

Eurocentrism and its Avatars: The Dilemmas of Social Science

Social science has been Eurocentric throughout its institutional history, which means since there have been departments teaching social science within university systems.¹ This is not in the least surprising. Social science is a product of the modern world-system, and Eurocentrism is constitutive of the geoculture of the modern world. Furthermore, as an institutional structure, social science originated largely in Europe. We shall be using Europe here more as a cultural than as a cartographical expression; in this sense, in the discussion about the last two centuries, we are referring primarily and jointly to Western Europe and North America. The social science disciplines were in fact overwhelmingly located, at least up to 1945, in just five countries—France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and the United States. Even today, despite the global spread of social science as an activity, the large majority of social scientists worldwide remain Europeans. Social science emerged in response to European problems, at a point in history when Europe dominated the whole world-system. It was virtually inevitable that its choice of subject matter, its theorizing,

its methodology, and its epistemology all reflected the constraints of the crucible within which it was born.

However, in the period since 1945, the decolonization of Asia and Africa, plus the sharply accentuated political consciousness of the non-European world everywhere, has affected the world of knowledge just as much as it has affected the politics of the world-system. One major such difference, today and indeed for some thirty years now at least, is that the 'Eurocentrism' of social science has been under attack, severe attack. The attack is of course fundamentally justified, and there is no question that, if social science is to make any progress in the twenty-first century, it must overcome the Eurocentric heritage which has distorted its analyses and its capacity to deal with the problems of the contemporary world. If, however, we are to do this, we must take a careful look at what constitutes Eurocentrism, for, as we shall see, it is a hydra-headed monster and has many avatars. It will not be easy to slaughter the dragon swiftly. Indeed, if we are not careful, in the guise of trying to fight it, we may in fact criticize Eurocentrism using Eurocentric premises and thereby reinforce its hold on the community of scholars.

I. The Accusations

There are at least five different ways in which social science has been said to be Eurocentric. These do not constitute a logically tight set of categories, since they overlap in unclear ways. Still, it might be useful to review the allegations under each heading. It has been argued that social science expresses its Eurocentrism in 1) its historiography, 2) the parochiality of its universalism, 3) its assumptions about (Western) civilization, 4) its Orientalism, and 5) its attempts to impose the theory of progress.

1. Historiography

This is the explanation of European dominance of the modern world by virtue of specific European historical achievements. The historiography is probably fundamental to the other explanations, but it also the most obviously naive variant and the one whose validity is most easily put in question. Europeans in the last two centuries have unquestionably sat on top of the world. Collectively, they have controlled the wealthiest and militarily most powerful countries. They have enjoyed the most advanced technology and were the primary creators of this advanced technology. These facts seem largely uncontested, and are indeed hard to contest plausibly. The issue is what explains this differential in power and standard of living with the rest of the world. One kind of answer is that Europeans have done something meritorious and different from peoples in other parts of the world. This is what is meant by scholars who speak of the 'European miracle'.² Europeans have launched the industrial

¹ This was the keynote address at the ISA East Asian Regional Colloquium, 'The Future of Sociology in East Asia', 22–23 November 1996, Seoul, Korea, co-sponsored by the Korean Sociological Association and International Sociological Association.

² See, for instance, E.L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environment, Economics, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, Cambridge 1981.

revolution or sustained growth, or they have launched modernity, or capitalism, or bureaucratization, or individual liberty. Of course, we shall need then to define these terms rather carefully and discover whether it was really Europeans who launched whatever each of these novelties are supposed to be, and if so exactly when.

But even if we agree on the definition and the timing, and therefore, so to speak, on the reality of the phenomenon, we have actually explained very little. For we must then explain why it is that Europeans, and not others, launched the specified phenomenon, and why they did so at a certain moment of history. In seeking such explanations, the instinct of most scholars has been to push us back in history to presumed antecedents. If Europeans in the eighteenth or sixteenth century did x, it is said to be probably because their ancestors—or attributed ancestors, for the ancestry may be less biological than cultural, or assertedly cultural—did, or were, y in the eleventh century, or in the fifth century BC or even further back. We can all think of the multiple explanations that, once having established or at least asserted some phenomenon that has occurred in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, proceed to push us back to various earlier points in European ancestry for the truly determinant variable.

