

The Need to Compare

Jack Goody's Historical Anthropology

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A highly respected figure in African studies, Jack Goody has become a distinctive voice in the torrent of academic critiques of western ethnocentrism. His work, spanning more than sixty years, has been based on a single ambition: comparison, for the sake of more accurately locating European history within Eurasian and world history.

Sir John (Jack) Goody (knighted in 2005 for his services to social anthropology) is a well-known critic of eurocentrism, a variant of the ethnocentrism that the most prominent members of his discipline have fought against since the early twentieth century. He is also known as the author of the “literacy hypothesis,” which since the 1960s has contributed to transforming our understanding of the effects that writing has on our psychology, cultures and societies. At first an Africanist, he turned to Europe, and more recently to China and Turkey, in order to rethink the ties that unite the two extremities of Eurasia, and to explain the breaks in their development that have driven them closer or further apart. An involved scholar, he has played a leading role in the debates that have rocked western social science since the 1970s, when although dominant in scientific discourse elsewhere in the world it was already being called upon to justify this dominance. Strikingly steadfast, Goody has maintained this position, or this stance, at the intersection of disciplines and of academic and popular demands, from his early years at Cambridge University up to his very active retirement.¹ So it is important to take his career and his work into account if we want to understand the current state of a recurring obsession, ever since Herodotus, in our writings about human society: comparison. While others, out of caution or from lack of time, often put off the task, Goody felt the need for comparison from an early stage, and 1950s and 1960s anthropology provided a convenient field. Coming from an intellectual tradition hostile to theory, he laid down the conditions favourable to comparison in several different ways, and he applied and tested it in diverse geographical areas and on timescales that connect a good part of his work to a *world history* covering half of the inhabited world, and stretching from prehistory to our time. Before examining the questions raised by this immense ambition, this essay aims to chart the stages of Goody's career, and to offer an interpretation of it.

Anthropology as a War Veteran's Choice

Goody has acted as his own historian on several occasions. In response to interviewers and audiences, as the need arose to position himself in the history of his discipline, or to redefine its borders, he has on numerous occasions listed influential books, decisive encounters, crucial experiences, and turning points in his career. Failure to recognize the dangers inherent in this self-narrating tendency would lead us to collapse under the weight of

¹ *Renaissances: The One or the Many?*, his most recent book, which he wrote with Stephen Fennell, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2010; Goody retired in 1984.

the many references, anecdotes and stories skilfully recounted by Goody. I will therefore limit myself here to reconstructing his path into anthropology, and the influence that the Second World War had on his choice.

Like many other British and American anthropologists of his generation, Goody likes to recall that the war was the opportunity to encounter the Other – but not the radical Other of non-western or “primitive” societies. While Goody was stationed in Cyprus, for him the Other was first and foremost a peasant world which he saw as unchanged for 4000 years, guided by his readings of the Australian archaeologist V. Gordon Childe, and comparison between the tools actually in use and those exhibited in museums.² The Other was also the Italian peasants of Abruzzo. And finally, it was the many encounters with soldiers of various nationalities in the prisoner-of-war camps in which he spent most of his military service. In short, the Other was first of all non-English; it was also, incidentally, illiterate (and Goody was to attribute to these few weeks living alongside Italian peasants without access to the written word his later interest in the social role of literacy). The war changed Goody’s career, not simply because it made him enter the reality of the Other, but because it did so in resonance with certain texts. Though it entailed a break from the classroom, the war was for Goody a continuation of university by other means – a Grand Tour, twentieth-century style. He was to draw particular attention to his reading, while in captivity, James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, a classic work underappreciated by the founders of English academic anthropology who were to become Goody’s teachers.³ The similarity between this anecdote and the intellectual project of returning anthropology to its comparativist roots is no coincidence – although the project as such was of course only to be developed forty years later.

In fact, while the war did affect Goody’s career, this was primarily because – as for many other veterans – it interrupted his studies in literature and made them seem less obvious. With the war’s end came a period of vacillation during which Goody, after failing to enter the Colonial Office, finished his degree in four months and then had a brief go at studying archaeology and anthropology. Wanting to return to non-university life, he taught for a while, and considered pursuing a career in sociology, before a grant from the Colonial Social Science Research Council (CSSRC) made it possible to return to Cambridge to write a doctoral thesis in anthropology under the direction of Meyer Fortes, an expert on West Africa and a colleague of Evans-Pritchard. The war, a necessary but not sufficient explanation of his pursuing anthropology, was also the biographical event that emotionally motivated strong personal adherence to the discipline.⁴ The war provides a motive for the narrative of a conversion to anthropology, concealing the hesitations and shifts that in the space of a few years transformed a would-be colonial administrator in Burma into an expert in West Africa. This lability in Goody’s career cannot be separated from post-war reforms in the British Empire, which provided the funding (through the CSSRC) for his studies. In place of the conventional image of an intellectual who has discovered the world by means of the war, we can see the typical first career steps of an educated British veteran, and a quite early desire to connect the development of intellectual questioning to historical consciousness – also a standard phenomenon among intellectuals.

