

The East in the West

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
30 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1996

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data applied for

ISBN 0 521 55360 1 hardback

ISBN 0 521 55673 2 paperback

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Introduction

The West's problem with the East

In Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) the poet Imlac tries to explain to Rasselas the state of the world outside the Happy Valley.

In the Near East 'I conversed with great numbers of the northern and western nations of Europe; the nations which are now in possession of all power and all knowledge, whose armies are irresistible, and whose fleets command the remotest parts of the globe. When I compared these men with natives of our own kingdom and those that surround us, they appeared almost another order of beings. In their countries it is difficult to wish for anything that may not be obtained: a thousand arts, of which we never heard, are continually labouring for their convenience and pleasure; and whatever their own climate had denied them is supplied by their commerce.'

'By what means', said the Prince, 'are the Europeans thus powerful?; or why, since they can so easily visit Asia and Africa for trade or conquest, cannot the Asiatics and Africans invade their coast, plant colonies in their ports, and give laws to their natural princes? The same wind that carries them back would bring us thither.'

'They are more powerful, sir, than we', answered Imlac, 'because they are wiser; knowledge will always predominate over ignorance, as man governs the other animals. By why their knowledge is more than ours, I know not what reason can be given but the unsearchable will of the Supreme Being.'¹

When did Europeans become conscious of their superiority over other nations?² Ethnic superiority is a universal feature of the human condition, the ethnocentric counterpart on the level of the group of the egocentrism that maintains the individual spirit. Such generalised superiority is not inconsistent with the presence of pockets of inferiority, with the recognition of inadequacies, with self doubts and self criticism. But at another level it emerges with especial clarity in group situations, as expressed by John of Gaunt's deathbed speech.

¹ *Rasselas*, p. 47.

² On the 'rediscovery' of the East in the later part of the eighteenth century, see Mannsåker 1990; Said 1978; and Schwab [1950] 1984.

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 This other Eden, demi-paradise . . . (Richard II, Act II, Scene i, 40–3)

What we do not find in Shakespeare is the expression of a generalised superiority of West over East that comes out so clearly in Johnson's statement in *Rasselas* in 1759, before the advent of the real Industrial Revolution (and of capitalism in that sense). There he correctly sees power and knowledge as being the attributes of the Europeans, especially military power and firepower, which recalls the theme of C. M. Cipolla's book, *Guns and Sails in the Early Phase of European Expansion 1400–1700* (1965). That power provides abundant trade goods and rests upon superior knowledge. So far so good. But such superiority is then given a permanent guise, being compared to the governance of man over the other animals, and that in turn is attributed to 'the unsearchable will of the Supreme Being'. However, the present superiority has not always existed, for it results from 'the progress of the human mind, the gradual improvement of reason, the successive advances of science'.³ Meanwhile the application of reason is associated with the coming of Christianity, with the disappearance of 'the darkness of heathenism and the first dawn of philosophy'.⁴

This notion that Europeans were 'almost another order of beings' was not simple ethnocentrism, the result of defensive narcissism, but was based upon the achievements of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. Hence the stress on knowledge, on reason (a concept which had come into fashion), on power and on trade. Yet while these achievements were recent, their roots were often seen to lie further back, in the deep structure of culture, in the heritage from the Greeks (or Germans) and in the favours of the Almighty (to a chosen people and to the coming of Christianity). In other words a historically specific advantage was generalised into a long-standing, indeed permanent, almost a biological superiority. Moreover the specific grounds for the superiority were not always well conceived, as a result of which Western historians, humanists and social scientists have often misunderstood the relationship between the East and the West. So too have some Eastern ones, blinded by the shattering effects of overseas expansion, of the advance of science, technology and knowledge more generally and finally of the coming of industry to Europe.