There is a premise here that is not really hidden, but was for a long time undebated. The premise is that whatever is the novelty for which Europe is held responsible in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, this novelty is a good thing, one of which Europe should be proud, one of which the rest of the world should be envious, or at least appreciative. This novelty is perceived as an achievement, and numerous book titles bear testimony to this kind of evaluation.

There seems to me little question that the actual historiography of world social science has expressed such a perception of reality to a very large degree. This perception can be challenged, of course, on various grounds, and this has been done increasingly in recent decades. One can challenge the accuracy of the picture of what happened, within Europe and in the world as a whole in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. One can certainly challenge the plausibility of the presumed cultural antecedents of what happened in this period. One can implant the story of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries in a longer duration, enlarging it by several centuries or tens of thousands of years. If one does that, one is usually arguing that the European 'achievements' of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries thereby seem less remarkable, or more like a cyclical variant, or less like achievements that can be credited primarily to Europe. Finally one can accept that the novelties were real, but argue that they were less a positive than a negative accomplishment.

This kind of revisionist historiography is often persuasive in detail, and certainly tends to be cumulative. At a certain point, the debunking, or deconstructing, may become pervasive, and perhaps a counter-theory take hold. This is, for example, what seems to be happening—or has already happened—with the historiography of the French Revolution, where the so-called social interpretation that had dominated the literature for at least a century and a half was challenged and then to some

degree toppled in the last thirty years. We are probably entering into such a so-called paradigmatic shift right now in the basic historiography of modernity.

Whenever such a shift happens, however, we ought to take a deep breath, step back, and evaluate whether the alternative hypotheses are indeed more plausible, and most of all whether they really break with the crucial underlying premises of the formerly dominant hypotheses. This is the question I wish to raise in relation to the historiography of European presumed achievements in the modern world. It is under assault. What is being proposed as a replacement? And how different is this replacement? Before, however, we can tackle this large question, we must review some of the other critiques of Eurocentrism.

2. Universalism

Universalism is the view that there exist scientific truths that are valid across all of time and space. European thought of the last few centuries has been for the most part strongly universalist. This was the era of the cultural triumph of science as a knowledge activity. Science displaced philosophy as the most prestigious mode of knowledge and the arbiter of social discourse. The science of which we are talking is Newtonian-Cartesian science. Its premises were that the world was governed by determinist laws taking the form of linear equilibria processes, and that, by stating such laws as universal reversible equations, we only needed knowledge in addition of some set of initial conditions to permit us to predict the state of the system at any future or past time.

What this meant for social knowledge seemed clear. Social scientists might discover the universal processes that explain human behaviour, and whatever hypotheses they could verify were thought to hold across time and space, or should be stated in ways such that they hold true across time and space. The persona of the scholar was irrelevant, since scholars were operating as value-neutral analysts. And the locus of the empirical evidence could be essentially ignored, provided the data were handled correctly, since the processes were thought to be constant. The consequences were not too different, however, in the case of those scholars whose approach was more historical and ideographic, as long as one assumed the existence of an underlying model of historical development. All stage theories—whether of Comte or Spencer or Marx, to choose only a few names from a long list—were primarily theorizations of what has been called the Whig interpretation of history, the presumption that the present is the best time ever and that the past led inevitably to the present. And even very empiricist historical writing, however much it proclaimed abhorrence of theorizing, tended nonetheless to reflect subconsciously an underlying stage theory.

Whether in the ahistorical time-reversible form of the nomothetic social scientists or the diachronic stage theory form of the historians, European social science was resolutely universalist in asserting that whatever it was that happened in Europe in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries represented a pattern that was applicable everywhere, either because it was a progressive achievement of mankind which was irreversible or because it

represented the fulfilment of humanity's basic needs via the removal of artificial obstacles to this realization. What you saw now in Europe was not only good but the face of the future everywhere.

