Narrating the World

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On the basis of a comparison between Asia and Europe, the anthropologist Jack Goody denounces what he calls "the theft of history". He criticizes Elias, Braudel, Needham, and others for having contributed to the widespread narrative that has turned Europe's historical experience into an exception, and the measure by which we appraise the history of the rest of the world. According to Jacques Revel, this criticism is legitimate and useful, but rests on judgments that are, sometimes, as sweeping as those it intends to oppose.

Reviewed: J. Goody, *Le Vol de l'histoire. Comment l'Europe a imposé le récit de son passé au reste du monde*, Gallimard, 2010 (original edition: *The Theft of History*, Cambridge University Press, 2006).

How can we think, or write history today on a global scale? This question has been raised repeatedly since the 1980s, and most recently, of course, in the context of globalization. But once the program of a global history was put on the agenda, we became aware of the difficulties of its realization. Admittedly, we had not waited for that moment to denounce the limits of history written within the traditional frame of a nation-state. We could all agree on the need for a comparative approach (although we have to admit that it is not always put into practice). There was no disagreement either about the necessity of gathering information that would better allow for a "transnational", "global", or "worldwide" perspective and making it available to researchers: periodicals, websites,

or networks were created and they have not ceased to proliferate during the past thirty years. But nor have we left it at that. To support this "change of scale" in historiography, proposals were made that recommended frameworks and ways of doing: connected history, shared history, crossed histories… Although these approaches have in common an insistence on movements and modes of contact, they vary greatly in their expectations or their goals, and we must therefore be careful not to simply reduce one to the other. We must do this even less so knowing that the recent multiplication of such proposals is probably due to our own uncertainties about the extent and the significance of contemporary globalization.

In some ways, it is prior to this current discussion or in its margins that we must situate Jack Goody's latest book translated into French. Britain's most senior anthropologist is far from being unknown to historians with whom he has never ceased to establish links and collaborations over the last forty years. Goody is an Emeritus Professor at Cambridge and the author of an imposing body of work that has been, for the most part, translated into French. Since his early fieldwork in Africa in the 1950s, Goody has shown a marked preference for vast comparative projects on a larger scale, such as the analysis of the cognitive stakes involved in the adoption of written forms of expression, the analysis of certain forms of rationality, the study of family systems and their dynamic, as well as cooking or the culture of flowers. This intellectual itinerary has been punctuated by a great number of books, many of which have become classics. Goody has a taste for wide angled views. Without ever losing sight of his first African references (the LoDagaa of the Northern Ghana are repeatedly referred to in his analysis), he has moved progressively towards Asia – most notably China, India, and, to a lesser extent, Japan. It is essentially from the standpoint of Asia, or from a comparison between Asia and Europe, that he denounces what he calls the "theft of history" – a catchphrase made explicit by the subtitle of the French edition of the book – "How Europe has imposed its own story onto the wider world".

The unity of civilizations

It is therefore historians, and, behind them, a powerful Western tradition of historiography within which they work and that they help to maintain (sometimes without fully realizing it) who are the object of Goody's close and sometimes vigorous criticism. And the main players chosen in this case are not just anybody: not the first comers in the profession, but some major names, and more specifically, those whose work has a wide ranging scope that would seem to protect them from such accusations: Fernand Braudel, the historian of the Mediterranean and of world capitalism; the sociologist Norbert Elias (and, in the background of his reading of the "civilizing process", Max Weber); the historian of Chinese science Joseph Needham; the classical scholar Moses Finley, and the theorist Perry Anderson – to name but a few of the most distinguished ones. But what grudge does Goody have against these men whose work he "admires" and who share his taste for a wide perspective and large scale comparisons? The fact that they have contributed, each in their own way, to the great narrative that has turned Europe's historical experience into an exception and the measure by which we apprehend the rest of the world, and have thus deprived it of its own history. Such is the thesis, incessantly thrust forward, of this book.

We shall not go into the details of this demonstration here – it is supported by a vast set of readings from every direction – but we shall focus instead on the argument around which this critique is organized. We might be tempted at first to see it as belonging to a well-known genre, the critique of Eurocentrism and of its continuing effects. Post-colonial studies, subaltern studies, and other types of studies have enjoined us to "provincialize Europe", to "disorientate" or shift our gaze off center when we look at the world, to let the multiplicity of histories that are part of it emerge.[1] But while these historiographical trends have usually emphasized historical differences and the very varied nature of the world, Goody's stand is diametrically opposite. He puts forward instead the thesis of a basic unity of all civilizations – at least the Eurasian ones – on the

[1] In a bibliography that has become overabundant, the central reference here is the book by Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton University Press, 2000 (French translation: *Provincialiser l'Europe : la pensée post-coloniale et la différence historique*, Paris, Amsterdam, 2009).

basis of a common origin that he sets during the Bronze Age, frequently referring to the work of the archaeologist of European prehistory Gordon Childe – a unity maintained over time by the interplay of continuous exchanges. On the basis of this shared experience, differences have occurred within this ensemble, of course, but, although they have never been univocal in any way – the West has known severe setbacks and Eastern civilizations moments of exceptional flourishing, so that there have been several renaissances on both sides – they have always been envisaged univocally by an historiography that has devoted itself to the demonstration of the exceptional nature of the West, to the detriment of the elements that are common to the whole of Eurasia.

