

## **The Role and Place of Europe in World History**

There has been a tendency amongst historians in recent times to try and ‘put Europe in its place’. This has involved attempts to play down what has often been described as European exceptionalism, that is to say the view that Europe took an exceptional path that led to the creation of an industrial modern civilisation. This desire to reduce the significance of Europe in world history is best summed up in the title of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s book *Provincializing Europe*: Europe is to be banished from the core to the periphery, to be made a province both in material and intellectual terms. Others, such as Lewis and Wigen, have attacked what they see as the Eurocentric nature of map making and challenge the notion that Europe can be said to constitute a continent.<sup>1</sup>

The ambition of such critiques is to limit the importance of Europe in world history in both time and space, to turn the years of European dominance into but an episode in modern world history. Recent works by Frank, Fernández-Armesto and Ponting<sup>2</sup> have also attempted to ‘provincialize Europe’ by demonstrating that:

- The dominance of Europe on the world stage came much later than is usually believed, at the end of the eighteenth century.
- The dominance was quite short-lived, lasting at most 150 years.
- This period of European dominance is best understood as a hiatus in between periods when China was the centre of world economy.
- European dominance was due less to pluck than luck<sup>3</sup>; it was a combination of American silver and the world economy centred on China that allowed it all to happen.

Two preliminary points are worth making as a response:

- The ambition of many of these writers is to downgrade Europe both in terms of its power and its intellectual/cultural significance. Yet this is done in terms, language and discourse derived from Europe. Even in the postmodern, postcolonial world the intellectual heritage of Europe remains paramount. This is revealed by the paradox in Chakrabarty’s attempt to ‘Provincialize Europe’. He complains about the way in which European historical thinking dominates how his field of enquiry, India, is understood

through the use of intellectual tools derived from the European experience. But then he attempts to fight this Eurocentric bias by using two thinkers whose thought worlds could be considered to be entirely Eurocentred in the shape of Marx and Heidegger. Chakbaraty may be considered an ‘outsider’ to European civilisation but his desire for revenge against that civilisation is shared by many who are unambiguously insiders. This tendency within European civilisation for many of its intellectuals to denigrate their heritage is highly unusual in human history and may be seen as one of European civilisation’s defining characteristics. One of the few precedents was the pro-Spartan anti-democratic group who clustered around Socrates in fifth century Athens.<sup>4</sup>

- There is more than a little truth in some of the claims regarding the way in which Europeans have over the past 200 years viewed the relationship of their civilisation to the rest of the world. They set up a series of fundamental dichotomies: West versus East, dynamic versus static, freedom versus despotism. But just as the nineteenth century advocates of European civilisation distorted the situation to make their civilisation seem more special than was the case, so the denigrators who followed in their footsteps have perhaps gone too far the other way.

The time has come to restore some balance by avoiding the excesses both of those who praise too extravagantly, and those who seek to disparage, the European achievement.

First I would like to say a word on terminology. This paper concentrates on the idea of European civilisation as an entity that has a genuine existence. I believe that the term ‘European civilisation’ is a more appropriate term than ‘Western civilisation’ and that while these two entities overlap they are not identical. In political terms a civilisation is roughly equivalent to the term commonwealth, an area sharing common cultural features and dominated by one or more states capable of exerting power over that commonwealth.<sup>5</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, states exert power and clash with other states; there are no ‘clashes of civilisations’.<sup>6</sup>

To appreciate the significance of European civilisation it is necessary to consider Europe within the framework of the Afro-Eurasian landmass. Stretching from North Africa to South East Asia this area has been home to a number of

civilisations over the past 5,000 years. They have been of two major types, agricultural and pastoral, and much of the history of what can be called Eurasia can be viewed in terms of the interaction of agrarian empires and pastoral nomadism.<sup>7</sup>

Two thousand years ago Eurasia was dominated by five major agrarian civilisations: the Roman Empire, the Parthian Empire, the Kushan Empire, India and China. There was increasing interchange amongst these civilisations through war, trade and cultural exchange. Around 200 CE historians of ancient Rome have identified a crisis in the empire but Ponting has pointed to a more ‘general crisis’ across Eurasia as a whole. It led to the collapse of the Kushan Empire, the replacement of the Parthians by the Sassanids in Iran and the disintegration of Han China into a number of states.<sup>8</sup>

