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The Assault on Eurocentric History

THE LAST THIRTY YEARS HAVE BROUGHT a major reorientation in historians' thinking on the origins of modernity. Earlier histories portrayed the Western European industrial revolution as a unique phenomenon with no precursors. Now economic and social historians generally agree that spurts of economic growth, even rapid and intensive growth, occurred in non-European societies. Scholars now see the European breakthrough to modernity as the last decisive development in a long series of advances that stretch far back in time and cover much of Eurasia. A new image of world history has emerged, often associated with the trends known as "postcolonialism" and "multiculturalism"—although the important research was done well before these fashions caught on, and they have added little of value to it. This article will discuss a number of historians and historically-minded social scientists writing during the last decade or so who have tried to replace "Eurocentricism" with alternative patterns of world history that give larger recognition to the contributions of non-Western cultures.

A NEW IMAGE OF THE WORLD

Half a century ago Joseph Needham drew attention to early Chinese achievements in science and technology. By the 1960s Far Eastern

specialists recognized that two periods of outstanding progress occurred in the early economic development of Eastern Asia: China under the Sung dynasty (tenth-thirteenth centuries) and Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate (sixteenth-nineteenth centuries). Mark Elvin made an early attempt at synthesis, arguing that the scope of innovation in medieval China amounted to a social and economic revolution comparable to that in Western Europe a few centuries later, even though the Chinese revolution faltered before it could achieve modernization. William H. McNeill, who publicized the concept of a medieval Chinese economic revolution far beyond the circles of Far Eastern studies, credited the Chinese revolution with having “tipped a critical balance in world history” by starting a worldwide surge in commercial activity that eventually gave rise to European capitalism. Medieval China thus appeared responsible for the initial breakthrough to modernism, and early-modern Europe for the final one, in a continuous, cumulative, global process.¹

Marshall G. S. Hodgson, one of McNeill’s colleagues at the University of Chicago, was developing similar ideas. When Hodgson died in 1968 at the age of 47, he left two vast unfinished projects, a general history of Islamic civilization and a history of the world. In the last and least-finished section of the former—edited and published in three volumes as *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*—Hodgson tried to discuss the emergence of modernity, or the “Great Western Transmutation” as he called it, from a “world-historical viewpoint.”² He was among the first historians to grasp the new picture of world history and to place it within a theoretical framework.

Hodgson asked why the Great Western Transmutation was Western: “what was so special about the Occident that it, and not other societies, achieved this?” Believing that historians had exaggerated the special nature of the Occident, he spoke of Transmutation as a cumulative achievement that depended upon earlier advances in the Islamic and Far Eastern worlds: “The Occident seems to have been the unconscious heir of the abortive industrial revolution of Sung

China.” The Transmutation would not have been possible without the vast global market that had developed by 1500, largely under Muslim auspices: “Without the cumulative history of the whole Afro-Eurasian Oikoumene, of which the Occident had been an integral part, the Western Transmutation would be almost unthinkable.” Hodgson pointed out that the final breakthrough to modernism had to come somewhere, and since it required a certain level of global population density and commerce, it could not have come earlier than around the middle of the second millennium A.D. It naturally occurred in Europe, the region that enjoyed a sufficient number of favorable local conditions at the time thanks to the clearing of the northern forests, which created an expanding economy at the crucial historical moment.³

Hodgson concluded that several different combinations of factors, besides the European, might have led to modernization. Given time, “we might have found similar transmutations taking place independently in other agrarianate-level societies, some sooner and some later, each with its own forms in terms of its own background.” China, for example, might have repeated the Sung achievement, but with more success. Once the Transmutation had occurred in one place, however, it “foreclosed the possibility of its happening so anywhere else.”⁴ Previously, because innovations in one place were adapted elsewhere within a few decades or centuries, a rough parity had prevailed among the several centers of civilization within the “Afro-Eurasian Oikoumene.” After the Transmutation, however, the old type of gradual diffusion was no longer possible. Some inventions can easily be diffused among cultures because they require a simple technology. If they confer military advantages, like gunpowder weapons in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, inventions can diffuse very rapidly. But the new-model European armies of the age of Louis XIV, with their drilled infantry lines, artillery batteries, and engineering corps, could not be assimilated by non-European powers, despite pressing military imperatives, because these military institutions were accompanied by a long train of cultural baggage.

