

Introduction

The ‘theft of history’ of the title refers to the take-over of history by the west. That is, the past is conceptualized and presented according to what happened on the provincial scale of Europe, often western Europe, and then imposed upon the rest of the world. That continent makes many claims to having invented a range of value-laden institutions such as ‘democracy’, mercantile ‘capitalism’, freedom, individualism. However, these institutions are found over a much more widespread range of human societies. I argue that the same is true of certain emotions such as love (or romantic love) which have often been seen as having appeared in Europe alone in the twelfth century and as being intrinsic to the modernization of the west (the urban family, for example).

That is clear if we look at the account by the distinguished historian Trevor-Roper in his book, *The rise of Christian Europe*. He recognizes Europe’s outstanding achievement since the Renaissance (though some comparative historians would put its advantage as dating only from the nineteenth century). But those achievements he regards as being produced uniquely by that continent. The advantage may be temporary but he argues:

The new rulers of the world, whoever they may be, will inherit a position that has been built up by Europe, and by Europe alone. It is European techniques, European examples, European ideas which have shaken the non-European world out of its past – out of barbarism in Africa, out of a far older, slower, more majestic civilisation in Asia; and the history of the world, for the last five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history. I do not think that we need to make any apology if our study of history is European-centric.¹

Yet he argues that the job of the historian is ‘To test it [his philosophy], a historian must start to travel abroad, even in hostile country.’ Trevor-Roper I suggest has not travelled far outside Europe either conceptually or empirically. Moreover, while accepting that concrete advantages began

¹ Trevor-Roper 1965: 11.

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with the Renaissance, he adopts an essentialist approach that attributes its achievements to the fact that Christendom had ‘in itself the springs of a new and enormous vitality’.² Some historians might regard Trevor-Roper as an extreme case, but as I intend to show there are many other more sensitive versions of similar tendencies which encumber the history of both continents, and of the world.

After several years’ residence among African ‘tribes’ as well as in a simple kingdom in Ghana, I came to question a number of the claims Europeans make to have ‘invented’ forms of government (such as democracy), forms of kinship (such as the nuclear family), forms of exchange (such as the market), forms of justice, when embryonically at least these were widely present elsewhere. These claims are embodied in history, both as an academic discipline and in folk discourse. Obviously there have been many great European achievements in recent times, and these have to be accounted for. But they often owed much to other urban cultures such as China. Indeed the divergence of the west from the east, both economically and intellectually, has been shown to be relatively recent and may prove rather temporary. Yet at the hands of many European historians the trajectory of the Asian continent, and indeed that of the rest of the world, has been seen as marked by a very different process of development (characterized by ‘Asiatic despotism’ in the extreme view) which ran against my understanding of other cultures and of earlier archaeology (both before writing and after). One aim of this book is to face these apparent contradictions by re-examining the way that the basic shifts in society since the Bronze Age of *c.* 3000 BCE have been conceived by European historians. In this frame of mind I turned to read or re-read, among others, the works of historians whose work I much admire, Braudel, Anderson, Laslett, Finley.

The result is critical of the way that these writers, including Marx and Weber, have treated aspects of world history. I have therefore tried to introduce an element of a broader, comparative perspective into debates such as those about communal and individual features of human life, about market and non-market activities, about democracy and ‘tyranny’. These areas are ones in which western scholars have defined the problem of cultural history in a rather limited frame. However when we are dealing with Antiquity and the early development of the west, it is one thing to neglect earlier (‘small-scale’?) societies in which anthropologists specialize. But the neglect of the major civilizations of Asia, or alternatively their categorization as ‘Asiatic states’, is a much more serious issue which demands a rethink not only of Asian but of European history too.

² Trevor-Roper 1965: 21.

According to the historian Trevor-Roper, Ibn Khaldun saw civilization in the east as being more firmly established than in the west. The east had 'a settled civilisation which has thrown such deep roots that it could continue under successive conquerors'.³ That was hardly the view of most European historians.

My argument, then, is the product of an anthropologist's (or comparative sociologist's) reaction to 'modern' history. One general problem I had was posed by my reading of the work of Gordon Childe and other pre-historians who described the development of Bronze Age civilizations in Asia and Europe as running along roughly parallel lines. How then did many European writers assume quite a different development in the two continents from 'Antiquity' onwards, leading eventually to the western 'invention' of 'capitalism'? The only discussion of this early divergence was framed in terms of the development of irrigation agriculture in parts of the east as contrasted with the rain-fed systems of the west.⁴ It was an argument that neglected the many similarities deriving from the Bronze Age in terms of plough agriculture, animal traction, urban crafts and other specialisms, which included the development of writing and the resulting knowledge systems, as well as the many other uses of literacy that I have discussed in *The logic of writing and the organisation of society* (1986).

