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978-0-521-29099-9 - The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History

Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas

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PREFACE

In some respects this is intended to be a revolutionary book, but in other respects it is very traditional indeed. It is revolutionary in that we have developed a comprehensive analytical framework to examine and explain the rise of the Western world; a framework consistent with and complementary to standard neo-classical economic theory. Since the book is written to be understandable (and hopefully interesting) for those without prior economic training, we have avoided the jargon of the profession and attempted to be as clear and as straightforward as possible.

This book is traditional in that we have built upon the pioneering studies of a host of predecessors. Scholars in the field will readily recognize our debt to Marc Bloch, Carlo Cipolla, Maurice Dobb, John U. Nef, M. M. Postan, Joseph Schumpeter, as well as the classic legal and constitutional studies of Pollock and Maitland and Stubbs.

We should emphasize that this is an interpretive study – an extended explanation sketch – rather than an economic history in the traditional sense. It provides neither the detailed and exhaustive study of standard economic history nor the precise and empirical tests of the new economic history. Its objective is to suggest new paths for the study of European economic history rather than fit either of these standard formats. It is more than anything an agenda for new research.

Our specific debts are many: to our long suffering colleagues and particularly Steven Cheung who provided assistance in developing the theoretical framework; to Martin Wolf for lending us the manuscript draft of his forthcoming book on French fiscal history; to David Herlihy and M. M. Postan who generously read and provided detailed suggestions and criticisms of earlier drafts of Parts One and Two; to Terry Anderson and Clyde Reed who provided both valuable research assistance as well as helpful critical comments; and finally to numerous audiences at various universities who heard earlier drafts of the theoretical issues. Ultimately, however, we are responsible for the book's shortcomings, although whatever value it has should be far more widely shared.

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research which made this book possible. We gratefully acknowledge our indebtedness for the continuing interest and support of the Foundation.

A special thanks is due to Marion Impola who has managed to translate our complicated and conflicting prose into readable and literate form, also to Joanne Olson for similar efforts.

At the risk of offending some scholars we have felt that the continuity and readability of the book could be improved by having a general list of sources for each chapter at the end of the book and confining the footnotes to citations that refer to direct quotations or involve explanatory asides.