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1

Europe's Grand Dialogue



The Portrait of the World

Venice, the summer of 1630. A long day draws to a close. An evening breeze blows in from the Lagoon over roof tiles still warm from the day's sun, the rush of air fanning the foreheads of three men who have gathered in one of the city's palaces. They have spent the day deep in earnest conversation, discussing the two "chief world systems": the model of Claudius Ptolemy, believed since antiquity, according to which the Earth was at the center of the universe, and the theory, not yet a century old, of the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, which had demoted the Earth to a planet orbiting the Sun. Sagredo, the group's host, now brings the day's discussion to a close with a speech extolling the human mind and the arts and sciences of his time. He praises the skill involved in removing the superfluous parts of a block of marble, thus revealing the beautiful figure contained therein. He acclaims the ability to mix colors, to spread

them across a canvas, and so to portray all visible things after the manner of a Michelangelo, a Raphael, a Titian. He cannot stop marveling, he says, at the age's musical compositions, poetry, architecture, and its art of navigation. But one invention above all he finds worthy of admiration: printing.

What sublimity of mind was his who dreamed of finding means to communicate his deepest thoughts to any other person, though distant by mighty intervals of space and time! Of talking with those who are in India; of speaking to those who are not yet born and who will not be born for a thousand or ten thousand years; and with what facility, by the different arrangement of twenty characters upon a page!¹

Behind this fictional Venetian scene was a great author: Galileo Galilei. The episode is found in his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, first published in Florence in 1632. Galileo puts his own views into the mouth of a scholar named Salviati, a proponent of the Copernican worldview. The host, Sagredo, plays the role of moderator. Yet he, like Salviati, is a supporter of Copernicus and thus also embodies Galileo somewhat. Advocating the old Ptolemaic system and Aristotelian science is the pedantic Simplicio, whose name means "simpleton." He is dispatched with great irony. Galileo's treatise bubbles over with wit and oozes with sarcasm. The author's aim is to convince an urbane audience. He therefore leads with rhetoric, not mathematics. The arguments put forth by his spokesperson Salviati are not new, nor do they always hit the mark by any means (for example, he thinks he can cite the tides as evidence that the Earth moves). The elegance of the argument is more important than the facts of the matter.

But that is not what concerns us. Galileo's *Dialogue* epitomizes a style of learned discussion that first arose in European culture and that, for a long time, was only cultivated there. Marked by the virtues of curious questioning and serene doubt, it eschewed conflict but embraced booming polemics. Thanks to the printing press, half a continent could participate in the grand dialogue. Galileo's text embodies this novel art of conversation, unparalleled in world history. Its author had not simply discovered something new; he argued in a new way.² Admittedly, his model, the Ciceronian dialogue, had deep historical roots, going all the way back to a discussion practice pioneered by Socrates in the fifth century BC. Over time, that ancient manner of seeking wisdom had become a method for gaining scientific knowledge. Socrates and Cicero were thus invisible guests at the summer evening symposium in Venice staged by Galileo.³

Many of the developments he praises can be summed up under the heading *revolution*. The first steps towards mechanization in the thirteenth century amounted to a fundamental overthrow of the world that had existed before. Johannes Gutenberg's invention set a media revolution in motion. It was preceded by what we might call a *discursive revolution*,⁴ a broadening—initially gradual but ever swifter—of the topics that could be written and spoken about, focused on the secular world and especially on antiquity. With the Reformation, a religious revolution followed. Finally, Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo revolutionized cosmology and physics. Taken together, these revolutions changed the world. They created what we call *modernity*, or to be more precise, the Western variety of modernity, which has exerted its influence on the entire world.

Without the dialogue with antiquity that was at the heart of the culture of the Renaissance—the subject of this book—these radical changes would have been unthinkable. Without the possibility of conversing and debating with others, of discussing issues critically, of reasoning publicly, democracy never would have arisen, nor would that abundance of technical innovation and scientific knowledge have been achieved that, for better and for worse, marks our day and age. In the words of the German poet Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), “A breath of our mouth becomes the portrait of the world, the type of our thoughts and feelings in the other’s soul. On a bit of moving air depends everything human that men on Earth have ever thought, willed, done, and ever will do.”⁵ Our book is about this *grand dialogue*, this exchange of knowledge, ideas, and practices that shaped the culture of the Renaissance. It was largely restricted to a predominantly male elite. Yet what those few creative minds conceived and constructed changed the world for everyone. Our aim is now to reconstruct how it was possible for the Renaissance to come about and to ponder the consequences it has had. Without its ideas and inventions, the modern world we know may not have been worse off—but it certainly would have been different.

