

The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914. Global Connections and Comparisons

Review Number: 420

Publish date: Friday, 1 October, 2004

Author: Christopher Bayly

ISBN: 631236163X

Date of Publication: 2004

Price: £17.99

Pages: 568pp.

Publisher: Blackwell

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Catherine Hall

The cover of C. A. Bayly's new book is stunning. A handsome black man stands poised, next to the bust of a European philosopher. Blazoned across the corner of the cover is 'A Masterpiece', the judgement of Niall Ferguson, current favourite historian of the US media, on Bayly's book. The reproduction is of part of Anne-Louis (not Louise as is stated on the back cover; the artist was a man) Girodet's painting of Citoyen Belley, exhibited in Paris in 1798. In Bayly's brief note on it, the painting is described as the most splendid visualisation of the 'universalising intention of the revolution' (p. 375). But how universalising was that intention?

Jean Baptiste Belley was one of the three representatives of the French colonies elected in San Domingue in 1793. Taken from his native Senegalese island to the Caribbean and enslaved, he had fought with Toussaint L'Ouverture and then joined the French revolutionary army. He spoke in the debate in the Convention in 1794, when a unanimous decision was taken to abolish slavery, and returned to San Domingue after losing his seat in 1797. He is lost from the historical records in the subsequent struggles of Haitians against the Napoleonic army, which was attempting to reinstate slavery. Girodet represented Belley at a critical moment in the revolutionary debates over race and citizenship. Who should represent the French colonies? Could Africans be citizens? Were they equal to white men? The emancipated slave is constructed as a powerful and striking figure. He is elegantly dressed, wearing the tricolore of the Revolution in his silk cummerbund and the decoration of his hat, his tight breeches showing off his masculinity, the whiteness of his eyes emphasising the blackness of his skin. He is leaning against the marble plinth of the bust of the encyclopaedist Abbé Raynal, who had died in 1796, perhaps the most radical metropolitan French critic of slavery and of colonial policy of the *ancien régime*. Here, argues Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff in an essay on Girodet, the artist has 'united two very different citizens of the French nation in a Janus-faced double portrait'.⁽¹⁾ Yet, as she goes on to analyse, there is no equality between these two figures, though, I would suggest, much ambivalence. Girodet was a strong supporter of emancipation and distanced himself from the paternalism of many abolitionist representations of black men and women with their kneeling supplicants seeking help from their white mothers and fathers. Belley is granted a full-body portrait. Yet what is so striking about the image is the corporeality of his black body, his sensual energy, the exhibition of his virility with his fingers pointing to his bulging phallus, the idealisation of sexualised black masculinity and its link to the idea of the 'noble savage'. Raynal, in contrast, is the philosophical head, the triumph of reason and

spirit over matter. Bayly may be an emancipated man in European dress, yet his ineradicable vitality legitimates the European rule of reason. But what is mind and reason without body, sexuality and emotionality? This double portrait, one might suggest, tells us much about modernity, a modernity structured through particular images of masculinity and racial difference. But is it the modernity that figures in Bayly's story?

The Birth of the Modern World is a wonderfully ambitious book that effectively demonstrates the global nature of the modern world and the need to decentre national histories and think big. It is a 'thematic history' demonstrating how 'historical trends and sequences of events, which have been treated separately in regional or national histories, can be brought together' (p. 1). Bayly's emphasis is on the interdependencies and interconnectedness of political and social changes across the world in a period well before contemporary globalisation. It is in part a culmination of his own work over a long period – using his rich and detailed knowledge of Indian and South Asian history as he did previously in *Imperial Meridian* – as a basis from which to reflect on national, imperial and global concerns. It is an intervention in the current debates over globalisation, for he shares the insistence of A. G. Hopkins and others that the contemporary version of this is not the first; theorists must be more careful to specify the particularities of phases of globalisation given its long history.⁽²⁾ It is also an attempt to put a particular reading of connection and interdependence at the heart of the making of the modern world, thereby unseating E. J. Hobsbawm's magisterial four volumes on the long nineteenth century, *The Age of Revolution, Industry and Empire, The Age of Capital* and *The Age of Empire* with its drama of the unfolding logic of capitalism and exploitation, and providing a new account for these post-Marxist times. In the process it cocks many a snook at post-colonial theorists with their 'polemic' and their 'jargon' and the particular sets of antagonisms and dynamics that they stress – racialised difference – and is proud of its sceptical stance towards theory, keen to avoid 'pretentious words'. This is a book that, in the words of the series editor, R. I. Moore, describes the birth of the modern world:

