

The West's Selective Reading of Eastern History and Values: From Thermopylae to the Twin Towers

Alain Gresh

The West's Selective Reading of Eastern History and Values: From Thermopylae to the Twin Towers

Alain Gresh

Translated by Donald Hounam

Shortly after the First World War, the French literary critic and historian Henri Massis (1886-1970) preached a crusade against the dangers threatening European values and thought – largely identified with those of France, in his mind. He wasn't entirely misguided: across the world, colonised nations were in revolt. He wrote: "The future of western civilisation, of humanity itself, is now under threat... Every traveller, every foreigner who has spent any time in the Far East agrees that the way in which the population thinks has changed more in the last 10 years than it did over 10 centuries. The old, easy-going submissiveness has given way to blind hostility – sometimes genuine hatred, just waiting for the right moment to act. From Calcutta to Shanghai, from the steppes of Mongolia to the plains of Anatolia, the whole of Asia trembles with a blind desire for freedom. These people no longer recognise the supremacy that the West has taken for granted since John Sobieski conclusively stemmed the Turkish and Tartar invasions beneath the walls of Vienna. Instead they aspire to rebuild their unity against the white man, whose overthrow they proclaim." [1]

These fears are resurfacing today in a very different context, also marked by a series of cataclysmic events: the end of the cold war,

9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and above all the restructuring of the global order in favour of new powers, such as China and India. Various authors, many of them highly regarded, have picked up on the Manichean view of history as an eternal confrontation between civilisation and barbarism as they excavate the roots of what Anthony Pagden calls the "2,500-year struggle" now bathing the world in blood.

Pagden has taught in some of the world's most prestigious universities, including Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard. The picture he paints of world history is a crude one: "A flame had been lit in Troy which would burn steadily down the centuries, as the Trojans were succeeded by the Persians, the Persians by the Phoenicians, the Phoenicians by Parthians, the Parthians by the Sassanids, the Sassanids by the Arabs, and the Arabs by the Ottoman Turks... The battle lines have shifted over time, and the identities of the antagonists have changed. But both sides' broader understanding of what it is that separates them has remained, drawing, as do all such perceptions, on accumulated historical memories, some reasonably accurate, some entirely false." [2]



The Trojan horse

Despite this minor reservation about “entirely false” memories, Pagden’s vision is a binary one whose founding event was the confrontation between the Greeks and Persians as described by the Greek historian Herodotus.

According to Pagden: “What [Herodotus] is concerned to show is that what divided the Persians from the Greeks or the Asians from the Europeans was something more profound than petty political differences. It was a view of the world, an understanding of what it was to be, and to live, like a human being.

“And while the cities of Greece, and of ‘Europe’ more widely, were possessed of very different personalities and had created sometimes very different kinds of societies, and were all too happy to betray each other if it suited them, they nevertheless all shared the common elements of that view. They could all distinguish freedom from slavery, and they were all committed broadly to what we today would identify as an individualistic view of humanity.”

Paul Cartledge, professor of Greek history at Cambridge University, takes a similar view of “the battle that changed the world”: Thermopylae (480BC). “This clash between the Spartans and other Greeks, on one side, and

the Persian horde (including Greeks), on the other, was a clash between freedom and slavery, and was perceived as such by the Greeks both at the time and subsequently... The battle of Thermopylae, in short, was a turning-point not only in the history of Classical Greece, but in the world’s history, eastern as well as western.” [3] In the mid-19th century, the economist John Stuart Mill described the battle of Marathon, fought some 10 years earlier, as “more important than the battle of Hastings, even as an event in English history”.



Thermopylae, 480 BC

In his preface, Cartledge makes no secret of his ideological perspective: “The events of ‘9/11’ in New York City and now ‘7/7’ in London have given this project [understanding the significance of Thermopylae] a renewed urgency and importance within the wider framework of East-West cultural encounter.” Not so much an encounter as a clash between despotism and freedom.

