

Eurasia and East–West Boundaries

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The notion that there was a profound cultural boundary between Europe (defined as Christian) and Asia (defined as other, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism . . .) was dear to the hearts of the Europeans at least from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. But it is as much a figment of European creation as the notion of a physical boundary. Of course there were cultural differences of a graduated kind and important political-military ones with the western developments of ships and guns (using the Islamic compass and Chinese gunpowder), but especially with the development of industrial production. Pomerantz has recently argued that western economic supremacy was not in evidence until after that time, a thesis that obviously cuts at the roots of those many writers who claim a cultural advantage in the West going back perhaps to classical times, to Christianity, to the German heritage, or even to the Renaissance and Reformation. Some important changes did occur in the West following developments in the sphere of printing, mainly in the sphere of education and the modes of communication. That earlier levels of cultural attainment were not so very different is clear from the early Jesuit reports of their work in the East.

So where and when did the notion of a great socio-cultural divide emerge? It was intrinsic to the work of the founder of demographic studies, T. R. Malthus (1766–1834) who postulated a difference between the late-marrying western Europeans, controlling their population by inner restraint, and the early-marrying Chinese, holding their population back only by the external checks of famine, disease and warfare. In this he was followed by countless demographers and historians who had in mind the need to account for the Industrial Revolution and who naturally searched around for possible causes or concomitants. So the idea was propounded of non-European patterns of kinship and marriage which had a hand in this situation, an idea that was followed up in Hajnal's notion of a unique European marriage pattern which was linked in a variety of ways to socio-economic developments in that continent and provided a reason for why the others did not make it (why are some nations rich and others poor? as David Landes asked).

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The questions are many. Did those differences exist? Did they have different consequences for population and family? Were they in any way related to the development of industrialization or to that will-o-the-wisp, capitalism? To take the first and second questions, recent research by Lee and colleagues has shown that the levels of population growth in China were no greater than in Europe but that control was placed on marital fertility rather than on age of marriage, a control that arguably required greater 'restraint' than in Europe, where bundling could be practised by adolescent couples. The difference is important but not in the way that was originally thought. Certainly as far as mercantile capitalism and its concomitants were concerned, the East was no laggard, controlling trade in the north Pacific and making voyages to the Indian Ocean and the shores of East Africa well before the Portuguese managed to navigate the Cape of Good Hope. And it was the East rather than the West that was initially the biggest exporter of manufactured products to the rest of the world, especially porcelain from China that provided the very word in English and led directly to the establishment of the industries at Delft in the Low Countries and at Staffordshire in England where, as on the continent, the firm of Wedgwood copied their pottery, their glazes and above all their decorations (as in the willow-pattern), which has been seen as the beginning of mass consumer culture. It was a similar story with that very Indian textile, cotton, imported in great quantities to Europe after the opening of the sea route. The impact on women's dress in Africa was enormous, as it was in Europe, since unlike earlier textiles cotton took the bright colours which from then on changed the nature of women's dress (and of men's underwear) as well as the decoration of the home. Again it was an attempt to provide substitutes for these extensive imports that provided the motor for the Industrial Revolution in England and elsewhere, a revolution that primarily concentrated upon the mechanized production of cotton and other textiles, though it also touched upon the development of energy efficiency and the iron needed for a variety of purposes.

At the level of thought, of cognition, I do not think there has, until recently, been much influence of East on West or vice versa. Of course, we have symbols from India via the Arabs (and possibly the zero from China), and less certainly forms of argument going from Greece to India, or Buddhist ideas from India to the Mediterranean. But since the Bronze Age in general what has happened in this sphere in the East as in the West, is largely because the developments were independently based on the fact that both had required writing in one of its many forms and were able by this means to build up knowledge systems and to communicate and elaborate that information over the generations as well as over space. That acquisition resulted in the dynamics of literacy, which affected all forms of knowledge, not only technical, but also philosophical, since writing encourages a more abstract as well as a more systematic approach to language and to the world. As examples, we may take the development of the syllogism, the extended use of lists, and the composition of encyclopaedias, as well as the emergence of new types of artistic genres such as the essay and the novel, and indeed of 'history' itself.

