Strategies for Decentering the Narratives of Modernity: Goody, Wolff, Chakrabarty and Fabian – Part 1

Veronica Lazăr,
West University of Timişoara, PhD. Student,
Email: veronica.lazar@e-uvt.ro

Abstract

This two-part article attempts to decipher four different critical strategies for decentering Eurocentrist narratives that promoted "the West" simultaneously as an agent, as a goal and as a yardstick for evaluating modernization processes across the globe: in the first part, it will examine Jack Goody's interrogation of the alleged European preeminence and exceptionalism and its imposition of value-laden temporal categories on the non-Western world, as well as Eric Wolff's reconstruction of the so-called invention of "Eastern Europe" by the Western mind during the Enlightenment; in the second part, it will take on Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of "provincializing" Western epistemology and Johannes Fabian's focus on the "denial of coevalness" for non-Western temporalities. The article will focus on the analysis these four authors provided for the emergence of specific temporal and geographical systems that backed the epistemic hegemony of the "West" and reinforced, therefore, its already established political domination. It will also examine the practice of translating spacial distance in historical time and its reverse, both at the core of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment understanding and construction of the cultural and historical "other".

Key words: Enlightenment, Eurocentrism, otherness, Jack Goody, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Larry Wolff, Johannes Fabian

In the postwar intellectual ecosystem, a growing discontent with the self-posited civilizational superiority of the "West" as a symbolic hegemon converged with the political movements adressing Western imperialist and colonial domination. These were times of epoch-making struggles for decolonisation in an enlarged world, while in the Western countries a critical turn emerged, in the 60s and 70s, in anthropology (fueled by anthropology's increasing self-reflexivity and severe interrogation of the epistemic and political conditions for its knowledge production), and, eventually, in other social sciences.

The world-historical project that followed the emergence, during the age of the Enlightenment, of "Europe" as a coherent cultural whole, coagulated by a unifying common history (Lilti, 2014), that allegedly separated it from the rest of the world and endowed it with a supreme consciousness of its identity and worth, was now being interrogated and challenged. Europe's acclaimed preeminence was denounced as merely a symbolic order supporting and justifying the Western domination over other regions of the world and the belittling of their being. In particular, the target of these new critical appraisals was Western long-lasting power to give life to cultural fictions othering non-Western regions of the world. This practice normalized the reification of cultural entities – creating the "Oriental", the "Eastern European", the "underdeveloped world" etc – and inscribed them into intrinsically hierarchical grids that both assigned them markers of superiority or inferiority and deprived them of their power to represent and depict themselves in their own terms. The Western post-Enlightened self-consciousness was by its very nature contradictory: there was, on the one hand, its emphatic universalism, while on the other there were its glaring efforts to expound and explain why other cultures' capacities to raise at the height of this universal were at most times rather poor.

Especially in the aftermath of Edward Said's enormously influential 1978 *Orientalism*, which opened the path to deconstructions of the eurocentric

imaginary map of the world[1] and nourished the transdisciplinary fields of cultural studies and postcolonial studies, a new wave of academic research began to uncover the process of symbolic construction (or the making, invention, imagining, phantasizing) of the cultural "Other". At a deeper level, some of these authors discovered, the political dimension of the "Western gaze" backing imperial domination was supported by specific historical categories, periodisations, symbolic geographies. Even geographical coordinates and scientific mapping techniques contributed to Eurocentrism, with its historical teleologies and its ideologies of Western-centered modernity and progress.

After several decades in his long and prolific career during which he transgressed disciplinary borders with – often comparative, sometimes *longue durée* - investigations of various systems of kinship and patrimony, of the role played by writing in "the domestication of the savage mind", of the impact of communication technologies upon social development, or of the cult of flowers and culinary cultures, British anthropologist and historian Jack Goody turned as well in the 1990s, with his *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive* (1990)*,* and then *The East and the West* (1996) to a deconstruction of the Western hegemonic epistemology.

