

The Myth of European and Chinese Values

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1. Core Values of Europe?

What are the most recurring values in European history which persist today and may persist in the future? I agree with the analysis of the famous historian Fernand Braudel, one of the leading lights of the famous journal *Annales* that introduced a multidisciplinary approach to the science of history. In his "*Grammaire de Civilisations*" (1963) he identifies humanism (within a Christian tradition), freedom (liberty, rights and private property), scientific thought (allowing industrialization) and socialism as the main values and concepts. However, despite the fact that Braudel was genuinely trying to open up the French school system for the multiplicity of the world's civilizations, he considered these values as only typical of European history. Therefore, I argue that Braudel himself was also a result of yet another characteristic of European history which is Eurocentrism. It is this phenomenon which I would like to focus in this essay.

2. Essay on "Eurocentrism"

Eurocentrism refers to the practice of viewing the world from a European perspective, with an implied belief, either consciously or subconsciously, in the pre-eminence of European culture. Eurocentrism was prevalent in the 19th century but re-emerged since the period of decolonization. Conventional international historiography which focused and still focuses the rise of the "West" from the 18th to the 20th century is its strong foundation. But in the very near future the main object of historical scholarship may be how to explain the rise of China and its neighbours in the 21st century. Other perspectives and historical facts will most probably come to the forefront. Meanwhile a Eurocentric approach of world history continues to dominate historiography. Considering the scale of globalization and mass communication today, should there not be a more balanced approach to world history?

Teaching history has become a very sensitive issue of which most West-Europeans are hardly aware of. An example of this is how globalization is presented. Both pro-globalists and anti-globalists like to present globalization as a "Western" phenomenon. Anti-globalists include it in their argument that everything that originates (and originated) in the so-called "West" is bad, while pro-globalists maintain that Western values and products are universal and that there are no substitutes. In doing so they both assume that there is indeed a concept like the "West", which can be identified, defined and described. Hardly any specialist on globalization has ever tried to do so but that did not seem to bother them. A recurrent argument is that there is an Asiatic, often Chinese alternative, which proves that the "West" actually exists. What is not considered is the possibility that many movements against West-European or American globalization actually derive from the continuous claim that principles considered as universal, like scientific and rational thought, economic behaviour, democracy, equality, freedom, etc., were of European origin and had no relationship with so-called non-Western civilizations like China. Once people identify certain values as foreign or alien, even worse, if they link them to what they historically and psychologically perceive as the oppressor or the opponent, then these values also come to represent the oppressor or the opponent. I argue that

this is the core of the problem of present-day globalization, which seems to invite almost automatically extreme forms of nationalism.

There are two questions here to be answered. First, is there indeed a “West” from which all universal values and institutions originate from? Second, if this is not the case, what caused this phenomenon, and how do we correct it? Of course this leads us to an alternative way of presenting and teaching both world history and the history of China and Europe.

A long list of 19th and 20th C European thinkers, including Karl Marx and Max Weber, have emphasized the uniqueness of Europe’s socio-economic history. Even recent globalization historians like Landes (1999) and MacGillivray (2006), consider globalization to be a Europe-centred phenomenon that started around the 16th century, shortly after Columbus supposedly discovered America. However, let us consider the historical evidence for an Asiatic world model, focussing China. Most West-European historians, like Needham (1954-) and Braudel (1993) have considered Chinese culture and society as unchanging over time and have emphasized the “unique” development of modern science in the West, along with the Renaissance, the bourgeoisie, democracy and capitalism. China is “a-historical” while only Western Europe was subject to change. But it also concerns the area of feelings and sentiment. Medieval historians, such as George Duby (1996), identified the birth of “romantic love” in the troubadour society of 12th century Europe. Other more generally have attributed a deeper or fraternal sense of love to Christianity and its tradition of charity (“love thy neighbour”). However, in China as early as the 9th to 7th centuries BCE love poetry appeared.

