

Confused Alarms: Duchesne on the Uniqueness of the West

Ricardo Duchesne, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization*. Studies in Critical Social Sciences, 28. Leiden: BRILL, 2011, 547 pp. \$US 155.00 hardcover (978-90-04-19248-5)

In what senses has the culture — or perhaps we should say the complex of cultures — of “Europe” been special in the long run of history? The terms of this debate have been set up recently in many ways, with a kaleidoscopic variety of important nuances. But perhaps the most fundamental line of cleavage runs between those, on the one hand, who believe in some perduring “European” quality that, in spite of ups and downs over time, and borrowings from elsewhere, has ultimately been the primary creative source of that ill-defined entity the “modern world,” and those, on the other hand, who prefer a conjunctural approach, seeing Europe after the later middle ages as a place where numerous historical currents of significantly different characters, and multiple origins, for a time converged and developed a new scientific and technological style; and then, following this, achieved an unprecedented breakthrough into a relatively short-lived but world-transforming productive and destructive supremacy, both backed by and undergirding new logistic and political organizational capacities. Others with a wider vision across time and space, while happy to acknowledge the earlier achievements of classical and Hellenistic Greek philosophy, science, and technology, are not only aware that these then largely *disappeared*, for the most part surviving only partially through remnants preserved and at times refined by the early and middle Islamic world, before being rescued through the almost literally last-minute efforts of the Renaissance to make translations of and commentaries on key books like Theophrastus’s *Researches on Plants*, the historical foundation of modern botany, or Archimedes’ works, which came to play something of the same role for integral calculus and aspects of analysis, but — also — that at the *other* end of the Old World the mediaeval Chinese Empire — for half a millennium the only

culture that printed books — had risen to economic primacy, and that at least in quantitative respects it probably outranked Europe until around the start of the 19th century.

There have been numerous debates on these issues — one of the more engaging of which has been playing out here in the pages of the *CJS* (31:4, 33:1, and 36:2) — but, sad to say, too many of them have seemed to pursue ideological rather than scientific ends. The uncompromisingly pro-European cultural extremists, sensitive to the seemingly now sinking relative position of the Western world, often appear anxious to seek solace in the assertion of a unique European contribution to world history and a unique greatness that they fear is now crumbling away. Their view indeed has some truth, but is only a part of a much larger picture. The motives of the more extreme proponents of the other perspective, namely that the originality and importance of Western scientific, economic, and creative achievements have been exaggerated, and that Western economic supremacy, for the short time it lasted, was based more on plundering or stripping the wealth of others than on any mastery of more reputable skills, are harder to understand, in their unbalanced obsession with what, too, is only a limited part of the truth. A few of the greatest, like the late Joseph Needham, a scholar of prodigious learning in the sciences and the humanities of both Europe and China, though arguably inclined to exaggerate and over-ideologize on occasion, have been genuinely moved by the desire to rectify a massive disequilibrium in the historiography, in his case the ignorance and neglect in the West regarding premodern Chinese science and technology, and the major role that the latter played in the launching of early modern Europe. In the writings of some contemporary Chinese scholars, often of high ability, the undeniably substantial achievements of premodern China are now being at times inflated beyond reason in what seems to be an attempt to salve the pain of having been left “behind” for a time in the historical race, if one may so call it, and to pretend that there never really was much difference. For their Western associates in this revisionist attack, the desire to restore a kind of “equality” out of a sense of fairness to China — and, more generally, to the non-West — while it is in a way morally admirable, too often has overdone, and hence — for critical readers — undone, its would-be remedial efforts. This has once again distorted understanding, albeit in different directions. There may in addition be an element here of misplaced psychological displacement activity, a frustrated attack, so to speak, on a proxy enemy, the source of whose motivation — it might be speculated — flows at least in part from an underlying dislike of many aspects of the “modern” world, and what is felt to be its dehumanizing of social and economic life, and its strategically self-destroying exploitation and

destruction of the natural environment. I can sympathize with the feeling behind this view, but these often inchoate impulses need to be kept under the tight control of logic and evidence if they are not to blur the clarity of historical vision.

