

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN HISTORY FROM EUROCENTRISM TO AN "OPEN" WORLD

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Our appreciation of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, and the role they played in world history, has long been seriously affected by the political and cultural climate of Europe at the time of their discovery. This is only too obvious, and the story of the relationships between Orientalism and colonialism has already been told more than once. What is less obvious is that such a bias, although already clarified, and although no longer in pace with the trends of our present time, still persists well alive at every level (from popular appreciation to school handbooks, to scholarly research). And what has attracted less attention than it deserves, is the problem of how to reshape, how to conceive and formulate anew the role of the ancient Near East in world history in the frame of present political and cultural relations. The two problems are somehow linked, since a new paradigm – which is already on the run in an informal way – can be widely accepted only if clearly and explicitly formulated.

We have hardly to remind here that the discovery of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, during the 19th century, took place in the framework of European penetration into the Ottoman empire and the surrounding countries (Egypt and Persia). The connection of political events and archaeological discoveries is quite evident in the case of Egypt, with the Napoleonic expedition directly producing the "Description de l'Egypte"; but also clear in the case of the first digs (by Botta and Layard) in the Assyrian capitals, which took place during the short season in between the European support to the Ottoman empire against Muhammad Ali, and the Crimean war. The archaeological activities in the Near East are just one of the many forms of European presence there: the shift from the Levantine trade to the establishment of permanent bases between the Mediterranean and the Indian ocean, the Suez canal and later the railways, the protection of Holy Places and Christian minorities, the European control on the Ottoman and Suez banks, the military advise and armaments, and so on. Well before the final collapse of the Ottoman empire, the penetration of the Near East by Europe (above all England and France) was pervasive, bringing about a strong interest in modern Oriental languages and the so-called "manners and customs" of the Islamic countries, and also a widespread interest in the antiquities of those lands.

In this relationship, culture functioned as a sort of sublimated justification of the economic and political appropriation. Western culture pretended to establish a strong and direct link between the most ancient civilizations of the Near East and its own civilization. Two channels were available for such an operation. The first and most powerful was that of religion: the Near East was the land of the Bible, even the land of Jesus Christ, therefore of European religion, as opposed to Oriental Islam. And the archaeological remains belonged to civilizations mentioned in the Bible. The second channel was provided by classical authors – Greek and Roman – pointing to the Orient as the obvious source for many and relevant aspects of their civilization. So in the main axis of world history, as conceived by European people of the past century, after a generic prehistory, the Near East was the first stage of civilization, later transferred to

Greece, to the Roman empire, to the christian Middle-Ages, to Renaissance, to the "industrial revolution" and the European conquest of the entire world.

The historical appropriation of the ancient Near East by Europe was also made easy and in a sense obvious by the Islamic disinterest for antiquities going back to the *jahiliyya*, the pagan age before Muhammad and the rise of true religion; and by the state of backwardness, depopulation, lack of safety (between despotic state and nomadic raids), that characterized the late Ottoman period in the eyes of western travellers. The cultural heritage was in a sense left free to foreign appropriation, and at the same time required such an appropriation for the sake of its own survival. We can just use the cry of Robert Mignan in Chaldea to express the common feeling of travellers visiting the Holy Places or looking for the Tower of Babel: "Can we ever sufficiently lament the circumstance of the country being in the hands of barbarians?" (*Travels in Chaldaea*, London 1829, p. 120). Pictures or engravings of the Romantic period, with the monumental, impressive ruins of classical Syria or pharaonic Egypt, populated by a colorful but miserable mob of squatters, communicate the same impression. These ruins, these cultural remains, cannot really belong to people who do not understand them, do not protect them, do not deserve them, who are just able to destroy them for the sake of religious ignorance or to sell them for the sake of a monetary return. They belong to us, instead: we discovered them, we appreciate them, we deciphered their inscriptions, we found there the origins of our civilization.

