

REVIEW ESSAYS

Islam and the Emergence of Modernity

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HODGSON, MARSHALL G.S. *Rethinking world history. Essays on Europe, Islam, and world history.* Ed., with an Introd. and Conclusion by Edmund Burke, III. [Studies in Comparative World History.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 1993. xxi, 328 pp. \$16.95.

Marshall Hodgson's name is widely associated with *The Venture of Islam*, his *magnum opus* on the history of Islamic civilization. Although a close examination of this major work reveals that Hodgson's project was by no means limited to the history of Islam as an insulated civilization, the need for reintroducing his epistemological innovations and revisionist vision of world history was long overdue. Edmund Burke's effort to collect these essays from personal letters, unpublished articles, and some previously published papers, introduces Hodgson to a wider audience in social sciences and humanities, to whom he has not been properly introduced.

Burke has organized Hodgson's essays into three sections: Europe in a global context; Islam in a global context; and the discipline of world history, each of which re-evaluates dominant interpretations of the subject. The book starts with Burke's general introduction to the works of Hodgson and his place among historians of civilization, and it ends with his critical analysis of Hodgson's contribution to the field of Islamic studies in particular and comparative history in general.

Hodgson wrote most of these essays in the 1950s and 1960s during his years of affiliation with the Department of Civilization Studies at the University of Chicago. It is clearly demonstrated in this collection that his work perhaps is best conceived as a contribution to the theories of modernization. The main theme which runs throughout these essays is that unlike what has been represented by the "Westernists" (all those whose highest allegiance is to what they call "Western culture" as the unique or at least the most adequate embodiment of transcendent ideals of liberty and truth), *discontinuity* is the most striking feature of the history of Western civilization. Hodgson rejected the traditional story of civilization that history began in the "East" – in Mesopotamia and Egypt; then the Romans and the Greeks successfully carried the torch and passed it on to the Christians of north-western Europe, where medieval and modern life developed. Such linear continuity in the history of Western civilization, particularly continuity between Renaissance and

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the condition of Modernity, he argued, is a mere fiction. To substantiate his critique of this misconception about the history of the Occident, Hodgson raised strong doubts regarding the validity of the “Westernist” representation of the emergence of Modernity, while, at the same time, he offered intriguing and innovative alternative explanations for the rise of the Modern period in a global context.

The hallmark of Hodgson’s work is that there was nothing intrinsic about the emergence of Modernity in Europe. Modernity is not to be compared with the spread of Hellenism, nor to be reduced to the stages of internal Occidental experience. Modernity is “the outcome of the breakdown of the common historical conditions [agrarian condition] on which rested the pre-modern Afro-Eurasian historical complex as a whole.” Modernity is simply “Western” neither in its origins, nor in its impact as a world event. In almost all the essays in this book there are traces of a response to the question of “why did Modernization first happen in the Occident?”

By scrutinizing three major events – the Industrial Revolution, French Revolution and the establishment of European world hegemony – which resulted in a general cultural, political and economic transformation of Western Europe, Hodgson ridiculed the idea that the Portuguese invasion of the Indian Ocean, and all other sixteenth-century Western oceanic ventures, brought “isolated” societies into the “mainstream” of history. On the contrary, he believed, if there is a “mainstream” of history, it was the Europeans who entered it, the Chinese, Indians and Muslims were already there. Since for centuries Islamdom was the only “alien” culture accessible to the Occident, he argued that the relation between Europeans and Islamic regions contributed significantly to the modernization of Europe. The appropriation of Chinese and Indian sciences and technologies, the incorporation of Chinese and Iranian political-administrative systems, and the introduction of these to Europeans by Muslims is widely neglected in the analyses of the rise of the condition of Modernity.

Hodgson believed that by gathering up the scattered scientific traditions of Greece, Iran and India, and by appropriating and spreading them from China to Western Europe, Muslims played a central role in the scientific and cultural transformation of Europe. The introduction of paper and printing technology to Europeans by the Islamic merchants provided the necessary means of creating a more sustainable intellectual innovation and social change. He provides the reader with a long list of ways in which Europeans benefited from their encounters with Muslims and how these encounters facilitated the advent of modernization in Europe.

