

1 Countering the Eurocentric myth of the pristine West: discovering the oriental West

History cannot be written as if it belonged to one group [of people] alone. Civilization has been gradually built up, now out of the contributions of one [group], now of another. When all civilization is ascribed to the [Europeans], the claim is the same one which any anthropologist can hear any day from primitive tribes – only they tell the story of themselves. They too believe that all that is important in the world begins and ends with them . . . We smile when such claims are made [by primitive tribes], but ridicule might just as well be turned against ourselves . . . Provincialism may rewrite history and play up only the achievements of the historian's own group, but it remains provincialism.

Ruth Benedict

We have been taught, inside the classroom and outside of it, that there exists an entity called the West, and that one can think of this West as a society and civilization independent of and in opposition to other societies and civilizations [i.e. the East]. Many of us even grew up believing that this West has [an autonomous] genealogy, according to which ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution. Industry, crossed with democracy, in turn yielded the United States, embodying the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . . [This is] misleading, first, because it turns history into a moral success story, a race in time in which each [Western] runner of the race passes on the torch of liberty to the next relay. History is thus converted into a tale about the furtherance of virtue, about how the virtuous [i.e. the West] win out over the bad guys [the East].

Eric Wolf

Most of us naturally assume that the East and West are, and always have been, separate and different entities. We also generally believe that it is the 'autonomous' or 'pristine' West that has alone pioneered the creation of the modern world; at least that is what many of us are taught at school, if not at university. We typically assume that the

2 EASTERN ORIGINS

pristine West had emerged at the top of the world by about 1492 (think of Christopher Columbus), owing to its uniquely ingenious scientific rationality, rational restlessness and democratic/progressive properties. From then, the traditional view has it, the Europeans spread outwards conquering the East and Far West while simultaneously laying down the tracks of capitalism along which the whole world could be delivered from the jaws of deprivation and misery into the bright light of modernity. Accordingly, it seems entirely natural or self-evident to most of us to conflate the progressive story of world history with the Rise and Triumph of the West. This traditional view can be called 'Eurocentric'. For at its heart is the notion that the West properly deserves to occupy the centre stage of progressive world history, both past and present. But does it?

The basic claim of this book is that this familiar but deceptively seductive Eurocentric view is false for various reasons, not the least of which is that the West and East have been fundamentally and consistently interlinked through globalisation ever since 500 CE. More importantly, and by way of analogy, Martin Bernal argues that Ancient Greek civilisation was in fact significantly derived from Ancient Egypt.¹ Likewise, the present book argues that the East (which was more advanced than the West between 500 and 1800) provided a crucial role in enabling the rise of modern Western civilisation. It is for this reason that I seek to replace the notion of the autonomous or pristine West with that of the oriental West. The East enabled the rise of the West through two main processes: diffusionism/assimilationism and appropriationism. First, the Easterners created a global economy and global communications network after 500 along which the more advanced Eastern 'resource portfolios' (e.g. Eastern ideas, institutions and technologies) diffused across to the West, where they were subsequently assimilated, through what I call oriental globalisation. And second, Western imperialism after 1492 led the Europeans to appropriate all manner of Eastern economic resources to enable the rise of the West. In short, the West did not autonomously pioneer its own development in the absence of Eastern help, for its rise would

have been inconceivable without the contributions of the East. The task of this book, then, is to trace the manifold Eastern contributions that led to the rise of what I call the oriental West.

This book feeds into the debate between Eurocentrism and anti-Eurocentrism. In recent years a small band of scholars have claimed that the standard theories of the rise of the West – Marxism/world-systems theory, liberalism and Weberianism – are all Eurocentric.² They all assume that the ‘pristine’ West ‘made it’ of its own accord as a result of its innate and superior virtues or properties. This view presumes that Europe autonomously developed through an iron logic of immanence. Accordingly, such theories assume that the rise of the modern world can be told as the story of the rise and triumph of the West. Importantly, the Eurocentric account has enjoyed a new lease of life or fresh reinvigoration, particularly with the 1998 publication of David Landes’s *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*,³ a book that implicitly harks back to John Roberts’s *The Triumph of the West*.⁴ Landes’s book in particular launches a passionate and pejorative attack against some of the recent anti-Eurocentric analyses (though for all this it is done with verve and wit and is an especially enjoyable read). Perhaps Landes’s most significant service is that he has helped transform the old theoretical debate conducted between Marxism/world-systems theory, liberalism and Weberianism into a new one of ‘Eurocentrism versus anti-Eurocentrism’. This, it seems to me, is where the real intellectual action lies. For arguably the old debate is something of a non-debate given that all these approaches now appear as but minor or subtle variations on the same Eurocentric theme (see the next section below). Accordingly, the present book enters this new debate and contests each of the major claims made by mainstream Eurocentrism, while simultaneously proposing an alternative account.

