

Oriental Globalization

Jan Nederveen Pieterse

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The critique of Eurocentrism has gone through several rounds. The first round was primarily a critique of Orientalism. Edward Said and Martin Bernal, among others, focused on cultural bias and racism in Eurocentric history. Others addressed Eurocentric biases in development thinking (Samir Amin, Paul Bairoch, Stavrianos) and historiography (Eric Wolf, James Blaut, Jack Goody).

Subaltern Studies made further contributions revising history from the point of view of the global South. A further strand, global history, generated critical historical studies that document the significance of, in particular, Asia and the Middle East in the making of the global economy. Janet Abu-Lughod focused on the Middle East, Marshall Hodgson on the world of Islam, K. N. Chauduri on South Asia, André Gunder Frank on East and South Asia, Kenneth Pomeranz, Robert Temple and Bin Wong on China, Eric Jones on Japan, and Anthony Reid on South-east Asia, along with many other studies. This body of work not merely critiques but overturns the conventional perspectives and implies a profound rethinking of world history that holds major implications for social science and development studies.

Arguably this body of literature converges on a major thesis: the Orient came first and the Occident was a latecomer. Frank's *ReOrient* settles on 1400–1800 as the time of 'Asian hegemony' (1998: 166). 'The two major regions that were most "central" to the world economy were India and China.' This centrality was based on 'greater absolute and relative productivity in industry, agriculture, (water) transport, and trade' and was reflected in their favorable balance of trade, particularly of China (1998: 127). Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence* offers meticulous comparisons of developments in China and Britain and Geoffrey Gunn (2003) draws attention to South-east Asia as a 'first globalizer'.

In general outline, the Orient-first thesis runs as follows. Global connections may go back to 3500 BCE or earlier still, but 500 CE may rank as the start of oriental globalization and 600 as the beginning of the big expansion of global trade.

This timing is based on the revival of camel transport between 300 and 500. At the time the global economy was centred on the Middle East with Mecca as a global trade hub. In 875 Baghdad ranked as a 'water-front to the world' linked to China (Hobson, 2004: 40). The Middle East remained the 'Bridge of the World' through the second millennium, but by 1100 (or later by some accounts) the leading edge shifted to China where it remained until the 19th century. In China's 'first industrial miracle' 'many of the characteristics that we associate with the eighteenth-century British industrial revolution had emerged by 1100' (Hobson, 2004: 50) with major advances in iron and steel production, agriculture, shipping and military capabilities. From Japan to the Middle East, the East was the early developer – far ahead of Europe in agriculture, industry, urbanization, trade networks, credit institutions and state institutions. Several historians note that 'none of the major players in the world economy at any point before 1800 was European' (Hobson, 2004: 74). The East was also expansive: the Afro-Asian age of discovery preceded Columbus and Vasco da Gama by about a millennium (Hobson, 2004: 139).

Europe was a late developer. Eastern ideas and technologies enabled European feudalism, the financial revolution in medieval Italy and the Renaissance: 'oriental globalisation was the midwife, if not the mother, of the medieval and modern West' (Hobson, 2004: 36). In Hodgson's words, the Occident was 'the unconscious heir of the industrial revolution of Sung China' (in Hobson, 2004: 192). Hobson dates China's central role earlier and extends it later than Frank does. According to Hobson, in shares of world manufacturing output, China outstripped Britain until 1860 and 'the Indian share was higher than the whole of Europe's in 1750 and was 85 percent higher than Britain's as late as 1830' (2004: 77, 76). In terms of GNP, the West only caught up with the East by 1870; in terms of per capita income, a less representative measure, the West caught up by 1800.

I will discuss three specific critiques of Eurocentrism that this literature contributes and then give an assessment of this literature. One of the cornerstones of Eurocentrism is the idea that China turned away from maritime trade and that this caused its gradual decline and opened the way for the expansion of European trade in Asia. The

revisionist literature argues that the closure of China (and Japan) is a myth and the diagnosis of decline is likewise mistaken. It is true that China did not choose the path of maritime empire, but Western historians have mistaken the official Chinese imperial legitimization policy of upholding the Confucian ideal and condemning foreign trade with the actual trade relations which continued and flourished. That China remained the world's leading trading power shows in the 'global silver recycling process' in which 'most of the world's silver was sucked into China' (Hobson, 2004: 66; Frank, 1998: 117).

Another cornerstone of Eurocentrism is Oriental despotism (and variations such as Weber's patrimonialism). In contrast, the revisionist literature argues that states such as China and Japan had at an early stage achieved 'rational' institutions including a 'rational-legal' centralized bureaucracy, minimalist or *laissez-faire* policies in relation to the economy and democratic propensities, while the European states during the 1500–1900 'breakthrough period' were far less rational, more interventionist and protectionist, and less democratic: 'eighteenth century China (and perhaps Japan as well) actually came closer to resembling the neoclassical ideal of a market economy than did Europe' (Pomeranz, 2000: 70). Light taxation and *laissez-faire* attitudes to enterprise were common in the East long before the West and trade tariffs were consistently far higher in the West than in the East throughout the period of comparison, which shows that the Oriental despotism thesis is faulty.

