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Can we speak of an ‘early modern’ world?

To speak of an ‘early modern’ world raises three awkward problems: the problem of early modernity, the problem of comparison and the problem of globalisation. In what follows, a discussion of these problems will be combined with a case study of the rise of humanism.

Peter Burke

The Concept

The concept ‘early modern’ was originally coined in the 1940s to refer to a period in European history from about 1500 to 1750 or 1789. It became widely accepted by the 1970s in English and other Germanic languages (including Dutch). The term is contradictory because historians first identified the years around 1500 as the rise of ‘modernity’, and only later applied the term to the world following the French and Industrial Revolutions.

The problem became still more acute when the term was extended beyond Europe to Japan, China, India and so on, a move to combat Eurocentrism which has come to appear Eurocentric. What dates can possibly mark the beginning and end of an early modern period in world history?

In the case of America, as in Europe, it is difficult to deny the significance of 1492. The rise of the three ‘gunpowder empires’ of the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals also support an opening date around 1500 (though 1350 is sometimes suggested, the Black Death having been a Eurasian rather than a purely European disaster). On the other hand, a number of historians of Africa prefer 1600 to 1500 as a turning-point. In East Asia, too, the great divide runs down the middle of the ‘early modern’ period. In China, the time of troubles leading to the replacement of the Ming dynasty by the Qing, in 1644, is a much more obvious turning-point than the years around 1500. In the case of Japan, the term ‘early modern’ has been used not to replace indigenous dating but as a synonym for the Tokugawa period, 1600–1868.

Varieties of Comparative History

When historians of Europe speak about comparison, they often begin by invoking the French medievalist Marc Bloch, who distinguished two kinds, the neighbourly and the distant. His comparisons and contrasts between medieval France and England illustrate the neighbourly approach. Bloch was more sceptical about distant comparisons, but he did say something about feudalism in Western Europe and Japan.

Distant comparisons in particular raise problems, as the case of Max Weber illustrates. In his day, Weber seemed to escape Eurocentrism by placing his investigation of the rise of capitalism in an Asian context. Today, by contrast, he is criticised for Eurocentrism because he assessed other cultures in terms of their lack of what the West possessed

(rationality, individualism, capitalism, and so on).

A major problem is the western origin of the conceptual apparatus with which we are working. As attempts to study ‘feudalism’ on a world scale have shown, it is very difficult to avoid circularity in this kind of enterprise, defining the phenomenon to be studied in European terms and then ‘discovering’ that it is essentially European. Even apparently unspecific terms such as ‘university’, ‘novel’, ‘portrait’, or ‘grammar’ were originally coined with the European experience in mind, with the consequent danger of forcing Islamic institutions, Indian artefacts or Chinese texts to fit a western model.

If comparison is risky, lack of comparison is even more dangerous. Take the case of another famous sociologist, Norbert Elias, and his study of what he called the ‘Civilising Process’, more exactly the rise in early modern Europe of social pressures towards increasing self-control (linked to the centralisation of government). Elias virtually ignored the rest of the world – yet similar pressures can be found in China, Japan, Java and other parts of Asia.

There seems no third way, at least at present, between using this western apparatus of comparison and refusing to compare at all. At the moment, to undertake comparison while remaining aware of the danger of Eurocentrism appears to be the lesser evil. One precaution that we can take is to follow what might be called the principle of rotation. That is, we can take different regions in turn as the norm. Bloch discussed to the extent to which Japan followed or failed to follow a model of feudalism derived from France, but it is equally legitimate to discuss whether or not 17th-century Spain was a ‘closed country’ on the model of Japan in the age of *sakoku*, or to look at the pleasure quarters of early modern Venice or Rome, Paris or London as western examples of the ‘floating world’ (*ukiyo*) to be found in Japanese cities such as Edō, Kyōtō or Ōsaka.

Globalisation

The third general problem is that of globalisation. Is it useful to speak of such a trend in the early modern period? Globalisation is often defined in terms of time-space compression, and in the early modern period, as the French historian Fernand Braudel reminds us in his famous book about the Mediterranean, distance was public enemy no. 1 and messages from Philip II to the Viceroy of Peru might take from six to nine months to arrive at their destination, and up to two years from Spain to the Philippines. Given this ‘tyranny of

distance’, it is probably best to describe the early modern period as at best a time of ‘proto-globalisation’, despite the increasing importance of connections between the continents, of economic, political and intellectual encounters, not only between the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’, but between Asia and the Americas as well.

There remains the question of standardisation, of the extent to which different parts of the world participated in common trends. There was indeed a rise of a ‘world economy’ in this period, an increasing dependence of the four continents on one another. There were similar trends towards political centralisation in Europe and Asia, and a similar ‘general crisis’ in the middle of the 17th century. Whether there were common cultural or intellectual trends in the early modern world, or at least in Eurasia, is a more difficult question, since ideas are so closely tied to the languages in which they are expressed. The following case study is intended as an illustration of the problems.

