

## ECONOMIC PATTERNS

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Though many world historians' long privileged developments in politics and culture, several basic economic themes have become fundamental to the field as a whole. From the classical period onward, with the emergence of the Silk Roads, trade has been the activity that most systematically brings different regions into contact – far more important in this regard, overall, than war, though of course the two phenomena have been linked. Basic world history periods, from the classical era but even more the postclassical centuries, are defined in large part by changes in trade relationships – right up to contemporary globalization. Many of these periods also saw parallel changes in commercial technologies – the stuff of transportation, navigation and ultimately communication.

The two most fundamental transformations in the human experience, around first the advent of agriculture and then the process of industrialization, also focus on economic changes, including trade but even more involving changes in work and production patterns and in available technologies.

Economic themes also bring complications. Regional developments vary, and at least since the postclassical period significant regional economic inequalities require attention and analysis. Divergent economic patterns, such as nomadic economies, need some special attention. Economic change in humanity's Agricultural Age often is quite slow, aside from the occasional big shifts in trade patterns. Peasant societies might gradually adopt new methods, and diffusion of new agricultural technologies from centers like China is an important part of agricultural history. And different labor systems applied to agriculture – relatively free farmers, versus serfs or slaves – could have important results in production and surplus. Manufacturing, though a lesser activity during the Agricultural Age, also deserves attention, along with larger consideration of the relationships between urban and rural economies. But again, developments and differentiations were not always dramatic, particularly in comparison with the more rapid pace of economic change after the arrival of industrialization.

Some basically economic themes have been more fully explored than others. The history of consumerism – a link between social developments and economic basics – is a relatively new topic, long either ignored or treated as a frivolous inconsequential. Work on consumerism in premodern settings, and outside the West, is not nearly as advanced as our understanding of Western consumerism from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward. Poverty is another vital theme where historical work has been somewhat inconsistent – yet arguably, given the persistence of poverty in the world today, a historical perspective is vital.

Economic themes obviously touch on other areas. The role of the state in the economy links two thematic areas, in many periods and regions. Relationships with culture are intriguing. Value systems in many agricultural societies viewed both excessive merchant zeal, and excessive consumerism, with some suspicion, though this did not prevent change. Missionary religions and trade could complement each other, but some aspects of coexistence might prove uneasy. Different regions generated different reconciliations between cultures and economic motivations, and this process continues in modern times.

Environmental history, understandably, has been gaining considerable attention within a world history framework. Human impact on the environment has of course massively accelerated, but it is not a new phenomenon, and advancing knowledge helps provide perspective – and in some cases, warning – concerning contemporary problems.

Some of the most important findings in world history, over the past several decades, have applied to key economic themes. The historic dynamism of Asian economies has challenged conventional views about some special Western advantage. Appreciating different patterns of economic success, for example during the early modern period, requires an ability to explore nonwestern assumptions. The increasingly global range of industrialization necessitates an approach to industrial history that goes beyond the conventional focus on British or Western experience around 1800. Examination of key economic themes is one way to facilitate adjustments to world history findings.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. What were some of the most important changes in agricultural economies, from the early civilization period onward?
2. What are some of the main issues in the history of consumerism? What were some of the characteristic constraints on consumerism in agricultural societies? In contemporary world history, is American-style consumerism a global model or a bit of an aberration?
3. Environmental history most commonly focuses on damage. Is there also a history of human efforts to limit environmental change?
4. Why is industrial history so commonly explored in largely Western terms? What is the best approach to industrialization as a global phenomenon?