Universalizing theories have always come under attack on the grounds that the particular situation in a particular time and place did not seem to fit the model. There have also always been scholars who argued that universal generalizations were intrinsically impossible. But in the last thirty years a third kind of attack has been made against the universalizing theories of modern social science. It has been argued that these allegedly universal theories are not in fact universal, but rather a presentation of the Western historical pattern as though it were universal. Joseph Needham quite some time ago designated as the 'fundamental error of Eurocentrism... the tacit postulate that modern science and technology, which in fact took root in Renaissance Europe, is universal and that it follows that all that is European is.'³

Social science thus has been accused of being Eurocentric insofar as it was particularistic. More than Eurocentric, it was said to be highly parochial. This hurt to the quick, since modern social science specifically prided itself on having risen above the parochial. To the degree that this charge seemed reasonable, it was far more telling than merely asserting that the universal propositions had not yet been formulated in a way that could account for every case.

3. Civilization

Civilization refers to a set of social characteristics that are contrasted with primitiveness or barbarism. Modern Europe considered itself to be more than merely one 'civilization' among several; it considered itself to be—uniquely or at least especially—'civilized'. What characterized this state of being civilized is not something on which there has been an obvious consensus, even among Europeans. For some, civilization was encompassed in 'modernity,' that is, in the advance of technology and the rise of productivity as well as the cultural belief in the existence of historic development and progress. For others, civilization meant the increased autonomy of the 'individual' vis-à-vis all other social actors—the family, the community, the state, the religious institutions. For others, civilization meant non-brutal behaviour in everyday life, social manners in the broadest sense. And for still others, civilization meant the decline or narrowing of the scope of legitimate violence and the broadening of the definition of cruelty. And of course, for many, civilization involved several or all of these traits in combination.

When French colonizers in the nineteenth century spoke of *la mission civilisatrice*, they meant that, by means of colonial conquest, France—or more generally Europe—would impose upon non-European peoples the values and norms that were encompassed by these definitions of civilization. When, in the 1990's, various groups in Western countries spoke of the 'right to interfere' in political situations in various parts of the world,

³ Cited in Anouar Abdel-Malek, *La Dialectique sociale*, Paris 1972; translated as *Social Dialectics*, Vol. 1, *Civilisations and Social Theory*, London 1981.

but almost always in non-Western parts of the world, it is in the name of such values of civilization that they were asserting such a right.

This set of values, however we prefer to designate them—civilized values, secular-humanist values, modern values—permeate social science, as one might expect, since social science is a product of the same historical system that has elevated these values to the pinnacle of a hierarchy. Social scientists have incorporated such values in their definitions of the problems—the social problems, the intellectual problems—they consider worth pursuing. They have incorporated these values into the concepts they have invented with which to analyze the problems, and into the indicators they utilize to measure the concepts. Social scientists no doubt have insisted, for the most part, that they were seeking to be value-free, insofar as they claimed they were not intentionally misreading or distorting the data because of their sociopolitical preferences. But to be value-free in this sense does not at all mean that values, in the sense of decisions about the historical significance of observed phenomena, are absent. This is of course the central argument of Heinrich Rickert about the logical specificity of what he calls the ‘cultural sciences’.⁴ They are unable to ignore ‘values’ in the sense of assessing social significance.

To be sure, the Western and social scientific presumptions about ‘civilization’ were not entirely impervious to the concept of the multiplicity of ‘civilizations’. Whenever one posed the question of the origin of civilized values, how it was that they have appeared originally—or so it was argued—in the modern Western world, the answer almost inevitably was that they were the products of long-standing and unique trends in the past of the Western world—alternatively described as the heritage of Antiquity and/or of the Christian Middle Ages, the heritage of the Hebrew world, or the combined heritage of the two, the latter sometimes renamed and respecified as the Judeo-Christian heritage.

Many objections can and have been made to the set of successive presumptions. Whether the modern world, or the modern European world, is civilized in the very way the word is used in European discourse has been challenged. There is the notable quip of Mahatma Gandhi who, when asked, ‘Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western civilization?’, responded, ‘It would be a good idea.’ In addition, the assertion that the values of ancient Greece and Rome or of ancient Israel were more conducive to laying the base for these so-called modern values than were the values of other ancient civilizations has also been contested. And finally whether modern Europe can plausibly claim either Greece and Rome, on the one hand, or ancient Israel, on the other, as its civilizational foreground is not at all self-evident. Indeed, there has long been a debate between those who have seen Greece or Israel as alternative cultural origins. Each side of this debate has denied the plausibility of the alternative. This debate itself casts doubt on the plausibility of the derivation.

