

Review of Radical Political Economics

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**Book Review: The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization John M. Hobson;
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 392 pp, \$75.00 (hardcover),
\$29.99 (paperback)**

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Review of Radical Political Economics 2007; 39; 609

DOI: 10.1177/0486613407306827

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norms (not rules, surely). But no wonder that the state should tolerate autonomist professors, whose intellectual labors are so dissociated from real politics—an unhappy consequence, perhaps, of a social autonomy for the few.

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The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization

John M. Hobson; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 392 pp, \$75.00 (hardcover), \$29.99 (paperback).

DOI: 10.1177/0486613407306827

Accepted November 21, 2006

John Hobson's thought-provoking and very readable book is a welcome addition to an increasing literature attempting to rescue the history of "non-Western" civilizations, as well as social theory (Abu-Lughod 1989; Amin 1989; Bernal 1991; Blaut 1993, 1992; Frank 1998; Goody 1996; Gran 1996; Joseph 1992; Kanth 2005; Pomeranz 2000; Wolf 1982) from over two centuries (and counting) of Eurocentric discourse. Hobson offers a non-Eurocentric (some might call it Afro–Asia centric) reading of the last 1,500 years of the history of China, Japan, India, and the Middle East–North Africa (MENA) region, in the process of reinterpreting the so-called "rise of the West," or the breakthrough of Western Europe into capitalist modernity. Considering its broad scope, the book is necessarily a survey rather than an in-depth treatment of any one culture. Nevertheless Hobson manages to pull together a wide range of primary and secondary works in service of his non-Eurocentric history that challenges nearly every major Eurocentric myth prevalent in mainstream economic history and historical accounts of the "European miracle."

Broadly speaking one can speak of two major currents of Eurocentric thinking in theories of world history: the “strongly Eurocentric” and the “weakly Eurocentric.” The former is the view that Europe first broke through into capitalist modernity while the rest of the world stagnated for diverse reasons including oriental despotism, unfavorable climate, and lack of Protestant ethic. Furthermore, the non-Western world is not thought to have contributed significantly to the “rise.” This view has been expressed, in varying forms, by both Marxist and non-Marxist scholars (Brenner 1977; Landes 1998). Sometimes the larger global context is simply left undiscussed, perhaps on the assumption that it was unimportant as compared to “internal contradictions” (as in the case of the “transition debate,” see Hilton 1976). The weakly Eurocentric view, in contrast, does acknowledge the Eastern contribution but only, or largely, in the form of cheap land, labor, markets for manufactured goods, or sites for investment of European capital (Hobson’s “Dark Side of British Industrialization” [243] or Marx’s primitive accumulation). Marx’s and some latter-day Marxist accounts can be said to fall into this category (Marx 1867/1976; Wolf 1982).

In contrast to both the strong and the weak Eurocentric positions, the non-Eurocentric perspective, such as Hobson’s, does not start with the question, “what makes the West progressive and the East stagnant?” Instead Hobson takes a long historical view and insists on empirically evaluating trade, technology, and commerce in Eastern cultures, rather than dismissing them or labeling them as “underdeveloped.” Of the three broad areas of contribution by the non-West that the non-Eurocentric literature has tended to focus on, namely the intellectual (philosophy, mathematics, art), institutional/technological (knowledge of trade routes, navigation, financial systems, printing, metallurgy), and resource/market (gold/silver, cotton, slaves), Hobson chooses to elaborate largely on the institutional/technological and resource/market themes. His focus on technology and trade is a welcome one because economic historians have tended to be particularly fine practitioners of the Eurocentric art, all the while parading it as “sound science” (see, e.g., Landes 1969, 1998).

