



The Politics of Knowledge: Or, How to Stop Being Eurocentric

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Abstract

In the last 20 years or so, a significant and growing body of work has sought to unveil, challenge and displace the ‘Eurocentric’ biases of the human sciences. The arguments advanced in these works vary, and the aim of this essay is both to survey this literature and to point out the differences between different ‘kinds’ or ‘types’ of ‘anti-Eurocentrism’.

The claim that the social sciences display a deep Eurocentric bias, according Europe’s history and/or European thought an unwarranted privilege, has a long history.¹ In the last 20 years or so, attempts to redress this bias have received hitherto unparalleled attention in scholarly literature, and there is now a significant and growing body of work that seeks to produce knowledge which challenges and escapes this Eurocentrism. The arguments advanced in these works vary, and the aim of this essay is both to survey this literature and to point out the differences between different ‘kinds’ or ‘types’ of ‘anti-Eurocentrism’.

The dominant historical account of the emergence of the modern world is one in which rapid economic growth, and the social and cultural transformations which define modernity, are seen to have emerged first in Europe, before spreading to other parts of the world through trade, settlement, emulation, conquest, and colonialism. This account (or versions of it) is to be found in ‘classical’ social theory, that is, in the works of those thinkers, like Marx and Weber, who tried to comprehend and explain the massive social transformations of their own and earlier times. It is also to be found in more up-to-date versions today, in scholarly books that explore the emergence of the modern global economy.² The premise informing such writings is that to narrate and understand our modernity requires a focus on Europe, because that is where modernity first emerged. Eurocentrism is not a ‘bias’ or a failing, but is rather, for good or ill, simply how history happened. According to David Landes, a leading contemporary ‘Eurocentric’, ‘as the historical record shows, for the last two thousand years, Europe (the West) has been the prime mover of development and modernity...Some would say that Eurocentrism is bad for us, indeed bad for the world, and hence to be avoided...As for me, I prefer truth to goodthink.’³

If the ‘historical record’ does indeed show that Europe has been ‘where the action is’, then it also makes sense to look for the peculiar qualities possessed by Europe which would explain why world-making changes occurred there. The Protestant ethic, a uniquely Western commitment to rationality (manifested in the scientific revolution), and economic and political institutions which were conducive to innovation, are only some among a plethora of explanations which have been advanced as to why transformative social and economic changes occurred in Europe. If the Eurocentric account is correct, it also makes sense to enquire into why Asia, or Africa, failed to generate such dynamics – to take Europe as the pole of reference and then examine the non-Western world for absences, lacks, and impediments to dynamic change.

One riposte to Eurocentrism, then, would be to show that ‘the historical record’ is not in fact Eurocentric, by offering an alternative historical account. The first two ‘anti-Eurocentric’ modes of scholarship I examine are precisely of this type. Both of these are principally empirical challenges, counterposing some facts against others, and making ‘hard’ claims to accuracy and truth, with the debate mostly occurring on the terrain of economic history. They have a wide range of historical reference, and bristle with facts, figures, and comparisons. The first forcefully and often polemically argues that the development of capitalism and modernity is not a tale of endogenous development in Europe, but of structural interconnections between different parts of the world that long predated Europe’s ascendance and, moreover, provided the conditions for that ascendance. The second is comparative, seeking to show that parts of East Asia and Europe were on a par economically until the late 18th century, that the divergence between ‘the West and the rest’ happened much later than the conventional narrative would have it, and due to historical exigencies rather than any trait or cluster of traits exceptional to Europe. Less polemical than the first, it is also based upon specialist knowledge (usually of China).

