

History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

Semester I, 2015-16

Instructor: Dr. Birgit Schneider

Student: Hannah Sharp

A Review of Jack Goody's *The Theft of History*

Jack Goody's *The Theft of History* is essentially a plea for historians and social scientists to rethink their methodology and thereby create a less Eurocentric field of scholarship in world history. Faithful to its title, it argues that the west has "stolen history" from the rest of the world due to the flawed methodologies used by scholars. Goody achieves this by looking in detail at the work of a few scholars and showing how and why their conclusions are flawed. In this review I intend to analyse both Goody's criticisms and suggestions, whilst bearing in mind Goody's own background. Some other reviewers have been fairly critical of *The Theft of History* so I will address these criticisms and explain why I think they fail to do the book justice by outlining the ways in which the book is successful, with particular reference to its structure and style. Nonetheless, the criticisms of other reviewers are, in some cases, justified which I will acknowledge and add a few problems that I personally found with the book. I will then justify why I see this book as an example of world history, and finally assess Goody's contribution to the field. Despite the fact that there are some issues that I would have liked to see addressed in the book, I will conclude that it is valuable to anyone interested in researching world history and its clear structure and argument lend it well to the purpose of informing non-historians or students on the issues that face any world history researcher.

There is a well-known saying that the victor writes history, and in the case of the race for development the west appears to have been said victor. According to Goody this has generated a significant misunderstanding of history because it has enabled the west to be the author of world history thus far, and the way in which western authors undertake this task has been Eurocentric and denied the non-western world recognition for its achievements.¹ According to Goody, scholars have postulated that the concepts of democracy, capitalism, individualism, freedom and even romantic love were entirely western phenomena, and have taken credit for a plethora of inventions and ideas that actually were developed entirely, or at least in part, elsewhere. Goody says

¹ Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), *passim*.

that the reason for this misappropriation is that historians are using frameworks which do not allow for proper or fair analysis of the development of non-western societies, for example seeing history as moving through the stages of antiquity, feudalism, renaissance and then into capitalism. Whilst these stages are relevant to the west, the eastern world has not developed in the same ways or through the same time frames. Despite this, historians have tended to project these frameworks onto places that they don't fit, which makes it appear that they have failed to develop 'properly,' i.e. like the west has done. This is used as evidence as to why the west ended up more developed. Clearly, Goody argues, this method is not a useful way of looking at history.

A second mistake that Goody claims scholars have made, which leads to the current Eurocentric view of the world, is their use of "teleological methods."² By this he means looking back at the past from the perspective of the present; he warns readers of the dangers of "interpreting the past from the standpoint of the present."³ Because the west is currently seen as ahead, historians have a tendency to look for why the world became this way, and therefore approach problems in a way that Goody deems flawed. For example, he admits that Europe did gain an advantage following the increase in printing and later the industrial revolution, but criticises scholars who claim that this advantage can be traced back to the political or legal systems of antiquity, as this serves to "project the present back onto the past in an unacceptable manner and to engage in a front-to-back reading of history."⁴ Another problem with scholars' approaches is the way they frame their research. He uses the example of Marx, whose questions are problematic because his terms "labour" and "capital" are defined in such a way that "necessarily excludes them from other types of society."⁵ Similarly, Needham selects the west as "the only region in the world in which 'modern science' spontaneously developed," and so is inevitably led to adopt a Eurocentric standpoint.⁶ Goody therefore shows how the very questions that are asked can lead to a flawed analysis of history.

To supplement this criticism, Goody also proposes a solution to the problem of Eurocentrism in scholarship: a new framework of analysis for scholars to use. He criticises the current use of categories to analyse societies, which tend to construct binaries such as societies having "*either* redistributive *or* market" economies and thereby opposing them.⁷ Instead he advocates the use of

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 48 (emphasis original).

“sociological grids”, because in reality the world cannot be compartmentalised into categories where each society possesses all the characteristics of one category.⁸ With a grid we would be able to see that there was much overlap and different elements of feudalism or romance for example, were present and absent everywhere in all societies.

The fact that Goody advocates a solution to the problem is commendable. However, I do not think that he was entirely successful in this attempt. The grids that he promotes are not clearly defined and, although he refers to them on a number of occasions, he doesn't dedicate much space to outlining exactly how he envisages them working. He merely makes statements such as “a grid can be a better guide to the fluctuations, changes and reversions to earlier models that occur in the historical process.”⁹ This problem is exacerbated by the fact that Goody himself does not attempt to construct such a sociological grid or use it for his analysis. It is worth bearing in mind here that Jack Goody was not a historian. He studied anthropology as an undergraduate at Cambridge University and earned a doctorate in social anthropology. His early work was on African societies but he was more latterly described as a “historical sociologist.”¹⁰ This is important to consider here because it could be argued that he was merely suggesting the grid methodology for a historian to use. I would counter that, because the grid is not explained in much detail, it would be extremely difficult for historians to take it from there, so an example of using a grid within a case study would have been a very useful addition to the proposal. This is especially the case considering that analysis relying on grids is likely to be less familiar to historians than to sociologists or anthropologists such as himself.

