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The Theft of History

Jack Goody is one of the pre-eminent social scientists in the world. Over the past half century his pioneering writings at the intersections of anthropology, history, and social and cultural studies have made him one of the most widely read, most widely cited, and most widely translated scholars working today.

In *The Theft of History* Goody builds on his own previous work (notably *The East in the West*) to extend further his highly influential critique of what he sees as the pervasive Eurocentric, or Occidental-ist, biases of so much western historical writing, and the consequent ‘theft’ by the west of the achievements of other cultures in the invention of (notably) democracy, capitalism, individualism, and love. This argument will generate passionate debate, as his previous works have done, and many will dissent from Goody’s perceptive conclusions. Few, however, will be able to ignore the force of his thought, or the breadth of knowledge brought to the discussion.

The Theft of History discusses a number of theorists in detail, including Marx, Weber, and Norbert Elias, and engages with critical admiration western historians like Fernand Braudel, Moses Finley, and Perry Anderson. Many questions of method are raised in these discussions, and Goody proposes a new comparative methodology for cross-cultural analysis, one that gives a much more sophisticated basis for assessing divergent historical outcomes, and replaces outmoded simple differences between, for example, the ‘backward East’ and the ‘inventive West’.

Historians, anthropologists, social theorists, and cultural critics will all find something of real value in *The Theft of History*. It will be a catalyst for discussion of some of the most important conceptual issues confronting western historians today, at a time when notions of ‘global history’ are filtering into the historical mainstream for the first time.

JACK GOODY is Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology in the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of St John’s College. Recently knighted by Her Majesty The Queen for services to anthropology, Professor Goody has researched and taught all over the world, is a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 1980 was made a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2004 he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences and he was elected Commandeur des Arts et Lettres in 2006.

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To Juliet

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Too often the generalizations of social science – and this is as true in Asia as it is in the West – rest on the belief that the West occupies the normative starting position for constructing general knowledge. Almost all our categories – politics and economy, state and society, feudalism and capitalism – have been conceptualized primarily on the basis of Western historical experience. (Blue and Brook 1999)

The Euro-American domination of world scholarship has to be accepted, for the moment, as an unfortunate but ineluctable counterpart of the parallel development of the material power and intellectual resources of the western world. But its dangers need to be recognized and constant attempts made to transcend them. Anthropology is a suitable vehicle for such an effect . . . (Southall 1998)

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I have presented versions of chapters of this book at conferences: on Norbert Elias in Mainz, in Montreal and in Berlin on Braudel (and Weber), on values at a UNESCO conference in Alexandria, more generally on the topic of world history at the Comparative History Seminar in London, on love to one organized by Luisa Passerini, to the Indian Section of the Johns Hopkins University in Washington, at the American University in Beirut, the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton, and extensively at the Cultural Studies Programme of Bilgi University in Istanbul.

In this enterprise, certainly one where angels might well fear to tread, a product of *la pensée sauvage* rather than *la pensée domestiquée*, but which touches upon many of my earlier interests, I have been much stimulated by the support and help of friends, especially Juliet Mitchell (not only for intellectual reasons but also for morale), Peter Burke, Chris Hann, Richard Fisher, Joe McDermott, Dick Whittaker, and many others including my son Lokamitra. I'm also most grateful for the assistance provided by Susan Mansfield (organizing), Melanie Hale (computing), Mark Offord (computing, editing), Manuela Wedgwood (editing), and Peter Hutton (library).