More recent research allows a different picture to emerge. Goody (2006), Pomeranz (2000) and Frank (1998) show the parallels between Chinese and European history. John M. Hobson even suggests “*the Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*” (Hobson, 2004, title). In this way he revised the history of the world, arguing that Western industrialization was largely based on the adoption of Chinese, Arab and Indian knowledge, and the imposition of asymmetric trading arrangements on Asian economies. Hobson’s work may indeed recall the hugely influential work of his great-grandfather, the radical anti-imperialist J.A. Hobson.

Arguing that religion is the undermining force, sometimes on a subconscious level, of the prevailing paradigms in a society, I analysed the role of religion in the socio-economic development of China in order to further assess the claim of “Western exclusivity”. In Western European literature and scholarship the Weberian interpretation was most successful among 19th century Orientalists, but also among some present-day postmodernists, claiming that Buddhism and Chinese traditions were counterproductive for economic growth and any other societal change. The result of my comparative attempt was that neither hierarchies, shame or the non-existence of revolutionary tendencies are exclusively typical of Confucianism. Also in Buddhism and Taoism I found the same contradictions: they both discourage and encourage economic growth, depending on the geo-political situation at a certain period in history. In all major religions, including Christianity and Islam, we observe the same contradictions. Religions, and their interpretations, adopt to circumstances and are not carriers of “fixed” values.

If so many contradictions appear in Chinese society, history and religions then why did West-European scholars remain fixed on one Eurocentric and negative interpretation? The Polish-Jewish scientific philosopher J. Bronowski who moved to England in the 1930s, emphasized the psychology of the dominant, in this case West-European, civilization. In his work “*The Ascent of Man*” (1973) he expresses regret but also realizes the unavoidability of the

temporarily character of so-called Western civilization and its eventual shift to the “East”. Chaohua Wang (2005) argues that it also may have to do with the fact that the length and depth of traditional Chinese civilization, nor the importance of China in the history of the world, are reflected in translations in European languages of Chinese thought and culture. This may be explained by the political criteria which the official translation offices and a foreign-language publishing house, set up after the Maoist revolution in 1949, were implementing. Mitter (2008) also refers to the fact that a typical characterization of China’s past, often put forward by the Chinese modernizers of the 20th century, is that (late) imperial China was a corrupt, “feudal” mess that was held back by unchanging Confucian thought. In the “West” publishing houses were not critical towards this official point of view and not concerned with relatively expensive translations of Chinese texts which were hard to get. This resulted in an imbalance in the cultural exchange between China and Europe; Chinese readers traditionally had more access to large areas of Western literature and intellectual thought than vice versa.

Is there an alternative? European history itself may provide some answers. Before the 19th century there was a long tradition of European commentators, including Jonathan Swift, Voltaire, François Quesnay, Jacques Turgot, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Arthur Schopenhauer and Leo Tolstoy, presenting Asian countries, and in particular China, as utopias or romantic oriental empires containing both spiritual and practical wisdom. Europe re-invented Asia, initially from an inferior position, and gradually from a superior position. In general this “European Asia” may not have had much to do with the real Asia. Asian philosophies and religions were used to make a point in a European context. But in doing so some traces of an authentic Asia, sometimes even forgotten in Asia itself, came to the surface. It also shows how European mentality can be open to interpretations of Asia and China in which Europe is not the centre of world history. While the 19th century became characterized by a Eurocentric Orientalism which romanticized China to such an extent that it was no longer taken seriously, the 20th century saw signs of the reintroduction of China and the East as an alternative for a war oriented Europe. Oswald Spengler, Nicholas Roerich and E.F. Schumacher all contributed to an “Eastern renaissance” in their fields.