In order to discover how we came to be and what we are, we must journey far and wide. By drawing comparisons with other regions, we hope to reach an understanding of the causes for why the Latin part of Europe underwent a development that gave its culture a worldwide impact. It is a tiny region, comprising not even two percent of the Earth’s surface. On three sides, it is bounded by water. To the east, it borders on Russian and Greek Orthodox cultures, a boundary now marked by the Baltic states, Poland, and Hungary, and further to the south by the Balkans.

History of a Possibility

Cultivating the art of conversation and thereby creating a space for disagreement and controversy are among the most important achievements of the Renaissance. Disagreement reveals the weak points of arguments and the cracks in the foundations of theoretical edifices; critical debates have always attended technological innovation. The art of arguing was driven and accompanied by intellectual revolutions. One such was the methodological paradigm shift that is usually designated as *Scholasticism*. Another, indicating the shift in intellectual style, was the diffusion of the revived art of ancient rhetoric that animates Galileo's treatise. What is the essence of the Renaissance? Mining antiquity for its treasures, refining them, using them to create new things, and ultimately surpassing them. Just about every department of knowledge was revolutionized. The Middle Ages, no doubt, did more than debate the sacred, but the Renaissance promoted the wholesale conquest of secular terrain. Across media of all kinds—from books to images, from preaching to disputation—the grand dialogue seized on every topic imaginable. In the lecture halls of universities, in patrician villas and princely palaces, even in monasteries and the Vatican, the heart of the Roman Catholic Church's power, a dialogue unfolded whose dimensions, in terms of the topics discussed and the number of participants, were unprecedented. It is no wonder that during the Renaissance the art of conversation itself was discovered as a topic of conversation.⁶

The expansion of free spaces for thinking, speaking, and writing took place in a world whose comforts may seem paltry to us—a world where the fight for survival left little time for culture and where religious conflict reliably monopolized all human reasoning. How such an environment could nevertheless produce the “European Miracle” (Eric Jones) and with it the “Great Divergence” (Kenneth Pomeranz) of the “West”—a value-free designation referring above all to parts of Europe and the New World—from the rest of the globe is one of the most hotly disputed questions in the discipline of history.⁷ Is Europe's “success” primarily a consequence of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, and therefore nothing but the shameful product of exploitation? Was its fuel the blood of oppressed peoples?⁸ Have Europeans passively profited from the decline of the Asian economy since the seventeenth century? Is the hegemony they enjoyed two hundred years later thus owed not to themselves but to other factors entirely?⁹

Let it be said at the outset that this book sees these issues very differently. It views the intellectual and technological upheavals of the Late Middle Ages

as necessary preconditions for the Industrial Revolution. Recognizing this, however, in no way entails celebrating the course of European history. The progeny of the “Christian West” enslaved foreign peoples, committed genocides, and destroyed cultures around the world. Yet in the nineteenth century—a “European century” like no other—the balance sheet has important items in the asset column, e.g., democracy, banishing starvation, victories over diseases, and useful technology. Much of this was exported, with consequences for other parts of the world that were not purely negative.¹⁰ Whether this was all worth the price that had to be paid for it—including by Europe itself, which remained drowned in blood until the dawning of our own time—is a question that will not be addressed here. We intend not to pass judgment on the past or to colonize it, but rather to give an account of it. Our aim is merely to sketch as detailed a picture of the age as possible.

The question of what constituted the Renaissance is the subject of a boundless academic debate, to which no further contribution will be made here,¹¹ except this: the core of the concept of the Renaissance, as used in this study, is that the reception and further development of ancient thought that began in the twelfth century continued thereafter uninterrupted and in ever-increasing variety and abundance (pp. 923–927). Other times and cultures also experienced renaissances. None, however, involved anything close to the same number of scholars, scientists, and artists. While other cultures, such as China's, treated the ancient world with awe and tried to emulate it, Europe, above all, learned skepticism and the art of critical thinking from its engagement with the great minds of antiquity. Western scientists and intellectuals overcame ancient paradigms (pp. 757–761). No other renaissance around the globe achieved comparable significance; Europe's Renaissance changed the world. As for periodization, our book draws the conclusion that epochs can never be narrowed down to one essential characteristic, nor can their boundaries be sharply drawn (pp. 927–934).

What role the Renaissance played in the prehistory of an ambiguous modernity is not the only question raised by this book, but it is the most important. To ask the follow-up question, namely why nothing similar happened anywhere else, does not entail claiming that some inevitable Western modernity has blazed a compulsory trail for similar developments in the “rest” of the world.¹² With this caveat, we may ask why the Industrial Revolution did not liberate Africa, New Guinea, or South America, whereas a flourishing economy developed in Australia.¹³ Why did necessity—little dry land, much water, and frequent flooding—make the Dutch inventive, but not the indigenous

Amazonians or the farmers settled along the Yangtze?¹⁴ No answers are available if we search only in the events immediately preceding modernity, in the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions that paved the way for it. For they were only possible under conditions that developed over a much longer period—conditions that, as a whole, appear to have been peculiarly European.