The Transmutation introduced into Europe a “new order of civilized life,” which non-Europeans could not successfully copy because they did not share European “cultural presuppositions.” Hence the “millennial parity of social power broke down”—a profound insight into the nature of cultural change and borrowing, which Hodgson never developed, for he did not live to write his projected world history.⁵

Soon after Hodgson’s death, his discipline was invaded by the wave of cultural relativism variously called postmodernism, post-colonialism, or multiculturalism. The influence of these ideologies, felt throughout the humanities, has been particularly pervasive in Middle Eastern studies, where Edward Said’s *Orientalism* rapidly acquired canonical status. Said, a literary critic, never pretended to know much about Islamic history and never produced any study of the region remotely comparable to Hodgson’s, but he succeeded in politicizing Islamic studies in anti-Western and anti-Israeli directions. He made “Orientalism” an epithet and portrayed traditional scholarship on Asia as a front for racism and colonialism, a charge that seems particularly absurd when one considers the empathy for Islam that infuses the work of such traditional Orientalists as Hodgson.⁶

What was new about the new world history of the 1980s and 1990s was its dismissal of Western culture. It became common—in some circles, *de rigueur*—to hold that the ascendancy of the West resulted from various superficial and temporary factors and had nothing to do with any traits deeply embedded in Western civilization. The dismissal of culture was not based on any new evidence, but simply reflected a growing consensus that to ascribe any particular value to Western culture could only be a symptom of Eurocentric arrogance or racism. Hence postcolonialists imagined they were doing non-Western peoples a favor by declaring culture irrelevant to progress. Yet Hodgson had argued that if the present state of the non-Western world could be explained in cultural terms, then it could not result from any racial factors, nor from any essential

flaws in non-Western cultures. I believe the radical postmodernists' dismissal of the causal impact of cultural variables represents a fatal flaw in their arguments.

A GEOGRAPHY OF ACCIDENTS: JAMES BLAUT, JARED DIAMOND,
JANET ABU-LUGHOD

The most extreme forms of anti-Eurocentricism are held by scholars who argue that no connection existed between Western culture and the modernization of the West. They attribute the rise of Europe to mere accidents of geography. At least three distinct versions of this thesis exist, represented here by James Blaut, Jared Diamond, and Janet Abu-Lughod.

James M. Blaut was a geography professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago until his death in 2000 at the age of 73. His *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* and *Eight Eurocentric Historians* have attracted little attention from scholars outside radical multiculturalist circles, but they present the argument for geographical accident in its most uncompromising form.⁷ Blaut's basic premise, which he calls "ethnoscience" or "ethnogeography," exhibits the familiar postmodernist assumption that ideas in historical and social studies are "validated" not by evidence but by conformity to "belief systems" that serve certain political interests. The particular system Blaut wants to expose he calls "Eurocentric diffusionism"—belief in the unique qualities of Western civilization—which he claims developed as a rationale for the colonial activities of nineteenth and twentieth century Western elites.

Eurocentricism, which Blaut never adequately explains, holds that "only certain select communities are inventive," forming "permanent centers of invention and innovation," and that the permanent center of the world is "Greater Europe," which in ancient times included western Asia and northern Africa.⁸ Yet elsewhere, with no awareness of contradiction, Blaut defines Eurocentricism as the belief in "past or present superiority of Europeans" (8). There is

nothing essentially elitist in claiming a temporary advantage—as Hodgson pointed out, an innovation must start somewhere. In any case, it seems odd that what Blaut calls “Greater Europe” did not even include Europe for half its history. If European colonizers created the Eurocentric worldview to serve their interests, why did they place all early civilizations in Asia and Africa? Blaut explains that they wanted to appropriate the “Bible lands” as “Europe’s self-proclaimed cultural hearth” (4). Perhaps, but it is also likely that they located early civilizations in Asia and Africa primarily because archeological evidence suggested this. Also, no modern historians known to me have claimed Western culture is generally superior to others, only that it has been special in well-defined ways, usually in certain traits thought conducive to modernization, and for a certain period beginning in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. This claim is large, but one can hardly argue that modernization theory “gave no real role to non-Europe, past and present, save as an essentially passive recipient of diffusions from Europe” (54). In short, the “Eurocentric model” never existed outside Blaut’s imagination. His method of argument, like Edward Said’s invention of an “Orientalism” that never existed to accuse Western scholars of inventing an Orient that never existed, resembles a self-reflecting mirror.

If we strip away Blaut’s exaggerations, the “Eurocentric model” means simply the view that the first breakthrough to the modern industrial type of society took place in Europe. Hardly a “model” in the sense of an explanatory pattern, prototype, or paradigm, it is a statement of generally accepted fact about a certain historical period. Blaut, however, does propose a model in the form of a novel theory, “uniformitarianism,” which attempts to explain all cultural evolution, and which reduces anything that does not conform to “Eurocentric diffusionism.”