Hodgson furnished a plausible response to the obvious question that if it is true that Muslims played such a crucial role in the process of modernization, why didn’t Modernity develop in Islamdom instead of

Europe? He refuted both the Weberian idea of despotic patrimonialism and the Marxian notion of dominance of the Asiatic mode of production as the reasons for “stagnation” of Islamdom. Hodgson believed that, in addition to geographical specificities of Islamdom and Europe, the answer lay in the particular social organization of power and a different system of legitimation in Islamdom which fundamentally differed from that of Europe. Hodgson formulated this difference as “Occidental Corporativism” versus “Islamic Contractualism”.

Although in many ways this distinction between the two systems is reminiscent of the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Hodgson offered a more complex explanation which goes beyond the idea of simple transition from a “traditional” community to a “rational” society (to this I shall return later). The “Occidental Corporativism” was an ascription-oriented system in which “ultimate social legitimation and authority were conferred not on personal relationships nor on a given power structure but on *autonomous corporative offices* and their holders as such”. The “Islamic Contractualism”, on the other hand, was an achievement-oriented system in which “ultimate legitimacy lay not in autonomous corporative offices but in *egalitarian contractual responsibilities*”. Hence, in Islamdom, formalistic succession by unilinear heredity or collegial voting was rare at best, not because Muslims were less inclined to rationalize their social arrangements but because the contractual spirit called for a different sense of legitimacy in succession. “Succession was open to some choice or even negotiation: to the fixed succession of formalistic Occident we may counterpose the succession by contest of the contractualistic Islamdom, where personal responsibility was to be undertaken by the best man.”

The Occidental corporative formalism and its system of ascription-oriented succession resulted in a deepening of the separation between public and private spheres and the creation of autonomous institutions. Consequently, this Occidental pattern as a whole, according to Hodgson, created a social continuity and contributed to the accumulation of capital by the holders of the offices. Contractualist egalitarianism of Islam and its achievement-oriented system of succession, however, resulted in a greater social mobility and, subsequently, social discontinuity and lack of accumulation of capital.

Hodgson’s effort to situate Europe in a global context and to view the condition of Modernity as the result of the evolution of all human history is based on particular epistemological presuppositions. Although at the time (1950s), as Edmund Burke points out, the epistemological critique of historical analysis (particularly that of Michel Foucault and Edward Said) was not available, Hodgson’s study negated the existence of any ontological differences between the “Occident” and the “Orient”. The dichotomy of the “West” and the “East”, he argued, not only implies that the Western culture is the equal of the sum of all other

cultures, but that it “ignores the very important fact that all non-Europeans are by no means alike”. Such dichotomy implies that the “East” is none other than a single cultural identity.

Hodgson attributed the creation of the “West” and the “East” to the rising hegemonic power of Europe, beginning from the seventeenth century and completed by the late nineteenth century, on one hand, and, on the other hand, to the “precommitments” of the “Westernists” in studying historical change. Hodgson’s notion of “precommitments” resembles the idea of the politics of location in recent cultural studies and it counts for the roots of Eurocentricity of the dominant theories of modernization. Scholars, he argued, are influenced by the group interests to which they belong. Although awareness of the existence of these “precommitments” could assist scholars to escape their ethnocentrism, an adequate basis for world-historical studies, beyond the older bases grounded in ideological precommitments, has not yet been developed. “Precommitments” result in the creation of bias which expresses itself through the questions scholars would pose or in the type of categories they use. Indeed, “bias is especially hard to track down because it is hard to suspect the very terms one uses, which seems so innocently neutral”.