[n]ot as something which some people or some regions did to others less favored or deserving, but as a series of transformations in which most of the people of the world participated, and to which most of them contributed, not simply as the objects or victims of the successes of others, but actively, independently and creatively (p. xxi).

The emphasis here is not on the antagonistic binaries of classes or of empires, but on processes of interaction and connection. Marxist historians and post-colonial critics, in Bayly's re-telling, have got it wrong.

Bayly starts from the position that all local, regional and national histories are also global histories. He sees Fernand Braudel as having pioneered global history in the 1950s and 1960s. (This was Marx's model long before, however, and, as Bayly himself notes, Marx posited a connection between inside and outside Europe as early as the 1850s. 'The next uprising of the people of Europe', he wrote in an article on China and Europe in 1853, 'and their next movement for republican freedom and economy of government, may depend more probably on what is now passing in the Celestial Empire – the very opposite of Europe – than on any other political cause that now exists'.⁽³⁾ Arjun Appadurai's reflections on the paradoxical relation between the local and the global, feeding off and cannibalising each other, provide one of Bayly's starting points. The nineteenth century, he argues, saw the rise of global uniformities in the state, religion, political ideologies, and the forms of economic life, visible not only in great institutions but in bodily practices, such as dress or the consumption of food. His focus is on decreasing the distance between 'the West' and 'the rest', insisting that industrialisation, urbanisation, nationalism and the development of the state all took place across the globe, albeit with local specificities. But similarities and connections could also heighten a sense of difference and antagonism, and it is holding on to both uniformities and specificities that he sees as crucial. His narrative is that the multi-centred world of 1780 gradually became a world dominated by the West. By 1914, however, that dominance was beginning to be challenged by the rise of Japan and the emergence of extra-European nationalisms. His history aims to show the contradictory tendencies at work,

to chart the interdependence of world events, while allowing for the brute fact of Western domination. At the same time it has to show how, over large parts of the world, this European domination was only partial and temporary (p. 3).

Bayly refuses both Marxist theories of causation and the impact of the cultural turn with its evacuation of grand narratives and its turn to micro-histories. His book does not address what he calls 'deep causation', but argues for a complex understanding of the interactions between political organisation and ideas and economic activities. Historical development was determined by a variety of forces and he puts particular emphasis on the role of the state and the significance of warfare. Modernity was a process, Bayly argues, but also a period that began at the end of the eighteenth century and has continued up to the present day. His definition of what constitutes 'the modern' focuses on the rise of a nation state that demands a centralisation of power and loyalty to ethnic solidarity, alongside a massive expansion of global commercial and intellectual links, industrialisation and urbanisation. He also claims that 'an essential part of being modern is thinking you are modern. Modernity is an aspiration to be "up with the times"' (p.10), but he pays little attention to the extensive literature of the last decade that focuses on questions of identity and subjectivity – how were (and are) modern people made?

