

# Many Renaissances, Many Modernities?

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Jack Goody, *Renaissances: The One or the Many?* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); *The Eurasian Miracle* (Polity Press, 2010)

## Abstract

This article discusses Eurocentric history, its focus on the Renaissance and modernity, which continues also in recent global history perspectives. Goody's argument regarding renaissances in the plural situates Europe in the wider field of Eurasia and deeper in time, going back to the Bronze Age, characterized by plough agriculture, the use of animal traction and urban cultures. Goody's perspective includes viewing renaissances as accelerations and leaps in the circulation of information. Since it is always the trope of the modern that marks Eurocentric claims, unpacking modernity is central to scrutinizing this construction. Goody shows that Europe is a late-comer rather than a forerunner to major strands of modernity. A wider question this account poses is: if Renaissance in the singular produces modernity in the singular, do renaissances in the plural produce modernities in the plural?

## Key words

Bronze Age ■ circulation of information ■ Eurocentrism ■ modernities ■ renaissances

WHEN I studied social science at the University of Amsterdam in the 1960s and 1970s, a general background assumption was that the Renaissance was a major turning point not just for Europe but for human history in general. Thus the historian Jan Romein spoke of a 'general human pattern' (of low productivity, low level of urbanization and compartmentalized worlds), from which Europe had deviated since the Renaissance and the journeys of exploration. Norbert Elias's theory of the 'civilizing process', which became quite influential in Dutch sociology,

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followed a similar track and also took the Renaissance and court society as its starting point.

Meanwhile, during the 1960s student movements, students at the University of California, Berkeley, summed up their course on western civilization as 'from Plato to NATO'. The civil rights movement with black studies and minorities' rights movements and multiculturalism began to unsettle the canon and seek wider understandings of history and culture. *From Plato to Nato* (Gress, 1998) encapsulates the Eurocentric narrative. The other main stations on this grand route are the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, capitalism, modernity. In this account Europe is the master genius of history, the Renaissance is history's hinge and western capitalism is its high point. The marker of the European moment is invariably the trope of the 'modern' (as in modern history, modern capitalism, the modern world, modern world-system, modern society, modernization, etc.).

This perspective has gone through several waves of critique and revision. Dependency thinkers such as Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin criticized modernization theory and its west-centric assumptions. Edward Said's *Orientalism* went further by arguing that imperialism was not just politically unacceptable and economically stunting but that its accounts of the 'east' and its epistemology were profoundly misleading. Subaltern studies and postcolonial theory contributed further strands. Another wave of revision is global history. Historians took Toynbee's work on civilizations further and adopted a still wider canvas, such as the Chicago historians William McNeill and Marshall Hodgson. History of the *longue durée* also decentred the focus on Europe (Delanty, 2006; Nederveen Pieterse, 1989, 1994) and since globalization became a central theme in social science, global history is gradually becoming the norm (Hopkins, 2002).

Yet, of course, this doesn't mean the end of Eurocentrism. First, because, as the deep matrix of western supremacy, its career is at least as long as that of western hegemony or aspirations to hegemony, and, second, because Eurocentrism isn't just politically embedded but also epistemologically anchored. To unsettle grand narratives takes a lot more than criticism. So Eurocentrism survives and resurfaces in many guises. It was revived in Fukuyama's argument of the 'end of history' (retracing Hegel and Kojève). Economic histories of the rise of capitalism and the west such as David Landes' work restate this narrative. Neoconservative takes on modern history resume the thread: Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong?* and Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations redo the same journey. Deepak Lal's *In Praise of Empires* (2004) and Niall Ferguson revisiting the history of imperialism rework Tory sensibilities according to which empire wasn't all that bad. Part of the longevity of western narcissism is elites pushing back plebeian, minority and postcolonial readings of history, as in Leo Strauss's rereading of the classics, or trying to put the genie of

multiculturalism back into the bottle, as in Alan Bloom's revindication of the canon.

