

Why Were Nationalism and Democracy European? Ethnicity and Power in Asia and Europe c. 1400 to 1850

Victor B. Lieberman

Raoul Wallenberg Distinguished University Professor of History
and Professor of History, College of Literature, Science and the Arts,
University of Michigan

Nationalism, and to some extent democracy, are now universal norms. But where did they originate? The idiosyncrasies of post-1750 West European political culture notwithstanding, I argue that they should be seen as peculiar mutations of a much older phenomenon that I term "political ethnicity." This I define as a frequently, although not invariably, secular cultural complex invoked to identify rulers and subjects as fellow members of a state-centered community which saw itself as distinct from, and generally superior to, other communities. In most of Asia imperial size, ethnic heterogeneity, and Inner Asian domination joined to preclude political ethnicity on the European pattern. There was, however, a second, more modest zone around the rimlands of Asia where smaller political units, greater ethnic uniformity, and above all, protection from Inner Asian conquest favored patterns broadly comparable in chronology, dynamics, and discursive expression to those in pre-18th century Europe. The question then becomes: Given overarching similarities, why did political ethnicity evolve into modern nationalism only in Northwest Europe? Using Myanmar and Britain as case studies, I argue that in Britain legal and religious institutions of medieval origin combined with the democratizing thrust of rapid post-1650 commercial/maritime expansion to foster political forms that were as original as they would become historically influential.

Victor Lieberman, an historian of early modern Southeast Asia and Eurasia, is the Raoul Wallenberg Distinguished University Professor of History at the University of Michigan. His recent two-volume *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, winner of the World History Association book prize, was described in the *American Historical Review* as "the most important work of history produced so far this century." Two international conferences have focused on his scholarship, and each of the main journals of Asian history has devoted a special edition to his work. His Yale talk will be drawn from his next book *Why Was Nationalism European? Political Ethnicity in Southeast Asia and Europe c. 1400-1850*.

Wednesday, April 20, 2016

12:00 Noon

Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue