long-term Western dominance as a hard fact demanding explanation rather than obfuscation or contrition. "As for me," he declares, "I prefer truth to goodthink. I feel surer of my ground" (p. xxi).

Landes also pursues a number of secondary battles. He engages intermittent

campaigns against leftists who pivot their explanations of advantage on exploitation and coercion. Since my own work falls into this category and since his tongue is sharp, I find myself more relieved than miffed that he spares me his attention. In compensation, much of Landes's narrative—as distinct from his conclusions—confirms the centrality of firepower and predation to European success.

Another series of skirmishes attacks “practitioners of the self-proclaimed New Economic History” (p. 193) who doubt the occurrence of an Industrial Revolution. At them, Landes aims not new numbers concerning growth rates but a summary of the technological changes he analyzed so acutely in his admirable *Unbound Prometheus* (1969). More exactly, he deploys statistics when they suit his arguments but overrules them when they do not. Landes begins Chapter 19, for instance, by comparing per capita product figures for Mexico, Barbados, and the territory of the contemporary United States in 1700, 1800, and 1989, only to warn in a footnote that such figures are “figments.” Despite the warning, he then assures his readers that the United States really did grow much more rapidly than Mexico and Barbados (p. 548).

Landes opens his third front against other economic historians whose statistics of income and production show little or no European lead before around 1800. There, however, he typically dismisses his opponents as credulous instead of confronting their analyses directly. Thus he rejects contrary econometric work with two small footnotes (one of them brushing off estimates by the same Paul Bairoch who receives thanks in the preface) and the following passage:

A few have even asserted—on the strength of estimates of food intake—that the Indian *ryot* lived better than the English farm laborer. Such calorimetric cliometrics seem to me implausible in the light of the gulf between European and Asian techniques. Nor am I persuaded by efforts to project twentieth-century comparative income estimates back to the eighteenth century. The opportunities to distort the result are endless, and the leverage of even a small mistake extended over two hundred years is enormous [p. 165].

Thus the presence or absence of the productive technologies that marked the English industrial revolution—especially, it finally turns out, transformation of textile manufacturing—becomes at once cause, effect, and evidence of eighteenth-century European mastery. No one who is looking for an even-handed, evidence-based assessment of competing theses concerning world economic history should seek it here. Landes offers us a lively, polemical, aphoristic, and anecdotal journey through an immense historical territory.

At a meta-historical scale, Landes joins many other comparative historians in supposing that a) causes of distinctive historical trajectories lie in similarly distinctive, durable attributes of the units displaying those trajectories (rather than, for example, varying relations to some large historical structure or process), b) the crucial attributes constitute both necessary and sufficient conditions of those trajectories, and therefore c) properly conducted yes/no comparisons (in the form: what did Europe have that China lacked?) will identify the causes in question. John Stuart Mill, often cited as the patron saint of large yes/no comparisons, followed the explication of his four basic experimental methods with strenuous warnings against any such misapplications of the methods to human affairs; for Mill, the main hope

lay in fitting major human experiences into general evolutionary patterns. For us, there is another alternative: identifying causal mechanisms of sufficiently general scope that, when rightly concatenated and placed in sequence, will reproduce the varied trajectories in question.

Landes eschews evolutionary theories. But he actually gestures toward a mechanism-centered strategy in his many obiter dicta on the importance of force in economic affairs, as when he describes the seventeenth-century Indian Ocean: "Everyone in these Eastern waters was half bandit, including the local sea jackals who ambushed the small boats and still in our time prey on defenseless refugees. But the English were the big guns, the pirates' pirates. No vessel too big for the taking. Not a bad strategy: if you can't make money in business, you grab from those who do" (p. 141). An unwary reader might expect such remarks to culminate in a theory of forcible expropriation. But when Landes stands back to consider why over the last few centuries some peoples have grown much richer than others, he turns away from violent encounters between those peoples and their neighbors to durable attributes of those peoples: curiosity, record-keeping, free markets, property rights, technological ingenuity, enthusiasm for work, and the Protestant Ethic or its equivalent, culture: "If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference" (p. 516). In short, he opts for necessary and sufficient conditions, to be established by means of yes/no comparisons across the world as a whole during the last millennium. Those necessary and sufficient conditions center on achievement-oriented culture.