There was all along a steep tension *within* dependency thinking: while it rejected the Eurocentric claims of imperialism, colonialism and dependent development (the 'neo' in neo-Marxism), it shared the general Marxist thesis that 16th-century Europe, with the 'conquest of the world market', ushered in modern capitalism. Thus in world-system theory the 'long 16th century' (1480–1620) functions as a hinge of history, giving birth to the 'modern world-system.' These are variations on the Renaissance narrative, now with an emphasis on capitalism and accumulation rather than on culture, knowledge and humanism, again installing Europe as history's master builder and again using the trope of the 'modern' as history's hinge and Europe's gift.

Global history doesn't necessarily mean the end of Eurocentrism either. Bayly's *Birth of the Modern World* (2004), though it claims the mantle of global history, adopts a thoroughly conventional time frame in which 'archaic globalization' takes place in the 16th century, a periodization that reaffirms the Europe-first thesis (a critique is Nederveen Pieterse, 2005).

Giddens' take on globalization as one of 'the consequences of modernity' (1990) makes a similar case but now timed at 1800. In different ways, Habermas and Held, revisiting Kant, also start out from the Enlightenment and linger at Europe's foothills. The Enlightenment is the Renaissance the Sequel, in which modernity re-enters the stage in a different costume (science, reason, people's sovereignty).

Working on deconstructing Europe and the west (Nederveen Pieterse, 1989, 1991, 1994; Nederveen Pieterse and Parekh, 1995), I find that eventually one comes out at the other end. Unravelling Europe means entering the east and Asia. The next step goes beyond criticizing Eurocentrism towards affirming and critically examining the contributions of other civilizations. Thus in Frank's *Reorient* (1998), Pomeranz's *Great Divergence* (2000) and Hobson's *Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (2004), as in Chaudhuri, Hodgson, Abu-Lughod and Pollock, the dominant note is no longer polemical but affirmative. While leaving world-system theory and its preoccupation with north-west Europe behind, Frank sets forth the scope and depth of accumulation, trade and urban culture in Asia and the Middle East, Pomeranz details China's contributions to technological innovation and Hobson argues the case of oriental globalization. Jack Goody's recent books belong to this category of scholarship. With Blaut and others, Jack Goody has made polemical contributions, as in *The Theft of History* (2006), which is discussed in an engaging issue of *Theory Culture & Society* (Burke, 2009; Featherstone, 2009; Pomeranz, 2009). But the recent work goes beyond critiquing mainstream history and sets forth an alternative account. Goody's starting point is a wide claim:

I do not view the Italian Renaissance as the key to modernity and to capitalism. This seems to me a claim that has been made by teleologically inclined

Europeans. In my opinion its origins were to be found more widely, not only in Arabic knowledge but in influential borrowings from India and China. What we speak of as capitalism had its roots in a wider Eurasian literate culture that had developed rapidly since the Bronze Age, exchanging goods, exchanging information. (p. 7; page numbers in this article refer to *Renaissances*)

He adds:

the result of drawing and emphasizing an exclusive Antiquity–Renaissance line has been to exclude non-European cultures from the growth of civilization...at times this exclusion, thought or unthought, encourages an almost racist fallacy of superiority towards the rest of the world. (p. 38)

He notes that as long as the west seemed to be in the lead economically and politically, this account seemed satisfactory and ‘the problem of ethno-centric history’ seemed marginal, but the contemporary rise of East Asia and ‘rise of the rest’ make it less compelling and the alternative account of ‘alternation’, that is, different zones and centres being in the lead at different times, now seems more plausible, also retroactively.

Key theses of *Renaissances* are the following. All cultures know periods of cultural flowering which may or may not be combined with ‘looking back’ to earlier eras. In literate cultures there have often been periods of looking back to old sources, sacred texts or canons, which may produce cultural efflorescence or a turn to conservatism. Written cultures are common to the Bronze Age cultures of Eurasia which, since 3000 BCE, have been characterized by plough agriculture, the use of animal traction and urban cultures. Major variables in renaissances are the circulation of information (oral or written) and modes of communication (writing, paper, printing, moveable type, later the internet).