I suggest it is a mistake to look at the situation solely in terms of some relatively limited differences in the modes of production when there are so many similarities not only in the economy but in the modes of communication and in the modes of destruction including, eventually, the use of gunpowder. All these similarities, including ones in family structure and culture more generally, were set aside in favour of the 'oriental' hypothesis which stresses the different historical trajectories of east and west.

The many similarities between Europe and Asia in modes of production, communication, and destruction become more apparent when contrasted with Africa, and are often ignored when the notion of the Third World is applied indiscriminately. In particular, some writers tend to overlook the fact that Africa has been largely dependent on hoe agriculture rather than the plough and complex irrigation. It never experienced the urban revolution of the Bronze Age. Nevertheless, the continent was not isolated; the kingdoms of Asante and the Western Sudan produced gold which, with slaves, was transported across the Sahara to the Mediterranean. There it contributed to the exchange of oriental goods by Andalucian and Italian towns, for which Europe badly needed

³ Trevor-Roper 1965: 27. ⁴ Wittfogel 1957.

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bullion.⁵ In return Italy sent Venetian beads, silks, and Indian cottons. An active market loosely connected the hoe economies with the incipient mercantile ‘capitalism’ and rain-fed agriculture of southern Europe on the one hand, and with the urban, manufacturing economies and irrigated agriculture of the east on the other.

Apart from these links between Europe and Asia and the differences between the Eurasian model and the African one, I was struck by certain similarities in the family and kinship systems of the major societies of Europe and Asia. In contrast to the ‘brideprice’ (or better ‘bridewealth’) of Africa whereby the kin of the groom gave wealth or services to the kin of the bride, what one found in Asia and Europe was the allocation of parental property to daughters, either by inheritance at death or by the dowry at marriage. This similarity in Eurasia is part and parcel of a wider parallelism in institutions and attitudes that qualifies the efforts of colleagues in the history of the family and of demography, who were, and still are, trying hard to spell out the distinctiveness of the ‘European’ marriage pattern found in England since the sixteenth century, and to link this difference, often implicitly, to the unique development of ‘capitalism’ in the west. That link seems to me questionable and the insistence on the difference of the Occident and the Other appears ethnocentric.⁶ My argument is that while most historians aim to avoid ethnocentricity (like teleology), they rarely succeed in doing so because of their limited knowledge of the other (including their own beginnings). That limitation often leads them to make unsustainable claims, implicitly or explicitly, about the uniqueness of the west.

The closer I looked at the other facets of the culture of Eurasia, and the more experience I gained of parts of India, China, and Japan, the more I felt that the sociology and history of the great states or ‘civilizations’ of Eurasia needed to be understood as variations one of another. That is just what notions of Asiatic despotism, of Asiatic exceptionalism, of distinct forms of rationality, of ‘culture’ more generally, make impossible to consider. They prevent ‘rational’ enquiry and comparison by means of the recourse to categorical distinctions; Europe had this (Antiquity, feudalism, capitalism), they (everyone else) did not. Differences certainly exist. But what is required is more careful comparison, not a crude contrast of east and west, which always finally turns in favour of the latter.⁷

There are a few analytical points that I want to make at the outset since their neglect seems to me partly responsible for our present discontents. Firstly, there is a natural tendency to organize experience by assuming the experienter’s centrality – be that an individual, a group, or

⁵ Bovill 1933. ⁶ Goody 1976. ⁷ Finley 1981.

a community. One of the forms this attitude can take is what we term ethnocentricity, which was, unsurprisingly, characteristic of the Greeks and Romans too, as well as of any other community. All human societies display a certain measure of ethnocentricity which is partly a condition of the personal and social identity of their members. Ethnocentricity, of which Eurocentricity and Orientalism are two varieties, is not a purely European disease: the Navaho of the American south-west, who define themselves as ‘the people’, are equally prone to it. So too are the Jews, the Arabs, and the Chinese. And that is why, while I appreciate there are variations of its intensity, I am reluctant to accept arguments that locate such prejudices in the 1840s, as Bernal⁸ does for Ancient Greece, or in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Hobson⁹ does for Europe, since they seem to foreshorten history and to make a special case of something much more general. The Ancient Greeks were no great lovers of ‘Asia’; the Romans discriminated against the Jews.¹⁰ The rationale varies. The Jews ground theirs in religious arguments, the Romans prioritize in terms of proximity to the capital and to civilization, contemporary Europeans ground it in the success of the nineteenth century. So, a hidden ethnocentric risk is to be eurocentric about ethnocentricity, a trap post-colonialism and postmodernism frequently fall into. But if Europe didn’t invent love, democracy, freedom, or market capitalism, as I will argue, it did not invent ethnocentricity either.