According to the uniformitarian model, all societies everywhere have developed in much the same way. Many have called Nature unjust and cruel, but Blaut thinks she has been grossly maligned. Blaut’s egalitarian conception of the State of Nature puts Jean-Jacques

Rousseau to shame. He believes nature tolerates no inequalities, even in the environment. The tropics are just as healthy for humans as the temperate zones, tropical climes are just as conducive as the temperate to hard physical labor, and a rough parity exists in the distribution around the globe of plant and animal species suitable for domestication.⁹ Nor does Blaut accept demographic inequalities. Overpopulation has never been a problem, for a magical balance exists whereby all populations automatically adjust their reproduction to fit their “population targets” (67–8, 139). Before modern times, when the West seized its unfair advantage, developmental inequalities did not exist. Blaut posits a “common hemisphere-wide process” (154) in which all societies evolve simultaneously by “criss-cross diffusion.” Cultural differences, he tells us, have never been important for cultural evolution, and cultural boundaries have never erected barriers to integration. Hence peoples all over the globe invented agriculture at about the same time. By 1492 most of the Old World had become “a single protocapitalist system,” forming a network of cities like “a network of strings of electric lights of various sizes and colors illuminating a garden party . . . so tightly integrated that there must have been rapid, almost instantaneous, crisscross diffusion *throughout* the system of essentially every material or immaterial culture trait that is relevant to the economic and technical and ecological progress of this form of society” (171–173, his emphasis).

Blaut offers a curiously static picture, devoid of conflict or stress. If no demographic pressure existed, what drove human societies to adopt agriculture? Blaut simply assumes that all people want “progress” and will automatically recognize and select the traits that lead to it. No society seriously resists foreign customs, for xenophobia does not exist in Blaut’s world. Hodgson and many others believed something like crisscross diffusion could happen under the pressures of military competition—but such diffusion does not exist in Blaut’s world, either.

Often Blaut's assertions rest upon nothing but a reference to some other publication sympathetic to postcolonialism. In *Eurocentric Historians*, he bases his claim that ancient Egypt was "well ahead of Greece in abstract science and mathematics" solely on the authority of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, although the flimsiness of Bernal's scholarship had been exposed long before Blaut's book appeared (116). Bernal contributed a blurb for the cover of *Colonizer's Model*, assuring the public that Blaut had made "an irrefutable case."

Colonizer's Model contains several passing allusions to the alleged invention of democracy in classical Greece, which carry the vague implication that it is just another Eurocentric myth. Eventually the insinuation becomes an established fact, as though Blaut had advanced an argument for it—"Just as we noted with regard to the ancient Greeks, political forms found in Europe had counterparts elsewhere" (123, my emphasis). In the same passage, Blaut dismisses the idea that free cities were unique to Western Europe as another Eurocentric myth, because "city-states" with "republican" forms of government were common all over Asia and Africa. He offers no evidence, but in the next chapter we find it has become an established fact, on the grounds that it "was discussed in the previous chapter" (171). Blaut offers no explanation of what he means by "republican" and "city-state." The superficial similarity between many institutions across many human societies makes it hard to do conscientious comparative history—but easy, if one uses such methods as Blaut's to claim that everything is everywhere alike.

Finally, when Blaut does admit that no evidence exists for some assertion, he assumes, in accordance with the postmodernist principle that even evidence is a matter of personal perspective, that the evidence will be discovered as soon as it is looked for, and until then the burden of proof is somehow on the other side. An uncritical believer in Afrocentrist claims, he thinks most of Africa in 1492 was as developed and urbanized as Europe. He admits that no evidence exists: "The facts needed to confirm or disconfirm these parts of

the argument have not yet been obtained, have not yet been sought with sufficient diligence by diffusionist scholarship” (153).

Blaut devotes most of his work to attacks on traditional scholarship, which he seeks to discredit on charges of racism or “cultural racism.” He offers hundreds of pages of repetitious and strident polemics directed against almost all significant writers of world history since Max Weber, but he leaves the positive case for his theory to the end of *Colonizer’s Model*, where he covers the history of the world in sixty pages. According to Blaut, Europe’s ascendancy over other civilizations did not begin until after 1492 and resulted entirely from the riches gained from colonial exploitation of the Americas. Therefore, Europe’s advantage did not spring from any qualities internal to Europe but from a lucky break—Europe happened to be closer to America than were other parts of the Old World.

If, as Blaut argues, nothing mattered but the exploitation of America, then what explains the disappointing performances of early-modern Spain and Portugal? Besides, Blaut’s premise is manifestly false. Europe is not closest to America. A glance at a map will show that the Arab Muslim world is closer than Europe, and West Africa, which Blaut repeatedly insists was then on the same level of development as Europe and the Arab Muslim world, is closer still. After much tortured pleading, Blaut concludes: “Just at that historical conjuncture, this region [the Maghreb] lacked a capacity for major long-distance oceanic expeditions” (183)—a concession that underlines the central fallacy in Blaut’s thesis. If the advantages of the West were temporary and accidental, then how did they become so permanent? If the disadvantages of the non-West were temporary and accidental, and if we are to believe in the instantaneous criss-cross diffusion of all cultural traits, then why was the non-West left behind?