Europe differs from other Eurasian cultures because after the fall of the Roman Empire it experienced a major decline of urban cultures, giving rise to a different itinerary, with a stress on rural life and the rise of feudalism. Europe experienced a Renaissance precisely because of its *lack of continuity*; in other Eurasian cultures continuity with the past was stronger and periods of decline and rebirth were less momentous. ‘Nobody else could repeat this rediscovery of Antiquity because nobody else had lost their past in quite the same way’ (p. 260). The Renaissance was so important in Europe:

because in many ways the continent had been relatively ‘backward’ in the earlier centuries, intellectually and commercially...the hegemonic influence of Abrahamistic religion made an enormous difference to the accumulation of knowledge of the universe, for it laid down its own definitive version of events...the Renaissance represented a catching up with the achievements of the eastern powers, who because they had never

experienced the same problems of divine omniscience, looked back to earlier times in a different spirit. (p. 262)

Goody documents Europe's decline and sliding back in many ways: 'After the decline of Rome, higher education was seriously interrupted in the west but it continued relatively smoothly in parts of the east' (p. 34).

In the tenth century the library of al-Hakim II in Cordoba consisted of 400,000 'books' according to Almaqqari, and 600,000 according to the Lebanese monk Casiri. This was at a time when the largest library in Christian Europe is said to be that of the monastery of St Gall in Switzerland; it had 800 volumes. (p. 22)

The idea of renaissances in the plural is not novel and was argued earlier by Toynbee and others. The flowering of the Maurya and Gupta periods, of Tang and Song China, of the Safavids, Abbasids, Muslim Andalusia (Cordoba, Granada, Toledo), the Mughal Empire and Ottoman civilization, among others, are well on record, as are the close relations between the European Renaissance and several of these zones of influence. Europe's isolation and decline were never total and commerce continued in the eastern Mediterranean (as in the link between Constantinople/Istanbul and Venice) and the western Mediterranean (the cultural radius of Andalusia) (e.g. Hoerder, 2002). Goody profiles the theme of renaissances in the plural in stronger and broader strokes than others have done before. He argues, 'If I am right in thinking that all literate societies are potential candidates for renascence and reformation, I need to examine the past of Islamic, Indian and Chinese regimes' (p. 91). Thus he devotes chapters each to renaissances in the Islamic world, in Judaism, in China and India, which give broad overviews and sometimes fine-grained accounts of their periods of efflorescence and developments in knowledge, technology, medicine, arts and commerce. While the polemic with Eurocentrism is familiar ground, these chapters strike different notes and are rich and enlightening because they tell stories rarely told in the west, never told together and never as a retort to European exceptionalism. Some brief highlights. China experienced an urban revolution and maintained an advanced postal system across the expanse of the state at a time when Europe still largely consisted of forests. Indic civilization was characterized by cultural continuity; the culture of Sanskrit and the Vedic age could not be reborn because, as Toynbee remarked, 'it never tasted death' (p. 172). While Ayurvedic medicine grew out of earlier curing techniques, during the Gupta period (320–540 CE) 'it was essentially a written medicine. How else would one have the listing of 600 drugs and 300 different surgical operations?' (p. 179).

While historically the Italian Renaissance was unique, sociologically it was not and should be viewed 'as one of a larger class of events that occur in all literate societies and involve a looking back and a burst forward' (p. 241). A keynote of Goody's approach is his emphasis on the circulation

of information and on modes of communication – oral or written, using parchment or paper, and using elite or vernacular languages. Thus a key feature in all these renaissances:

was an increase in the flow of information, especially in writing... important too is not simply the existence of the written word but the degree of its circulation, especially if we are moving from a minority possessing an ability to read and write to a wider 'democratic' one in which the majority can. The increased circulation of information may depend partly on printing... but this too varied with the materials used, for example the shift to paper that occurred not only in first-century China but also in eighth-century Islam and in later Europe. That cheaper material meant that the book was much more widely available... Another important factor was of course what was written, especially the language used. (p. 249)

Printing was invented in China, woodblock printing in the 8th century and cheap popular printing in the 12th century.

