

The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation

John Hobson challenges the ethnocentric bias of mainstream accounts of the rise of the West. It is often assumed that since Ancient Greek times Europeans have pioneered their own development, and that the East has been a passive bystander in the story of progressive world history. Hobson argues that there were two processes that enabled the rise of the 'oriental West'. First, each major developmental turning point in Europe was informed in large part by the assimilation of Eastern inventions (e.g. ideas, technologies and institutions) which through oriental globalisation diffused from the more advanced East across the Eastern-led global economy between 500 and 1800. Second, the construction of European identity after 1453 led to imperialism, through which Europeans appropriated many Eastern resources (land, labour and markets). Hobson's book thus propels the hitherto marginalised Eastern peoples to the forefront of the story of progress in world history.

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To the indirect influence of my great-grandfather,
John Atkinson Hobson,
whose 'heretical' writings have permeated much of
how I explain the world.
I thank you.
Your lone twilight will never fade away.

To the direct influence of my beloved Cecelia
and to my family,
Evangeline, Michael and Gabriella,
whose loving and empathic actions have permeated much
of what I know, feel and understand of the world.
I thank all of you.
Your bright dawn alone warms me every single day.

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Preface and acknowledgements

To reassure my potential reader who thinks anxiously, ‘not another typical book on the rise of the West’, let me say this is not one such book. For unlike almost all the books on this topic this one does not recount all the familiar themes according to the standard European, ethnocentric frame of reference. In place of the usual story, I produce one that brings the East into the limelight. Accordingly, though my purpose differs in certain respects to that of Felipe Fernández-Armesto’s *Millennium*, nevertheless I, like him, take delight in surprising the reader. I focus on the many Eastern discoveries, peoples and places that enabled the rise of the West, all of which are ignored in the conventional accounts. If I may be permitted I would like to draw on the phraseology found in the prologue to *Millennium* to convey a sense of what my book is and is not about.

In this book the reader will find nothing about the Investiture Conflict, the Thirty Years War or the Treaty of Westphalia. While the Italian merchant communes are discussed, they are at all times revealed as derivative of the wider innovative developments pioneered in the Eastern-led global economy. The European Renaissance and scientific revolution are considered more from the perspective of the Islamic Middle East and North Africa than Tuscany.¹ Da Vinci, Ficino and Copernicus kneel before the likes of al-Shātir, al-Khwārizmī and al-Tūsī. Vasco da Gama fades into the marginalised shadows cast by the brilliance of Asia. This is the only

¹ Note that I have used the term ‘Middle East’ rather than ‘West Asia’ only because the former term is more recognisable to the general reader. It is also noteworthy that I have used the Wade-Giles as opposed to the Pinyin system for referencing Chinese names, again only because the former is more clearly recognisable to the general reader than is the latter.

xii PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

mention of Elizabeth I, Oliver Cromwell and Queen Victoria. Louis XIV and Frederick the Great appear only to beg to be excused. For the majority of the period discussed in this book, Madrid, Lisbon, London and Venice are all provincial backwaters of Baghdad, Cairo, Canton and Calicut. London's Great Exhibition turns out to be hubris, given that Britain's industrialisation is but the final stage of the transmission of the much earlier inventions pioneered in China. And the processes of state-led, militarised industrialisation and protectionism are discussed and applied, but in the context of Britain rather than Meiji Japan. Last but by no means least, in place of Germany's 'late industrialisation' the reader will be treated to a discussion of Tokugawa Japan's 'early development'. In general the reader will learn much more about the East – especially the Islamic Middle East, North Africa, India, South-east Asia, Japan and above all China – though in so doing will learn new things about the West and its origins.