In *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, Jared Diamond, a biologist at the University of California at Los Angeles medical school, puts forward a geographical thesis similar to Blaut’s but much more plausible and readable and infinitely less

acrimonious.¹⁰ It has reached a large audience and won its author a Pulitzer Prize. Like Blaut, Diamond assumes all human societies develop in a uniform way, that neither racial nor cultural differences have any effect on development, and that the rise of the West is attributable to geography. Blaut thought the geographical advantage lay in a single factor, the proximity of Europe to the New World, whereas Diamond assumes a large complex of geographical factors going back to the Pleistocene epoch. Europe shared certain advantages with Asia and Northern Africa, such as a favorable distribution of domesticable plants and animals and east-west axes of communication that enabled the rapid spread of inventions. Other advantages were peculiar to the European subcontinent, especially an environment conducive to the growth of a number of independent competing polities—an argument apparently based upon Eric Jones’s *European Miracle*. Diamond’s thesis is more plausible than Blaut’s “uniformitarian model” because it does less violence to obvious facts of history, especially the different levels of development among societies. Like Blaut, Diamond assumes all cultures develop alike, but he thinks they differ in their *rates* of development, which were determined by their starting points in the Ice Age.

Some of Diamond’s environmentalist explanations are more convincing than others.¹¹ His environmentalist interpretation of history does not accomplish its primary aim—to disprove the existence of genetic differences among human groups. Diverse environments may have started populations on different trajectories, but 10,000 years is ample time for significant genetic differences to develop. His secondary aim, to disprove the existence of significant cultural differences, offers the more radical proposition, since few historians or anthropologists think genetic inheritance is important, whereas most believe in the power of cultural inheritance to shape history. Diamond clearly states his reasons for rejecting cultural explanations: The main task of scientific history is to prove that “differences among peoples’ environments” determine societal development. If not, “Most people will continue to suspect that

the racist biological explanation is correct after all" (25). Although Diamond does not use terms such as "cultural racism," he remains averse to cultural explanations because they resemble racial explanations in suggesting that inequalities between human groups are deeply structured and resistant to change.

Diamond and Blaut both assume models of development that exclude cultural differences to show that cultural differences do not affect economic and political development. Diamond says he wants "to develop human history as a science, on a par with acknowledged historical sciences such as astronomy, geology, and evolutionary biology" (408), yet I doubt reputable scientists would approve of his method of basing an analysis of economic and political development on a postulate that has never been established and that most social scientists do not accept. Blaut never discusses culture, and Diamond devotes to it only a page and a half at the end of his 425-page book. Diamond concludes that local cultural factors unrelated to the environment might lead to differences in development: "A minor cultural factor may arise for trivial, temporary local reasons, become fixed, and then predispose a society toward more important cultural choices, as is suggested by applications of chaos theory to other fields of science. Such cultural processes are among history's wild cards that would tend to make history unpredictable" (417–418). His favorite example is the modern computer keyboard, which was invented for typewriters in 1873 and designed to solve long-vanished engineering problems, but is still used because to change it would be too troublesome to such vested interests as typing schools and manufacturers. If we restrict ourselves to such trivial, temporary, and local examples, it would be easy to conclude that all cultural change is trivial, temporary, and local. But if serious economic incentives to change the keyboard arose, such as giving computer manufacturers a significant edge in the market, keyboards would be changed over the protests of the typing teachers. Diamond never contemplates the possibility of deep cultural presuppositions capable of impeding development no matter how pressing the economic incentives.

Nor can Diamond explain, any more than Blaut, why such accidents have long-lived consequences, although he is aware of the problem: "One might even wonder whether the geographical reasoning employed throughout this book has at last become wholly irrelevant in the modern world . . . [but] nations rising to new power are still ones that were incorporated thousands of years ago into the old centers of dominance . . . Unlike Zaire or Paraguay, Japan and the other new powers [of the Far East] were able to exploit the transistor quickly because their populations already had a long history of literacy, metal machinery, and centralized government . . . The hand of history's course at 8000 B.C. lies heavily on us" (417). How does a primeval environment manage to control the hand of history across ten millennia? Why cannot the course of cultural evolution be accelerated or short-circuited? Diamond seems to admit the existence of deep—structured cultural traditions, such as literacy and centralized government, that are neither elements of the material environment nor ephemeral wild cards. Yet he never follows his reflection to any conclusion, nor does he attend to the considerable anthropological literature that focuses on the relation between culture and environment and maintains that environmental factors determine only the differential payoffs for certain behavioral patterns, thereby nudging cultural evolution in one direction or another.

Janet Lippman Abu-Lughod, a sociologist at the New School for Social Research, has put forth another variation on the theme. Her *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* has been honored by the American Sociological Association and, according to the author's resume, is used widely in courses on world history.¹² Abu-Lughod describes the Eurasian civilizations of the High Middle Ages as a "world system," a term borrowed from Immanuel Wallerstein's neo-Marxist studies of modern capitalism but used here in a special sense to mean the international trade network, the most extensive in history to that time, that grew up in the wake of the Mongol conquests and connected many centers

of civilization from Western Europe to China, all of them relatively equal in economic and political power. After 1350, the Black Death and the disruption of trade routes caused a general decline in the system, and by 1500 a new “world system” dominated by Western Europe had replaced it. The transition from the medieval to the modern world occupies only a short final chapter in Abu-Lughod’s book, but it contains her theory of “world systems” and so is of primary interest here.