The tenacious assumption that "Europe" was superior to all the other civilisations because it possessed something unique and essential to its Weltanschauung – democracy, or maybe individualism, romantic love, a unique penchant to abstract thinking, a penchant to novelty or even to freedom –, had already found opponents in various theories contesting any claim to a European fundamental superiority whatsover[2]. Goody's

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[1] For criticisms addressing Said's political biases manifested in his selection of the material for *Orientalism*, see Robert Irwin (2006) *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies*. London: Allen Lane. For his penchant for culturalist explanations and his alleged contribution to essentializing "the West" and unintentionally contributing to the "clash of cvilizations" theory, see Aijaz Ahmad (1992) *In Theory*. London: Verso, and Vivek Chibber (2001) "The Dual Legacy of Orientalism", in Bashir Abu-Manneh (ed.), *After Said: Postcolonial Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] See, for instance, Martin Bernal's 1987 *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization,* that Goody engages polemically.

strategy was to partially oppose both camps. In *The East and the* West, his previous book contesting Eurocentrism, he had gathered together various studies designed to prove that the cultural achievements of the "East" were absolutely comparable to the Western ones, provided one deepened the historical perspective much beyond the beginning of European modernity and examined those practices that revealed Indian, Arabic, Chinese, etc. proficiency in commerce, industry, economy, family structures, rationality. In *The Theft of History* (1996), Goody's strategy was again to challenge the supposed European exceptionalism in matters of rationality, commerce and kinship and their connection to "modernisation". (Not that "Europe" had not achieved a real preeminence and that its power to dominate the globe was not indisputable: indeed, it was due mostly, according to Goody, to the so called "technologies of the intellect" (Goody, 2006, 289), the power of literacy to transform and develop societies into something more durable; nevertheless, this superiority was a very late historical phenomenon, and a non-exclusive one[3].) This time, though, deconstructing the opposition between "us" and "the other" and challengind the notion of an essential "Oriental" primitivism was not only supported by a reevaluation of Europe's alleged uniqueness and by a reaffirmation of its fundamental indebtedness to other cultures (by drawing attetion to, for exemple, the Semitic contributions to the creation of the alphabet, or the transfer from East to West of several technological inventions like paper, water mill, rigorous procedures for the organisation of work in manufactures etc.[4]). It was also a disclosure of the – this time indeed

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[3] For instance, "Regarding astronomy, mathematics, and physics, the west caught up in 1600 and fused some thirty years later. That hardly suggests one needs to look for some deep-seated causal features in the so-called failure to develop modern science, but rather for some more contingent ones. By contingent I refer to features of the so-called 'internalist' model of science but not necessarily confined to such developments alone; there can be no general opposition between 'internalized' and 'social' explanations" (Goody, 2006, 140).

[4] Here, Goody can only concur with Eric Wolf's work opposing the essentializing notion of "peoples without history". Wolf's research emphasized that even peoples that eventually came under the radar of Western colonial imperialism had a prior complex historicity of their own, not only in reaction and not in isolation, but as a product of various mutual

singular – capacity of the European system of mind to universally impose its idiosyncratic way of narrating the story of the world and representing its own map of the globe.

Consequently, thanks to the take-over of history by the West, the past (and, some might add, the present and the future) of all countries and regions of the world "is conceptualized and presented according to what happened on the provincial scale of Europe, often western Europe, and then imposed upon the rest of the world" (Goody, 2006, 1). While Western historiography has been singular in developing the intellectual genre of "universal history"