² V. Gordon Childe, *The Bronze Age*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1930, and *What Happened in History*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1943.

³ Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, *Jack Goody: L’homme, l’écriture et la mort. Entretiens avec Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1996, p. 44.

⁴ Even before the end of the war, he wrote fictional memoirs in the third person, which he finished only near the end of the century. Cf. Jack Goody, *Au-delà des murs*, Parenthèses, 2004.

The Africanist Becomes a Leading Figure in the Profession

In order to find the roots of Goody's comparativism, we have therefore to focus not so much on the war as on Goody's education. In fact, after 1945, and for the first time in Great Britain, anthropology was becoming a career, and this context is essential: public funding of the Empire reforms generated the creation of teaching positions, as well as great interest in Oriental and African studies.⁵ Goody's career is basically that of all of the anthropologists of his generation who were affected by this "boom"⁶: with little professional experience apart from his time in the army, he had a few years of academic training before going into the field for two years, and then publishing his doctoral thesis, *The Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast*, in 1954. The choice of the Gold Coast was not original, either: in devoting himself to the ethnology of what would soon be Ghana, Goody was following in the steps of his teacher, Meyer Fortes. Like him, a significant part of the profession turned away from research on the Pacific, to concentrate on the more complex societies of Sub-Saharan Africa which Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard had studied in *African Political Systems* (1940). The study of kinship in relation to systems of property, which Goody was to pursue up to the 1970s, came directly from this turning point in British anthropology, when it freed itself from the functionalism advocated by Malinowski.

The first years of Goody's career were thus prosperous ones for the profession, the membership of which increased tenfold in twenty years. Three generations were active during this period leading up to the 1970s, when he became a professor: that of his teachers educated before the war, his own, and that of his first students. Then came an identity crisis: the collapse of the British anthropological orthodoxy confronted by structuralist assaults, the end of the Empire, and the first criticism of anthropologists' alleged compromises with colonial governance. As an heir of Fortes, Goody is generally considered to have been a skilful tactician in the power struggles in Cambridge, and he survived the crisis. He became a University Lecturer in 1959, and was elected to a Fellowship at St. John's College in 1960, where he became a Director of Studies in 1969. He was promoted to Reader in 1971 and then Professor in 1973, a position he held up to his retirement in 1984, which enabled him, as departmental director, to be one of the few anthropologists of his generation to remain little affected during this troubled time for the profession. The scale of his work rests on the centrality of his position in British academic anthropology, including his access to Cambridge University Press, with whom he edited several collections.

Why Compare?

The tremendous amount of work produced during these thirty years of Goody's university career has sometimes been criticized for its eclecticism.⁷ It seems more perceptive to distinguish different furrows started by Goody early in his career and stubbornly ploughed ever since, not without variation. Raised in the cult of fieldwork, Goody tried to free himself from it in order to argue for the validity of a comparative and more bookish approach, but he

⁵ Adam Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School*, London, Routledge, 1996 (third edition), pp. 121-4.

⁶ See Edwin Ardener and Shirley Ardener, "A directory study of social anthropologists", *British Journal of Sociology*, 16 (1965), pp. 295-314, quoted by Adam Kuper, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-4.

⁷ Many of the books were collections of articles that had been published previously, sometimes several times, and Goody's productivity benefited from the help of his many assistants, among them his wife, Esther N. Goody, also an anthropologist specializing in Ghana.

always based this project on his long stays in Ghana (1949-1951, 1956-1957, and 1964-1966). The first part of Goody's research was directly influenced by the fashionable methodology of British anthropology in the 1950s, focusing on the study of kinship and property in segmentary African societies. Noticing the importance of funerals in the two northern Ghana villages that he studied, Goody sought to explain this particular treatment of ancestors. His proposed explanation, then based on a legal anthropology, set out both a principle: that it is out of guilt that heirs worship the dead from whom they inherit; and a law: the larger the inheritance, the more these ancestors are worshipped.⁸ Being prevented from producing a work of reference on African kinship – according to his own account – by the daunting work done by Fortes on this subject, Goody was looking, already in the 1960s, for another way to generalize his discussion.⁹ In contrast to Malinowskian ethnology, Goody's study with Fortes and Evans-Pritchard led him to look for anthropological principles that were almost universal.¹⁰

