

Certainly this division into broad epochs is a device that gives the book a manageable structure. However – and although Barbier does attempt to demonstrate how later periods built upon developments from earlier eras – it brings with it a limitation in that it tends to obscure the substantial overlap between what are, essentially, divisions of convenience rather than substance. The result is a somewhat linear historical narrative, despite the considerable range of material and cases upon which Barbier draws.

Likewise, the overarching global scope of the book also tends towards a homogenization of particular frontiers. This is probably unavoidable in a volume written on this scale, but research would indicate that, if we lower our sight to the local or regional level, individual frontiers display quite marked contrasts of relative success; and where a particular frontier may appear in one historical period to be sustainable and displaying the qualities of positive feedback indicated by Barbier, in the next the virtuous circle may have turned vicious. Similarly, more could perhaps be made of the question of multiple perspectives, whereby a particular frontier may figure in more than one developmental frame – apparently contributing to the sustainability of one, while acting to the detriment of another.

However, Barbier's frontier-expansion hypothesis may offer a very potent tool for the comparison of resource extraction and development on different commodity frontiers, and for understanding the subtleties that are outside the scope of a volume of this magnitude. By clearly defining the 'necessary and sufficient conditions for successful frontier-based development' (p. 21), he offers a straightforward means of assessing whether or not a frontier at any given historical moment may be sustainable, and thus enabling its comparison with others: generated surplus reinvested in other productive economic activities in the local economy; these investments resulting in diversification; and 'complementarities and linkages' developed 'between the frontier and other sectors of the economy' (p. 22).

That the book may have the potential to prompt further in-depth comparative research is itself a credit to its erudition and timeliness; and the volume's coverage is certainly phenomenal, in both its historical and geographical range. The narrative combines engaging accounts of cases with detailed examination of key phenomena and processes, and expansive footnotes; it is bolstered throughout with extensive maps, diagrams, tables of data, and bibliography. Undoubtedly this will come to be seen

as essential reading for all students of global economic history, and a substantial work of reference for many researchers.

However, while this is a substantial text book in its own right, Barbier has a more pressing objective in writing it than just education and historical analysis. The final chapter testifies to the urgency with which we need to deal with questions of how development has been sustainable in the past, in order to respond effectively to the economic and ecological challenges of our present times; and Barbier attempts to draw contemporary policy prescriptions from the historical lessons that his model has revealed. But, worthy though his recommendations undoubtedly are, it is hard not to feel that he is himself constrained both by the very global focus of his analysis and by his own position within this. The result is that he concentrates on the need for concerted international political agreement and action on the part of the powerful, rather than the myriad of potential local and social responses that may, in the long run, offer a more sustainable future than any that remains defined upon present-day global power structures, however greened these may become. Nevertheless, Barbier should be praised for demonstrating just how relevant the study of our global past is for the world today.

The long divergence: how Islamic law held back the Middle East

By Timur Kuran. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. xvi+405. Hardback £19.95/US\$29.95, ISBN 978-0-691-14756-7; paperback £16.95/US\$24.95, ISBN 978-0-691-15641-5.

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There was a time when the economic landscapes of the Middle East and Europe were remarkably similar. But in the course of the second millennium, economic growth in the Middle East progressively declined. Only in the nineteenth century, and largely as the result of foreign influence and the establishment of Western institutions, did Middle Eastern business practices begin to evolve in the direction of modernity in certain cities. Discovering what were the root causes

of these trends is the central question guiding Timur Kuran's latest book, a comparative economic and institutional history of the Muslim world that also sheds light on factors accounting for the rise of modern economies in the West.

The long divergence is composed of fourteen chapters containing informative maps, tables, graphs, pie charts, and illustrations. The two central sections – one concerned with explaining the institutional factors accounting for the Middle East's economic stagnation and the other focused on markets in the age of imperialism – form the core of the book. Kuran's overarching thesis, encapsulated in the book's title, is that the rigidity of Islamic legal institutions is the root cause of the Middle East's stunted economic growth. For the most part, Muslims did not innovate by adapting the principles of Islamic law to evolving market conditions or adopting institutions of the modern economy. Many readers will recognize this line of argument, which harks back to Max Weber's critique of Islam as a hindrance to modernity owing to what was perceived as the 'irrationality' of Islamic law. But Kuran goes beyond Weber by giving careful consideration to specific areas of the law and its practice that seemingly impeded the economic performance of Muslim entrepreneurs. The first two chapters present the puzzle of the Middle East's 'economic underdevelopment' and discuss the role of Islam in structuring economic institutions. According to Kuran, the religion of Islam shaped the economy in three fundamental ways. First, the holy law of Muslims (*shari'a*) regulated many areas of social and economic life. Second, Islam provided a sense of identity and cohesion among Muslims. Third, most Muslim polities were governed by Islamic legal and institutional principles. He takes issue with proponents of so-called Islamic economics, who tend to blame external factors, namely European colonial rule, for the failings of Muslim market economies.

Part II of the book, comprising Chapters 3 to 8, examines distinct features of Islamic law. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Islamic partnership agreements (in particular the *mudāraba* or limited liability partnership, akin to the *commenda*). While such contractual forms facilitated the operation of commerce, their 'simplicity' rendered enterprise 'atomistic' in the long run because they restricted both the number of partners and the longevity of collective enterprise. Based on court records from Istanbul and Galata dating to the seventeenth century, Kuran finds that close to 80% of partnerships mentioned therein involved just two contracting parties, which he takes

to be a sign of institutional stagnation. Over time, partnership agreements increased in complexity in the West, by accommodating more partners, conjoining primary and subsidiary partnerships, coordinating through double-entry bookkeeping, and so forth – innovations that foreshadowed the development of the joint-stock company.

