

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-43253-5 - Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History

Marshall G. S. Hodgson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Europe in a global context

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-43253-5 - Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History

Marshall G. S. Hodgson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

The interrelations of societies in history

It has been long pointed out that the destinies of the various sections of mankind began to be interrelated long before the twentieth century, with its global wars and cold wars; or even the nineteenth century, the century of European world hegemony. Here we will study certain of the historical ways in which these destinies were intertwined; in this way we may distinguish more valid modes of tracing large-scale history and of comparing the societies involved in it, from a number of popular but unsound modes of trying to do so. I shall speak mostly of the ages before modern times, noting only briefly at the end of the paper certain crucial ways in which modern interrelations among human societies have been different from earlier ones.

The geographical world-image of the West

It would be a significant story in itself to trace how modern Westerners have managed to preserve some of the most characteristic features of their ethnocentric medieval image of the world. Recast in modern scientific and scholarly language, the image is still with us; indeed, all sorts of scholarly arguments are used to bolster it against occasional doubts. The point of any ethnocentric world image is to divide the world into moieties, ourselves and the others, ourselves forming the more important of the two. To be fully satisfying, such an image must be at once historical and geographical. As in the Chinese image of the "Middle Kingdom" and the Islamic image of the central climes, so also in the Western image,

This paper was delivered originally as a lecture at the downtown College of the University of Chicago in a series on "The Idea of Mankind," sponsored by the Committee for the Study of Mankind. It contains a sketch of ideas which the writer hopes to substantiate more fully; meanwhile, it constitutes an advance over the writer's "Hemispheric Interregional History as an Approach to World History," in *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale*, Vol. I (1954), pp. 715–723.

most of this sleight of hand is performed through appropriate historical maneuvers. Western Europe may be admitted to be small geographically, but all history is made to focus there.

But we must begin with the map. A concern with maps may seem trivial; but it offers a paradigm of more fundamental cases. For even in maps we have found ways of expressing our feelings. We divide the world into what we call “continents.” In the eastern hemisphere, where more than four-fifths of mankind still live, there are still the same divisions as were used by medieval Westerners – Europe, Asia, and Africa. As we know, Europe west of the Russias has about the same population as historical India, now India and Pakistan; about the same geographical, linguistic, and cultural diversity; and about the same area. Why is Europe one of the continents but not India? Not because of any geographical features, nor even because of any marked cultural breach at the limits we have chosen. The two sides of the Aegean Sea have almost always had practically the same culture, and usually the same language or languages and even the same government. Much the same is true of the Black Sea and the Ural Mountains.

Europe is still ranked as one of the “continents” because our cultural ancestors lived there. By making it a “continent,” we give it a rank disproportionate to its natural size, as a subordinate part of no larger unit, but in itself one of the major component parts of the world. Incidentally, we thus also justify ourselves in evaluating it on a far more detailed scale than other areas. I believe it was the *New Yorker* magazine that published the “New Yorker’s map of the United States,” in which New York City, New England, Florida, and the West appeared as roughly comparable subdivisions. With our division of the world by continents, we allow ourselves a similar projection of our own interests. Italy is a country in the south of the “continent” Europe; India is a country (naturally “vast” and “mysterious”) in the south of the “continent” Asia.

The *New Yorker* map of the United States went on to reflect the New Yorker’s notions in the very sizes the several areas appeared to have on the map. Our Mercator world maps have done much the same thing for our Western world image. Some say the Mercator world map is so popular because it shows the correct angles essential for navigation (even though its shapes are almost as badly distorted as its areas). But if you use a map not for navigating but for placing and comparing at a glance different parts of the world, shapes and areas are more important than angles. Moreover, areas are more important than shapes, because they have cultural implications. What is objectionable about the Mercator

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-43253-5 - Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History

Marshall G. S. Hodgson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

world map in fact is not that it distorts the shape of North America, nor even that it shows Greenland so large – our conception of Greenland makes little difference. Rather, it is that it shows India so small, and Indonesia, and all Africa. (I call such a world map the “Jim Crow projection” because it shows Europe as larger than Africa.)

