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Dear Colleague:

Core vs. Periphery. I've to admit that I never did follow that literature with diligence in its heyday, and it may be too late to do so now, such is the short life of great ideas. I've always wondered, though, how Periphery could ever join the Core. Once a gradient of Power is firmly established, for a reversal--or even a leveling--to occur would seem as miraculous as for water to run uphill. Nevertheless, historically, areas of primary production (periphery) have been able to break out of the trap of marginality and industrialize. Examples are, in the West, Scotland, Denmark, and Australia; and in the East, much more recently, the Four Little Dragons. Did the Big Dragons fall asleep or what?

Core = the West, which rose on the backs of the Periphery = the Third World. Patrick O'Brien, however, does not think that the statistics support this popular formulation. "Some three centuries after the voyages of discovery, Europe's trade with the periphery still formed a very small part of total economic activity. Even for maritime powers, like Britain, closely engaged with Asia, Africa, and Latin America, profits from that commerce probably financed less than 15 percent of gross investment between 1750-1850... For the economic growth of the core, the periphery was peripheral (Economic History Review, 2nd Series, vol. 35, 1982).

Keith Thomas notes that as late as 1800, for all of Europe's supposed domination of world economy, other continents still outweighed it in population and wealth. Per capita income in the whole Third World averaged about \$200; in China it was \$228; in Western Europe it was \$213. Vast discrepancies began to emerge only with the Industrial Revolution. (In 1976, the figures were: Western Europe \$2,325; the Third World, \$355; and China, \$369). "The three centuries between 1500 and 1800 were merely the long period of preparation for modern inequality" (NYRB, Nov. 22, 1984).

What kind of a world should we aim at in the 21st century? Not--I suggest-- a return to the Middle Paleolithic Age, as some extreme environmentalists desire. A mere return to the year 1800 would give us a high measure of worldwide economic parity at the regional scale and tropical forests galore.

Best wishes,

*Z. Fu*