The best we can hope for from our investigation is to arrive at probable explanations. What can be described are geographically and chronologically definable *realms of possibility*, i.e., frameworks of circumstances that permitted certain kinds of thinking and scopes of action. A historically discernible event, such as a discovery, a revolution, or a work of art, can be thought of as the realization of an opportunity. In the language of probability theory, an *event* emerges from the sample space of possible outcomes. Historical circumstances and conditions are the unscalable walls that encompass the realm of possibility, circumscribing what can (but need not necessarily) be thought or done. Chance—the upshot of complex, unfathomable chains of causes and effects—is also enclosed by the realm of possibility, as are the adventitious, the unnecessary, and the serendipitous. Only a miracle could breach its walls. What will emerge within them we cannot calculate with certainty. For along with other “streams” that flow in the realm of possibility, the power of contingency—i.e., the fact that things happen one way but could have happened another or not at all—is too strong to account for.

Realms of possibility, understood as structures in continuous flux, result from a combination of streams (that often take centuries to form) and individual actions. Events occur in a chronologically circumscribed “window of opportunity.”¹⁵ A creative achievement can consist of the crossing of various streams with one another. What results is something new that expands the realm of possibility up to the point that it bears almost no resemblance to its former state. This process can be equated with the concept of *emergence*. Thanks to the working of an invisible hand, the interaction of various elements within a complex system yields outcomes that can be neither completely explained nor predicted from the system itself, that are greater than the sum of the individual causes.¹⁶

This book begins by tracing the formation of the realm of possibility that gave rise to the Renaissance and the revolutionary innovations it entailed. We will survey vast cultural, political, social, and economic landscapes that provided space for conflict, struggle, and opportunity. Sometimes these opportunities were seized. Yet there were no necessary outcomes in this scenario, just as there was no monocausality. For example, as important as capitalism was

for the genesis of Western modernity,¹⁷ it was only one of many factors that stood in a complex interrelationship with one another. Europe's "rise" can be explained by "killer apps" like competition, the rule of law, science, modern medicine, and freedom.¹⁸ Yet this does not tell us why the bundle of these and other factors only appeared in the "West." What circumstances made them possible? This book will also consistently pay attention to detours, slowdowns, and countercurrents: struggles between dispassionate reason and fiery faith, between freedom and high-handed claims to power. When mention is occasionally made of "backwardness," it will always strictly be with reference to objectively measured economic, technological, or similar conditions. The people outside of Latin Europe were not less intelligent than the Europeans. Some cultures—such as in China and the Islamic world—even experienced promising fits and starts. But these eventually led to stagnation, whereas the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions took place in the "West."

The Deep History of an Epochal Emergence: The Seven Pillars of Modernity

We shall first consider the primordial preconditions for the path taken by Europe: *geography and climate*. They represent the *first*, predetermining foundation for everything else.¹⁹ A *second* necessary precondition for Latin Europe's trajectory was the fact that, by the Middle Ages, it had already become a continent of *multiple states engaged in political and cultural competition*. The Middle Ages were also the setting for three more of the seven pillars upon which the grand dialogue of the Renaissance rested, as will be outlined in the following two paragraphs.

Compared with many states in Asia, medieval Europe's government structures were hopelessly inferior in terms of rational organization, economic strength, technology, and military power. The "northern barbarians," as described by a Muslim scholar in eleventh-century Toledo, "lack[ed] keenness of understanding and clarity of intelligence, and [were] overcome by ignorance and apathy, lack of discernment and stupidity."²⁰ This was to change as the "saddle" from the medieval valley to the modern peak,²¹ which began with a gentle slope, grew ever steeper. Economic and demographic conditions improved. The European city and town took shape, and social relations developed there that were unique around the globe. The *urban middle classes and the influence of horizontal power structures* on a broad spectrum of life became the *third* pillar of the Renaissance. Horizontal power structures can

be understood in contrast to the vertical organization of authority. Both are ideal types, rarely met with in their pure form. Even in dictatorships and absolute monarchies, opposition to the power that is concentrated in a single individual can be discerned. Civil societies also evince many vestiges of vertical power structures, resulting, for example, from economic inequality and the natural preponderance of executives. That having been said, horizontal power structures prevailed in the cities and towns, and they arose earlier and much more frequently in European societies than elsewhere.