A third challenge to Eurocentrism is conceptual or theoretical, rather than empirical. Postcolonial theory starts from the presumption that alternative empirical accounts, important as these may be, are not enough. The problem with Eurocentrism is not only that it accords European history a privileged status in our thought, but also that it privileges categories of analysis that arose in the course of that history, in an effort to understand it; and these categories are not always be adequate tools for seeking to understand the non-Western world. But this is not only because the European provenance of the social sciences means that they do not always ‘travel’ well when taken and applied elsewhere, but also because the social sciences have been a force in constituting the modern world and the ways in which many peoples inhabit it, and not only a way of comprehending that world. ‘Constituting’ and ‘comprehending’ are here linked, for the categories of social science best work to explain and understand, where they have remade that which they seek to understand. That is why their deficiencies are most readily apparent in relation to the non-Western world. However, the modern West has also not been wholly remade, and thus this essay concludes by suggesting that the categories of the social science are not fully adequate even to comprehending and explaining the modern West. What begins as an argument against Eurocentrism widens into a claim about the limitations of the social sciences when it comes to explaining *all* pasts and presents, not only non-Western ones.

I will examine each of these three challenges to Eurocentrism in turn.

Conquest and Colonialism

Since there is no dispute that the Industrial Revolution first happened in Britain, and then in some other parts of Europe, it has seemed reasonable to look for the reasons for this in the preceding history of Britain (or Europe). But this is to overlook or preclude the possibility that even if rapid and sustainable economic growth first occurred in Europe, this may have been because of Europe’s economic and other relationships with different parts of the world. Widening the frame of reference beyond Europe, and looking at ‘world history’,⁴ is critical to the historical accounts offered in two influential anti-Eurocentric explanations, J.M Blaut’s *The Colonizer’s Model of the World* (1993) and Andre Gunder Frank’s *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998).

Blaut argues that economic differences between Europe, Asia, and Africa were not very marked in the 15th century. The more economically advanced areas in each of these continents, such as their port cities, had all displayed signs of ‘protocapitalism’ (170). Why

then did Europe begin to forge ahead after that? This was certainly not due to ‘any European superiority of mind, culture, or environment’ (51), for ‘Europeans had no special qualities or advantages, no peculiar venturesomeness, no peculiarly advanced maritime technology, and so on’ (181). The answer lies instead in the relations Europe was forging with other parts of the world. 1492, the date of the ‘discovery’ of America, marks the dividing line, and conquest and colonialism were the motor force which explain why Europe forged ahead, while other parts of the world did not – or indeed, regressed under the impact of European colonial exploitation. Europe’s economy grew as a result of ‘the riches and spoils obtained in the conquest and colonial exploitation of America and, later, Africa and Asia’ (51). In Blaut’s summary of his argument, from the 16th century ‘both the quantitative significance... of production and trade in colonial and semicolonial areas, and the immense profitability of the enterprise, that is the rapid capital accumulation which it fostered... add up to a significant vector force, easily able to change the process of economic transformation in Europe from sluggish evolution to rapid revolution’ (193).

Like Blaut, Frank begins not with Europe, but with global economic linkages which had been in existence for many centuries before Europe’s rise to pre-eminence. Asia was the hub of these exchanges, whereas ‘the European and even Atlantic economies... were no more than backwaters in the world economy’ (333). Indeed, there were very few European products that found a market in Asia, until the ‘discovery’ of the Americas gave Europe sudden access to copious amounts of silver, which *did* have a market in Asia, and especially in China. This, supplemented by the products of and profits from slave plantations in Brazil, the Caribbean and southern North America, enabled Europe to ‘muscle in on the intra-Asian trade’ (281). Europe’s path to dominance was still an exceedingly slow one (Frank dates it much later than Blaut), for the vitality of the Asian-centred global economy meant that Europe advanced only gradually from being a bit player in this global economy to becoming dominant within it: ‘the West first bought itself a third-class seat on the Asian economic train, then leased a whole railway carriage, and only in the nineteenth century managed to displace Asians from the locomotive’ (37). Around the 18th century, Asian economies registered signs of decline just as Europe was beginning to make rapid progress. Some time around 1815, their paths ‘crossed’, with an ascendant Europe overtaking a declining Asia (283). Not only did this take place much later than the Eurocentric narrative would have it, it took place for altogether different reasons: ‘Europe did not pull itself up by its own economic bootstraps, and certainly not thanks to any kind of European “exceptionalism” of rationality, institutions, entrepreneurship, technology... instead Europe used its American money to muscle in on and benefit from Asian production, markets, trade – in a word, to profit from the predominant position of Asia in the world economy’ (4–5).

