



The Puzzle of Eurocentrism

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August 11, 2017

The occasion of Jack Goody's recent passing was a major event not just within the confines of anthropology, but also for the field of comparative world history. He was, or is, probably as much known for the great intellectual efforts he spent during his career on combating the Eurocentric worldview in the study of world history in the *longue durée* as he is for his more anthropologically oriented studies of literacy and the LoDagaa in northern Ghana. Goody played an important part in the rise of a consciously anti-Eurocentric tradition in the former field. A number of his books, such as *The East in the West* (1996), *Capitalism and Modernity: The Great Debate* (2004), *The Theft of History* (2006), and *The Eurasian Miracle* (2010), were themselves major events in the development of this tradition.

Goody's own distinct contribution to it was his notion of historic parallelism in urbanized and elite culture, taking Eurasia rather than Europe as the relevant unit of historical inquiry. As he expressed it in *The Eurasian Miracle*, "the relative unity of the European and Asian continents" began for him with the divergence of Eurasia from other parts of the world in the Bronze Age. The 'urban revolution' that occurred in Eurasia in this period, a concept borrowed from V.G. Childe, and the subsequent differences in patterns of property and inheritance as well as elite culture across that great landmass, together determined a unique trajectory – distinct, for example, from the sub-Saharan African societies he studied anthropologically. But within Eurasia, Goody insisted, there was nothing special about Europe, nor any reason to posit a long-term advantage or separateness. 'Alternation' was his key concept here: the idea that the 'rise of the West' was really merely a particular instance of the long-term pattern in Eurasia where now this, now that part of that historical unit was the dominant or technologically leading one. And on this basis he extensively critiqued what he perceived as the Eurocentrism of leading historians and social scientists, from Marx and Weber to Braudel and Needham.

Given this influential account, it seems fitting that by way of a commemoration Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Peter Burke, Robert Tombs and David Christian organized a conference on Goody and the Eurocentrism debate, co-hosted by the Notre Dame branch in London and Goody's old Cambridge college, St. John's. The occasion saw some of the most prominent

names in world history and comparative study gathered to discuss the present state of thinking about Eurocentrism. Now that the fiercest controversy engendered by the rise of the anti-Eurocentric tradition, and its habit of polemical writing, has died down somewhat, what do we make of the 'rise of Europe' (or perhaps 'rise of the West') question today? This was debated for a number of days in London and Cambridge, with the organizers having kindly arranged for me to be able to attend – as a distinctly junior participant. The format was unusual, described by the host as a 'Quaker meeting', in that after some brief introductory statements by panelists everyone was encouraged to speak freely as the spirit took them. (Although my impression is that Quaker meetings are mostly spent in silence, which this conference certainly was not...)

After some initial hesitation, much of the first discussion revolved around the meaning of Eurocentrism and how it might be defined. Since the term has become such an obvious pejorative, nobody was quite keen to identify with it, but the conceptions of what precisely this vice entails and what is wrong with it diverged. Fernández-Armesto identified no fewer than four different categories of Eurocentrism: looking at the world through a European lens, examining world history in terms of the rise of the West exclusively (the teleological error), locating the hegemony of the West only in its own properties or virtues, and the development of universal models in social science based on data only from one's own part of the world.

This last point was an important subject for the development of the Eurocentrism debate, going by the conference. While virtually all present were agreed that a purely European focus for accounting for the rise of the West (whatever 'the West' might mean) is no longer tenable in light of the anti-Eurocentric critiques, and there was a general shared interest in more specific and less normatively laden comparisons between different parts of the world in different historical periods. But such new approaches are still phrased in terms of the social and historical sciences, and their conceptual and terminological apparatus, as developed in the 'West' in the 19th and 20th centuries. Should this be seen as another case of Eurocentrism? While many were willing to assent to this, it is also an obvious truth that other parts of the world have, by and large, fairly happily taken over this way of doing science and of organizing knowledge, and indeed have fared well by it. This in turn raised a question that would recur throughout the discussion, namely what the alternative to a Eurocentric approach might be. In the case of comparative world history, it is somewhat clear, in that one can historiographically change tack and ask different questions, such as many of those present have done in their own work. One can also avoid the tendency to ask what flaws or vices in other parts of the world prevented their 'rise', and rather focus on what the historical boundaries and specificities are of the European moment in world history. But the alternative to a European social science are much less clear, and unlike in the comparative approach to global history, control cases are not easy to come by.

The later part of the conference was more devoted to the examination of alternative historiographical approaches, as if to answer the question the participants set themselves. Here different perspectives contributed to the bigger picture of world history that is now emerging: one in which history of science and technology plays an important role, in which the re-emergence of China as a world power invites further study of comparisons and contacts between that society and Europe, and in the larger scheme of things, one that is ever more willing to see the whole of human history as its subject and as an integrated whole, beyond the disciplinary hyper-specialization that still often limits knowledge at modern national boundaries.

How Goody's own concept of Eurasian specificity will fare in these wider horizons remains to be seen. Fact is, the Eurocentrism debate is not going away, since the fundamental historiographical paradox remains. The moment of European dominance in world history is, seen from a long-term perspective, not a matter of inherent European superiority or the inferiority of other civilisations. Nor is it obviously a unique and permanent feature of history. But the stubborn fact is also that it *did* happen, and that it incontrovertibly had an enormous impact on all other societies in the world. Most importantly for present historiography, it gave us, through and within its colonial-imperialist context, our social scientific conceptual apparatus and academic institutions: the same ones that allow us to dispute its causes and to combat its nefarious political and intellectual effects. Of the period of European, or if one will 'Western' hegemony, one can therefore say that we cannot live with it – especially in an era of carbon catastrophe - and yet we cannot understand without it. That remains a puzzle of world history in the present.