And yet these are key elements for Goody. A great deal of his analysis is devoted to the demonstration that the particular traits and supposedly distinctive acquisitions of our Western experience have equivalents in the Eastern world. There, the anthropologist develops an idea that he had already sketched in some of his previous books, in particular in *The East and the West* (1996).[2] In this earlier work, Goody had demonstrated that, as far as rationality or the organization of exchanges and family are concerned, Europe cannot claim to be essentially different from Eastern societies. He pursues this idea in the last part of this book, and extends it, this time, to other objects: the city and its urban functions, the institutions of knowledge, the production of values and affects. His argument is unevenly compelling,[3] but the main idea is clearly outlined: the European experience has not produced anything in a long time that would justify its exceptional status. It cannot be apprehended in terms of a radical difference. It offers only variations that can, and must be related to other variations. There, we clearly see the point of view of the anthropologist that Goody opposes to that of the historian: he intends to give us a different account of the development of human societies since the Bronze Age, "the

[2] J. Goody, *The East in the West*, Cambridge University Press, 1996 (French translation: *L'Orient en Occident*, Seuil, 1999).

[3] It is the case with Chapter 9, "The appropriation of values: humanism, democracy, and individualism". If J. Goody is quite convincing in his critique of the notion of "Asiatic despotism" and the effects it had, he is less so when dealing with some of the more ordinary problems of political philosophy and anthropology. Does it really make sense, for instance, to oppose to the regulating idea of democracy "viewed as a universal value of which the contemporary Western world is the primary custodian and the only model" (p.248), beyond the typical argument of is imperfect application, the existence, in many societies, of "many […] systems, including very simple ones, embod[ying] consultative procedures designed to determine the will of the people", especially "in the context of opposition to authoritarian rule" (p.256)?

continuing elaboration of an urban and mercantile culture that the East and the West have shared for a long time".

And yet it is the exact opposite choice that was made by an age-old historiographical tradition whose effects can be felt, if we follow the author, well beyond historical circles. It supports the thesis of European exceptionalism and an absolute differentiation inscribed in the very long term. In placing the history of Europe in such a teleological perspective, it reads it backwards. It chooses to scan it according to values and realizations that have only fairly recently become its own, and in which it is easy to see the promises of what it claims is its particular fate. Goody's criticism of this attitude is two-fold. Goody first uses all the empirical data we have mentioned previously: for each asset the West likes to consider as its own, he tries to find a rough equivalent in the East and concludes that nothing justifies European claims. We shall not embark here on a discussion that hopefully will be pursued elsewhere and would inevitably call for the competence of specialists – in fact, it has already been initiated on several fronts. The second part of Goody's criticism refers to something else: it challenges the nature, and the function even of this historical narrative that the West has tried to produce and managed to impose on the rest of the world: the story of its own history and, inseparable from it, of all the others. Yet this differentiation of the history of Europe and European extensions is a recent phenomenon: it started, according to Goody, with what he still calls the "Renaissance", and continued with the scientific revolution of the 18th century, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. It is then and then only that the West has established its supremacy and its (temporary) domination over the rest of the world. But this hold has been reinforced and justified by the invention of a narrative of triumphant modernity, identified with its own history reinterpreted as inevitable.

Exceptionality versus continuity

According to Goody, this historiographical construct relies on moments that have been conveniently detached from the historic continuum and to which he devotes the second part of his book. The Greco-Roman Antiquity, or more specifically, the "Greek miracle" is one of those moments that have been established as an absolute beginning in

