

Review Article

Ideas without borders

The Europeanization of the world: on the origins of human rights and democracy

By John M. Headley. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. Pp. 308. 8 halftones. Hardback £19.95, ISBN 978-0-691-13312-6.

The argumentative Indian: writings on Indian history, culture, and identity

By Amartya Sen. London: Penguin, 2006. Pp. 432. 3 b/w illustrations. Paperback £9.99, ISBN 978-0-141-01211-7.

The Declaration of Independence: a global history

By David Armitage. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp. 320. Hardback, £17.95, ISBN 978-0-674-02282-9; paperback £12.95, ISBN 978-0-674-03032-9.

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Developments within American academe since the 1960s have worked to marginalize or reject, while vilifying, what formerly seemed most solid and meritorious in the Western tradition ... The West may be responsible for much of the present state of the world, including some horrendous features. Nevertheless, there is much in the Western tradition that we need to recognize, nurture, and enhance, rather than vehemently denigrating the entirety and indiscriminately pursuing the celebration of variety and differences for their own sakes ... [T]he object here is to deepen our historical

appreciation of two distinctive features of our civilization – the idea of a common humanity that reveals itself in programs of human rights, and the tenability of political dissent that expresses itself in constitutional democracy; they bear within themselves the ideas of equality and of political freedom, respectively.¹

[T]o recognize that the form of Indian democracy is based on the British model does not undermine it in any way. [But] to take the view that there is something quintessentially ‘Western’ about [democratic] ideals and values [that is, tolerance and liberty], related specifically to the history of Europe, can have a dampening effect on their use elsewhere ... [And] is it indeed true (as claimed, for example, by Samuel Huntington) that ‘the West was the West long before it was modern’? The evidence for such claims is far from clear ... [F]reedom and tolerance both get support from Aristotle (even though only free men – not women and slaves). However, we can find championing of tolerance and freedom in non-Western authors as well. A good example is the emperor Ashoka in India, who during the third century BCE covered the country with inscriptions on stone tablets about good behavior and wise governance, including a demand for basic freedoms for all – indeed, he did not exclude women and slaves as Aristotle did ... There are, to be sure, Indian classical authors who emphasized discipline and order over tolerance and liberty ... But Western classical writers such

1 John M. Headley, *The Europeanization of the world: on the origins of human rights and democracy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 5 and 7.

as Plato and St. Augustine also gave priority to social discipline ...²

How can historians and historically minded scholars in other disciplines contribute to contemporary debates about the global spread of treasured ideals, such as the notions that tyrannized populations should be able to establish independent states and that individuals should be protected from abusive governments? Does it help or hinder internationalist projects, such as those promoted by the United Nations, to try to pinpoint and then to emphasize the specific geographic and temporal points of origin of the core ideas articulated in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an important product of United Nations debates, whose sixtieth anniversary is about to be celebrated as I write this in November 2008? Or is it more worthwhile (and perhaps also simply more accurate) to stress the hybrid nature of such documents, which were, after all, often crafted by groups with multinational memberships and which incorporate language drawn from more than one cultural tradition? What value does looking backward have as we try to navigate through the ideological minefields of the present age, when talk of a 'clash of civilizations' can become a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy, and when authoritarian leaders concerned only with staying in power can use claims about the need to respect 'cultural difference' in a purely cynical fashion? These are complicated, deeply vexed questions, which a variety of authors have been wrestling with in one way or another in recent years, coming at the issues from diverse vantage points due to their training, ideological orientation, and location, and to the countries and periods whose histories they know best.

Perhaps only one thing has become crystal clear as a result of the burgeoning literature on these issues, which I see as including works ranging from the legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon's *A world made new: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), which focuses on the 1940s and emphasizes cosmopolitan currents as well as the actions of an American individual; to the French cultural historian Lynn Hunt's *Inventing human rights: a history* (New York: Norton, 2007), which explores distinctive shifts in European approaches to empathy in

the eighteenth century; to *Human rights, human wrongs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), a volume based on the 2001 Amnesty International lectures, which is edited by Nicholas Owen and contains contributions by everyone from the philosopher and rights-talk sceptic Tzvetan Todorov, to the post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, to the jack-of-many-trades and frequent defender of humanitarian interventions Michael Ignatieff. What is the one thing that this diverse corpus reveals? That no single book – even one with as distinguished, international, and interdisciplinary a set of contributors as *Human rights, human wrongs* – can be expected to provide us with definitive answers to all or perhaps even any of the questions posed above. This is not, however, to diminish the value of continued work in the field. For sometimes, when several new publications are placed side by side and read together, we can at least begin to see more clearly what exactly is at stake in important debates over the origins and spread of precious ideas and ideals, while also getting a sharper sense of the main strategies that academics wrestling with the all-too-topical issues of oppression and tyranny have been or could be using to move discussion of the subjects forward.