Other works bearing a strong family resemblance to those discussed above include John Hobson’s *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (2004) and Jack Goody’s *The East in the West* (1996). These books also seek to demonstrate that commerce and industry were flourishing in Asia at a time when they were relatively undeveloped in Europe, and Hobson, like Frank, argues that from 500 AD (the beginnings of a global economy) to 1800, the East was more advanced than the West. However, as the titles to these works indicate, they also seek to render problematic the idea that East and West, Europe and Asia were transhistorical and essentialist identities. Hobson argues that the debate over Western exceptionalism or genius is misconceived, as there is no ‘autonomous’ or ‘pristine’ West; the West, as we have come to know it, has been an ‘oriental West’, one decisively shaped by its extensive interactions with, and its borrowings from, non-Western civilizations. Goody argues that the great civilizations of Eurasia had more in common with each other than the fundamental differences that are presumed in Eurocentric accounts: ‘what is required is more careful comparison, not a crude contrast of east and west, which always finally turns in favour of the latter.’⁵

The Great Divergence

The second kind of challenge to Eurocentric historical accounts does precisely this. Instead of sweeping contrasts between ‘East’ and ‘West’, or ‘Europe’ and ‘Asia’, it undertakes detailed comparisons between roughly cognate entities, specifically, the most economically developed or ‘core’ regions of China (supplemented by material on Japan), and western Europe. This presupposes specialist knowledge (including, of course, language abilities), and the two important works of this type are by historians of China – Roy Bin Wong’s *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (1997), and Kenneth Pomeranz’s much-praised, prize-winning book, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2000).⁶ The comparative method is accompanied by a methodological innovation: the comparison between Asia and Europe does not take Europe as the norm, in order to investigate how and why Asia was different and lesser. It is instead genuinely reciprocal – Pomeranz, for instance, attempts to ‘look for absences, accidents and obstacles that diverted England from a path that might have made it more like the Yangzi Delta or Gujarat, along with the more usual exercise of looking for blockages that kept non-European areas from reproducing implicitly normalized European paths’ (8).

The argument – I concentrate on Pomeranz here and overlook the minor differences between his arguments and those made by Wong – begins by seeking to show that up to about 1800, the more advanced regions of Europe (such as England) and China (the Yangzi delta) were broadly similar economically. Pomeranz finds that the factors often seen as contributing to Europe (or England’s) economic transformation – such as greater longevity, more efficient markets in capital and labour, and security of property rights – were what core areas in China and Europe had in *common*, and distinguished them *both* from less developed regions in Europe, China, and elsewhere. The core regions of East Asia and Europe both saw increases in population that were sustained by a more advanced division of labor, ‘proto-industrialization’, and more efficient allocation of resources under market competition (Pomeranz, 107).⁷

However, neither was poised for the rapid and self-sustaining growth which occurred first in England and then in other parts of western Europe in the 19th century. On the contrary, ‘Both in western Europe and in east Asia, there was relatively little room left by the late eighteenth century for further extensive growth to occur without significant institutional change, new land-saving technologies, and/or vastly expanded imports of land-intensive commodities’ (212); for ‘the production of food, food, fiber, fuel and building supplies all competed for increasingly scarce land’ (207). The biggest constraint, in other words, was an ‘ecological’ one – land was finite, and increased labor and capital intensive land cultivation brought these regions closer to reaching the limits of how much more could be achieved. Pomeranz concludes, ‘economically developed parts of the Old World [ie, in China and Europe] all seem to have been headed for common “proto-industrial” cul de sac, in which even with steadily increasing labor inputs, the spread of the best known production practices, and a growing commercialization making possible an ever-more efficient division of labor, production was just barely staying ahead of population growth’ (206–7). Yet in the 19th century, Britain was launched into self-sustaining growth, soon to be followed by other regions of western Europe. Wherein lies the explanation for this dramatic departure?

