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Owen Lattimore, Asia, and Comparative History

WILLIAM T. ROWE

Perhaps best known today as a pioneering scholar of Inner Asia and a victim of the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s, Owen Lattimore was more basically, like his friend Arnold Toynbee, a major player in the vogue of comparative history that captured wide public attention in the second quarter of the twentieth century. His lifelong intellectual project was to develop a “scientific” model of the way human societies form, evolve, grow, decline, mutate, and interact with one another along “frontiers.” In the process of working out this model, Lattimore appropriated for his own purposes, and often later discarded, some of the analytic devices most popular in his day, including ecological determinism, biological racism, economic geography and location theory, and Marxist modes of production. At every stage in his thinking, he sought to confound complacent teleologies, both those of Western “progress” and those of Chinese “civilization” of its pastoralist neighbors.

TAKEN AS A WHOLE, the writings of Owen Lattimore (1900–1989) present a distinctive vision of the fundamental dynamics of human history, a relatively coherent, extended analysis of populations in motion in both space and time on a global stage. In his grandiloquent way, Lattimore was given to describing his project as a “scientific” observation of “forms,” “styles,” “modes,” “norms,” and “tones” within an ongoing world-historical process. The units of this analysis are human groupings that he calls by a variety of names: “societies,” “races,” “civilizations,” and “cultures.” His studies attempt to explain systematically how such groupings form and divide, prosper and decline, expand and contract, mutate internally, and interrelate with contiguous groups. The methods of Lattimore’s analysis are applied variously to a wide range of spatial arenas: to the borderlands of China (most famously, but hardly exclusively, its “Inner Asian frontiers”), to China itself, to Japan, to Europe and America, and to the world as a whole. In this project, Lattimore was not alone: He was a key participant in the vogue of an especially ambitious kind of generalized historical comparison, a “search for the morphology of history,” that arose out of “Europe’s encounter with the rest of the globe in the era of the two world wars” (Grew 1980, 764; see also Sewell 1967).

Despite occasional attempts to revive it, this kind of audacious historical vision has largely disappeared from Sinological scholarship in the West and,

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perhaps to a lesser extent, from historical writing more generally. In the case of Asian history, at least, it was in large part the political disfavor into which Lattimore fell in the early 1950s that contributed to its demise. It now seems possible to reappraise that vision somewhat more dispassionately. Accordingly, this article will not focus on Lattimore's politics or that of his opponents, topics that have been well studied elsewhere (Lattimore 1950a; Newman 1992; Harvey 2001; Herzstein 2005). It will not attempt to assess his specific contributions to Inner Asian history, a field in which he remains acknowledged as a pioneer even by those who reject many of his ideas (Lee 1970; Rossabi 1975; Gaubatz 1996; Crossley 1999; Elliott 2001; Di Cosmo 2002; Atwood 2002; Duara 2003). Nor will it deal, except as necessary in passing, with the theoretical question with which Lattimore is most readily identified, that of the "frontier." Instead, I will attempt here to analyze the sets of general assumptions underlying Lattimore's historiography and to place these in a context of the "big ideas" of his day, to suggest the ways in which Lattimore's studies of Asia fit into, and to some extent influenced, larger currents of thought about historical processes.

Like the French *Annalists*, Lattimore downplayed the historical role of individuals, events, and political regimes relative to that of deeper structures. As early as 1932, he wrote that "[g]enerals and statesmen are the accidents of history; traditions, the way of life, the effort of race and region to assert themselves in the face of culture and nation, and the effort of nation and culture to impose themselves on race and region, are history itself." And again, in 1940, "Political events are only the surface phenomena of history. The forces that create them lie deeper, and these forces derive from the interaction of society and environment" (Lattimore 1932, 301; Lattimore and Lattimore 1947, 83; Lattimore 1988, 340).

The larger subject of Lattimore's historiography is a single, intelligible global process, "a vast universal tragedy, in which the separate histories of this or that country are only chapters." The collective human units by means of which this global process may be dissected are identifiable, first, by their occupation of a specific (though not fixed) "territory" and, second, by their possession of defining (though not immutable) "prime characteristics," such as, in the case of the Chinese, intensive agriculture. These societies achieve identifiable form through a dynamic process of "differentiation" accomplished over prolonged experience of mutual interaction. Lattimore's attempt at a transcendent perspective impels him to actively resist all ethnocentrism, not only that of the West but also that of his sources—emphatically, those of the Chinese textual tradition. Yet his method is hardly fully relativist, as he readily divides societies into such categories as "primary" or "secondary," based on their antiquity, scale, or power, and "normal" (that is, conforming to perceived ideal types) or "mixed." Though he self-consciously labors to avoid teleology and unilinearity, Lattimore's model is by no means devoid of developmental scales of assessment, as we shall see (Lattimore 1962b, 26, 506).

Lattimore's early approach to history was shaped by the rather eclectic set of readings he picked up as a young man and carried around in his saddlebags while

huckstering along the Inner Asian trade routes.¹ These included such notable writers as Thomas Henry Huxley, Ellsworth Huntington, Oswald Spengler, and Karl August Wittfogel, but also lesser-known works such as Winwood Reade's 1872 *The Martyrdom of Man*, which he found "inspirational" for its global approach. In his later, politically besieged years, Lattimore strongly denied any influence of Marx, though it is clear that Marxist analysis—absorbed primarily through Wittfogel—did affect his thought to a degree. Indisputably most central to Lattimore's historical vision, however, was the impact of Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975). The two first met in Kyoto, early in Lattimore's career, and the older man saw the younger as both a protégé and a specialist source, citing Lattimore's *Manchuria: Cradle of Conflict* (1932) authoritatively in volume 3 of his own *A Study of History* (1934–39). Although Lattimore gradually distanced himself from certain of Toynbee's views (among other things, he found him too "mystical"), it was from Toynbee that he adopted his distaste for national histories, his basic notion of historical change, and much of his distinctive vocabulary (Toynbee 1934–39; Lattimore 1948; McNeill 1989).

ECOLOGY AND SOCIETY

During the era between the two world wars, the period when Lattimore was formulating and refining his views, the impact of terrain and climate on human behavior was a subject of unusually intense scholarly interest, and Lattimore became a key party in the debate. In the discipline of geography, an influential voice was that of longtime Harvard professor William Morris Davis (1850–1934). Davis imported the ecologically determinist "new geography" of the German Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), who had argued that a people's natural environment revealed all one needed to know about their *volksgeist* and that the essential point of human history was the movement of populations through varying habitats; Ratzel was also a key formulator of the ideology of *lebensraum*,

¹Born the son of a high school teacher in Washington, D.C., Lattimore was raised from the age of one in China. Although he left China to study Greek and Latin at secondary school in England and later (having never attended college) spent a year as a graduate student in anthropology at Harvard University, Lattimore described himself, with considerable justification, as "largely self-educated." He began his professional life at age nineteen as an itinerant commercial agent in Mongolia and parlayed this experience into a successful career as a journalist, travel writer (Lattimore 1929, 1930), and ultimately foreign policy commentator, joining the Walter Hines Page School of International Relations at Johns Hopkins University in 1937. Though he spent a good portion of his later career (1955–63) in the History Department at Johns Hopkins, to the extent that he had any disciplinary identification, it was likely as a geographer. Positively glorying in the fact that he was *not* a trained historian, he scoffed throughout his life at both the textual scholarship and the topical specialization conventionally demanded by that discipline; with characteristic pugnacity, he equated overreliance on textual sources with giving in to "authoritarian attempts to control opinion" rather than relying on his own rough-and-ready "commonsense kind of reasoning" (Lattimore 1962b, 23–26; 1988, 364–65).

the justification for a stronger population to displace a weaker from the territory it occupied (James 1972; Bunzl 1996).