terms of reason and politics and considered ever since as the founding moment of European exceptionalism, without any consideration of the Middle Eastern environment in contact with which it had developed. The same applies to "feudalism". It is unlikely that many medievalists will recognize themselves in the image that is projected there of their period of choice and its interpretation – a "transition towards capitalism" and towards the birth of the modern state. But never mind. Frequently repeated, Goody's main thesis is that since the beginning of the 19th century (much earlier, in fact), Europe has had a stranglehold on world history, that it has understood it and forced others to envisage it as something linear and composed of necessary sequences, the history of a continuous and cumulative progress reserved for only one part of the world – a progressive or "whig" conception, to use Goody's own words, that has had the immediate consequence of making the rest of the world topple over the edge of the history that matters, or, at best, to push it towards its outer margins. This is illustrated in particular by an in-depth discussion of the concept of Asian despotism and its effects. To the West "that has invented invention" – to use an expression by David Landes that is frequently quoted by Goody – is therefore reserved the sole privilege of change. Exceptionalism, continuity, cumulativity: we can see that the purpose of this historical narrative of the West has been in essence to credit the idea of a very ancient and vast division, and to provide necessary proofs or justifications throughout history.

But are these representations still ours? Yes, most likely, if we think of the unfortunate discourse that Nicholas Sarkozy pronounced in Dakar in July 2007. But it is probably not at this level that Jack Goody is trying to place himself. In the first part of his book – in many ways, the most interesting (and sometimes the more questionable) – he tries to show how these ideas still influence the thinking of those we could expect to have resolutely sided for a de-centering of the way we look at world history. Joseph Needham, for instance, has dedicated his entire academic career to the monumental enterprise of *Science and Civilization in China.*[4] He has shown that, until the end of the 16th century,

[4] Let us remember that the first volume of this project, *Science and Civilization in China*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 1954 (translated into French as *Science et civilisation en Chine* in 1974). The series has since been continued by the author with his collaborators, then by them only after his death in 1995.

the results of Chinese science have been comparable, and often superior, to those of European scientists. And yet it is in the West that the modern scientific revolution has taken place. This is "the Needham problem" that has, as the great sinologist admits, directed his whole enterprise. But he has found a solution, Goody tells us, which is to think of these evolutions of history in terms of continuity, instead of trying to identify breaking points and beginnings. Besides the fact that "European science did not appear in a scientific desert" (p.151) (in other words: that it has been nourished by constant exogenous circulations), "the distinctions with which Needham operates, between early and modern science, technology and science […] come out of a habit of regarding developments in post-Renaissance Europe as the zenith of accomplishment and seek to justify a preference which otherwise might seem arbitrary" (p.151). It may therefore be more appropriate to compare the common elements of scientific developments, rather than exacerbating their differences by using categories that are both simplifying and distorting. A similar analysis is devoted to Fernand Braudel's trilogy on capitalism. Goody claims that despite its analytical strength, Braudel's work continues to use normative criteria that have been created by the West to conceive of European particularity and oppose it to everything else.

A critique too global?

In the end, does this all justify the title of this book? Is it legitimate to talk about a "theft of history" benefiting those who have thought for centuries that they were its masters and legitimate beneficiaries? The answer is far from obvious. First because, to follow Jack Goody and the details of his many developments, we would need to reopen one by one all the files that he has put on display and on which his demonstration relies. Few historians, I imagine, would be willing to take that risk. They would feel intimidated, or at least humbled by the virtuosity displayed by the author and his ability to move across so many and different fields. They would also ask themselves, perhaps, about the necessary distance that allows us to decide with authority about the emergence of democratic forms or the historical implications of feudalism. To which Goody would probably respond – and rightly so – that he is not an historian, and that his only concern is to produce, after reviewing a considerable amount of historical evidence, the elements

for a large scale comparison. The approach of the anthropologist that he recommends and exemplifies aims precisely at getting rid of the categories and sequences upon which our historical constructions have relied until now – and still rely, according to him. We would be more eager to follow him if we did not have the feeling that the panoramic point of view he has chosen forces him at times to oppose global judgments to the global judgments he denounces. And even if we adopt his perspective, does it really make sense to appraise the standards or the achievements of a whole civilization by using data that are strictly monographic in nature, and what heuristic benefits can we expect to gain from this exercise?

It is therefore mainly the criticism of the history of the world that the West has produced that we will take away from this book. But this analysis could have been more convincing, had the author taken the time to show how this historiographical model has succeeded in imposing itself. How have the criteria and some of the values that Europe has produced to assert its own modernity been converted into objective instruments to measure its successes and delays? How have they spread? Why and how has this narrative been often adopted precisely by those who were excluded from it or destined to remain on its margins? Contemporary trends suggest that the effects of domination do not in themselves offer a sufficient explanation for this. The fact that, for a long time, this narrative has reinforced the belief of the West in its own special status and the existence of a natural hierarchy between the different parts of the world is unquestionable. But now that this order has been called into question, we would like Jack Goody to extend his study to an analysis of the ways in which the elements of this old Western narrative are used today in some new, unexpected, and paradoxical contexts.

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