

The Appropriation of 'Curiosity'

Written by Lorenzo Kamel

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LORENZO KAMEL, OCT 12 2021

An important historiographical debate developed starting from the 1980s. It was triggered by the publication of a few influential books by British historian Bernard Lewis. The latter argued that “intellectual curiosity” about “other cultures” – and thus the predisposition and will to study languages, history and traditions – is “still peculiar to Western Europe, and to the inheritors and emulators of the European scholarly tradition”. Lewis, who was writing in the very period in which new approaches to global history as well as the subaltern studies project were starting to gain ground, found it natural to claim that it is only with the European Renaissance that “a human society for the first time developed the sophistication, the detachment and, above, all, the curiosity to study and appreciate the literary achievements of alien and even hostile societies”.

Over time, these arguments have been echoed by dozens of public intellectuals, many of whom have applied them to specific contests and “cultures”. Franco Cardini, an internationally renowned medievalist and historian of religions, went so far to claim that “disinterest in civilizations other than Islamic ones” is “a characteristic of the culture which emerged from Muhammad’s religious revolution”. Other scholars have framed the same issue in slightly different terms, by placing much emphasis on “the unusual openness of Europeans to learning from other cultures”, while stressing, at the same time, that curiosity became “the trademark of progress itself”.

In more recent years, a host of new academic publications have demonstrated, in an increasingly accurate and well-documented manner, how problematic these kinds of approaches are: indeed, every society – from the hunter-gatherers to the largest of the Empires – was in one way or another curious.

Roxanne L. Euben’s studies, for instance, supply a wide array of cases on “others’ curiosity” and how they have contributed to “global Europe”. Further examples include the works of Sanjay Subramanyam, – which highlights the dangers of conceiving of “Europe as a *deus ex machina*” and fosters a global intellectual history which tend to universalize parochial insights – Iraj Omidvar, whose studies aim at “recovering Oriental Perspectives on the West”, and the Lebanese historian Nabīl Matar, who provides a wealth of detail in outlining India’s role and the writings of 17th century Arab travelers expressing their curiosity about the “lands of the Christians” (*Bilād al-Nasārā*), as well as their ability to appreciate “non-Islamic” concepts and aspects.

As Nizar F. Hermes has noted, specifically in relation to the Mediterranean context, “the problem lies more in the Western neglect of the corpus of medieval writings about the Other”. In other words, the limited knowledge of complex “non-colonial languages” and a plethora of manuscripts and documents produced in locations which remain difficult to access, have erroneously led some scholars to emphasize “others’” alleged lack of curiosity.

Yet, the debate on ‘curiosity’, or the lack of it, can be fully grasped only within a much broader frame which is rooted in the old-new narratives connected to ‘*European exceptionalism*’. Still today, in fact, plenty of scholars link the key achievements in human history – including, among much else, “critical thinking, freedom of research, experimental science, the secularity of culture and politics, technological inventiveness, the industrial revolution, modernization, capitalism, the autonomy of the individual” – to the influence exerted by “Europe’s knowledge and actions”, and its “leaning toward curiosity”. Others locate the origins of universal concepts, such as the “notion of freedom”, in the “ancient Western world”. The thesis that “there is no doubt that those values [democracy, rule of law and human rights] were born in Europe” is no less widespread.

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These claims are all rooted, in different forms and ways, to what Peter Burke called “the grand narrative” of the establishment of Western civilization, specifically a triumphalist account of Western achievement from the Greeks onwards in which the Renaissance is a link in a chain which includes the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and so on. Each of these historical periods has been (and still is) often presented as a moral success story, as well as by juxtaposing an alleged European pro-activeness to a supposedly intrinsic “Eastern” passivity.

What is largely missing in these types of approaches are the structural contributions of the “others”. Take, for instance, the case of the debates around democracy, and the related and largely successful attempt to detach ancient Greece’s legacy from its Mediterranean and ‘oriental’ background. In Ellen Meiksins Wood’s words, “it is even more artificial to detach ancient Greece from, say, Egypt or Persia, as if the Greeks were always ‘European’, living a separate history, and not part of a larger Mediterranean and ‘Eastern’ world”.

Think of symbols such as the myrtle dedicated to the Goddess Aphrodite and Athena’s olive tree, both borrowed from the traditions of ancient Egypt. In other words, scholars who link Europe’s roots to Ancient Greece, and thus to many of the previously mentioned concepts and ideas, are simply (more or less consciously) recognizing Europe’s oriental connections (in Greek mythology, Europe is the name of the daughter of Agenor’s, king of Tyre, in modern-day Lebanon), dominant religion (Christianity was an Oriental religion), and philosophical roots.

The term *φιλόσοφος* (philosophos) itself, “lover of wisdom”, is drawn from the Egyptian *mer-rekh* (*mr-rh*), “lover of knowledge”. The most ancient philosophical texts originate precisely from ancient Egypt, and this includes also the papyrus on the “Immortality of writers”, (re)discovered in the 1920s and dated 1200 BCE.