Abu-Lughod, who has written enthusiastic reviews of Blaut’s books, denies that the rise of the West can be attributed to Western culture and posits instead a geographical or, rather, geopolitical cause. She suggests European hegemony grew from an imbalance in the configuration of power in the world system, which caused the East to decline and the West to rise simultaneously. She contends that “the context—geographic, political, and demographic—in which development occurred was far more significant and determining than any internal psychological or institutional factors. Europe pulled ahead because the ‘Orient’ was temporarily in disarray” (18). Abu-Lughod borrows liberally from the language of systems theory, a loosely defined mathematical method, used widely in engineering, management, and other fields, that studies organized phenomena by focusing on the interactions of their components. The relevance of systems theory to historical studies remains unclear, and in the case of Abu-Lughod’s book it imparts nothing but obfuscation to an argument none too clear from the start. Only one “world system” of the type she describes has ever existed, and thus it is hard to generalize about how such “world systems” may be expected routinely to perform. Abu-Lughod also makes reference, as Diamond does, to chaos theory—another mathematical hypothesis of dubious application to history—and she does no more with it than Diamond did.

Abu-Lughod believes that she has constructed a theory of “systemic change,” which she defines as “shifts in the direction and configuration of central trends (or vectors) . . . In a system, it is the

connections between the parts that must be studied” (368, her emphasis). Hence “no simple, deterministic explanation can account for Europe’s later hegemony. Explanations that concentrate on the special . . . characteristics of European society are not sufficient, since they tend to ignore the contextual changes in the preexistent system” (353). Abu-Lughod’s method amounts to a series of tautologies. She concludes, for example, that a world system rises when integration increases and declines when integration falls. She tells us, “Changes have causes but only in context. The very same acts have different consequences when they occur at different times and when the surrounding system is structured differently. The Vikings reached the New World without reorganizing the old one. The Arabs sailed around Africa without making the Atlantic a core. Chinese science (including gunpowder) was there, but failed to make China hegemonic” (369). Do such diverse events qualify as “the very same acts”? Surely no one needed the jargon of systems theory to see that the minor Norse toehold in medieval Greenland held no resemblance to the unrelenting European inundation of the Americas in early-modern times.

Abu-Lughod dismisses cultural, institutional, and technological explanations for sixteenth-century European hegemony, pointing out that in the medieval period many different cultures were equally successful in trade, and none enjoyed great advances in the technology of sea transport (353). She explains the rise of European hegemony thus: “the ‘Fall of the East’ preceded the ‘Rise of the West,’ and it was this devolution of the preceding system that facilitated Europe’s easy conquest.” But immediately afterward she admits that the takeover of the old system “was certainly not according to the old rules.” The old world system offered little resistance to the Portuguese because the East, accustomed to peaceable trade, was unprepared for the new European combination of trade and plunder, and the change in the rules “caught the older players off guard” (361–362). Abu-Lughod never asks how the Portuguese were able to change the rules. Was it not because they knew how to

mount many ship-destroying cannon on their decks and hence could immediately take the command of the Indian Ocean away from its ancient masters, the Arabs and the Malays? These developments, Abu-Lughod's conclusions to the contrary, constituted a considerable advance in technology—a simple deterministic factor internal to Europe and influenced by European culture.

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF CONTINGENCIES: JACK GOODY

The distinguished British anthropologist Jack Goody, Emeritus William Wyse Professor at St. John's College, Cambridge, has studied sub-Saharan Africa since the 1950s and has also written widely on cross-cultural subjects, especially the cultural affects of literacy. Goody has questioned the idea, stemming from Max Weber, that the modern West is distinguished by a peculiar "rationality." *The East in the West*, a collection of essays on various subjects including literacy, accounting, and family structure, offers the fullest statement of his views on cultural evolution.¹³ Like the radical geographers, Goody excludes cultural factors from modernization, but by a different sort of argument, concluding that economic development can be explained by a variety of "contingent" factors, not necessarily geographical.

Like Blaut, Diamond, and Abu-Lughod, Goody argues that growth occurs everywhere, and the Western European achievements "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 existence of "deep-structural differences" among societies is "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." Goody regards as inadequate any theory "that claims to find something profoundly 'structural' in Asia that prevented these developments from taking place, or in Europe that advanced them" (7–8).

For an Africanist writing in the mid 1990s to say that Africa has had “setbacks” seems oddly euphemistic. The mere recognition of the difference might lead Goody to ask why large parts of the Confucianist world have been able to modernize successfully while Africa has not. Goody, who references Abu-Lughod’s *Before European Hegemony*, claims that only Eurocentric prejudice leads us to assume priority “at deep, socio-cultural levels whereas the evidence for this is either thin or non-existent. The reasons for achievements in both West and East are more contingent” (8–9). As Goody’s title suggests, he argues that growth must be everywhere the same: “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” (8). But why cannot different kinds of growth occur in different cultures? He writes, “I am not trying to make all the world the same” (226)—and indeed, he is no James Blaut, but he seems to go as far in that direction as a reasonable man can.