It could, however, be replied that the ‘Eurocentric versus anti-Eurocentric’ framework that this book operationalises is an oversimplification and is itself a ‘non-debate’. Presuming a kind of Manichean struggle between two coherent ideologies is problematic

4 EASTERN ORIGINS

mainly because, it could be claimed, there is no coherent paradigm called 'Eurocentrism'. Indeed, I believe it would be wrong to assume that most scholars are fighting to defend an explicitly Eurocentric 'triumphalist' vision of the West. And while there are some who explicitly associate themselves with Eurocentrism (such as Landes and Roberts), most do not. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that Eurocentrism infuses *all* the mainstream accounts of the rise of the West, even if this mostly occurs behind the back of the particular scholar (see the next section below). Accordingly, I believe it to be legitimate to develop my own account by critically evaluating the many claims made by Eurocentrism.

The main argument of this book counters one of Eurocentrism's most basic assumptions – that the East has been a passive bystander in the story of world historical development as well as a victim or bearer of Western power, and that accordingly it can be legitimately marginalised from the progressive story of world history. Although this volume differs in various ways from Felipe Fernández-Armesto's phenomenal book, *Millennium*, nevertheless I share with him his empathic belief that:

For purposes of world history, the margins sometimes demand more attention than the metropolis. Part of the mission of this book is to rehabilitate the overlooked, including places often ignored as peripheral, peoples marginalized as inferior and individuals relegated to bit-parts and footnotes.⁵

Or in a narrower context, as W. E. B. Du Bois explained in the foreword to his important book, *Africa in World History*:

there has been a consistent effort to rationalize Negro slavery by omitting Africa from world history, so that today it is almost universally assumed that history can be truly written without reference to Negroid peoples . . . Therefore I am seeking in this book to remind readers . . . of how critical a part Africa has played in human history, past and present.⁶

Likewise, my major claim in this book is that the Eurocentric denial of Eastern agency and its omission of the East in the progressive story of world history is entirely inadequate. For not only do we receive a highly distorted view of the rise of the West, but we simultaneously learn little about the East except as a passive object, or provincial backwater, of mainstream Western world history.

This marginalisation of the East constitutes a highly significant silence because it conceals three major points. First, the East actively pioneered its own substantial economic development after about 500. Second, the East actively created and maintained the global economy after 500. Third, and above all, the East has significantly and actively contributed to the rise of the West by pioneering and delivering many advanced 'resource portfolios' (e.g. technologies, institutions and ideas) to Europe. Accordingly, we need to resuscitate both the history of economic dynamism in the East and the vital role of the East in the rise of the West. Nevertheless, as we shall also see, this does not mean that the West has been a passive recipient of Eastern resources. For the Europeans played an active role in shaping their own fate (especially through the construction of a changing collective identity, which in turn partially informed the direction of Europe's economic and political development). In sum, these two interrelated claims – Eastern agency and the assimilation of advanced Eastern 'resource portfolios' via oriental globalisation on the one hand, entwined with European agency/identity and the appropriation of Eastern resources on the other – constitute the discovery of the lost story of the rise of the oriental West.