In any case, who would argue that Japan can claim ancient Indic civilizations as its forerunner on the grounds that they were the place of ori-

⁴ Heinrich Rickert, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, Tübingen 1913; translated as *The Limits of Concept Formation in the Physical Sciences*, Cambridge 1986.

gin of Buddhism, which has become a central part of Japan's cultural history? Is the contemporary United States closer culturally to ancient Greece, Rome, or Israel than Japan is to Indic civilization? One could, after all, make the case that Christianity, far from representing continuity, marked a decisive break with Greece, Rome, and Israel. Indeed Christians, up to the Renaissance, made precisely this argument. And is not the break with Antiquity still today part of the doctrine of Christian churches?

However, today, the sphere in which the argument about values has come to the fore is the political sphere. Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia has been very specific in arguing that Asian countries can and should 'modernize' without accepting some or all of the values of European civilization. And his views have been widely echoed by other Asian political leaders. The 'values' debate has also become central within European countries themselves, especially within the United States, as a debate about 'multiculturalism'. This version of the current debate has indeed had a major impact on institutionalized social science, with the blossoming of structures within the university grouping scholars denying the premise of the singularity of something called 'civilization.'

4. Orientalism

Orientalism refers to a stylized and abstracted statement of the characteristics of non-Western civilizations. It is the obverse of the concept, 'civilization,' and has become a major theme in public discussion since the writings of Anouar Abdel-Malek and Edward Said.⁵ Orientalism was not too long ago a badge of honour.⁶ It is a mode of knowledge that claims roots in the European Middle Ages, when some intellectual Christian monks set themselves the task of better understanding non-Christian religions, by learning their languages and carefully reading their religious texts. Of course, they based themselves on the premise of the truth of Christian faith and the desirability of converting the pagans, but nonetheless they took these texts seriously as expressions, however perverted, of human culture.

When Orientalism was secularized in the nineteenth century, the form of the activity was not very different. Orientalists continued to learn the languages and decipher the texts. In the process, they continued to depend upon a binary view of the social world. In partial place of the Christian/pagan distinction, they placed the Western/Oriental, or modern/non-modern distinction. In the social sciences, there emerged a long line of famous polarities: military and industrial societies, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, mechanical and organic solidarity, traditional and rational-legal legitimation, statics and dynamics. Though these polarities were not usually directly related to the literature on Orientalism, we should not forget that one of the earliest of these polarities was Maine's status and contract, and it was explicitly based on a comparison of Hindu and English legal systems.

⁵ Abdel-Malek *La dialectique sociale*; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

⁶ See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'The Place of Oriental Studies in a University', *Diogenes*, no. 16, 1956, pp. 106-11.

Orientalists saw themselves as persons who diligently expressed their sympathetic appreciation of a non-Western civilization by devoting their lives to erudite study of texts in order to understand (*verstehen*) the culture. The culture that they understood in this fashion was of course a construct, a social construct by someone coming from a different culture. It is the validity of these constructs that has come under attack, at three different levels: it is said that the concepts do not fit the empirical reality; that they abstract too much and thus erase empirical variety; and that they are extrapolations of European prejudices.

The attack against Orientalism was however more than an attack on poor scholarship. It was also a critique of the political consequences of such social science concepts. Orientalism was said to legitimate the dominant power position of Europe, indeed to play a primary role in the ideological carapace of Europe's imperial role within the framework of the modern world-system. The attack on Orientalism has become tied to the general attack on reification, and allied to the multiple efforts to deconstruct social science narratives. Indeed, it has been argued that some non-Western attempts to create a counter-discourse of 'Occidentalism' and that, for example, 'all elite discourses of anti-traditionalism in modern China, from the May Fourth movement to the 1989 Tiannamen student demonstration, have been extensively orientalized',⁷ therein sustaining rather than undermining Orientalism.

5. Progress

Progress—its reality, its inevitability—was a basic theme of the European Enlightenment. Some would trace it back through all of Western philosophy.⁸ In any case, it became the consensus viewpoint of nineteenth-century Europe—and indeed remained so for most of the twentieth century as well. Social science, as it was constructed, was deeply imprinted with the theory of progress.