The factors explaining why Islamic legal instruments remained impervious to change are examined in the following chapters. Chapter 5 discusses the drawbacks of the Islamic inheritance system, which, because of marriage patterns (polygyny) and egalitarian settlements (male and female entitlements), fragmented estates and thereby inhibited the process of large-scale and long-term capital accumulation. This situation is contrasted to property right structures, including the practice of *primogeniture*, in the West, which favoured the concentration of productive wealth across the generations. In Chapter 6, Kuran discusses the absence of the concept of legal personhood in Islamic law, which explains why the Middle East adopted corporate structures only in relatively recent times. The chapter begins with the intriguing case of a maritime transportation company in Istanbul (*Şirket-i Hayriye*) founded in the 1850s along the lines of a joint-stock company – the first of its kind in the Muslim world – demonstrating the attempts at legal reform under Ottoman rule. Kuran considers some of the reasons for the resistance of the Islamic institutional framework to accommodating modern corporate forms in the following chapter, including the existence of the *waqf* system, used only to manage unproductive assets. The lack of formal banks in the financial markets of the Middle East are the subject of Chapter 8, where Kuran provides a fascinating discussion of casuistry and the legal stratagems that Muslims employed to evade the Islamic interest ban.

In the five chapters forming Part III of the book, entitled 'The makings of underdevelopment', Kuran turns his attention to interfaith relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chapters 9 and 10 consider the role that the Middle East's religious minorities, namely Christians and Jews, played from the eighteenth century onward in gaining access to international markets. Kuran discusses the legal pluralism that prevailed, and the puzzling popularity of Muslim courts for the settlement of interfaith trade disputes. In time, these religious minorities came to 'Westernize' their practices, to become 'protégés' of foreign powers, and to carve out a dominant share of local and international trade. The next chapters discuss the increasing encroachment of European powers on Middle Eastern soil, the

negotiation of capitulations, and the establishment of Western institutions that facilitated transactions and impersonal exchange. The final subject that Kuran addresses is the role of consuls as precursors to colonial rule, and he questions why the Middle East did not develop similar institutions abroad or establish diasporas of Muslims traders in the European markets.

The long divergence is a bold and stimulating book, based on a prodigious amount of research in world economic history. It is the first work of its kind to wrestle with the big question about the Middle East's economic path, as Kenneth Pomeranz did some years ago for the case of China and Europe. Scholars who have followed Kuran's work will find segments and revised versions of several arguments previously published in article form. Though it may stir up controversy among those who may not take well to his critique of Islam, this landmark study will find a broad readership to debate its provocative conclusions.

The Muslim empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals

By Stephen F. Dale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv+347. 22 b/w illustrations, 18 maps. Hardback £55.00, ISBN 978-0-521-87095-5; paperback £19.99, ISBN 978-0-521-69142-0.

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Stephen Dale's book on early modern Muslim empires is, regrettably, a missed opportunity. Writing a comparative history of the Ottomans, Mughals, and Safavids is such an obviously good idea and an endeavour much to be welcomed. But readers of this book can hardly avoid putting it down without a sense of disappointment. However, there are lessons to be learned from failure.

In recent years, the comparative study of pre-colonial land empires has experienced quite a flowering. One might point to Walter Scheidel's *Rome and China* (2009), Björn Forsén and Giovanni Salmeri's *The province strikes back: imperial dynamics in the eastern Mediterranean* (2008), or Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's *Empires in world history* (2010), among others. This is clearly

a broad and diverse trend. In a classic essay, Marc Bloch long ago identified the great advantage of such work:¹ the value of comparison lies in its ability to liberate historians from the limitations imposed by conventional historiographical divisions, to sharpen their perception of problems, to widen their questioning horizon, and to teach them to approach their topic from new angles. In short, comparison engages the historian in continuous reflection on how to conceptualize and frame the analysis.

But conceptualization is precisely the Achilles heel of the current work; this task only receives scant attention. Empire, for instance, means nothing more than rule over 'extensive territories and diverse populations' (p. 4). That is very broad. It is not at all clear, at least to this reviewer, that the tribally segmented domains of the Safavids constituted an empire in anything close to the same sense as the centralized Ottoman state; and there were other Muslim dynasties ruling diverse populations in this period. There is little, then, to distinguish Dale's theme from a general history of Muslim statecraft, not only during the early modern period but from the time of the fragmentation of the Abbasid caliphate. This is also, in fact, what the reader gets for much of the book. An extensive part of it is dedicated to narrating the medieval precursors of Dale's empires. Here, incidentally, both the strength and the very real limitations of Dale as a historian are revealed. One might think that he would follow in the footsteps of a pioneering world history work such as Marshall Hodgson's *Venture of Islam*. But inspired generalization and imaginative synthesis is not what interests him. Rather, detailed dynastic narrative is what is on offer. The bread and butter of his account lies in relating the fates of great men and the poets (and other artists) whom they sponsored. There is a strangely traditionalist air clinging to the story given in this book of the rise and fall of Muslim dynasties. The focus is emphatically on the early and so-called classical eras and on their emblematic rulers. Dale's empires are those of Selim the Conqueror and Süleyman the Magnificent, of Shah Abbas, of Akbar and Shahjahan. After the golden age of their reigns, corruption and inexorable decay sets in with the bigotry of Aurangzeb, the energetic but austere Mughal, the weakness of the harem that affected later Ottoman sultans, and the alcoholism of the last Safavids.

1 Marc Bloch, 'Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes', *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, 56, 1928, pp. 15–50.