By 650 CE there had been a further re-configuration. The Roman Empire, having adopted Christianity, lost its Western provinces, recovered, triumphed over the twin menaces of the Sassanids and the Avars, only to face Muslim armies emerging out of Arabia. The expansion of Islam saw both the collapse of Persia and the shrinking of the Roman Empire to a largely Greek speaking rump based on Anatolia. At the same time China emerged as a largely Buddhist empire under the Tang dynasty. Borders would continue to shift but the fundamental cultural or civilisational make-up of Eurasia was completed by the emergence of Islam.

Where did Europe stand in relation to these developments? It was still largely a ‘frontier society’ populated by lightly Romanised and Christianised barbarians and the descendants of those who had once been Romans. But, except for Spain, it did not succumb to Islam. This was due less to Charles Martel than to the heroic defenders of Constantinople and to the Khazars whose empire extended into the Caucasus.

In this way Europe was largely quarantined from the major currents of civilisation during the next few hundred years: the development of Islamic civilisation and the intellectual advances of Buddhism in China. Throughout much of the ‘Agrarian Age’ Europe was not a significant player in world history. It stood on the periphery of a world in which the two key players were the Islamic ‘commonwealth’ and China.<sup>9</sup> These were both sophisticated and developed civilisations that made significant intellectual, cultural and technological advances.

It should also be said that they were ‘successful’ civilisations. Marshall Hodgson has claimed that

In the sixteenth century of our era, a visitor from Mars might well have supposed that the human world was on the verge of becoming Muslim.<sup>10</sup>

Hodgson based this claim on the cultural vitality of Islam at the time and on the fact that there were three dynamic Muslim empires then in existence: the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Iran and the Mughal Empire in India.

One can also point to the precocious commercial and industrial development of China, particularly under the Sung dynasty. China developed many major inventions during the first one thousand years CE including paper, printing and cast iron. China remained the world's largest iron producer until the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

All Eurasian civilizations faced similar problems. They needed to protect themselves from the occasional ravages of pastoralists such as the Mongols and the Avars. They needed to create the wealth required to put armies in the field, they needed to bring into being institutions that expressed what they believed to be the 'right ordering of the world'. Finally they needed to establish a relationship between their political structure, or state, and their society, without which they could not survive.

Ultimately both the Islamic Commonwealth and China did not break out of their agrarian moulds. Certainly China became a highly urbanised society but it did not break out of the constraints imposed on it by agriculture to move from extensive economic growth to the intensive growth pattern characteristic of an industrialised society.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that either civilisation was a 'failure' anymore than the Aztecs in Mesoamerica were a 'failure'. It simply means that they had real problems when subsequently they had to face the power generated by European states.

Why did these civilisations remain essentially agrarian in nature? Intrinsic and extrinsic factors both need to be considered:

- Extrinsic: The most important is the Mongol invasion from which Western Europe was spared. The Mongol invasions had profound effects on both these civilisations, disrupting the course of their development.<sup>13</sup>
- Intrinsic: These can be broken down into two major factors, what Hodgson terms cultural patterning and what Joseph Tainter has identified as the tendency of societies over time to yield returns that are increasingly marginal.<sup>14</sup>

Civilisations have a cultural patterning that comes out of their beliefs, practices and institutions. This patterning should not be seen as something firm and rigidly determinist that sets a civilisation in a mould or straightjacket. Rather it should be viewed as a set of possibilities that the members of a civilisation are able to follow depending on circumstances. A cultural pattern establishes possible options within a civilisation, but it cannot prescribe what option will be chosen.

Tainter is concerned with the question of why complex societies collapse. The core of his argument is that societies develop complex structures as a means of satisfying human needs but that over time the return on that complexity declines. For example, basic spending on health, sanitation and diet gives a much higher return in terms of life expectancy than later, and much more expensive, spending on medical technology. There may come a time when the evolving institutions of a civilisation fail to deliver because the cost of the level of complexity is greater than the return that it provides. Such an argument can be applied not only to the problem of collapse but can also be used to explain why civilisations stagnate and remain constrained within certain cultural patterns. The combined arguments of Hodgson and Tainter can be used to analyse the logic of a civilisation's development.

