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Breaking the Eurocentric cage

John M. Hobson

The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2012; 408 pp: 9781107020207, £60 (hbk)

Robbie Shilliam (ed.)

International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity, Routledge: London, UK, 2010; 272 pp: 9780415522847, £24.95 (pbk), 9780415577724, £85 (hbk)

Reviewed by Cemal Burak Tansel, *University of Nottingham, UK*

In a recent brief on the state of the critique of Eurocentrism in social sciences, Sanjay Seth noted, ‘being critical of Eurocentrism, or seeking to “provincialize Europe” ... is no longer a marginal project’ (2009: 334). The burgeoning ‘non-Eurocentric’ literature which is producing an important cross-fertilisation between global history, historical materialism, historical sociology and postcolonial theory strongly attests to Seth’s pronouncement. International relations (IR), too, has been a recipient of the wave of intellectual decolonisation, as a number of critical interventions has attempted to reorient the discipline’s suffocating focus away from its Anglo-American Weltanschauung, and to incorporate non-Western agency into paradoxically provincialist theoretical frameworks. This essay examines two recent efforts in this overall endeavour: *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics* (hereafter, ECWP) by John M. Hobson, and *International Relations and Non-Western Thought* (hereafter, IRNWT) edited by Robbie Shilliam, both of whom have been vocal critics of Eurocentric IR, and who have crafted a number of powerful publications in the interstices of non-Eurocentric, postcolonial IR and historical sociology.

While both books are located within and advocate for a post-Eurocentric research agenda, their components, namely the methodological discussion, points of critique and alternative forms of theorising, show considerable diversity. In ECWP, Hobson embarks on constructing an all-inclusive negative critique of Western international theory, whereas the contributions in IRNWT are geared towards accentuating the lost and hidden voices of the non-West, with a healthy dose of scepticism poured in the mix. Read together, the books not only complement each other, but also help uncover strengths and weaknesses in each other’s empirical and conceptual discussions. With this reciprocity in mind, I will position ECWP at the heart of this exploration while simultaneously

consulting and engaging with IRNWT in order to unravel the full intricacy of the task that underpins the two books, namely challenging Eurocentrism in international theory.

Drawing heavily from the revisionist global history literature, Hobson's critically acclaimed monograph, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (2004) was an extremely timely and decisive intervention that effectively debunked a whole swath of Eurocentric triumphalist myths in IR and historical sociology. Yet its prospects were crippled by the author's reluctance to conceptually re-situate the emergence of capitalism and modernity through a 'non-Eurocentric' lens. This theoretical gap, combined with the firm denial of the established Eurocentric narrative, led Hobson into a quagmire within which his analysis often bordered on a form of 'reverse Eurocentrism' – or what Wallerstein calls 'anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism' (1997: 101) – which projected similar essentialist civilisational identities that are diametrically opposed to each other in Hobson's own 'arbitrary temporalities' (Mielants 2009: 122, 72n.61; also Pomeranz 2006: 352). While correctly pinpointing the 'Eastern origins' of a number of 'resource portfolios' that transformed the trajectory of European development, Hobson ultimately disregarded the question of which social forces and processes led Europe to diverge from the East, wherein the initial mechanisms of the ensuing 'European miracle' originated. In ECWP, Hobson takes a step back from grand social theory and targets, in characteristic fashion, the relatively short lineage of Western international theory from 1760 to 2010. The result, in the author's own words, is 'a twin revisionist narrative of Eurocentrism and international theory' (ECWP: 1).

