



Review of *Les Mondes de L'Océan Indien. Vol. 1: De la formation de l'État au premier système-monde Afro-Eurasien; Vol. 2: L'Océan Indien, au coeur des globalisations de l'ancien Monde.*

Philippe Beaujard. *Les Mondes de L'Océan Indien. Vol. 1: De la formation de l'État au premier système-monde Afro-Eurasien; Vol. 2: L'Océan Indien, au coeur des globalisations de l'ancien Monde.* 2009. Paris: Armand Colin. 624 pages and 799 pages, ISBN 978-2-2002-7708-6 and 978-2-2002-7709-3 (\$80.00 each).

Lamentations about the disappearance of the book and its replacement by brief flashes on the Internet are clearly premature. Not only do books continue to appear; they seem to get longer and heavier as the 21st century matures. Historians and world-systems theorists now have two vast compendia of Old World history to peruse. No sooner had diligent scholars finished with Victor Lieberman's magisterial *Strange Parallels* (Lieberman 2003, 2009) when we are faced with an even longer and more detailed survey of the Old World in the form of Dr. Philippe Beaujard's monumental two-volume work. Fortunately for English-speaking readers, Dr. Beaujard has provided a summary of the Bronze Age section of the first volume in a book chapter, "Evolutions and Temporal Delimitations of Possible Bronze Age World-systems in Western Asia and the Mediterranean" (Beaujard 2011), and of the Iron Age section from the same volume in the *Journal of World History* (Beaujard 2010).

By any standards, Beaujard's work is an incredible achievement. He provides an up-to-date, accurate summary of the history (and, locally, prehistory) of Eurasia and nearby parts of Africa over several thousand years, focusing on the period from the dawn of civilization around 3200 BCE to the rise of modern capitalism after 1500. (Vol. I covers the period from the dawn of agriculture to the sixth century CE; Vol. II the rest of the time period to 1500.) Especially important are the enormously detailed summaries of trade



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and contact, which verge on the exhaustive, especially for Arabia, east Africa, and Madagascar. Insofar as I can judge (from a fair knowledge of some of the areas, especially China and Central Asia), he has found the major recent sources, even quite obscure ones. He cites major works right up through 2009 (first volume) and 2012 (second). The combined bibliography for both volumes runs to 153 pages. Using the index and contents tables, one can find up-to-date information on almost anything.

The point of view is world-systems theory, as developed from the ideas of Fernand Braudel by Immanuel Wallerstein, and then extended by Andre Gunder Frank, Christopher Chase-Dunn, and their coworkers. Frank, Chase-Dunn and their groups have extended the concept of the world-system from medieval and modern times to the entire history of the world, thus allowing Beaujard to interpret the progress of the economy from ancient Mesopotamia to today as the expansion and fusion of multiple world-systems. As a good Braudelian (at least in this respect), he focuses on economics and trade, seeing commerce as the great creator of world-systems and the rise and intensification of commerce as the real driver of historical processes. (Somewhere behind all this lies Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.) Chase-Dunn would define world-systems as interacting polities that have actual military and political engagements as well as commercial interactions (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997).

Beaujard distinguishes globalization (ancient and ongoing) from “worldization” (*mondialisation*), which is the modern expansion of capitalism. In contrast to the very pervasive view in the older literature (think of Weber, Pirenne, and Wallerstein), Beaujard does not see pre-modern trade as mere “luxury trade” that can be ignored. First, luxury trade is economically, politically, and culturally important. It links people and gets all manner of information and ideas around. Religion, for instance, follows trade, and Beaujard documents the spread of the world religions along trade routes. Second, documented trade in luxuries goes with less documented but far more important trade in basic goods. One of the dark mysteries of the world is how staple crops got so far so fast. Beaujard emphasizes things like the enormous importance of bananas, a Malaysian/Indonesian domesticate, in Africa—and they came there quite early, by completely unknown and undocumented routes. For these and other important but little-noticed crops, such as sorghum, millets, and tubers, he has assembled every relevant source, but still must speculate on who carried these around the Indian Ocean, and when, and how. The trade in beads – another subject he knows thoroughly – is documented, because beads last while bananas decay. Beads are a minor luxury, but they indicate trade that involves more valuable subsistence items.