The book is hugely ambitious and difficult (indeed impossible) to reduce to a brief account. Here I can only identify some key themes and raise some questions. It is structured in four parts. Part 1, 'The end of the Old Regime', focuses on the worldwide shift to political and cultural uniformity and the emergence of modern social and economic patterns. It sees the rise of European dominance as having its origins both inside and outside Europe. The 'archaic globalisation' of the eighteenth century – the networks created by geographical expansion (not just European) – opened the way for new patterns. A long-term shift, 'the great domestication' – a move from nomadism to intensive agrarian exploitation – took place alongside a number of 'industrious revolutions' (in the terminology of Jan de Vries), some industrial, others not, all associated with consumer demand. The economic and social context of the changes in north-western Europe, from its hinterland of resources to its colonial expansion to its use of enslaved labour, however, gave Europeans a dynamic edge. It allowed the subjugation of other people's industrious revolutions and the development of European nation-states with effective war machines, fierce rivalries and active public spheres – European exceptionalism. Bayly's picture of piecemeal and contradictory development, he insists, diminishes the distance between Europe and the rest of the world. 'World history becomes more comprehensible', he rightly argues, 'when we abandon the picture of China and its satellites as being caught in intellectual stasis' and recognise the work done by scholars to demonstrate eighteenth-century Japan's adaptability (p. 79). But that adaptability, one might add, is to a modernity defined by nation states, urbanisation and industrialisation. It is the Japanese and the Chinese, alongside Europeans and North Americans, who become the key historical actors in this account.

Part 2, 'The modern world in genesis', sees the period between 1815–1865 as one of flux and hiatus. The new forms of state, economy and ideology were not yet consolidated and the mid century saw a crisis in legitimacy. Rebellions in China, South Asia, Europe and North America were all global in their origins and consequences, and must be understood as interconnected. One key common feature was rural protest, and Bayly argues that recent historiography has displaced traditional Marxist accounts of the growth of class consciousness with a focus on rural discontents. Rebellion in one arena drew on thinking from other parts of the world and, in turn, sent ripples across the globe. Nana Sahib, responsible for the 'Cawnpore Massacre' of 1857, the iconic act of treachery for the British in the 'Indian Mutiny', was taught to read English and French by his British tutors and fondly hoped that the US or France would intervene in support of him. British veterans who fought in India in 1857–8 were active in the suppression of 'natives' in New Zealand and South Africa. Meanwhile, Bayly argues, industrialisation was a slower and more patchy process than used to be thought, and manifested itself in different but related ways, rural and urban, across the globe. Similarly, nationalisms of different kinds emerged in Asia, Africa and the Americas as well as Europe, drawing on indigenous legends, histories and sensibilities, 'rather than being a malign imposition of the West' (p. 199).

Racial theory, the intensification of which was closely connected to the resolution of the mid-century crises, was also a global phenomenon, again with its national variants.

In part 3, 'State and society in the age of imperialism', Bayly traces the development of a more cohesive state, a process most marked between 1850 and 1870. Nation states began to aim to make exclusive claims on their subjects' loyalties, their new powers rooted in rapid economic development, new armaments and national rivalries. Yet this power must not be exaggerated, Bayly warns. James Scott and those influenced by Foucault's theories of governmentality are taken to task, along with Bernard Cohn and 'new imperial historians', for giving too much credence to the authority of the state and placing too much reliance on official records. The power of the state has assumed mythic proportions, argues Bayly, just as the myth of working-class consciousness did in the 1960s. While recognising that states were more powerful in 1914 than in 1870, and that the nation state was assumed to be the key actor on the world stage, he highlights their hybrid forms across the world and the limitations on the exercise of their authority. Meanwhile key ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, and indeed science, when examined in a global context, can be seen to be empowered by 'ideas derived from indigenous rationalistic and ethical traditions' (p. 285). Western ideas were re-worked rather than simply adopted as, for example, nationalist and anti-colonial leaders mixed elements from western radicalism with a defence of their ancient communities and forms of honour. Perhaps Bayly's most innovative argument in this section is that the nineteenth century saw religious revivals on a global scale. These 'empires of religion', he maintains, whether Islamic, Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, can be compared with nation states in their attention to centralised authority, expansion of bureaucracies, harnessing of print media and scale of building. The modern world he is describing was certainly not secular.

