

BOOK REVIEW SERIES

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GOODY, JACK. *The Eurasian Miracle, Polity, Cambridge, 2010, 159 pages.*

Jack Goody began to explore the sources of the contrast between Africa and Eurasia with *Production and Reproduction* (1976). That book was prefaced by a brief, but revealing account of his personal history and motives in launching this enterprise. Now, some three and a half decades and twenty volumes later, Goody has produced this retrospective view of what the series was all about. Ever since *The East in the West* (1996), Goody's focus has been less on what makes Africa different and more on subverting Europe's pretension to superiority over Asia. In this time, he has gained credibility from the latter's rise as home to new capitalist powers, first Japan, now China, India and others. Since the claim for Europe's exceptional status always lay in identifying the distinctive social and cultural conditions for capitalist development, this shift in the economic balance between the West and the rest reinforces a perspective on world history that long predates current evidence for it.

As Goody has insisted many times, twentieth century anthropology retained more of its predecessor's racist evolutionism than its practitioners like to admit. This took the form not only of treating the indigenous inhabitants of Oceania, Africa and the Americas as "primitives", but also of treating the civilizations of the East, explicitly or implicitly, as backward and more suitable for comparison with them than Western societies. This attitude was reproduced by historians who traced the global mastery assured by industrial capitalism to the Renaissance or Reformation and even to medieval feudalism and Greco-Roman antiquity. The theories of capitalist development offered by Marx and Weber provided the strongest intellectual

support for these views. The present essay takes off from Goody's critical riposte to a Cambridge conference on the "European miracle" held a quarter century ago (*Europe and the Rise of Capitalism*, edited by J. Baechler, J. Hall and M. Mann, 1988). His case looks a lot more persuasive now.

The organization of this book documents the main areas in which Goody has sought to dismantle the evolutionist myth of Europe's unique historical path. These are: kinship, the family and individualism; urban commerce; the puritan roots of capitalism; and communications technology. He has addressed the second theme only recently, but has devoted a number of books to the others. Goody's main thesis -- following the prehistorian Gordon Childe, whose *What Happened in History* (1939) he read during the war, and before him L.H. Morgan -- is that the emergence of cities and civilization in the Bronze Age constituted an "urban revolution" in which all of Eurasia participated eventually. The relative standing of its constituent regions has fluctuated over 5,000 years, with Western Europe (and its North American offshoots) enjoying some advantage since the Renaissance and especially in the last two centuries since the industrial revolution. He utterly rejects any claim that this advantage has its roots in western history before then or that non-western Eurasia was ever structurally inferior. In most respects, Asian civilizations were well ahead of Europe for much of history. The speed with which they have adopted modern capitalism -- faster than the Renaissance diffused to Northwestern Europe -- points to a fundamental similarity between Europe and Asia that helps us to understand the reversal in dominance underway now.

Above all, Jack Goody set out to deconstruct the racist binaries that organize so much thinking about anthropology and world history. He thinks too much has been made of the industrial revolution as a decisive break in history; that modern capitalism may not be so radically different from its predecessors; and that attempts to associate recent history exclusively with the achievements of the West are deluded. He obviously feels that the contrast between Old and New Worlds is exaggerated, since he never contemplates the Americas. This leads Goody to assert that many of the features taken to be culturally distinctive of particular regions (notably

Europe) may be found elsewhere, often in quite well-developed forms. So, rather than classify whole societies according to the presumed presence and absence of cultural traits, it is better to consider institutional variation between them as a matter of emphasis and combination. In this way the core grounds for racial superiority are undermined and economic development might be less readily conceived as a series of radical revolutions.

Yes, but... Childe did not assimilate the machine revolution of industrial capitalism to what emerged in Mesopotamia five millennia ago. Since 1800 the world's population has grown more than six-fold, half of it now living in cities, whereas only a fortieth of humanity was urban two centuries ago. This explosion depends on the conversion of inanimate energy by machines, with the result that many people live longer, work less and spend more than they ever did before. Goody is right to insist that the legacy of agrarian civilization is still strong in our world and that older forms of capitalism (merchant and financial) have not been swept aside by factory production. But we are still compelled to understand the economic revolution we are living through, if only to head off global disaster. Marx and Weber have more uses in this respect than as mere cheerleaders for western hegemony.