This first attempt to generalize also arose from a question then in fashion, concerning the nature of the state in Africa at the time of decolonization. Comparison was at the centre of this approach, since European anthropologists imported the concept of feudalism – conceived by Marx as a mode of production and an essential stage in the development of a “socio-economic formation” – in order to look for signs of it, or for its absence, in Africa. Goody here took as a point of reference the whole of Eurasia. He cited differences in the productivity of soils and tools, and the rarity of domestic animals (because of diseases), to explain the existence of predator states that were richer in men than in resources, in contrast to European elites in the Middle Ages, who could divert to their benefit the surpluses created by agriculture.¹¹ From this emerged a typology that distinguished, depending on the military technologies in use, between acephalous political systems (with bows and arrows) and centralized states (with guns and horses). There was a theoretical conclusion: the pre-colonial situation was too different from that of Europe to justify using the same term, feudalism.¹²

This work remains familiar only to specialists in African studies. In contrast, an article published in 1963 by Goody and Ian Watt, a specialist in European literature, immediately reached a wider audience. This study, focusing on literacy and its “consequences”, was very much in tune with the times: the Toronto School (Havelock, Innis, McLuhan) had long studied the transition from the oral to the written word. The spadework for this had already been done by Albert Lord and Milman Parry in their studies of the oral origins of the Homeric epic.¹³ Inspired by these developments, Goody wanted to revisit the boundary between those people still called “primitives” and those called “civilized”. While anthropology should study both groups, it should not deny differences between them – in this case, writing. Ancient Greek civilization seemed to him to be the ideal example of a transition towards a writing society, and of the consequences of this transition: on the relation to the past, the accumulation and criticism of knowledge, and forms of logic – but also on the appearance of

⁸ Goody would later recognize that different modes of production can create different modes of inheritance. Cf. Rosaire Langlois, “An Introduction to Jack Goody's Historical Anthropology”, pp. 4-5, in David R. Olson and Michael Cole (eds.), *Technology, Literacy and the Evolution of Society: Implications of the Work of Jack Goody*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006.

⁹ Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁰ *Death, Property and the Ancestors: A Study of the Mortuary Customs of the LoDagaa of West Africa*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1962.

¹¹ This theme was borrowed from Marc Bloch, *Caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*, Paris, Les Belles lettres, 1931.

¹² *Technology, Tradition, and the State in Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971.

¹³ On this context, see Michael Cole and Jennifer Cole, “Rethinking the Goody Myth”, pp. 308-312, in David R. Olson and Michael Cole (eds.), *op. cit.*

social classes, the state and its bureaucracies; and on generational conflicts and the individualization and alienation that these changes entail. Alphabetic writing itself, because it is phonetic and therefore closest to the act of speaking, would develop a consciousness that is more precise and therefore more critical than other kinds of writing. Although Goody and Watt are careful not to take “the Greek miracle” as representative of the adoption and generalization of the role of writing in social life, that miracle would nevertheless be incomprehensible without these phenomena.

A significant part of the rest of Goody’s work has been devoted to the consequences of this thesis, and to responding to the numerous criticisms that it has inspired. The main criticism of course relates to the alleged determinism of the approach developed by Goody and Watt. Goody responded to this criticism, rather unconvincingly, by replacing the word “consequences” by the word “implications”, and also by considering times when the introduction of writing had not resulted in the profound social changes he had described in 1963.¹⁴ More troubling in relation to his later views, was the question: to what extent does the “literacy hypothesis” give new life to the idea of a “great divide” between, on the one hand, Greek, western, civilized, modern societies, and on the other, oriental, primitive, non-western, traditional societies. These criticisms very quickly drew Goody’s attention to the history of China, which he then took to citing more and more in his arguments. However, it would be wrong to think that the “hypothesis” developed only defensively after 1963. In fact, it fitted in very well with the technologist leanings of Goody’s thinking (which he never denied), as well as with his African connection. Indeed, the issue of education in decolonized territories showed the importance of literacy as a technical and social problem. This issue even provided the questions for a test of his hypothesis¹⁵. And the hypothesis also went well with a part of his fieldwork that he left almost unexploited in his Africanist publications up to 1972, although his experience there dated from 1950-1951: the Bagre.