In Goody’s concluding essay, a more original argument surfaces. He claims that it is impossible to explain a temporary advance, such as when some particular human group takes the lead in economic modernization, by allocating permanent advantages, such as deep and continuing cultural factors. Instead of using categories like mentalities, outlooks, and cultures, he explains development by the accumulation of knowledge. Thus there occurred an “alteration in achievement based on the common attainments of the Bronze Age. Over the centuries we find a swing of the pendulum with one advancing on one front at one time, another at a different stage.” Goody explains these differences in development with reference to “hold-ups” and “advances” within societies: “Hold-ups could be caused by invasion from the outside, by unrest from within, by ‘a high-level equilibrium trap’ [a phrase used by Elvin], by the interference of church or state, or simply by inertia. The advances could be promoted by new means of production or communication, new advances in knowledge or in practice, new resources, or by other contingent features” (231). Although Goody seems to acknowledge

differences among societies that lead to differences in development, he refuses to consider any permanent differences in cultures: "In view of this alternation, it is pointless to speculate about deep, continuing, cultural factors, such as individualism, that imply a semi-permanent pre-eminence for the West." Instead, Goody argues that scholars should "ask on a much more specific level what factors enabled the East to advance at one period and in one sphere and the West at others. That is quite a different enterprise from the one that assumes the West to be marked by the presence or growth of rationality (or a special form of rationality) or by similar, unique features" (238).

The absence of concrete examples makes Goody's argument difficult to understand. His distinction between "temporary" features and "semi-permanent" or "long-standing" features seems arbitrary. One might think that cultural institutions such as schools, universities, libraries, learned societies, publishers, law courts, and so on decisively affect the accumulation and transmission of knowledge. When Goody speaks of "deep, continuing cultural factors," he seems to have in mind large, nebulous abstractions like "individualism" or "rationality." But in between abstractions and contingencies lie structures known as institutions, which are the traditional objects of study for historians and social scientists. Knowledge and skills are not passed down in a vacuum. Cultures transmit them in the form of elaborate information packets, including scripts, often fairly complete, for the roles individuals are to play in institutional settings. Goody's analysis, perhaps reflecting the influence of postmodernist anthropology's dismissal as "essentialism" the study of institutional and cultural continuities, seems to have no room for such institutions and scripts.

In *The East and the West* and in earlier works, Goody has argued that logic is not peculiar to Western culture but is implicit in the invention of writing itself. One may accept without difficulty that all literate cultures have some kind of formal logic, but literate cultures institutionalize the ability in vastly different ways. G.E.R.

Lloyd offered some insight into the institutionalization of literacy in his work on the history of science.¹⁴ He argued that the physical sciences, although they deal with invariant truths, developed differently in ancient Greece and ancient China in response to different socio-political structures, chiefly because the legal and juridical habits of confrontational debate that permeated Greek society imparted a peculiar hard-edged argumentativeness to philosophical and scientific discourse that was largely absent in ancient China. Lloyd's argument suggests that institutional analysis may offer at least as "specific" an analysis of the institutional nature of knowledge as Goody's discussion of "inertia," "equilibrium traps," and "other contingent features."

Other scholars have agreed that the cluster of features Goody has chosen to examine, such as bookkeeping and family organization, are significant, and one can accept his arguments that they were not unique to Europe and conferred no special advantages. But one is left with a sense that Goody has hardly scratched the surface of the great problem of modernization. At the beginning of *East in the West*, he quotes a passage from Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759) as an example of the European conviction of European specialness. The philosopher Im-lac is describing his travels: "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 attained: 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."

When Johnson and other eighteenth-century Europeans considered Europe's growing hegemony over the world, they did not think

about kinship structures; they would probably have been bemused at the suggestion that double-entry bookkeeping could be important; and, being men of the Enlightenment, they would probably have acquiesced readily in the proposition that all men are endowed with the same rational faculties. They thought the rise of Europe a matter of power and knowledge: military and naval power, mercantile power and freedom, political freedom, rational philosophy, and experimental science. Goody suggests his method would work on these larger issues, too. He admits that other scholars have focused on law, freedom, “and similar virtues that are associated in Westerners’ minds with the Greeks, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, and have been seized on as differences relevant to the speed of later changes in Europe compared with Asia. But I have concentrated on the first set [accounting, etc.] and tried to show that the differences are not so great, nor are the chosen features all that critical in the development of industrial capitalism. The same exercise could be undertaken for those other global variables” (248–249). That exercise will surely be undertaken, but I for one shall be surprised if it comes to the same conclusions.