Davis founded the Association of American Geographers and trained two of Lattimore's most direct influences: Ellsworth Huntington (1876–1947) and Isaiah Bowman (1878–1950). Huntington's 1907 *The Pulse of Asia* drew on his personal travels through the Inner Asian steppe and argued that virtually all functions of human life—especially what he called “character”—are determined by environment, most of all by climate. Because climate changes according to roughly thirty-six-year “pulses,” so, too, do the “mental” or “moral” characteristics of the population groups inhabiting that environment. Those groups that are climatologically favored are destined to “dominate” their neighbors because they are more “vigorous” and “honest.” In the 1920s, Lattimore traveled much the same steppe trade routes as Huntington, toting the latter's work along as his guide. Another early influence, Carl Whiting Bishop (1882–1942) of the Smithsonian Institution, picked up and elaborated many of Huntington's ideas in an influential article titled “The Geographical Factor in the Development of Chinese Civilization,” published in a 1922 issue of the *Geographic Review* under Bowman's editorship. Bowman would become one of Lattimore's most powerful patrons in his capacities as director of the American Geographical Society in the 1930s and as president of Johns Hopkins University from 1935 to 1948.

A second influential element of Davis's approach was the use of an organism metaphor to describe the symbiosis of a population group and its environment. In the hands of social scientists, especially at the University of Chicago—notably, the geographer Harlan H. Barrows and the sociologist Robert Park—this concept came to be known as “human ecology.” In a mystical, poetic essay by that name published in the July 1936 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*, Park wrote of the “symbiotic community” of habitat and inhabitants, a closed system characterized by “competitive cooperation,” undergoing sequential cycles of “equilibrium” and “disequilibrium,” and evolutionary phases of “dominance” and “succession.” This organism metaphor, too, as we shall see, found echoes in Lattimore's work.

Historians as well, during the same era, were newly captivated by the idea of ecological influences on human and social development. In France, partisans of the *Annales* school such as Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, like Lattimore himself, called upon historians to go beyond textual sources and pay close attention to terrain and climate. In his *Geographical Introduction to History* (1925), Febvre pondered the question of whether human beings are “more or less passive under the action of the natural forces of environment” or instead are “endowed with an activity of [their] own and capable of creating and producing new effects,” concluding ultimately that the truth lay in some “balance” between these two views (Febvre 1925; see also Bloch 1966). Among historians of North America, Harold Innis, who shared with Lattimore an early infatuation with the Soviet Union and a lifelong antipathy to imperialism, flirted more closely with

ecological determinism in his magisterial *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930). Even more so did Walter Prescott Webb in *The Great Plains* (1931), published the following year, which attributed major transformations in all aspects of American life—technology (the use of the horse for transport, the abandonment of intensive agriculture), social institutions (the legal system), culture (gender relations, costume, literary styles), moral concepts, and indeed the basic “human psyche”—to westward expansion from the humid forests of the eastern seaboard to the airy grasslands of the Midwest.

Of more immediate interest to Lattimore was Wittfogel, who was both a well-credentialed historian of China and an important, if heretical, voice in the international communist movement. Wittfogel broke angrily with the emerging Stalinist orthodoxy over the latter’s insistence on universal adherence to a unilinear path of history based on the European model. Instead, in his 1931 book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas* (Chinese Economy and Society) and in various articles published throughout the 1930s, he argued that China must be understood as an “hydraulic society” whose practice of intensive agriculture in a “semi-arid” climate led to its dependence on a massive bureaucratic structure to manage irrigation works. Under this situation, private property and economic classes were necessarily weak relative to the awesome power of the state. Western modes of production were thus absent from Chinese history, displaced by what Wittfogel, following scattered notes in the works of Marx, Kautsky, and the early Lenin, termed the “Asiatic mode of production,” and China’s history accordingly lacked the progressive stages undergone by the West, remaining timelessly (or cyclically) “stationary” (Wittfogel 1931; for English-language synopses, see Wittfogel 1935, 1938). By the late 1930s, Wittfogel was already elaborating his ideas into a cross-cultural model of “oriental society,” in anticipation of his notorious 1957 Cold War diatribe *Oriental Despotism*. Lattimore was initially quite close with this most ecologically determinist of historians, and his growing alienation from Wittfogel over the 1930s paralleled his increasing discomfort with such a monocausal view of Asian—and human—historical development.²

For Lattimore, ecology was clearly the single most fundamental determinant of the history of human groups. The Chinese, for instance, were “creatures of their environment,” and with an effort made to understand this environment, even the novice student could easily come to comprehend them and their history (Lattimore and Lattimore 1947). Ecological regimes exert a “long-term molding influence” on peoples, who, in turn, develop over time a “collective affinity for their own optimum kind of environment.” The archetypical forms of a social group, “primary societies,” form within “primary environments”; they are

²Wittfogel, of course, eventually emerged as the chief academic witness denouncing Lattimore as a “card-carrying Communist” to the McCarran Commission in 1952. For a sympathetic account of Wittfogel’s scholarship and politics, see G. L. Ulmen (1978); on the early influence of Wittfogel on Lattimore’s thought, see Lattimore (1962b, 27–28).

given their basic character by these (e.g., “steppe society,” “oasis society”), and their natural “boundaries” are constituted by ecological “frontiers.” Terrain and climate offer the “determining” factor in the development of a society’s economic base, and together ecology and economy give rise to “the entire cultural complex.” At one point, indeed, Lattimore endeavored to show how different world religions are products of their own “appropriate” ecological contexts (Lattimore 1988, 180).

Beyond bequeathing its basic “character,” ecology has a critical impact on the trajectory of a society’s subsequent history—its “destiny.” The differing relationships of terrain and seacoast, for example, serve to explain the divergent courses of Chinese and Japanese history. Though never so overdetermined as in the case of Wittfogel, Lattimore periodically advanced his own weaker version of “hydraulic society.” The collective labor demanded by irrigated sedentary agriculture was “a step of the utmost importance in [China’s] social evolution.” Together with the country’s broad and relatively undifferentiated landscape, this predetermined China’s generation of a “centralized imperial bureaucracy” and its corresponding failure to develop the industrial capitalism that was a logical outgrowth of Europe’s own highly variegated ecological regime. (Lattimore 1936; 1957; 1988, 393; Lattimore and Lattimore 1947, 22–23).

The interwar years in Western social science saw a vigorous debate over the question of environmental determinism, leading to the progressive discrediting of this idea, and Lattimore’s own views followed the same track. In his earliest scholarly work, most notably the 1928 article “Caravan Routes of Inner Asia,” he uncritically applied the determinist notions he had encountered in Huntington. Ecologies are not permanently fixed, it is true—they undergo change through “climatic pulsation”—but the histories of human societies follow helplessly along with them. In later years, however, Lattimore energetically disavowed this position, even condemning books by other authors (e.g., René Grousset’s *L’Empire Mongol*) who had absorbed these ideas from his own work. He also criticized Toynbee’s acceptance and elaboration of Huntington’s “geographic materialism” (Lattimore 1928; 1988, xii–xiii, xlix; 1962b, 116).

Already by 1932, in *Manchuria: Cradle of Conflict*, the book that effectively made his scholarly reputation, Lattimore had begun to pull away from ecological determinism: The climate in Manchuria, he argued, though “important” in that the short growing season encouraged migration over permanent settlement, did not exert a more encompassing “decisive” effect on society (Lattimore 1932, 17). But it was in the several years that followed, during which Lattimore served as editor of the combative and influential journal *Pacific Affairs*, that he moved away emphatically from a determinist approach. His awareness of the American Dust Bowl was an important factor in this turn, as was his concern over similarly counterproductive efforts by the Chinese Nationalists to convert Inner Asian grasslands into rice paddy. Articles solicited by Lattimore for *Pacific Affairs*, as well as his own writings of this period, sounded a crusade against the prospect

of global desiccation (Lowdermilk 1935). What this demonstrated was, simultaneously, the limits imposed by ecological conditions and the possibility of human-induced environmental change, for the worse, as well as the better.