Divided into four timeframes (1760-1914, 1914-1945, 1945-1989 and 1989-2010), the book presents an elaborate spectrum in which both mainstream and critical approaches in international theorising are scrutinised using a well-developed non-Eurocentric framework. One of Hobson's main conceptual achievements here is rejecting a 'black-box' treatment of Eurocentrism, wherein different forms of homogenising claims to universality, hegemonic material and knowledge production and outright racist tendencies are blended into nebulous and internally contradictory epithets of Eurocentrism. Instead, Hobson outlines Eurocentrism as 'a polymorphous multivalent discourse', and thus his complex analytical taxonomy is 'pluralistic and multivalent' (ECWP: 1-3). Important here is the signal difference between Hobson's temporally specified utilisation of Eurocentrism and Edward Said's pioneering, yet irresolutely transhistorical discussion of Orientalism. Said's initial deconstruction of the Orientalist mindset in the West was paralyzed by his overextended scope, in which the existence of a more or less homogeneous ideology of difference had existed since time immemorial. The autopoietic character assumed by Said's orientalism rendered radically different forms of (non-) representation and the negligence of the 'non-West' as corresponding symptoms of the same disease which repeatedly manifested across temporal and civilisational lines. Thus, for Said, Aeschylus' *The Persians* and Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* became representatives of the same logic of exteriority that plagued a seemingly monolithic Western civilisation (Said 2003 [1978]: 21). The question of Eurocentrism, however, is not merely an instance of 'banal provincialism', nor an ordinary form of ethnocentrism, as Samir Amin has aptly observed (2009 [1989]: 154, 178), but is more specifically a commensurate ideology of Western capitalist development and imperialism. Thus a careful periodisation and the delineation of the specific nature and function of Eurocentrism should be at the heart of the discussion.

Hobson is acutely aware of this point. Eschewing Said's 'monochromatic definition' (ECWP: 3), he unpacks the influence of Eurocentrism on Western theory by asking several questions aimed at revealing the differentiated forms of Eurocentrism. He asks, does theory construct a hierarchical world order? Does it universalise the Western socio-economic experience as a normative standard? What kind of agency does it grant to the 'non-West'? What is theory's position vis-à-vis imperialism, colonialism and other types of extra-territorial interventions and forms of domination? Examining the works of a long and varied line of intellectual figures including, but not limited to Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, John A. Hobson, Norman Angell, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin and Robert W. Cox, Hobson unforgivingly rules that the entire history of Western international theory is tainted by at least one form of Eurocentrism. While some may point out that this is an unjust charge considering how some of these authors themselves have complained about IR's ethnocentrism (Gilpin 1981), or attempted to provide alternative loci of theorising (Cox 1992), they conform to at least one type of Eurocentric pitfall in Hobson's meticulously constructed analytical framework. This, however, does not mean that Hobson's analyses are always as punctilious as his framework, and below I shall provide a critique of what I regard as the most problematic part of the book, namely Hobson's attempt to confront Marx's Eurocentrism.

On Marx's 'paternalistic Eurocentrism', Hobson initiates the discussion by following a well-trodden path in postcolonial critique: that Marx's prognosis of the 'results and prospects' of British colonialism in India, outlined so bluntly in his thoroughly rectified *New York Daily Tribune* articles, not only indicates but unequivocally affirms that Marx subscribed to a Enlightenment narrative which pictured a static, unchanging East wherein the only real progress could occur via the impact of an external force. That Marx shunned the modus operandi of British colonial policy or advanced a 'moral condemnation' thereof is a side issue, since he ultimately expected, and even supported, the 'annihilation of old Asiatic society' through British-led (forced) capitalist development. Constructing a critique of Marx's theory of history or his purported provincialism based exclusively on these pieces is deeply problematic, and the manifold shortcomings of such an approach have been extensively revealed in a number of publications.¹ Unlike many other critics, who continue to interpret Marx's corpus in isolated fragments or disregard the evolution of his own thought on world history, Hobson initially offers a refreshing change by tackling some of the responses garnered by the original postcolonial critique. It is, perhaps, also an attempt on Hobson's part to remedy some of his previous discussions of a materialist conception of history, where Marx's substantial ideas often received a rather cursory treatment (see especially Hobson 2005: 375-6).

Yet Hobson's indication of taking a constructive step towards re-working the counter-intuitive postcolonial critique resembles the proverbial Janissary march: he takes two steps forward by acknowledging the strength of Marxist counter-criticism, but his renewed engagement obstinately takes him back to his former position. 'Marx's whole theory of history', Hobson argues, 'faithfully reproduces the teleological Orientalist story' as Marx operated on Eurocentric concepts like 'the Asiatic mode of production' and 'Oriental despotism', which effectively disassociate private property and class struggle, and hence endogenous sources of social change from non-European societies (ECWP: 56). According to Hobson, Marx could not remove the shackles of Eurocentrism because his framework was irreversibly woven upon a 'familiar series of binaries' such as