Richard Duchesne's *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* is the most recent contribution to this somewhat confused and confusing controversy. It belongs unambiguously to the first school outlined above, who might be called the "restorationists" in implied contrast to the "revisionists" of the second school, but is unusual and commendable in attempting, above all in two long early chapters (the second and third), to confront the revisionists' specific arguments head-on. The real trouble is that *neither* side, at least in the case of China, has a solid enough factual base in many important areas to warrant arguing with the kind of confidence they tend to show. An example is the population dynamics of the densely inhabited lower Yangzi delta in late-imperial times. It is becoming fairly clear now that it is misleading to describe it as just having *either* a "high" *or* a "low" mortality; a truer picture is probably given by saying that it had a savagely heavy perinatal and early childhood mortality *combined* with what was, at least by early modern standards, a very moderate later childhood and adult mortality, where a female's expectation of life if she made it to 10 was on the order of 41 more years. There was a marked shifting of demographic gears somewhere well before the age of five. Only a few rather special sources open the window on early childhood, however. It was largely occulted — as was, in direct terms, the birth rate. There was also a wide range of variation in the expectancy of life at birth at the level of the prefecture or county, in the extreme case up to 13 years, a gap that had already approximately halved by the age of ten (Elvin and Fox 2008, 2009; Elvin 2011). And this was only one region, albeit the most important. Despite this continuing problem of data blur, which the current state of the field makes all but inevitable, Duchesne probably wins most of his cases on economic issues relating to the comparison between Europe and China, even if only narrowly on points more often than not. And for this these two chapters are well worth reading — but very cautiously!

The polemical logic is not so effective elsewhere. *Uniqueness* is, to use old-fashioned examiner's terminology, an alpha-delta book — with some very good and some unnervingly bad components. It is also all but impossible to review fairly, at least in a brief compass. I will therefore proceed mostly by responding to the five main points that he helpfully lays out in his preface. These are as follows: (1) a great deal of often shoddy recent historiography and social science have devalued the intrinsic quality of Western civilization; (2) recent "revisionist" historical

writing has seriously underestimated Western achievements between approximately 1500 and the present day; (3) for at least during the two-and-a-half millennia since classical antiquity, and probably far longer, the culture of the “West” has *always* been “in a state of variance from the world”; (4) a virtually unique “liberal-democratic culture” was crucial to the rise of the modern West; (5) the West’s restless creativity ultimately derives from the war-like “aristocratic egalitarianism” of the early Indo-Europeans. Space being limited, I will express myself in response to these ideas as bluntly as he summarizes them. Needless to say, both our full positions are more nuanced. *Nota bene*: what follows is therefore only a selective *tour d’horizon*.

Duchesne’s first thesis is that since about the 1960s there has been “a devaluation of Western culture” that was part of an intellectual movement that has included “anthropological relativism, critical theory, dependency theory, evolutionary materialism, post-modernism, feminism, and identity politics.” This omnium-gatherum style is symptomatic of the author’s distaste for making important distinctions. Most of these names are labels for hypertrophied forms of earlier styles of thinking that, when done well, have had a legitimate scientific or interpretative justification. For example, effective cultural anthropology can hardly be done without a serious effort at mental transference by the researcher of his or her own mind-set into the ways of thinking and feeling of another society, even if this psychological realignment is only temporary. One’s own moral judgment needs to be to a large extent suspended during the process, even if not necessarily — in the last analysis — in any way rejected. Usually what happens is that the inquirer’s acceptance will be broadened in certain respects, and, conversely, in a few at least, his or her moral resistance hardened. But understanding will for the most part be deepened. Were the traditional Naxi of northern Yunnan province in China, necessarily worse or unhappier for not having any institution that could be regarded as “marriage”? Whatever one’s intuitions regarding this matter, it cannot be fairly judged *a priori*. The expanding importance given to the narratives of women in history and sociology gave to the traditional male monody a vital new bass line (in a sense, the crucial role of demographic reproduction) and a counterbalancing counterpoint (often marked by an alternative subtle and subversive sensibility — a classic in this genre being Ruth Cowan’s *More Work for Mother*) that enriched both disciplines out of recognition. When this edged into a routinely dogmatic and at times male-hating form of feminism, it could be a dispiriting waste of energies and talents. Dependency theory, for its part, drew important attention to the painful distortions induced in many non-Western societies too weak politically and economically to resist the self-interested pressures of the

developed West, even if its causal claims could too easily degenerate into simpliminded overstated scapegoating. The reader can handle most of the others him- or herself. As for “evolutionary materialism,” is the author *per contra* implicitly advocating “creationist idealism”? If so, does he realize that this additionally involves jettisoning a large swathe of hard, well-established modern science that lies *outside* evolutionary biology, notably the physics used to estimate geological time?

