Global Dialogical History and the Challenge of Neo-Eurocentrism

John M. Hobson

The worst thing ethically and politically is to let [Eurocentric] separatism simply go on, without understanding the opposite of separatism, which is connectedness…What I am interested in is how all these things work together. That seems to me to be the great task—to connect them all together—to understand wholes rather than bits of wholes…In a wonderful phrase, Disraeli asks, “Arabs, what are they?” and answers: “They’re just Jews on horseback.” So underlying this separation is also an amalgamation of some kind.

Edward W. Said

It has become the fashion to level the charge of Eurocentricity at the West for ignoring our debt to the achievements of other civilizations. Yet while fully acknowledging this debt, we must still ask why the West, after the end of the Middle Ages, so rapidly overtook the great civilizations of the East.

Ernst Gombrich

When talking of the Middle Ages…historians of science…tend to talk of the “transmission” of Greek and Arabic learning to the West, or about how the West “received” [these ideas]…all painting a passive picture of the process…[But Westerners] actively sought [Arabic learning]…The West was to learn much from Islamic scholars, philosophers, and scientists like Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroës, and even learned to respect “chivalric heroes like Saladin.” It is worth pondering that there was a period in Islamic civilization when it was open to outside influences in ways similar to the West. Early Islamic civilization derived much from the Greeks, Romans, Indians, and Persians. But crucially, at a certain date, it rejected the “foreign sciences,” which led to intellectual stagnation and decay.

Ibn Warraq
Introduction

In the last few years the idea of the “dialogue of civilizations” has begun to permeate into the study of non-Eurocentric global history. Its prime rationale is to challenge two interrelated approaches—Samuel Huntington’s idea of the “clash of civilizations” and Eurocentric world history. Let me discuss each in turn. Huntington, of course, characterized intercivilizational relations as inherently conflictual, on the basis that civilizations are self-contained entities that have their own unique cultures that are, in turn, incommensurable with those of other civilizations. This culminates in his view that the meeting point between civilizations can be likened to tectonic platelike fault lines, which abrade to produce or generate violent and bloody conflict. It is helpful here to differentiate two forms of civilizational analyses—substantialist and processual/relational. A substantialist approach is essentialist, wherein civilizations are thought to display essential characteristics that are largely static or unchanging. By contrast, a relational approach conceives of civilizations as sets of social practices such that their boundaries are written or drawn and redrawn over time through intercivilizational interactions. However, while Huntington might balk at being placed in the substantialist category, since he does, in fact, argue that civilizations change over time, nevertheless the logic of his position remains otherwise, given that the traditional and primordial cultural/religious values that he focuses upon are by definition unchanging. Moreover, the second defining feature of substantialism seals his position within this category. This concerns the point that substantialist accounts view the reproduction of civilizations as endogenously generated. By contrast a relational approach—as the term properly implies—insists that civilizations are shaped and constituted, reshaped and reconstituted, through iterated interactions with others around and beyond them.

Huntington’s commitment to the idea that civilizations endogenously self-generate is also a fundamental aspect of Eurocentric world history. Although some of the ideas upon which Eurocentrism was founded began to emerge in the period following the “discovery of America,” it was only during the European Age of Enlightenment that Eurocentrism was really crystallized, as European thinkers set about determining Europe’s place in the world on the one hand, and sought to construct a new, modern European identity on the other. Prior to, and even during much of, the eighteenth century, Europeans often recognized that the East and the West were interlinked. But the emergence of Eurocentrism and the concomitant “production of alterity” led to the construction of what I like to call an imaginary line of civilizational apartheid that fundamentally separated the East from the West. While Jessica Benjamin usefully refers to this as the process of “splitting” the East and the West