Prasanna Parthasarathi’s *Review: The Great Divergence* was published as an article in Past & Present in August 2002. Past & Present is a historical journal founded in 1952, and published by Oxford University Press. The book reviewed is *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* written by Kenneth Pomeranz and published in 2000 by Princeton University Press. Pomeranz’s book, and thus Parthasarathi’s review, deals with the 18th and 19th centuries, and geographically covers Europe, specifically Britain and Asia, specifically China and India.

Pomeranz’s historiographic intervention is in the field of global comparative history, on the divergence between Europe and Asia in which Europe “advances” and Asia “stagnates.” Pomeranz argues that the reasons for Europe’s advancement are not internal or innate to Europe but are more material and situational. Pomeranz also argues to shorten the advancement gap between Europe and Asia in the 17th century, claiming China and India were just as advanced as Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Parthasarathi’s review disagrees with Pomeranz’s evidence for Europe’s eventual divergence (ecological pressure). Parthasarathi offers his explanation of Europe’s technical advancement: the competition British cotton manufacturers felt towards the Indian cotton industry.[[1]](#footnote-0) Parthasarathi points out that manufacturers in China and India were self-sufficient and didn’t come under these economic pressures. He also points out that the British armies and navies needed more iron than India and China due to their “very different attitudes to politics and warfare”[[2]](#footnote-1) and needed to produce more. These attitudes were supported by British mercantilist and labor policy, which other Asian nations lacked at the time.

Parthasarathi agrees with the warrant in Pomeranz’s work; he says Pomeranz “has moved the debate on Eurasian economic development to entirely novel terrain”[[3]](#footnote-2) and has made it more “difficult to sustain tired and worn-out arguments about European superiority.”[[4]](#footnote-3) Parthasarathi’s review goes further to point out other conditions that led to Europe’s technical advancement. The underlying warrant is that technical advancement could have been achieved anywhere, and that Europe could have been China and China could have been Europe.

Prasannan Parthasarathi received a PhD in economics from Harvard in 1992 and is Professor of South Asian History at Boston College. He writes with and for other historians in the early 21st century, dealing with South Asia and the shape of global history. There is a Tragic form to Parathsarathi’s note that there is more work to do on the subject of the great divergence.

Parthasarathi’s argument is for a varied take on economic development in Eurasian history. The metric of economic development still validates Euro-American superiority, because the historical conclusion of the argument is in the visible present. I would argue that the argument has to be instrumentalized in other fields to have more impact in the 21st century.

1. Prasannan Parthasarathi, “The Great Divergence,” ed. Kenneth Pomeranz, *Past & Present*, no. 176 (2002): 275–93, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3600733>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Parthasarathi, “The Great Divergence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)