The interrelations of societies in history

The point is not, of course, simply that we make Europe big or put it in the upper center. Such matters in themselves might be as irrelevant as the fact that we put the prime meridian at Greenwich. What matters is the peculiar way our perceptions get distorted by the map projection (as they are by no prime meridian). The fortieth parallel north has a curious significance for our world image. Historically, almost all the great centers of civilization have lain south of the fortieth parallel; all, that is, save Europe. Most of Europe lies north of that parallel. But it is precisely at about the fortieth parallel that the Mercator projection begins to exaggerate areas unconscionably. In consequence, that projection and others like it show Europe on a far larger scale than the Middle East, or India, or China. India does appear to the eye on that projection, as a “country in Asia” on the order of, say, Sweden in Europe. And it is possible to show on such a world map numerous details in Europe, towns and rivers that are famous among us, while India or Indonesia, say, are quickly filled up with only the most essential features – which, indeed, are all we have usually heard of.

No wonder, then, that despite all our awareness that Mercator distorts, and that many better projections are available, Mercator remains the most common form of world map outside geographers’ classrooms. It confirms our predispositions. It flatters our egos. If we decide we must abandon Mercator because of its notoriety, we adopt a projection which may reduce the size of Greenland, but leaves India as diminutive as ever, compared to Europe; for instance, Van der Grinten, used by the National Geographic Society. Yet what we really want is to face the world as it actually is, not as our Western self-esteem would like to picture it. We may study our own Europe in more detail than other areas – on appropriate separate pages of the atlas. But when we look at the world as a whole – when we look at mankind as a whole – we want our own parts of it to fall into place so that we can see ourselves in true proportion. We need an equal-area world map for any purposes for which we need a world map at all.

The historical world-image of the West

So much for our geographical paradigm. An idea of world history is much less tangible than a map of the world. But much the same points can be made about the Western image of world history. Here too the very terms we allow ourselves to use foster distortion. We aim to overcome any parochial outlook, but so long as we do not radically overhaul our historical categories and our notions of the structure of the historical world, we find ourselves dragged back by older preconceptions the moment the center of our attention shifts to other concerns.

We know how the traditional story runs; history began in the “East” – in Mesopotamia and Egypt (but not in Paradise, still further east, as the medieval Westerners had said); the torch was then passed successively to Greece and Rome and finally to the Christians of northwestern Europe, where medieval and modern life developed. During the Middle Ages, Islam temporarily was permitted to hold the torch of science, which properly belonged to the West, until the West was ready to take it over and carry it forward. India, China, and Japan also had ancient civilizations but were isolated from the mainstream of history and “contributed” still less to it (that is to Western Europe). In modern times Western Europe expanded over the rest of the world, so that Islam and India and China have ceased to be isolated, and have entered the orbit of the ongoing Western Civilization, now becoming a world civilization.

In this story, there are two key notions. There is a “mainstream” of history, which consists of our own direct antecedents. This includes all West-European history since it became civilized, of course; and, before that time, selected periods from areas to the southeast: Greek history ‘till the time of the Roman empire (but not since – the Byzantines do not count as mainstream); and the Near East till the rise of the Greeks, but not since. Note that this conception of “mainstream” is not identifiable with the history of lands of cultural creativity, or times of intensity of historical change. The “mainstream” of history, in the traditional image, runs through northwestern Europe in the Dark Ages of the Merovingians – although everyone knows that the Byzantines and the Muslims (and the Indians and the Chinese) were far more civilized then. The “mainstream” of history is simply our own closest historical antecedents.

In fact, all the lands of the “mainstream” are sometimes identified with the “West.” Classical Greece is called “Western,” though Byzantine Greece is often included in the “East.” This brings us to the second key notion which allows us to construct a world history in which our own cultural ancestors hold most of the attention. All the other civilizations

of the Eastern Hemisphere are lumped together under the heading "East," "Orient." This concept in history is the equivalent of the concept "Asia" in geography. It enables us to set up our West as conceptually equivalent to all the other civilized regions taken together – "Asia." Apart from Eurasia and the northern part of Africa (the latter is, of course, included in the "East," though Morocco is west of Spain), the more distant parts of the world were relatively sparsely inhabited and for the most part not highly civilized; their history does not force itself on our attention. Hence such a conception of Eurasia allows us to erect a classic ethnocentric dichotomy in the main part of the world – ourselves and the others, Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Barbarians, "West" and "East." Since by definition the "mainstream" of history runs through the "West," by the same definition the "East" is isolated and static; hence the West, already appearing as one half of mankind, is made the more important half also.