In this context it is especially noteworthy that our common perception of the irrelevance of the East and the superiority of Europe is reinforced or 'confirmed' by the Mercator world map. This map is found everywhere – from world atlases to school walls to airline booking agencies and boardrooms. Crucially, the actual landmass of the southern hemisphere is exactly twice that of the northern hemisphere. And yet on the Mercator, the landmass of the North occupies two-thirds of the map while the landmass of the South represents

6 EASTERN ORIGINS

only a third. Thus while Scandinavia is about a third the size of India, they are accorded the same amount of space on the map. Moreover on the Mercator, Greenland appears almost twice the size of China, even though the latter is almost four times the size of the former. To correct for what he saw as the racist privileging of Europe, in 1974 Arno Peters produced the Peters projection (or the Peters–Gall projection), which sought to represent the countries of the world according to their actual surface area. Here the South properly looms much larger, while Europe is considerably downgraded. Although no perfect map of the world exists, his representation is certainly free of the implicit Eurocentric distortion found in the Mercator. Not surprisingly, when the Peters projection first appeared there was a political storm, for as Marshall Hodgson points out, ‘Westerners understandably cling to a projection [the Mercator] which so markedly flatters them’.⁷

This present book in effect attempts to correct our perception of world history in the same way that the Peters projection seeks to correct our perception of world geography, by discovering the relative importance of the East *vis-à-vis* the West. More specifically, I have presented a variant of this projection (the ‘Hobo-Dyer’) at the beginning of this chapter but have reconfigured it so as to place China at the centre, given its pivotal role in the rise of the West. No less importantly, the USA and Europe now properly occupy the diminished peripheral margins of the Far North-east and Far North-west respectively. And while Africa also occupies the Far West, its upgraded size corrects for its downgraded marginalisation in the Eurocentric model.

This chapter proceeds in two sections. The first begins by very briefly tracing the construction of the Eurocentric discourse as it emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It then proceeds to show how the major explanations of the rise of the West, found specifically in the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber, became grounded within this discourse. The second section then briefly fleshes out my own two-prong argument as a remedy to the prevailing Eurocentrism of mainstream accounts.

Constructing the Eurocentric/Orientalist foundations of the mainstream theories of the rise of the West

European identity formation and the invention of Eurocentrism/Orientalism

In 1978 Edward Said famously coined the phrase 'Orientalism', though in fairness a number of other scholars, including Victor Kiernan, Marshall Hodgson and Bryan Turner, were already thinking along such lines.⁸ Orientalism or Eurocentrism (I use them interchangeably throughout this book) is a worldview that asserts the inherent superiority of the West over the East. Specifically Orientalism constructs a permanent image of the superior West (the 'Self') which is defined negatively against the no less imaginary 'Other' – the backward and inferior East. As ch. 10 explains in detail, it was mainly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that this polarised and essentialist construct became fully apparent within the European imagination. What then were the specific categories by which the West came to imagine its Self as superior to the Eastern Other?

Between 1700 and 1850 European imagination divided, or more accurately forced, the world into two radically opposed camps: West and East (or the 'West and the Rest'). In this new conception, the West was imagined as superior to the East. The imagined values of the inferior East were set up as the antithesis of rational (Western) values. Specifically, the West was imagined as being inherently blessed with unique virtues: it was rational, hard-working, productive, sacrificial and parsimonious, liberal-democratic, honest, paternal and mature, advanced, ingenious, proactive, independent, progressive and dynamic. The East was then cast as the West's opposite Other: as irrational and arbitrary, lazy, unproductive, indulgent, exotic as well as alluring and promiscuous, despotic, corrupt, childlike and immature, backward, derivative, passive, dependent, stagnant and unchanging. Another way of expressing this is to say that the West was defined by a series of progressive presences, the East by a series of absences.

Particularly important is that this reimagining process stipulated that the West had always been superior (in that this construct

8 EASTERN ORIGINS

Table 1.1 *The Orientalist and patriarchal construction of the 'West versus the East'*

The dynamic West	The unchanging East
Inventive, ingenious, proactive	Imitative, ignorant, passive
Rational	Irrational
Scientific	Superstitious, ritualistic
Disciplined, ordered, self-controlled, sane, sensible	Lazy, chaotic/erratic, spontaneous, insane, emotional
Mind-oriented	Body-oriented, exotic and alluring
Paternal, independent, functional	Childlike, dependent, dysfunctional
Free, democratic, tolerant, honest	Enslaved, despotic, intolerant, corrupt
Civilised	Savage/barbaric
Morally and economically progressive	Morally regressive and economically stagnant