At the most general level, the contrast between Europe and Asia, with the consequent devaluation of the East, took root early in the history of

³ Johnson 1759: 116. ⁴ Johnson 1759: 186.

the West. The struggle between Greeks and Persians led to Asiatics being referred to as marked by despotic authority and barbaric splendour; in the *Politics* Aristotle saw them as more servile.⁵ The medieval identification of Christianity and Europe reinforced these sentiments and following Aristotle, Montesquieu (1689–1755) again contrasted Europe's 'genius for liberty' with Asia's 'spirit of servitude': 'we shall never see there anything but the heroism of servitude, which held the despotic empire together because political relations are modelled on the filial piety.'⁶ That contrast was challenged by the greater knowledge of the East resulting from the expansion of European trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: for China it was the Jesuits who insisted on a different perspective; for India it was the more perceptive merchants, travellers and administrators.⁷ But the challenge rarely affected the general assessment of difference, as we see from Johnson's fantasy.

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, the political contrast took a more specifically economic turn at the hands of the classical economists in England. Their views went back to Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* in which he saw the poverty of the masses arising from the fact that the economy could not keep pace with the growth of the population. That feature had already concerned Montesquieu who ascribed excessive increase to hot climates; China was a stationary regime, neglecting natural liberty in favour of artificial regulations that checked commerce.

Among those influenced by the classical economists was Karl Marx, who lived in England between 1850 and 1883. Marx followed these earlier writers and more popular attitudes in seeing the static Asiatic state, based on irrigation, as ruling despotically over a servile peasantry. This was the Asiatic way of life. For profound reasons they were unable to follow the sequence of development that led from ancient society to feudalism and eventually to capitalism and then socialism. Marx's scheme of developmental stages were formalisations of widespread assumptions based upon European experience; they excluded Asia which took the road to a stagnant 'oriental' form of society, the road of 'Asiatic exceptionalism'.

By the time these economists were writing a considerable gap had opened up in the standard of living, in the accumulation of knowledge,

⁵ 'Uncivilized peoples', including Asiatics, are more servile than Greeks or Europeans (*Politics* III, xiv, p. 6).

⁶ Montesquieu [1989]: 280, 284.

⁷ On the Jesuits and China, see Dawson 1967 and Mungello 1989.

as well as in the political systems between the East and the West. In the latter part of the eighteenth century western Europe had entered a period of self-sustaining growth so that Asia appeared static in comparison. The gap looked as though it was there to stay.⁸ Again this advantage tended to be seen as reflecting a permanent state of affairs based upon long-standing social differences as the result of which the East had not experienced the growth of feudalism and its commercial centres, the communes that spread from northern Italy and heralded a civil society. Those actual and speculative advantages formed the background to the brilliant work of Max Weber. Weber produced a sounder basis for discussion than earlier writers like Hegel and more especially Herder who saw the difference with the Far East as due to 'the peculiar nature of the Chinese', by which he meant nature rather than culture since it arose from innate peculiarities.⁹ That particular line of thinking can be dismissed; it is interesting only because it illustrates the extremes to which ethnocentricism can go – to racism in the literal sense. Weber's views require more serious consideration, especially as very similar ones still dominate much thinking in the social, political and historical fields. It is to those views, and the views of many others like him, that this book is addressed. Many Western specialists on Asia are well aware of their deficiencies, though others are mesmerized by the undoubted accomplishments of the West into giving them a global character (for example, rationality) when more specific factors would be appropriate, or into seeing the advantage in more long-standing terms than the evidence seems to warrant. If those failings are found among some specialists, including Eastern ones, they are yet more prevalent among historians, humanists and social scientists in the West, whose 'miraculous' Uniqueness constitutes a basic assumption of their work. What is at issue is the nature of the Uniqueness (which all societies obviously possess) in relation to the gap that grew up in this period.

In the nineteenth century there arose the specific question of the Uniqueness of the West in relation to the 'miracle' of self-sustaining growth, or in the eyes of others to the 'curse' of capitalism. The 'static' nature of the economics of Eastern society was seen to follow from the fact it did not possess adequate forms of rationality, of kinship, or of entrepreneurial skills, which were considered to be features of the West alone, as well as being critical to the major developments that had taken

⁸ From the analytic standpoint, the term 'rapid growth' would be preferable since we do not know how 'self-sustaining' the growth will be, either for specific units or for the world as a whole.