We conclude and suggest that if more importance in education is put on history, reflecting the achievements of mankind as global phenomena and stopping presenting everything within a dangerous West/non-West framework, understanding between China and Europe would greatly improve. Goody (2006) suggests to understand the great nations or civilizations of “Eurasia” as variations one of another. However, using notions like Asiatic or Chinese despotism and exceptionalism, and linking notions like capitalism and democracy to the “West”, makes this impossible. They prevent rational enquiry. Of course differences certainly existed. But what is needed is a more careful comparison, “*not a crude contrast of East and West, which always finally turns in favour of the latter*” (Goody, 2006, p. 4). In many “Western” world history overviews the entire continent of Asia is even overlooked, except when the so-called “West” interacted with it or intruded on it. The title of Goody’s book, “*The Theft of History*” (2006), clearly reflects the fact that Europe has misinterpreted Chinese civilization and has underplayed the importance of China and the “East” in world history.

Obviously, history reflects personality and environment. It certainly reflects one’s own time: most scholars still try to explain the success of the West from the 18th century to the 20th century. But in the very near future the main object of scholarship may be how to explain the rise of the East in the 21st century. Certainly in a world that is becoming increasingly conscious of the inter-relationship between the world’s continents, there is a specific need to

overcome these subjective factors and to consider globalization and development from a broadminded, genuinely international historical framework. The psychology of humans is to consider everything that they do not understand or can identify with as something suspicious. If Western Europe would consider itself no longer as the ultimate vehicle of civilization, and if China would stop considering itself as “the country in the centre of the world”, haunted by bad experiences of interactions with West-Europeans in contemporary history, then exchange of experiences and ideas would greatly be promoted.

The question whether we can simply implement the West-European ideals of democracy and market mechanisms within a mixed economy on a country like China becomes irrelevant as both concepts are no longer West-European. For that matter, India, the other fast-growing liberalizing economic Asian giant of the 21st century took up both ideals. It is nevertheless characterized by huge corruption and infrastructural problems. Many analysts argue that India grows despite its government which is synonymous for “bad governance”. Many Indians envy China for its strong unity, its planning capacities, its sense of order and discipline. India excels in individually driven activities like software and other intellectual activities connected to human capital while China excels in any production activity that requires a group coordination. Their different political cultures may explain the socio-economic differences between these two Asian neighbours. Both have advantages and disadvantages. But when it comes to it a one party system “on a full stomach” may be preferred by democratic rights “on an empty stomach”. And China so far was more successful in fighting poverty than India. Friedman (2005) also argues that the Chinese economic growth itself has resulted in better a better standard of living and has introduced more democratic values and tools compared to the beginning of the 1980s. China may follow South Korea’s path in introducing democracy after being a one-party military dictatorship for almost half a century. But at the same time Friedman also emphasizes that no society, no matter how rich it becomes, is ever immune from seeing its fundamental democratic values placed at risk at any time. Western European countries have introduced fascism and Nazism at a time when they still economically performed much better than most other areas in the world. By the beginning of the Second World War the economic crisis of the 1930s had actually been solved. Friedman concludes that moral benefits are an important part of the story of economic growth but that a reframing of policies in order to move in the direction of genuine growth is necessary. There is no doubt that China has the tools and the values to find its own path to balance economic growth and moral considerations. The Tibetan problem may be a very important challenge but the Indian-Buddhist spiritual heritage of Tibet itself and its role in Chinese history, which cannot be denied, may play an important role in solving it.

China sometimes continues to be nationalistic and even occasionally xenophobic (see Mitter, 2008), and continues to promote itself as “the alternative” or “the other”, in contrast with some other external power, in this case the so-called imperialist “West”. By seeing themselves as a unique and ultimate civilization, which was different from all other civilizations, “Westerners” contribute to this phenomenon. Such theories like the West-non-West theories “*have lives of their own, quite defiantly of the phenomenal world that can actually be observed*” (Sen, 2006, p. 104). Goody (2006, p. 9) rightly observes that “*the voices on the other side (the Eurocentric side) are often so dominant, so sure of themselves, that we can perhaps be forgiven for raising ours*”.