Goody also discusses interrelations across cultures. This doesn't just concern the famous *convivencia*, the cross-pollination of cultures in Muslim Iberia, but ranges much wider:

The Islamic lands stretching from Spain to India and the east constituted 'an enormous, contiguous, relatively stable, low-duty commercial zone' in which there was much exchange not only of goods but of ideas and of people travelling freely... the entire Afro-Asian seaboard as well as all the large rivers appear to have been well travelled since Harrapan times. (p. 121)

This is the key point of the thesis of Eurasia – as a vast intercultural expanse in which merchants and scholars travelled, the world of Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Rushd, Maimonides. Chinese, Indian, Persian, Turkic, Central Asian, Muslim, Arabic, Mongol, Berber cultures were interconnected. The *Dâr al-Islâm*, the 'abode of Islam', was not only the world's earliest cosmopolitanism but one that stretched further than any and endured longer (Nederveen Pieterse, 2007). To mention just two snippets out of myriad instances: 'In the ninth century there were said to be over 100,000 Muslim merchants in Canton' (p. 254). 'In the compendium of Ibn al-Baitar (d. 1248) of Malaga, probably the greatest botanist of the medieval period, the author gives the names of plants in Arabic, Persian, Berber, Greek and in the Romance languages' (p. 112). In global history the notion of parallel and interconnected histories is now a common thread and Goody's perspective matches that of Lieberman (1999) and others. But for a long time, from the decline of Rome to the 12th-century Renaissance, most of Europe stood apart from or was only marginally connected to this expanse.

While the Renaissance is represented as Europe's recollection of European antiquity, this recollection took place through the mediation of other cultures and languages and the *convivencia* of Muslim Spain and Sicily.

Goody's work shows that the actual and wider significance of the Renaissance is Europe reconnecting to the east and rejoining Eurasia – through Venice, Genoa, Sicily, through the Levant trade, resuming the links with the Silk Routes which had existed during Roman times. Thus a major subtext of the Renaissance is not just bridges to antiquity but bridges to the orient – as in the land bridge of the Mongol empire, as in Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci, the glasswork of Venice following Ottoman craftsmen, the Italian craftsmen who sought to imitate the precious goods brought to the Levant ports, the architecture and decoration of buildings in the Levant ports and their oriental styles (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009a). Accordingly, the Renaissance wasn't just or wasn't even principally Europe reclaiming its Hellenic and Roman past, but was Europe re-establishing trade with the east and reconnecting with the orient and with the major achievements that had taken place there during Europe's 'dark ages'.

After extensive discussion of the development of medical knowledge in Europe and in particular the role of Montpellier and Salerno, deeply influenced by knowledge from the Muslim world, Goody rightly notes:

In the end the thinking behind this supposed European uniqueness is partly based upon a clash model of the contrast between cultures, civilizations and religions, Christianity (the west) against Islam (the east). That model does not account for very much... What we need for this aspect of culture [the intercultural transfer of knowledge] is not only a clash metaphor but also a flow chart. (p. 61)

Part of this flow chart is that, in brief, Chinese gunpowder ended the castle system, and thus ended feudalism, and Chinese inventions of paper and printing enabled the spread of Renaissance humanism (Goody, 2009).

Goody criticizes Norbert Elias for neglecting non-European civilization: 'the east had long known refinements of the kind Elias sees as part of the "civilizing process" emerging in Europe after the Renaissance, refinements which in the Asian cultures are evidenced by the elaboration of food and flowers' (p. 92). Since Elias sees the 'civilizing process' in Europe unfolding since 16th-century Florence, he neglects classical culture as well.