Goody, for all his learning and sophistication, is on the same track as the radical geographers. They all assume that growth is everywhere, and everywhere the same, and thus they assume that culture is extremely malleable. But they exaggerate the “alternation” of development. Goody’s metaphors of “leap-frogging” and the swinging “pendulum” are misleading. The pendulum did not swing much. The European movement had only one relatively minor precursor, in medieval China. The rest of the world never played leapfrog at all, or at least that is too acrobatic an image for its glacial progress. The evolution of science and technology has not been a common stream to which all societies have made equal and undifferentiated contributions. The significant non-Western inflows dried up centuries ago, and non-Western cultures contributed virtually nothing to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nor have they contributed anything since.

THE ECONOMICS OF RECURRENT GROWTH: ERIC JONES

The British economic historian Eric L. Jones, now at the University of Melbourne (Australia) and the University of Reading (England), has attempted to write world history on a grand scale, rather than theorizing about how it should be written. He has produced two brilliant studies of world economic history, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, which compared Western Europe with the other major civilizations of Eurasia in early-modern times; and *Growth Recurring: Economic Change in World History*, in which he incorporated early and non-Western episodes of growth, especially in the Far East.¹⁵ *Growth Recurring* argues that “economic growth would have been possible in any society had impediments, especially political ones, been removed” (2nd ed., xv). Historians “need to get away from the belief that growth came about abruptly and only once” (193). Jones thinks that “extensive growth,” caused by rising population, has been normal in history, but “intensive growth,” which brings increases in average income as well as population, has been much more rare. The early-medieval Islamic world may have come close to intensification, but only three certain episodes of intensive growth have occurred in world history: Sung China, Tokugawa Japan, and early-modern Western Europe. In all three, proto-industrialization occurred, along with rising prosperity, urbanization, rural domestic industry, and some technical innovation. The Mongols ended the Sung progress, although not entirely, for China later regained the Sung level of prosperity and may have remained equal to Europe till the eighteenth century. What would have happened to Tokugawa Japan if Westerners had not intervened in the 1850s remains a mystery. Only the European episode endured long enough to spark a permanent industrial and technological revolution.

Jones’s theory has two sides: rational choices, and the constraints on rational choices. Jones claims the propensity for growth has always existed, simply because in every large community, some individuals will work hard to improve their circumstances, and

sometimes they succeed in large numbers. Growth is inevitable unless actively frustrated, as it was in pre-industrial states by exploitative elites who rarely saw the promotion of growth as advantageous. Jones argues that the repeated blockage of growth can be explained simply by the tendency of ruling elites to maximize rent-seeking—the “repeated restoration of an unfortunate equilibrium, a low-level political trap” (194). He sees history as the record of economies constantly dashed by their own growth against the rock of exploitation (43). Technological advances occurred in pre-industrial times, especially in war, but progress was unstable and had no systematic upward effect on income, leaving no bases to build upon—thus creating the centuries-long lags between surges forward. A breakthrough could occur only when political power became so decentralized that a number of centers of power had to compete with one another, “so that market forces could push their way through, the way weeds crack paving-stones” (189). When market development reached a certain point, elites learned to think of commerce as an advantage and offered services to promote further growth. Western Europe and Japan approached the threshold at about the same time.

Jones and the postcolonialists exhibit one similarity: They accept the primacy of material causation. Jones, a historical materialist in the way of most traditional economists, doubts the power of cultural traditions to inhibit growth. “There are few grounds for finding in the values or institutions of pre-modern Asia final blockages to growth rather than brakes and filters that gave local coloration to change.” He even suggests that “only a superficial check held Asia back between, say, Sung times and the nineteenth century” (106–107). He seems to think that sufficiently strong economic incentives will almost always, if not immediately, bring change, and he is even more doubtful about the ability of culture to exercise a positive effect. Jones is not convinced by Weber’s thesis about the alleged connection between Protestantism and capitalism, and still less by those scholars who try to stretch the Weber thesis to include the Far East by labeling Confucianism or Shintoism a sort

of “aberrant Calvinism” (32, 101). Instead, Jones argues that economic growth has proven to be compatible with so many different philosophies and religions precisely because it is a “base” goal that escapes the attention of priests and philosophers (43). This leads him to a guarded optimism: If the impediments to growth are more political than cultural, they should be easier to remove.

Jones’s synthesis explains the forces for growth better than the constraints upon growth. To call growth “normal,” when we can point to only three episodes of intensive growth in 5,000 years of civilization, seems rather like saying thaws were normal in the Ice Age—they were, but not as normal as freezes. Is “superficial” the right word for a check that held Asia back for 600 years? Is rent-seeking enough to explain a chilling power that can swallow up centuries? Perhaps some additional impetus is needed to account for the occasional bursts of dramatic growth. Nevertheless, Jones’s concept of recurrent growth offers a more promising method to explain problems of global economic development than the theories of uniform growth discussed earlier.