### **Islam**

Islamic civilisation, according to Gellner, was quite capable of producing modernity and industrialisation because its combination of what he terms scripturalism and individualism provide the right cultural settings for such developments.<sup>15</sup> But it did not. Individualism by itself is clearly insufficient to create modernity. Rather one needs to look at the distinctive cultural patterning of the Islamic world and the singular development of its institutions. Hodgson argues that the characteristic feature of Islamic civilisation was what he calls egalitarian contractual responsibilities:

legitimate authority was ascribed to actions that followed from responsibilities personally undertaken in such roles as that of amir in a town or iman in the salat or ghazi on the frontier or husband in a family...This personal, contractual, principal was extreme in the opposite direction from the corresponding Occidental principle of public, corporate offices.<sup>16</sup>

In other words because Islam did not have a church or a concept of society composed of corporations, its civilisation encouraged a far more radical form of individualism than was to be found in Europe. That individualism, however, remained bound up with personal obligations. It did not allow for a concept of public office and public responsibility. Moreover this radical individualism was combined with traditional tribalism, a subordination of the secular to the sacred that led to the sacralisation of politics, and a suspicion and mistrust of politics in which the only model available was that of a despotic ruler unconstrained by law. It helped to lead to what looks to an outsider as a bizarre outcome: the development of slave armies that came to rule societies by virtue of their status as outsiders.<sup>17</sup>

From a perspective derived from Tainter the initial Islamic Arab conquest can be considered to be about maintaining cohesion amongst a tribal society normally given to conflict and division by running what was essentially a protection racket and by expanding through conquest. As David Christian has pointed out such protection rackets were common amongst pastoral peoples as they sought to exploit the vulnerabilities of settled agricultural empires such as Rome and China while not relinquishing their pastoral lifestyle.<sup>18</sup> The Islamic Arabs took this a step further by conquering large areas and then creating a group, the *dhimmi*, who were second class citizens forced to pay protection money, a poll tax, to their conquerors.

But such a set-up had limits. As the conquered peoples increasingly became Muslims the Islamic polity mutated into a more traditional agrarian empire, but one that always had a bad faith because its ideal remained that of the desert tribal warrior. Its answer to the problem of increasing complexity was the circulation theory of Ibn Khaldûn. According to this theory tribesmen come out of the desert to take control of urban societies only to be 'corrupted' by the lifestyle such societies offer so that within a couple of generations new tribesmen emerge to conquer this now effete ruling group.<sup>19</sup> The plunder empires of the Islamic world could only go so far. Once the Ottoman Empire had reached its limit of conquest only decay remained. In this it resembled the Roman Empire: both were the creation of a military ethos that sought riches through plunder.

### **China**

China had the cultural patterning of a bureaucratic empire and, unlike Islam, accepted the bureaucratic ideal of settled regular rule. Nevertheless, in the wake of the 200 CE

general crisis, it was conquered intellectually by Buddhism, at least for a time, even if later it reacted against this ‘outside influence’. Partly owing to the need to keep up connections with the wider Buddhist world, under the Tang China was a dynamic society that interacted with the wider world. Even after its reaction against ‘foreign influences’ China continued to develop technologically and commercially. It has been argued that China almost had an industrial revolution during the years of the Sung Dynasty.<sup>20</sup> It certainly did not endure the sorts of structural problems suffered by Islamic civilisation.

As with Islam, Chinese cultural patterning did not discourage commercial development. Nevertheless the reaction against foreign influences that took place around 800 CE does indicate a certain attitude towards the outside world, a defensive mentality that emphasised self-sufficiency and cultural superiority that was not unjustified given the very real successes of Chinese civilisation.<sup>21</sup>

It may be argued that it is an inappropriate, a Eurocentric, question to ask: why then did not China achieve the industrial breakthrough achieved in Europe. It has been argued that the cultural pattern of China itself was the problem. The Confucian bureaucratic elite, according to this view, did not like commerce and prevented it from developing freely.<sup>22</sup> Instead of looking outwards China, seeing itself as the centre of the world, instead retreated into itself. The only problem with this argument is that the European bureaucratic elite has also never been renowned for its fondness for commerce.