Such Eurocentric provincialism in my view also applies to world-system theory and Wallerstein's preoccupation with the Low Countries and the Baltic trade as the origin of the 'modern world-system' and therefore modern capitalism. Compare the level of development of the medieval and 16th-century Low Countries, Scandinavia and the Baltic with that of China, the Mughal Empire, the Muslim world, even in terms of material culture, let alone the expanse of commerce, and the idea becomes quite absurd. Scandinavia emerged from the ice age only late and was unpopulated when the development of trade and towns in Asia was already well advanced, from the Harappan era onward. Braudel and Janet Abu-Lughod criticized Wallerstein's focus on the 16th century, opting for the 1200s instead. While Wallerstein has held on to this premise, Frank and Arrighi did not and both ventured on profound inquiries of developments in Asia, historical and modern. In later work

Frank (1996) argued that attention should shift away from categorical and bulky concepts such as capitalism and instead adopt the old tradition of examining shifting trade routes and shifting centres of hegemony. Goody (2006) also objects to using monolithic concepts such as antiquity and feudalism, and opts for using an 'analytical grid' that allows one to see subtle gradations across multiple axes of difference, which makes it possible to register variations in the pace and degree of change, rather than just categorical change (see Burke, 2009; Pomeranz, 2009).

According to *Renaissances* there was not one route to modernity – there were several, and they were interconnected. 'As elsewhere, in China, India or in Japan, "modernization" was partly the result of uneven contact with the west, resulting from the discrepancies in military and economic power as well as in the accumulation of knowledge' while 'the west had in turn borrowed heavily for its own Renaissance' (p. 143). This, in brief, is Goody's argument of *alternation*. The how and why of alternation, of cultures and centres rising or declining in influence, raise many questions but, at any rate, as Goody notes, 'essentialism cannot account for alternation' (p. 141).

I have argued that 'globalization is braided', one link over another, and east–west osmosis is a major part of this: for 18 out of 20 centuries the east influenced and shaped the west; standing on the shoulders of the east, the west ruled from 1800 to 2000; and now the east rises again and does so in a world shaped by the west (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009a). This is also the argument of the 'orient-first' and *oriental globalization* as primary globalization, well ahead of occidental globalization (Hobson, 2004; Nederveen Pieterse, 2006).

Goody's account of alternation differs in one minor respect: he claims ancient Greece and Rome temporarily moved ahead of the east with democracy and prosperity built on slavery. 'The Greeks and the Romans created a new order, based on slavery and democracy (for some Greek citizens), which left Asia distinct and indeed behind' (*Eurasian Miracle*, p. 62; cf. p. 113). I don't think that is a strong claim. It is argued only briefly and in passing in *The Eurasian Miracle*. The point of Karl Jaspers' 'axial age' (whatever its further limitations) is the *parallelism* of developments in east and west at the time. If flows of information and modes of communication are as important as Goody argues, then Greece and Rome owed much to the east, as Martin Bernal shows (1987), among others in language, numeracy and mathematics. Greek philosophy and medicine also include Asian and oriental lineages. Democracy, as Goody notes, first developed in Mesopotamia. Thus whether in antiquity Europe was an equal of the east or an importer of knowledge and technologies from the east, the claim that it was *ahead* of the east is at odds with most findings and is also unnecessary in light of the wider thesis of Eurasia.

Goody's book *The Eurasian Miracle* argues that while the idea of a 'European miracle' is an ethnocentric fallacy, the actual miracle is *Eurasia* and is based on the shared Bronze Age culture. Eurasia is a theme of growing interest (e.g. Gunn, 2003; Inglis and Robertson, 2006; Lieberman, 1999; Nederveen Pieterse, 2004) and Goody takes it further back in time, building on Gordon Childe's work in archaeology and anthropology.



According to the thesis of the Bronze Age underlying Eurasian developments, Europe is an outlier because it lost the urban culture of the Hellenic and Roman world and Africa is an outlier because it did not experience a Bronze Age. While iron technology did develop in Africa, agriculture remained – and in many places still remains – a hoe agriculture rather than plough agriculture and animal traction did not develop nor did an urban culture and writing. Since Goody is also an accomplished anthropologist of West Africa this isn't a matter of conventional bias. At any rate, some reservations and queries are in order. First, this doesn't apply to North Africa, where urban culture and writing did develop, and North Africa was linked to sub-Saharan Africa. Second, major towns did develop also in Africa south of the Sahara based on the control of long-distance trade, from famed Timbuktu stretching to Zimbabwe and Zanzibar. The empires of Ghana and Mali also included urban centres. Sixteenth-century European travellers reported on major towns in West Africa, several of which were larger than towns in Europe. But because agricultural productivity remained limited and urban centres declined when trade routes changed, this didn't generate an urban culture; on this point I agree with Goody. Third, Goody's focus on Eurasia underplays Africa's links with Eurasia. Africa did not stand apart but was connected through many trade routes that crisscrossed the continent and linked it to Asia (notably the Indian subcontinent and the Indonesian archipelago), the Middle East and Europe. Thus a more appropriate category than Eurasia is Afro-Eurasia, as in Hodgson's work (e.g. 1974). Fourth, it is not clear and is not spelled out in Goody's work what the implications are of the, partial, African exception. Fifth, as Pomeranz notes (2009), Goody also leaves out the Americas.