In articles written during the late 1930s and 1940s, notably “The Geographical Factor in Mongol History” (1938), Lattimore laid out his most detailed critique of Huntington’s views, as well as his own systematic theory of human-environmental reciprocal interaction. Attacking “crude geographical determinism” (though still in deeply social Darwinist language), he wrote,

My own view is that the relation of history to geography is much more complicated I believe that while the environment strongly conditions a primitive society, it does not always make social evolution impossible. Moreover society, as it evolves, attempts to exercise choice and initiative in the use of the environment The study of geography should not be distorted in the attempt to make it explain the whole of any historical process. (Lattimore 1938, 1, 5)

Lattimore acknowledged that ecology, especially climate, may itself change independently of human intervention, but as a general principle, “it is important to stick to the fact that nature is passive and that the active factor is man” (Lattimore 1962b, 532).

RACE

In the context of the era in which he wrote, it made a very great difference what Lattimore called the social units of his analysis. The vocabulary that he drew on came out of a grab bag of “perilous ideas” whose impact, especially during a period in which the boundary between academia and the wider world of social opinion was not nearly so sharply defined as it is today, had deep implications for politics, policy, and popular attitudes (Banton 1980; Wolf 1994).

Lattimore’s formative years in the early twentieth century were the heyday of the scientific study of “race” and the application of “raciology,” with generally assumed legitimacy, to the basic processes of human history. In its rise to salience over the centuries, the idiom of “race” had undergone an evolution of its own, with newer understandings inscribing themselves upon older ones without ever fully superseding them. In the longer Western tradition, the founding notion of race was one of *genealogy*, based on the biblical model of descent from Adam, with those groups of offspring spawned later in time, or in unfavorable circumstances (the descendents of Ham, for example), operating throughout their subsequent history at a moral or other disadvantage relative purer groups of descendents (always presumed to include the speaker). In the eighteenth century, with the new imperative to classify organisms according to *physiological type* sparked by the work of Linnaeus (1707–86) and others, sorting human populations into visually discernable “bio-moral” entities with differing inherent

“temperamental and moral dispositions,” capacities, and historical destinies, gained a scientific authority to accompany the religious. “National” histories gradually came to be understood as struggles among differentially endowed “racial” types. In the wake of Darwin’s contributions of the mid-nineteenth century, race became more clearly understood as *subspecies*. Although Darwin’s message cautioned that racial gene pools had continually intermingled over their history, so that no “pure” type of any race ever actually existed, the even greater scientific credibility his work imposed on racial thinking ironically contributed to an even more hardened racial essentialism among historians and social scientists, as among the wider public.

Racialism reached its pinnacle of appeal in social and historical thought through the vehicle of “social Darwinism,” as elaborated by the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) in his book *The Study of Sociology* (1872). Analogizing human races to animal species in Darwin’s evolutionary model, Spencer and his followers held biological difference to be *the* overriding determinant of the fate of human societies and history to be a process of natural selection among races. Though some influential followers such as Thomas Huxley (“Evolution and Ethics,” 1893) parted company on this point, the general impact of social Darwinism was to portray human history as a crude “survival of the fittest”—mentally and physically—among races. A corollary in this imperialist age, of course, was that the most powerful races were necessarily intrinsically superior to those they dominated. As Richard Hofstadter (1955) has demonstrated in detail, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social Darwinist assumptions were broadly and deeply entrenched in American thought. In the China of Lattimore’s youth, their impact was perhaps even more pervasive. Following the publication of Yan Fu’s translations of Huxley in 1898 and of Spencer in 1902, the basic model of the “yellow race’s” struggle for existence against the white—and the need for the Chinese to liberate themselves from the biologically inferior Manchu “race” in order to survive—were unquestioningly accepted among the rapidly politicized reading public and shared by reformers and revolutionaries across the political spectrum. In China, as in the United States, eugenics movements for the improvement of the racial stock had gained wide appeal by the 1910s (Schwartz 1962; Pusey 1983; Dikötter 1989).

In the United States during and after World War I, fears of tides of southern and eastern European immigrants fused with social Darwinist ideas to provoke a wave of intense, racist nativism that transcended intellectual and popular circles. An emblematic work was Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), an Anglo-Saxon manifesto against emerging currents of “melting pot” thought, hailed by the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1920 as a book that “every American should read.” A wealthy New York lawyer with no scientific training, Grant was nevertheless able to give his racism a scholarly cast by his active membership on the boards of the American Museum of Natural History and the New York Zoological Society (at one point, he arranged to display a caged African Pygmy

in his zoo) and his cofounding of the museum's eugenicist Galton Society (Higham 1988; Barkan 1992, 66–76; Pierpont 2004).

At the same time, scholarly opposition to this thinking was mobilized especially within the developing discipline of anthropology, spearheaded by A. L. Kroeber of the University of California, Berkeley, and Franz Boas of Columbia University, both themselves German-born immigrants. In a pioneering 1917 article, "The Superorganic," Kroeber registered his absolute rejection of race as an explanation for human social difference, significantly adding a dismissal of environmental determinism as merely a thin disguise for racist thought (Degler 1989). Boas, for much of the period an employee of Grant's natural history museum, argued passionately against racial essentialism, against overly encompassing aggregation or classificatory schemes, and against the facile correlation of separate variables such as physical and mental attributes. An eager practitioner of physical anthropology himself, he conceded that certain physiological and temperamental features may indeed be *roughly* correlated with human groups in different locations, and with each other, but he denied that the correlations were so complete that these features may be naturalized as hereditary "racial" characteristics, still less assigned causation for these groups' greater or lesser historical "progress" (Boas 1940, 3–17, 191–95).

Lattimore's own approach to the concept of race grew out of his early readings on the geographical factor in history. Among his early influences, Wittfogel, the historical materialist, seemingly managed to keep his ecological-determinist theories entirely aloof from the language of "race." Toynbee, in volume 3 of *A Study of History*, bitterly attacked racial theories: Acknowledging that they were "very much in vogue," he condemned them as a "travesty" of biology and a "pseudo-intellectual reflection" of innate Western prejudices, adding that "we may safely venture to discount them altogether" (Toynbee 1934–39, 3:209, 223). But Lattimore's strongest early influence, Huntington, was another matter. In *The Pulse of Asia* (1907), Huntington identified "races" as the repositories of climatic determinants on human "character" and argued that a long-term global shift in climatic ambiance from south to north explained why the Mediterranean and Chinese races had become less "vigorous" over time and why the Anglo-Saxon and Japanese races had become correspondingly more so. Two decades later, in his influential *The Character of Races* (1924a), he broadened his racial theories beyond ecological determinism, giving them a more pronounced Darwinian cast:

From the biological standpoint we are quite certain that the inherent mental and physical differences between one race and another are largely due to three chief causes: first, sudden mutations ... second, racial mixture, and third, natural selection Inheritance, physical environment, and social environment ... select certain kinds of character for preservation or destruction and cause certain mental characteristics to become a permanent part of the racial inheritance. (6–7)

In 1934, Huntington assumed the presidency of the American Eugenics Society (James 1972, 374–77).