Hobson (like Wolf 1982) departs strongly from teleological narratives that cast non-European history as a precursor to the ultimate triumph of the West. But he also significantly parts company with Wolf, who largely discusses history of “the people without history” *in the context of* their interactions with Europe (the fur trade, the slave trade, etc.) and leaves the major Eurocentric tales of the British origins of the industrial revolution or of European supremacy in long-distance navigation uncontested. Hobson’s attack on Eurocentrism is two-pronged. In parts 1 and 2 of the book, Hobson shows how the East (China, India, MENA, Southeast Asia, and Japan) played a substantial and integral part in the rise of the West by virtue of the Western assimilation of Eastern “resource portfolios” (Hobson’s term) such as long-distance sea navigation, iron and steel making, printing, military technology, and financial institutions. He further argues, perhaps more controversially, that the West (i.e., Western and Northern Europe) to a large extent lagged behind on most of the above mentioned fronts up to 1800 C.E. On this count Hobson is more in agreement with Pomeranz (2000), and seems to differ from Blaut (1992) in whose view the playing field was more or less even prior to 1492, after which Europe began to diverge from other parts of the world. And of course Hobson’s argument is radically different from explicitly Eurocentric historians such as Roberts (1985) or Landes (1998) who see Europe as the “prime mover” of civilization for the last 500 to 1000 years. Part 3 of Hobson’s book constitutes the second prong of attack wherein he deals with the role of European agency and the construction of an imperial/racist

European identity. The importance of colonialism, the slave trade, and South American gold and silver (in part to finance the trade deficit with India and China) are also discussed here.

Chapter 1 covers some terrain, like the historical construction of a “West versus the rest” dichotomy, that will be familiar to readers acquainted with Said’s *Orientalism* (Said 1978/1991) and other texts in that tradition. Furthermore, the role of the Mercator projection of the world map in reinforcing the Eurocentric story, by flattering Europe and deemphasizing the Southern Hemisphere, is also discussed. Hobson’s analysis of the Eurocentric roots of Marxism and Weberianism nicely complements Blaut’s (2000) earlier work. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 discuss in detail the Islamic world, China, and India-Southeast Asia-Japan, respectively. Hobson makes a case for the existence of a global economy in the period between 500 C.E. to 1500 C.E. (what he calls “oriental globalization”). In focus is the “Islamic bridge of the world” or the global economy created by the Arabs, that incidentally also facilitated the movement of goods, ideas, and institutions not only from MENA, but China, India, and other places, to Europe. Chapter 3 on the “Chinese pioneers” is a survey of the Sung Industrial Revolution of the eleventh century. The much-discussed withdrawal of China from international trade in the fifteenth century is also dealt with and is shown as being more hype and myth than fact. Chapter 6 deals with the “Myth of the Italian pioneer 1000–1492,” that is, the view that several important innovations in proto-capitalism were made for the first time in the Italian republics. Navigation, finance, textiles, iron, paper, and clock-making are discussed in the context of the Eastern contributions, and sufficient details are given for those interested in following up the claims. In chapter 7 (“The Myth of the Vasco da Gama Epoch”) Hobson offers his counter-propositions to the Eurocentric take on the Age of Explorations epitomized by John Roberts’s statement that “the exploring was done exclusively by the Europeans” (quoted on 134).

The second prong of Hobson’s attack on Eurocentric accounts, discussed in part 3 of the book, is the role of European agency in the rise of the West via the construction of a racist and imperial European identity. Here Hobson assumes a position similar to Wallerstein’s, in insisting on attributing agency to the West or Europe, if largely an imperial, resource-appropriating one (Wallerstein 1997). This is in distinction to more functionalist or materialist arguments (e.g., of the world-systems school), where the role for cultural identity formation and nonmaterial factors is usually deemphasized. Chapter 10 deals with the crucial period from 1700 C.E. to 1850 C.E. when the European imperial and racist identity came to full fruition and the valences attached to cultures such as China and India went from being positive to negative. In economics, this dramatic shift is captured by the transformation in the attitude toward China seen from Adam Smith (1776/2000), who saw it as “much richer than any part of Europe” and “not a declining country,” to Karl Marx (1857/1969), who saw it as a “rotting semi-civilization.” Chapter 11 takes on the myth of the nineteenth century British *laissez-faire* era.