One of my main arguments here will be that this is the case with the three books that are the focus of this essay. *The Europeanization of the world* (the work of a prominent Renaissance specialist) and *The argumentative Indian* (by a philosophically and historically minded economist) will get the lion's share of attention below, in part because of how differently their authors approach a cluster of central concerns. I will bring Armitage, a scholar of the Atlantic world, into the discussion at the end, however, to see if his detailed study of how an important Western document was created and then 'embarked' upon an 'international career' and 'broke loose from the circumstances of its birth' (p. 15) can resolve any of the tension between Headley's and Sen's visions and methods.

When I claim that these three books are worth reading together, this should not be construed as suggesting that I feel each is equally on target. It will soon become clear, for example, that I find Sen's approach to the 'Western tradition' (one that emphasizes its internal contradictions) considerably more compelling than Headley's. I admire the erudition of *The Europeanization of the world*, especially its careful explication of how encounters with new lands and a re-engagement with Western classical texts stimulated novel Renaissance thinking about the nature of humanity. And I find some of

2 Amartya Sen, *The argumentative Indian: writings on Indian history, culture, and identity*, London: Penguin, 2005, pp. 284–5.

Headley's specific claims persuasive, such as that the Enlightenment has sometimes been credited for developments that preceded it. But I think Sen is right about the danger – when it comes to historicity and politics alike – of overstating the uniqueness and consistency of the Western tradition.

I want to stress – since it probably shapes my impression of all three books – that my main graduate training was in the social and cultural history of the modern period very broadly and loosely defined (meaning roughly 1789 onwards, to borrow the chronological starting point of *The birth of the modern world*, C. A. Bayly's landmark survey); and that that same training involved a particular focus on China and secondary emphases on Japan, Britain, and France. As a result, when I think about the challenges posed by moving into 'world history', taking a 'global turn', or embracing a 'transnational' approach, my default mode is still to assume that the main issue to be confronted will be getting beyond frameworks that are tied to the nation-state – or to empires such as those associated with Queen Victoria and the rulers of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), to which a contemporary nation-state traces its descent. As Prasenjit Duara's sophisticated and evocatively titled *Rescuing history from the nation: questioning narratives of modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and a variety of others have stressed, after all, the project of modern history has long been enmeshed in the workings and myths of these specific sorts of modern political formations.

Let us first consider Sen's approach. Though the name of a modern state, India, figures in Sen's title, he is not primarily interested in 'rescuing history from the nation' in Duara's sense. Instead, though he spends some time debunking nationalist myths about India's past and has much to say about legacies of empire, he is most concerned with challenging myths about 'civilizations' as units. He is disturbed by the hold – to his mind still a powerful and powerfully distorting one – of visions of 'civilizations' as discrete entities with unified 'traditions' to be celebrated or reviled. He skillfully debunks the canard of 'Asian values', arguing that it is based upon a tendency to overlook the incredible variation of moral codes and approaches to politics within a massive and culturally diverse landmass. And he has no time for talk of a unified 'Western tradition' and attempts to give it exclusive credit for things that have been prized by open-minded and tolerant people based in disparate parts of the world. Here, too, he claims, there has been a tendency to gloss

over important forms of heterogeneity. This approach shows through in the section from *The argumentative Indian* quoted at the start of this essay, and even more so in an ensuing section, in which he suggests that we should start classifying ancient philosophers not in terms of their religion or culture but in terms of their views on tolerance and liberty: 'Aristotle and Ashoka on one side, and on the other, Plato, Augustine and Kautilya' (a fourth-century BCE order-loving Indian).

One of the main threads that runs through Sen's book is a call for greater appreciation of the international variation within and mutability of traditions, and of the hybrid nature of things associated with particular parts of the world. We too easily forget, he suggests, how often the same values have emerged independently in different settings (the theme of his discussion of Ashoka and Aristotle), and how concepts or approaches that have come to be associated with one tradition were originally the result of interactions between multiple ones. He makes this latter point especially well in discussions of mathematics and science, whether by teasing out the mongrel linguistic roots of trigonometry terms or stressing how 'extensively' work done in 'Babylon, Greece and Rome' influenced early Indian astronomy (p. 28).