was extrapolated back in time to Ancient Greece). For the West has allegedly enjoyed dynamically progressive, liberal and democratic values and rational institutions from the outset, which in turn gave birth to the rational individual, whose flourishing life enabled economic progress and the inevitable breakthrough to the blinding light and warmth of capitalist modernity. By contrast, the East was branded as permanently inferior. It has allegedly endured despotic values and irrational institutions, which meant that in the very heart of darkness, a cruel collectivism strangled the rational individual at birth, thereby making economic stagnation and slavery its eternal fate. This argument formed the basis of the theory of oriental despotism and the Peter Pan theory of the East, which conveyed an eternal image of a 'dynamic West' versus an 'unchanging East' (see table 1.1).

It can hardly escape notice that these binary opposites are precisely the same categories that constitute the patriarchally

constructed identity of masculinity and femininity. That is, the modern West is akin to the constructed male, the East the imagined female. This is no coincidence, because during the post-1700 period Western identity was constructed as patriarchal and powerful, while the East was simultaneously imagined as feminine – as weak and helpless. This led to the Orientalist representation of an Asia ‘lying passively in wait for Bonaparte’, for only he could liberate her from her enslaved existence (an act of liberation, which was subsequently dubbed ‘the white man’s burden’). And this theory was vitally important because branding the East as exotic, enticing, alluring and above all passive (i.e. as having no initiative to develop of her own accord), thereby produced an immanent and ingenious legitimating rationale for the West’s imperial penetration and control of the East.

But this was not just a legitimating idea for imperialism and the subjugation of the East. For by depicting or imagining the East as the West’s passive opposite it was but a short step to make the argument that *only* the West was capable of independently pioneering progressive development. Indeed, the outcome of the European intellectual revolution was the construction of the ‘proactive’ European subject, and the ‘passive’ Eastern object, of world history. Moreover, European history was inscribed with a progressive temporal linearity, while the East was imagined to be governed by regressive cycles of stagnation. In particular, within the Eurocentric discourse this divide implied a kind of ‘intellectual apartheid regime’ because the superior West was permanently and retrospectively quarantined off from the inferior East. Or, in Rudyard Kipling’s felicitous phrase, ‘Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet’. This was crucial precisely because it immunised the West from recognising the positive influence imparted by the East over many centuries, thereby implying that the West had pioneered its own development in the complete absence of Eastern help ever since the time of Ancient Greece. And from there it was but a short step to proclaiming that the history of the world can only be told as the story of the pioneering and triumphant West from the outset. Thus the myth of the pristine West

10 EASTERN ORIGINS

was born: that the Europeans had, through their own superior ingenuity, rationality and social-democratic properties, pioneered their own development in the complete absence of Eastern help, so that their triumphant breakthrough to modern capitalism was inevitable.

It is no coincidence that the social sciences emerged most fully in the nineteenth century at the time when this process of reimagining Western identity reached its apogee. For by then the Europeans had intellectually divided the whole world into the two antithetical compartments. But rather than critique this Orientalist and essentialist West/East divide, orthodox Western social scientists from the nineteenth century down to the present not only accepted this polarised separation as self-evidently true, but inscribed it into their theories of the rise of the West and the origins of capitalist modernity. How did this occur?

Most generally, as the quote from Eric Wolf (posted at the beginning of this chapter) points out,⁹ within the mainstream theories we can detect a latent – though occasionally explicit – triumphalist teleology in which all of human history has ineluctably been leading up to the Western endpoint of capitalist modernity. Thus conventional accounts of world history assume that this all began with Ancient Greece, progressing on to the European agricultural revolution in the low middle ages, then on to the rise of Italian-led commerce at the turn of the millennium. The story continues on into the high middle ages when Europe rediscovered pure Greek ideas in the Renaissance which, when coupled with the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the rise of democracy, propelled Europe into industrialisation and capitalist modernity.

Pick up any conventional book on the rise of the modern world. The West is usually represented as the *mainstream civilisation* and is enshrined with a *Promethean* quality (to paraphrase the titles of two prominent books).¹⁰ While Eastern societies are sometimes discussed they clearly lie outside the mainstream story. And it is often the case that if the East is discussed at all, it is discussed in separate sections. Accordingly, one could focus only on the Western sections and get