The Bagre is a LoDagaa initiation ceremony, in which creation myths are transmitted. For Goody, the Bagre, by the diversity of its valid versions, and by the effects that the arrival of writing had on this diversity, illustrates several important theses: (1) Mythologies are not, as Lévi-Strauss would have it,¹⁶ ordered systems, but “the sort of thing that mankind can take or leave” – merely one narrative among others, to which listeners and narrators may or may not give credence.¹⁷ (2) Oral societies are not places with a mechanical conformity to tradition – tradition now appearing as a permanent combination of accommodation to and concealment of cultural variation, individual as well as collective. (3) This variation is possible because human beings are fundamentally ambivalent about their own creations. (4) The power of writing, which the 1963 article referred to only hypothetically, reached a hegemonic position in LoDagaa society through the written description of the Bagre – which of course had been written by Goody himself.

¹⁴ Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968; *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987; and *The Power of the Written Tradition*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000. For a recent overview of the debates inspired by Goody’s work on literacy, see Emmanuel Isnard, “Jack Goody, *Pouvoirs et savoirs de l’écrit*”, *L’Homme*, 189, 2009, <http://lhomme.revues.org/index21208.html>; “La littératie. Autour de Jack Goody”, no. 131/132 of the journal *Pratiques*, December 2006, and “*New Literacy Studies*, un courant majeur sur l’écrit”, *Langage & Société*, no. 133, September 2010, reviewed on *La Vie des idées*.

¹⁵ Sylvia Scribner et Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981.

¹⁶ Goody’s rival Edmund Leach was then the spokesman for Lévi-Straussian views in Cambridge.

¹⁷ *The Myth of the Bagre*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 33.

In 1976, with *Production and Reproduction*, Goody tried to bring these scattered threads together. In order to test his theories with statistics, he exploited the data on several hundred human societies in the *Human Relations Area Files*, which had been created by the American anthropologist George P. Murdock in 1947. For the most part, he recounts his views about the connection between land, class, kinship and marriage: in Eurasian societies, daughters as well as sons inherit, in order to preserve status differences in an advanced economy in which surpluses produce hierarchies. Hence a number of implications for the concept of the family and for behaviour, in particular sexual behaviour, and a synthetic formula, from which Goody will thenceforth almost never depart: the differences between African and Eurasian states and societies can be understood as differences of degree (over a continuum of complexity), but also as differences of nature. The latter are rooted in different modes of production, but also in very dissimilar modes of communication: writing, in particular, can lead to bureaucracies and states (this leads him to talk about “literate states”).¹⁸ In all this, Africa highlights the profound unity of Eurasia.

A Return to a Merely Literary Anthropology?

The kind of comparison that Goody introduced thus effectively rose out of the need to understand his chosen territory, Africa, and to understand it, as his Africanist predecessors had (explicitly or not), with Europe in mind. By taking Eurasia into account, as opposed to Europe, he stood out from contemporary world-system theories, which focused on the issue of European economic take-off, industrialization and the development of capitalism. In short, he developed a comparativism with an ambition internal to anthropology. But he retired (or rather became emeritus) at a time of increasing attacks on the profession in which he had been a leading figure in Cambridge for some thirty years.¹⁹ This was also a period when opposing narratives were developed not only by historians but also by anthropologists like Eric Wolf in his *Europe and the People Without History*. The liberalization of China and its inclusion in the global economy (as the world’s workshop) also suggested revisiting the issue of this country’s role in world history.

Faced with these developments, Goody’s thinking – or rather his method – underwent several modifications. His method becoming more focused on the grand narrative of the history of “human culture”, it also became more polemical, because it had to adapt to an increasingly competitive field in which, with the rise of a generally economic global historiography, talk of the Other was no longer confined to anthropologists, and in which the category of the Other itself was being questioned. Opposing all theorizing, Goody responded pragmatically to these changes. Highly capable of taking on board and analysing the latest historiography, he made a number of revisions (for example, on the exceptionality of the west on account of the alphabet),²⁰ and moved the primary field of his investigations to Eurasia. New themes emerge, such as the issue of the Asian influence on Europe.²¹ The theme of the

¹⁸ *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p 117.