More recent studies have emphasised the continuing success of Chinese civilisation up until the end of the eighteenth century not only in terms of commercial development but also in such things as life expectancy and population growth.<sup>23</sup> It remained an agrarian based economy that existed within the framework of a bureaucratic state but caught in the trap that growing productivity was invariably matched by a growing population. In this sense the growth of social complexity was stunted. Even the bureaucracy could not effectively expand to match the growth of Chinese society.

## **Europe**

European civilisation must be seen as a latecomer on the Eurasian scene, a *parvenu* from the periphery. Like Islam it both borrowed from earlier civilisations while at the

same time being essentially a new creation. As Judith Herrin has demonstrated, it could not come into being until it viewed itself as distinct from Rome, that is to say the Byzantine Empire.<sup>24</sup> Hence the crowning of Charlemagne was the founding event of European civilisation in the same way as the preaching of Muhammed was the key event for Islamic civilisation. European civilisation derives ultimately from what is best described as the Carolingian commonwealth: Germany, France, northern Italy, England. As Robert Bartlett has persuasively argued, for the next 1,000 years it was in a state of constant expansion.<sup>25</sup> At first this occurred in Spain, North Eastern Europe and *Outre Mer*. Its initial protagonists were Muslims and the remaining pagans of Europe.

The expansion of Europe succeeded in Spain and the North East. It floundered in the eastern Mediterranean where its major achievement was to destroy Byzantium, thereby opening the way for the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans. More positively the 'tyranny of distance' allowed the European heartland to escape the worst excesses of the Mongols and to develop its cultural patterns free from outside interference.

Then it was on to the Americas. The point here is that both the Islamic world and China were capable of conquering the Americas if they had so wished. But clearly they did not seek to do so. European expansion into the Americas tells only that the European states were vastly more powerful than those of Mesoamerica. It took place at a time when Ottoman expansion into the Balkans and across the Mediterranean seriously threatened European civilisation. The gunpowder empires of the Islamic world were both rich and powerful.

How then are the dynamism of Europe and the direction of its energies outwards to be explained? Unlike China, Europe was not a rich and successful civilisation satisfied by its achievements. Interestingly European expansion accelerated after the Black Death and during the Little Ice Age, at a time when climatic conditions made the business of food production increasingly difficult, conditions that made the American potato so attractive as a food in Europe.<sup>26</sup> Europe did not produce many goods that the rest of Eurasia wanted but Europeans certainly desired many of the goods produced in the East. As Janet Abu-Lughod has demonstrated, Europe had been tied into the wider Eurasian trading system since the time of the Mongol Empire. Europe was not endowed with resources and Europeans

desired to be part of the wider world economy and to acquire the high quality goods that came from the Islamic world, China and India.<sup>27</sup> The silver and gold plundered from the Americas certainly helped them to do this. European countries became aggressive because they were seeking to break into the established trading networks of Eurasia. The behaviour of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean illustrates perfectly this point.<sup>28</sup> It is not inappropriate to see Europeans as outsiders, even as ‘barbarians’, driven to impose themselves on the rest of the world.

The fact remains, however, that European countries, despite their relatively small populations, were able to generate an enormous amount of power relative to their Eurasian cousins. Why should this have been the case?

### **The Peculiarity of European Civilisation:**

The basic form of political organisation for polities based on agrarianism was that of the agrarian empire, which was essentially an extended form of chiefdom. As Peter Bogucki has noted:

After the emergence of Chiefdoms and until the development of the modern democracy in the late eighteenth century, virtually all polities were governed in this manner.<sup>29</sup>

This was true of both Islamic and Chinese civilisation. What Finer has termed ‘forum states’ have been rare in human history, limited perhaps to ancient India, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Europe.<sup>30</sup>

Seen in these terms both democratic Athens and republican Rome look odd. Following the argument advanced by Moshe Berent regarding Athens, I believe that it can be contended that both these polities are best described as stateless societies in which politics rather than bureaucracy played the crucial role in mobilising the population.<sup>31</sup> European civilisation is not a simple extension of Graeco-Roman civilisation but it has certainly claimed its heritage. Moreover it has been concerned with claiming the classical heritage of Greece and Rome whereas it can be argued that Islam was much more the product of the late antique than of the classical world.<sup>32</sup> Certainly while there exist texts on administration and ruler advice books in both Chinese and Islamic civilisation there is nothing in these civilisations equivalent to European political theory.<sup>33</sup>