Pomeranz’s answer, in a nutshell, is coal and colonies. Britain had coal deposits that were geographically close to economically developed regions where they were required, and relatively easy and cheap to access with the technologies of the time. China also had coal deposits, but they were mostly in the north, far from the economically advanced Yangzi delta. The importance of coal was not merely that it was what powered the industrial revolution, but that in replacing timber as a source of heat and energy, it released pressure

on what was the greatest constraint for the further expansion of the most advanced regions, namely land. Pomeranz quantifies this by means of estimating ‘ghost acreage’, the amount of land which would have been required to provide the same amount of heat and energy that was being provided by coal in the early 19th century, finding that it equaled or exceeded the total amount of arable land in Britain.

Like Blaut and Frank, Pomeranz also accords great importance to the New World, but for somewhat different reasons. Conquest of and trade with the New World was indeed vital, but ‘not so much for capital accumulation (as some scholars have argued), but because its resources helped Europe move off a path of ecologically constrained, primarily labor-intensive development (which it shared with China and Japan) onto a far more transformative path that used prodigious amounts of both energy and land’ (113). Timber, sugar, coffee and tea, cotton, and other goods, which if grown in Britain would have required far more arable land than the total acreage of Britain, were now imported from the New World; and the American colonies imported European goods which could now be produced in great volume because the land that would have been used to feed people, and the timber that would have been grown on it for housing and fuel, was freed up for these other uses. The New World and the slave trade ‘created a new kind of periphery, which enabled Europe to exchange an ever growing volume of manufactured exports for an ever-growing volume of land-intensive products’ (20). In summary, the availability of coal, and resources provided by the New World, ‘helped Europe move off a path of ecologically constrained, primarily labor-intensive development (which it shared with China and Japan) onto a far more transformative path that used prodigious amounts of both energy and land’ (113).

Contingency and chance play a greater role in this account than is normally the case in explanations of far-reaching historical transformations. In Pomeranz’s explanation, the roots of Europe’s economic transformation are not found to lie in the distant past, whether this be the slow maturation of institutional, ideological, or cultural features conducive to economic growth (and lacking in the non-Western world), or even in a long process of exploitation of others, beginning in 1492. The ‘great divergence’ between the West and the rest is instead found to be ‘the result of important and sharp discontinuities’ (13), or in the words of one critic, ‘late and lucky’.⁸

Pomeranz and Wong are methodologically innovative – their anti-Eurocentric accounts are in part enabled by comparisons that are reciprocal and do not take Europe as the norm – but they are less interested in conceptual or theoretical issues. Pomeranz registers impatience with such ‘postmodern’ questions (8). Wong is more open to the possibility that the concepts and categories we use to make comparisons might themselves be European and not wholly suited to understanding non-European societies. ‘Postmodern anxieties’ about the categories of our explanations are, he concedes, ‘real’. However, such reflexivity is not pursued: ‘unlike many whose postmodern rejection of the modernist project accepts extreme relativism’, he writes, ‘I am arguing for the importance of continued efforts to expand the capacities of social theory through a more systematic grounding in multiple historical experiences’ (293). For both authors, an excessive attention to reflexivity can only lead to paralysis and an abandonment of any effort to explain.

Postcolonial Theory

By contrast, one of the defining features of postcolonial theory – at least, of the type that I consider here⁹ – is that it is ‘reflexive’. By this, I mean that works of this nature are as much interested in the categories through which explanations and narratives are crafted, as they are in the production of explanations and narratives themselves. Postcolonialism assumes that

even after the biases of social science are corrected (such as through the methodological innovations of the scholars discussed above), problems of the politics of knowledge remain, precisely because the central categories of the social sciences are the product of a European history, and are not necessarily adequate to all times and places. To put it another way – it may not just be the ‘content’ of the social sciences (the explanations they offer, the narratives they construct) that is shaped by their European genealogy, but also their very ‘form’ (the concepts through which explanations become possible – including the idea of what counts as an explanation).