Very often the analytical model adopted to discuss this process is one of what anthropologists used to call 'diffusion', or in the modern context, globalization. That occasionally happened as in the export of 'painted' cottons from India to Europe and

Africa, which changed the mode of dressing and of decorating the home, substituting light for heavier materials, brightness for dullness. But more important was the process of parallel development, for example of mercantile capitalism, which emerged from earlier trading activities such as those described in *Markets in Africa* by Dalton and Bohannon and that existed in all the post-Bronze Age societies, in the Near East, in India, in China, and in the Mediterranean. Similar but far from identical instruments were developed in these areas because of the functional demands of mercantile systems, that is, types of credit, types of monetary transfer, types of risk insurance, types of trading activities, as well as in the cultural domain, in the culture of food, of flowers, of representation. There are similarities that are due to more limited versions of globalization, that is, intercultural transfers, 'diffusion'; there are others that involve parallel internal developments. An example of the first would be Alexander's invasion of north India and central Asia, which established Greek towns with philosophers and theatres. The result was certainly an artistic influence on the sculpture of the region, on Gandara and on Buddhist art generally. There were quite specific design transfers, such as the acanthus leaf to the East and the dragon and willow-pattern and mango feature to the West. More hypothetically there was the influence of Greek drama on the emergent Sanskrit theatre associated with the name of Kalidas. These features are all quite specific.

At the same time, possibly in the context of identical features, there have been parallel internal developments. Anthropologists have often argued that borrowing would never have taken place unless there had been some kind of prior disposition on the part of the recipient. Be that as it may, and it is an idea that can easily be overstretched, there are many internal developments in post-Bronze Age societies that depend directly on changes, for example in the modes of transport (the use of wheeled vehicles), the modes of communication (the uses of literacy) and the modes of production (intensive agriculture with the concomitant changes in land ownership, in stratification and in artisanal and commercial activity). Mercantile 'capitalism' arises directly out of this situation and there is no necessity for outside stimulation (although that may hasten developments). With industrialization the situation is different, as it involved inventions which, like the wheel, the compass and gunpowder, are unlikely to be made twice.

To revert to the earlier question of the boundary between East and West, I have pointed out that there are many more similarities than is often assumed by Europeans attempting to explain the late socio-economic advantages they developed partly as a result of the adaptation of the printing press to an alphabetic script, giving a great boost to education and to the communication of knowledge from the sixteenth century but more obviously to the development of an industrial mode of production in the late eighteenth. Those events did create some kind of divide not only with the Asian East but also with eastern Europe. Some historians have tried to explain those developments in terms of the cultural roots of Europe, its family, its religion, its 'individualism'. In a comparative perspective, these explanations, where they can be established, turn out to be rather weak, indeed ethnocentric (even though adopted by some Asian scholars). It is preferable to look at more immediate variables and causal chains, and to place less emphasis on the cultural divide which would seem to confine the rest of the world to an underdevelopment that can be

changed only by massive borrowing. However, Asia seems much more internally prepared for modern developments than those theories suggest, were they really so deeply buried in cultural dispositions.

In any case there were many contacts between Europe and Asia. These were mostly of trade and visits by scholars but they included conquests. Trade developed by land via the Silk Road and by sea via Egypt. The importance of trade between Asia and Europe in earlier times is brought out in the manuscript material of the tenth to the thirteenth centuries from the Geniza in Cairo that has been so imaginatively analysed by the historian Goitein. The trading community in Cairo consisted of Jews, Muslims and Christians living and working side by side, trading with South India, which had its own Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities. In this way, spices from Indonesia came to the Mediterranean, and earlier to the Roman Empire. That same empire imported other luxury items, perfumes and silks, from the East, and sent some glass and bullion in return.

That was also true of the land routes between the continents, notably the famous Silk Road by which valuables passed from China to the Mediterranean and back again. That route was well established as early as the Roman period and it even allowed some scholar-merchants like Marco Polo to travel and bring back information about the East. Well before that, Chinese scholar-travellers had journeyed to the West, at least as far as India in the search for Buddhist manuscripts, and even to Arabia in the course of pilgrimage.

Another transgression of boundaries came of course through conquest. No one needs reminding that Europe's steppe frontier was open not only to trade but also to military conquest and large-scale migration. Altaic languages spread as far as Finland and later to Hungary. We know something of the latter movement but little of the earlier. They were part of a long series of population movements from central Asia to eastern Europe, involving groups such as the Huns and the Vandals whose coming was implicated in the fall of the Roman Empire. By this Asian populations established themselves in Europe and played an important part in that continent's history. At a later period, Islamic groups from the East penetrated Europe in a major way, bringing with them forms of written knowledge that owed something to India and much to the classical texts of the Greeks, whose work had crossed and recrossed the geographical boundary, reducing the opposition between East and West to its proper perspective.

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