The Three Humanisms

This case study concerns what might be called the three humanisms: Italian (which became European), Islamic and Chinese. It is an attempt to deparochialise the Renaissance, often viewed as part of a triumphal story of the rise of ‘Western Civilisation’, as well as to consider the links between different elements in what is known as ‘the humanist movement’.

Italian ‘humanism’ was so named because the humanists were concerned with the studia humanitatis, claiming that the study of certain academic subjects (notably rhetoric, ethics, poetry and history) could make students more fully human. The humanists themselves were generally employed either as university teachers or as secretaries to important people. Their scholarship was in the service of the revival of antiquity, whether classical or Christian. The age of the so-called ‘Fathers of the Church’, such as Augustine and Jerome), though for some scholars antiquarianism, including the collection of ancient statues and coins, was pursued for its own sake. The humanists both preached and practised a return ‘to the sources’ (*ad fontes*), stripping away layers of medieval commentary on Aristotle, Roman law and the Bible.

In practice, the humanist movement was divided. On one side there was the philosophical or ethical wing, concerned with what was sometimes called ‘the human condition’ or the ‘dignity of man’ (the topic of a famous oration by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, delivered

at the end of the 15th century). Following the shock of the French invasion of Italy in 1494, some leading humanists, notably Machiavelli, shifted from a concern with ethics to a concern with politics.

On the other side, we find the philologists. The interest in the revival of antiquity extended to the revival of classical Latin. Humanists were well aware of the differences between the Latin of Cicero and what they considered the ‘corrupt’ or ‘polluted’ Latin of the Middle Ages. Their sense of linguistic anachronism enabled the detection of a number of forgeries, as in the famous case of Lorenzo Valla’s exposure of the text in which the emperor Constantine allegedly donated the region around Rome to the pope and his successors.

One of the most famous representatives of the ethical wing was Montaigne, whose remarks about the philological wing reveal the distance between the two. He once made fun of a humanist sitting up at night to study: ‘do you think he is searching in his books for a way to become better, happier or wiser? Nothing of the kind. He will teach posterity the metre of Plautus’s verses, and the correct spelling of a Latin word, or he will die in the attempt’.

It seems illuminating to speak of Islamic humanism because the Arabic keyword *adab* (variously translated as ‘custom’, ‘manners’, ‘civilisation’ or ‘literature’) corresponds at least roughly to humanitas. In any case, the Islamic world, like Europe, drew on the classical tradition, not only in science, but in the humanities as well. For example, Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics were well known in the 12th and 13th centuries CE.

The kinship between Italian and Islamic humanism was recognised by at least one of the Italians. In his Oration on the Dignity of Man, Pico, who knew a little Arabic, quotes a man he calls ‘Abdala the Saracen’ to the effect that nothing is more wonderful than man. ‘Abdala’ is ‘Abd Allah Ibn Qutayba (828–99 CE). His treatise *Adab-al-Katib* (‘the book of Adab’) is concerned with rhetoric, with what might be called ‘the culture of secretaries’. It resembles the rhetorical treatises of the humanists, though a few hundred years earlier, and carries similar implications about the humanising function of the art of speaking and writing well.

The case of Chinese humanism, unlike that of the Islamic world, presents similarities rather than connections to Italian humanism. The central aim was similar, a return to antiquity (*fugu*). Once again, the movement had two wings.

The ethical wing has been discussed by Theodore de Bary and others who note the concern of Confucius (Kongzi) and his followers and of ‘neo-confucians’ like Zhu Xi with the ideal man, ‘princely man’ or ‘noble person’ (*chunzi*) and also with the cultivation of the self (*xiushen*). Like the Italians after 1494, some of the Chinese humanists became more concerned with politics after the shock of the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644.

The philological wing, previously neglected, has been studied by Benjamin Elman. It was associated with the ‘search for evidence’ (*kaozheng*, a slogan equivalent to *ad fontes*) and led to an increasing sense of anachronism. The argument that part of the ‘Documents Classic’ was forged was made with increasing philological precision. Again, in Tokugawa Japan there was a movement called ‘the way of ancient learning’ (*kogaku*), attempting to return to the ideas of Confucius by stripping away neo-confucian commentaries.

This brief sketch of an attempt to write the history of three humanisms inevitably omits a number of important problems. Why was there more of a scholarly preoccupation with humanity and philology in these three cultures than elsewhere? How different was the role of religion in these three cases? What would it be like to try to apply the principle of rotation? How illuminating would it be to speak of *kaozheng* in Italy or of the ulema in early modern Europe? ◀

Suggested Reading

- Julia Ashtiany et al. (eds.) *‘Abbasid Belles-Lettres* (Cambridge, 1990)
- William Theodore de Bary, *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York, 1970).
- Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA, 1984, 2nd edn Los Angeles, 2001)
- Donald Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (New York, 1970)
- Paul Kristeller, *Renaissance Thoughts and its Sources* (New York, 1979)
- George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh, 1990)
- Randolph Starn, ‘The Early Modern Mud-dle’, *Journal of Early Modern History* 6 (2002), 296–307

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