'rational capitalist states in Europe versus irrational Oriental despotisms', and the 'capitalist mode of production versus the Asiatic mode of production' (ECWP: 57). What Hobson ultimately fails to distinguish is the nature of the discussion and the crucial level of abstraction within which Marx deployed these terms. Leaving aside the fact that the concepts of oriental despotism and the Asiatic mode of production disappear from Marx's lexicon during the 1870s (see Blaut 1993: 48 n.28; 142 n.75; Banaji 2010: 20), Hobson's hasty dismissal of the Asiatic mode of production leads him to overlook the underlying reasons that prompted Marx to use this underdeveloped concept. The concept of the Asiatic mode of production was an unfinished attempt to map out the contours of the historical heterogeneity of social development across different societies. Hence it was utilised as 'a universal rather than a peculiar geographic reference' (Blackledge 2006: 112). Marx's description and application surely lacked precision, yet even in its embryo form, it signified a radical break from 'the unilinear and necessary schema ... [which is] so foreign to the spirit of Marx' (Dussel 2001 [1992]: 14). Without having recourse to the wealth of historical evidence we possess today (Banu 1981 [1966]: 279; Banaji 2010: 126), Marx rightly pointed out that antecedent social and economic conditions, most importantly existing class and property relations, engendered differentiated developmental outcomes. While the conventional European wisdom to which Marx seemed to subscribe was undoubtedly wrong to assert that no 'private ownership of land exist[ed]' in Asia, he was not too far off the mark to claim that in Asia, 'there is no private landed property, though there is both private and communal possession and usufruct of the land' (1981 [1894]: 927), since land regimes in, inter alia, the Ottoman Empire and Russia were organised according to the fundamental principle that all arable land was state property, or exclusively the property of the sovereign.²¹

In retrospect, a major part of Hobson's fragmentary critique could have been salvaged had he not omitted an oft-quoted letter Marx wrote to the Russian journal *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* in 1877. In it, Marx warns his critic Mikhailovsky that the historical overview he provides in *Capital*, especially the discussion of primitive accumulation, should not be regarded as 'a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed' (Marx 1989 [1877]: 200). Marx attacks the same teleological, 'supra-historical' history writing that Hobson repeatedly, fervently and quite rightly condemns; and yet Hobson's incarnation of the paternalistic Eurocentric Marx is not the same one that confronted Mikhailovsky, or entertained the notion of a 'Russian path' of capitalist development in his correspondence with Vera Zasulich (Marx 1989 [1881]). Equally, Hobson's Marx seems to be unaware of the principles of historical materialism as he builds his theoretical framework not dialectically, but upon what Hobson calls 'binaries', i.e. abstractions designed as antipodean extremes. It is perhaps this ontological indifference which Hobson displays vis-à-vis historical materialism that impels him to disregard a core tenet in Marx's dialectics: that 'Marx's abstractions [are] phases of an evolving and interactive system', not 'mere sequence[s] of events isolated from their context' (Ollman 2003: 67). As Anne Bailey and Josep Llobera have emphasised, the importance of Marx's late ethnological research and his correspondence with Russian populists lies in the fact that they 'reaffirm ... [Marx's] weariness of periodization focusing on a specific element abstracted from the totality' (Bailey and Llobera 1981: 35). Thus, it is not only unfortunate that Hobson's reading completely misses out the direction Marx took in the 1870s, when his 'attention

turn[ed] to the ‘problem of historical interdependence of people and countries in the different period of global history, i.e. the synchronic unity of history’ (and one should add to dichronic intersocietal unity)’ (Porshnev, quoted in Shanin 1983: 18), but it also is a colossal lacuna which renders his analysis of Marx significantly incomplete. Barring minor errors in interpreting empirical evidence, Marx’s conceptual argument regarding the multidirectionality of social development was and still is extremely relevant, but Hobson’s one-dimensional Marx makes him neglect possibly the most productive trajectory to design international theory ‘along non-Eurocentric lines’ (ECWP: 58).