I believe that it can be argued that European civilisation is unique in the role that it has given to politics in its cultural patterning. Following Augustine's conception of the two cities it permitted the development of a secular understanding of politics that was beyond the control of the sacred. This was not the case either in Byzantium or in the Islamic world where the religious and the political remained in close embrace. In fact it has been contended that the cultural patterning that developed in the European world was deviant in comparison to the rest of Eurasia. Deepak Lal has argued that Europe deviated from the Eurasian norm on a range of matters. These include the development of the nuclear family, the fostering of both a 'this-worldly' individualism and guilt as a means of controlling that individualism, and the creation of a legal framework by the church that allowed for the growth of both the state and commercial enterprise. According to Lal the 'cunning of history ... gave rise to the West'; its development was less the product of will than of certain factors enabling it to break out of the constraints imposed on all agrarian civilisations.<sup>34</sup>

Europe evolved peculiar institutions and then was left free to develop them. In this way the insulation from the devastation caused by the Mongol invasions may have been crucial. Nevertheless there is another key to understanding European civilisation that Lal ignores but which has been identified by Hodgson. This was its corporatism. European individualism did not occur within the framework of a radical egalitarianism but in an environment in which both law and the idea of public office had a significant place. In contemporary usage European civilisation was marked by both the concept of the individual and by that of civil society.<sup>35</sup>

On this basis Martin van Creveld has argued that the term 'state' can only be applied to European polities because the state is essentially a form of corporation possessing a legal *persona* that acts as if it were 'a real, flesh-and-blood, living individual.' The polities produced by other civilisations, claims van Creveld, can be called governments but not states.<sup>36</sup> There is more than just a debate about terminology involved in this issue. There are similarities between European political organisation and that of the Islamic and Chinese worlds. They faced similar problems of administrative organisation, including what Finer has called the 'coercion-extraction cycle': how to obtain sufficient resources to supply an army to ensure the survival of the political unit.<sup>37</sup> The most common Eurasian answer to this problem

was the agrarian empire based on an authoritarian political structure. This is what European political thinkers identified as ‘oriental despotism’ and argued, incorrectly, that such a political structure was incompatible with economic development and ‘progress’.

The European equivalent of this form of polity, Absolute monarchy, never really succeeded. When one reads the works of the apologists for absolutism, such as the administrative theorists known as the cameralists, one is struck by the way in which their ideas conform to the Eurasian model of agrarian imperial authoritarianism.<sup>38</sup> Two points, however, can be made:

- Absolutism and Cameralism never succeeded in destroying the corporate structures of European civilisation. These structures were embedded in the ‘cultural patterning’ of European civilisation and of its derivative entities, including both the Americas and the Antipodes. Even Nazism and Communism never fully succeeded in their attempts to eradicate civil society.
- When it came to a competition between absolutism and corporatism, as in the case of the eighteenth century struggle between France and Britain, absolutism ended up on the losing side because it was not capable of generating the same amount of power as corporatist, or constitutional, England. Another way of putting it would be to say that Britain solved the coercion-extraction problem more effectively than France because of its constitutional mechanisms.<sup>39</sup>

Michael Mann has argued that one of the features of the modern (i.e. European) state is its capacity to utilise what he terms infrastructural power, that is to say power derived from the consent of society.<sup>40</sup> Such power stands in opposition to despotic power; that is the essentially coercive power that a polity exercises over the society that it administers. Despotic power was the means through which an agrarian empire solved the extraction-coercion problem. In democratic Athens and republican Rome the citizens gave funds to support the common good, for example the liturgy paid by the wealthy of Athens for a range of purposes, including the funding of a chorus at the annual Dionysian drama festival.<sup>41</sup> In the modern European world this infrastructural power derived from a combination of its corporate state structures, its individualism and its capacity to combine these with the tradition of politics derive from republican Rome and democratic Athens.