Ronald B. Dixon, the physical anthropologist under whose tutelage Lattimore spent his year at Harvard University in 1928–29, was more problematic. His best-known work, *The Racial History of Man* (1923), is a bizarre mélange of cranial measurements drawn from diverse populations and arbitrarily deployed in support of the argument that humankind essentially comprises eight fundamental races, systematically gradable in terms of “achievement” and “hereditary ability.” The book is so wildly overdetermined that it immediately became a laughingstock and largely destroyed Dixon’s reputation. One befuddled scholar went so far as to suggest that it might have been a deliberate satire meant to expose the ludicrous extremes to which physical anthropology might be taken—if so, no one got the joke. Boas mercilessly lampooned Dixon’s assumptions in his own review of the book, and yet he curiously remained Dixon’s friend after its publication; indeed, the two anthropologists were lifelong allies in public campaigns against scientific racism. And Lattimore himself, somewhat naively perhaps, chose to invoke his Harvard mentor’s book as authority for dismissing race as a useful tool of historical analysis (Dixon 1923; Boas 1940, 160–64; Lattimore 1988, 167; Barkan 1992, 100–101).

Most intriguing of all was Isaiah Bowman, the dean of American geographers, who, as a member of the Social Science Research Council, had secured Lattimore’s grant for his Manchurian research in 1928 and who, as university president, brought him to Johns Hopkins as director of the School of International Relations in 1937. Johns Hopkins as an institution, in its role as America’s leading research university of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had been at the epicenter of American social Darwinism; university president Daniel Coit Gilman had controversially eschewed religious leaders and instead invited Huxley to be the chief speaker at the school’s opening in 1876, and Herbert Baxter Adams’s influential “Historical Seminar” at Johns Hopkins was dedicated for decades to documenting the triumph of the Teutonic/Anglo-Saxon race and its ideal of self-government (Hofstadter 1955). In the 1920s and 1930s, among the most distinguished and influential members of Hopkins’ faculty was the biologist Raymond Pearl, who, though a vocal public critic of eugenics, privately worked with equal energy to keep the university an Anglo-Saxon haven and did so on explicitly social Darwinist grounds. Jewish presence especially must be minimized, he wrote, as “a necessary move in the struggle for existence on the part of the rest of us Whose world is this to be, ours, or the Jews’?” (Barkan 1992, 217).

Both before and after coming to Johns Hopkins in 1935, Bowman’s career research focused on the comparative movements of peoples into frontier regions, what he called “pioneering.” He saw, for example, Chinese movements into Manchuria as analogous to the settlement of the American West. Like the earlier Johns Hopkins product Frederick Jackson Turner, he was critically concerned with the closure of the frontier, but on a global scale. He saw the

global population crisis as no longer potentially resolvable by the settlement of new lands or the discovery of new resources, and he considered various ways in which new technologies could be discovered to compensate for this. But Bowman was also an overt racist. He saw world history as a conflict of “races” (defined biologically as well as culturally), some of which were clearly superior to others. He fretted about the reproductive rates of blacks versus whites in the United States, worried about high immigration rates of inferior southern European “races,” and was an adamant supporter of the Exclusion Acts against immigration by East Asians, whom he saw as polluting America’s superior racial legacy. Lattimore described Bowman blandly as “my academic patron” (Bowman 1928; Lattimore 1962b, 16).

In Lattimore’s own historical work, we see that racial explanations underwent a process somewhat like ecological-determinist ones: He embraced them in his earlier writings, but then, as he began to more confidently work out his own historiographical model and, simultaneously, as the theories themselves were gradually discredited in broader intellectual circles, he moved ever more decisively to reject them. In only one early article, the “The Chinese as a Dominant Race” (1928)—written while at Dixon’s Harvard—did “race” play a central explanatory role. In that essay, Lattimore wrote,

Political systems are not everything. There is still the spirit of the race, which shines through like a candle through a lantern. To my mind, the politics of a Chinese are a trivial matter. The spirit of the race leaps beyond that. (Lattimore 1962b, 217)

But even here, Lattimore was turning Eurocentric racial theories on their head: His point in the article was to argue that, far from passive recipients of expansion on the part of the more “vigorous” white man—as both Western and Chinese writers, for differing political motives, would like to portray them—the Chinese, throughout their history, have themselves shown a hereditary urge to exert “imperialist” domination over other peoples.

Three years later, Lattimore first explicitly voiced his reservations about racial explanations of historical processes. In *Manchuria: Cradle of Conflict*, he denied Huntington’s logic that “race” was a function of place and argued that, in at least certain instances, “regional feeling” (that uniting the culturally disparate inhabitants of Manchuria) may run counter to, or even override, “conditions of race”; “racial characteristics,” though he would not yet dismiss them altogether, “have been greatly overemphasized” (Lattimore 1932, 8, 46). In 1937, he similarly resisted the ideas of Bowman. In a volume on comparative migration organized by Bowman himself, Lattimore insisted that economic factors were more significant than racial ones in determining migratory patterns: “Where capital is able or willing to move, population will follow.” Arguments based on “racial fitness,” he added, were bunk (Lattimore 1937). By the 1940s,

at Bowman's Johns Hopkins, Lattimore had, in fact, left racial historiography far behind. In his masterwork, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, he repeatedly attacked its utility. The very notion of "race" in a biological sense, he argued in a postwar article, is "a late development, which confuses more than it clarifies." And summing up the progress of his career in 1962, on the eve of his departure from Johns Hopkins, he dismissed social Darwinism *in toto* as a "misplaced analogy" (Lattimore 1962b, 25; 1988, 24, 55–56, 167).

CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE

With "race" invalidated as a label for the collective actors in Lattimore's historical drama, what could take its place? Two ready concepts were at hand to choose from—"civilizations" and "cultures," and Lattimore made use of both. By the time of Lattimore's major productivity, the notion of "civilization" had already been held up to critical scrutiny, by Febvre and a growing number of others.³ Febvre pointed out that since the late nineteenth century, there had, in fact, been two separate ideas simultaneously, and often confusingly, operating under this single label. The first and oldest referred to a unitary and positively valued moral and material state of being, the outcome of teleological progress by which societies, at differential rates, passed through lower states such as savagery and barbarism. "Civilization" in this sense was closely linked to the evolutionary concept of "races," as both languages drew fundamentally on the paradigm of a single, graduated, and progressive order of beings posited by Lamarck and other eighteenth-century naturalists (Wolf 1994). The second, later usage was pluralist and not necessarily value laden, referring to "all features that can be observed in the collective life of one human group, embracing their material, moral, political, ... and social life." Febvre traced the origins of this more relativist language to Alexander von Humboldt and other early nineteenth-century ethnographers; it reflected a sense of postrevolutionary disillusionment with the optimistic Enlightenment teleology.

Among Lattimore's mentors, both Huntington and Toynbee used the language of civilization routinely and rather uncritically. As early as the 1907 *Pulse of Asia*, and yet more ambitiously in his 1924 global study of *Civilization and Climate*, Huntington sought to root the teleology of civilization in his environmental determinism, his notion of "civilization" a careless amalgam of Febvre's two contrasting usages (Huntington 1924b). Toynbee favored the word "civilizations" to name the units of his determinedly cultural-relativist

³Lucien Febvre (1973). For a brilliant critical examination of the concept published by Lattimore's own university, see Pearce (1953). Pearce's book is dedicated to another of the concept's great interrogators and Lattimore's Johns Hopkins colleague, Arthur O. Lovejoy (see Lovejoy 1936). For a consideration of the impact of this shifting language of "civilization" on international politics in interwar East Asia, see Prasenjit B. Duara (2003, 91–94).

global history, while at the same time, he noted “civilization” as an attribute possessed in greater or lesser extent by the various “societies” he examined. In precisely the kind of prose that Lattimore had decried as overly “mystical” (but also emulated himself), Toynbee wrote that moments of “civilization” are “particular beats of a general rhythmical pulsation which runs all through the universe” (Toynbee 1934–39, 3:176, 205).