One of these “innocently neutral” concepts against which Hodgson organizes his argument is Max Weber’s distinction between “rational” and “traditional” societies. Although Hodgson is clearly influenced by a Weberian system of analysis – in his methodological commitment to *verstehen* and in establishing an interconnected relationship between social, intellectual and economic spheres of life – implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, he criticizes Weber’s Eurocentric perspective on the rise of the condition of Modernity. Representing the circumstances under which the condition of Modernity was developed as the break from “traditional” to “rational” Europe neglects the contributions of other civilizations to the history of human society. Weber, Hodgson concluded, illustrated the Occident as inheriting “a unique combination of rationality and activism”. This, of course, invokes the “dead hand of tradition” to explain the “failure” of non-Western societies in developing a comparable condition of Modernity.

There are two important lessons in Hodgson’s critique of Weber’s theory of rationalization. First, in rejecting the separation between “rational” and “traditional”, he historicized the pre-Modern; he showed the dynamic calculations involved in reinventing, redefining, and rearticulating traditions to make it compatible with changing needs of society. All “traditional” societies went through constant rationalization of social institutions and reconfiguration and reconstruction of traditional structures in society in accordance with periodic generational and interregional changes. “Without such constant rationalization and legitimation of the

traditional institutions," Hodgson observed, "traditions could never have survived."

Second, and more important for social scientists, in nullifying the fiction of "traditional" society, Hodgson rejected the categorization of contemporary non-Western societies as pre-Modern. Equating non-Western with pre-Modern presupposes the condition of Modernity in the West as being a "universal stage" through which all societies pass. He criticized the evolutionist perspective of historical change: Toynbee's cyclical idea of civilization and the Marxian teleology of historical stages. "We shall see", Hodgson contemplated, "that the Modern acceleration carries different sets of economic, social, and moral implications in other parts of the world from what it does within the Occident." Modernity is neither a common stage in a sequence through which all peoples pass, each in its own time, nor is it merely a feature of Occidental history, having only secondary effects elsewhere.

The break which separated the condition of Modernity from all previous social, economic and intellectual relations was made possible by the dawn of a new mentality: *technicalism*. Hodgson coined the term *technicalism* in contradistinction to ideas of industrialization and rationalism, of which the former is criticized for its reductionist implications and the latter is rejected for its Eurocentric formulation of the "traditional" societies. Although he considered Modernity an *unparalleled* and *pervasive* event (the notion which resembles Wallerstein's world systems theory and the dependency theory), he believed that it is "received in different ways in different parts of the world", and the universal impact of Modernity is not uniform.

What has happened in the cultural, political and social life of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was conceptualized by the "Westernists" as "progress". By its presupposition of movement toward a goal, or a better life in a "right" direction, the notion of progress, Hodgson insisted, "implies a moral judgment". For progress captures the essences of historical changes in Europe, against regress or mere digression which portrays the internal historical dynamics of the rest of the world.

While Hodgson's work has the obvious merit of introducing Islam into the Eurocentric notion of Modernity, his analysis was not free of flaws. Aside from his early death in 1968 at the age of 47, perhaps what limited his ability to advance his theory further, was the fact that he never separated himself from the discipline of civilization studies. Although his project was to develop a comprehensive critique of essentialist approaches in that discipline, his construction of his own units of analysis, like "civilizations", or an essentialist notion of "human being", fell short of completely breaking with the discipline in which he positioned himself.

Furthermore, although Hodgson's criticism of Weber's Eurocentrism is quite convincing, his vehement critique of Weber's notion of rationalization indicates some misinterpretation of Weber's contribution. While Weber formulated concepts of "rationalization" and pure (ideal) type "rational" or "traditional" legitimation as methodological devices, Hodgson interpreted these concepts literally as existing conditions. Several references in this book to "irrational" action as contradistinction to "rationality", further demonstrates Hodgson's "common-sense" appropriation of rationalization and a major fallacy in his critique of Weber. It would not be far-fetched if one suggests that Hodgson's invention of the concept of *technicalism* is largely based upon his misinterpretation of Weberian notion of *rationalization*.

Nevertheless, after one comes to terms with his peculiar neologisms, his thoughtful reconstruction of the emergence of the condition of Modernity in a global context can be useful for all students of humanities and social sciences.