One of the most curious features of this modern Western ethnocentrism has been its superimposition on all the other ethnocentrism of the world, generally compounding the confusion. Muslims or Hindus have tended to accept modern Western conceptions as indiscriminately scientific; they have commonly accepted their geographical and historical terms from the West, and the implications that follow from them. Sometimes the Western conceptions prove convenient, as when an Egyptian, identifying himself as "Oriental," claims spiritual superiority to the West on the ground that Jesus, Buddha, and Confucius were also all "Orientals"; or, accepting the Western conception of "Africa" as a continent, finds an excellent excuse, as an "African," to meddle in sub-Saharan politics without looking imperialistic. Sometimes the Western conceptions proved less convenient. I found displayed on the wall of an ardent Muslim in a government office in Cairo a map of the Muslim world, showing how widespread is Islam. But the map was a French one, drawn on the Mercator projection, and consequently drastically minimized the area of Islam as compared with Europe. The official was so used to the Mercator projection that he had not noticed this case of what might be called official imperialism.

Now just as the Mercator projection has been criticized so much that everyone is aware that it distorts, so the Western historical world image has been criticized; most of us are uneasily aware that "the East" is more important than we had thought. But just as most people think of Greenland as the best example of Mercator's distortion, failing to see just where the distortion is most misleading, and why certain related projections are just as bad, so it is rare for one to see the full implications of the

distortions in the Western picture of world history, and to judge soundly of the various attempts to improve on them. Jim-Crow world maps continue to be the usual map in newspapers, magazines, and general books; and few protest. Similarly, one or another modification of the Western world-historical image still underlie most discussions of mankind. This is true, unfortunately, even on the scholarly level, for some of the presentations of world history that try hardest to escape the traditional pattern still show its distortive influence.

The Continuity among the regions of the Eurasian historical complex in pre-modern times

I must limit myself here to discussing the major civilized regions of the Eastern Hemisphere. The overwhelming majority of mankind – until the last two centuries – lived within the region I am including. It was in a zone of Afro-Eurasian lands extending from Atlantic to Pacific, but chiefly north of the equator, that most of those societies were to be found, before modern times, which had the developed agricultural and urban life which carried with them density of population. It is becoming conventional to articulate this Afro-Eurasian zone of civilization into four main nuclear regions, which we may call Europe, the Middle East, India, and the Far East of China and Japan. Such a division makes a good deal of sense from about 1000 B.C. on, at least down to about 1800 of our era. Each of these regions presents a considerable continuity over some three thousand years of cultural development. More precisely, in each of these regions there was a core-area with reasonably persistent traditions, from which the cultural influences have radiated more or less continuously into a wide surrounding region.

We must place these areas with greater precision, as we will have much to say of them. The core-area of what may be called Europe was the northern shores of the Mediterranean, from Anatolia to Italy especially. It had a Greek (and, later, Greco-Latin) culture which pervaded increasingly the lands to the north; but the Mediterranean lands remained economically and culturally over the more northern ones, on the whole, from the time of the Minoans to the end of the Middle Ages. The core of the Middle East was the Fertile Crescent and the Iranian Plateau, to which lands north and south from Central Eurasia to Yemen and East Africa looked for cultural leadership, as did increasingly even Egypt, despite its distinct roots in its own past, and North Africa, and eventually all of Sudan. The great cultural languages of the Middle East were of the Semitic and Iranian families; though the particular Semitic and Ira-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-43253-5 - Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History

Marshall G. S. Hodgson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

nian languages changed, much cultural lore was carried over from one period to the next. In the vast domain of Indic tradition east and south from the Hindu-Kush range, the Indus and Ganges valleys formed a somewhat similar core; there the Sanskrit and Pali languages developed, which became classical as far away as Cambodia and Java. Finally, the Hoang-Ho and Yangtze valleys in China formed a fourth creative core-area, from which cultural influences spread to an ever-increasing distance in all directions, within a constantly expanding China and beyond it to such lands as Japan and Vietnam.