In conclusion, Hobson leaves us with three major factors that shaped modern world history: (1) the East-led globalization and industrialization, and its assimilation and development by the West; (2) the construction of a European racist/imperial identity and the imperial windfall of South American gold/silver, African slave labor, and Eastern markets; and (3) contingency factors such as the foregoing of expansionary imperial policy by China.

Hobson’s concept of Eurocentrism seems to be “ethnocentrism as practiced by European historians.” However, it has been argued (see Kanth 2005) that the context of capitalist modernity makes Eurocentrism different from any other ethnocentrism. The secularization of knowledge accompanying the Enlightenment has elevated Eurocentric thinking to the

status of science, making it a particularism that masquerades as universalism (Amin 1989). Moreover, in the guise of liberal and Marxist social theory, Eurocentrism assumes the position of “ally of the oppressed.”

Two points remain. First, how does Hobson’s account square with the “obvious fact” that today “European civilization” stands triumphant everywhere? And second, if most cultures were on track toward capitalist modernity, what scope exists for seeking noncapitalist modes of organization in the past as inspiration for the future, as Gandhi (1908/1938) tried to do? The colonial encounter is undeniable, and in fact, as mentioned earlier, this is what gives Eurocentrism its unique power. But to take Roberts’s (1985: 28) example, the use of the Christian calendar no more makes India “Europeanized” than the use of Indian (Arabic) numerals makes Europe “Indianized.” As for the second point, Hobson’s project is to emphasize trade and industry, which can exist just as well under capitalist as under noncapitalist (i.e., nonclass exploitative) conditions. That Hobson does not make this distinction (by not clearly defining “capitalism”) does not prevent others from doing so when carrying his project further.

Finally, revisionist history, such as Hobson’s, is not, to use Landes’s (1998) colorful term, “egalitarian history” that only searches for and finds “something good” to say about everybody. To label the efforts at telling alternative histories as “multicultural goodthink” is to impede a fuller understanding of the past (and present). Thus I would recommend Hobson’s book, at the very least, as an alternative perspective to certain prominent varieties of Eurocentric “goodthink.”

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Beyond the Promised Land, the Movement and the Myth

David Noble; Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005, 214 pp. \$19.95 (paperback).

DOI: 10.1177/0486613407306828

Accepted November 27, 2006

David Noble's newest book is quick, elegant, and rich in information, thinking, and purpose. The "movement" is the world justice movement. The "myth" is the paradigm of deferred reward (the "promised land") for present sacrifice. Noble presents this myth as the foundational con game of industrial capitalism.

Noble has published extensively and critically on the history of automation, the social consequences of technology, and the corruptive influences of corporate power on education. With Ralph Nader and Al Meyerhoff, he was a founder of the National Coalition for Universities in the Public Interest. He is devoted to the ideal of open, democratic universities, and his home-front political activism has resulted in hand-to-hand combat with various university administrations, including MIT in 1986 and presently at York University, in Toronto, where he teaches.

And where I do, I acknowledge conflict of interest. Academic reviewers, properly, should share a specialty but work at arm's length. I fail on both counts. As I am in fine arts and he in liberal arts, we have one degree of separation, half an excuse, but I have had the privilege of being inspired by his remarks in meetings of the same union and suffer the guilt of inadequate participation in his battle with our common administration, which has attacked him personally.¹ Thus, by institutional affiliation, I start out prejudiced in his favor.

Rather short books that treat a grand theme (this one is 200 pages in octavo) may offer a great advantage in force. Necessarily, short books leave gaps. The varieties of developments surveyed in *Beyond the Promised Land* are not firmly encompassed by a well-articulated and thoroughly argued supervening thesis; yet the argument is fascinating throughout. Certainly, many links of the chain are strong.

The road map for Noble's account is provided by his juxtaposition of the myths of Abraham and Gilgamesh. In the pre-Babylonian myth, Gilgamesh's heroic but unsuccessful quest for immortality leads him to accept the limitations of his here-and-now. The story of