Lattimore often followed his mentors in using the plural notion of “civilization” unreflectively. At times, he tended to elide the categories “culture” and “civilization,” but when he addressed the question directly, it became clear that all “societies” are not necessarily “civilizations.” He spoke of “the great civilized empires” of Asia, North Africa, and the Mediterranean, and he was deeply interested in their patterned interaction with “barbarians” on their perimeters. “Civilization,” we may infer, is an attribute possessed in unequal degrees by various “societies,” but just what the content of this attribute may be Lattimore tended to leave to his reader’s imagination. He was explicit, however, that it is no necessary concomitant of the society’s economic basis. A flourishing pastoral economy may well be more “civilized” or “cultured” than a languishing agrarian one. And what we think of as “modern civilization” is by no means the necessary end product of history (Lattimore 1932, 76; 1938).

Indeed, probably the central thrust of Lattimore’s entire corpus was to combat “unidirectional” historical thinking, a fallacy, he pointedly noted, engaged in by Marxists and non-Marxists alike. His *bête noire* was the presumed historical sequence from hunting-gathering to pastoral nomadism to shifting agriculture to sedentary agriculture, a pernicious teleology he associated with the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–81) and the archeologist V. Gordon Childe (1892–1957), but also with centuries of Chinese propagandists for “assimilation” (*tonghua*) of peripheral peoples (Childe 1936, 1951; Lattimore 1962a). Lattimore’s work indeed became highly animated in its attack on contemporary programs of Nationalist politicians, buoyed by newly imported industrial technologies, to “sinicize” their steppe neighbors once and for all; “assimilation,” he charged, really means “extermination.” He lampooned these programs in essays such as “On the Wickedness of Being Nomads” (1935), and Chinese Nationalist scholars fired back in scathing critiques of his work (Lattimore 1962b, 415–26; Lin 1935).

In Lattimore’s view, nomadic pastoralism was by no means “primitive” but was instead a rational and efficient adaptation to ecological conditions of the steppe—more rational, indeed, than the efforts of Chinese colonists to convert this terrain to an agriculture it could not support. With a sly nod perhaps to the glorification of the self-reliant plainsman in Turner and Webb, he asked, is the American rancher culturally “inferior” to the American farmer? “We look too uncritically for ‘evolution,’” he said, seeing in pastoralism a “lower” form of society that must eventually evolve into something better. In fact, it is not a “transitory” stage at all but rather a “complete” and “independent” form in itself, and

as such, it cannot be evolved out of existence but only brutally bulldozed out of existence by conquering neighbors.

If a temporal sequence must be imposed, Lattimore insisted, “the truth is that agriculture is earlier than pastoral nomadism.” The latter is really a late *by-product* of the former, “created by the growth and spread of the great ancient civilizations” through a process—a key notion in his historiography—that he termed “differentiation.” An expanding people, originally fairly homogeneous in terms of heredity and culture, encounters a new ecology that it is unable to exploit using its own distinctive economic techniques, and so a portion of the old population adapts technology and eventually comes to constitute a new cultural group. Invoking his own biological metaphor to replace the evolutionary paradigm, Lattimore went on to describe the “symbiosis” reached by the old and new societies, living in a continually tense, but in fact mutually supportive relationship. “Civilization,” then, is actually “the mother of barbarism”: “civilization itself created its own barbarian plague” (Lattimore 1932, 74–75; 1938; 1962b, 420–21, 504–5).

If one manifestation of disillusionment with the unitary Enlightenment notion of “civilization” had been, as Febvre described, simply to pluralize and relativize that term, a more common response had been to substitute instead the Germanic notion of “culture.” Beginning with Herder in the late eighteenth century, and more decisively in the early nineteenth with the brothers von Humboldt, German scholars turned away from the valorized concept of “civilization” in favor of comparative and (in theory) value-neutral studies of individual peoples, each of which had their own *volksgeist*, *national charakter*, or *kultur*. Alexander von Humboldt used the terms *cultures* and the pluralized *civilizations* almost interchangeably to describe the relativist subjects of his investigations, as did Spengler and Toynbee, who so deeply influenced the early Lattimore (Febvre 1973; Bunzl 1996; Duara 2003, 91–92).

But the most self-conscious early twentieth-century propagandist of the notion of “culture” was Boas, who brandished it as a weapon in the battle against biological determinism and evolutionary positivism. Boas was an indefatigable champion of nurture versus nature, arguing on the one hand against ecological determinists that physical environments could have different meanings for peoples with different cultural attitudes, and, unequivocally against racial theorists, that “any attempt to explain cultural form on a purely biological basis is doomed to failure.” He argued as well against *cultural* essentialism, maintaining that cultures mutate and adapt over historical time; the playful Elizabethans and the dour Victorians, for example, indisputably derived from the same genetic stock and inhabited the same terrain, yet the two cultures’ mental sets could hardly be more different. Freed as it was from such reductionisms, however, the Boasian notion of culture did retain a certain holistic element derived from its *volksgeist* antecedents, which ultimately caused the anthropological discipline to move away from it (in favor of the more easily disaggregated concept of

“ethnicity”) in the second half of the twentieth century (Boas 1940; James 1972, 406–7; Wolf 1994, 5; Bunzl 1996, 53–61).

Whether or not, as one recent scholar has argued, Boas directly influenced Lattimore in his acceptance of holistic “cultures” as the principal agents of history,⁴ notions clearly similar to those then emerging in ethnography did inform his work. Lattimore often termed the units of his analysis “cultures,” and he argued that it is “cultural characteristics” that in the course of history define such groups and provide boundaries of group membership. These characteristics are acquired in one of at least two ways. First, they may be a response to the specifics of the ecology inhabited by the group and the economy and technology developed in adaptation to that ecology; in *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, for instance, Lattimore derived the Chinese practice of early marriage and the ethos of “filial piety” from the need to spawn a large child labor force and so “get back an adequate return on the cost of water conservancy works.” Second, cultural features are defined and hardened through the process of “differentiation” from other cultures, those either encountered on the frontier or, more commonly, thrown off from the mother culture itself (Lattimore 1962b, 495–98; 1988, 374).

Once formed (and continually re-formed), however, cultural features become independent variables in their own right: They form the “styles,” “norms,” or “casts” of the groups that possess them, especially in the case of the most clearly defined “type-cultures,” such as the Chinese. In 1932, responding to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, Lattimore strikingly differentiated national “cultures” from “races” or “peoples,” arguing that history is essentially a “struggle” of the former to impose itself on the latter and of the latter to resist the former. But as he gradually edged away from racial (and ecological) determinism, the salience he assigned to culture in world history correspondingly grew; by the mid-1950s, “cultural momentum” had become one of the central causal forces in his historiography (Lattimore 1932, 301; 1962b, 486).

TECHNOLOGY AND PRODUCTION

Lattimore was always fascinated by the way societies get things done, but as he moved away from his early ecological determinist leanings, he emphasized ever more strongly the role of “technique” versus “the hard environment.” The application of technology, as we have seen, can alter the environment itself and, perhaps more pervasively, alter the “meaning” of the environment—as, for example, the development of navigational skills might transform a river from a boundary to a linkage. There is, in fact, a complex historical interplay between technology and ecology, which, at his boldest, Lattimore laid out as an elaborate theory of stages: A given environment may not allow exploitation

⁴Duara (2003, 106–7). Duara also finds direct influences of Boas in the work of an even more centrally situated American historian of China, John King Fairbank.

by its inhabitants until they have reached a sufficient level of technological expertise, but it may ultimately prove “lacking” once the society’s skill level has developed beyond that environment’s resource endowment. As a general rule, a society will “inevitably” be driven to expand to occupy all of the contingent environment that it already possesses the technology to exploit, but usually no farther. It is this factor that has made China’s northern frontier, for instance, historically a “hard” or “static” one and its southern frontiers “soft” and “dynamic.” Militarily, as well, societies have technologically determined “strategic optimums” that help set their spatial parameters (Lattimore 1962b, 25–26, 38, 494).

