



THE



EURASIAN MIRACLE



JACK GOODY



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Alternation or supremacy?

A short introduction to a short book. This book is about the relative unity of the European and Asian continents rather than their differences, a relative unity that began with the Bronze Age Revolution. That great change – what the prehistorian Gordon Childe has described as the beginning of the Culture of Cities (hence Civilization in his sense) – did not result in a bifurcation between the dynamic west, passing through antiquity, and feudalism, to capitalism, and the east that produced a static, hydraulic, bureaucratic, despotism, which was not about to modernize. This was the nineteenth-century theory of the earlier sociologists, Marx, Weber and many European historians, who saw the world from the standpoint of Europe's predominance and presumed it had always had an advantage. No one is doubting the achievements of Europe in the Industrial Revolution, nor yet in the Renaissance. What is at stake is the extent to which this was European. In some respects its roots were Eurasian, but in any case the key movement is alternation between post-Bronze Age societies, rather than viewing one as having a permanent advantage over the other.

This first chapter attempts to deal with various Europeanist arguments that propose a completely different trajectory in the west. It is based upon my contribution to a conference

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held in Cambridge in September 1985 under the title of ‘The European Miracle’. On this occasion I began to query the whole discussion on the grounds that it placed too much emphasis on the invention of something called ‘capitalism’, it neglected the contributions of other societies to the achievements of the Industrial Revolution and, in particular, it overlooked the contributions of the east to ‘modernization’, mechanization and industrialization. The thesis of the book was not wrong in recognizing the advantage gained by the west after the Renaissance and especially in the nineteenth century after the Industrial Revolution, but it seemed to be an example of ethnocentric teleology in so far as it attributed that European achievement to deep-rooted, quasi-permanent features of the west, rather than recognizing the phenomenon of alternation of advantage in an exchange economy (which included the exchange of information).

This short book contains little that I have not hinted at before but much that I wanted to clarify – and, specifically, the aspect of alternation among the major civilizations of Eurasia, which raises the question of why I think the so-called ‘European miracle’ was part of a wider Eurasian phenomenon, developing as it did in the nineteenth century (and even before in the Renaissance), but also of why I cannot agree with the kind of essentialist account that Europeans have been only too ready to offer. Alternation automatically rejects essentialism and the notion of permanent advantage.

The idea for this book came from John Thompson who pointed out that I needed to deal more specifically with the question of ‘why capitalism in Europe?’ That made me look again at the report of the conference, which only confirmed my belief that capitalism had to be seen in a wider Eurasian context where there were a succession of miracles and rebirths. What happened in Europe in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries was part of these. Today we are experiencing another swing towards the east, which is not simply copying the west but picking up on earlier achievements. Only such a hypothesis can explain the different records of development in Asia and in Africa, which never experienced

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the Bronze Age Revolution. The foundation of the culture of cooking and the growth of a 'grand cuisine' as well as the culture of flowers are things I constantly refer to, partly because these are areas in which I have done extensive research.¹

But also they are areas outside the normal range of economic purview, even though they were much influenced by the economy, and they are areas associated with more general cultural achievement. Nevertheless, as I have argued, they are areas in which the west remained in constant comparison with the east, which in many respects had the advantage over a long period, so that neither the economy nor the knowledge system was inferior to that of the west.

Why European and not Eurasian?

It was in the 1980s that a number of European intellectuals – Jean Baechler, John Hall and Michael Mann – held a prestigious conference where proceedings were published as a book on the European Miracle. It dealt with the particular ideological or political structures of the east and west. That is to say, it dealt with the twin questions of the ‘uniqueness of the west’ and ‘the miracle of the west’ that not only have formed the central focus of enquiry explicitly in the works of Marx, Weber and countless other economists, sociologists and historians, but are implicitly subsumed by the folk-models of most Europeans and in the analytic categories of those anthropologists, and other scholars, who draw a broad black line between modern and traditional, industrial and pre-industrial, advanced and primitive, indeed between ‘we’ and ‘they’.

