

seem to be influenced by the populist narrative of “the peasants versus the incompetent state,” which has been popular in Western studies of socialist countries since James Scott’s path-breaking book *Weapons of the Weak*. Today, most villagers remember collectivization as a struggle of “us” against “them” (the regime), and present themselves as passive victims of circumstance. However, Kligman and Verdery show that the new collective order eventually increased social mobility for Roma, young people, and women, both in and outside of the villages.

The book’s introduction and appendices present helpful discussions of the challenges of grounding research in both oral and written sources. All studies of socialist countries face the difficulty that archival sources, petitions, and memories of eyewitnesses are all heavily influenced by the official language of the regime, or, in the case of oral history, contemporary discourses. It should be said that many developments described in the book also occurred in the Chinese collectivization of the mid-1950s. However, the Soviet Union was the only socialist country to enforce collectivization with the deportation and elimination of millions of *kuláks*, and the so-called “Soviet blue print” displayed other exceptional elements. It is clear that we need more studies that compare different forms of socialist agriculture. I recommend *Peasants under Siege* to everyone who is interested in peasants-state relations under socialism or in modern Romanian history.

———Felix Wemheuer, University of Vienna

Jack Goody, *Renaissances: The One or the Many?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

doi:10.1017/S0010417512000126

Jack Goody, in all his many prolific years, has never written a dull work. Though the word “comparative” does not seem to have featured in any of his titles, comparisons—with their constructively unsettling effects—and a perspective spanning Eurasia and Africa, have characterized his writings from the 1960s on. In his latest book, he starts from the European concept of Renaissance, and the thing it was coined for, which he calls a European “burst forward” (the adverb offers a hostage), first in Italy, then more widely, between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. He inspects critically renaissance’s core meaning of rebirth, in order to compare its alleged anticipations, repetitions, and analogues. The metaphor signals the inspiration of the past. Oral myths and traditions can transmit such inspiration, but Goody is interested here in pasts known through texts, not just in Europe but in non-European cultures too. Long before the words “global” and “transnational” history appeared

on university curricula, Goody concerned himself with the things. He is more frank now than before about what drives him: a determination to challenge Eurocentrism and the teleology that makes Europe's lead in modernity a foregone conclusion.

The genesis of *Renaissances* lies in some of Goody's earliest work. He himself identified a particular co-authored article, "The Consequences of Literacy," which appeared in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* in 1963: in 1986, in the preface to *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Goody described this article as "brashly entitled." The adverb was tongue-in-cheekily unrepentant. *Renaissances* reprises the argument that a literate culture exhibits specific traits, whose interactions produce not a simple binary—literate: oral—but highly varied consequences and options, social, economic, and above all communicative. Texts formulate, preserve, and transmit knowledge, but how these processes affect culture at large depends on who commissions, studies, interprets, teaches, and applies the texts. In the first chapter, Goody introduces and explores the role of religious texts, especially those of the "Abrahamistic" trio of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Though he downplays the difference between monotheists and polytheists (exemplified by Greeks and Chinese), noting that the Egyptians practiced a monotheism "buried in polytheistic beliefs," Goody says that the monotheistic religions were "in practice the most hegemonic." The effects were two-edged: hegemony stifled both "independent enquiry" and representational art, and created "a coherence of the 'irrational'" (pp. 12–13). Yet these same religions were pre-set to return to the foundational texts, in "periods of looking back," conceived as reformations or recuperations, which sometimes produced "bursts forward" of knowledge and creativity, even if, in between, came periods of conservatism and stasis. In the rest of the book Goody is, rightly, far less concerned with the inevitable oscillations, the blips and freezes, than with the returns and bursts forward, and what conditions and contingencies promote them.

This is where comparisons and perspectives broaden. Goody is interested in contacts and influences between text-based cultures, notably between the Islamic world and Christian Europe—chapter 2 deals with medicine as a medieval example—but he is even more interested in the endogenous traits and clusters within each culture, and how historical patterns of change are manifested over long spans of time. Arnold Toynbee and Fernand Braudel are progenitors of this intellectual project, and the Renaissance is "at the center" because it provides a paradigm alongside which multiple "renascences" in European and other cultures can be identified, analyzed, and compared. The distinction between terms creates an expectation which hovers over the remaining chapters and which the book fulfils in the end.