The invention of a “Judeo-Christian tradition”

The considerations highlighted so far are also caught up with the misleading view frequently referred to as the “Western Judeo-Christian tradition”. The latter paradigm denies the large entanglement between Judeo-Christian-Muslim faiths, and overshadows the millenary history which predated them. Still today, plenty of scholars habitually refer to a supposed Judeo-Christian tradition as “the cradle of principles of equality and justice”, while others focus on “democracy’s biblical roots” and, more generally, the role of Biblical texts in fostering secular political power and its desacralization. In this case as well, however, such assumptions reflect limited, simplistic, and frequently anachronistic perspectives.

Indeed, atheism, as well as some principles related to secularism, were introduced into Indian traditions long before being introduced in Europe. Even more important within the frame of this article is the fact that, in the words of the American Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, “Judeo-Christian” isn’t a thing. It a) positions Jews & Christians against Muslims, is Islamophobic b) elides Christian oppression & murder of Jews over more than 1000 years & c) ignores Jewish civilization worldwide & facts of key Jewish developments in Middle East & N[orth] Africa”.

In addition to being misleading, the widespread tendency to refer to a “Western Jewish-Christian tradition” risks accentuating dangerous antagonisms and “watershed” phenomena at the expense of a greater understanding of the shared historical legacy underlying the three largest mono-theistic religions. A powerful confirmation of this fact can be seen in the Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2100), a literary product of ancient Mesopotamia, the cradle of Sumerians, to whom we owe, among many other inventions, cheques, letters of credit, and interest payments on loans. The Epic contains many of the themes – including the myth of the “universal flood”, Noah’s Ark, the Garden of Eden – that were later included in the Bible and other religious texts.

What has just been argued applies to many other related issues as well. Think, for instance, of the literary parallelisms of the Song of Songs, that is, compositions of similar topics that existed previously in ancient Egyptian and Sumerian literature: “The love song genre”, as noted by Michael V. Fox, “certainly underwent many changes between its presumed Egyptian origins and the time when it reached Palestine, took root in Hebrew literature, grew in native forms, and blossomed as the song of songs”. To remain in the field of literature, it should be noted, incidentally, that 24th-century BCE Mesopotamia was the birthplace of the first poetess in history: the Sumerian

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priestess Enheduanna.

A further significant example can be found in the 'holy city' *par excellence*, Jerusalem. As noted in a study published by the University of Bar-Ilan, "Canaanite Jerusalem had two holy sites; both were above and outside the city walls. Shalem was probably worshipped in the area of the Temple Mount, which later became the holiest site for the Jews and the third most holy site for Moslems".

The idea of the rosary itself was borrowed from Muslims in Spain, who were inspired by the prayer beads Buddhists used in Central Asia, who in turn borrowed the idea from Brahmans in Hindu India. Even Christianity underwent continuous contamination as it expanded from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe: during this process, it took on numerous spatio-architectural practices, – such as the "Gothic style", adopted to build many cathedrals in Europe (but also castles, palaces, and town halls) – and cultural customs, including traditions typical of pre-Christian Europe that form the basis of some key aspects of the Christmas and Easter holidays. Like all the themes and aspects mentioned in this article, religions are thus the result of human 'accumulation': a process which is not always understood in all its complexity and potential.

Health and rights

Two other aspects have played a particularly relevant role in the development of humankind and represent key elements within the frame of 'entanglements': health and rights.

It was above all the ancient Egyptians and Indians, and later some Persian, Chinese and Arab luminaries, who invented – or played a key role in introducing – practices such as anesthesia, bloodletting, and plastic surgery (Alexander the Great was responsible for importing the ancient Indian Sanskrit texts dedicated to early techniques for ear, nose and lip reconstruction into Europe), as well as plenty of surgical techniques and the first medical diagnoses for hundreds of diseases such as smallpox, measles and Parkinson's.

Chinese doctors were the first to develop rudimentary vaccines and it was a Chinese author, Wan Quan (1499-1582), the first historical figure to clearly refer to the practice of vaccination by inoculation: the year was 1549 and Wan Quan was intent on highlighting efforts to combat the scourge of smallpox. It is worth recalling that inoculation was not practiced outside of China, India, Turkey and other "eastern countries" until the 18th century.

The medieval hospitals in Iraq and several other Islamic majority countries pioneered the practice of dividing hospitalization into different sections, based on the diseases that the patients were suffering from. It should also be remembered the role played by figures such as the Persian scientist Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (the first doctor to understand the function of fever, discover allergic asthma and describe diseases such as smallpox, at the end of the 9th century), the Basra-based physicist ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham (who founded modern optics at the beginning of the 11th century), the Syrian physician 'Alī ibn 'Isā al-Kahhāl (the first to prescribe an anesthetic for surgical purposes and produce an illustration of optic chiasm and the brain, around the year 1000), the scholar Ibn al-Nafīs from Damascus (considered "the father of circulatory physiology"), and the Turkish physicist Şerafeddin Sabuncuoğlu (author of the first surgical atlas). These and many other examples show that the field of modern medicine, like all others mentioned so far, owes its development to a long process of 'accumulation', within which European physicians have largely played the role of beneficiaries, and much less the one of contributors.

