1997

Review of: The East in the West, Jack Goody, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

1997 *Journal of Imperial and Colonial History* 25: 323-5

The East in the West, Jack Goody, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, Pp. 295, 0-521-55673-2.

This is the latest, and perhaps the most accessible and inclusive, of Professor Goody's series of books on the economic, political and aesthetic development of the Eurasian world. Extraordinary in their range of knowledge and theoretical ambition, these volumes offer a sustained challenge to generally accepted notions of the uniqueness of the West, and especially to the Weberian model of the origin of capitalism. The argument, in a nutshell, is that the taken-for-granted division between East and West is a false dichotomy. In fact, Goody says, China and India and the rest of East Asia share the same cultural heritage as Europe. In a reversion to the old anthropological obsession with diffusion, he sees the whole of Eurasian culture springing from a common root in the ancient Near East - especially Mesopotamia. The appearance of capitalism in the West is then viewed by Goody as simply one moment in a long-term oscillating pattern of social evolution that has effected the whole of the Eurasian world ever since the Bronze Age. For Goody, any assertion of a specifically western rationality associated with innovation and capitalist enterprize is nothing more than ahistorical ethnocentricism.

Goody's scholarship is breathtaking, though piecemeal. He builds upon his many earlier publications, picking and choosing from a vast range of material to authenticate his claim for the structural and intellectual similarities between East and West.

Special emphasis is placed on the development of writing in Eurasia, which Goody associates with the evolution of new human capacities - particularly syllogistic reasoning and the use of formal logic. More pragmatically, writing also permitted the development of bookkeeping and written contracts, which Goody discovers everywhere in the historical records of East Asia and the Middle East. Next, using mostly Indian material, he argues that the existence of "communal" organizations and jajmani-type local level economic relationships do not, as is usually assumed, preclude involvement in commercial activities and markets; rather, entrepreneurs and international trade have existed from ancient times, and the image of a self-sufficient "Asiatic" community is an illusion. Nor do supposedly non-economic ethics, such as the Hindu caste system, eliminate the growth of protocapitalist exchange - an argument clinched by demonstrating the range and efficiency of the pre-colonial Indian banking and manufacturing system. Goody then moves on to the analysis of families, repeating his well-known claim that eastern and western family organizations are not substantially different, and further asserting that individualism is not required for the development of capitalism, as is demonstrated by the continued importance of extended family networks in modern companies - not only in East Asia, but in America and Europe as well! This leads to the argument that relations of production based on the labour of independent workers are not in themselves sufficient to generate capitalist enterprize. Rather, specific shifts in knowledge systems and technology,

which rest, in Goody's model, primarily on developments in the modes of communication, must be taken into account for a comprehensive, and non-ethnocentric, portrait of the historical trajectory leading to modernity - a trajectory followed, more or less, throughout Eurasia.

All this is heady stuff, but is it convincing? As an anthropologist with an interest in valuing the contributions of the "other", I am compelled by Goody's impressively documented debunking of the superiority of the West, but at the same time I am wary of his wholesale downplaying of differences. For example, are all forms of writing somehow cognitively equivalent, or are Sumerian seals and Chinese divinitory ideograms so divergent in form and purpose as to be incomparable? Is Goody right to scarely mention the relative weakness of the European state and the corresponding independence of urban guilds and merchants - factors usually seen as crucial to western economic and intellectual development? Should he have paid more attention to the related development of civil society in the West, and to the ideals of human equality and participatory citizenship which fueled that development?

Other questions also arise. Goody does not consider at any length the appearance in Europe of a scientific rationality that aimed at pragmatic results and not at the amusement of a courtly elite. And it is never clear how the great literate cultures of precolonial America - the Maya, Inca and Aztec - fit into his equation, nor why Africa is so resolutely relegated to

backwardness. Finally, the very fact, often cited by Goody, that Asian peoples have now become robust capitalists hardly indicates that they were always protocapitalistic; instead one could argue, with Weber, that such wholesale adaption simply indicates the enormous efficiency and organizational power of capitalism. In other words, instead of many possible streams leading to the present, what we may actually see is one expanding flood overrunning all other alternatives.

But such queries and quibbles do not diminish the impressive contribution that Professor Goody has made. After his work, Western historians and social scientists will never again be able to assume quite so complacently that their own culture is the necessary center of the universe.

CHAARLES LINDHOLM

boston university