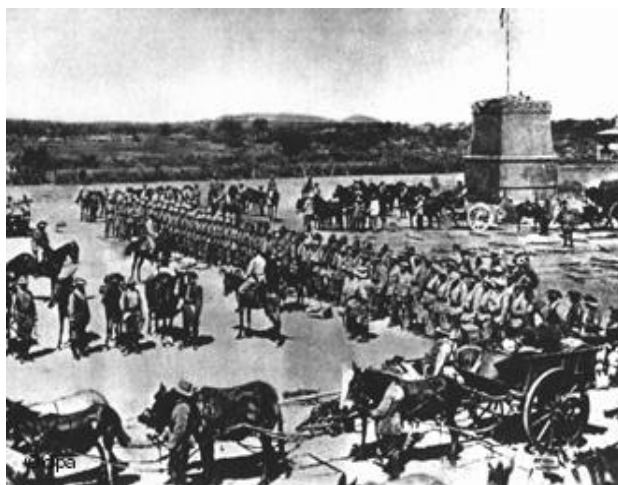
‘No prisoners!’

A popularised version of this academic view is presented in 300, a film depicting the battle, directed by Zack Snyder and based upon the graphic novel of the same name by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley. The two-hour film,

which was a hit at the US box office, resembles a video game in which chiselled musclemen, high on amphetamines, square off against effeminate barbarians (black or Middle Eastern in appearance) whose deaths nobody would regret. “No prisoners!” shouts the hero, King Leonidas of Sparta, who has already killed the Persian ambassador at the beginning of the film: savages are excluded from humanity’s most sacred laws. [4]

So basically civilisation means exterminating barbarians. As early as 1898, the German political scientist Heinrich von Treischke stated what many of his contemporaries would have regarded as the obvious: “International law becomes meaningless when any attempt is made to apply its principles equally to barbarian nations. The only way to punish a black tribe is to burn their villages; it is the only sort of example they understand. For the German empire to apply international law in cases like this would not be either humanity or justice; it would be shameful weakness.”

The Germans showed no “weakness” between 1904 and 1907 when they exterminated the Herero in Namibia. This first genocide of the 20th century was one of a series of colonial policies that served as model and precursor to the Nazi genocide against the Jews.



German troops dispatched to put down the Herero Insurrection

According to Cartledge, there is no Persian source – no native Herodotus – for the Greco-Persian wars. But we now know enough about the Persian Empire to modify traditional views. Touraj Daryaee, professor of ancient history at California State University, Fullerton, points out that slavery, widely practised in Greece, was rare among the Persians, whose women enjoyed higher status than their Greek counterparts. [5] He also reminds us of the Cyrus cylinder, a document that the UN decided to translate into all its official languages in 1971; this first known charter of human rights was granted by Cyrus the Great in the 6th century BC and called for religious toleration, the abolition of slavery, the freedom to decide one’s profession...

It is unsurprising that the Greeks – particularly Herodotus, who, to be fair, was less of a caricature than his literary heirs – should have presented their victory as a triumph over barbarism. As long as wars have been fought, the protagonists have draped themselves in idealistic principles. US leaders have similarly depicted their campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan as wars of Good against Evil. But it may be worth asking why, 4,500 years later, we remain so obsessed by the Greeks.

According to Marcel Detienne of John Hopkins University in Baltimore: “In his Instructions, Lavissee declared that what secondary-school pupils need to be taught, without their realising it, is that ‘our history begins with the Greeks’. [6] Our [French] history begins with the Greeks, who invented liberty and democracy and who introduced us to ‘the beautiful’ and a taste for ‘the universal’. We are heirs to the only civilisation that has offered the world ‘a perfect and as it were ideal expression of justice and liberty’. That is why our history begins – has to begin – with the Greeks. This belief was then compounded by another every bit as powerful: ‘The Greeks are not like

others'. After all, how could they be, given that they were right at the beginning of our history? Those were two propositions that were essential for the creation of a national mythology that was the sole concern of traditional humanists and historians, all obsessed with nationhood." [7]

Detienne continues: "It is commonly believed not only that both the abstract notion of politics and concrete politics one fine day fell from the heavens, landing on 'classical' Athens in the miraculous and authenticated form of Democracy (with a capital D), but also that a divinely linear history has led us by the hand from the American Revolution, passing by way of the 'French Revolution', all the way to our own western societies that are so blithely convinced that their mission is to convert all peoples to the true religion of democracy."