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interactions among themselves, among regions, countries, continents. Wolf's map of interactions was even larger and less Euro-centered than Goody's, because he was less concerned with the contribution these other cultures had made to the development of Europe in the first place. Nevertheless, as Talal Asad notices, his organizing principle for this complex historical and geographical map, the "mode of production", was in itself somehow colonised by a category of analysis specific to Western capitalism: "His project is to demonstrate that the societies typically studied by anthropologists have been continuously changed over the past five centuries by global political-economic forces. Two explicit assumptions are made in this work: first, that no society is completely self-contained or unchanging, and, second, that a proper understanding of societal linkages and transformations must start from an analysis of the material processes in which all social groups are necessarily involved - the production, circulation, and consumption of wealth. (...) There is no doubt that Wolf's use of the notion of mode of production enables him to construct a single narrative in which political-economic forces and structures throughout the world, and their systematic interaction, can be described together. To this end, three basic categories are employed: the capitalist mode, the tributary, and the kin-ordered. (...) The concept of 'the capitalist mode of production' is a way - the most powerful way - of writing a particular history of relations, institutions, processes, that have hegemonised (but by no means homogenised) the world. There is not and cannot be any conceptual parallel to it in the form of 'precapitalist modes of production.' Practices of work and power are central in any collective life, but there is no a priori way of determining how these are articulated, let alone how they will change." In short, not even Marxist historical materialism, even without post-Hegelian teleological history, could be a genuinely universal tool for understanding other cultures. (Wolf, 1982; Asad, 1987). Goody acknowledges as well the need for "a very radical conceptual shift, abandoning the notion of a distinct European sequence of modes of production, of communication, and of destruction" (Goody, 2006, pp. 121-2).

and in its concern with systematically spelling out its relations with every other region of the world, this comprehensiveness was also structured around a rigid teleological spine: "world history has been dominated by categories like 'feudalism' and 'capitalism' that have been proposed by historians, professional and amateur, with Europe in mind. That is, a 'progressive' periodization has been elaborated for internal use against the background of Europe's particular trajectory" (Goody, 2006, 6). Not infrequently, this procedure could be perceived as a correction to the "unscientific", mythical views on history peculiar to many non-European cultures: "There is another more general aspect to the appropriation of time and that is the characterization of western perception of time as linear and eastern as circular" (Goody, 2006, 18).

Hence, internal categories of periodization used for the Western history (which as a matter of fact have been constructed themselves only during the last couple of centuries) were projected over world history, and simultaneously assumed to be first of all a quintessential characteristic of the West[5]. The order of succession in this process, the "stages" or "epochs"[6] of development, were also deemed essential[7].

The consequence of this epistemically authoritative move was a tendency either to insert into this teleologic temporal tapestry non-European regions

[5] Whence Goody's project in his *Renaissances: The One or the Many* ? (2010) to show that European Renaissance was not an unpaired event in world history.

[6] For a recent argument about the politics of periodizations and the internal epistemic colonialism that the notion of "feudalism" brought to Western history itself, see Kathleen Davis (2008).

[7] European scholars, he says, have taken Europe to be "set on a self-sufficient, selfmade course in Antiquity which led inevitably through feudalism, to colonial and commercial expansion, and then to industrial capitalism" (Goody, 2006, 293).

A sequence Goody comes down on in the first part of his book. To emancipate history from this iron cage, Goody suggests in *The Theft of History* that one should firstly undo the baseless and deceptive separation or Antiquity from the Bronze Age; this separation had helped Western historians assert the singularity and essential character of the European path and ground it on a hellenocentric thesis proclaiming the exceptionalism of the "Greeks" and their alleged superior institutions of politics, arts and sciences. Secondly, Western "Antiquity" should be reconsidered in light of its countless and constitutive commercial and cultural connections with other parts of the world.