Works by Dipesh Chakrabarty, Walter Dignolo, Timothy Mitchell, and others start from the premise that not only the dominant accounts offered by the social sciences, but the very concepts through which such accounts are fashioned, have genealogies ‘which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe.’¹⁰ This does not necessarily mean that they are ‘merely’ European and therefore parochial, but it does require that scholars remain alert to the possibility that the analytical categories which the social sciences presume to be universal – land, labor and capital, state, individual, civil society, and so on – may not in fact transcend the European history from which they originate. The task before an anti-Eurocentric intellectual endeavor – or the task of ‘provincializing Europe’, in the title of an influential book by Chakrabarty – is ‘to explore the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories...in the context of non-European life-worlds.’¹¹

What does this mean? Let me take as an example the categories the economic historian deploys, such as ‘land’, ‘labour’, ‘capital’, and ‘production’. The economic historian is aware that these terms/concepts only came to be used in their current senses with the emergence of political economy in Europe, but assumes that the objects and relations they designate existed in all places and all times, and thus using these analytical terms can illuminate the pasts (and presents) of all peoples – even those who did not always have words for these things. The postcolonial theorist would dispute this. She/He would not deny that the categories of political economy, such as land, labour, and capital can be used to illuminate the pasts and presents of non-European societies. But she would insist that political economy and the categories it deploys have something ‘particular’ (rather than universal) that inheres to them; and therefore that to apply these categories to non-European contexts is to engage in an act of translation, not simply one of neutral description. In the only direct engagement (that I am aware of) between a postcolonial scholar and the works surveyed in the previous section, Chakrabarty provides an appreciative but also critical discussion of Pomeranz’s book. In doing so, he disputes the idea that ‘the dross of all particularistic thought has been drained away’ from political economy (30), and takes as one of his examples the category of ‘land’. When in the 18th and 19th centuries Europeans arrived in Australia, they were used to seeing land as an economic good. But for the original inhabitants of Australia, ‘a reified, objectified, and abstract category of “land” simply would not have made sense to them. Yet, European colonisation proceeded on the basis of an imagination that took the political-economic category of “land” for granted. Eventually, the Aborigines had to deal with this category as they learned to make ‘land’ claims over time.’¹² It is possible to write histories of the ‘economies’ of indigenous settlements, of what they produced, exchanged, and gifted, both before and after the arrival of the white man. These are useful, no doubt, but in treating ‘land’ as if it were an abstract, reified category, such accounts engage in an act of translation; and whatever its benefits, there is also something that fails to get translated, indeed gets lost – in this case, the relationships of many indigenous people with land as a source of life and meaning, and not as an ‘input’ or an economic good.

Arguments of a similar nature have been made of even the most ‘natural’ and seemingly uncontroversial categories. Some postcolonial scholars have argued that the distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘society’ is not a brute fact about the world, but a distinction which

only became meaningful, in its current form, at a particular point in the history of the West; when we employ such a distinction to understand the worlds of those who do not themselves make that distinction, we are translating.¹³ I have argued that the idea of a human subject, possessed of autonomy and interiority and will, is not something that translates well in 19th century colonial India, as debates around western education and western knowledge in 19th century India unwittingly reveal.¹⁴ Even the very distinction between the ‘real’ and ‘representation’, which underpins the modern conception of knowledge – where a subject represents, maps, renders, or reproduces, in words or images, an external world – is not, Timothy Mitchell has argued, something given, is not the ‘natural’ and inevitable form that knowledge takes, but is rather ‘a particular historical practice...’¹⁵

Such arguments can provoke ire, and sometimes lead to the charge that such claims amount to a crippling ‘relativism’ that abandons all aspiration to understand and explain. But the works I am referring to are mostly histories; they seek to produce knowledge, but in doing so, they are sensitive to the genealogies, and the limits, of their categories (including the master category of history itself¹⁶). They do this not in order to make social science impossible, but rather to remain attentive to that which gets overlooked, lost, or mistranslated. Postcolonial theorists are thus not hostile to the accounts of those scholars who challenge Eurocentrism by providing an alternative to the dominant or ‘standard’ account of how capitalism and modernity came into being. They may accept such arguments. But their own arguments are at a tangent to these.