The second part is devoted to refuting the revisionist “dismantling” of the “Eurocentric” consensus on ‘the rise of the West’.” Much of the detailed refutation, as has already been said, is quite skilfully done. These are some of the alpha parts of the book. Nor is it wholly untrue that a number of scholars in this area have come close to arguing, as Duchesne asserts they have, that “the Industrial Revolution was the one transformation [i.e., the sole one] that finally set Europe on a different path of development.” But the complex of issues involved here is more subtle than he indicates. For around three millennia, *most* of the Eurasian world, including its North African edge, has been the scene of an endless to-ing and fro-ing of techniques and ideas, without which modern Europe would not have happened. Think of the lists in Needham’s *Science and Civilisation in China* (1956 — with a volume or two by colleagues still to appear, though Needham himself died in 1995) of Chinese creations like paper, gunpowder, the mariner’s compass, and the axial rudder, just to begin with. (As regards printing, the transference from China to Europe, though highly probable, still lacks conclusive demonstration.) Cutting off a domain called “Europe,” as Duchesne does, raises difficult questions about both dates and demarcation. Classical “Africa” included Alexandria, home to some of the greatest Hellenistic scholars and scientists of the ancient world, as well as, when no longer “European,” cities like Tunis, the birthplace of Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), one of the handful of the world’s greatest historians, and the founder of economic history, as can be seen from Franz Rosenthal’s three-volume translation *The Muqaddimah* (1958). If Duchesne wants to have a “Europe” culturally distinctive from early times, the multicultural cauldron in the Ancient Near East, which included the eastern end of the Mediterranean, and out of which so much of the culture of the classical world drew its inspiration, poses an insuperable difficulty. It is also worth remembering that *both* European Christendom *and* Islam were, however grudgingly the inheritance was acknowledged, to a great extent the religious heirs of ancient Israel, a seedbed of spiritual inspiration that is strangely little mentioned in this book.

There have probably only been two periods when Europe, broadly interpreted, was arguably distinctive in, if we may so express it, a world-

historic way. The first occasion was the early Hellenistic period, its intellectual heartland in the triangle between Alexandria, Rhodes, and Syracuse, the home of Archimedes, as described by Lucio Russo in his crucial *The Forgotten Revolution: How Science Was Born in 300 BC and Why It Had to be Reborn* (2004). The second was the period from perhaps about 1600 to some recent time such as 1950. If one has a scholarly background outside of Europe, as is mine with its focus on premodern China, one acquires a basis for contrast that lets one easily sense that something dramatic is happening around 1600, if one strays enough to read through a number of the key European works. To take my own particular interest, I will not easily forget my awareness of this when first studying Camerer's *De sexu plantarum epistola* (Letter on the sex[uality] of plants) of 1694. This is a miniature masterpiece of summarized and analyzed observations and experiment directed at testing a conceptual model, in a context of breathtaking honesty about both what he had done and also failed to do. The book is the foundation text of modern plant science — and I found myself saying to myself, almost in a state of shock, something like “so that was when and how it happened!” Camerer's breakthrough, in turn, has to be put into the context of two centuries of endlessly improving botanical observations, and of corrections and extensions of ancient works, together with the development of an increasingly systematized vocabulary and taxonomy, as well as ever more numerous publications, fierce controversies, and fruitful errors. Duchesne is sharply aware of this transition, as can be seen from his footnotes 19 on p. 108, and 17 on p. 148, and it is a pity he does not focus on it as the heart of his inquiry. A full sensitization, though, also includes knowing, by way of contrast, a work like Li Shizhen's monumental but in no way “modern” *Bencao gangmu* (Herbal arranged by greater and lesser categories) of 1596, no less than Theophrastus's *Researches on Plants* (now wonderfully translated into French by Suzanne Amigues) from almost two millennia earlier. With three centuries of hindsight, one knows as one reads that the door to Darwin is now starting to swing open.