Progress became the underlying explanation of the history of the world, and the rationale of almost all stage theories. Even more, it became the motor of all of applied social science. We were said to study social science in order better to understand the social world, because then we could more wisely and more surely accelerate progress everywhere—or at least help remove impediments in its path. The metaphors of evolution or of development were not merely attempts to describe; they were also incentives to prescribe. Social science became the advisor to, sometimes perhaps the handmaiden of, policy-makers from Bentham's panopticon to the Verein für Sozialpolitik, to the Beveridge Report and endless other governmental commissions, to Unesco's post-war series on racism, to the successive researches of James Coleman on the US educational system. After the Second World War, the 'development of underdeveloped countries' was a rubric which justified the involvement of social scientists of all political persuasions in the social and political reorganization of the non-Western world.

⁷ Xiaomei Chen, 'Occidentalism as Counterdiscourse: "HeShang" in Post-Mao China', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 4, Summer 1992, p. 687.

⁸ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, London 1920; Robert A. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, New York 1980.

Progress was not merely assumed or analyzed; it was also imposed. This is perhaps not so different from the attitudes we discussed under the heading of 'civilization'. What needs to be underlined here is that, at the time when 'civilization' began to be a category that had lost its innocence and attracted suspicions—primarily after 1945—'progress' as a category survived and was more than adequate to replace 'civilization,' smelling somewhat prettier. The idea of progress seemed to serve as the last redoubt of Eurocentrism, the fall-back position.

The idea of progress of course has always had conservative critics, although the vigour of their resistance could be said to have declined dramatically in the 1850–1950 period. But since at least 1968 the critics have burst forth anew, with renewed vigour among the conservatives, and with newly discovered faith on the Left. There are however many different ways one can attack the idea of progress. One can suggest that what has been called progress is a false progress, but that a true progress exists, arguing that Europe's version was a delusion or an attempt to delude. Or one can suggest that there can be no such thing as progress, because of 'original sin' or the eternal cycle of humanity. Or one can suggest that Europe has indeed known progress but that it is now trying to keep the fruits of progress from the rest of the world, as some non-Western critics of the ecology movement have argued.

What is clear, however, is that for many the idea of progress has become labelled as a European idea, and hence has come under the attack on grounds of its Eurocentrism. This attack is often however rendered quite contradictory by the efforts of other non-Westerners to appropriate progress for part or all of the non-Western world, pushing Europe out of the picture, but not progress.

II. The Claims of Anti-Eurocentrism

The multiple forms of Eurocentrism and the multiple forms of the critique of Eurocentrism do not necessarily add up to a coherent picture. We shall try to assess the central debate. Institutionalized social science started as an activity in Europe, as we have noted. It has been charged with painting a false picture of social reality by misreading, grossly exaggerating, and/or distorting the historical role of Europe, particularly its historical role in the modern world.

The critics fundamentally make, however, three different—and somewhat contradictory—kinds of claim. The first is that whatever it is that Europe did, other civilizations were also in the process of doing it, up to the moment that Europe used its geopolitical power to interrupt the process in other parts of the world. The second is that what Europe did is nothing more than a continuation of what others had already been doing for a long time, with the Europeans temporarily coming to the foreground. The third is that what Europe did has been analyzed incorrectly and subjected to inappropriate extrapolations, which have had dangerous consequences for both science and the political world. The first two arguments, widely offered, seem to me to suffer from what I would term 'anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism'. The third argument seems to me to be

undoubtedly correct, and deserves our full attention. What kind of curious animal could 'anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism' be? Let us take each of these arguments in turn.

First Past the Post

There have been throughout the twentieth century persons who have argued that, within the framework of, say, Chinese, or Indian, or Arab-Muslim 'civilization', there existed both the cultural foundations and the socio-historical pattern of development that would have led to the emergence of full-fledged modern capitalism, or indeed was in the process of leading in that direction. In the case of Japan, the argument is often even stronger, asserting that modern capitalism did develop there, separately but temporally coincident with its development in Europe. The heart of most of these arguments is a stage theory of development—frequently its Marxist variant—from which it logically followed that different parts of the world were all on parallel roads to modernity or capitalism. This form of argument presumed both the distinctiveness and social autonomy of the various civilizational regions of the world, on the one hand, and their common subordination to an overarching pattern, on the other.