CONCLUSION

The sort of “Eurocentrist” lambasted by scholars like Blaut may be a straw man, but everyone holds a Eurocentric view of modern history, whether admitted or not, simply because a Eurocentric view of the modern world is the only realistic view conceivable. Since the nineteenth century, the world has been soaked in Western influences. The diffusion of those influences began much earlier—a recent Indian scholar dates “the European age in world history” from A.D. 1500.¹⁶ But it is also true that our picture of world history as a whole has been transformed. We know now that the European industrial revolution was not such a great discontinuity. I believe that, if the push into modernization had not happened in Europe, it would probably have been made somewhere else sooner or later, most likely in Japan, followed by Korea and China.

In recent years, “Eurocentricity” has come to mean, not the undeniable fact that the modern world is Eurocentric, but the view that

Western cultural traditions have been instrumental in its creation. The authors discussed above share a suspicion of cultural explanations, but the “uniform growth” and “recurrent growth” theories offer quite different justifications for it. The “uniform growth” scholars, all under postcolonialist influence, often give no particular reason for their materialist bias. They simply assume materialism to be “scientific.” If they offer a reason, it will usually be the Marxist principle—which exercises a lingering influence on the minds of many who are not real Marxists—that matters essential to survival must always take priority. The argument is deceptively obvious. The necessities of life must override all other considerations, but the necessities of life do not operate all the time. The anthropologist C. R. Hallpike argued that, for primitive cultures, “It is extremely difficult to be maladaptive, because almost everything will work,” and so they run most of the time on the principle of “survival of the mediocre.”¹⁷ Complex cultures, on the other hand, are subject to more competition, but they also have many more devices to immunize themselves from contamination by foreign values and to manipulate “rational choices.”

The nineteenth-century distinction between base and superstructure has always depended more upon ideology than evidence. It seems certain that material factors, demographic and economic, lie behind great worldwide changes of prehistory, like the spread of agriculture and the rise of the state, but these changes are hardly “history” in the usual sense. In ordinary history, where time is measured in centuries or decades rather than millennia, it seems more useful to adopt Eric Jones’s concept of cultural forces as brakes and filters. If the filters are fine enough to block economic change, which Jones has acknowledged can happen “over periods which are quite long in policy terms,” then all changes must happen simultaneously, and there is no reason to call one more basic than another.¹⁸ Ample room remains for disagreement about the relative importance of cultural factors—for example, I tend to place more importance than Jones on the power of cultural variables to reinforce or retard

economic development. But here is not the place to pursue that argument. I wish to offer a more modest proposal: Until compelling evidence can be presented, any research strategy that asks us to begin by putting on blinders to vast areas of human experience should be politely declined.

NOTES

I am grateful to Professor Eric Jones for reading and commenting on an early draft of this article. I am, of course, solely responsible for all the opinions expressed.

1. Joseph Needham et al., *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 17 vols. to date, 1954–). Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past: A Social and Economic Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973). William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
2. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
3. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, V. 3, p. 197, 198.
4. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol 3, p. 199.
5. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol 3, p. 200.
6. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1978). Martin Kramer's *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001) provides a powerful attack on the school of Said.
7. James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (N.Y.: Guilford Press, 1993) and *Eight Eurocentric Historians* (N.Y.: Guilford Press, 2000).
8. Blaut, *Colonizer's Model*, p. 12, his emphasis. Subsequent page references are to this book unless otherwise noted.
9. I cannot resist quoting Blaut's extraordinary argument. In response to Jared Diamond, who argued that the development of black Africa was handicapped by the absence of ungulates that could be domesticated, Blaut calls it "circular" to say that only "those species that actually were domesticated were suitable for domestication" (*Eurocentric Historians*, 163). But the fact remains that zebra, for whatever reason, were never domesticated, so why does their theoretical domestication matter?
10. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1997). Page references will be given in the text.
11. Since I have discussed Diamond's book in a recent article, I will focus here on more general issues. See Doyné Dawson, "The Marriage of Marx and Darwin?" *History and Theory* 41 (2002), 43–59.
12. Janet Lippman Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Page references provided parenthetically within the text.
13. Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Page references provided parenthetically within the text.
14. G.E.R. Lloyd, *Adversaries and Authorities: Investigations into Ancient Greek and Chinese Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Goody discusses Lloyd's work in *The East in the West* on pages 241–245.
15. Eric L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 2nd ed. 1987); and *Growth Recurring: Economic Change in World History*

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- (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 2nd ed. 2000). All page references are to *Growth Recurring* unless otherwise indicated and will be given, where possible, parenthetically within the text.
16. K.M. Pannikat, quoted in *The Times Atlas of World History*, ed. Geoffrey Parker (4th ed., London: Hammond, 1993), 48.
 17. C. R. Hallpike, *The Principles of Social Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 122.
 18. Eric Jones, "Culture and its Relationship to Economic Change," *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 151 (1995), 269–285; see 269. Jones would not concede so much to culture as I do. In the second edition of *Growth Recurring*, he is still inclined "to emphasize the malleability of values and the central importance of political circumstances" (xliv), and he has reaffirmed as much in personal communication.