Put another way, I think that the strength of European civilisation lay in the fact that it brought together politics and administration in the form of the state. Moreover the European Commonwealth was composed of plurality of both states and types of state although over time the nation state came to pre-dominate. This meant competition amongst states and the reality that states that had defective structures, from Burgundy to Poland, simply went out of existence.<sup>42</sup>

To gain an advantage in the long term within the European state structure required the development of infrastructural power and this meant bridging the gap between the association known as the state and the associations of civil society. European states from the French Revolution onwards came increasingly to rely on 'citizen armies'. As any student of Greece and Rome knows, citizen soldiers mean popular participation in the running of the government. Given the strong nature of the institutions of the European state, however, this did not lead to the destruction of the bureaucratic apparatus and the creation of some sort of stateless society as in the form of Athenian direct democracy. Instead it led to 'modern democracy' or the attempt to make the state responsible to the popular will. Or, in Bogucki's terms, government, understood as an extended chiefdom, was over ridden generally by 'politics'. The consequence was a political form marked by the fusion of popular participation, corporate structures and bureaucratic administration. It is also not irrelevant that this change took place in the context of a movement from relatively scarce resources to abundance and the integration of the ordinary European into a modern industrial economy.

Different civilisations can be demonstrated to possess quite distinctive cultural patternings. European civilisation's distinctiveness lies particularly, I believe, in the way it has differentiated between sacred and the secular. A number of consequences have resulted from this differentiation. These include an understanding of politics as a secular activity, the creation of secular associations to manage political affairs and the creation of a secular space into which what might loosely be termed 'science' moved in as a means of explaining the world. As Marcel Gauchet has put it, 'Christianity proves to have been *a religion for departing from religion*.'<sup>43</sup>

Individualism and commerce are not uniquely European. Islamic civilisation is strongly individualistic; given the right circumstances China could have created the capitalist revolution. There were many tendencies in European civilisation, as in

China, opposed to commerce. Perhaps the difference between China and Europe lay in the fact that even reactionary European states had to foster commercial enterprise if they were to survive and compete against other European states. This competitive process may also explain why European states did not get locked into declining marginal returns and ultimate stagnation and possible collapse. Competition pushed the members of the European commonwealth to look for ways of evading this trap, be it through increased production or emigration.

The real issue, in a sense, is the relationship between the cultural patterning of European civilisation and the creation of a modern industrial commercial world. Past arguments often looked at the modern world, considered what looked unique regarding European civilisation, and then made a causal link. More recently this whole approach has been called into question because as we all know as good Humean empiricists that it is almost impossible to establish necessary connections between cause and effect.<sup>44</sup>

It must be acknowledged, however, that it was Europeans who accomplished the transition to a modern industrial and commercial society. Consequently this transition was achieved within the framework of a particular cultural patterning. Put another way, modern industrial society may have looked quite different if it had taken place within the context of Chinese civilisation. Hence, whether necessary or not, the modern world was brought into being by a civilisation marked by a secular conception of politics, a dynamic outward looking view of the world and composed of a collection of competitive warring states capable of generating enormous power because of their institutional arrangements. European civilisation gave 'modernity' a certain shape and flavour.

Much of the condemnation of 'Europe' in recent times has come out of what is perceived to have been its aggressive tendencies towards the rest of the world during its period of dominance. That European civilisation had powerful militaristic elements is certainly true, but then many civilisations have been aggressive from Hellas to Rome to Islam to the pastoral societies of Eurasia; in fact civilisations have generally glorified their military prowess. Laurence Keeley has pointed out that warfare is endemic to human society because it pays, and that societies can become militaristic or pacific according to circumstance, a point proved by recent European history.<sup>45</sup> Equally the charge of exploitation can be levied against nearly every

civilisation that has existed, and has more to do with opportunity than with intrinsic factors arising from cultural patterning.

The Romans, the Islamic Arabs, even, or especially, the Chinese, were convinced of their civilising missions even as they butchered the barbarians and proclaimed the superiority of their values and ideals. At the same time the civilised worlds that they created proved to be a magnet for outsiders. It appears to be the case that such peoples never really lost faith in the values of their civilisations although it could be argued that the success of Christianity in Rome and Buddhism in China were responses to a 'crisis' in both of these civilisations.