Social, cultural, and political forms, including the size and nature of the state, are in large measure shaped by the technology on which the society is constructed, on the “specific technological adaptations” it has to make in order to most effectively exploit its environment. In some instances, as with hydraulic management in imperial China, “a single technique” may be very largely determinative. When technologies change, or when a society expands into a new environment necessitating technological adaptation, new modes of human behavior become “profitable,” and cultural and political change are the “inevitable consequence.” In other words, technological innovation often moves faster than political change, and drives the latter. Lattimore cited the example of the introduction of the horse-drawn chariot and the ox-drawn plough into China from outside, which precipitated the collapse of Chinese “feudalism” (Lattimore 1962b, 126–28, 475–77, 548).

But social forms are not entirely a dependent variable. Lattimore argued that it makes little difference whether a new technology is indigenously generated or “imposed by conquerors”; the technology’s acceptance and impact is a function of whether or not it suits the needs of the receiving society, whether social institutions are “ready” for it. Citing the differential reception of European technologies by Chinese and by Native Americans, Lattimore suggested that an imposed innovation can only “fertilize” a society when that society’s existing technology is “just high enough” to profit from it (Lattimore and Lattimore 1947, 63).

In analyzing the historical impact of technological change on China, Lattimore developed a model suggesting the influence of early twentieth-century “location theorists” such as Walter Christaller and August Lösch and intriguingly anticipated the ideas of sinologist G. William Skinner.⁵ Most especially by the time of his 1940 masterpiece, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, Lattimore had routinely invoked the language of “distance” and “range,” deployed notions such as “range of relative advantage” and “zone of diminishing returns,” and even proposed determination of these by a calculation of the factors of “distance” and “mass.”

⁵G. William Skinner (1964–65, 1977). Though it was available to him in his later years, I have not seen any citation by Lattimore of Skinner’s work. He does cite, however, and indeed was active in arranging the publication of, a seminal work in the history of Chinese regional analysis (Chi 1936). The major works of Walter Christaller and August Lösch were not translated from German until the 1950s, but scattered writings of theirs had earlier appeared in American scholarly journals (see, e.g., Lösch 1938).

Like Skinner, Lattimore saw imperial China as constrained by the limits of its transport technology into a spatial structure of concentric “compartments.” The basic level was a “cell,” composed of a walled city and a surrounding green belt—“an indefinite multiplication of standardized units.” A secondary order of magnitude was the “region,” containing scores or even hundreds of cells. Again like Skinner, Lattimore insisted that both of these compartmentalized structures were social as well as economic units. Though “regional markets” might exist in some commodities, a Chinese “national market” never developed on the basis of indigenously generated technology, and the cycles of prosperity and decline experienced by individual regions did not necessarily correlate with those of other regions (Lattimore 1988, 390–95; 1962b, 477–80, 498–99).

Lattimore specifically tied this “horizontal” cellular structure to China’s failure to spawn industrial capitalism, whereas Europe, which “faced many seas and [whose] rivers flowed in many directions,” saw a “diversity of regional products [that] could be transformed into an animated trade more easily than in China” and hosted a “vertical” urban–rural division of labor that proved more conducive to industrialization. However, the late nineteenth-century importation of new transport technologies into China—for which, as we have seen, Lattimore deemed the country socially “ready”—quickly overcame inherited inhibitions of distance, allowed greater scale for socioeconomic institutions, and decompartmentalized the empire. At the same time, new industrial technologies “shattered the old balance between farming and handicrafts,” rapidly destroying the latter.⁶ The new “age of machinery” also radically altered the relationship of China with its neighbors: the steamship accelerating expansion into the “soft” frontier to the south, and the railroad allowing unprecedented penetration of the “hard” frontier to the north, in the process turning much of Inner Asia into a “drainage economy” in the service of China (Lattimore 1937, 128; 1962b, 501–13).

Later in his career, Lattimore was increasingly comfortable periodizing global history on the basis of transport technologies. He wrote of alternating “continental” and “maritime” eras. Recent centuries had constituted an “age of maritime power,” not only bringing Europe to Asia but also—especially with the opening of the Suez Canal—shifting the “center of gravity” within the larger Eurasian land mass from east to west. But the railroad offered the hint of a revived “continental” age, promising a reverse shift in the center of gravity of China itself away from the coast and toward the interior. Lattimore confidently predicted that the ascendancy of “air power” would usher in a new “historical age,” within which a “complex of new geographical, technological, and political forces” would pertain; as in past history, none of these forces could effectively

⁶Lattimore (1943, 484–85; 1960, 103–13). The destruction of Chinese handicrafts by industrialization was a constant theme of *Pacific Affairs* under Lattimore’s editorship and of the journal’s sponsoring institution, the Institute of Pacific Relations (see, e.g., Institute of Pacific Relations 1938).

be studied in isolation from the others (Lattimore 1962b, 119–33; 1988, xviii–xx, 4; Lattimore and Lattimore 1947, 21–25).

At the same time, Lattimore fitfully flirted with a Marxist-Leninist periodization of historical modes of production. Though it now seems clear that he never joined the Communist Party, as his denouncers claimed, Lattimore was definitely on the political left. He admired Marx, he said, as one of those seminal thinkers of the early industrial age, like Adam Smith and Darwin, who had struggled valiantly to figure out how the world had gotten to this state and where it might be going, but he protested that he had never undergone “an apocalyptic conversion” to Marxism. Lattimore was not routinely given to Marxian class analysis, but on occasion he could fall into this with enthusiasm. In the relatively late article “The Industrial Impact on China” (1960), he sought to discredit Wittfogel’s oriental despotism model, with its presumption of the weakness of class interests with regard to the state in Chinese history. Instead, Lattimore took the Stalinist/Maoist line that the Chinese empire was “a government of landlords, by landlords, for landlords.” When technological transfer broke this down, the new classes struggling for dominance were the “compradore bourgeoisie” and the “nationalist bourgeoisie,” precisely the categories employed by the Stalinist-inspired Chinese Communist Party. And, though he shunned any overt reference to Marxist modes of production (which he found “excessively rigid” and “dogmatic”), his own categories “social forms” and “social economies” conveyed much the same content (Lattimore 1937, 122–23; 1960; 1962b, 27–28, 101, 479–80).

Lattimore was quite comfortable with the language of “feudalism,” “capitalism,” “imperialism,” and “socialism,” even as he demanded that these terms be continually subjected to critical analysis. He spoke with conviction of the historical agency of a reified “capital” in its socially specific forms (slaves, sheep, grain), and at the moment of the Japanese invasion of China, he argued vehemently that the key asset in the ongoing territorial struggle was not the “racial fitness” touted by the fascist powers but rather the “relative command of capital and the ability to put it to use among peoples in regions still not fully exploited by the methods that capital can employ” (Lattimore 1937, 129, 134; 1936, 588).