¹⁹ On his prominence in the literature in the 1970s, see Adam Kuper, *op.cit.*, p. 186. He was also well received in France, in particular at the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. He was familiar with the project of fusing anthropology and history, under the aegis of the EHESS; he rejected the concept of mentality, but he adopted Marc Bloch’s approach to historical sociology. He sees Bloch as a successor to Frazer, notably in *Les Rois thaumaturges* (1924). The anti-colonial critique of anthropology was initiated by Talal Asad, “Introduction”, in Tala Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, London, Ithaca Press, 1973, and Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon, 1978.

²⁰ *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 17.

²¹ *The Culture of Flowers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 424.

family facilitated this transition to a historical anthropology without borders; replacing the anthropological terminology of kinship, this theme appeared as early as 1983, in order to establish the anthropological unity of Europe after the year 300 (with the entrance of the Church into family life). Here, a critique of the idea of European exceptionalism in world history was already evident, a critique that was to become increasingly important in his work. By the 1980s, Goody has definitively turned his back to fieldwork and his books read less as monographs than as restatements of the main themes developed during his Africanist period, restatements that are now based on encyclopaedic reading. So each work summarizes and adjusts the previous one: the study of the means of production ends in the theme of cooking, the work on flowers leads up to the prohibitions that restrict their uses, and one thing leading to another, as far as pure iconoclasm; the work on the European family ends with reflections on the birth of European capitalism, the feeling of love, etc.²² Likewise, the theme of radical European unity vis-à-vis the rest of Eurasia gradually fades away, almost to nothing in *The Theft of History* in 2006.²³

For the critique of eurocentrism is clearly the backdrop of Goody's work: the exceptionalism of family structures, of feelings (love), and of practices (haute cuisine, flower customs), are all challenged in these works, in which the African referent is still visible, but only just. Eurasian unity is actually constructed in contrast to the image of African unity: it is the absence in Sub-Saharan Africa of the "culture of flowers", of feudal elites, and haute cuisine, which makes perceptible the surprising similarities – based on material conditions – between China and France, Indonesia and Scotland, and so on. Between the urban revolution of the Bronze Age and the modern era, there was no major rupture, asserts Goody. Neither is there any metaphysical differentiation between the two poles of the continent, Europe and the sinicized Far East: though the former developed starting in the sixteenth century, and especially in the nineteenth, its progress, far from being decisive, is in fact merely a catching up with the latter, after the regressive Middle Ages. It is neither to the exceptional vigour of its bourgeoisie and its idea of work, nor to its extraordinary inventiveness – in short, it is not to its "culture" – that Europe owes its temporary domination of world affairs in the nineteenth century. It is simply a matter of the movement of an age-old pendulum, which has actually more often favoured Asia than Europe.

The logic behind what, for those that Goody calls "fieldwork authoritarians", without question amounts to drifting away towards rootless speculation, is clear: Goody's materialism (plus his academic standing) permits him to move quickly up to a level at which anthropological questions shift towards grand humanist questions, often closely tied to historical context. Beyond the details of the arguments, the effectiveness comes partly from the effort, contrary to the functionalist tradition, of setting out a historical narrative that highlights processes and synthesizes the various different analytical threads developed in the research. The distance from the field, turning the post-functionalist anthropologist into a stay-at-home essayist, enables him to argue on equal terms with the economic historians, the rising

²² Ibid.; *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982; *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia: Studies in Literacy, the Family, Culture and the State*, Cambridge University Press, 1990; *The East in the West*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; *Representations and Contradictions: Ambivalence towards Images, Theatre, Fictions, Relics and Sexuality*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1997; *Food and Love: A Cultural History of East and West*, London, Verso, 1998.

²³ *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia: Studies in Literacy, the Family, Culture and the State*, Cambridge University Press, 1990; *The East in the West*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; *The Theft of History*, Cambridge University Press, 2006; *Renaissances: The One or the Many?*, Cambridge University Press, 2010; *The Eurasian Miracle*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010.

stars in global history. This distance leads Goody's work to a radical renewal of the maltreated anthropological discipline, and to its more or less skillful defence.²⁴ In fact, the historical anthropology developed by Goody seeks to return to the ambitions of a pre-fieldwork, literary anthropology, which brings him closer to E.B. Tylor and James Frazer, whom he strives to rehabilitate, although of course he finds very regrettable their eurocentric evolutionism.²⁵ It is Max Weber, with his emphasis on European "rationality", who bears the brunt of this winnowing of great predecessors.²⁶ The attack was gradually extended to other eminent social scientists: Norbert Elias, Fernand Braudel, Joseph Needham, and Kenneth Pomeranz (prominent in the "California School" of world history).²⁷ In line with *Production and Reproduction*, Goody does not base the specific character of his anthropology on a single idea (although a rather fuzzily-used concept of culture increasingly asserts itself in his work), and he prefers a layered approach, distinguishing modes of production from modes of communication. He seems to revert to an idea of human nature, understood as the (in principle, limited) set of variations that life in societies provides to human beings. He also enquires into the material conditions that make evolutions and divergences possible. And he gives his anthropology a cognitive base, based on reading Freud and T.S. Eliot. Leaving aside strategic positioning, he is less inclined than other world historians to stake everything on comparison between China and Europe, preferring instead the intermediate concept of Eurasia. Finally, in accordance with his bookish approach, he emphasizes the cumulative nature of knowledge, and opposes the intention to undermine each other that is sometimes adopted by different generations.