But what about the gap in time? The vast hiatus between the first period of “European” world-historical intellectual innovation and the second? At its very shortest, let us say the millennium between John Philoponus in the 6th century CE, who refuted Aristotle's theory about falling bodies, and William Gilbert's unabashedly aggressive assertion of new truths *On the Magnet, Magnetic Bodies, and the Great Magnet that is the Earth*, published in London in 1600. The hiatus when — in spite of an important, but limited and partly derivative, later mediaeval European creativity beautifully chronicled by Alistair Crombie (1994, and earlier) — science was mostly conserved and created anew outside Europe, as in

the optics of Ibn Sahl (c. 940–1000 CE) and Ibn al-Haytham (965–1040 CE). How can the second of these “Europes” really be regarded as having been intrinsically the same as the first? Surely the “revisionists” were far from being mistaken in feeling uncomfortable with the extreme form of Eurocentrism, even if they have too often taken their reaction somewhat too far?

The differences between Europe and China often varied greatly in degree from one period to another. An intriguing example is that both in northern China and in Lucca and Bologna in Italy water-powered multi-spindle spinning and silk-twisting were invented at about the same time, namely the later 13th century. This technology later *died out* in China, but *remained* in Italy, eventually to inspire some of the earliest triumphs of the western Industrial Revolution (Endrei 1968; Elvin 1996). Thus whatever the supposed long-lasting deep-level differences between the advanced regions of Europe and other relatively advanced parts of the world in some particular domain of activity, these could sometimes be demonstrably minimal at one time and quite striking at another, as had become the case for spinning around 1750–1800. Conjunctures were always changing, and people were both changing them and being changed by them. This surely has to cast doubt on the usefulness of any theory of a perduring difference as an explanatory factor for the different histories of different parts of Eurasia.

The third objective of *The Uniqueness of the West* is to argue that “the West has always existed in a state of variance from the rest of the world’s cultures.” If we set aside for the moment both the cultural links of Europe with the ancient and also to some extent the mediaeval Near East, as well as the truism that *all* different cultures differ from each other by definition, otherwise they would be treated as belonging to the same culture, there are some interesting angles to explore here. For example, as regards ideas about how the universe may have come into existence, there would seem to be several *overlaps* in the ideas of the late Hellenistic and early Roman imperial age on the one hand and the approximately contemporary late pre-imperial and early imperial China on the other. Both had, *inter alia*, (1) theories of endogenous cosmic self-development, as in Epicurean philosophy and familiar to us from Lucretius, on the one hand, and the totally immanent self-originating and self-shaping *Dao* or Way of Happening in China on the other; and also, alternatively, (2) theories of the shaping of existing matter by some external power like the supernatural *dēmiourgos* imagined by Plato which is paralleled by the Chinese Shaping Force or Transformer, the *Zaohua*, also in the late pre-imperial and early imperial periods. This pair of parallels fades away when in Europe the *creatio ex nihilo* become estab-

lished Christian orthodoxy after Tatian and Augustine. Later, in what we might loosely term the central and later part of the Middle Ages, we find that alchemy and astrology were active *both* in China *and* Europe, with some important differences of course. Even more surprisingly there was concern among serious thinkers in both areas with the issue of what in the West is called “theodicy.” Can the actions of the supreme cosmic power be regarded as always morally just? Are people always so wicked that they deserve to suffer as they often do? Some scholars would regard the supreme power in China, a term we normally translate as “Heaven” (*Tian*), not “God,” as not so different from “God,” particularly as it was sometimes personified as *Shangdi* (roughly “Supreme Lord” or a number of other somewhat comparable translations). Others would maintain that these two metaphysical entities were essentially different. Even hypothetically accepting this latter assertion (whose plausibility depends mostly on how finely one wants the analytical focus to be turned up), the cores of the actual debates had a lot in common. For details on all the foregoing see the overview and the introductions to individual chapters in Hans Ulrich Vogel and Günter Dux (Vogel and Dux 2010). Even if we agree with Duchesne’s doubtful thesis of a long-lasting European “state of variance,” it was surely of a different degree in many different dimensions at any given time. And these degrees surely also varied significantly through time.