The following period, after World War I and the partition of the Ottoman empire, is a phase of direct exploitation and administrative responsibility of the "mandatary" European countries on the Near East, and a phase of consolidation of the above sketched historical paradigm. Again, we can just quote as a symbol of the time that sculptured relief at the entrance of the Oriental Institute of Chicago, already described to this end by Mogens Trolle Larsen (in *Domination and Resistance*, London 1988, pp. 229-239), where representatives of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations – kings and scribes – hand over their heritage to representatives of the Western world – crusaders and explorers and archaeologists. James Breasted, the founder of the Oriental Institute, used this very image as his *ex-libris*; and we have to acknowledge that Breasted's program for the foundation of the Oriental Institute (*The Oriental Institute*, Chicago 1933) is a most clear and authoritative statement of what we defined above as the "main axis of world history". The search for roots encompassed a wide range of topics: Breasted himself was interested in the rise of individual soul and morals (*The Dawn of Conscience*, New York 1933); others will be rather interested in technology, and Vere Gordon Childe will point to the Near East as the birth-place of agriculture, of cities, and states.

It is to be noticed that the same appropriation did not apply to other areas in the world, where archaeology was also discovering the remains of early civilizations, or where such civilizations were well known since long. In China, early civilization was recognized as the root of later Chinese developments, and the same is true for India. And when American archaeologists discovered the remains of early cultures in Mesoamerica or in the South-West of the United States, it was obvious that their heirs were the very peasants still inhabiting their ruins, and that all the Europeans (in this case the Spaniards) had done to them was their destruction and conquest. Only in the case of the Near East a significant link was established between the most remote past (the pre-classical and classical civilizations) and modern Western culture, to the exclusion of the intermediate Islamic phase and the very modern inhabitants of those countries.

In current archaeological excavations in the Near East the so-called "late" levels, i.e. the Islamic (medieval and modern) remains often covering the ancient sites, were

removed with no recording (often with no mention at all) as an alien disturbance in the cultural sequence. And this practice continued until recent decades, until the advent of an ethno-archaeological approach – not by chance originated in America where the cultural continuity of ancient and modern inhabitants of the archaeological sites was evident for practical and ideological reasons.

We have also to mention here that the paradigm we can label “Ex Oriente lux” is only apparently counterposed to the paradigm we can label “the Greek miracle” – according to which the positive values of Western civilization did suddenly appear only with archaic and classical Greece. Since European historians in the age of Romanticism viewed the Greek independence war against the Ottoman empire as a kind of repeated performance of the “Median” war of ancient Greek city-states against the Persian empire, the contrastive characters of Europe and the Orient have been marked by a full set of opposed pairs: freedom vs. serfdom, democracy vs. despotism, progress vs. stagnation, individual personality vs. anonymous mass, rationality vs. mysticism, science vs. magics. These oppositions do not deny, they even underscore, that the Near East is a previous and lower step in the progressive formation of western advanced culture. Just to quote one example, Chinese despotism is just a peculiar feature of a civilization quite different from ours; while Near Eastern despotism is a negative feature, and the very reason for its defeat by democratic Greece.

Toward the middle of our century, with most of the world conquered or colonized by European peoples and nations, the Eurocentric paradigm of world history reached the top of its fortune. But suddenly, after World War II, the situation changed. The process of decolonization that took place in the late '50s and '60s is probably the most widespread and substantial and relevant change that ever took place in a so short period of time in all of world history. Of course we know that the establishment of independent, national states all over the world does not solve all the problems. And we know that Western hold on “third world” economies still maintain the same levels as in colonial times. Yet the formal political independence brings about the attempt by every people to build (or restore) its cultural identity on the basis of language, religion, culture, traditions, including ancient history and archaeology – whose relevance for self-identification has always been quite obvious.

In addition to decolonization, another relevant factor is the spread and intensification of communications: messages, technologies, people are moving from country to country at an unprecedented pace and in unprecedented amounts. The “global village” of mass-media, mass tourism, immigration, the multi-ethnic texture of the megalopoleis, all these and other phenomena make impossible to keep the old Eurocentric paradigm of world history as a useful and usable tool.