“Imperialism,” the Anglophile Lattimore wrote puckishly in 1928, “is an honest word that casuists have of late years brought into bad odour—to the mortification of many honest men who once took a pride in it” (Lattimore 1962b, 200). But over the course of his career, as first racial and then ecological factors receded from his causal scheme in favor of technological and economic ones, he moved somewhat closer to a Leninist usage of that term, arguing, for example, in *Inner Asian Frontiers* that it was Western imperialism, far more than any “crude” political factor, that explained the origins of the Pacific War, and in 1957, he wrote that “the spoils of imperialism stimulated the growth of industrialism, and then as industrialism grew, it strengthened imperialism” (Lattimore 1962b, 509; 1988, 9). Where Lattimore remained constant, given his abiding sympathy for peripheral peoples, was his avoidance of any

knee-jerk identification of imperialism solely with the West; the Chinese themselves were always, for him, “imperialists” of the first order. Observing the aggressive Nationalist relocation to the southwest during the war, he predicted a new era in which Western imperialism along the Burma Road would be displaced by a revived Chinese one (Lattimore 1943, 481).

In his discussions of socialism, especially in Outer Mongolia, Lattimore the political chameleon seems most in evidence. In 1944, he ridiculed commentators who wrote with alarm that Mongolia had “gone Communist” or become a Soviet “puppet state,” insisting that ideological factors were far less salient in that society’s politics, then as always, than geographical and ethnic ones. Yet only three years later, he was positively rhapsodic about how the new “common utilization of resources” in Mongolia, introduced by the admittedly expansionist Russia, had benefited the local population; Mongolia now had “the only intact, improved, and flourishing economy of any people in Asia,” and its evident deference to the Soviet Union “must be assumed to [stem from] gratitude” (Lattimore 1947, 48–52; 1962b, 127).

The notion of feudalism played a growing part in Lattimore’s historical vision, especially by the 1950s, when he produced two major theoretical articles on the subject (Lattimore 1957; 1962b, 514–41). It was, he conceded, an elusive and controversial subject, but invoked carefully, and with the understanding that “feudal” societies were both individually distinctive and systematically comparable, a useful one (Lattimore 1950b, 183). In leftist politics and historiography of the second quarter of the twentieth century, feudalism was an incendiary and divisive concept. Its applicability to contemporary China was the major point of division between Stalin and his opponents in their attempts to direct the Chinese revolution (Stalin insisted that China had remained “feudal,” and so a “United Front” with bourgeois elements was a prudent strategy, which Trotsky and others denied), and the rhetoric of the power struggle in the Soviet Union from which Stalin eventually emerged victorious hinged largely on this point (Schwartz 1954; Rowe 1985, 275–83). Wittfogel, as part of his bitter split with Stalin and based on his heretical Marxist formulation of “hydraulic society,” argued with increasing stridency that China was not—nor indeed had *ever been*—“feudal.” When the German historical sociologist Wolfram Eberhard employed the notion of feudalism without reservation in his influential *Chinas Geschichte* (A History of China) in 1948, Wittfogel scathingly condemned him for doing so, and Eberhard responded vigorously.⁷ Lattimore, who by this time had also been publicly denounced by Wittfogel, leapt into the debate on Eberhard’s side. Although *imperial* China had not been feudal, as Stalin and the Chinese Communists claimed (for Lattimore, it was a “postfeudal society”), China of the classical age had certainly been so (Lattimore 1962b, 500).

⁷Wolfram Eberhard (1950). Eberhard (1952) offers a detailed refutation of Wittfogel (48–88), as well as several explicit (though not uncritical) acknowledgments of Lattimore’s influence (3, 107–10, 137).

Lattimore's own conception of "feudalism" was not basically a Marxist (still less, Stalinist) one, with which, he protested, he had "never been able to get to grips."⁸ Nowhere did he use the term in specific reference to a mode of economic production in which surplus is systematically expropriated by a ruling class on the basis of its ownership of land. For him, it was, at bottom, an *administrative* system, although certain economic and social elements predictably follow this as part of an overall "complex." In line with the general principles of historical causation toward which he was moving, Lattimore's feudalism came into being as a result of factors of geography and technology. It occurs when a society develops the military technology to stake claims to a larger unit of territory than its economic or logistical technology can effectively integrate; enfeoffing "vassals" is the solution. His own formulation of "frontier feudalism" is a secondary phenomenon, under which an expansive society develops the technology to integrate its core territory under central direct administration, but still must rely on vassals to rule its frontiers; this, he suggested, is a condition that China (thanks to imported technologies) had only recently begun to escape. Yet here, as elsewhere, Lattimore was emphatic in his denial of a necessary unilinearity to historical processes. Explicitly dismissing the Marxist teleology of feudalism as a universally observable stage toward the development of capitalism and socialism, he argued that what distinguishes the "feudalism" of one society from that of another is, above all, "what [that society] came from and what it is going toward." Societies can "devolve" into feudalism, he insists, as easily as they can "evolve" into it (Lattimore 1957, 545).

STRUCTURE, PROCESS, COMPARISON

Lattimore's view of history was, as we have seen, a deeply structural one. Nevertheless, he insisted that dynamic process rather than static structure was the basis of his vision. Spatially, his most basic contribution to the analysis of the frontier was to reconceptualize this as a shifting and fluid zone of interaction rather than a comfortably delineated borderland. Temporally as well, he argued that there are no "fixed points" in history and that, despite historians' need to select a working baseline for the study of change, such a baseline "always turns out to be a sort of twilight zone" (Lattimore and Lattimore 1947, 56). Lattimore's personal development as a historian can be seen as a struggle against monocausal explanations, most notably ecological determinism; yet, much as he condemned these in his later work, he never stopped searching for "the prime impulses of historical change" nor wavered in his assurance that he (perhaps uniquely) was able to identify these. There was little "accidental," about history; rather, there were "inevabilities," even "predictabilities," about historical processes, which

⁸Lattimore (1957, 549). Lattimore's readiness to use "feudalism" as an analytic device nevertheless formed part of the indictment against him during the McCarthy era; see David Harvey (2001, 101–2).

he habitually delighted in pointing out (Lattimore 1937, 128; 1943, 490; 1988, 32, 251, 373; Lattimore and Lattimore 1947, 21, 78).

Lattimore's historical writing was deeply infused with metaphor, and the metaphors he chose underline his conviction that he was writing a history of surpassing scientific validity. While he decried "elaborate mechanical explanations" of historical processes, even those of Toynbee, yet—like the "human ecology" rhapsodies of Robert Park—Lattimore unblushingly invoked the language of physics ("momentum," "stability," "equilibrium," ebbs and flows, gravitational pulls) to describe the dynamics of social change. Though turning away emphatically over the course of his career from social Darwinist notions of race and attacking with vehemence unilinear schemes of human development, he never abandoned the language of social "evolution" and "devolution." It was critically important for Lattimore's "dialectical" historiography that devolution *happened*, but his very description of it in this way betrays an underlying assumption of a proper, or at least presumed, path of historical social change.⁹

Most pernicious, in my view, is Lattimore's routine adoption of a biological metaphor to characterize societies and describe social change. Inspired by Emerson, Bergson, and others, the notion that societies, like individual organisms, undergo stages of youth, maturity, and age was much in vogue in the early twentieth century. It was nowhere more embraced than in East Asia, where it inspired both national regeneration movements such as the "Young China Association" and the journal *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*) and expansion-minded Japanese ideologues such as the sinologist Naitō Konan (1866–1934), who argued for the filial duty of the youthful Japan to protect and oversee the senescent parent culture, China (Meisner 1967, 21–28; Chow 1960, 176–82, 327–32; Fogel 1984). Conditioned to think in this way during his youth in China, Lattimore further absorbed the organism metaphor from the German tradition of social thought: It was central to both the "new geography" of Ratzel and the "comparative morphology" of Spengler (Lattimore 1948, 104; James 1972, 220–25). Well into the 1950s, Lattimore fell back on the language of biological "growth" to describe the history of societies and, more specifically, of stages of "maturation" analogous to the organism's life cycle. But it was above all in his early breakthrough work of 1932, *Manchuria: Cradle of Conflict*, that this metaphor dominated his narrative. The Manchus were still a "young" society, and hence flexible and creative; China, by contrast, was not just "mature" but also (echoing Naitō) "old" and "late," and thus necessarily "static" and "repetitive." And further, in a passage that must have caused him considerable political