Since almost all the various arguments of this kind are specific to a given cultural zone and its historical development, it would be a massive exercise to discuss the historical plausibility of each case, and I do not propose to do so here. What I would point out is one logical limitation to this line of argument, whatever the region under discussion, and one general intellectual consequence. The logical limitation is very obvious. Even if it is true that various other parts of the world were going down the road to modernity/capitalism, perhaps were even far along this road, this still leaves us with the problem of accounting for the fact that it was the West, or Europe, that reached the goal first, and was consequently able to 'conquer the world'. At this point, we are back to the question as originally posed, why modernity/capitalism in the West?

Of course, today there are some who are denying that Europe in a deep sense did conquer the world on the grounds that there has always been resistance, but this seems to me to be stretching our reading of reality. There was, after all, real colonial conquest that covered a large portion of the globe. There are, after all, real military indicators of European strength. No doubt there were always multiple forms of resistance, both active and passive, but if the resistance were truly so formidable, there would be nothing for us to discuss today. If we insist too much on non-European agency as a theme, we end up whitewashing all of Europe's sins, or at least most of them. This seems to me not what the critics were intending.

In any case, however temporary we deem Europe's domination to be, we still need to explain it. Most of the critics pursuing this line of argument are more interested in explaining how Europe interrupted an indigenous process in their part of the world than in explaining how it was that Europe was able to do this. Even more to the point, by attempting to diminish Europe's credit for this deed, this presumed 'achievement', they reinforce the theme that it was an achievement. The theory makes Europe into an 'evil hero'—no doubt evil, but also no doubt a hero in the

dramatic sense of the term, for it was Europe that made the final spurt in the race and crossed the finish line first. And worse still, there is the implication, not too far beneath the surface, that, given half a chance, Chinese, or Indians, or Arabs not only could have, but would have, done the same—that is, launch modernity/capitalism, conquer the world, exploit resources and people, and themselves play the role of evil hero.

This view of modern history seems to be very Eurocentric in its anti-Eurocentrism, because it accepts the significance—that is, the value—of the European ‘achievement’ in precisely the terms that Europe has defined it, and merely asserts that others could have done it too, or were doing it too. For some possibly accidental reason, Europe got a temporary edge on the others and interfered with their development forcibly. The assertion that we others could have been Europeans too seems to me a very feeble way of opposing Eurocentrism, and actually reinforces the worst consequences of Eurocentric thought for social knowledge.

Eternal Capitalism

The second line of opposition to Eurocentric analyses is that which denies that there is anything really new in what Europe did. This line of argument starts by pointing out that, as of the late Middle Ages, and indeed for a long time before that, western Europe was a marginal, peripheral, area of the Eurasian continent, whose historical role and cultural achievements were below the level of various other parts of the world—such as the Arab world or China. This is undoubtedly true, at least as a first-level generalization. A quick jump is then made to situating modern Europe within the construction of an ecumene or world structure that has been in creation for several thousand years.⁹ This is not implausible, but the systemic meaningfulness of this ecumene has yet to be established, in my view. We then come to the third element in the sequence. It is said to follow from the prior marginality of western Europe and the millennial construction of a Eurasian world ecumene that whatever happened in western Europe was nothing special and simply one more variant in the historical construction of a singular system.

This latter argument seems to me conceptually and historically very wrong. I do not intend, however, to return to this argument.¹⁰ I wish merely to underline the ways in which this is another form of anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism. Logically, it requires arguing that capitalism is nothing new, and indeed some of those who argue the continuity of the development of the Eurasian ecumene have explicitly taken this position. Unlike the position of those who are arguing that some other civilization was also en route to capitalism when Europe interfered with this process, the argument here is that we were all of us doing this together, and that there was no real development towards capitalism in modern times because the whole world—or at least the whole Eurasian ecumene—had been capitalist in some sense for several thousand years.