It was on this latter point that I disagreed with the bulk of Europeanists since I saw many of the arguments put forward by them – including Marx and Weber, and the historians, Braudel, Laslett and Joseph Needham – as being mistaken, indeed teleological. I do not want to rehearse these arguments now except briefly to mention the thesis, central to the work of the whole Cambridge Group in population studies which Laslett headed, that the ‘European marriage

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pattern' (of the statistician John Haynal) was singular in promoting a late marriage age for men and women, which meant that they had fewer children and more Weberian restraint (part of the Protestant ethic), following the late eighteenth-century comments of the Revd Malthus. The Chinese on the other hand married earlier and were less constrained in their sexual life, producing more and more offspring. The thesis was obviously in tune with the work of Max Weber and the importance of the Protestant ethic in the establishment of capitalism in the west and the supposed 'failure' of the east to achieve it.

In the eyes of many Europeans, a fundamental difference of this kind went back long before the rise of capitalism, to antiquity itself (which apparently only occurred in the west) and indeed to the division, so critical to Marx and many others, between an east characterized by authoritarian rule and by the Asiatic mode of production and the west with its slave society in Greece and Rome leading to the emergence of feudalism and then of capitalism.

While my own speciality of social anthropology in no way depends upon the nature of these modes of production, nevertheless it reinforced in many minds a binary division between east and west, the traditional and the modern. For instance, the French sociologists Durkheim and Mauss included China in their analysis of 'primitive classification'; the French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss cited the Chinese as an example of cross-cousin marriage in his 'Elementary Forms of Kinship', just as his colleague, Dumont, contrasted India with Europe in his discussion of stratification. Yet how could we reconcile these discussions with the sinologist Needham's demonstration that, until the Renaissance, China was ahead of Europe as far as most science was concerned. In other words, Durkheim was taking a very partial view of the Chinese system of classification, denying it 'modernity' in the same way that Lévi-Strauss did for the kinship system when, following the French sinologist Granet, he speaks of a system of marriage which falls into his category of 'elementary forms'. But if Chinese kinship is elementary, then there

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must be queries about Europe too, since it had a similar system of dowry endowment as an aspect of marriage.¹ In fact, there are many other resemblances, but the Europeans have constantly attempted to point to the differences, to the supposed absence of the notion of love, to the early marriage and to the assumed plethora of children, especially in the work of Malthus who presumed a dramatic contrast between the two. Yes, they had early marriage, which inevitably limited individuals' choice of spouse, as many have shown, but they did not have the runaway family life that he supposed. While they started marrying and producing children earlier than in the west, their rate of marital fertility (children within marriage) was lower than Europe's, partly because the latter had no post-partum sex taboo and women could start procreating again straight away after a birth. My maternal grandmother had thirteen children, of which my mother was the last, and could have had little time for anything except childbearing and going to the kirk. Although in the west some may have exercised a Protestant restraint *before* marriage, despite the practice of 'bundling' (spending the night without penetration) and the incidence of pre-marital conception or even births, the Chinese practised limitation *within* marriage. One region of the globe was no more socially restrained than another, yet Europeans congratulated themselves on the uniqueness of this quality, which was supposed to be involved in the birth of capitalism, to which they also laid claim.

It is this same view of 'the uniqueness of the West' that has given rise to the ideas that love, at least romantic love, originated in Europe among the troubadours of twelfth-century Provence and that the bulk of unions in the west were 'love' marriages, as distinct from the arranged weddings of Asia (and, of course, the Near East, including the Jews, whom Sombart has seen as central to the birth of 'capitalism'). Provence, of course, was much influenced by Muslim Spain, where love poetry abounded, demonstrating that the European thesis had little value. It is true that late marriage, which was emphatically not the route chosen by Juliet in her liaison with Romeo, gave more scope for the choice of spouse,

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at least in first marriages. But divorce and remarriage (which was necessarily freer) were common features of Arab unions. In any case, even with arranged marriages, who is to say that parents make worse choices for young partners? Certainly this is delicate ground upon which to build a theory of difference.

There is a similar problem with the anthropologist Dumont's contrast between the class system of the west and the caste system of India. The first produced the essayist Mandeville as well as Marx, which gave him the title of his book *From Mandeville to Marx*; the latter, however, resisted the advent of modernity, differentiating Europe from Asia. From the African point of view, both systems are aspects of stratified societies built upon the complex civilization of the Bronze Age. No doubt the caste systems of India were more restrictive than the class systems of the west, but the differences should not be exaggerated. In the west too, certain tasks were confined to specific groups, within which marriage took place in endogamous unions. In-marriage, as the French historian Marc Bloch pointed out, was part of the way that sub-classes were formed. But it was not obligatory as in India; however, the difference between a stated norm (what people were supposed to do) and an actual practice was not all that great in its social consequences, and to regard one as embodying freedom and the other as constraint (as with marriage) is misleading, although the idea forms an important part of 'modern' western ideology. Certainly, one form of stratification may have been somewhat easier to bypass than the other – though, until recently, not as easy as is often thought.