It is also Duchesne’s view that a key question is “why the great accomplishments in the sciences and arts have been overwhelmingly European.” But were they? How does one adjudicate? Let us begin with the second of these categories, the “arts,” as the issue here is simpler. Put directly, he shows, so far as I can see, no signs of the deep familiarity with the arts of *any* of the great historical non-European cultures that might entitle him to say what he says. The rich nature poetry of China in the period between the Han and the Tang dynasties, where Xie Lingyun’s “Living in the Hills” (*Shanju fu*) has as much right to be called the world’s greatest environmental poem as Lucretius’s “On the Nature of Things” (*De rerum natura*) has to be called its greatest scientific poem. The majestic landscape paintings of the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties are masterpieces of observation and brushwork that can stand comparison with any Western works on comparable themes. Cao Xueqin and Gao E’s panoramic 18th century *The Story of the Stone* (or *A Dream of the Young Ladies’ Apartments*, in Chinese the *Honglou Meng*), is one of the four or five greatest novels ever written. Also of this company is the earliest major novel of all: *The Tale of Genji* first read to the Japanese Empress’s Court ladies by Lady Murasaki in the 11th century. Such extraordinary artistic achievements cannot be simply dismissed. Sometimes, more-

over, a non-European literary sensibility opens up an entire realm of experience touched on only fleetingly, if at all, in Europe. Since the 1950s, one of the more familiar examples has been the world of the Japanese *haiku* (best read with the help of the translations and commentaries by R. H. Blyth): their precision of focus on the minutest and most humble or evanescent aspects of life and nature can stir somewhere in the back of the mind a strangely powerful Zen-inspired sense both of all there is that exists, and of the causal interlocking of everything that happens. If we turn to India we can find other examples of great works, such as the plays of Kalidasa admired by Goethe. But let us leave it at that for literature. Here, to the extent that one can make objective statements about matters of aesthetic evaluation, Duchesne is wrong.

Music would be a harder case to argue against. The achievements of Western music in, roughly speaking, the half-millennium following Guillaume de Machaut in the 14th century, have no parallel in other histories in their development of a polyphony and harmony that led to a treasure-house of sonic creations without peer. Also a uniquely complete notation created by Guido d'Arezzo and his successors. It is once again true here, though, that some non-European musics can evoke feelings and produce effects, partly by distinctive tunings and intervals, that are not traditionally within the ambit of traditional Western music. Hindustani classical music, as exemplified by the early sitar playing of Ravi Shankar and Ustad Vilayat Khan, for example, whom I listened to enthralled when I was an undergraduate (and an addict of the then ultra-modern Webern), was based on an emotionally vibrant and technically sophisticated heritage. And the accompanying *tabla*, the Indian tuned drum played with the fingertips, permits a virtuosity denied the Western kettledrum and a subtlety unknown to the Western orchestral percussive "kitchen." But music, which offers some real if limited support to the author's case, is, oddly, not part of the book.

The other part of this third thesis, that of "great accomplishments" in "the sciences" being "overwhelmingly European," requires attention to definitions and to period. Since the main discussion in Duchesne's book concerns the social and intellectual *preconditions* for modern achievements in the sciences and technology, this is what I shall focus on. I don't think there can be any dispute that from the end of the 16th through the 20th century, the Europeans monopolized all but a handful of the major scientific breakthroughs. One has to hunt hard to find the few authentic exceptions, such as Zhu Zaiyu's correct mathematical formulation, based on experiment, of the rules for equal-temperament tuning of both stringed and wind instruments published in 1595, on the order of 20 years after its discovery (*History of Technology* 2004, vol. 25, pp. 89–96). But

their existence reminds us that only quite limited social and intellectual changes might have been necessary for this style of thinking to flourish.