The problem of eurocentricity is, however, augmented by the fact that the particular view of the world in European Antiquity, which was reinforced by the authority derived from the extensively used system of Greek alphabetic writing, was appropriated and absorbed into European historiographical discourse, providing an apparently scientific overlay to one variant of the common phenomenon. The first part of the book concentrates on an analysis of these claims with regard to the sequencing and chronology of history.

Secondly, it is important to understand how this notion of a radical divergence between Europe and Asia emerged (this I will discuss mainly for Antiquity).¹¹ The initial eurocentricity was aggravated by later events on that continent, world-domination in various spheres which was often looked upon as almost primordial. Starting with the sixteenth century, Europe achieved a dominant position in the world partly through the Renaissance, through advances in guns and sails¹² which enabled it to

⁸ Bernal 1987. ⁹ Hobson 2004. ¹⁰ Goodman 2004: 27.

¹¹ This point relates to Ernest Gellner’s argument with Edward Said about Orientalism in Gellner 1994.

¹² Cipolla 1965.

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explore and settle new territories and to develop its mercantile enterprise, just as the adoption of print provided for the extension of learning.¹³ Towards the end of the eighteenth century, with the Industrial Revolution, it achieved virtually world-wide economic domination. In the context of domination, wherever it occurs, ethnocentricity begins to take on a more aggressive aspect. 'Other breeds' are automatically 'lesser breeds' and in Europe a sophisticated scholarship (sometimes racist in tone, although in many cases the superiority was considered to be cultural rather than natural) manufactured reasons why this should be so. Some thought that God, the Christian God or the Protestant religion, willed it that way. And many still do. As some authors have insisted, this domination needs to be explained. But explanations based on long-standing primordial factors, either racial or cultural, are unsatisfactory, not only theoretically, but empirically, since divergence was late. And we have to be wary of interpreting history in a teleological fashion, that is, interpreting the past from the standpoint of the present, projecting contemporary advantage back on to earlier times, and often in more 'spiritual' terms than seems warranted.

The neat linearity of the teleological models, which bracket together everything non-European as missing out on Antiquity and forces European history itself into a narrative of dubious progressive changes, has to be replaced by a historiography which takes a more flexible approach to periodization, which does not assume a unique European advantage in the pre-modern world, and which relates European history to the shared culture of the Urban Revolution of the Bronze Age. We have to see subsequent historical developments in Eurasia in terms of a dynamic set of features and relations in continuous and multiple interaction, especially associated with mercantile ('capitalist') activity which exchanged ideas as well as products. In this way we can comprehend societal development in a wider frame, as interactive and evolutionary in a social sense rather than in terms of an ideologically determined sequencing of purely European events.

Thirdly, world history has been dominated by categories like 'feudalism' and 'capitalism' that have been proposed by historians, professional and amateur, with Europe in mind. That is, a 'progressive' periodization has been elaborated for internal use against the background of Europe's particular trajectory.¹⁴ There is therefore no difficulty in showing that

¹³ This advantage has been queried by Hobson 2004, but we have to account for the success of the 'expansion of Europe' not only in the Americas but especially in the east where it came up against Indian and Chinese achievements in this area. See also Eisenstein 1979.

¹⁴ See Marx and Engels 1969: 504.

feudalism is essentially European, even though some scholars such as Coulbourn have made stabs at a comparative approach, always starting from and returning to their western European base. That is not how comparison should work sociologically. As I have suggested, one should start with features such as dependent land tenure and construct a grid of the characteristics of various types.

Finley showed that it was more helpful to examine differences in historical situations by means of a grid which he does for slavery, defining the relationship between a number of servile statuses, including serfdom, tenancy, and employment, rather than using a categorical distinction, for example, between slave and freeman, since there are many possible gradations.¹⁵ A similar difficulty arises with land-tenure, often crudely classified either as 'individual ownership' or as 'communal tenure'. Maine's notion of a 'hierarchy of rights' co-existing at the same time and distributed at different levels in the society (a form of grid) enables us to avoid such misleading oppositions. It enables one to examine human situations in a more subtle and dynamic manner. In this way one can analyse the similarities and differences between, say, western Europe and Turkey, without getting involved, prematurely, in gross and misleading statements of the kind, 'Europe had feudalism, Turkey did not'. As Mundy and others have shown, in a number of ways Turkey had something that resembled the European form.¹⁶ Using a grid, one can then ask if the difference appears sufficient to have had the consequences for the future development of the world that many have supposed. One is no longer dealing in monolithic concepts formulated in a non-comparative, non-sociological way.¹⁷

The situation regarding global history has greatly changed since I first approached this theme. A number of authors, especially the geographer Blaut, have insisted upon the distortions contributed by eurocentric historians.¹⁸ The economist Gunter Frank has radically changed his position on 'development' and has called on us to *Re-Orient*, to re-evaluate the east.¹⁹ The sinologist Pomeranz has given a scholarly summary of what he has called *The Great Divergence*²⁰ between Europe and Asia, which

¹⁵ See Bion 1970, frontispiece and p. 3. Also Bion 1963 where the notion of a grid has been used for understanding psychological phenomena.