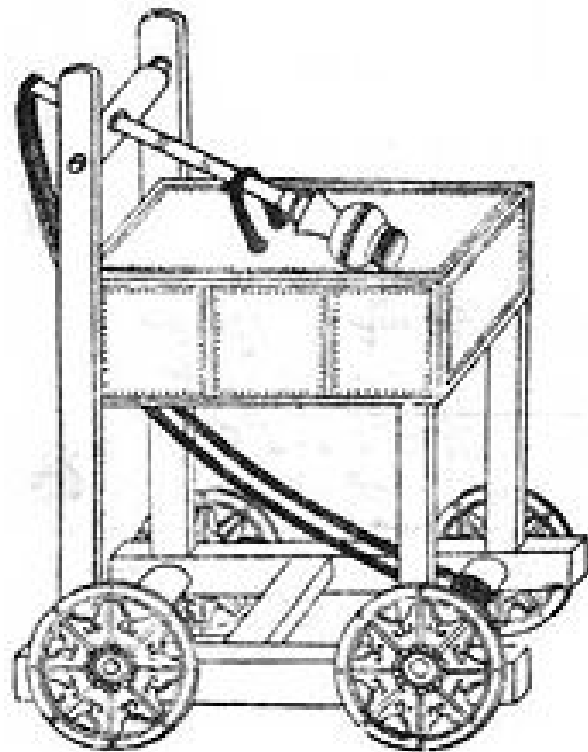
A number of Anglo-Saxon writers, unpersuaded of Europe's "uniqueness", have questioned the idea of a direct line of descent from classical antiquity via the Renaissance – a term invented by the historian Jules Michelet during the 19th century – to contemporary Europe. Their message has rarely reached French shores. [8]

John M Hobson of Sheffield University has shown that it is impossible to understand world history without recognising the crucial importance of the East: "This marginalisation of the East constitutes a highly significant silence because it conceals three major points. First, the East actively pioneered its own substantial economic development after about 500. Second, the East actively created and maintained the global economy after 500. Third, and above all, the East has significantly and actively contributed to the rise of the West by pioneering and delivering many advanced 'resources portfolios' (eg technologies, institutions and ideas) to Europe." [9]

China, the leading player

How many of us are aware that the first

industrial revolution began in the 11th century, in Song dynasty China? This dynasty produced 125,000 tonnes of iron in 1078, seven centuries before Britain managed to produce 76,000. The Chinese mastered advanced technologies like iron casting and substituted coke for charcoal to prevent deforestation. During the same period they revolutionised transport, energy (the water mill), taxation, trade and urban development. Their green revolution attained levels of agricultural production that Europe did not match until the 20th century.



A Trebuchet catapult of 1044 used to launch the earliest type of explosive bombs

Until 1800, China remained the leading player in a global economy that some described as Sinocentric; India, too, was of enormous importance. Many Chinese technologies, ideas and institutions spread to Europe and helped bring about the rise of modern capitalism. The British industrial revolution would have been

impossible without China's contribution. And the same is true of the great Muslim empires (see box).

According to John M Hobson: "Eurocentrism errs by asking wrong questions at the outset. All Eurocentric scholars (either explicitly or implicitly) begin by asking two interrelated questions: 'What was it about the West that enabled its breakthrough to capitalist modernity?' and 'What was it about the East that prevented it from making the breakthrough?'" But these questions assume that western dominance was inevitable, and lead historians to scour the past for the factors that explain it. "The rise of the West is understood through a logic of immanence: that it can only be accounted for by factors that are strictly endogenous to Europe." East and West come to be regarded as distinct entities separated by a cultural Great Wall of China, which protects us from barbarian invasion.

Fear of barbarians

But who are these barbarians? Tzvetan Todorov questions Claude Levi-Strauss' definition of the barbarian as "the man who believes in barbarism" and suggests: "It is someone who believes that a population or an individual is not fully human and therefore merits treatment that he would resolutely refuse to apply to himself." In his recent *The Fear of Barbarians*, Todorov develops an argument he presented in earlier works such as *On Human Diversity* (a thought-provoking book that deserves to be far more widely read). [10] "The fear of barbarians," he writes now, "is what is in danger of turning us into barbarians. And the evil that we do will far exceed what we initially fear."

Only the individual who fully recognises the humanity of others can be called civilised. "For a long time," Todorov continues, "the ideas of the Enlightenment served as a source of inspiration for a liberal, reformist tendency that fought conservatism in the name of

universalism and equal respect for all. Things have changed now, and the conservative defenders of the superiority of western thought claim to be the heirs of the Enlightenment, battling against the 'relativism' that they associate with the Romantic reaction of the early 19th century. But they can only achieve this by renouncing the true Enlightenment tradition with its articulation of universal values and cultural pluralism. We must go beyond the clichés: Enlightenment thought should not be confused either with dogmatism (my culture must be imposed upon all) or nihilism (all cultures are equally valid). To use it to denigrate others, as an excuse to subject or destroy them, is simply to hijack the Enlightenment."