of the world as backward pieces of history – whence "Asia" was associated with something pre-modern, with despotism, or, in a Marxist model, with the "Asian mode of production" – or to look for the presence or the absence of certain modernisation traits into these regions (for instance, the presence of the bourgeoisie). Nevertheless, this binarism, especially in terms of presence/absence, is not illuminating for Goody: "Finley showed that it was more helpful to examine differences in historical situations by means of a grid which he does for slavery, defining the relationship between a number of servile statuses, including serfdom, tenancy, and employment, rather than using a categorical distinction, for example, between slave and freeman, since there are many possible gradations. A similar difficulty arises with land-tenure, often crudely classified either as 'individual ownership' or as 'communal tenure'. Maine's notion of a 'hierarchy of rights' co-existing at the same time and distributed at different levels in the society (a form of grid) enables us to avoid such misleading oppositions. It enables one to examine human situations in a more subtle and dynamic manner. In this way one can analyse the similarities and differences between, say, western Europe and Turkey, without getting involved, prematurely, in gross and misleading statements of the kind, 'Europe had feudalism, Turkey did not'. As Mundy and others have shown, in a number of ways Turkey had something that resembled the European form. Using a grid, one can then ask if the difference appears sufficient to have had the consequences for the future development of the world that many have supposed. One is no longer dealing in monolithic concepts formulated in a non-comparative, non-sociological way" (Goody, 2006, 7). Moreover, these criteria that have to be validated are in themselves arbitrary; adopting others would lead to different results: if one looks at the systematic destruction of the environment, for instance, or progress in spiritual matters, the Western success story turns into the story of a catastrophe (Goody, 2006, 25).

Even among the most basic landmarks of history writing, in the apparently ideologically neutral practice of archiving and dating events, one can find, according to Goody, undeniable traces of this epistemic power to name, count and describe that supplanted alternative systems: "The dates on which history depends are measured before and after the birth of Christ (BC and

AD or BCE and CE[8] to be more politically correct). The recognition of other eras, relating to the Hegira, to the Hebrew or to the Chinese New Year, is relegated to the margins of historical scholarship and of international usage. One aspect of this theft of time within these eras was of course the concepts of the century and of the millennium themselves, again concepts of written cultures. (…) the framework for discussion is inevitably cast in terms of the decades, the centuries, and the millennia of the Christian calendar. (…) The monopolization of time takes place not only with the all-inclusive era, that defined by the birth of Christ, but also with the everyday reckoning of years, months, and weeks" (Goody, 2006, 14 sq). Adopting a calendar based on the sidereal year, on the division into months and the seven-day week was a cultural choice of its own, that the West eventually imposed to the rest of the world, making other local or regional conventions of measuring time and organizing the calendar even more local, "ethnic" or antiquated, when not erasing them altogether.

In fact, not only are these measures conventional, as they all are in all cultures, but here, in the secularized West, states Goody, one can still trace in them the footprint of the Christian religion. Moreover, in the Western model, assessing time and temporality became more abstract (thanks to new technologies of measuring and to new practices of organizing labour in the factories) and had a greater impact on individual behaviour (as historians of corporeal discipline or those of workplace organisation have repeatedly shown). "Clockwork, which for some philosophers became the model for the organization of the universe, was eventually incorporated in portable watches that made it easy for individuals to 'keep time'. It also led to their utter contempt for people and cultures who could not, who followed 'African time', for example, and therefore could not conform to the demands of regular employment that not only factory work, but any large-scale organizations, demanded. They were not prepared for the 'tyranny', the 'wage slavery' of nine to five" (Goody, 2006, 17). Nevertheless, beyond the mention of the well-known

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[8] On the ideological significance of the choice between the two sets of notations, see Lynn Hunt (2008).

subsumption of the labour process under the domination of abstract time, which was fundamental for the organization of labour in the global spreading of capitalism, the precise cultural and political implications of the universalisation of this temporal model are not very detailed in these chapters of *The Theft of History*.

It was not only time and temporal coordinates that were confiscated; conceptions of space, too, were shaped by the way Western conventional measures were integrated with mathematical and astronomical objective calculation. This development was again for Goody influenced by Western superior technologies of graphic representations. This meant both objective measuring *and* convention because, while latitude was indeed the result of the spatial distance from the Equator, longitude, in turn, which had no fixed starting point, was established at the end of the 19th century starting from the conventional – geographically, but not politically arbitrary – point of Greenwich, near London. The zero meridian of Greenwich was therefore chosen as the basis for calculation of time throughout the world (Goody, 2006, 21). And, of course, the Mercator projection created in the 16th century, which has for a long time been organizing and normalizing the Eurocentric image of the whole world and became the standard depiction of the continents and oceans, distorts their contours; what is more, besides nudging the eye away from "peripheries" (meaning, that which is not the Western Atlantic world), it misrepresents landmasses and creates the illusion that the southern countries are much smaller that the northern ones[9].