His central political points include this simple one: current understandings of and debates about notions of equality, rights, and democracy – all things he values; all things he is ready to admit have, at times, though not always, been most fully appreciated in Western locales – are undermined when we fall into the trap of assuming that particular civilizations (as opposed to particular rulers, particular polities, particular religious groups within a polity, and so forth) have treasured them, while other specific civilizations (as opposed, again, to more specific kinds of entity) have dismissed them. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the 'peculiarly reductionist' talk of a 'clash of civilizations' is anathema to him – and not just because 'Samuel Huntington places India firmly in the category of "the Hindu civilization"', when the country has 'many more Muslims (more than 140 million – larger than the entire British and French populations put together) than any other country in the world with the exception of Indonesia and, marginally, Pakistan' (p. 54).

The Europeanization of the world is also concerned far less with nations and empires than with civilizations, yet Headley's take on the general problem and the Western tradition in particular is radically different from Sen's. Headley insists, contra Sen (though without invoking him), that the current

era is one in which ‘Western civilization’ is being held in too low rather than too high regard, blamed for evils more often than it is given credit for anything. He insists, again contra Sen (and again without invoking him), that it is vital to think not in terms of each region having multi-stranded traditions but rather of there being one clearly dominant ‘tradition’ in the singular. This is clearest in his approach to the West, but his passing references to other settings suggests that he thinks that there are relatively unified entities such as the ‘Chinese tradition’ as well, defined in terms of a single, key, Confucian thread rather than being envisioned as a braided amalgamation of different sorts of modes of thought that come together to form a twisted rope.

Finally (and here he does refer to Sen’s *Argumentative Indian* as the kind of work against which he is writing), he is impatient with the notion that in any civilization other than the Western one can we see a sustained commitment over time to two crucial things: ‘a comprehensive understanding of humankind’ as a universal group with members who deserve to be treated equally; and a prizing of ‘political dissent’ and a ‘diversity’ of opinions as necessary to the health of polity. Those such as Sen who make counterclaims to this position, Headley insists, tend to bring up the tolerant nature or egalitarian visions of ‘truly attractive, unusual figures such as the emperors Akbar and Asoka in Indian civilization’ (that, too, I guess, is seen in the singular) or ‘the Confucian Mencius’ (p. 5).

Pondering Headley’s approach, one thing about it that troubles me is that, despite focusing on an era before that of the nation-state, it comes across so often as a kind of transnational equivalent to the nationalist narratives from which (as Duara and others persuasively argue) history needs to be rescued. Headley wants us to think of the unit that interests him as bounded and enduring. The West becomes, in his account, a kind of nation writ large, complete with an origin story that goes back to Greece and Rome and a period of rejuvenation and reinvention (nations can have those as well) in the Renaissance. His story shows ‘it’ (the West) facing challenges and encountering other units of its kind (specific, unitary civilizations), sometimes being transformed by this encounter, more often transforming those it encounters, but remaining an identifiable entity. Like a sophisticated nationalist historian, he admits that his unit’s past has its blemishes (that slavery is one provides a parallel to patriotic American tales), but these are seen as somehow unrelated to its essence.

Sen, on the other hand, when focusing on what could be an equivalent unit – what Headley would call ‘Indian civilization’ – sees not singularity and unity but a shape-shifting constellation of traditions. Though seeing all civilizations as multi-stranded and fluid, he refers often to a single Indian tradition, the ‘argumentative’ one – encapsulated by the story of Indians being most afraid of death because they know that, once gone, they will no longer be part of arguments that will continue in their absence – but not because it defines the Indian people. Rather, he claims, he focuses on the ‘argumentative Indian’ because competing figures, such as the ‘spiritual Indian’, which he thinks of as no more representative, have received more attention of late.

Reading Headley and Sen side by side allows one to construct a spirited debate between the two, even though the former only mentions the latter in a footnote and the latter never mentions the former at all. When each poses a rhetorical question, it could easily be construed as aimed at the other. Headley has Sen specifically in mind when he asks (after noting that, of course, one can point to specific, isolated non-Western historical figures who espoused tolerance), ‘But where [is] the continuity? the sustained influence? the religiously neutral legal framework?’ (p. 5). Only in the West do we see these, according to Headley. It is Gertrude Himmelfarb to whom Sen gives the credit for articulating ‘with admirable explicitness’ the assertion, which he finds flawed, that ‘ideas of “justice”, “right”, “reason” and “love of humanity” are “predominantly, perhaps even uniquely, Western values”’ (p. 283). But one could easily imagine a revised edition of *The argumentative Indian* incorporating a reference, right after this summary of Himmelfarb’s position, to *The Europeanization of the world* as a work that provides a slightly more nuanced and updated version of her argument. And, after noting the way that Headley credits the West alone with a sustained tradition of viewing all human beings as belonging to a single category (as opposed to differentiating between the more and less fully human on the basis of religion or caste and so forth), Sen might leave unchanged the rhetorical question that he poses about Himmelfarb’s list of noble sentiment, worthy ideals, and rational practices that she claims are distinctive Western values: ‘But are they?’