The fact that townspeople enjoyed greater freedom to write and say what they wanted was in part due to the *fourth* pillar: *the containment of religion*. The title of this book—*The World at First Light*—intentionally has several shades of meaning; it alludes to this weakening of religion vis-à-vis the “worldly,” understood both as *earthly* instead of *heavenly* and as *secular* as opposed to *holy*. It was indeed this development that the French Enlightenment considered the essence of the Renaissance.²² Christianity was not per se opposed to science or progress, and religious institutions were indispensable for the preservation and proliferation of knowledge in the Middle Ages. Yet what nourished the growth of dialogue in Europe was the avoidance of excess and the curtailment of priestly power. *The critical dialogue with ancient and Arabic philosophy and science* then became the *fifth* precondition for the revolutions of budding modernity. Europe alone was able to draw from the wells of two world cultures, Greco-Roman and Arabic, both of which preserved traditions from still other cultural areas: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, India, and even a little bit from China. The very possibility of dialoguing with the clever pagans of antiquity and with Muslims was itself due to the first three pillars of Europe we have described above. Without the “rebirth” of knowledge about the speaking and writing practices of antiquity, a discursive culture like the one that developed in the waning Middle Ages in Latin Europe was inconceivable. Of course, the flow of ancient texts never dried up during the Middle Ages, and thus the grand dialogue with the ancients had not fallen entirely silent. Nevertheless, engagement with ancient texts increased dramatically starting in the twelfth century. If this engagement were to be plotted on a curve, this is where the slope would rise steeply.

The *sixth* pillar of European modernity was the *media revolution* set in motion by Gutenberg. Its success mirrored the radical change in speaking and thinking that took place in the High Middle Ages. This new technology provided Latin Europe with communication possibilities that did not exist (or were not used) in any other culture, and they are what gave the grand dialogue

of the Renaissance world-changing significance. The European intellectual community was now by far the largest the world had ever seen.

The *seventh* and final prerequisite for true paradigm shifts was *very long periods of time*. In this sense, this book is a manifesto against what the historian of Africa Richard Reid has decried as *presentism*—the notion that it suffices to study a few decades of the past in order to understand the present and that the deepest structures of history can be forgotten.²³ Our enterprise could therefore be called *archaeology* or *deep history*;²⁴ indeed, historians have long considered the early morning twilight the best time to hunt. The need for “de-sedimentation” (Jacques Derrida) is obvious, as the Renaissance was a culture whose essence lies in recourse to ancient ideas and forms. The term *archaeology*, incidentally, will be used in this book in a way that is the exact opposite of how it was understood by the cunning wordlord Michel Foucault.²⁵ We shall set the term back firmly on its feet, treating it as a suitable metaphor for the traditional business of the discipline of history. This archaeology uses ground-penetrating radar to map the subsurface and then digs up one layer at a time. It treats words and artifacts as the dusty remains of what were once ideas, calamities, power, work, and war, i.e., as the vestiges of human life. It seeks after the framework of culture and investigates how something as wonderful as rational free dialogue managed to develop out of the chaos of wars, state formation, and waxing and waning empires.

Our archaeology investigates origins and causes, although it knows that the ultimate beginning is lost in seemingly endless chains of causality, in the golden glow of myth or the mist of metaphysics. Monocausal explanations—such as that Christianity was responsible for the “rise of the West”²⁶—do not help us gain insight into the origins of grand historical phenomena. Similarly, the provocatively presented and elegantly argued thesis that the Renaissance began with the discovery of a single text, Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*, would never occur to a trained historian.²⁷ The radical changes that marked the beginning of modernity—such as the revolutions of Gutenberg and Copernicus, the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions—were the culmination of overlapping developments that had very different origins, strands of causes and effects that, in turn, became intertwined and mutually influenced one another.

The modernity whose roots we are digging for is a paradoxical enterprise.²⁸ It contains within itself the communication society and censorship, state capitalism and pluralism, rationality and secularization, fundamentalism and skepticism. Our narrative attempts to identify some of the circumstances that gave rise to it, to capture the moment when, to borrow an image from

Aby Warburg, the butterfly emerged from its cocoon.²⁹ The focus, naturally, will be on the history of the grand dialogue with European antiquity and Islamic high cultures that reached its fullest potential in the Renaissance. The course of world history would have been very different if the legacy of antiquity had not found its way into medieval Latin Europe. We shall, therefore, trace the paths it took, giving ample consideration to intellectual cross-pollination and cultural transfer.

We shall begin with a tour of the deep prehistory of the “great Renaissance,” paying close attention to the origins of Europe’s diversity, its bountiful imagery, its realms of memory and its myths, which sprang from epics out of the primordial mist and found an especially impactful narrative vehicle in the legend of Rome. Our first task will be to examine the geographical framework, the well-nigh immutable foundation of all that was to follow.

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