Some of Goody's main nominal targets for criticism are great historians from the first half of the 20th century like Norbert Elias, Fernand Braudel or Moses Finley; nevertheless Goody seems to pay little attention to the fact that a vast body of scholarship – and even whole intellectual currents - committed to dissolve many of the Eurocentric assumptions of the Western scholarly work has emerged in all disciplines of humanities and social sciences, especially after the critical turns in anthropology, in geography, in cultural and literary studies.

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[9] See also Jerry Brotton (2012) *A History of the World in 12 Maps*. New York: Penguin.

What is more, if he is set to disputing the alleged European singularity[10], it is because he reintegrates "Europe" into the great whole from which he believes it has been extracted: historically, culturally, economically and even geographically, Europe and Asia are or have been in the *long durée* history a continuum. This exceptionalism seems to recompose itself not as Euro-centric, but as Eurasia-centric, especially because Goody suggests that Africa (apart from its northern regions) belongs to a different cultural block, for a long time less gifted in terms of long-term historical advantages like the use of the wheel, the plough and having different marriage and property patterns of transmission. This is why, in his review of Goody's book, Roger Des Forges rightly observes that, "Despite its critique of European notions of 'progress', it accepts the language of 'development' and affiliated notions of being 'ahead' or 'behind' in a global horse race (to what end?)" (des Forges, 2008, 187).

In other words, the principles that allowed eurocentrism to affirm itself are partially left untouched, and reproduced as transparent concepts and values that transcend the conditions of their emergence[11]. Only the border has been displaced.

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[10] And this even in terms of Europe's ethnocentricity, which is of course not exceptional in itself.

[11] "While Goody is certainly right to point out the cultural specificity of 'progress' and the need to transcend the historical categories and teleological perspectives he critiques, his own work demonstrates the challenges such an effort presents. Antiquity, feudalism, and capitalism, East and West, and a clear presupposition of 'progress' - references, for example, to how Europe or 'the west' 'caught up with the 'modernizing' process' or 'fell dramatically behind' (pp. 301- 303) - continue to function throughout Goody's narrative as integral components in his explanatory framework.

Moreover, while many will be sympathetic to this critique of Europe's imposition of categories on the non- West, does the assertion of an 'imposition' ultimately downplay the capacity of the so-called 'non-West' to redirect the power of this imposition? Rather than an 'imposition' and a 'theft of history' (which seems to imply a passive other devoid of agency), should we speak instead of an 'appropriation' on the part of the non-West, a creative reconfiguration of these historiographical terms and teleologies?" (Reitan, 2009, 441-2).

It is the non-objective, imaginary nature of these criterias and values as projected by the Western gaze over other parts of the world that is the object of Larry Wolff's celebrated *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilizations and the Mind of the Enlightenment*. This time, the focus is on one of the most discourse-productive periods in history, namely European Enlightenment. Here, the *East-West* relationship takes a dramatically different significance as a reconstruction of a powerful *philosophical geography*, with some long term consequences.

With strong echoes from Said, Wolff builds a complementary piece of work on *orientalism*, discovering the emergence of an essentially intermediate symbolic space that is neither European proper, nor non-European in the strict sense[12]. Starting from extensive readings of travelogues, philosophical histories, diplomatic accounts, literary fictions, scholarly work of geography, ethnography, political economy and memoirs written in several Western languages, Wolf reconstructs this mental process of the invention of a completely new entity. "Eastern Europe" was born from the reconversion of the North-South imaginary line that the moderns had inherited from the ancients and from the renaissance philosophers into a West-East imaginary line. – And it would not be completely accidental, according to the rather idealist and continuitist historical vision Wolff deploys here, that in the middle of the 20th century, the Iron Curtain would cut accross the European continent, reinforcing exactly the same imaginary border between the "real Europe" and its Eastern little sister, wannabe Europe.