If we include “technology,” however, then the author’s statement as applied to the world before about 1600 is a dangerous and potentially misleading exaggeration, though it would not do to undervalue Graeco-Hellenistic and Roman engineering innovations and capacities. But medieval and late-imperial China on its own can offer some of the premodern world’s greatest hydraulic engineering, including the various Grand Canals, and possibly the introduction of the earliest large-scale standardized mass production. Under the Northern Song dynasty a thousand years ago, the Chinese state was turning out 16.5 million iron arrowheads a year by means of multiple moulding. (Yoshida 1967:230). The example of Chinese water-powered multispindle spinning and silk-twisting has already been mentioned. In the matter of routine practical mathematical manipulations, medieval China, with its long-established decimal-place notation and its skill in handling fractions of any kind, was also clearly ahead of Europe at that time (Chemla and Guo 2004). It was only at the very summit that the Hellenistic world rose briefly for a time above all premodern others. To put it oversimply but dramatically, not only was there was no equivalent of Archimedes anywhere else in the world, there was also no counterpart to the Antikythera mechanism, of perhaps circa 100 BCE, that complex hand-operated multi-cogwheel calculator for determining the occurrence of eclipses (for introductions, see Netz 2007 and Marchant 2008). But Archimedes is nowhere mentioned by Duchesne, at least to judge by my memory and his index.

The fourth thesis is that “the development of a liberal-democratic culture was an indispensable component of the rise of the West.” This touches on what is probably an important aspect of the truth, but one that needs to be set in context. A strong case has been made by Jean Baechler (1985, 1994) that the tendency towards a democratic form of power relations had deep historical roots in virtually *all* early or simple societies, and that this in general became diminished and then virtually extinguished during more recent historical times by the pressures on the internal arrangement of social systems by the demands of survival and success in the nearly permanent organized warfare between polities that became endemic in developed human societies. One can, incidentally, find a similar resistance to authoritarian rule described by Pierre Clastres (1987 [1974]) for certain of the Amazonian Indians, though the techniques were almost completely different apart from a partial parallel to the Roman *dictator* in the war chief whose writ ceased to run the moment a war was over. Baechler (1994: 107, 160) sees what he calls the enduring “oligo-polar” nature of the fragmented European state system, which

was in some respects an accidental outcome, as the key factor in making possible what he terms the “reinvention of democracy” in the later 16th century. Or as he put it in the title of a chapter of another book (Baechler 2002: ch. 6), the key factor was “the missing empire of Europe” (*l’empire européen introuvé*), the unification that *would* have occurred had the sub-continent followed the general human pattern, whereas it didn’t. His full argument is more complex, and I am not entirely won over by it, but it links interestingly with Duchesne’s last thesis, as we shall see shortly. It is, to oversimplify, that the strong surviving western European aristocracies played a vital role in resisting trends towards absolutism, so keeping a space open for eventual new democratic developments. If it is granted that this exceptional capacity of early modern Europe to retain, even if in fact with great difficulty, a significant measure of democracy was at least made possible by continuing disunity, then what we are in effect talking about is this: the internal effects of *conjunctures* affecting the *external* relations between polities. Above all, why empires cannot be indefinitely ruled successfully by democratic structures, even backed by an aristocracy (Baechler 1994:188). We are not, in other words, looking at *almost innate cultural predispositions*, which is whither Duchesne’s argument seems implicitly to lead us. The temptation to long-term explanations in terms of predispositions is something that nonetheless has a brief but noteworthy presence in Baechler with his resort to an essentially *Indo-European* kind of peasantry, as he puts it, as the key component of the evolution toward early modern democracy (Baechler 1994:165), notwithstanding the greater part of a millennium of serfdom, which of course kept its grip longer still in East Europe and, above all, in the Tsarist Empire. This is a tricky view to sustain convincingly; and I would personally reserve judgment in its regard. But it is an interesting convergence between the two writers. How far Baechler is right in thinking that this democratic element was *essential* for the development of modern science and modern capitalism, perhaps by keeping open social space for a greater freedom of thinking and of action, is another — very interesting — question, whose answer is far from certain, and which must be left for discussion some other time. It is reasonable for the moment to assume that, on the whole, it at least *helped*. What I find strange in this part of *The Uniqueness of the West* is the absence of any explicit engagement with Baechler’s work, so magisterial at its best and so immediately relevant to so much of what Duchesne is discussing.