Here as in all areas, Beaujard shows a great familiarity with ethnobotany. On page 234, we learn that the Semitic words for pomegranate and sesame go back to Sumerian, showing that these plants were in the Near East very early, and the Semitic word for quince is in Akkadian. Pomegranate, and also safflower dye, turn up in Egypt in Dynasty XII around 2400-2300 BCE. Broomcorn millet (*Panicum miliaceum*) was in Arabia by 3000-2200 BCE, and sorghum, an African crop, around the same time. Pearl millet and sorghum are in India by 2000 BCE or shortly after and eleusine by 1600-800 BCE (235); all three are

African. Cowpea, watermelon, tamarind, and other African crops entered India around that time (236). Pigeon peas, jujubes, and bitter orange spread from India (or near it).

An important observation, followed up with detailed histories, is the role of metals, for example, coinage, tools, and weapons, in forcing the expansion of trade. Once they became even slightly dependent on bronze, the ancient civilizations found themselves chained to a treadmill—forced to produce more and more beer, wool, and whatever else they could, in order to trade for the gold, silver, copper, tin, arsenic, zinc, and (later) iron that they more and more desperately needed. Metals had a way of being located in the most unfortunate places: mountain fastnesses guarded by savage tribes or upstart states. (The current world problem with oil is obviously not far from Beaujard's thoughts.)

Beaujard has an Indian Ocean view of the Old World. The Indian Ocean is as central to the Afro-Eurasian world as any transportation corridor can get. The monsoons, which he describes with thorough scientific detail, govern traffic and trade. Opening the Indian Ocean led to the gradual expansion of the Near Eastern world toward India and later Africa and Southeast Asia. The ocean was the great highway of the spice trade, and thus in the 15th century, the field of Portuguese conquest. It carried not only spices, but many more useful crops, into new environments. It was a highway for textiles, metals, coins, ships and shipping technology, and other important goods over the millennia. These themes have been explored before, especially by K. N. Chaudhuri (1985), and Anthony Reid (1988, 1993), but Beaujard has far more detail as well as new information.

His major personal expertise is with Madagascar, which he describes as a periphery. It was not settled until about two centuries CE, when Austronesian groups from Indonesia began to explore the East African coast and settle on the coast of the big island. Beaujard marshals a formidable amount of archaeological, ethnological, historical, and linguistic research to provide a superb reconstruction of the many streams of Indonesian contact that contributed over many centuries to the formation of the Malagasy people and language. Africans, especially from the facing coast of Mozambique, contributed somewhat to this also. (Having done some of my own research there, I think Beaujard downplays the earliness and importance of African contacts; certainly many coastal and western Malagasy would think so. Further research is needed.)

Beaujard sees the early millennia as broken up into three periods, separated by declines due in part to climate change. He is a strong believer in the importance of climate; even quite small fluctuations appear in this book as major causes. The degree to which climate determines history remains controversial. It appears that climate may have much more effect in some areas and under some conditions than in others. (This is the sort of qualified statement that drives to madness those interested in a 'science of history,' but, alas, it is the mere truth.) Cold dry periods around 1700 BCE and 1300-1200 BCE had affected earlier local systems; the latter had something to do with launching the "sea peoples" – and others – on campaigns of raiding in the eastern Mediterranean. Then came, presumably, linked cycles of the western and Chinese world-systems: 1000-850, 750-450, and 350-200 BCE were times of growth, with periods of colder, drier

weather related to the intervening pauses. India was less linked, especially at first. After this the Old World became increasingly linked into one system, with another pause around 350-500 CE (the Roman Empire fell, China was disunited, Central Asia was in turmoil). A dry period may be involved (I can add that a major dry period put a sharp check to Maya and Mexican civilization around 200 CE, but major recovery had come about by 400 CE). Of course, the Medieval Warm Period (Medieval Climatic Anomaly) and Little Ice Age were far more pronounced and dramatic later events.

