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## Review of John M. Hobson The Eastern origins of Western civilization

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## Review of John M. Hobson *The Eastern origins of Western civilization*

### **Abstract**

Extract:

Are we about to return to a global order similar to that which existed for most of the past two millennia, when Chinese civilization led the world - administratively, economically, technologically and medically? Is it possible that Confucian-Daoist, rather than Judeo-Christian, cultural norms will prove best suited to overseeing a global knowledge economy?

Hobson, John M. (2004) *The Eastern origins of Western civilization*, New York, Cambridge University Press.  
ISBN: 0521838355

### **Keywords**

Chinese civilization, Confucian-Daoist, Judeo-Christian, John Hobson

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## BOOK REVIEW: -

**Review of John M. Hobson *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, N.Y., Cambridge University Press, 2004, reviewed by Reg Little.**

Are we about to return to a global order similar to that which existed for most of the past two millennia, when Chinese civilization led the world - administratively, economically, technologically and medically? Is it possible that Confucian-Daoist, rather than Judeo-Christian, cultural norms will prove best suited to overseeing a global knowledge economy?

In other words, will the period of Western leadership - or, more accurately of Anglo-American empire - prove to be but a brief 200 year historical interlude before China returns to a more traditional role? Is China likely to be again at the centre of the global trading system? Will China again produce an array of high quality products that Europe and America struggle to pay for through the value of their own production"? Will the West's universal values - democracy, rule of law and free trade - come to be seen as little more than the opportunistic, and rather hypocritical, inventions of a past imperial order?

John M. Hobson's *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* offers many reasons, which are only marginally related to the contemporary rise of China and East Asia, to ask these questions. Simply put, history as it has been understood in the West has largely been a political invention.

Andre Gunder Frank's 1998 publication, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, which preceded Hobson's work by six years, sums up a variety of evidence, including the path-breaking work of a Japanese researcher, in the following terms:

Thus, we can and should make an even stronger case than Hamashita does: the entire world economic order was - literally - Sinocentric. Christopher Columbus and after him many Europeans up until Adam Smith knew that. It was only the nineteenth-century Europeans who literally rewrote this history from their new Eurocentric perspective. As Braudel observed, Europe invented historians and then put them to good use in their own interests and not those of historical accuracy or objectivity.

*The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* complements and builds on the insights of Frank, Braudel and others to illustrate in great detail both how substantial China's historical achievement has been and how much the West has distorted history to serve the purpose of its imperial civilizing mission:

.....the Enlightenment was 'schizophrenic'. For its greatest paradox was that while it borrowed and assimilated Eastern (mainly Chinese) ideas these were then crafted into a body of knowledge that imagined the East as uncivilized and, in turn, led on to the imperial civilizing mission and the repression of the East.....

The discourse created (largely unwittingly) a kind of intellectual apartheid regime in which the West was fundamentally segregated from the East by an imaginary borderline that stretched back in time to Ancient Greece.

John Hobson's work is important because the West's deliberately distorted understanding of history and civilization may now play a role in its own marginalisation. How well placed are Western nations to adjust to a genuine cultural renaissance in the Confucian-Daoist world of East Asia?

At almost all times in recent millennia China has had more people organized in one coherent,

administrative order than any other political entity. Hobson shows how only in recent centuries has the West produced the wealth necessary to trade seriously with China. It was the later discovery of precious metals in the Americas by Europe that provided the West with sufficient wealth to begin to trade seriously with China. Indeed, without the formal institutional structures that are now seen as essential to international commerce, China was central to a global trading system that serviced large areas of the world until the early decades of the 19th century.

While the European Enlightenment, as well as the European industrial and agricultural revolutions, learnt much from the Chinese example prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, over the past two hundred years the imperial civilizing mission has ensured that many of the more profound aspects of Chinese civilization were, and continue to be, poorly understood in the West. The past two hundred years of vast material power in the West may come to be seen as a period also of tragic lost opportunity

Many Chinese innovations and ideas, such as examinations and bureaucracy, were absorbed and legitimised before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and became a tool for extending empire. What failed to make it in time was put beyond the reach of self-respecting, mainstream society and institutions. All recognition of Asia's contribution to Europe's transformation was constrained by the imperial civilizing mission's intellectual apartheid, which effectively ruled further intellectual exploration and discovery attributed to Asian sources to be politically incorrect. In a very important sense, this has led to the failure of the European Enlightenment, condemning it to forms of knowledge, science, industry and medicine that are beginning to prove both uncompetitive and unsustainable.

*The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* suggests both the brilliance and limits of the achievement of the Enlightenment. This work, which could almost be described as a chronicle of the persuasiveness and perfidy of European, or more accurately of Anglo-American, historians, clearly identifies 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain as a 'newly industrializing country' or a 'late developer'. A chapter titled: 'The Chinese origins of British industrialization: Britain as a derivative late developer, 1700-1846' concludes with the words:

In short, my global-historical-cumulative perspective of industrialization suggests that the conventional emphasis on the British industrial revolution as the place where, to quote Rostow, 'it all began', can now be seen as the product of a parochial Eurocentric mindset. We could, therefore, do little better than close with the words of Eric Jones:

Once upon a time it seemed we had a definite event to learn about. Growth began with an industrial revolution in late eighteenth century Britain. Now we know quite surely that the event was really a process, smaller, far less British (and far more Eastern), infinitely less abrupt, part of a (world-historical) continuum, taking much more time to run.