Although I think that the sociological grids could have been outlined more clearly, this is the only part of the book that suffers from this problem. The argument itself is outlined very clearly. I differ from other scholarly reviews here. These tend to criticise Goody's approach to his argument; Tignor describes it as “carping” and “overly critical.”¹¹ I would argue that this “carping” could more usefully be interpreted as well reinforced points, and the “overly critical” nature as thoroughness in Goody's approach. Another criticism made by a reviewer that I disagree with is Wang's condemnation of the title. Wang argues that *The Theft of History* is an inappropriate title because “if the advance of European civilisation was simply built on ‘stealing’ from others,

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁰ Peter Burke and Joe Mc Dermott, “Sir Jack Goody, Obituary,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2015, accessed October 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/aug/06/jack-goody>. [].

¹¹ Robert L. Tignor, Review of *The Theft of History* by Jack Goody, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39, no. 2 (2008), 251.

then it would ultimately undermine the key message he intends to get across here: civilisations are/were mutually dependent through exchanges.”¹² I think this represents a misunderstanding of the book’s key argument. The “theft” Goody refers to is of history itself – the way it is written. This has meant that the west has stolen the credit for some ideas and inventions, but Wang is wrong to imply that Goody is arguing that the west stole the ideas themselves. Goody actually emphasises that this development has been a collaborative process. I think the title is a very good one to which he remains true the whole way through.

These two points, that the argument is clear and logical and the title is appropriate and adhered to, are part of what I would praise the book for most: being accessible. The argument is introduced at the beginning in no uncertain terms, some of the paragraphs even starting with “My aim is...” and “My argument is...”¹³ The rest of the book is then split into three separate sections, addressing socio-cultural, scholarly and institutional Eurocentrism respectively. These are subdivided into chapters, each with appropriate subheadings throughout. The conclusion then sums up his entire argument again in order to reinforce the message to all readers. In addition to this logical layout, the vocabulary and explanations used are also highly accessible; Goody addresses topics such as the economy, legal systems and politics in a way that enables non-specialists to understand his argument. His clear and logical approach leads me to conclude that non-historians and students must be among Goody’s target audience, a conviction which is reinforced by the fact that Goody himself is not a historian. I therefore think that this book is an extremely good one for such inexperienced readers as it gets across the complex problems of western domination and its implications in relatively simple language and with good clarity.

There are other criticisms of scholars that I would agree with, though. It has been widely pointed out that Goody’s argument is not a brand new one - the books he criticises are outdated, and his calls for less Eurocentric approaches have already been heeded by many scholars. This even leads one reviewer to describe the book as “passé.”¹⁴ These problems have been made worse by the fact that Goody barely mentions any scholars that have a similar argument to his. This omission is partly what leads reviewers to criticize him for overstating the extent to which scholars are unaware of their Eurocentric bias; by not mentioning them, it seems he thinks they don’t exist. Considering the number of works he could draw on by the time his book was published in

¹² Edward Q. Wang, Review of *The Theft of History* by Jack Goody, *The English Historical Review* 123, no. 503 (2008), 990.

¹³ Goody, *The Theft of History*, 8 and 4.

¹⁴ Tignor, Review, 252.

2006, Edward Said's *Orientalism*¹⁵ being perhaps the most important one, this is a considerable oversight on Goody's part. For example, he describes the measures taken by early world historians attempting to consider the rest of the world as "grossly inadequate to the task" which is too harsh and generalised considering the scope of world history by 2006, and he exaggerates the extent to which the Eurocentric work of Elias, Needham and Braudel have "played an important part in the contemporary understanding of world history."¹⁶ Maybe they used to, but shifts towards a more global understanding of the world have already occurred, reducing the scholarly Eurocentric bias.

That is not to say that Goody doesn't rely on any other scholars; Goody's aim is historiographical (i.e. he is looking at methodology rather than analysing a period or theme in history), so he uses the research of others to support his argument and provide evidence. This technique enables him to achieve the wide time frame (from the Bronze Age almost to the present day) and area (practically the whole world) that *The Theft of History* encompasses. All of the historians he quotes to make his criticisms are therefore ones supporting strands of his argument, or pieces of evidence, for example that Indian society had the necessary ingredients for capitalism, or that the watermill was not a European invention,¹⁷ rather than any who agree with his fundamental argument.