During the Enlightenment then, the mythology of Eastern Europe was concocted and then preserved elastic enough – thanks to its fundamental and eventually fruitful ambiguities – to cover both the necessity and the impossibility of its becoming Europe, meaning *civilized*. First of all, the ambiguity was geographic in nature. Although Western Enlightenment authors knew that those countries, regions and cities that would become *the*

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[12] Just a few years later years later, Maria Todorova's work in her *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) and Milica Bakić-Hayden's concept of "nesting orientalism" would further explore the process of cultural myth-making related to Eastern Europe.

East (Hungary, Poland, Russia, Bohemia, Caucasus, Moldova, Valachia) were being part of the same continent as their own, they nevertheless insisted, according to Wolff, to present them as external, outside Europe. (Wolff seems to forget how much Europe itself was for Western scholars an overtly cultural construction, not a strictly geographical one.) What is more interesting here is Wolff's observation that the scientific endeavours of geographical mapping went not against phantasmatic processes of invention, but nourished and were consolidated in their turn by a propensity for myth-making.

Knowledge and power, exploration and conquest were therefore the two sides of the same coin – nevertheless Wolff is less than precise in his defition of what "Western power" was or would later be in those "Eastern" territories that would never actually become Western colonies in the following centuries. More that a process of colonisation of the imagination that would ease direct imperial or political domination, what Wolff seems to describe in his *Invention of Easten Europe* is a vague, open-ended process of self-colonisation of the Western imagination in relation with its projected other.

And, as he briefly acknowledges in the final conclusions of his book, nor does he elucidate whether the "Eastern" officials, administrators or intellectuals themselves had anything to do, any contribution to this design, if they were active producers of the *invention of the Eastern Europe* or mere passive receptors.

There was then no real geographical entity to be baptized "Eastern Europe". But it was precisely this approximate spatial circumscription that allowed the most convenient ambiguity to settle in in descriptions, in "philosophical" mappings, in the design of cultural borders and not least in acknowledging the successive transformations of various political borders in the Eastern regions.

Contradictions and paradoxes were part of the Eastern Europe itself, following the structure of the Western gaze and its propensity to see contrasts everywhere[13] - as if to support the insight that the East lacked any ontological

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[13] Thence, according to some travelers, "Poland was an 'inconceivable melange of ancient centuries and modern centuries, of monarchical spirit and republican spirit, of feudal pride and equality, of poverty and riches.' The traveler's eye picked out the contrasts and

and historical consistency. What was here to stay as a persistent character trait were the deep affinities of the East with submission and violence: more often than not, it seems difficult to discern in the travelogues and philosophical histories examined here if the large scale dissemination of something that might be called slavery – or servage – was a violence against the spirit of the Eastern Europeans or an expression of the deeper essence of their soul. Especially what the Westerners perceived as the shocking frequency and ferocity of corporeal punishments to men and women, free men and servants alike, became eventually a stamp attesting the main feature of the Eastern societies. Here, against the expectations of Western liberal, anti-patriarchalist political thought, the political freedom and the domestic authority were conflated, so state and the family were founded on the same arbitrary coercion. If there is an obvious connection between the orientalists tropes an author like Montesquieu drew up to catch the essence of sophisticated Middle Eastern societies and the terms that travelers like the Marquis de Ségur or Giaccomo Casanova used to describe their experiences in Russia or Poland, "the whip" is one of the most arresting.