The above passages from Hobson's work more or less sum up his conclusions and sketch out some of their implications. Hobson has, however, explored in considerable detail the past fifteen hundred years. He shows the East as the early developer in a comparatively benign oriental globalization from 500 to 1800, the invention of Christendom as a medieval, reactive European response, and the mythology of the Europe's civilizing, universal values as little more than a necessary invention to market the West's determined imperial strategies.

Hobson does not deny the remarkable character of this achievement but no more does he pull his punches in describing a British imperial project built on national protectionism, regressive taxation, interventionism, despotism and militarism. This leads up to a passage headed '*Racism, Industrialization and the moral contradiction of the British Imperial civilizing mission*', which is followed by other headings such as '*The contradictions of imperial free trade: containment verses cultural conversion*' and '*Racism and the commodification of the East: the Afro-Asian origins of British industrialization*'. The latter explains the critical role of the slave trade and the empire's slave labour plantations in generating further wealth and capital resources that led on to advances in Asia.

Of course, it would be naïve to indulge for a moment the thought that a grand empire could be built

through the enlightenment of other people with democracy, the rule of law and free trade. Hobson does not make the case that the British empire was bloodier or more brutal than other empires. He does remind us, however, that it is the victors who get to write history and that that history is valid only so long as they remain victors.

With this in mind the timing the work of Hobson, and before him Frank, takes on its true importance. After only a few years of the third millennium, a growing body of evidence suggests that the leader of the West, and contemporary globalism or Anglo-American empire, the United States, is under mounting challenge from East Asia in general and from China in particular. An abstract of an article in the July-August 2004 edition of the authoritative American policy journal, *Foreign Affairs* by James F Hoge and titled "A Global Power Shift in the Making" reads:

The transfer of power from West to East is gathering pace and will dramatically change the context for dealing with international challenges. Many in the West are already aware of Asia's growing strength. This awareness, however has not yet translated into preparedness.

Articles in the January-February 2005 *Foreign Policy* and the 24 February 2005 British *Financial Times* and books like Oded Shenkar's *The Chinese Century: The Rising Chinese Economy and its Impact on the Global Economy The Balance of Power and Your Job* and Ted C Fishman's *China, Inc.: How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World*, together with many others, have all explored related themes and reflect a growing preoccupation with this concern and an intensifying debate about responses to such a challenge. Moreover, Joshua Cooper Ramo has written a paper titled *The Beijing Consensus*, which highlights the fact that China is taking a path that makes it an attractive alternative leader for developing economies that have become disillusioned with the exploitative economic doctrines of the Washington Consensus.

Hobson's work is valuable because it provides a timely reminder that there is nothing exotic or threatening about a world where China resides in 'inscrutable' authority at the centre. That, in fact, has been the reality for much of humanity's recorded history. The inscrutability has largely been a product of Anglo-American imperial disinformation and intellectual apartheid. In reality, the universal values - democracy, the rule of law, free trade - that have been marketed to the global community in recent decades are simply the political tools of an Anglo-American empire that is now threatened with decline after two hundred years of inventive expansion. The viability of such universal values remains dependent on the continuing authority of Anglo-American leadership.

Hobson's concluding passages, titled '*The oriental West verses the Eurocentric myth of the West*', poses the dilemma now confronting the West generally and Anglo-American empire in particular. The mythologies that are powerful weapons in the construction of an empire and its foundation beliefs also can become a source of vulnerability when history moves on and exposes the true character of those mythologies. Today, every time a serious commentator, like James F Hoge, raises questions about a major shift of power from the West to Asia, it should be understood immediately that this should also be an exploration of whether this goes beyond a simple shift in economic and political power. Does it foreshadow also a fundamental shift in dominant perceptions of mythological constructs, historical truth, cultural values and even scientific paradigms?

Although Hobson does not directly address the issue, a return of the centre of the global trading system to China and East Asia might well involve a shift from the West's mechanical and reductionist sciences, which have so ravaged physical and human ecologies, to the East's more organic and holistic approach to science, which after all led the world prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Hobson's illuminating review of history does, however, remind the reader that the Anglo-American empire was constructed, like most earlier empires, on an aggressive spirit of conquest, over both humanity and nature. It also reminds us of the fact that China preserved a position at the centre of a global trading system for a long period, without the free trade subversions and assertions of the Opium Wars with which Britain undermined China's then political order.

Reflections of this character are prompted by Hobson's revelations, even though they go beyond the scope of his book. The true value of *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* resides in its capacity to reveal the manner in which politically expedient mythology has distorted Western understanding of both history and culture. There will be a need for many more such exploratory books, if Western peoples and governments are not to totally misunderstand processes at work in today's global community and are not to allow sheer ignorance to disadvantage and harm them in times of difficult, but perhaps healthy, transition. After all, prior to the British use of the opium trade to undermine traditional authority, Chinese thought and behaviour had been characterised for more than a thousand years by a profound search for a disciplined, balanced, peaceful sense of political and human order. Indeed, for more than half of the past seven hundred years Chinese civilization was able to evolve, prosper and grow ever more resilient under foreign rulers - first the Mongols and then the Manchu.

### Endnotes

1. FRANK, Andre Gunder *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, p117.
2. HOBSON, John M. *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, Berkeley, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p222.
3. Ibid., p218.
4. See HOGE, James F. "A Global Power Shift in the Making", *Foreign Affairs*, 83 no. 4, July-August 2004., pp2ff.
5. RAMO, Joshua Cooper *The Beijing Consensus*, London, The Foreign Policy Centre, Spring 2004, [Internet access via [www.fpc.org.uk/publications/123](http://www.fpc.org.uk/publications/123)].

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