At a formal level, international organizations are based on a footing of “one head one vote”, international conferences must provide pair opportunities to every nation or state, world histories must reserve a chapter to every civilization, and entrust their authorships to varied (and possibly local) scholars, and so on. Some of these formal parities can look rather inadequate, at least in a transitional phase (which could be quite long) during which the real levels of competence remain uneven. But apart from the formal organization, the most concrete fact cannot be denied, that the world became a multi-centric community, and that its cultural integration is a complex affair, certainly not to be simply solved by a monopolistic claim by a single culture – as the eurocentric strategy still pretended just 40 or 30 years ago.

Of course we are well aware that the Western world has not given up his pretensions to control the resources of other countries: only the strategy has changed, from colonialism to so-called neo-capitalism. And it is difficult to evaluate what is now,

and what will become in the near future, the real balance between multi-polarism and neo-capitalism. Whatever mixture of them will prevail, we need in any case a new paradigm, and such a paradigm is in fact progressing. It is and must of course be multi-centered, widely acceptable, unbiased, "open"; every country will be given an equal role, every tradition will be appreciated for its own merits (and not for its distance from our tradition). Nobody – no race, no people, no religion, no area – will be allowed to claim a primacy or a hegemony or a special role. Everybody will be happy with it, there could hardly be any controversy. We all agree, where is the problem? Yet the accomplishment of so easy programmatic statements has to face enormous theoretical and practical problems.

Two points seem to provide the theoretical basis to the new paradigm. The first point is an equal evaluation of every cultural complex and every cultural feature, disregarding their respective quantitative burden, their fitness to prevail in the darwinian competition, their capability to generate other "progressive" features, and so on. The second point is the privileged role accorded to inner development, and the refusal of diffusionism, even in the more refined form of acculturation processes.

The first point, if (or when) applied to a virtual "world history" will make an understanding of the historical processes impossible. Any understanding implies some amount of selection, not only for unavoidably practical reasons, but above all for the aim of isolating message from noise, of recovering a meaning from chaos. Hierarchies and inequalities do exist in history and society. History writing must explain (i.e. help to understand) inequalities and their origins. A uniform treatment of everything means a renunciation to understand and explain. This is not an apology of the old paradigm. The old paradigm made use of history in order to *justify* the hegemony of the West. We have to renounce to that, but we can and must still use history in order to *understand* such an hegemony (and any other inequality occurring through history). Understanding – a critical understanding – is the very reverse of justifying: it should make people alert and provide the possible counter-actions.

As to the second point, the obsessive insistence on inner development and denial of foreign influences, it seems to me just stupid or blind if compared to what is happening in our times at a planetary scale. This point is the historiographical counterpart to the frantic rise of nationalisms (old and new, large and small) which took place in the last decades. Of course, recently constituted states need such a strong emphasis on autonomous development, and Western neo-capitalism is also interested in concealing its role and its effects as much as possible. But influences do exist and have always existed, even colonization processes do exist and have always existed: to deny them is a childish solution, that I hope will be soon abandoned, and replaced by a technical search for explanations.

So both qualifying points in the new paradigm seem to be provided with an obvious political meaning, but at the same time they seem to constitute a serious obstacle – or simply a renunciation – to historical understanding.

Let's consider, just as an example, such basic and much discussed topics as the "neolithic revolution" and the "urban revolution" – to use Gordon Childe's terms – or else the spread of food-production and the origins of the state – to use more neutral terms. In the old paradigm, the Near Eastern origin was commonly admitted, in the frame of an unilineal evolutionary model. The model was not – properly speaking – monogenetic, because other pristine centers were accepted (China and Mesoamerica), but it was such in respect to Europe, the other centers being so remote from development of real history to be easily forgotten. The Near Eastern origin of agriculture and domestication, of urbanism and writing and state organization, joint to