What is remarkable is the fact that European modernity has generated an extraordinary hatred from both inside the European world and without. At least some of the external hatred can be put down to the fact that Europe was the 'new kid on the block'; the barbarians were both winning and believed themselves to superior. A comparison might be to consider what the civilised Christian communities of the Near East thought of their Islamic conquerors in the seventh century. The internal hatred is more puzzling because it indicates an extraordinary loss of faith in the values of European civilisation by a significant element of its members.<sup>46</sup> Every society derived from European civilisation has produced an intellectual class that has denounced the values of that civilisation and at least advocated some sort of alternate model, be it communism, fascism, or some sort of reactionary nationalism. They have done so in the context of a civilisation that has provided them with a material comfort, life expectancy and freedom from disease unknown before in human history.

The solution to understanding this problem lies, I believe, in the particular cultural patterning of European civilisation that has given modernity its peculiar shape. That cultural patterning effectively released the secular from the sacred, thereby allowing the creation of a sphere of activity in which 'humanity' would reign supreme. But, as John Milbank has argued, this 'secularisation' was not a simple and unproblematic movement from sacred to secular. Secular categories in European civilisation quite clearly have grown out of theological contexts; the development of political economy and sociology are good examples of this process. Modern social science has its roots firmly planted in European cultural patterning.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, as Milbank argues, the creation of a secular politics raised the problem of power in quite new and worrying ways. One could extend this argument

by saying that the protean quality of secular power in European civilization has defined its greatness and its flaws, in other words the particular form that what might be called its moral ambiguity has taken. On the one hand there have been such things as the end of slavery and the respect for human rights; on the other hand there has been exploitation, *hubris* and the faith that human society can be remodelled through human will. And there has been the loss of meaning that have driven many to attempt to re-impose the sacred back on the world. All civilisations are ambiguous in that they contain both their blessings their curses. But European civilisation has been marked by the extent to which many, particularly of its intellectual classes, have believed it to be uniquely cursed. This characteristic, I believe, is a consequence of its particular understanding of the relationship between sacred and secular. Unfortunately it may yet prove to be its undoing.

Deepak Lal develops this point in a slightly different way. He argues that the factors that gave Europe its head start over the rest of the world may turn out to be its Achilles's heel. Lal points to such factors as the problems created by secularisation in the search for meaning, and the disadvantages entailed in the European nuclear family in such matters as welfare. He makes the quite reasonable point that once the modern world has been created those who seek to adopt it do not also have to take on board the peculiar cultural package in which it was initially wrapped. In fact that wrapping may have real disadvantages contained in it and a society may be able to get an improved version of modernity by not taking it. Tainter's argument regarding marginal returns also needs to be taken seriously in this regard.<sup>48</sup> Societies derived from European civilisation are rapidly approaching the point where the marginal returns for their investment in a whole range of matters, especially health and education, do not justify the ever-expanding expenditure. The level of social complexity may eventually prove to be unsustainable.

In the final analysis what we are left with is a sense of wonder regarding the European achievement. Yes, at times it was not pretty, but then that has been the case with every major world civilisation, and that is certainly no reason to revile it as uniquely evil. It also is probably the case that the reasons for the European achievement are quite different to what we thought that they were. I have attempted to offer my explanation but ultimately all one can offer are correlations, not proven causes. And there is much in the European experience that has been admirable,

regardless of who won, or should have won, the race to modernity. The odd thing is that even in reviling it, many of those who react negatively to it are at the same time claiming its heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and Historical Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. Introduction, Martin W Lewis and Kären E Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Andre Gunder Frank, *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Millenium: A history of our last thousand years*, (London: Black Swan, 1996), Clive Ponting, *World history: A New Perspective*, London: Pimlico, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> David D Buck, 'Was it Pluck or Luck That Made the West Grow Rich?' *Journal of World History*, 10, 2, (Fall 1999): 413–430.

<sup>4</sup> I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates*, (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 121–4.

<sup>5</sup> On the idea of commonwealth see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of monotheism in late antiquity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially chs. 5, 6 and Charles Keith Maissels, *Early Civilizations of the Old World: The Formative Histories of Egypt, The Levant, Mesopotamia, India and China*, (London: Routledge, 1999), ch. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Melleuish 'The Clash of Civilisations: A Model of Historical Development?', *Thesis Eleven*, no. 62, (August 2000): 109–120.