The centrepiece of Eurocentrism is the judgement that other cultures lacked the European commitment to enterprise and accumulation. Weber highlighted the Protestant ethic and described Islam and Confucianism as obstacles to modern development. But many observers have noted the penchant for commerce in the Islamic world. Viewing Confucianism as an obstacle to development involves historical ironies too: what ranked as an obstacle in the early 20th century was recast as the Confucian ethic hypothesis to account for the rise of the Asian Tigers in the late 20th century. An additional irony is the influence of Confucianism on European thinking. That behind Adam Smith stood François Quesnay and the Physiocrats is a familiar point, but the Physiocrats' critique of mercantilism was inspired by Chinese policies and the philosophy of *wu-wei* or non-intervention, which goes back to well before the Common Era (Hobson, 2004: 196). Thus, Confucius emerges as a patron saint of the European Enlightenment.

What is the significance and status of oriental globalization literature at this stage? There are

echoes of dependency theory in this body of work for if it wasn't European genius or other endogenous factors that turned the tide, the role played by colonialism and imperialism in changing the global equation must be greater than is acknowledged in Eurocentric perspectives. One thinks of Eric Williams's work on slavery, Walter Rodney on Africa and other studies. But dependency theory was structuralist while the recent revisionist history rejects a global structural approach (such as world-system theory) and reckons with contingency and devotes attention to agency and identity formation: 'material power in general and great power in particular, are channeled in different directions depending on the specific identity of the agent' (Hobson, 2004: 309). Dependency thinking came out of the era of decolonization while the allegiance of revisionist history is to global history rather than to history viewed through the lens of a particular region and time period. It looks past Fernand Braudel and his 'Mediterranean world' and past world-system theory and its preoccupation with the Low Countries and the Baltic, to wider horizons in the tradition of William McNeill's global history.

At times there is a rhetorical surcharge to this literature which reflects its character as a polemical position. This comes across in a recurrent problem: though the *portée* of its findings is that the East–West divergence is a fiction and is really a continuum, the oriental globalization literature reverses the current of Eurocentrism by marginalizing the West and centring the East; thus it replays East–West binaries. Taking global history beyond East–West binaries is the thrust of another body of studies (Lieberman, 1999, 2003; Whitfield, 2003).

The oriental globalization literature is uneven in that it represents a kind of retroactive Sinocentrism and Indocentrism; for various reasons China, India and the Middle East have been more extensively studied and are more salient than other areas. There is frequent mention of the 'Afro-Asian global economy' but the African part remains sketchier than the Asian side. Also South-east Asia, Central Asia and the Mongol Empire often fall between the cracks of the world's major zones. The oriental globalization thesis needs to integrate finer-grained regional histories and studies such as Hoerder's (2002) work on world migrations during the second millennium. Janet Abu-Lughod also suggests triangulation with local histories but notes, 'We can never stand at some Archimedean point *outside* our cultures and outside our locations in space and time. No matter how *outré* we attempt to be, our vision is also distorted' (2000: 113).

While the oriental globalization literature has grown rapidly and is increasingly substantial, it is by no means dominant. Mainstream thinking continues to view the West as the early developer and the East and the global South as laggards or upstarts. At the turn of the millennium – following the Soviet demise and the Asian crisis and neoconservative belligerence in Washington – Western triumphalism, though increasingly hollow, sets the tone as part of an entrenched ‘intellectual apartheid regime’. The Washington consensus is as steeped in Orientalist stereotypes and historical myopia as the neoconservative mission to bring freedom and democracy to the world. Eurocentric economic history à la David Landes (*The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*) and Roberts (*Triumph of the West*) rhymes with Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations, Bernard Lewis’s account of Islam (*What Went Wrong?*), Fukuyama’s ideological history (*The End of History*) and Mandelbaum (*The Ideas that Conquered the World*). This general mindset informs IMF and World Bank policies (economics without history or anthropology) as well as American aspirations in the Middle East (politics without memory), as if development and democracy are virtues that the West chanced upon first and only.

Besides plain ignorance and arrogance, there is something deceptive about Eurocentrism-as-policy, a trait that Ha-Joon Chang summed up as *Kicking Away the Ladder* (2002). In the 19th century free trade was used as a means to deindustrialize colonial economies and now WTO statutes and free trade agreements that uphold the intellectual property rights of multinational corporations short-circuit industrialization in the global South. Institutionalized amnesia and intellectual apartheid are instruments of power.

As the oriental globalization literature overtakes the self-indulgent west-centric view of globalization, perhaps the global realignments that are now gradually taking shape will catch up with the material side of American supremacism. This diagnosis of the ‘global confluence’ arrives on the scene at the time that China, India and East Asia are re-emerging as major forces in the global economy; historiography catches up with the present just when the present is coming full circle with past trends in the world economy. A synthesis that is yet to take shape is that of the historical oriental globalization thesis with the

cutting edge of contemporary globalization in the making.

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Jan Nederveen Pieterse is at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, specializing in transnational sociology, and is the author of several books.