Beaujard also sees some very long cycles. The first ran from 1600 BCE to 1200 BCE, ending with the Dark Ages of that time. Further cycles occurred in the Iron Age, and then the rise of an Old-World-wide linkage and linked cycles from about 1 CE. There follow three major cycles. The first ran from 500 to 1000 CE, the second 1000 to 1300 CE (tracking the Medieval Warm Period), and the third 1400 to 1600 CE, merging into the rise of the modern world. These he bases on dynamics within “socioecological systems.” The systems in question were more political than economic or ecological. Cores were strong when imperial systems drove more trade, weak when core political systems were disunited.

The famous voyages of Zheng He are covered in Vol. II (starting on page 396). For a brief period, the Chinese of the Ming Dynasty dominated the Indian Ocean, sending fleets of ships so large that they could almost literally have loaded Columbus’ ships as lifeboats. Then the Ming suddenly and sharply pulled back, saying China was losing too much money. Western scholars used to use this as proof that the Chinese were naïve xenophobes, but Beaujard agrees with recent scholarship showing that the Ming emperors were basically right, and that in any case the Mongols were seriously menacing them again—the Mongols actually captured the Emperor in 1449 and held him for ransom. Beaujard notes that there was also a problem with deforestation; accessible timber for building such huge ships was running out, and bringing it from remote forests was expensive.

There follow some passages on the rise of trade-based city-states in Southeast Asia. These never became capitalist nodes as Genoa, Venice and Amsterdam did. They were too tightly bound in traditional political structures of autocratic command, and too tightly connected to an economy based on supplying raw forest and farm products – often luxuries – to the world. They remained peripheral until modern times.

In his conclusion, Beaujard wisely disagrees with the old point that ‘necessity is the mother of invention,’ seeing luxury as very often the mother and father. In addition, he “would nuance the point of view of Chase-Dunn and Hall (1998) who considered demographic pressure as the general origin of technical progress and political expansion” (539; my translation). He sees population itself as affected by many other variables (Vol. II, 539). He notes that basic innovations seem to come during prosperous periods. (This is true from the record we have, but most of these innovations are very poorly dated.)

Of minor facts that seem worth transmitting, the most surprising to me was that donkey-onager hybrids were common in the ancient Near East before horses became available and rendered such difficult creatures obsolete. (See Vol. I, 90. The onager, the Eurasian wild ass, is notoriously hard to tame and train.) Another

interesting point not often made is that many early references to ‘saffron’ are probably really to turmeric (see Vol. I, 384). This is only one of many spice names, including nard and cinnamon, which he unpacks in this discussion of the early spice trade. By Roman Empire times, the Indian Ocean spice trade was enormous and wide-flung, but names can be confusing—e.g. the reapplication of *kardamon* from a thistle to the hot spice we now know. Later, a large number of African plants and animals, mostly domesticated but including a wild tortoise, were introduced to Madagascar (Vol. II, 101-135; see also major ethnobiological notes, 343 and 508).

The volumes are reasonably free from errors. The Yellow and Yangzi rivers are confused on p. 58, and eastern and western Han are reversed in the table of contents in vol. I; presumably those familiar with other regions will pick up equivalent minor errors. A claim that will arouse some controversy is that ancient Mesopotamia had bank-like institutions and letters of credit, and Greece had savings banks paying interest (Vol. I, 304 and Epilogue). They had means of saving money, loaning out, and collecting interest, but calling these instruments ‘banks’ is possibly an overextension. Finally, in admitting that hard times can sometimes be the mother(s) of invention, he says that the cold, harsh Younger Dryas period (ca. 10,500-9,500 BCE) stimulated the invention of agriculture (Vol II, 539). Current findings show agriculture started later, around 8500 BCE, when times were dramatically improving on the climatic front in the areas where agriculture came early (Zohary et al. 2012). This, however, merely confirms his profound and accurate observation that good times produce good inventions. What he thought was a major exception turns out to be a major confirmation.

No paper on trade or merchant activity is too small, recent, or obscure to escape Beaujard’s gaze. In general, he stays close to documented history (except in postulating those cycles); Lieberman provides more daring, controversial, boundary-testing speculations. Lieberman, however, lacks Beaujard’s ability to move easily from archaeology to ethnology to linguistics to botany.

Thus, we have here a magisterial summary of Old World economic and commercial history, as seen from an Indian Ocean perspective.

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