Marx, for all his occasional references to Asia's stagnation, explicitly did *not* reduce the capitalist mode of production to a case study of western history. He saw in Victorian capitalism the seeds of a new stage in human history and identified the complex of workers, machines and money that drove it. Since he was right, we might pay attention to his theoretical model. Goody's elision of any significant difference between merchant and industrial capital makes that impossible. Nor was Weber just concerned with the role of the protestant ethic in the rise of capitalism. Goody is probably right to disparage the results of his excursions into Asian religion; but Weber's *General Economic History* (1922) contains much that is essential to understanding modern capitalism as an economic system.

Goody himself is rarely explicit that his whole *oeuvre* is an attack on cultural anthropology. Like Morgan and Childe before him, he explains cultural difference by technological change. The unequal class structure of

agrarian civilization underpins many of the overt cultural differences between Eurasia and Africa and this was made possible in turn by the intensification of agriculture (the plough and irrigation) and by new means of communication (writing). So western supremacists are not only mistaken in their pretense of Europe's uniqueness, but they are usually idealists who fail to grasp the material conditions underlying the differences they celebrate. This leaves two gaping holes in Goody's claim to offer a better way of understanding modern world history. I have already indicated that one of them is his willful neglect of the social causes of the machine revolution that has transformed the world in 200 years and continues to do so. But the other is the place of contemporary Africa in his scheme.

Jack Goody has reverted in his later years to preoccupations formed when a student of English literature, but the period he spent as an ethnographer in Northern Ghana provided the original ground for his extended foray into world-historical comparison. The problem is that "Africa" forms a binary contrast with Eurasia in his work and the lifestyle of the stateless hoe-farmers he knew stands as its symbol. North Africa was part of the "urban revolution" almost from the beginning and the Sahara hardly inhibited links with the Sudan via the Nile or with Ethiopia and the East African coast by sea.

In West Africa, a Sudanic civilization based on marked rural-urban divisions was ancient. When the King of Mali went to Mecca in the thirteenth century, the gold he spent in Egypt caused runaway inflation there for thirty years. Kano, with its wide boulevards, was the textile manufacturing hub of the region. Ibadan had a population of 200,000 in the nineteenth century. (Yoruba Nobel laureates don't come from nowhere). All of this suggests that the logic of Goody's treatment of Asia, as being more complex than reductive stereotypes, should also be applied to Africa. Even so, in 1900 Subsaharan Africa was by far the least populated and urbanized major region in the world, so Goody's claim that, despite limited imports of iron and literacy, it missed out on the full effects of the urban revolution has some force. Since then, Africa too has gone through a demographic explosion that will see it reach a quarter of the human population by 2050. The urban share is fast approaching the global average

of a half. It seems barely credible, given his engagement with the politics of independence, yet "Africa" seems to have become for Goody a static abstraction used selectively to support his assault on western disparagement of the East.

In the nineteenth century, anthropologists tried to explain how Europeans came to dominate the planet so quickly and easily. Racist binaries (and even triads) were the result. The whites succeeded because of intrinsic cultural advantages that had a biological foundation; empire was justified as an alternative to the permanent inferiority of the colonized. The ethnographic revolution was in part a way of rejecting this evolutionism, but, as Jack Goody shows, the contrast between western civilization and its primitive, non-industrial or non-western antithesis survived. In the last half-century, he and Eric Wolf stand out as anthropologists who wished to engage with the history of inequality in global terms. Indeed Goody acknowledges Wolf's preference for "tributary states" over the traditional opposition between western feudalism and Asiatic despotism. Their methods and emphasis could not be more different; but each succeeded in replacing a cultural anthropology of infinite variations with a materialist world history illuminating the sources of humanity's discontents.

This small book provides a road map to Goody's vast canvas, spread over a score of volumes. It is almost as if a great painter wrote the catalogue for an exhibition of his life's work. John Thompson of Polity Press is to be congratulated for persuading him to write it, since this synoptic essay offers the best short guide yet to an extraordinary project.