⁹ See various authors in Stephen K. Sanderson, ed., *Civilizations and World Systems: Studying World-Historical Change*, Walnut Creek, CA 1995.

¹⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein, ‘The West, Capitalism, and the Modern World-System’, *Review*, vol. xv, no. 4, Fall 1992, pp. 561–619.

Let me point out first of all that this is the classic position of the liberal economists. This is not really different from Adam Smith arguing that there exists a ‘propensity [in human nature] to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another’.¹¹ It eliminates essential differences between different historical systems. If the Chinese, the Egyptians, and the Western Europeans have all been doing the same thing historically, in what sense are they different civilizations, or different historical systems?¹² In eliminating credit to Europe, is there any credit left to anyone except pan-humanity?

But again, worst of all, by appropriating what modern Europe did for the balance-sheet of the Eurasian ecumene, we are accepting the essential ideological argument of Eurocentrism, that modernity—or capitalism—is miraculous, and wonderful, and merely adding that everyone has always been doing it in one way or another. By denying European credit, we deny European blame. What is so terrible about Europe’s ‘conquest of the world’ if it is nothing but the latest part of the ongoing march of the ecumene? Far from being a form of argument that is critical of Europe, it implies applause that Europe, having been a ‘marginal’ part of the ecumene, at last learned the wisdom of the others—and elders—and applied it successfully.

And the unspoken clincher follows inevitably. If the Eurasian ecumene has been following a single thread for thousands of years, and the capitalist world-system is nothing new, then what possible argument is there that would indicate that this thread will not continue forever, or at least for an indefinitely long time? If capitalism did not begin in the sixteenth—or the eighteenth—century, it is surely not about to end in the twenty-first. Personally, I simply do not believe this, and I have made the case in several recent writings.¹³ My main point, however, here is that this line of argument is in no way anti-Eurocentric, since it accepts the basic set of values that have been put forward by Europe in its period of world dominance, and thereby in fact denies and/or undermines competing value systems that were, or are, in honour in other parts of the world.

The Analysis of European Development

I think we have to find sounder bases for being against Eurocentrism in social science, and sounder ways of pursuing this objective. For the third form of criticism—that whatever Europe did has been analyzed incorrectly and subjected to inappropriate extrapolations, which have had dangerous consequences for both science and the political world—is indeed true. I think we have to start by questioning the assumption that what Europe did was a positive achievement. I think we have to engage ourselves in making a careful balance-sheet of what has been accomplished by capitalist civilization during its historical life, and

¹¹ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* [1776], New York 1939, p. 13.

¹² For an opposing view, see Samir Amin, ‘The Ancient World-Systems Versus the Modern Capitalist World-System’, *Review*, vol. xiv, no. 3, Summer 1991, pp. 349–85.

¹³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *After Liberalism*, New York 1995; Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, coord., *The Age of Transition: Trajectory of the World-System, 1945–2025*, London 1996.

assess whether the pluses are indeed greater than the minuses. This is something I tried once, and I encourage others to do the same.¹⁴ My own balance-sheet is negative overall, and therefore I do not consider the capitalist system to have been evidence of human progress. Rather, I consider it to have been the consequence of a breakdown in the historic barriers against this particular version of an exploitative system. I consider that the fact that China, India, the Arab world and other regions did not go forward to capitalism is evidence that they were—to their historic credit—better immunized against the toxin. To turn their credit into something which they must explain away is to me the quintessential form of Eurocentrism.

Let me be clear. I believe that, in all major historical systems—‘civilizations’—there has always been a certain degree of commodification and hence of commercialization. As a consequence, there have always been persons who sought profits in the market. But there is a world of difference between a historical system in which there exist some entrepreneurs or merchants or ‘capitalists’, and one in which the capitalist ethos and practice is dominant. Prior to the modern world-system, what happened in each of these other historical systems is that whenever capitalist strata got too wealthy or too successful or too intrusive on existing institutions, other institutional groups—cultural, religious, military, political—attacked them, utilizing both their substantial power and their value-systems to assert the need to restrain and contain the profit-oriented strata. As a result, these strata were frustrated in their attempts to impose their practices on the historical system as a priority. They were often crudely and rudely stripped of accumulated capital, and, in any case, made to give obeisance to values and practices that inhibited them. This is what I mean by the anti-toxins that contained the virus.