### **Many Modernities?**

Goody's question about renaissances – is there one or are there many? – may be answered in favour of the latter. A wider question this account poses is if Renaissance in the singular produces modernity in the singular, do renaissances in the plural produce modernities in the plural? There are several variants of the singular modernity narrative, such as Weber's Protestant ethic and Marx's conquest of the world market, shifting centres (Mediterranean, north-west Europe, France, Britain, the United States) and different phases (early, late modernity, postmodernity), but all along it remains a western trajectory. Goody doesn't pose this question but it is a logical implication.

Since it is invariably the qualifying trope of the 'modern' that marks the European claim and its gateway to history, from Marx to Weber and all of western classical sociology (cf. Connel, 1997), unpacking modernity is part of scrutinizing the Eurocentric edifice. *Renaissances* shows that Europe is a latecomer to rather than a forerunner of major strands of modernity: urban culture, long-distance crosscultural trade, industrial production (ceramics in China and cotton production in India already long used advanced techniques of division of labour), advanced flows of

information and modes of communication. Goody adds *haute cuisine* (in China, India and the Muslim world) and the cultivation of flowers, to which he has devoted studies. European contributions such as double-entry bookkeeping, the exploration of the Americas and moveable type printing come only in the late 15th and 16th centuries, and many date from after 1800. Other cultures also knew humanist traditions, such as the Arab humanists and the worldly elites in China (Burke, 2009), and periods of enlightenment. In 1591–2 the Mughal emperor Akbar codified the neutrality of the state in relation to all religions (which included, in addition to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Christians), at a time when in Europe the Inquisition ruled and Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake on the Campo dei Fiori in Rome in 1600 (Sen, 2005). To the traditionalists Akbar argued that tolerance is based on reason: if the traditionalists were right the prophets would have never come with new ideas because they would have just followed their predecessors. The Muslim *Dhimma* and the Ottoman *millet* system institutionalized multiculturalism at a time when ghettos, persecutions and pogroms were the norm in Europe. Periods of enlightenment and heterodoxy in Islam and the Arab world have been widely discussed (e.g. Burke, 2009; Mortimer, 1982; Rodinson, 2002).

If modernity and capitalism are not singular, if there are multiple lead-ins to modernity and several forms of early capitalism, if there are diverse traditions of enlightenment too, two possibilities emerge. There are multiple paths to modernity or, in view of different histories and geographies, there are multiple modernities. The former view is uncontroversial; multilinear evolution has been the mainstream view since the 1940s. Therborn adopts this view (1995), although in later work he speaks of ‘entangled modernities’ (2003). But the case for multiple modernities and capitalisms is strong. If the lineages of modern ways (urbanism, industrialism, enlightenment) extend much further back in time than in the Eurocentric script, and are geographically wide apart and culturally diverse, and there are likewise early forms of capitalism in different regions, it is more plausible that these would generate diverse modernities and multiple capitalisms than that they would yield a single modernity and a single capitalism. The idea of a singular modernity carries the further disadvantage of being associated with western modernity as the ideal type (and its flipside history of domination and imperialism). I have argued the case of multiple modernities elsewhere (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009b). This gives us a wide and open window on contemporary times. This is relevant for understanding the contemporary rise of emerging societies. Thus Goody’s studies offer us a deeper perspective not just on the past but also on contemporary history.

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