In the conceptually complicated chapter 3, "Religion and the Secular," Goody traces a tension between philosophy and theology in Islam and Judaism, as in Christianity, at very different periods in each case, and

extends this point to Hinduism and Buddhism, and even to China (though he recognizes that religious specialists there did not occupy the hegemonic position they had elsewhere [85]). Here Goody starts many hares that, unlike sheep, are not to be rounded up and penned. *Aperçues* abound. Not only in medieval Christendom but also in the Islamic world and in Judaism, literacy led beyond the Book. Love poetry thrived in all these cultures. Scientific ideas were discussed in schools; they grew in botanists' gardens, in medical consulting rooms and in naval yards; they were applied by the builders of cathedrals and mosques, fortifications and palaces. It was not only in Christendom that the intolerance of monotheistic hegemonic creeds was modified in practice by humanistic and "secular" values. Especially through trade, contacts between cultural zones proliferated in "vaguely equivalent societies" (90–91).

In more detailed and lengthy considerations of renaissances in Islam, India, and China (chapters 4, 6, and 7) cyclical patterns emerge. Here a collaborator, Stephen Fennell, has helped with the spadework. The results, never less than interesting, do sometimes read like the summary narratives often encountered in large-scale cross-cultural syntheses. In the 120 footnote references to the chapter on China, for instance, some half-dozen secondary synoptic works predominate, most of a certain vintage. Yet the chapter's concluding assertion that "looking back [in China] has not prevented a total 'modernization'" (240) is in part belied by the persistence and ubiquity of those backward looks. In chapter 5, by contrast, Goody's sole-authored reflections on Judaism's renaissances include a quotation from his book's dedicatee, Eric Hobsbawm, in which the impact of later-nineteenth-century urbanization on Jewish emancipation is likened to "the lid [being] removed from a pressure-cooker" (154). This chapter begins and ends in modern times with "efflorescence" that involved "not so much a looking back as a looking around" (145, 159) to Islam and to the Asiatic world as well as to Christian Europe. Just as "the Italian Renaissance" had not abandoned but circumscribed Christianity's cultural sway, so secularization confined the sway of religious Judaism, letting immigrant Ashkenazi Jews dominate American cinema and much of art and science in the West, thence globally.

In the final chapter, "Were Renaissances only European?" Goody seems to be heading toward a negative answer: he points out that all the major cultures considered have had Dark Ages, followed by "renaissances" typically centered on rulers and their courts, which stimulated the increased flow of written communication, consumer demand, and commercial supply. Is "renaissance" after all a synonym for "Renaissance" (as implied fleetingly at page 241)? Given premises and concerns voiced at the outset of *Renaissances*, the reader is surprised by the conclusion that only in Europe did the return to Antiquity cause a "looking back" so determined, a break with the medieval past so drastic, and a degree of secularization so large, as to allow "a burst forward in science and in knowledge generally," which opened the door to modernity (261–62, 265;

cf. 62). *The Renaissance's* “uniqueness” (272) turns out to depend, in other words, on a uniquely strong version of the break in continuity (“nobody else had lost their past in quite the same way” [260]) caused by the Western European Dark Ages and the subsequent domination of the Latin Church. *The Renaissance*, then, historically specific and with irreversible ripple effects, is indeed “*only* European” (my stress). There is no truck here with Eurocentrism or teleology, nor any lack of good faith, but simply a recognition that, some similarities notwithstanding, the Renaissance in Europe came about in conditions that were not replicated elsewhere—hence, was different from any renaissance.

Goody's historical diagnosis is correct, but a reviewer who moonlights as a medieval Europeanist raises an eyebrow over how he reached it. Medieval Europeans had not “lost their past,” nor was the Renaissance possible without multiple medieval renaissances, or even renaissances, Carolingian, Ottonian, and twelfth-century (Goody is familiar with these but discounts them), that effected new versions of Antiquity, and new fusions of these with other cultural inheritances, biblical, variously Roman, and variously barbarian, in which law and practical know-how (*scientia*) loomed large. Do many European renaissances a Renaissance make? If so, however labeled, they are not mere links in a chronological chain but documented phenomena whose relationships cumulatively suggest, even explain, a comparatively studied *social and historical* one—and Goody has done it again!

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Stephen Chrisomalis, *Numerical Notation: A Comparative History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

doi:10.1017/S0010417512000138

What first strikes a reader of this impressive work is its sheer encyclopedic comprehensiveness. Whereas most authors might base their discussion of numerical notation on a few select examples, Chrisomalis is committed to including each and every known system of numerical notation that has ever been used by humans. This is an ambitious goal, but the author is up to the task: he identifies one hundred different systems that have been used from the 4th millennium BCE to the present day, and divides them into five “families” according to their shared origins and mutual influence. The systems on the list include some very familiar ones, such as our “western” and Roman numerals; some less so such as the Babylonian, Mayan, and Brahmi systems, the latter being the ancestor of Arabic and western numerals; and some truly esoteric ones such as the script developed by Sultan Njoya of