In addition to these critiques I would like to raise my own. The first is a point of emphasis. Goody says that his aim is to show how "Europe has not simply neglected or underplayed the history of the rest of the world, as a consequence of which [Europe] has misinterpreted its own history, but also how it has imposed historical concepts and periods that have aggravated our understanding of Asia in a way that is significant for the future as well as for the past."¹⁸ I found that he spent too much time on the first half, pointing out what has not actually come from Europe. Although useful to make his point clearer, this sometimes went too far, e.g. not many people today would think that chocolate, tea and coffee were discovered by Europeans. Sometimes it took a while of reading through lists of examples before getting to the analysis, the more interesting part, which looks at the impact of this misappropriation on our understanding of history. For an uninformed reader such as myself and (as previously concluded) his target audience, this is not a

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978).

¹⁶ Goody, *The Theft of History*, 305 and 125.

¹⁷ Irfan Habib, "Merchant Communities in Precolonial India," in *The Rise of Merchant Empires* edited by J. D. Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), quoted in Goody, *The Theft of History* 194; Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th – 18th century* (London: Phoenix Press, 1981), 375, quoted in Goody, *The Theft of History*, 188.

¹⁸ Goody, *The Theft of History*, 8.

major flaw and the examples can ease understanding. The insight of the analysis makes it worthwhile taking time to gain this thorough understanding. For a world historian such as Tignor though, it may be less engaging and thus I can understand why his review describes the book as “disappointing.”¹⁹

I was also led to a few more serious criticisms. Seeing as the point of the book is to look past outdated assumptions of the west’s advantage coming from ancient times, I think Goody should justify his assumption of the contemporary advantage of the west. This is not something he tries to question, and in fact is something he accepts on a number of occasions, he is merely debating when this advantage began. He also uses language of development such as “ahead” and “behind” unproblematically throughout the book, which I would have liked him to comment on. He was therefore guilty of what his very criticism was against, being influenced by one’s own Eurocentric bias.

Secondly, considering that he is attempting to show the similarities between, and cooperation of, various countries during their development, it is surprising that he uses such dichotomous terms as “east” and “west” in his own analysis. I would question the extent to which such ambiguous terms are useful for an analysis of world development, especially seeing as they encourage the reader to think of the world in two opposing halves. This is completely contrary to his argument that we must look for similarities and not just differences. Just saying the words “eastern” and “western” can conjure images in the minds of the readers based on their own prejudices which would not help them to be open minded while reading the book. This is an issue Goody should have been aware of and addressed. I would have liked him to talk about the world in a more inclusive way that takes into account the very blurred lines between what constitutes a “western” or an “eastern” society. Goody appears to define “the west” as anywhere that went through the development process of antiquity, feudalism, renaissance and capitalism. This is problematic because diversity of experience across Europe was enormous. For example, Italy is considered the birthplace of the renaissance but did not experience industrialisation until almost the twentieth century. Europe has also had a variety of political systems and the experience of Australia and Northern America have been completely different again. Goody’s fundamental argument of the importance of transnational understanding could have been reinforced by employing less reductive vocabulary.

¹⁹ Tignor, Review, 251.

I would like to discuss this book in relation to world history. In the simplest sense, the book could be considered as contributing to transnational history because its geographical scope is very large. Although Goody is often criticized for neglecting Africa, to which I would add most of Australasia and South America, his coverage of Europe, and the near, middle and far east is extensive, with some examples being given from elsewhere too. Also, it addresses an issue which affects the whole world: the methodology of historians and social scientists. However, transnational history is far more than simply the study of more than one place; it requires a different approach as to *how* we study history, not only *what* it is that is being studied.²⁰ This difference in approach is one of the main reasons it can be categorically separated from national history, which has been more frequently practiced by historians. The purpose of world history is to approach history in ways which allow us to acknowledge, but not be constrained by the boundaries of nation states in our analysis. As Ranajit Guha argues, rather than fight elitist history by writing new history, we need to do so by questioning the way history is written.²¹ Similarly, Michael Geyer and Charles Bright argue that “fundamentally our basic strategies of historical narration have to be rethought” because world history involves a variety of practices and processes and therefore defies existing paradigms.²² World history therefore cannot be extrapolated from the combined histories of a number of nations but needs to be addressed totally differently. Goody also advocates this change in methodology as he draws our attention to the need to ask different questions when looking at history in order to get a less biased view. *The Theft of History* can therefore also be considered a work of world history on these grounds.