The question of health and safeguarding health is closely intertwined with the defense of human rights, that is, the inalienable rights that every human being possesses. Contrary to what is commonly asserted, the recognition of these rights is by no means a "product of Europe", "the West", or the Enlightenment.

In the words of Indian jurist Upendra Baxi, "the dominant discourse presents the very notion of human rights as 'the gift of the West to the Rest'". The latter is a meta-narrative that, among other side effects, fosters a sort of 'collective amnesia': "The 'Enlightenment' epoch that gave birth to the liberal 'modern' notions of human rights [...] in effect, globalized extraordinarily cruel practices of Social Darwinism".

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It should also be clarified that the issue of human rights is rooted in a much earlier past than the one Baxi analyzes. Indeed, the first known historical figure to address the issue was the Persian Emperor Cyrus the Great (590 BCE-530 BCE). His decrees were engraved, in Akkadic cuneiform characters, on a baked clay cylinder known as the Cyrus Cylinder: this represents the world's first document about human rights. The principle of 'human rights' spread from Babylon primarily to India. In the latter, the concept of human rights and the protecting of such rights are not seen in any way as 'Western'; rather, they are perceived as principles embedded in Indian culture since the dawn of time.

This argument neither erases nor diminishes the fact that the Magna Carta (1215), the Petition of Right (1628), the Constitution of the United States (1787), the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) and the United States' Bill of Rights (1791) are documents with epochal scope and value. They have been highly influential in the process of asserting individual rights, albeit for a very limited group of human beings (the wealthy and/or powerful).

Nevertheless, the common approach of identifying the Magna Carta as the starting point in the process of recognizing human rights is tantamount to framing the "City of Three Monotheisms" (Jerusalem) in 1000 BCE as the beginning of human history (an equally common approach). In reality, just as the "Holy City par excellence" had already experienced 2000 years of history when it was conquered by King David (1010 BCE), so many of the principles contained in the Magna Carta belonged to a larger 'human history' that had developed in places quite distant from the supposed "cradle of the rule of law" (England) and conceived in times much older than modernity alone.

In addition, all the above-mentioned declarations and constitutions were addressed to only a small subsection of the inhabitants and, in later times, of the citizens. The Magna Carta, for example, was conceived for the exclusive benefit of "free men", to the detriment of the "servants" who accounted for nearly all of England's population at the time. For centuries, as confirmed by the spread of slavery, the right to property – which, in various forms, have existed in South Asia and other world areas since the 'Early Middle Ages' – was believed to have priority over the rights of human beings.

It might be rightly argued that it was only with the United Nations (1948) – within which, beside Western countries, also a number of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern diplomats provided significant contributions – and, later on, the Council of Europe (1949), that tools and monitoring mechanisms to ensure the universal protection of human rights were enacted: the attempt to achieve such 'universality' represented indeed an unprecedented step in world history. And yet, only a limited number of academic studies have dealt with *the* role played by international human rights in legitimizing and reproducing existing relations of dominations.

Even less are the studies which have discussed the link between white supremacy and the process which brought to the introduction of the concept of 'human rights' into the UN Charter. Last but not least, that very same tools and monitoring mechanisms were adopted right after the bloodiest and most devastating war in human history, a "European war"[1] which became a world, or global, conflict only at a later stage.

Ultimately, the misunderstood authorship discourse of human rights is embedded in a solipsistic approach that still today often confounds and overlaps a simplified perception of the 'history of the West' with a more complex, ongoing 'human journey'.

Conclusions

Each of the aspects addressed in this article reminds us of the need to support the mainstreaming of a more syncretic (in the original ancient Persian meaning of the term), 'cross-pollinating', and entangled knowledge, which will be able to place also the 'others' – with their 'curiosities' and contributions – at the center stage, to better understand 'ourselves' and the fluid world which we inhabit.

How to do so? By opposing any form of "epistemic violence", – that is the process by which the non-Western peoples are viewed as passive, weak and disinterested – while at the same time enabling the retrieval of different ways of

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knowing and a wider understanding the “epistemologies of the South”; by deconstructing and tackling the assumption “that the West represents the center of scholarship and the rest (usually Africa, Asia, and Latin America) fits the margin”; by involving – in line with the ongoing “Why is My Curriculum White” campaign – a larger number of non-Western faculty from institutions around the world; by investing more in “denationalized curricula”, occluded and marginalized knowledges, and academic positions which foster indigenous approaches.

All this requires, first and foremost, intellectual flexibility and the will to question long-established scholarly traditions. It also demands a process of ‘unlearning’ the way in which history – and particularly the one linked to intellectual curiosity – continues to be (often) taught and learnt. It is indeed necessary to unlearn in order to relearn, to deconstruct in order to reconstruct. In Susan Buck-Morss’ words: “The greater the specialization of knowledge, the more advanced the level of research, the longer and more venerable the scholarly tradition, the easier it is to ignore discordant facts”.

Note

[1] Center for Asia Minor Studies (CAMS) – KP 350, p. 94. Document produced in the late 1910s by Ioanna Palaxtsis, Farasa (Cappadocia), undated: “After the European war people from Farasa went to search for work elsewhere”.

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