There are many ways to enter into this debate, for Headley and Sen part company on so many issues, from whether civilizations are best seen as unitary, to whether the Western tradition tends to get too

much or too little credit these days for the more admirable aspects of the modern world, to whether the calls for tolerance made outside of the West before modern times should be seen as important or mere flukes. And whether individual historians end up siding with Headley or Sen, each of whom makes a passionate and erudite case for a particular vision of the legacies of the past and the problems of the present, will probably be the result of many things, from political leanings to life experiences to epistemologies.

In my case, it probably has a lot to do with the particular topics that have been the focus of my research. One of these has been the history of the city of Shanghai between the 1840s and 1940s, a period during which it was a subdivided treaty port, made up of sections run largely or exclusively by Westerners and sections run by Chinese authorities. In treaty-port-era Shanghai, Western and Chinese authorities certainly handled many specific issues differently. But it does not help to go into this historical terrain assuming that the former, due to their traditional values, would be predisposed, à la Headley, to view all people as equal. How then to explain their decision to keep the best park under their control off-limits to all Chinese residents other than servants for much of the period? Nor does it help to assume that only the Chinese authorities in the mix would have argued that a concern with order should be paramount, since many local Westerners, apparently not realizing that this was an 'Asian value', were passionate defenders of just this notion.

Another focus of my research, which again leads me into Sen's camp, has been the Boxer Crisis of 1899–1901. This event began with Chinese anti-Christian insurgents using violence to try to rid the country of a foreign creed and kill all believers in that religion. They lashed out against foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians alike, treating the former as 'devils' and the latter as 'secondary devils' – a classic example of dividing humanity into individuals thought of as fully human and individuals thought of as less than human. In one standard version of the story, which fits with a tale of 'Europeanization' in Headley's sense, the uprising was put down by a consortium of Western, Russian, and Japanese troops – soldiers affiliated with countries that had recently come together to codify rules for humane warfare – and the Qing Dynasty (which at the last minute threw its support behind the Boxers) was given a clear message: it could only continue to rule China if it promised never again to

back such a movement and made moves toward becoming a constitutional monarchy and otherwise shifted onto a more civilized track. What this leaves out of the picture, however, is the fact that, as Paul A. Cohen stresses in *History in three keys: The Boxers as event, experience, and myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), there were a great many parallels between the worldviews of the anti-Christian insurgents and their Western opponents. And the fact is that the foreign foes of the Boxers spoke of their opponents in harshly dehumanizing terms before heading to China, and once there carried out campaigns of retribution that violated all of the recently celebrated rules of humane warfare. Here again, coming to the topic with Headley's assumptions about the Western tradition and its distinctiveness in mind seems to have little value.

Let us turn, finally, to Armitage's *Declaration of Independence*, a work that provides a sense of what a much more focused form of globally minded intellectual history might look like, and celebrates an aspect of Western history yet avoids the pitfalls of Headley's approach. It emphasizes the need to be attentive to the strains and stresses that are likely to be present within any particular tradition (both the British deprivation of liberty to colonial subjects and the struggle for more rights are treated as strands of the same civilization), and it encourages us to focus, à la Sen, on the flow of ideas across borders, as flagged by chapter titles such as 'The world in the Declaration of Independence' and 'The Declaration of Independence in the world'. It is not without its flaws: most notably, it feels at times as though it is either too long (many of its points could have been conveyed equally well in an extended essay as opposed to even a slim book and there are some repetitive sections) or too short (its treatment of later declarations would have benefited by more local context, more of a sense of what was left out or added in to fit the 1776 template to specific needs).

Still, Armitage guides the reader expertly through the making of the document itself. And the appendix, made up of the texts of many documents inspired by the American declaration, encourages readers to ruminate independently about the shifts in emphasis that occurred as the genre begun in 1776 developed and globalized. This nicely makes it a book that extols a Western link to human rights with greater specificity and without the defensive tone of Headley's book, and which strives to open up debates rather than settle them.