the European appropriation of the Near Eastern early civilizations, became the factual, archaeologically proved, demonstration of the nineteenth-century evolutionary systems. We have to acknowledge that Childe's arrangement of these topics already marked an enormous improvement in comparison to eighteenth-century (pre-ethnological and pre-archaeological) arrangements. As for the origin of the state, the privileged set of cases to be taken into account shifted from the tern "Israel, Greece, Rome" to the tern "Mesopotamia, China, Mesoamerica". Now we have progressed well beyond Childe's stage, reaching a stage in which such a tern as "Hawai, Dahomey, Cherokee" could be used as well. To my mind, such a tern is more apt to ensure a politically correct role for the ethnic minorities in the USA, than an historically correct analysis of the relevant topic. Recent books on the origins (plural, of course) of agriculture generally reserve most space to regions which never saw any neolithic revolution, and to modern cases, than to the pristine heartlands of early domestication (cf. my comments in *Studi Storici* 36, 1995, pp. 901-921). The old evolutionary arrangement is mostly refused, any "strategy" (this is the key-term) is considered as valid as the others, with no regard for its historical outcome, its success or failure in the "darwinian" mechanics of interaction. The distinction of pristine and secondary phenomena is also refused, no country accepts to be secondary – and hardly accepts to be second. All the phenomena are studied in their inner development, in their original features, disregarding whether they took place at an early or later date, in a vacuum or in between other countries that had already undergone similar processes.

We cannot go into greater details here, but it is clear that theoretical problems do exist, unless we accept to dismiss a world-wide historical reconstruction for the sake of guaranteeing political correctness. And practical problems also exist, especially in the contributions provided by scholars from the newly independent countries. The main responsibility in building the new paradigm should in principle belong to them, rather than to Western scholars so unavoidably embedded in their old eurocentric views. Yet some (probably most) of the non-Western countries did not have any historical tradition sound enough to be usefully applied to the entire world. Other countries did have such traditions – either properly historical (just think to China) or rather un-historical (just think to India). But it is difficult to see how these traditions (each of them separately considered) could be more effectual in building a multi-centered world view, than the Western tradition itself. Consequently (and for political, linguistic, technological, economic reasons as well) also the new countries are mostly adopting the forms if not the ideology of Western scholarships.

The results are for the moment quite diverse: some advances are positive, but other proposals are even worse than the eurocentric view they want to criticize. And by the way: the response of a part at least of the European historians and pre-historians seems to me as much dangerous, in their refusal of past evolutionary and global systems, and their retreat toward self-sufficiency and symbolism.

As to Near Eastern scholars in particular, their approach to the "new paradigm" seems particularly difficult or complicated. Will the modern Near Eastern nations adopt those early civilizations as their own cultural, historical roots? Islamic religion and Arabian desert do not help, at least for the moment. Will the Near Eastern scholars adopt such shortcuts as "Black Athena" or "The Bible was born in Arabia"? Will the local governments use their past civilizations for so awkward political or touristic aims, to force us to re-evaluate (by comparison) the old colonial eurocentrism? And how much time will pass before they acquire the necessary standards in philological competence and historical methodology?

For the moment being, the Western scholars still do most of the work. But what kind of work? Provided we have to abandon the old paradigm and accept the new one, what kind of peculiar interest provides the ancient Near East for our historical analysis? Being no longer the first chapter in our history, it should become a relevant chapter (a quite unique one, in my opinion) in the multi-centered world history.

A first line of approach could be the focus on the ancient Near East as "prime mover" for several important innovations in world history, giving rise to relevant processes in that area and the adjacent ones including Europe. For instance, the Mesopotamian urban revolution (1) was probably the first in the world, at a purely chronological appreciation; (2) it gave rise to secondary processes in so different directions as Egypt, the Indus Valley, Central Asia, the Mediterranean; (3) it put in motion long-term processes influencing a large part of the world. The historical problem is to find out and analyze the ecological and technological reasons explaining why did this phenomenon take place there and then, how different were the local varieties resulting therefrom, and why did other areas remain untouched. The multi-polar approach should of course produce an equal attention to all local developments (Indus valley no less than Europe, Central Asia no less than Egypt), and underscore local contributions and peculiarities; but cannot deny the basic processes of acculturation and mutual influence, that are under our eyes still in modern times. As I told before, I see the present refusal of diffusionism as a justified reaction against a too simplistic and ideologized diffusionism of past scholarship, but an unacceptable excess in itself.

