

“One Big Unanswered Question”

For the *Comparative Politics Section Newsletter*, Winter 2008

Excluding a few petro-states, twenty-seven of the richest thirty countries in the world today are Anglo-European. Why? In other words, what is it about ‘The West’ that has made it so rich and successful? While this question has obviously been a subject of great interest to social scientists in the past, political science has backed off this fundamental issue in recent years precisely because it is “too big.” Europe, a rather small peninsula on the western edge of the great Asian land mass has had its share of ethnic conflict, brutal dictators, epidemics and genocides – all reasons used to help explain why development is so difficult elsewhere. Yet Europeans (or ‘The West’) somehow developed cultures and institutions that helped them conquer the rest of the world. Clearly, the early development of democratic capitalism gave European societies economic and technological advantages. But this fact simply begs the question: What was it about European society or culture that led these peoples to develop democratic capitalism? Many today reject Weber’s classic explanation as overly simplistic, too ‘Euro-centric,’ and/or just wrong. But do we have any good alternative hypotheses? I submit that having a better understanding of how and why Europe (or ‘western society’) developed might shed light on why others developed differently. This does not suggest that there is only one route to development. Quite the contrary. But if we do not or cannot deal the question of what made The West so rich, how can we hope to explain development at all?

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October 15, 2007