The spectre of this ‘late Marx’ is nowhere to be seen in Hobson, but its apparition manifests in vivid, yet often unacknowledged hues in IRNWT. Shilliam’s brilliant introduction to the volume sets out the aim of the book as engaging with ‘the irreducible yet inter-related plurality of modern world development’ (IRNWT: 3), and it is safe to say that most contributors succeed in interweaving complex histories of colonialism, imperialism and capitalist modernity into coherent and well-structured arguments. The nucleus of this intervention comprises two interlinked moments in the re-conceptualisation of the emergence of the modern world system. The first moment, in Mustapha Kamal Pasha’s words, is a full recognition of the premise that the ‘colonial encounter was integral to the inauguration of modernity’ (IRNWT: 199); and the second is what Shilliam regards as sensitivity ‘to the differentiated nature of experiences of imperialism and colonialism’ (IRNWT: 21).

A case in point, which operates on these two principles, is Gerard Aching’s exceptional discussion of 19th-century Cuba and his conceptualisation of ‘colonial modernity’. Situating colonial modernity as ‘an experience of subjugation – analogous to but not a mere duplicate of a “universal” modern subjectivity’ (IRNWT: 44), Aching fleshes out an instance of the ‘differentiated nature’ of the colonial encounter. Furthermore, he offers another extremely valuable examination by unearthing the Cuban Creole bourgeoisie’s modernisation problematique in the 19th century. This is important not only because it sets out a materialistic and dialogical conception of the condition(s) of modernity that goes beyond geocentrically canvassed ideational descriptions of the term; but also, and perhaps more significantly, because it challenges a time-honoured tradition in both mainstream and critical approaches, namely the universalisation of the European experience both with its causes and consequences as a blueprint to explain other developmental trajectories. Whether the analytical focus is on concrete processes of nation-building and socioeconomic development, or on the inception or further progression of discursive practices such as the emergence of the discourses of civil society, civic rights and the prioritisation of a public realm governed by ‘Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham’, the social sciences (including the most critical currents) have long prescribed for the non-West the Enlightenment remedy, the justification for which is found ex hypothesi in a selectively read and interpreted European history.

Kamran Matin’s chapter furnishes an incisive comment on postmodernism and post-structuralism which gives voice precisely to the same concern. He recognises that even these ‘radical Western intellectual traditions ... are preoccupied with the ways in which social, political and cultural forms have changed diachronically within Europe’ (IRNWT: 122 emphasis in original). Yet Matin’s comment, as he has previously acknowledged (Matin 2007: 421), is equally applicable to various contributions in Marxist IR and HSIR, where this tendency still lurks beneath the foundations of even the most

promising contributions such as the ongoing debates in capitalist geopolitics and the theory of uneven and combined development. The concepts that constitute the main bulk of analytical discussion (e.g. state system, sovereignty, territoriality) are still utilised in an ontological 'Eurocentric cage' (Hobson 2007a: 415). Hence we are led to explore carefully the origins of the modern international state system where 'the international' strictly refers to inter-European state rivalry (ECWP: 188), or to theorise celebrated causality brought about by inter-societal relations in a manner that strips all agency from the non-West, representing 'the rest' as a mere victim or, in a best case scenario, a 'collaborator' of European-induced mechanisms like colonialism, imperialism and of course, the essential process that underpin them: capitalist expansion (Pasha 2009: 536; Halperin 2006: 43; Acharya 2011: 627-629; Blaney and Inayatullah 2002: 106-110). While Martin's own work stands as an exceptional testimony to the utility of the theory of uneven and combined development for '[a] conceptual incorporation of this specifically international dimension of social change' (IRNWT: 122), the same, regrettably, cannot be said for many other contributions in the field. Rather than enforcing an intentional neglect of the non-West, Marxist IR and HSIR are plagued by a form of what Hobson has termed as 'subliminal Eurocentrism' (Hobson 2007b: 93), a fairly subtle provincialism that effectively exteriorises the non-West from a global historical development framework by conceptualising history, political economy and international relations as strictly intra-European/inter-Western.