But were despotism and violence arbitrary indeed? Or were they the only way to deal with people born to be brutaly submitted? A fundamental paradox supported the moral outrage aroused by this political culture of the whip: "There was something circular in Segur's logic of development, for while the softening of manners might alter the nature of slavery, manners themselves were a measure of civilization, and the advance of civilization was obstructed by the existence of slavery. 'The real cause of this slowness of civilization is the slavery of the people. The serf, supported by no pride, excited by no amour-propre, lowered almost to the level of the animals, knows only limited and physical needs; he does not raise his desire beyond that which is strictly necessary to support his sad existence and to pay his master the

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combined the elements of observation into that inconceivable melange. In the chateaux there were 'a great number of servants and horses but almost no furniture, Oriental luxury but no commodities of life.' Wealth in grain contrasted with a scarcity of money and almost no commerce, 'except by an active crowd of avid Jews.' The Polish 'passion for war' contrasted with an 'aversion to discipline'" (Wolff, 1994, 20).

tribute imposed upon him'" (Wolff, 1994, p. 63). As Casanova would find out from the relation with a slave girl he had purchased, people in Russia not only needed to be beaten in order to perform even their most modest duty, they wanted to be beaten, because violence was a proof of love and care and its opposite was indifference.[14]

In Wolff's analysis, circularity is a result of the peculiar historical situation of Eastern Europe. While its geographical position, caught between Western Europe (or "Europe") and Asia, was that of an *in-between*, and simultaneously of a *neither-nor* (nor European nor Oriental), historically, Eastern Europe was situated again in an in-between, and had an equally paradoxical position.

Wolff does not imbed these Enlightenment texts in a coherent world-view derived from some variant of the new Enlightenement intellectual genre of *conjectural history*, where all human communities were described as bound to go through the same evolutionary process marked by similar stages of development, each of them associated with a specific "mode of subsistence" - hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and ultimately commerce.[15] In Wolff's interpretation, the general narrative of the four stages history is rather marginal. Nevertheless, what is central there is the idea, if not the notion, of civilization – both as a state of historical acomplishment and as a process that leads to that state[16]. Eastern Europe, even in its most refined urban culture and practices, as for instance the court of Catherine the Great that several Western travelers and philosophers had visited, is always suspect of being merely a simulacrum of real politeness and accomplishment: Russian or Polish efforts of improvement and catching up notwithstanding, Potemkin villages are indeed the best metonymy for describing the fact that only a hollow veil of improvement covers the brutishness of Russian or Polish manners and morals.

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[14] The standards of judgement, then, could not be the same for Eastern and Western political societies. As Hautrive exclaims, "If M. de Beccaria had seen all the cutthroats of this land, he would be less disposed to be tender!" (Wolff, 1994, 115).

[15] See, for instance, for this pattern in the Enlightened historical imagination, Ronald Meek's 1976 *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[16] About this ambiguity, see Spector, in Lilti, A., Spector, C. 2014, 93-115.

Eastern Europe as an aspirational space is not only a middle space and a a middle time caught between a not yet and a soon to be, but also a space of contradictions that might never be solved: the Enlightened mind oscillates in its descriptions and harsh judgements about the *East* and its absence of civilisation between optimistic gradualism (that encouraged the Westerner to *advise* the Easterner and reveal her the best possible ways to become something radically other) and fatalistic binarism (that condemned the Easterner's effort of improvement to its fate of failure).

In the Enlightened model of conjectural history, thanks to the capacity that all human societies possess to take the same universal path of development, philosophical histories discover that they can translate historical distance in terms of geographical remoteness – therefore, observing the contemporary "savage" peoples of North America might lead to getting to understand the ancestors of the West[17]; conversely, as Wolff perceptively notices in his book, geographical distance to one's contemporaries is often comprehended in terms of historical gaps: Polish, Russians, Caucasians, Valachians or Tartars play one after another the role of those nations that never actually left the "primitive state of the world" (Wolff, 1994, 125). But rather than a source of venerable pride, a mirror where modern Westerners could read their own past, this antiquity is sign of disabling infantilisation.[18]