⁹ See the general account in Dawson 1967.

place there. Weber sees Europe as characterised by special forms of authority, rationality and economic ethic that allowed for the development of capitalism, whereas in Asia this outcome was inhibited by caste and kinship, as well as by the religious ethic. Both theories continue the humanist tradition that singled out the inheritance from Greece and Rome as conveying special virtues upon Europe. That ancient inheritance combined with the post-Renaissance search for rationality in knowledge and the economy enabled it to make the great leap forward, phrased in various ways as the Scientific Revolution, the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, leading to 'modernisation', industrialisation and capitalism, the 'economic miracle' itself. Countless Western historians make similar assumptions in slightly different forms. Reduced to its ethnocentric bones, the question they pose to themselves is: 'What made us more fitted to be the torchbearers of modern society?'

I spoke of two classical theories. In addition we have various versions of 'world-systems theory'. Its advantage lies in its emphasis on the impact of recent changes on societies throughout the world. Its disadvantages are twofold. Firstly all other 'systems' or 'subsystems' are classified in relation to the West, i.e. as periphery or semi-periphery. While this division may represent an advance on a unitary concept of the Third World, it looks at the situation in terms of recent progress towards industrialisation; for example, Taiwan raised itself from periphery to semi-periphery since the post-war land reform.

The framework of such ideas has been the bread and butter of sociologists, historians, demographers, economists and, from a somewhat different angle, anthropologists. They have attempted to draw lines that not only overemphasised and deepened historically the differences (especially the critically relevant differences of which we have spoken) between the two parts of the Eurasian landmass, but also in my view those lines often overlooked the common heritage of the major societies of that region in the great Near Eastern civilisations, tending to 'primitivise' Eastern institutions, domestic, economic, religious and political, in unacceptable ways, at least in comparison with those of early modern Europe. From a broad, long-term standpoint we have to account for the subsequent divergence rather than the initial differences.

The facts have become increasingly apparent through major publications such as Needham's *Science and Civilisation of China*. The arguments relying on a long-standing advantage failed to take into account the fact that during the Middle Ages the East was pre-eminent in many fields. Moreover the discussion has become outdated by recent events in Asia, with the rapid growth of the economy, the technology and

systems of knowledge, first in Japan and now in many other nations in the region.

Some decades ago it was clear, even to social scientists (historians did not yet have to face up to the problem: only practical men did), that Japan was worthy to be ranked among the industrial nations (the G7). How did this upgrading fit with current theories and popular prejudice? It was first assumed to be a case of Japanese exceptionalism. At the end of the 1950s, a scholar could put the question: 'Why did modern industrial capitalism arise in one East Asian society (Japan) and not in another (China)?'¹⁰ Twenty years later another sociologist following this classic approach asked again, why Japan was 'the only non-Western country to have become a major industrial nation'.¹¹ The question behind this study remained that behind much of the work of Weber and Marx. In Parson's words, why did the Oriental civilisations never develop capitalism? The new gloss was that, largely since their days, Japan had become a world power. How was this to be explained? As 'the exception that proves the rule'?

For many in the West, scholars as well as the general public, the answer to the general question lay in the socio-cultural differences in the nature of their traditional societies, whether in the 'value system', the structure of the family, or another factor or combination of factors, that is to say, to internal differences. When Japan was brought into the analysis, a search was made for the similarities between Japan and western Europe, and hence for the differences of the former from China, which at that time had clearly not developed in the same way. Moulder argues that the differences between China and Japan were not all that great. What created the differences was the relative positions of Japan and China in the political economy of the world. While Japan was relatively autonomous and could adapt to the new situation, China (like most of the rest of the world) was said to be dominated by foreign capitalism, locked into 'a world system that disproportionately benefits others'.

The problem for this argument is that, while it recognises the internal similarities, it overstresses the external ones. For the same problem dogs the 'external' explanations of world-systems theory (developed by Wallerstein) that hampers the internal ones of Weberian theory. Both attempts have now suffered not only at the hands of Japan but since then from the development of the overseas Chinese communities of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and (though not Chinese in the same sense) Korea. All have undergone 'imperialist domination'; all have a similar

¹⁰ Jacobs 1958: ix.

¹¹ Moulder 1977: vii.

culture to mainland China, which according to Moulder could only industrialise by undergoing a revolutionary Communist movement to loosen external ties. Events have amply demonstrated what is wrong with this analysis.