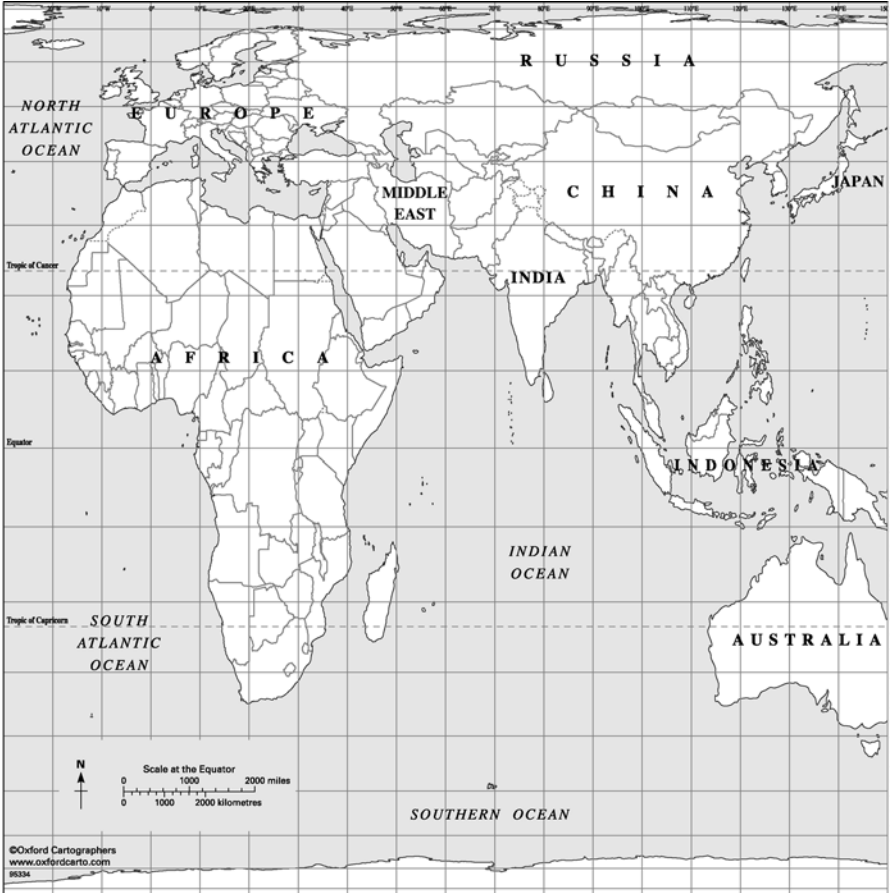
Accordingly the reader who expects to be treated to all the specific details of Western development cast only in a European light, will necessarily be disappointed. Nevertheless my intention is precisely to disappoint such a reader, though simultaneously treat him or her with the lost story of how the East enabled the rise of the modern West. Whether the reader is entirely convinced by this book's particular arguments in a sense concerns me less than whether they are perceived to be fresh, interesting and insightful. And I am more interested in the larger questions and issues that this book's arguments pose than the particular answers that it provides. Thus I can reassure my anxious potential reader that there is indeed not a place for yet another typical book on the rise of the Western world. I, therefore, hope that the intrepid reader who does read on will enjoy this book's counter-intuitive journey into the hitherto dark world of the largely forgotten.

Let me now turn to thank a number of people who have in various ways enabled me to chart these waters more effectively than I might otherwise have done. I thank the following who offered helpful advice: Robert Aldrich, Brett Bowden, Jeff Groom, Steve

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Thanks to John Haslam at CUP, whose patience and sensitive editorial advice is, as always, much appreciated. I also thank my indexer, Trevor Matthews, for his heroic efforts as well as Hilary Scannell for her copy-editing. And special thanks too must go to the three anonymous reviewers, all of whom offered many positive comments as well as constructive criticisms, and proposed the most substantial revision that I have yet undertaken in my career. In particular, I thank them for enabling me to write a better book, certainly one that I am much happier with. And, of course, the familiar rider stands: that I remain responsible for any errors.

Finally, I want to express my love and deepest gratitude to my fiancée, Cecelia Thomas, who guided, anchored and sacrificed for, me in so many ways in three of the most tumultuous years of life-changing events that I have yet experienced. Her humane strengths of sacrifice, sensitivity and empathy represent the best of all that is good on this troubled planet and shed light and warmth upon my place in it. Here the less familiar rider stands: that I remain responsible for any personal errors.



Map 1 Hobo-Dyer projection of the world