The fifth thesis is original and Nietzschean in flavour; and I suspect many readers will find it outrageous. But it can provoke one into thinking hard, which is no bad thing. It is that the West’s “creativity and libertarian spirit” originated in “the aristocratic warlike culture of Indo-European

speakers,” who were “governed by a spirit of aristocratic egalitarianism.” The “primordial basis for Western uniqueness,” Duchesne tells us, “lay in the ethos of individualism and strife” (p. x). The highest ideal in life was “the attainment of honorable prestige through the performance of heroic deeds.” One’s first reaction to this is to ask why, if this was so, were the invigorating effects not equally in evidence in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent, where speakers of one of the oldest great Indo-European tongues, namely Sanskrit, arrived and settled? Arjuna’s troubled heart and sense of duty as he faces battle in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* are hardly those of Beowulf! This question about cause and effect seems not to have been noticed by the author, but it is a fair one. He might (but doesn’t) argue that the perpetuation here of the creative stimulus required intermittent reinjections of reinvigorating barbarism, as proposed for Europe on p. 462, and that these were missing in South Asia. The Chinese specialist will counter that during the Sui dynasty in the late 6th century under which China was reunified, and the Tang that followed it, China may have experienced something not so dissimilar, both dynasties being racial and cultural syntheses of the Chinese and the Xianbi, a war-like Mongol-Turkish people.

A second question, which he *has* noticed, and which he discusses on and off through a subsection of the book (pp. 410–418) is, “Does not Gilgamesh, the principal figure of the oldest epic of which we have a record, even if only an incomplete collection of fragments in several different linguistic and cultural layers, have most of these fame-besotted heroic characteristics?” Duchesne is adamantly opposed to any parallels with the *Iliad* or *Beowulf* being found to affirm such a view, but it seems to me that there are numerous significant elements in common, even if it would clearly be mistaken to claim anything like a point-by-point similarity. Moreover, the surviving handful of early Sumerian stories often differ considerably in this regard from the later master-narrative in Akkadian. Interestingly, in the earliest of all, Bilgames (as he was named in Sumerian) appears as both as the guardian of his people, with two almost-equal heroes — his bodyguard and Enkidu — at his side, in a world where honour requires that debts of honour be paid: thus, in recompense for the kindness of the king of the rival city of Kish to him when he was young, he sets the latter free when he has defeated him in battle (Andrew George 1999: 143–148). In the Akkadian canonical version, consider how Gilgamesh and Enkidu, here his equal comrade-in-arms, slay first Huwawa, a monster living in the cedar forests of the Lebanon, and then the Bull of Heaven sent against them at the request of the outraged goddess Ishtar. It is not unlike the killing of the man-devouring Grendel and his mother, and later of the serpent-dragon, by Beowulf. Consider, too, what

Gilgamesh says to his companion when the latter is fearful of attacking Huwawa: that fame is the only way that a hero can defeat death. And he exults that he is “the most splendid among heroes” (Speiser in Pritchard 1958:51, 55). Beowulf takes the same view as the king of Uruk: our lives all inevitably end, and achieving glory before death is the best a warrior can hope for. Competition for postmortem renown is also a familiar feature in *Beowulf*, especially as embodied in the grudging Unferth, who dislikes the great hero for having performed deeds surpassing his own (Porter 1975: lines 1384-89 and 499 et seq. respectively).

Duchesne’s dismissal of the deep similarities of such sentiments thus overlooks some recent work. His characterization of Gilgamesh as a “despot” as opposed to the ideal ruler who should be a shepherd to his people is too simple, though some passages in the canonical version certainly support it. Above all he does not note that in the Sumerian tale referred to above, before deciding to defend Uruk against Kish, Gilgamesh *consulted* with the elders, and then, finding them too timid for his taste, *consulted* the younger men, who supported resistance (George 1999:143–146). He of course went with the latter.

I have dwelt on these two epics a moment, though without beginning to unravel even a tithe of their complexities, because establishing the uniqueness of the Indo-European spirit of the warrior-aristocrat is crucial to Duchesne’s argument for this fifth point. If it crumbles, his argument for *uniqueness* crumbles. And in fact it is my view that, as it stands, what he says in this regard is mostly less than convincing. This does not mean that he has identified a point without interest or importance. Was there a distinctive Indo-European legacy still at work several millennia later as at least one strand in an ever more complicated cultural tapestry?

