

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JACK GOODY, *The Theft of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 342 p., index.

The “theft of history” in this book’s title refers to the appropriation of history by the west. The past, Goody argues, has been conceptualized largely within the framework of western Europe, and then imposed on the rest of the world. Goody is an eminent and venerable British anthropologist, knighted for his scholarly work, and perhaps best known for his studies on the cultural context of writing and literacy. Here, however, he focuses on the presentism and Eurocentrism of western historians. Thus the relatively recent leap of western European countries to world dominance is seen to have underpinnings which reside in the historical depths of western social structures and institutions. For example, some historians, Goody notes, would argue that particular features of Roman agricultural estates, western feudalism, and religion (*vide* Weber’s “Protestant Ethic”) created just the right structural basis for the creation of capitalist enterprises which formed the underpinnings of later western industrial and political dominance. Not only that, but such institutions as western European towns and universities are seen to have been uniquely supportive of the values of “progress,” individualism, humanism, and democracy. Much of *The Theft of History* refutes this line of argument.

The book is divided into three parts. The first consists of four chapters that expand on issues surrounding antiquity, feudalism and oriental despotism. Part two examines the intellectual perspectives of three influential sociologists and historians whose writings Goody holds, in varying degrees, to be Eurocentric. The third part looks at “three institutions and values,” namely, the claim to the uniqueness of European towns and universities; what Goody calls “stolen love” – European claims to the emotions; and also the set of values noted in the previous paragraph.

A brief commentary on the first part must suffice here. Goody is correct when he notes that many western historians and sociologists have been blinkered by their Greco-Roman heritage. For example, what do we know of the Carthaginian Empire which may have been the originator of our form of alphabet? The Romans destroyed it, and like the Persians and Parthians, it became just another “oriental despotism” of the type both Marx and Weber were keen on articulating, and which Goody notes as being a short-hand excuse for ignorance. Likewise, he argues forcibly against the view that European feudalism contained within itself the peculiar roots of later economic advance: “part of a unique causal chain

leading to western capitalism. Everything beyond, in Marx's phrase, was 'Asiatic exceptionalism'" (83). As to "oriental despotism," Goody looks at the history of the Ottoman Empire and finds a society which, in contrast to the nineteenth-century view of the "sick man of Europe," was far from being static. Goody even argues that the Ottoman Empire's long refusal of the printing press was an outcome of religious beliefs, not an overall unwillingness to change. Furthermore, he believes that until the rise of the printing press, the Islamic world held a distinct advantage in the production of knowledge. There is no suggestion here, of course, that the Ottoman Empire did not later become a shadow of its former self, although this reviewer's own work incorporates research on the efforts of late-nineteenth-century Turkish "modernizers" to combat the country's decline (Dwayne Winseck and Robert Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets and Globalization, 1860-1930*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

Various historically-minded scholars are criticized in the first part of Goody's book, particularly M. I. Finley who wrote a series of studies on ancient European history, and one on ancient and modern democracy, in the 1970s and 1980s. However, three eminent scholars are specifically singled out for analysis and criticism. The first, Joseph Needham, is best known for his "magisterial series" of volumes on *Science and Civilization in China* in which he showed that "Chinese science had been equal, if not superior, to that of the west until the sixteenth century" (125). The second is the German-born historical sociologist Norbert Elias, who "looked at *The Civilizing Process* which he saw as achieving its zenith in Europe following the Renaissance" (ibid). The third is the great French historian Fernand Braudel "who in his three volume work *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century* discussed various forms of capitalism in different parts of the world, but concluded "true capitalism was a purely European development" (ibid). Goody takes on the task of showing that their arguments are flawed either because they take the comparative advantage gained by Europe following the Industrial Revolution "back to a distant past, or also privilege later Europe in a questionable way, so that they distort world history rather than illuminate it" (ibid). However, a footnote attached to this accusation of distortion gives Goody some wriggle room: "Of course, [the three distort] only in certain ways; I am in complete agreement with most of their writings" (ibid).

Goody needs the room, especially in the cases of Needham and Braudel, because he recognizes that he is dealing with outstanding scholars. Thus he insists that he in "no way wants to undermine the enormous advances that the former made in our understanding of Chinese scientific achievements" (153). Braudel, in turn, is described as "brilliant" and "a historian of the very first rank" (184). Yet, we are offered a plethora of criticisms of the assumptions and conclusions of both scholars which mix serious attacks on their views of the rise of western commerce and capitalism with some rather marginal quibbles: for example, attacking Braudel for suggesting that the west "discovered" alcohol, tea, coffee and chocolate. Then there is Norbert Elias whose work, Goody notes, some may consider *passé*, but which, he suggests, still has a major European following. Elias's work

focussed mainly on the progressive unfolding of modes of behaviour that he considered typical of the development of “western civilized man” – the notion of civilization linked to cleanliness, good manners and savoir-faire. That he saw an unfolding of “civility” in this area in western nations, and apparently ignored other cultures, in Goody’s view clearly opens him to criticism on the grounds of Eurocentrism and, likely, bad history.