Conclusion

If, as some have argued, there is a general tendency towards homogenization or towards the McDonaldization of the world, then it would seem that being anti-Eurocentric is of little or no contemporary relevance. For even if the alternative histories of anti-Eurocentricists are correct, *now* (or if not now, soon), China, India, and much of the world is/will be capitalist and modern. By the same logic, even if postcolonial scholars are correct in insisting that the categories of the social sciences are fruits of the modern West, to the very degree that the whole world begins to resemble the modern West, these categories are – or soon will be – fully adequate to their non-Western objects. I will conclude by considering this possibility, and in arguing against it, will make one final distinction between the two historicizing modes of anti-Eurocentrism on the one hand, and postcolonialism on the other.

Implicit, and sometimes explicit in the explanations of Pomeranz and Wong, is the idea that there are multiple paths, rather than a single path, to modernity. For if industrialization and rapid economic growth in Europe took place because of contingent factors rather as a result of some inner necessity, then different contingencies may lead other societies to economic growth and to the modern via different paths. As Wong puts it, ‘Social theory must take seriously the task of moving beyond failed teleologies rooted in nineteenth-century visions to a reasoned consideration of the multiple paths into and out of the present’ (288). Here, the argument joins that of scholars who have been urging that we think of modernity in more complex ways, not as a single state of affairs reached by a single path, but rather in terms of ‘alternative’ or ‘multiple’ modernities.¹⁷ In such an understanding, ‘becoming modern’ does not mean that everywhere becomes the same in all essentials: “If the transition to modernity is like the rise of a new culture...[then] the starting point will leave its impress on the end product ...transitions to what we might recognize as modernity, taking place in different civilizations, will produce different results that reflect their divergent starting points...new differences will emerge from the old. Thus, instead of speaking of modernity in the singular, we should better speak of “alternative modernities”’.¹⁸ I think that this is a useful way of thinking about our present, for it explains both why (say) China and

India are part of the modern, and yet why they are in many significant ways different from Europe. And if this is so, then the different pasts which led to different presents are far from being of antiquarian interest only – they may go a long way in helping us understand the significant differences between societies that are otherwise similar, in that they are capitalist and modern.

The postcolonial theorist will accept the above argument, but will add another, and I will conclude this essay with a brief sketch of this argument. Our conception of the relation between knowledge and its objects is one of externality, one where a subject ‘represents’, ‘renders’, ‘captures’, and ‘portrays’ objects; the more accurate the representation or portrayal, the more it deserves to be regarded as accurate or true knowledge. But, as mentioned earlier, postcolonial theorists argue that this, too, is a Western and, for the most part, a modern conception. In fact, knowledge does not just offer cognition of a world external to it by representing this world, it also constitutes it; and modern Western thought, of which the natural and social sciences are the formalised expressions, has been constitutive of modernity, rather than simply the self-apprehension of it. The knowledges that we moderns have produced have not just described and explained the changes that have brought the modern world into being; they have been a force in the making of these changes, and precisely to the extent that they have done so, they are able to perform the role of mirroring and representing the world they have helped to produce. Outside of Europe, these concepts/categories, embedded in and given life through the institutions and practices of colonial governmentality, legal systems, the census, and colonial schooling, sometimes served to disseminate and ‘make real’ what they (wrongly) assumed to be universal features of all human and social worlds. That is why despite their European genealogy, the social sciences are not ‘merely’ European, but can tell us things about all parts of the world.