The five-point summary does not cover the last chapter. This is entitled “The emergence of the self,” in which it is implied that this was a distinctively western phenomenon. It opens with various themes, swiftly stated, that call out for proper definitions of key terms; but they do not get them. Western aristocrats, he says, referring to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* [or *Spirit*], were “the historical agents in whom ‘self-consciousness’ was able for the ‘first’ time to make its appearance” (p. 429). Likewise, he seems to agree with Hegel that “only the European continent saw the development of freedom” (p. 431). The Indo-European aristocrats awakened a sense of “human ‘inwardness,’” thereby “leading to the discovery of the mind,” and “the unique evolution of a Western self” (p. 431). The views of the contributors to *The Category of the Person* (Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985), an anthology focused on the work of Marcel Mauss, differed widely on such points, but I provided evidence in my own chapter on China that in antiquity and medieval times

one can find celebrated cases of the human actor (*personne*) conceived of as an independent entity. Examples from the later pre-imperial period are the radical philosophical individualist Yang Zhu, and the great poet Qu Yuan whose *Encountering Sorrow* expresses a searing sense of personal isolation. Even in one of the oldest classics, the *Book of Odes*, one can find a lament by a deserted wife that reveals the speaker as having a clear vision of herself as a relatively coherent, enduring, and self-contained entity that makes decisions, carries responsibilities, is possessed of feelings, and has, in general, a fate, a fortune, and a history (No. 58 in Karlgren 1950). Rather later than this, in the historical *Commentary of Zuo*, referring to an event in 6th century BCE, we find that the mother of a former ruler who is defending herself against accusations has a sharp sense of herself as a locus of decision making and as struggling with a life that is partly predetermined, partly the consequences of her own choices. As regards “freedom,” the medieval Chinese had something of a tripartite system: noble (*gui*), free (*liang*), and servile or mean (*jian*). We have documents from the 8th century CE describing and confirming manumission from the third to the second category that are at times lyrical in their phraseology:

We have heard that when slaves are released to be free persons the mountains of felicity rise up high, and that when free persons are crushed down into servile status there is hatred deep as hell. When the fish who has been in captivity sees the open sea, he skims upon the waves. When the breath of spring touches the sleeping willow tree, it stretches aloft. Let what should be done now be done. (Elvin 1973:74)

Duchesne may feel that this was a different sort of freedom from that in the West, but he does not present any arguments to this effect, and it seems that in this area he has simply not done his non-European homework. As to the concept of “mind” in historical times, this leads to serious and difficult questions of definition, but it seems undeniable that once Buddhism had spread from its Indian home and established itself in China not long after the turn of the eras, religious-philosophical discussions of the relation of mental processes to reality gradually became widespread. Thus a basic theme associated with the Huayan school around the 6th century CE was that the world of apparent objects is “created by the objects in one’s own mind” (Carrithers et al. 1985: 171). The remainder of this final chapter is a long discussion of various aspects of Western feudalism not systematically linked to the theme of European uniqueness, but often interesting in its own right.

The foregoing account omits many important themes and arguments. I can also imagine the author arguing back against at least some of the criticisms that I have made, using the disclaimers on his page 177:

Affirming the uniqueness of Western civilization in no way implies the idea that Europe can be viewed as a self-contained civilization. A major secret of European creativeness was precisely its multi-cultural inheritance and its wider geographical linkages with the peoples of the world.

The main trouble with this — at least as regards the middle ages — is that *until the overseas expansion of Europe* after the late 15th century, the general proposition about its exceptionally wide linkages is untenable, especially during the period when Islam blocked most of its contacts with most of the rest of the Old World. As to its being exceptionally multicultural, the Indian subcontinent was also probably at almost all times more multicultural, with its extraordinary range of religions and ethnic groupings. One can definitely make a good case, though one more circumscribed than Duchesne allows, for the exceptional character of Europe during the last half of the second millennium CE, with modern science and its associated attitudes of mind, as the strategic core. For the really *longue durée* it doesn't work.

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