Others have provided more 'cultural' reasons. Some time ago the sociologist Bellah, following in the tradition of Parsons and Weber, argued that the religio-ethical tendencies in Japan prior to the Meiji Restoration provided a similar stimulus to economic and social development as Protestantism had played in the West.¹² That thesis has been taken up by Japanese writers like Morishima who argues that Japanese culture, especially its religion, explains these remarkable economic achievements. Now the goal posts have again been moved. Ten years later, and from a very different political position, Berger includes all east Asia as a second case which has generated 'a new type, or model, of industrial capitalism'. That type operates under 'non-democratic regimes and in non-"individualistic" cultures'.¹³ It is akin to the notion of the alternative, collectivist form of capitalism put forward by a number of writers such as Redding, Rudner and Gellner. In other words this theory of the two capitalisms, one Western, one Eastern, meant that while they were unable to make it 'our way', they produced their own. The implication remains that they could not have modernised because of deep-structural features, a notion that needs to be challenged.

What is clear is that the superior achievements of the West can no longer be seen as permanent or even long-standing features of those cultures but as the result of one of the swings of the pendulum that has affected these societies over the millennia. The merest outline of a theory must begin by accepting the alternation. There remains of course a problem in explaining the pre-eminence of the West during the period between the Renaissance and the present day. Spectacular advances were made that ushered in the modern period. The result has been that European systems of industrial production, of intellectual activity (schools and universities), of health care, of bureaucratic government and to a significant extent of 'cultural' achievement, have established themselves, not without modification, throughout the world.

I am obviously not denying the importance for world history of these events and achievements associated with the Renaissance nor later with the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath, though comparisons with the East and the earlier West as well as some doubts about the way these claims are phrased lead me to entertain some queries. My main reservations have to do with the nature of the explanations for those

¹² Bellah 1957. ¹³ Berger 1987: 141, 170.

changes, and their implications not simply for social science but for our perception of ourselves and of others. These reservations bear upon the way the changes have been characterised and upon the subsequent processes of 'development' in other parts of the world. It is often difficult to reconcile the developer's belief (a natural result of his calling) in the malleability of other social systems with the historical sociologist's belief in deep-structural differences. Indeed the latter appear to be belied by the fact that, while economic 'development' has had its setbacks in parts of the world (Africa, for example), in east Asia there have been major changes in the commercial and industrial spheres, as well as in many other areas of endeavour.

One tendency has been to ascribe to Europe the ability to modernise, whereas others could but copy. That argument can as well be applied to the West. It has been said of medieval economic life in Europe that 'What made it extraordinary was less the capacity to invent than the readiness to learn from others, the willingness to imitate, the ability to take over tools or techniques discovered in other parts of the world, to raise them to a higher level of efficiency, to exploit them for different ends and with a far greater degree of intensity'.¹⁴ That widespread view assumes the occurrence of a radical break which only the West could make. But 'modernisation' is a continuous process and one in which regions have taken part in leap-frogging fashion. No one is endowed with unique features of a permanent kind that enable them alone to invent or adopt significant changes such as the Agricultural Revolution. What is critical is that the same kind of explanation has to be offered for the earlier superiority of the East as for the later achievements of the West. That is not what has happened. Academia is still stuck with its earlier theories which it is reluctant to abandon. I do not attempt to offer an account of the Rise of the West nor yet of the East, for I do not have the competence to do so. My intention is to reevaluate the approaches we should be taking to such questions by querying the adequacy of our account of Western rationality, of Western commerce and of the Western family, in the way they relate to the process we loosely speak of as 'modernisation', 'industrialisation' or 'capitalism'.

In view of earlier achievements and later advances, what I regard as inadequate is any theory that claims to find something profoundly 'structural' in Asia that prevented these developments from taking place, or in Europe that advanced them. In looking at Europe, and specifically England, our natural egocentricity has often led us to assume a priority at deep, socio-cultural levels whereas the evidence for this is either thin

¹⁴ Oakley 1979: 100.

or non-existent. The reasons for achievements in both West and East are more contingent. That leaves many questions to be asked and answered in a more particular, less ethnocentric way than has often been the case.