The final section of the book, 'Change, decay and crisis' looks briefly at the reconstitution of social hierarchies during the long nineteenth century – the reconfiguring of women's subordination, of forms of unfree labour, of elite, landholding and monarchical power and privilege. Alongside this went the destruction of native peoples and the ecological depredations that marked the expansion of European imperialisms and forms of government. In the conclusion he returns to the 'big themes' of the book – especially the multi-centric nature of change in world history, the rise of western domination and challenges to that domination. By the *fin de siècle*, he notes with a bow to Lenin, there was indeed a great economic and industrial acceleration, rooted in the uneven nature of capitalist development. 1890–1914 was indeed the crucible of modernity.

There is much to learn from this book and much to admire. Bayly's knowledge of global history is enviable. His wide range of reading, his grasp of Chinese, Japanese, Iranian and Ottoman histories, alongside the more widely known histories of Europe and North America, is impressive. His insistence that 'all historians are world historians now', whether they know it or not (and, one might add, whether they practice it or not!), and that we do not need to reinvent world history, but, instead, to decentre it, is most welcome (p. 469). Also welcome is his commitment to an understanding of the syncretic and hybrid forms produced by the constant traffic of peoples and things. But given this interest in cross-currents and hybridity, why is Bayly so anxious to separate himself from, and polemicise against, the body of work discussing these issues that has been produced by scholars influenced by postcolonial theory in the last decades? What might be described as 'the postcolonial turn', the recognition of the centrality of colonialism, empires and racial difference to the history of 'the West' as well as 'the rest', has been enormously influential across disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences in the last decades. Perhaps we should struggle to put global history and postcolonial history in the same frame. Bayly scorns the literature on the nature of subaltern speech. But is that speech so straightforward? Postcolonial scholars have taught us how to read and listen differently, to hear voices that once were not heard. In his conclusion Bayly suggests that the discovery of history as the essential mode of explanation for all phenomena, natural and human, was the most revolutionary change of the nineteenth century (p. 294). He has a point – but then might it not be appropriate to inquire into those definitions of history and critically evaluate those categories? And this is some of the work that postcolonial critics and historians have opened up – from Michel-Rolph Trouillot on Haiti and the 'unthinkable' nature of the revolution of the enslaved to Dipesh Chakrabarty's attempts to provincialise Europe.[\(4\)](#)

Notes

1. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 'Male Alterity in the French Revolution - Two Paintings by Anne-Louis Girodet at the Salon of 1798', in eds. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann and Catherine Hall, *Gendered Nations. Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2000), p. 91.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See particularly *Globalization in World History*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (London, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Karl Marx, 'Revolution in China and in Europe' in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Colonialism* (London, 1960).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

Cercles

<http://www.cercles.com/review/r30/baylyl.html> [2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/420#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2083>

[2] <http://www.cercles.com/review/r30/baylyl.html>

Global Interconnections 1780â€“1914. What Were The Motors Of Change?. Power In Global And Inter-National Networks. Contested Uniformity And Universal Complexity Revisited. August 1914. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Reviews. "With its dazzling erudition and its vast scope, The Birth of the Modern World is a masterpiece of distance-annihilating synthesisâ€”|At a stroke, all other general histories of the nineteenth century have become parochialâ€”|I cannot think of any living historian who could match this feat. The rest of us must simply applaud."

The global age of revolutions between about 1780 and 1820 was not predicated on huge regional inequalities in wealth. A few of the competitive advantages which the West would enjoy were already visible, but the long-term economic subordination of the non-Western world was not yet a fact of the global economy.Â Despite his sensitivity to global connections, he is scrupulously honest, and happy to argue with his overall thesis by foregrounding incidents of local isolation when these present themselves. But he does not retreat from his central position that "nationalist" historiography is the intellectually limited small talk of the parish pump.