**Introduction**

This distinctly geopolitical character of the origins of capitalism is brilliantly anticipated in German Renaissance painter Hans Holbein’s 1532 masterpiece *The Ambassadors* (Figure 0.1), which illustrates a meeting between French envoys Jean de Dinteville and George de Selve in London. The painting astounds because these two aristocratic subjects are placed at the periphery, and the only explicitly religious symbol, a cross, is veiled by a curtain. While these two pillars of medieval power—the church and aristocracy—are symbolically pushed to the side, an anamorphic skull and a table littered with objects—with commodities—occupy the focal point of the painting. Was this a prophetic, if unwitting, forecast of feudalism’s imminent decline? Did it anticipate a capitalist future where social relations would come to be ‘mediated by things’?

Notwithstanding such speculation, these objects constitute a vivid record of the geopolitical milieu that defined European international relations in the early 16th century. The morbidity portrayed by the skull reminds us that death was at the forefront of European consciousness in this period—indeed, Holbein’s own life would be taken by plague in the autumn of 1543 in England just ten years after the painting was completed. In the immediate time of the painting, peasant revolts were sweeping through Christendom, leaving the ashes of serfdom in their wake. In preceding centuries, Europe had been ravaged by disease, precipitating a demographic crisis that had reduced Europe’s population by between 30 and 60 per cent by the 15th century.

On the bottom right-hand side of the table in the painting, a book of Lutheran hymns sits by a broken lute, signifying the discord in Christendom between Protestants and the Catholic Church. To the left of these items rests Martin Benhaim’s terrestrial globe, made under the commission of Nuremberg merchants seeking to break the Portuguese hold on the spice trade. The globe is tilted so that after European towns, ‘Affrica’ and ‘Brasilici R’. (Brazil) are the most legible markers. We can also see the *Linea Divisionis Castellanorum et Portugallenum* (‘Line of division between Spain and Portugal’) demarcating the division of the New World between Habsburg Spain (west of the line) and Portugal (east of the line), here signifying the importance of these discoveries and the subsequent competition between European states over commercially profitable territories.

In front of the globe is Peter Apian’s *A New and Well Grounded Instruction in All Merchant’s Arithmetic*, an early textbook of commercial scholarship that covered profit–loss calculation, trading customs, navigation and route mapping. Placed alongside Benhaim’s globe, it demonstrates the inseparability of commercial interests from maritime exploration, as well as the increasingly global—and competitive—character of trade. Above these items, on the top of the table,
numerous scientific instruments highlight the rapid development of techniques in seafaring. Continuing the theme of Christendom’s decline, these also indicate a mounting shift away from the divinity of religion as the predominant episteme and towards the rationality of scientific inquiry and humanism. Finally, linking the resting arms of the two ambassadors, and tying the objects together, is a Turkic rug, indicating the rivalry between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. The presence of this ‘Eastern’ commodity indicates that the numerous changes taking place in Europe in this period were often undergirded by processes emanating from non-European sources, by social formations and actors that were unambiguously more powerful than anything seen in Europe at the time.

Let us run through these themes once more: a demographic crisis brought about by the Black Death; the Ottoman–Habsburg rivalry; the discovery of the New World and its division along linearly demarcated spaces of sovereignty; the festering atmosphere of revolt and rebellion; the economic significance of colonisation. Each in their own way either captures or anticipates the central dynamics and historical processes behind the collapse of feudalism and the emergence of capitalist modernity. Moreover, running throughout the themes of the painting is a resolute awareness of the geopolitics behind these processes. The emphasis on the New World and the Ottoman Empire reminds us that the making of capitalism in Europe was not simply an intra-European phenomenon, but a decidedly international (or intersocietal) one: one in which non-European agency relentlessly impinged upon and (re)directed the trajectory and nature of European development. Tracing this international dimension in the origins of capitalism and the so-called ‘rise of the West’ is what concerns us in this book.
Figure 0.1 Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533
The Problem of Eurocentrism

So what exactly is Eurocentrism? At its core, it represents a distinctive mode of inquiry constituted by three interrelated assumptions about the form and nature of modern development. First, it conceives of the origins and sources of capitalist modernity as a product of developments primarily internal to Europe. Based on the assumption that any given trajectory of development is the product of a society’s own immanent dynamics, Eurocentrism locates the emergence of modernity exclusively within the hermetically sealed and socioculturally coherent geographical confines of Europe. Thus we find in cultural history that the flowering of the Renaissance was a solely intra-European phenomenon. Analyses of absolutism and the origins of the modern state form are similarly conducted entirely on the terrain of Europe, with non-European cases appearing (if at all) comparatively. Dominant accounts of the rise of capitalism as either an economic form or a social system similarly place its origins squarely in Western Europe, while non-Europe is relegated to an exploited and passive periphery.

This internalist story of an autonomous and endogenous ‘rise of the West’ constitutes the founding myth of Eurocentrism. By positing a strong ‘inside-out’ model of social causality (or methodological internalism) – whereby European development is conceptualised as endogenous and self-propelling – Europe is conceived as the permanent ‘core’ and ‘prime mover’ of history. In its worst forms, this can lend itself to an interpretation of European society and culture as somehow superior to the rest of the world. This second normative assumption of Eurocentrism can be termed historical priority, which articulates the historical distinction between tradition and modernity through a spatial separation of ‘West’ and ‘East’. Through this method, non-European societies have been opposed to Europe as an ideological Other against which the specificity and distinctiveness of Western modernity has been and continues to be defined. Through numerous sociological trends, the ‘East’ has in turn been (re)constructed as an intransigent and threatening foe representing a fundamental and irreconcilable challenge to the values of the ‘West’.

In establishing this ‘Iron Curtain’ of mutual obstinacy, both Eurocentric internalism and notions of historical priority have been reinforced, not only ideologically but also materially. Expressed through either the comparative approach or ‘methodological nationalism’, Eurocentrism tends to overlook the multiple and interactive character of social development. In doing so, it sets up an epistemological distinction between Europe and ‘the Rest’ as theoretically incommensurable objects of study, turning the study of the origins of capitalism into an exclusionary process in which the agency of non-European societies is erased or overlooked.

From these two assumptions emerges a third predictive proposition: that the European experience of modernity is a universal stage of development through which all societies must pass. This stadial assumption posits a linear developmentalism in which endogenous processes of social change – from tradition to modernity, feudalism to capitalism and so on – are conceived as universal stages which encompass all societies of the world, at different times and different places. These three propositions (methodological internalism, historical priority and linear developmentalism) make up the core of Eurocentric accounts.