Another important aspect of world history is its portrayal of the world as interlinked; there is international exchange of goods, people, diseases and even ideas, none of which can usefully be defined as coming from one country in particular. National history usually overlooks or at least downplays such connections as they do not fit into the individual stories of each separate nation. World history, by transcending arbitrary geographical boundaries, can address this issue and therefore enable a deeper, broader understanding of the way human societies have progressed. Goody also subscribes to this idea of interconnectedness, for example by emphasising the collaborative nature in which much technology has developed, with an invention in a primitive form being developed in one place and built upon and adapted by different people in different ways. Again, Goody is clearly engaging in world history.

²⁰ Eric Martin, “World History as a Way of Thinking,” *World History Connected* 2, no. 2 (2005), accessed September 5, 2015, <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/2.2/martin.html> (my emphasis).

²¹ Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 5-6.

²² Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “World History in a Global Age,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (1995), 1059.

As mentioned, world history is a very large topic and the enormity of the task of writing could be off-putting for a scholar; how do they decide where to begin? It is important that scholars do find a way because scholarship on world history is valuable. It helps us to understand where we have come from in a more holistic way than national history. For many people, their only exposure to history was at school, learning from textbooks designed to foster their sense of citizenship and belonging to their country. An understanding, or at least awareness, of the wider picture of world history (as could be gleaned from world history) can give people a far better understanding of who we are and how we got here. It is thus important that scholars develop methods for approaching transnational history. One way it can be tackled is with an interdisciplinary approach. Some scholars engaging in world history have focused on specific areas like disease, war and the environment, which makes it a more manageable task. Such an interdisciplinary approach can help ensure that the topic being addressed is not oversimplified, as it provides plenty of approaches for analysis of a period or event. This also enables scholars to work in their own areas of expertise, something most likely to provide richer analysis and prevent historians overstretching themselves in areas in which they are less comfortable. This is certainly true in *The Theft of History*; as mentioned, Goody is not a historian so his methodological approach is informed by his own specialist knowledge from the field of anthropology. He also advocates an interdisciplinary approach as a good way of conveying complexity, which is clear from his analysis of topics as varied as law, politics, economy, and warfare.

Having shown how Goody's arguments, approaches and philosophies justify the consideration of *The Theft of History* as world history, it is also important to consider what Goody adds to the field. As addressed, his fundamental argument cannot be considered a ground breaking contribution. However, through his presentation of the research of other scholars, Goody provides copious examples and evidence to back up this argument which are a useful addition to the body of work criticising Eurocentrism. *The Theft of History* also contains many of the ingredients of a work of world history, such as a transnational scope, emphasis on the interconnectedness of the world, advocacy for changed methodology, and an interdisciplinary approach. To a critical reader Goody therefore provides a very useful example of what a work of world history should strive for. Although his intended contribution (i.e. that of his fundamental argument) is less significant, the book is still a useful addition to the field of world history.

In conclusion, I find Goody's *The Theft of History* to be an interesting and relevant contribution to the important discipline of world history. I accept the fact that the danger of eurocentrism is not a brand new idea, but don't agree that the book is 'passé.' I think it still has a use for

students and non-historians who are among the target audience, which is evident from the clear explanations and non-technical vocabulary used throughout the book. Critiques I would make are a lack of clarity in Goody's grand design to fix the problem through sociological grids and an imbalance between examples and analysis. The more important issues with the book are its lack of reference to other scholars of the same opinion and the unproblematic use of dichotomous and development vocabulary. By addressing these issues Goody could have written a book with a deeper analysis that may have left academic reviewers more satisfied. However, despite this lack, its usefulness to the less informed is still valid and warrants its reading. The points made on approaches to world history are vital ones for anyone who wants to pursue research in the area to understand, therefore I find the book to be a useful one.

Bibliography

Burke, Peter and Joe Mc Dermott. "Sir Jack Goody, Obituary." *The Guardian*, August 6, 2015. Accessed October 9, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/aug/06/jack-goody>.

Geyer, Michael, and Charles Bright. "World History in a Global Age." *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (1995): 1034-1060.

Goody, Jack. *The Theft of History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Guha, Ranajit. *History at the Limit of World-History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Martin, Eric. "World History as a Way of Thinking." *World History Connected* 2, no. 2 (2005). Accessed September 5, 2015. <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/2.2/martin.html>.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978.

Tignor, Robert L. Review of *The Theft of History* Review. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39, no. 2 (2008): 251-252.

Wang, Edward Q. Review of *The Theft of History*. *The English Historical Review* 123, no. 503 (2008): 988-990.