One resolution to the problem lies in looking at a wider span of world history than that from 1600 to the present day, and in modifying the emphasis so many of these theories give to events in western Europe.¹⁵ To carry out such a wide-ranging re-examination of the specific reasons for Western pre-eminence lies well beyond the scope of the present essay. What I hope to do is to question many current assumptions about the Uniqueness of the West and so to lay the groundwork for better explanatory theories as well as for an improved understanding. As Berger remarks, what was earlier seen as an obstacle to development, namely Confucianism, came to be regarded as a facilitator. Now Mahayana Buddhism joins the queue, for 'the genius of the Chinese mind . . . succeeded in changing a radically world-denying religion into an essentially world-affirming one'. Certain components of the Western tradition, 'notably activism, rational innovativeness, and self-discipline' are now seen as elements of east Asian civilisation, whether in the great traditions or in folk culture. Individualism on the Western model, a theme much beloved by sociologists and historians, is not included and Berger does not think this element intrinsic, though it may appear as a consequence. In any case the net is already large enough to take in a multitude of fish. With parts of south-east Asia following the pattern of east Asia, similar questions have to be raised about Islamic values in Malaysia. When south Asia follows, as it shortly will, then Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism will enter the picture so that little or nothing is excluded among the 'world religions'.

That seems to me correct. 'Culturalist' explanations for the rise of the West are problematic. So too are many 'institutionalist' ones.¹⁶ In both cases the nature of the 'comparative advantage' allocated to these sets of factors needs to be re-examined with care. Some of these factors I look at in this book, beginning with rationality, going on to bookkeeping (*ragioneria*), then to levels of commerce at the time of European expansion, and the nature of the family and other groupings that were involved in trade and then in industry.

My conclusion is that we need to reconsider the East in the West. Let me give one example. Following the humanist tradition rather too closely, I earlier argued the West had a 'comparative advantage' due to the development of alphabetic literacy in Greece. That argument I now

¹⁵ From a Near Eastern perspective, see Abu-Lughod 1989 and Adas 1993.

¹⁶ See Vogel 1979.

regard as not entirely invalid but as exaggerated. Many of the achievements that are associated with the alphabet were also available to those making use of logographic or other systems of writing. In pre-industrial times, widespread literacy was not important for most purposes. In any case the levels of reading and writing in societies with non-alphabetic scripts were underestimated. That does not affect the socio-cultural significance of writing in any way. But it does affect the way lines are drawn between the East and the West in the context of scripts.

One problem constantly facing the enquirer is the kind of binarism that looks at the world and in one of many possible ways says, or implies, that there are two kinds of society, modern and traditional, advanced and primitive, hot and cold, capitalist-industrialist as against pre-capitalist-pre-industrialist, Worlds One and formerly Two as against the Third World. That is the case even with many anthropologists. Those concerned with their own intensive fieldwork inevitably set up a series of binary comparisons, at least implicitly, between what they know about, say the Asante of Ghana, and the European society from which they come; or *vice versa*. On a general level the result tends to get phrased in terms of binary categories (as between simple and complex and so on). There seems to me a few, but very few, contexts in which this division is useful, especially when one is experiencing a situation where individuals, groups and even societies are shifting from one category to another. Even if such a division were acceptable (and we are obviously forced to make some broad categorisations), it is manifestly wrong to include the major societies of Asia and of Africa in the same category, wrong from the standpoint of 'contemporary development' and wrong from the standpoint of the history of cultures.

Intellectually, we know that such a categorisation is all too crude and useful for very few purposes. In practice it is part of our repertoire of folk concepts. But the major problem we face in the present discussion has to do not so much with binary divisions but with more sophisticated but nevertheless insufficiently sophisticated ways of dividing the great Oriental civilisations from our own. I have been deeply dissatisfied with these types of vision, arising either from the binary or from the stage approach, not only in a general, intellectual sense but because of my own experience in and with Asia and Africa. In a short essay I can only point to how another perspective can suggest some ways in which earlier discussions have gone awry. For the wrong evaluation of the comparative situation as between East and West also affects the West's understanding of itself.