Nuances are not absent from Goody's project of all-round comparison. In particular, he refuses to jump from a challenge to artificial (in particular cultural) oppositions to a consensual humanist universalism. The moderation of his position is especially apparent if we compare it to that of some other world historians. However, some of his attempts to correct imbalances seem excessive (for example, the vision of a medieval European "Dark Ages", or the minoritization of cultural differences with Asia). And other strategies seem ineffective: searching for non-European "renaissances" that are truly equivalent to *the* Renaissance of the sixteenth century appears to be a vain restatement of what has been clearly established to be an essentially ideological idea.²⁸ More fundamentally, the idea of a Eurasian unity

²⁴ His attempt to write in a very personal way a history of British anthropology in the 1950s, to clear his colleagues of any complicity with British colonial governance, was not terribly convincing (Goody, *The Expansive Moment: The Rise of Social Anthropology in Britain and Africa, 1918-1970*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, especially pp. 42-43). On the varying relations of English anthropologies with the Colonial Office, see Benoît De l'Estoile, *Empires, Nations and Natives: Anthropology and State-making*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005; Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945*, New York, 1991; Adam Kuper, *op. cit.*; and George Stocking, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

²⁵ He explains this in "Cognitive contradictions and universals: Creation and Evolution in Oral Cultures", *Social Anthropology*, February 1996, Volume 4, Issue 1, pp. 1-16, an article included in *Food and Love*, pp. 239-260.

²⁶ Especially in *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; *The European Family: an Historico-anthropological Essay*, Oxford/Malden, Blackwell Publishers, 2000; and *The Theft of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²⁷ A non-exhaustive list of the principal voices in debates about Europe's exceptionality would include historians like William McNeill, sociologists like Robert Bellah, biologists like Jared Diamond. The California School rather loosely unites Kenneth Pomeranz, R. Bin Wong, Jack Goldstone, James Lee, Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giráldez, Robert Marks, John Hobson, Jim Blaut, Andre Gunder Frank, and Wang Feng. The great predecessor of this galaxy is the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, especially noted for *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York/London, Academic Press, 1974.

²⁸ Peter Burke, *The European Renaissance: centres and peripheries*, Oxford (UK) and Malden (MA), Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

uninterrupted since the Bronze Age has a certain heuristic value, but it leaves out huge swathes of human history, particularly in the Muslim world. It also flattens out historical changes after the “urban revolution”, thus preventing a finer periodization in which emotional and intellectual changes could be taken into account alongside the technological evolutions.²⁹ As for the “literacy hypothesis”, it has clearly become an essential reference; however, because it is too inattentive to issues of power, and has not been much renewed since its inception, it is in fact hardly ever used in actual studies of literacy.³⁰

What ultimately proves most appealing in Goody’s work is his comparativist faith. It had been a potential of anthropological discourse ever since the discipline’s origins; it was implemented by Goody in the best functionalist tradition, which after all had envisaged monographs in order to improve comparisons of human societies, term by term. The formation of the “Goodyan synthesis” as early as the 1970s reminds us of the historical depth of debates that we have a tendency to regard as having begun only ten or twenty years ago. Decolonization, and the critique of colonialism that preceded it, had already inspired a major effort to understand the difference between Europe and the rest of the world, which the social sciences since Marx and Weber had sought to account for. Goody’s commitment to cross-disciplinary exchanges stands as a fair and anthropology-based contribution to this ongoing ambition.

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²⁹ Kenneth Pomeranz, “Putting Modernity in its Place(s): Reflections on Jack Goody’s *The Theft of History*”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 26(7/8), 2009, pp. 43-47.

³⁰ For a recent critique, see Joanne Rappaport and Tom Cummins, *Beyond the Lettered City: Indigenous Literacies in the Andes*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2012.