<sup>7</sup> On nomadism see David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, vol. 1, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), and Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Civilizations*, (London: MacMillan, 2000), Part 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ponting, *World History*, Chapter 11.

<sup>9</sup> On Islam see especially Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in A World Civilization*, 3 volumes, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) and Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). On China see Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and S A M Adshad, *China in World History*, (London: Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Marshall G S Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke III, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> See Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, p. 378.

<sup>12</sup> R Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of the European Experience*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), especially chs. 1–3, Deepak Lal, *Unintended Consequences: The Impact of factor Endowments, Culture, and Politics on Long-Run Economic Performance*, (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1998), Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, ch. 13, Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, ch. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, ch. 8, Joseph Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), ch. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, p. 146

<sup>17</sup> See Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, ch. 7, Ira Lapidus, 'State and religion in Islamic Societies', *Past and Present*, no 151, (May 1996): 3–25., Anthony Black, *A History of Islamic Political Thought*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), especially Parts 1 & 2, Bernard Lewis *The Middle East: 2000 years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day*, (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), especially ch. 8, Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horseback: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), chapters 10 and 11, S E Finer, *The History of Government*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1997, *II*, chs 2, 2a., *III*, ch. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, pp. 190–5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, (London: Routledge, 1978), Gellner, *Muslim Society*, pp. 16 ff.

- <sup>20</sup> Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, pp.210–32, Adshead, *China in world history*, chs. 2,3, Ponting *World History*, ch. 13, Lal, *Unintended Consequences*, pp. 39–48, Bin Wong, *China Transformed*, ch. 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, pp 292–3.
- <sup>22</sup> Lal, *Unintended Consequences*, p.43.
- <sup>23</sup> Bin Wong, *China Transformed*, ch. 2, Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.
- <sup>24</sup> Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*, (London: Fontana, 1987), pp.295–306.
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350*, (London: Penguin, 1993), ch 1.
- <sup>26</sup> Brian Fagan, *Floods, Famines and Emperors*, (London: Pimlico, 2000), ch. 10.
- <sup>27</sup> Janet Abu-Lighod, *Before European Hegemony: the World System A.D. 1250–1350*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- <sup>28</sup> K N Chaudri, ‘The Economy in Muslim Societies’, in Francis Robinson (Ed), *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.135.
- <sup>29</sup> Peter Bogucki, *The Origins of Human Society*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 262.
- <sup>30</sup> Finer, *The History of Government*, 1, pp.43–7.
- <sup>31</sup> Moshe Berent, ‘Stasis, or the Greek Invention of Politics’, *History of Political Thought*, XIX, 3, (Autumn 1998): 331–62, ‘Anthropology and the classics: war, violence and the stateless “polis”’, *The Classical Quarterly*, 50, 1, (Jan-June 2000): 257–288.
- <sup>32</sup> Black, *A History of Islamic Political Thought*, pp. 57–60.
- <sup>33</sup> Black, *A History of Islamic Political Thought*, pp. 108–114.
- <sup>34</sup> Lal, *Unintended Consequences*, p.94 and ch. 5 generally.
- <sup>35</sup> Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, ch 8, See also Harold J Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the western Legal Tradition*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- <sup>36</sup> Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–2.
- <sup>37</sup> Finer, *The History of Government*, 1, p. 15.
- <sup>38</sup> Keith Tribe, *Governing economy: The reformation of German economic discourse 1750–1840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- <sup>39</sup> See Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ch. 4.
- <sup>40</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, volume 11, The rise of classes and nation states, 1760–1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 59.
- <sup>41</sup> ‘Liturgy’, in N. G. L. Hammond & H. H. Scullard, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 613.
- <sup>42</sup> Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States: AD 990–1992*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
- <sup>43</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 4.
- <sup>44</sup> See for example on the role of the state in industrialisation, P H H Vries, ‘Governing Growth: A Comparative Analysis of the State in the Rise of the West’, *Journal of World History*, 13, 1, (Spring: 2002): 67–138.
- <sup>45</sup> Laurence Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 130.
- <sup>46</sup> See for example the discussion by François Furet in his *The Passing of an Illusion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), especially ch 1.
- <sup>47</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), chs. 1–5.
- <sup>48</sup> Lal, *Unintended Consequences*, ch.9, See also Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, ch. 6.