Several of these anachronic and unsympathetic comparisons end not in clarifications, but in further taxonomic confusion: in the absence of substantial historical knowledge about Eastern nations, what Wolff calls Linnean classifications of peoples, which are meant to inscribe them in a natural history of human societies, trouble even more the ethnographical map. What is more, modern Eastern nations are named after and described as if they were identical with their ancestors: in the inhabitans of Moldova or

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[17] As Locke famously observed in his *Second Treatise* of Government, "In the beginning, all the world was America". See also the very influential work of Joseph-François Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux moeurs des premiers* temps (1724).

[18] The vocabulary of the infancy was one way of expressing the idea of backwardness, so Richardson would describe the Russians, generally, as "bearded children" (Wolff, 1994, 84).

Russia - nations without history – the cultivated traveler could identify their – imaginary – forebears depicted on the Trojan Column.[19] Moreover, this essential suppression of their real history also meant a radical depolitisation of the Eastern societies: while despotism was, from Fénelon and Montesquieu onwards, the opposite of the *political* government, characterising modern Eastern nations by reducing them to the character traits of their ancestors was likewise a manifest deafness to their actual political and cultural lives.[20]

Overall, thanks to this ambiguous relation to historicity that was projected over Eastern Europe, thanks to imposing on it a scale of historical development while simultaneously denying its capacity to follow, "Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century provided Western Europe with its first model of underdevelopment, a concept that we now apply allover the globe" (Wolff, 1994, 9).

The East was less a real place than a screen onto which they projected their own superiority complexes, fears and desires. Nevertheless, Wolff does not explain what would a harmless cultural fantasy have looked like, and why Western orientalism had more impact and shaping power than other practices of exoticising alien cultures. Nor does he hint towards the ways Enlightenment Europe's view of itself as core of the world was significantly shaped by its margins (Whithers, 2007). But his narrative is vulnerable to criticism inasmuch as it is based on depictions of the "West" and the

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[19] "Trajan's column was in fact an important and complex reference for the eighteenth-century discovery of Eastern Europe, a sort of travelers' totem pole. Segur arrived in Russia in 1785, the same year that Hauterive came to Moldavia. When Segur gazed upon the Russians, he saw 'those Scythians, Dacians, Roxolans, Goths, once the terror of the Roman world,' brought to life; they were the 'demi-savage figures that one has seen in Rome on the bas-reliefs of Trajan's column,' reborn and animated 'before your gaze.'31 Segur, like Haute rive, thought irresistibly of Trajan's column when he traveled in Eastern Europe" (Wolff, 1994, 295).

[20] See also David Allen Harvey's observation that, when Oriental studies developed in France in the 18th century, they emerged as a subfield of classical studies, while the interest in "oriental" languages and history was limited to ancient pre-Muslim history, allowing then the Western literary imagination to colonize the contemporary Middle East with fictionalizing tropes (Harvey, 2012).

"Enlightenment" as monolitic blocs, cultural and geographical constellations of political and discoursive practicies that he reifies artificially and sometimes counterproductively – ironically, in the same work where he brilliantly describes and decries the reification of the Eastern *other*.

Nevertheless, the Enlightened practice he excavates with his explorations of numerous historical and philosophical works written in the 18th century, of translating spacial distance in historical time[21], was indeed one of the most subtle ways of dealing with historical and ethnographical diversity, either for constructing a universal framework of development common to all the peoples, races and nations, or, at the contrary, to generate exclusions and hierarchies between human communities (usually, between Europeans the the rest of the world).

This "schizogenic use of time" became, according to the anthropologist Johannes Fabian, a permanent instrument for controlling anthropological narratives about other human groups and for the creation of global temporal hierarchies. The second part of this article will investigate Fabian's notion of the "denial of coevalness" that he believes to be at the core of classical anthropology, as well as Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to re-"provincialize" Western epistemology and its temporal and geographical categories.

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