We could easily consider additional cases for analysis, but we need not to insist too much on this point, the reconstruction of a complex network of interrelations, covering in time and space the entire world history. It is easy to realize that in such a picture the ancient Near East would deserve a quite peculiar role: agriculture and animal domestication, urbanism and state formation, writing and later the alphabet, administration and law-codes, monotheism and universal religions, build up an impressive set of contributions to universal culture.

I see also another use of the ancient Near East: as a kind of "workshop" or "laboratory" for the study of what we can term the "simple forms" in various sectors of culture. Let's consider, just as one example among many, the case of political propaganda. Its forms in present world are too complex, also too intentional, to provide a good data-base for the study of its elementary functioning. Other periods in ancient history are even less usable, because of the deforming filters of ancient and modern historiography. Still other cultures are too different from our own. Ancient Near Eastern texts provide an excellent set of examples, simple enough to put the elementary features on the fore, and varied enough to present us with a full set of variations and sub-types. The basic mechanisms connecting political purpose and literary codes can be pointed out there more easily and efficiently than anywhere else. This is just one example, but the same holds true for many other fields in art, literature, economy, politics, sociology, religion, and so on.

The combination of the historical and phenomenological approaches can afford the ancient Near East a quite peculiar role. Greek experience cannot explain all of Western civilization, and very few of the others. All over the world, and in Europe as well, civilization is becoming more and more complex in origins, in values, in institutions. In multi-ethnic societies, immigrants are mostly assimilated, but provide in their turn something additional and different to the resulting culture. The old monogenetic evolutionism is necessarily substituted by a multifarious network of reciprocal influences. We can still idealize and reserve a privileged role to the "Greek

miracle”, only if we are ready to accept other miracles that took place in other parts of the globe – and in the ancient Near East in a quite unusual measure.

Before ending this overview of ancient Near Eastern studies in the perspective of our times, I want just to mention here a couple of additional features which look quite characteristic of recent developments. The first is the question of salvage interventions to protect and recover the cultural heritage of those countries, mostly through archaeological activities. In recent decades almost all digs have been salvage digs, in areas soon to be flooded or urbanized or else destroyed by war or by peace – development programs being most dangerous to the remains of the old civilizations. As in many other cases (from ethnology to ecology), we are studying what we are destroying, at the very last moment available before destruction is complete. Of course, neo-capitalistic intervention in regional planning and development programs has provided also the archaeological activities with an unprecedented support in technology and scientific knowledge. But we have to fully realize that within a few decades there will be nothing left to be protected and recovered, every square kilometer will be covered or polluted or modified. The next generation could perhaps be the last one to have the possibility of studying wild animals, “primitive” communities, and archaeological remains in at least partly intact environments. This is a tremendous responsibility toward future generations, and we should profit at our best of every occasion, of every bit of time, of every available human and economic resource.

The second and last question to be shortly mentioned is the one related to the audience in historical research. Modern history writing, especially in ancient history (and in close parallel to ethnographic literature) is a product of the bourgeois revolution, of a spread of education and culture in the middle classes. The main and almost only carrier for history during two centuries has been the book, and the literary form has been narrative – history and story being so closely linked to share the same etymological origin or (e.g. in Italian) the very same word. And this applied, and still largely applies, both to properly scientific historical production, and to popular books addressed to a wider audience. I think we will shortly see a sharp differentiation of the two genres. On the one hand, the properly scientific production will be more and more built up of diagrams and statistical tables, data-bases and distribution charts, and so on, rather than of narrative discourse. On the other hand, popularization will use more and more the audio-visual forms (from exhibits to TV recordings) under the banner of “virtual reality”, of simulation, in order to capture for short moments the attention of a distracted audience. Ancient history will become a minor branch of science fiction. The two different genres will be obviously the task of different people: and this means that professional historian will lose control on popular dissemination. Such a risk applies to all of history of course, but the danger seems more acute with ancient history and with exotic societies, where the risk of losing contact with reality is completely unchallenged by any widespread and consolidated knowledge. Professional historians will have to fight many battles against the political and spectacular use of the past, battles not easily understood by the general audience. Besides the already growing ecological consciousness, we need a still missing historical consciousness as well, in order to avoid irreparable mistakes in political and economic decisions affecting the entire world and its survival.