Of importance here is Hobson's similar diagnosis regarding the prospects and shortcomings of Marxist IR and HSIR. Hobson, showing an unusual but brief show of faith, maintains that Marxist IR has proven that it is capable of crossing the non-Eurocentric bridge, but he also cautiously indicates that the success of this endeavour still depends on the question of 'whether the majority of Marxist IR scholars are prepared to take up the non-Eurocentric challenge that some are already engaging with' (ECWP: 254). Yet the question of how exactly Marxist IR should tackle this seemingly perennial problem is not clearly answered by Hobson. The significant challenge that I would assert here is not merely 'fixing' Marxist IR, which already possesses both classical and contemporary sources to reinvent its problematic aspects, but effectively producing 'non-Eurocentric' alternatives to the Western international theory without succumbing to relativism or relinquishing social theory in toto.

At this juncture, the question of 'anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism' becomes more than a neologism, and starts jeopardising the development of truly non-Eurocentric alternatives. In IRNWT, Ryoko Nakano succinctly decodes the possible ways in which such seemingly non-Eurocentric approaches (e.g. Japanese humanism) could take the form of 'reverse Orientalism', thus ultimately falling back to a parochial defense of 'cultural particularities'. A more comprehensive and incisive indictment is advanced by Arif Dirlik, who, in similar fashion to Hobson, attacks Western IR's inherent Eurocentrism via an interrogation of IR scholarship in China. Dirlik's main point of contention is with those who promote a (false) promise of 'IR with Chinese characteristics', conceived of as a viable and radically different alternative to Western IR theorising. Here, genuine non-Eurocentric alternatives are not only blocked by the same cultural parochialism that Nakano points out, but they are also neutralised by and co-opted into hegemonic Western IR thinking. Dirlik shrewdly notes that the goal of Chinese IR

has been to accommodate, and integrate into, mainstream IR theory, much as the PRC seeks to integrate into a global system through which it seeks to achieve the goal of 'peaceful development' (*heping fazhan*). Under these circumstances, the insistence on 'Chinese characteristics' reads not as a challenge to 'Western' IR theory, but as a nativistic self-assertion to guard against loss of identity within it. (IRNWT: 148-9)

Beyond the twin traps of parochialism and co-option, a further risk that non-Eurocentric alternatives have to avoid is that of resorting to other equally regressive and provincial 'autocentrism' (Alam 2003). Both these books provide excellent examples of how to minimise this threat by putting global interdependence and multilinearity at the heart of their discussions, but a caveat is, nevertheless, in order. Displacing the West from the ideological and material throne it so arrogantly occupies may sound tempting to those who are primarily concerned with the voices emerging from the peripheries; but the attempted elimination of all the residues of Eurocentric thought in knowledge production, political economy and international relations cannot be accompanied by equally dangerous forms of autocentrism, which simply aim for the substitution of Europe with another monolithically perceived cultural and geographical entity in the overall equation. Such an effort would simply mean the imposition of another brand of intellectual subjugation, provincial triumphalism, the denial of social and cultural heterogeneity, and the neglect of the interdependent conditions of socio-economic development.

Both ECWP and IRNWT pose a number of crucial challenges to many well-entrenched tenets in international theory, and should be regarded as remarkably significant contributions to critical IR, HSIR, postcolonial and cultural studies literatures. The task that now awaits both students and scholars in these fields is to critically re-engage with history and theory without crawling back into the 'dark underworld' (ECWP: 30) of false comfort offered so righteously and seductively by Eurocentrism.

Endnotes

1. See most recently Jani (2002); Burns (2009); Anderson (2010); Brown (2010); Lindner (2010).
2. Nevertheless, the complexity of concrete land arrangements should not be overlooked, for this principle itself frequently assumed the form of 'legal fiction' (Banaji 2010: 356; Aytekin 2009: 944. On Ottoman legislation, see Özel 1999; Genç 2000: 89; cf. Moutafchieva 1988: 65).

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Author biography

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The return of anti-Eurocentrism?

Samir Amin

Global History: A View from the South, Pambazuka Press, Nairobi, Kenya, 2011; 200 pp: 9781906387969, £14.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by Andreas Bieler, *University of Nottingham, UK*

This book is a collection of several previously published pieces on global history by Samir Amin. The breadth and depth of this study is considerable, and is testimony to the author's status as an internationally leading progressive scholar of the left. In only 190 pages of text, Amin covers global history from about 500 BC to the present day, including the various parts of the world and how they have been related to each other in different ways over time. The book highlights the author's independent contribution to