Western scholars, at least since the nineteenth century, have tried to find ways of seeing this Afro-Eurasian zone of civilization as composed of distinct historical worlds, which can be fully understood in themselves, apart from all others. Their motives for this have been complex, but one convenient result of such a division would be to leave Europe, or even Western Europe, an independent division of the whole world, with a history that need not be integrated with that of the rest of mankind save on the terms posed by European history itself. But such attempts, if pressed consistently, leave us with a false notion of both world history and even European history. For even among the four great nuclear regions, the cleavages were not decisive enough to sustain such an interpretation. A brief survey of some of the more obvious cleavages will enable us to assess their significance.

If one tried to group these great cultural regions so as to divide the whole of the Afro-Eurasian historical complex into two portions (which is not often seriously attempted), the least useful division would be one in which Europe formed one portion, the "West," and the other three formed a second portion, the "East"; for the cleavage between Europe and its nearest neighbors was unusually slight. The lands north of the Mediterranean were always very closely linked with those of the Fertile Crescent and Iran. I have listed the Anatolian peninsula (the western half of the present Turkish Republic) as part of Europe, since it was one of the chief formative centers of Greek culture, and has always shared the fortunes of the Balkan peninsula; but it is commonly listed as part of the Middle East, and not entirely without reason. The Mediterranean Basin formed a historical whole not only under the Roman empire but before and since; even at the height of the Middle Ages a land like Sicily brought together creatively Greek, Arab, and Latin. Greek thought became an integral element in the Middle Eastern tradition, while Middle Eastern religion had a central place in European life.

A somewhat sharper division existed before Europe and the Middle East on the one hand and the Indic lands on the other. Greeks and Arabs,

Latins and Persians, have had much the same reaction to India, in medieval times, finding it alien to a degree that they have not found each other alien. The Hindu-Kush and the Baluchistan desert formed a more serious barrier than the Taurus. Yet even so the constant thriving trade between the Middle East and India was reflected in important cultural exchanges, which reinforced the fact of a partly common background. For, long before the coming of the Indo-Europeans assured a common origin to the languages and myths of India, Iran, and Greece, the Indus Valley civilization had been closely linked with that of Mesopotamia.

The greatest breach in continuity was between China on the one hand and the Indian, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean lands on the other. The Himalayas were more effective even than the Hindu-Kush. Until modern times, direct contact was usually limited to mercantile expeditions. Alexander invaded both Greece and the Punjab; the Turk, Timur, campaigned in Russia and on the Gangetic plain; but though Timur dreamed of China, he could scarcely have reached it. Yet the Mongol armies at one point mastered much of China and at the same time won victories in Germany, in Iran, and on the Indus. As we know, Buddhism, originating in India, colored deeply the life of China and Japan; while numerous important inventions, among them gunpowder, the compass, paper, and printing, apparently came at various times from China to the Middle East and so to India and Europe.

As Eurasian history is studied, it becomes clear that these interrelations were not purely external, accidental cultural borrowings and influences among independent societies. They reflect sequences of events and cultural patterns shading into each other on all cultural levels. The four nuclear regions are imperfect historical abstractions. All regions formed together a single great historical complex of cultural developments.

'Till modern times, the four core-areas were the most creative centers; but there were always lesser creative centers beyond them, such as Tibet; and the core-areas themselves cannot always be taken as units. Very early the cultural traditions of the western and eastern Mediterranean regions began to be distinguished, 'till finally Greek and Latin, Orthodox and Catholic, developed relatively independently of each other. Iran and Central Eurasia often seemed to have had their own history apart from the Fertile Crescent and Egypt. Northern and southern India presented a major contrast to each other. Finally, there is no point where the sort of differences that existed between the great regions could be decisively distinguished from the sort of differences that existed between particular nations. Yet all our modern serious attempts at understanding world history are based on all the assumptions of a series of