There is also the question of timing; whereas Weber discusses the advent of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, raised in chapter 11 of the *Miracle* book, other authors have concerned themselves with features that were already present such as family structure, individualism, developments in the Graeco-Roman tradition (chapter 10 of that book) or in the wider Christian church that was supposed to have predisposed Europe, or a particular part of that continent, to be the cradle of industrial capitalism.

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The problem I had is best illustrated in chapters 3 and 4 below. It was not to deny the advantage that Europe and the USA had enjoyed since the nineteenth century, and in some ways since the Renaissance, but to see that this priority – especially with regard to the extensive production of cheap metal, to the mechanized factory production of commodities plus intellectual achievements – had nothing to do with primordial features that would have excluded others from participation (or at least inauguration). But it was also related to an alternation between interacting civilizations in Eurasia, in which first one, then the other, was privileged. So that there was no unique, unilineal transition from antiquity to feudalism to capitalism. The notion of antiquity referred to a type of Bronze Age society, possibly with a greater emphasis on slavery, but this institution was in no sense intrinsic to the above sequence. Nor yet was feudalism, which represented an effective decentralization of political and economic activity, a ‘catastrophic regression’ in the historian Perry Anderson’s words. And, as Braudel realized, ‘capitalism’ in a broad sense (mercantile exchange) developed in the Bronze Age and continued to do so right up to the appearance of its industrial form.

The alternative position taken in the Miracle book, and by many others, is both essentialist and Eurocentric. It fails to take account of the alternation of post-Bronze Age culture within Eurasia and it is this position, which does not deny recent Euro-American advances, that I attempted to outline in my contribution to this conference, which was not included in the printed version, presumably because it was contrary to the organizers’ beliefs.

These arguments (see appendix 1), put forward by those I shall refer to as Europeanists, are problematic in several senses. Since they are largely self-congratulatory, that is, viewed from the standpoint of those who see themselves as benefiting from the miracle – indeed bringing it about – they are in the first instance directed internally, looking for factors unique to Europe, to western Europe, to north-western Europe, or even, in some cases, to England. There are clearly

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two pitfalls in this approach, related to the argument's ethnocentric point of departure: namely, the pitfalls of overestimating the uniqueness and of overestimating the miracle.

One result of the first of these is that scholars look around the world in an attempt to discern critical differences in other major civilizations, thereby discovering the stagnant quality of Asiatic systems or the non-compatibility of the economic ethic of Islam or of Hinduism. While the desire for comparison is to be applauded, this particular enterprise is focused entirely around the question of 'why did the Oriental civilizations fail to develop capitalism?'. What were 'the unique characteristics' of western civilization that led to its rise?²

A consequence of the second of these pitfalls is the tendency to overstate the nature of the leap-forward at any particular moment in time, a point that is illustrated in the problems facing scholars in deciding when those critical transformations took place. Some see 'real capitalism' as the industrial capitalism of the late eighteenth century.³ Others see mercantile capitalism as following the dissolution of feudal Europe; yet others search for proto-capitalism at an earlier period, in simpler conditions, even among African cultivators. More traditionally, Guy Bois writes of the period between 1300 and 1500 as being the one in which the feudal mode of production declined, simultaneously with the rise of capitalism⁴ – in other words the period before the expansion of Europe either towards the New World or to India and the East Indies, the expansion of mercantile and of booty production. Yet it is not clear that 'capitalism' provided the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors of the New World with any great superiority to the conquered, certainly not morally or ethically, except that they had the ships, the horses and the swords, and, later on, muskets and writing itself were additional advantages. In India, virtually the only initial advantages of the Europeans were their improved clocks and guns.

What has happened here? A series of transformations extended over time are summed up as the shift from one designated state of the world to another, from feudalism to capitalism. I do not argue for a gradualist rather than a