But was the Enlightenment really hijacked, or did it go along willingly? Hobson argues that the construction of 18th- and 19th-century European identity allowed the affirmation of an "exceptionalism" that no other civilisation has ever asserted. "Ultimately, the Europeans did not seek to remake the world simply because 'they could' (as in materialist explanations). They sought to remake the world because they believed they should. That is, their actions were significantly guided by their identity that deemed imperialism to be a morally appropriate policy." Many European supporters of the anti-colonialist struggle and the Third World rejected this vision, often in the name of the Enlightenment. The debate will no doubt continue.

Translated by Donald Hounam

Notes:

(1) Henri Massis, *Défense de l'Occident*, Plon, Paris, 1927. An alliance of Poles, Germans and Austrians defeated the Ottomans outside Vienna on 12 September 1683.

(2) Anthony Pagden, *Worlds at War: The 2,500-*

Year Struggle Between East and West, Random House, New York, 2008.

(3) Paul Cartledge, Thermopylae: The Battle that Changed the World, Overlook Press, New York, 2006.

(4) See "300 Spartans" on Youtube.

(5) Touraj Daryaee, "Go tell the Spartans" , Iranian.com, 14 March 2007.

(6) Ernest Lavisse (1842-1922) was an important influence on the teaching of history in late 19th-century France.

(7) Marcel Detienne, The Greeks and Us: A Comparative Anthropology of Ancient Greece, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007.

(8) See, for example, Janet Abu-Lughod, Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350, Oxford University Press, 1991; Andre Gunder Frank, Reorient: Global economy in the Asian Age, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998; Kenneth Pomeranz, The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the World Modern Economy, Princeton University Press, 2000; Jack Goody, The Theft of History, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

(9) John M Hobson, The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

(10) Tzvetan Todorov, La peur des barbares. Au-delà du choc des civilisations, Robert Laffont, Paris, 2008. Also On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought, Harvard University Press, 1998.

Alain Gresh is editor of Le Monde Diplomatique and a specialist on the Middle East. His book Israël-Palestine, vérités sur un conflit (Fayard, 2001 et 2002) has been translated into German, Arabic, Dutch, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. His book L'Islam, la république et le monde was published by Fayard in 2004. His

coauthored book, The New A-Z of the Middle East: Second Edition is available [here](#)

This article appeared in Le Monde Diplomatique in January 2009 and is published at The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus on January 1, 2009.

Recommended Citation: Alain Gresh, "The West's Selective Reading of Eastern History and Values: From Thermopylae to the Twin Towers" The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 1-6-09, January 2, 2009.

Comment by John Hobson:

Rational and progressive: From Thermopylae to the Twin towers

Let us suppose we were living back in, say, 900CE. The Islamic Middle East/North Africa was at that time the cradle of civilisation. Not only was it the most economically advanced region in the world, standing at the centre of the global economy, but it enjoyed considerable economic growth and perhaps even per capita income growth – the alleged sine qua non of modern capitalism. Were we to set up a university at that time and enquire into the causes of Islamic economic progress we might come up with the following answer. The Middle East/North Africa was progressive because it enjoyed a unique set of rational and progressive institutions.

First, it was a pacified region in which towns sprang up and capitalists engaged in long-distance global trade. Second, Islamic merchants were not just traders but rational capitalist investors who traded, invested and speculated in global capitalist activities for profit-maximising ends. Third, a sufficiently rational set of institutions was created including a clearing system, banks engaging in currency exchange, deposits and lending at interest, a special type of double-entry bookkeeping, partnerships and contract law, all of which presupposed a strong element of trust.

Fourth, scientific thought developed rapidly after about 800. And fifth, Islam was especially important in stimulating capitalism on a global scale. Certainly no one would have entertained the prospect of writing a book entitled *The Christian Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which would dismiss Islam as growth-repressive.

More likely, someone would have written a book called *The Islamic Ethic and the Spirit of*

Capitalism, which would definitively demonstrate why only Islam was capable of significant economic progress and why Christian Europe would be forever mired in agrarian stagnation. Or we might subscribe to the claim made by the contemporary Sa'id al-Andalusi (later followed by Ibn Khaldun): that Europe's occupation of a cold temperate zone meant that its people were ignorant, lacked scientific curiosity and would remain backward.