Elias had to flee his native Germany during the Nazi regime. Yet Goody notes “today’s violence in family and street is not a mirage and it is difficult to reconcile Elias’s Whiggish approach...with the fact that at the time he was writing Nazis were murdering Jews throughout Europe, clicking their heels with handkerchiefs stuffed in their pockets and blowing their noses in a refined way” (165). But if Elias is so easy to criticize, and so patently lacking a non-European perspective, why bother with him? Goody apparently met Elias whilst both were working in Ghana in the early 1960’s. The book contains a footnote in which Goody outlines very negatively his impression of Elias’s cavalier approach to fieldwork – driving out to a village with chauffeur and students – and of his casual collecting of African art (178). The footnote is intended to underline Elias’s Eurocentric blinkers, but it is rather picayune.

Turning finally to the third part of *The Theft of History*, one confronts a complex series of arguments against the historical perspective that early western European towns and universities had particular features that stimulated the growth of learning and commerce. With regard to the universities, Goody is confronting the argument that higher learning in the Islamic world became dominated by religion whereas incorporated western universities were able, at an early date, to carve out some secular territory. His point is that religion did (and does) dominate the madrassas in Islamic countries, but that humanistic, medical, and scientific learning found a place elsewhere in their respective societies. Yet, Goody recognizes that Islam’s long-standing rejection of the printing press on the grounds that the prophet’s word could not be produced by mechanical means laid a heavy hand on the prospect for educational reform – indeed on any of the profound socio-cultural changes that the printing press wrought in western countries. Clearly, therefore – though Goody does not say much about this – state or religious practices in Middle-Eastern and Asian countries during the time of the European Renaissance, may have established circumstances which ultimately proved quite detrimental not only to educational advance but to the stimulus of domestic economies. For example, China’s swift movement into the western ceramics business in the eighteenth century shows an evident entrepreneurial spirit – no one could doubt it – but the growing isolation of the country from outside influences was earlier typified in the recall and destruction of the huge Great Fleet during its final expedition westwards in 1433 – an act which profoundly effected the history of both China and, likely, the world. Western Europe offers no such historical parallel, although certainly plenty of examples of disastrous economic policies. In a sense, China, and likewise Japan, isolated themselves because they could do so. By contrast, European rulers of, say, the early Renaissance period lived cheek by jowl, competing and cooperating, trying to gain advantage. Isolation was out of the question.

The remainder of part three, devoted mainly to “romantic love” and western appropriation of values, can only be superficially reviewed. The chapter on the former, based on earlier work, is intended to counter historians’ claims that romantic love, linked to such values as individualism and indirectly to the role of the conjugal family in the rise of capitalism, originated with the troubadour society of twelfth-century Europe. Whilst there are some historians who have taken this line, the argument for troubadour origins or specifically western roots is so patently false that – once again – one wonders why it needs to be a theme for major criticism. Look at *The Song of Songs* in the *Old Testament*, as indeed Goody notes, if one wants an example of earlier romantic and raunchy love lyrics from outside of Europe.

The view that the Greeks, or rather Athens, created democracy has always rather grated on me, when one recognizes that no women, slaves or outsiders were included in Athenian democracy; and also that the Greek city states contained some regimes, Sparta as a case in point, which would have made George Orwell cringe. In contemporary international affairs too, Goody is anxious to point out that democracy and rhetoric go hand in hand. So, he notes, Israel is touted as the Middle-East’s only democracy whilst maintaining a huge army, restricting the rights of Palestinians, and having engaged in a series of atrocities. On the other hand, the Palestinians and neighbouring Arabs are defined as corrupt and never having known “true democracy.” But at this point Goody has entered the foreign affairs debate, and its link to the comparative historical framework of the book is tenuous.

In his concluding chapter, Goody observes “in recent years, scholars have...taken steps to make their steps more comparative, more relevant to the rest of the world. But these measures are grossly inadequate to the task” (305). I do not have the historical expertise to judge this claim on scholarly grounds *per se*, but it is striking that he criticizes Braudel for using the term “junks” in reference to a 1419 Chinese westward ocean expedition, but makes no direct reference either to the Great Fleet nor, more importantly, to the growing body of western literature which is drawing increasing popular attention to the sheer scale, and technological superiority, of that fleet and its ships. The contemporary west had nothing to match them either in scale or advanced technology. So the wheels of comparative history are turning, and whilst I applaud any effort to make us more aware of the debt which is owed to our non-European contacts, it is with regret that I suggest *The Theft of History* may have less impact on this growing awareness than it should. One is left with the impression that the editors of Cambridge University Press let Goody’s scholarly reputation blunt their pens. Take these cases in point. Goody does not actually negate Braudel’s suggestion that the chair may have been a European invention, for the “sitting up” position was not found in non-European societies (sic), but he simply states that “the statement seems dubious” (185). This despite a fine example of a high-backed chair being found in the tomb of Tutankhamen! In another spot, Goody talks about Italy developing as a commercial centre only after the Crusades of the fourteenth century (206). Even taking into account the large number of Crusades, they ended in the

Middle-East in the thirteenth century. These examples may seem trivial, but they look like a case of too much haste. Added to this, the book is stylistically a tough read. Jack Goody has done so much better.

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