Such conclusions move us to the world-historical scale. There, Landes gives priority to geographic over temporal variation. He provides no systematic, general answer to one obvious question: why did capital-intensive industrialization and its inequality-generating effects begin in the eighteenth century rather than earlier or later? Instead, he concentrates on why England came first, why nearby Continental powers followed closely, and why since then, on the whole, areas of Western European influence and emigration have prevailed. This makes it easier for him to assert in the face of evidence for considerable prosperity in eighteenth-century India or China that European superiority and dominance were visible long before 1800: "As the historical record shows, for the last thousand years, Europe (the West) has been the prime mover of development and modernity" (p. xxi).

To defend that thesis would require a far different book from the one Landes has written. It would entail either minimizing the widespread evidence of Asian prosperity and sophistication conceded throughout the book or demonstrating that Asian advances resulted from interactions with Europe. While making occasional efforts to minimize Asian accomplishments during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Landes offers no sustained account of Asian backwardness before then and no evidence that Europe had profound effects on the Indian Ocean's dynamic political and economic systems before the massive European incursions of the sixteenth century and after.

Landes settles for a weaker and more conventional case: that European gunboats, privateers, mercenaries, and traders—he says little of missionaries—forced their ways into Asia and the Americas, and the subsequent struggles transformed all parties permanently. The only odd thing about the account is how much coercion

informs the details and how little coercion appears in such summaries as the following comment on businessmen: "They sometimes make big mistakes. In spite of the greatest care and forethought, not every investment pays off. But this has not stopped businessmen and investors from trying again. It is not want of money that holds back development. The biggest impediment is social, cultural, and technological unreadiness—want of knowledge and know-how. In other words, want of the ability to use money" (p. 269). In short, inadequate cultures explain the lack of economic growth, superior culture the West's triumph.

At a national-historical level, Landes alternates remarkably between command of detail and risk-taking where detail escapes him. When he tells stories, they generally contain accurate and telling information. (To be sure, on page 138 he mistakenly places Spain's Charles V in the seventeenth century, but all of us make occasional slips of this kind.) Landes's incomparable knowledge of British, French, and German economic history between 1750 and 1950 sustains sparkling discussions of innovations in cotton textile production, competition within the chemical industry, and the place of clocks in economic innovation. He extends the account knowledgeably to the Americas as well as other European regions before moving more contestably (but no less assertively) to China, Japan, India, and the Ottoman Empire.

Landes repeatedly (and, to my mind, rightly) stresses the significance of such "metics" as Greeks, Jews, and Armenians in connections between poor agrarian regions and richer industrial areas. Yet he cannot resist stretching the argument, then scolding those who resist it: "The Balkans remain poor today. In the absence of metics, they war on one another and blame their misery on exploitation by richer economies in western Europe. It feels better that way." "Leftist political economists and economic historians like such explanations. They think in terms of core and periphery: the rich center vs. the surrounding dependencies. But that is not the relevant metaphor or image: Europe's development gradient ran from west to east and north to south, from educated to illiterate populations, from representative to despotic institutions, from equality to hierarchy, and so on" (p. 252). Again, deficient culture and social structure explain backwardness.

Landes stresses cultural differences with stubborn consistency. Confronting the fact of relatively slow Dutch industrialization and economic growth after the Low Countries' spectacular performance during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he cites eighteenth-century cultural decay among a wealthy people, only to identify another cultural shift as the Dutch industrialized during the nineteenth century (pp. 444–48). Disconcertingly, he immediately follows the discussion of Holland's decline and rise with vigorous denials that economic historians can speak meaningfully of late Victorian British decline or recent American decline.

Consistent with his main line, Landes portrays Chinese rejection of European science and technology as evidence of cultural incapacity for growth, while seeing in Japan the cultural equivalent of a Protestant Ethic (p. 363) and opining that Japan (perhaps alone in the non-European world) had propensities that could well have produced growth independent of European influence (p. 368). Nevertheless, his analyses of China and Japan have a teleological tone. If it is not clear that European per capita wealth passed that of China before the eighteenth or

nineteenth century, how can evidence of Chinese culture from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries establish that culture causes or inhibits economic growth? The argument assumes precisely what is to be proven.

Again, given the many obstacles to markets and enterprise set by Japan's Tokugawa regime and well described by Landes himself, what proves that the Japanese equivalent of a Protestant Ethic, rather than a hundred other elements of Japanese experience, explains the country's twentieth-century leap to economic heights? Culture makes a difference, agreed. The historian's job, however, is to show how, when, and why.

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**Charles Tilly**, a specialist in modern European history, teaches social sciences at Columbia University. His most recent books are *Work under Capitalism* (with Chris Tilly, 1998), *Roads from Past to Future* (1998), and *Durable Inequality* (1998). Many years ago, he and David Landes co-authored and co-edited *History as Social Science* (1971).