But only ever partially so, because these knowledges, and the historical processes of industrialization and capitalism with which they are closely associated, have not fully remade the non-Western world. More than this, while the failures of modern knowledge to mirror or map a world it has not fully (re)made are most obviously apparent in the non-West, such failures are *also* apparent in the West. Modernity and the knowledges of which it is cause and effect cannot and have not completely effaced or transformed other ways of knowing and being, even in the West. For instance, the social and natural sciences treat the world as divided into a ‘nature’ that is the domain of impersonal laws, and a society that is the domain of human purposes and meanings; and they treat gods and spirits as products of human desires and fears. This corresponds to some of the ways in which the world has been remade, and is now experienced and lived. But it only corresponds to some of these ways. There are still large numbers of people, in the West as outside of it, for whom nature is not disenchanting, and/or who attribute agency to gods and spirits. To ignore and override their understandings, for instance, by regarding their views as a mistaken ‘projection’ or as ‘alienation’, sometimes helps to foreground certain things that we might otherwise fail to see, and render them explicable. But such foregrounding works by pushing other things into the background, and thus the knowledge produced through the social sciences, is only ever partial and perspectival.

Thus postcolonial theory, though it begins by critically examining the universalist pretensions of social science in relation to non-Western pasts and presents, is driven to do more than challenge Eurocentrism. And this may prove to be the most important difference between the two historicizing, and the postcolonial, modes of anti-Eurocentrism – whereas the former assumes that the social sciences can (be made to) be applicable everywhere, postcolonial theory argues that they are never fully adequate anywhere.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ Important earlier works include Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, and C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*.

² These include Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus*, and *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, and Eric Jones, *The European Miracle*.

³ Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, xxi. This argument is the default position of those who are conscious of the ‘charge’ of Eurocentrism and wish to defend themselves against it, and is not confined to economic history. For an example from the discipline of international relations, see Bull and Watson, ‘Introduction’, 2; and for a critique of this see Seth, ‘Postcolonial theory and the critique of International Relations’.

⁴ Immanuel Wallerstein’s *The Modern World System* (1974) had already made such an argument, suggesting that the emergence of capitalism in Europe was in significant part a result of the economic relations western Europe established with ‘peripheral’ economies. However, the literature we are surveying finds that Wallerstein’s argument is still Eurocentric, because it treats the rest of the world as a ‘periphery’ incorporated into an emergent system whose core, from the beginning, was western Europe.

⁵ Goody, *The Theft of History*, 4.

⁶ These have recently been supplemented by Indian comparisons in Prasanna Parthasarathi’s *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (2011).

⁷ Wong similarly finds that in the early modern period ‘China and Europe shared important similarities of preindustrial economic expansion based on Smithian dynamics. These included increased rural industries, more productive agricultures, and expanded commercial networks’ (278).

⁸ Bryant, ‘The West and the Rest Revisited: Debating Capitalist Origins, European Colonialism, and the advent of Modernity’, 410.

⁹ The works of Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, for instance, are important to postcolonial theory, but they do not directly speak to the issues I am considering here.

¹⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (2000). Other works include Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (2003, second edition); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (1988) and *Rule of Experts* (2002); Seth, *Subject Lessons* (2007).

¹¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 20.

¹² Chakrabarty, Dipesh, ‘Can political economy be postcolonial? a note’, 31.

¹³ See Seth, ‘Once Was Blind but now can see: Modernity and the Social Sciences’, and Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*. Such arguments are indebted to the works of Bruno Latour; see especially his *We Have Never Been Modern*, and also *Politics of Nature*.

¹⁴ Seth, *Subject Lessons*.

¹⁵ Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, 173.

¹⁶ See Seth, ‘Reason or Reasoning? Clio or Siva?’.

¹⁷ See, for instance Eisenstadt (ed), *Multiple Modernities*, and Gaonkar (ed), *Alternative Modernities*.

¹⁸ Taylor, ‘Two Theories of Modernity’, 161–62.

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