⁹Lattimore (1950b, 183, 191; 1962b, 110–16, 489–91; 1988, 32, 259, 316–17, 340, 512). On at least one occasion, with some evident discomfort, he spoke of alternating "progressive" and "backward" tendencies of social change (Lattimore 1962b, 472). For Lattimore's description of his work as "dialectical" (in a "para-Marxist" way), see Lattimore (1948, 105).

embarrassment during the McCarthy witch hunts, he turned the language of youth and age on the West itself:

There seems to be no conclusion but that the West has exhausted its powers of creativeness, and left behind the period when party meant more than the leader and the nation meant more than the party.... It cannot be said of British or American politics of the present day that a Harding, a Coolidge, a Hoover, or a Lloyd George, a Baldwin, a Macdonald, are 'men of destiny' Russian appears to be the only nation of the modern world that is 'young' enough to have 'men of destiny.' It creates its Lenin and its Stalin, and they follow each other with the certainty of fate. Russia, more than China and more than any nation of the West, is launched on a career of growth, and grow it will, irrespective of the leader. (Lattimore 1932, 293–94)

It was this notion of relatively predictable stages of maturation in disparate societies that allowed Lattimore to engage in what he took to be the historian's most exalted and challenging task: comparison. He drew inspiration in this endeavor from Spengler and Toynbee, but more immediately from University of California historian Frederick J. Teggart's "invaluable" book *Rome and China: A Study of Correlations of Historical Events* (1939). Lattimore's own studies of comparative frontiers, a special case of his more general efforts at comparative history, took off in part from Teggart's insistence on cultural relativism: Any productive attempt at historical understanding must assume from the outset that "all people have histories." He expanded Teggart's study of the barbarian pales of Rome and China to encompass the broadest possible comparative base, including the frontiers of British India and of North and South America, and faulted Turner's famous frontier thesis for its parochial assumption that the experience of the United States was somehow exceptional or unique (Teggart 1939, 245; Lattimore 1950b, 186; 1962b, 482, 489–91; 1988, xlii).

Historical comparison required a great deal of care. Teggart cautiously differentiated between legitimate "correlations" based on genuine relationships among cases and mere "correspondences," phenomena with but a surface similarity. Spengler, in a formulation that Lattimore cited often, differentiated between "homologies of *form*" (or "structure" or "institutions") and "analogies of *function*"; both were noteworthy, but the historian should not be misled into confusing the two nor assume that they always occur in tandem. Lattimore saw the failure to make this distinction as one of the weaknesses of Marx's historical "modes of production," which were, after all, a heroic effort at identifying comparable phenomena over diverse times and places but which Lattimore found inadequately sensitive to the particularisms of individual historical cases (Lattimore 1957, 551; 1962b, 27–28, 479–80).

Does the existence of true "correlations" necessarily imply a pattern of actual *influence* among historical cases? For Teggart, like the "new geographers," it did;

it was precisely these interconnections across space but in synchronic time that he found most worthy of investigation (Teggart 1939, viii; Bunzl 1996, 42). Lattimore was interested in this project as well; at one point, he argued that the density of such intercultural linkages became so great around 1600 that “the convergence of world history” could be said to date to that point (Lattimore 1947, 24). But he also sought to do more, to compare historical phenomena *across* time, with no presumption of mutual influence, and he found license to do so in Toynbee’s doctrine that, no less than space, “time is relative” (Toynbee 1934–39, 1:172–75). Lattimore seized on Toynbee’s notion of “contemporaneity” to compare societies that, though in existence at different points of historical time, were at comparable stages of “growth” or “maturity” or were otherwise “functionally equivalent” (Lattimore 1948, 104; 1962b, 536; 1988, xliii). It was this systematic comparison of societies that made it possible to do a truly “scientific” history, to induce (as Toynbee wrote) transcendent “absolutes” about causal principles in history, and (in Teggart’s more homely words) to draw universal generalizations about “the way things work” in human affairs (Toynbee 1934–39, 1:10; Teggart 1939, v).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

All moments are seminal, but some are more seminal than others. In the historical discipline, the moment of Owen Lattimore’s prominence—most centrally the 1930s and 1940s—was one of these. It was a time when producing narratives of national history was being seriously challenged as the proper terrain of the historian. New, highly relativist, comparative cross-cultural models of history emerged, in the process questioning complacent parochial assumptions of the nature and spread of “civilization.” So, too, did new notions of what a “scientific” (not quite yet “social science”) history might comprise (Stone 1979). Racial thought, in history as in other disciplines, was wearing out its welcome, partly because of the horrific way it was being employed in National Socialism and similar political movements, and partly because of emerging sensitivities about racial and ethnic relations within the United States. Ecological explanations of human processes, which had recently gained widespread popularity, likewise began to recede as a result of the crudely determinist ideas of some of their enthusiasts. And the highly visible activities of communist movements worldwide, most notably the Chinese revolution and the stunned worldwide reactions to its success, made Marxist-influenced historiography alternately fashionable and taboo and brought into popular consciousness visceral arguments *within* the Marxist camp.

Lattimore was a party to most of these debates, and in some of them he was a major player. There is no question that his lack of formal academic credentials limited his influence to some extent and that his political disgrace persuaded even some whom he did influence to conceal that fact. (A clear example of the latter would seem to be Walter Prescott Webb’s 1952 *The Great Frontier*, an ambitious

attempt to apply the Turner thesis, stripped of its American exceptionalism, on a global comparative scale; published at the height of the McCarthy witch hunts, Webb's book opens with a broad survey of the existing literature on comparative frontiers, omitting Lattimore's name entirely.) But his claim to special expertise on a relatively unknown and romantic part of the globe, his extraordinarily powerful prose style, his sweeping geopolitical and historiographical models, his personal pugnacity, and his always boldly expressed political positions, made Lattimore a prominent public intellectual whom the academy and the historical discipline could not ignore. By the time of his death in the late twentieth century, several of the "styles" of history that Lattimore had championed were in clear revival. He was acknowledged as a pioneer by exponents of comparative or "world history" such as Moore, McNeill, and Curtin; less commonly so by new ecological historians such as Braudel, Crosby, or Cronin.¹⁰ But his influence had been felt.

Was that influence a constructive one? It seems undeniable that the reductionism of Lattimore's historical modeling did much violence to the messy complexities of past experience, and, struggle as he would against it, there was something of an "orientalist" paternalism in his applications of such Western-generated models to Asian history. (Kären Wigen, for example, has nicely critiqued the readiness of Lattimore and his contemporaries to find ecological roots for East Asia's "failure" to industrialize; see Wigen 1992, 7–9). The romantic tenor of Lattimore's prose, particularly his infatuation with metaphors drawn from the biological and physical sciences, had disturbing implications.

At the same time, however, along with Toynbee, he was a major force in the collective project of breaking down teleological assumptions of "the unity of history" and establishing in their place a comparative history of a multitude of cultures and societies of equal dignity (Iggers 1997, 7, 143). As an Asianist of generally respected expertise, Lattimore arguably did this even more effectively than his mentors. And the fact is that Lattimore remains one of the very few historians of the non-Western world to have helped shape the larger historical discipline in the West to any degree whatsoever.

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¹⁰For explicit expressions of debt to Lattimore by world historians, see, for example, Barrington Moore (1966, 169) and William H. McNeill (1983, 63–64). Philip D. Curtin has expressed similar sentiments to me in personal conversations. For a survey of the new ecological history, see Richard White (1985).

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