What happened in the Western world is that, for a specific set of reasons that were momentary—or conjunctural, or accidental—the anti-toxins were less available or less efficacious, and the virus spread rapidly, and then proved itself invulnerable to later attempts at reversing its effects. The European world-economy of the sixteenth century became irremediably capitalist. And once capitalism consolidated itself in this historical system, once this system was governed by the priority of the ceaseless accumulation of capital, it acquired a kind of strength as against other historical systems that enabled it to expand geographically until it absorbed physically the entire globe, the first historical system ever to achieve this kind of total expansion. The fact that capitalism had this kind of breakthrough in the European arena, and then expanded to cover the globe, does not however mean that this was inevitable, or desirable, or in any sense progressive. In my view, it was none of these. And an anti-Eurocentric point of view must start by asserting this.

I would prefer therefore to reconsider what is not universalist in the universalist doctrines that have emerged from the historical system that is capitalist, our modern world-system. The modern world-system has

¹⁴ See Immanuel Wallerstein, ‘Capitalist Civilization’, Wei Lun Lecture Series II, *Chinese University Bulletin*, no. 23; reproduced in *Historical Capitalism, with Capitalist Civilization*, Verso, London 1995.

developed structures of knowledge that are significantly different from previous structures of knowledge. It is often said that what is different is the development of scientific thought. But it seems clear that this is not true, however splendid modern scientific advances are. Scientific thought long antedates the modern world, and is present in all major civilizational zones. This has been magisterially demonstrated for China in the corpus of work that Joseph Needham launched.¹⁵

What is specific to the structures of knowledge in the modern world-system rather is the concept of the 'two cultures'. No other historical system has instituted a fundamental divorce between science, on one hand, and philosophy and the humanities, on the other hand, or what I think would be better characterized as the separation of the quest for the true and the quest for the good and the beautiful. Indeed, it was not all that easy to enshrine this divorce within the geoculture of the modern world-system. It took three centuries before the split was institutionalized. Today, however, it is fundamental to the geoculture, and forms the basis of our university systems.

This conceptual split has enabled the modern world to put forward the bizarre concept of the value-neutral specialist, whose objective assessments of reality could form the basis not merely of engineering decisions—in the broadest sense of the term—but of socio-political choices as well. Shielding the scientists from collective assessment, and in effect merging them into the technocrats, did liberate scientists from the dead hand of intellectually irrelevant authority. But simultaneously, it removed from the major underlying social decisions we have been taking for the last 500 years from substantive—as opposed to technical—scientific debate. The idea that science is over here and sociopolitical decisions are over there is the core concept that sustains Eurocentrism, since the only universalist propositions that have been acceptable are those which are Eurocentric. Any argument that reinforces this separation of the two cultures thus sustains Eurocentrism. If one denies the specificity of the modern world, one has no plausible way of arguing for the reconstruction of knowledge structures, and therefore no plausible way of arriving at intelligent and substantively rational alternatives to the existing world-system.

In the last twenty years or so, the legitimacy of this divorce has been challenged for the first time in a significant way. This is the meaning of the ecology movement, for example. And this is the underlying central issue in the public attack on Eurocentrism. The challenges have resulted in so-called 'science wars' and 'culture wars' which have themselves often been obscurantist and obfuscating. If we are to emerge with a reunited, and thereby non-Eurocentric, structure of knowledge, it is absolutely essential that we not be diverted into side paths that avoid this central issue. If we are to construct an alternative world-system to the one that is today in grievous crisis, we must treat simultaneously and inextricably the issues of the true and the good.

And if we are to do that we have to recognize that something special was indeed done by Europe in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries that did

¹⁵ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Cambridge 1954 onwards.

transform the world, but in a direction whose negative consequences are upon us today. We must cease trying to deprive Europe of its specificity on the deluded premise that we are thereby depriving it of an illegitimate credit. Quite the contrary. We must fully acknowledge the particularity of Europe's reconstruction of the world because only then will it be possible to transcend it, and to arrive hopefully at a more inclusively universalist vision of human possibility, one that avoids none of the difficult and imbricated problems of pursuing the true and the good in tandem.