¹⁶ Mundy 2004.

¹⁷ While I have spoken of this form of sociological comparison, there are few sociologists capable of carrying out one involving human institutions on a world-wide scale. Nor anthropologists, although in my view it is consistent with the work of A. R. Radcliffe Brown. Both professions are too frequently locked into east-west comparisons of a dubious kind. Probably the Durkheimian school of the *Année sociologique* came closest to achieving a satisfying programme.

¹⁸ Blaut 1993, 2000. ¹⁹ Frank 1998. ²⁰ Pomeranz 2000.

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he sees as occurring only at the beginning of the nineteenth century; before that comparability existed between key areas. The political scientist, Hobson, has recently written a comprehensive account of what he calls *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*, attempting to show the primacy of eastern contributions.²¹ Then there is the fascinating discussion by Fernandez-Armesto of the major states of Eurasia, treated as equals, over the last one thousand years.²² In addition, an increasing number of scholars of the Renaissance, such as the architectural historian Deborah Howard and the literary historian Jerry Brotton, have emphasized the significant part the Near East played in stimulating Europe,²³ just as a number of historians of science and technology have drawn attention to the enormous eastern contribution to the west's subsequent achievements.²⁴

My own aim is to show how Europe has not simply neglected or underplayed the history of the rest of the world, as a consequence of which it has misinterpreted its own history, but also how it has imposed historical concepts and periods that have aggravated our understanding of Asia in a way that is significant for the future as well as for the past. I am not seeking to rewrite the history of the Eurasian landmass but I am interested in redressing the way we look at its development from so-called classical times, and at the same time to link Eurasia to the rest of the world, in an attempt to show that it would be fruitful to redirect discussion of world-history in general. I have confined my discussion to the Old World, and Africa. Others, especially Adams,²⁵ have compared the Old and New World with regard, for example, to urbanization. Such a comparison would raise other issues – their commerce and communication in the development of 'civilization', but it would clearly require greater emphasis on internal social evolution rather than mercantile or other diffusion, with important consequences for any theory of development.

My general goal has been similar to that of Peter Burke in his treatment of the Renaissance, except that I start from Antiquity. He writes: 'I seek to re-examine the Great Narrative of the rise of western civilisation' which he describes as 'a triumphant account of Western achievement from the Greeks onward in which the Renaissance is a link in the chain which includes the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and so on'.²⁶ In Burke's review of recent research on the Renaissance he attempts 'to view the culture of Western Europe as one culture among others, co-existing and interacting with its

²¹ Hobson 2004. ²² Fernandez-Armesto 1995. ²³ Howard 2000, Brotton 2002.

²⁴ For details see Goody 2003. ²⁵ Adams 1966. ²⁶ Burke 1978: 3.

neighbours, notably Byzantium and Islam, both of which had their own “renaissances” of Greek and Roman Antiquity’.

The book can be divided into three parts. The first examines the validity of the European conception of a kind of equivalent of the Arabic *isnad*, a socio-cultural genealogy, arising from Antiquity, progressing to capitalism through feudalism, and setting aside Asia as ‘exceptional’, ‘despotic’, or backward. The second part examines three major historical scholars, all highly influential, who make an attempt to view Europe in relation to the world but who nevertheless privilege this supposedly exclusive line of development, namely, Needham, who showed the extraordinary quality of Chinese science, the sociologist Elias who discerned the origin of ‘the civilizing process’ in the European Renaissance, and the great historian of the Mediterranean, Braudel, who discussed the origins of capitalism. I do this to make the point that even the most distinguished historians, who would doubtless express a horror of teleological or eurocentric history, may fall into this trap. The concluding part of the book looks at the claim that many Europeans, both scholars and laymen, have made to be the guardians of certain prized institutions, such as a special version of the town, the university, and democracy itself, and of values such as individualism, as well as of certain emotions such as love (or romantic love).

Complaints are sometimes made that those critical of the eurocentric paradigm are often shrill in their comments. I have tried to avoid that tone of voice and to concentrate upon the factual treatment arising out of my earlier discussions. But the voices on the other side are often so dominant, so sure of themselves, that we can perhaps be forgiven for raising ours.

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Part One

A socio-cultural genealogy