

# History Inside Out

## THE ARGUMENT

**T**he purpose of this book is to undermine one of the most powerful beliefs of our time concerning world history and world geography. This belief is the notion that European civilization—"The West"—has had some unique historical advantage, some special quality of race or culture or environment or mind or spirit, which gives this human community a permanent superiority over all other communities, at all times in history and down to the present.

The belief is both historical and geographical. Europeans are seen as the "makers of history." Europe eternally advances, progresses, modernizes. The rest of the world advances more sluggishly, or stagnates: it is "traditional society." Therefore, the world has a permanent geographical center and a permanent periphery: an Inside and an Outside. Inside leads, Outside lags. Inside innovates, Outside imitates.

This belief is *diffusionism*, or more precisely *Eurocentric diffusionism*. It is a theory about the way cultural processes tend to move over the surface of the world as a whole. They tend to flow out of the European sector and toward the non-European sector. This is the natural, normal, logical, and ethical flow of culture, of innovation, of human causality. Europe, eter-

autonomous rise of Europe," sometimes (rather more grandly) called the idea of "the European Miracle." It is the idea that Europe was more advanced and more progressive than all other regions prior to 1492, prior, that is, to the beginning of the period of colonialism, the period in which Europe and non-Europe came into intense interaction. If one believes this to be the case—and most modern scholars seem to believe it to be the case—then it must follow that the economic and social modernization of Europe is fundamentally a result of Europe's *internal* qualities, not of interaction with the societies of Africa, Asia, and America after 1492. Therefore: the main building blocks of modernity must be European. Therefore: colonialism cannot have been really important for Europe's modernization. Therefore: colonialism must mean, for the Africans, Asians, and Americans, not spoliation and cultural destruction but, rather, the receipt-by-diffusion of European civilization: modernization.

This book will analyze and criticize Eurocentric diffusionism as a general body of ideas, and will try to undermine the more concrete theory of the autonomous rise of Europe. The first chapter of the book discusses the nature and history of diffusionism. Chapter 2 analyzes the theory of the autonomous rise of Europe as a body of propositions about European superiority (and "the European miracle"), then tries to disprove these propositions, one after the other. Chapter 3 discusses world history and historical geography prior to 1492, attempting to show that Europe was *not* superior to other civilizations and regions in those times. Chapter 4 argues that colonialism was the basic process after 1492, which led to the selective rise of Europe, the modernization or development of Europe (and outlying Europeanized culture areas like the United States), and the underdevelopment of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Chapter 4 also argues that the conquest of America and thereafter the expansion of European colonialism is not to be explained in terms of any internal characteristics of Europe, but instead reflects the mundane realities of location. The chain of argument in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, as a whole, therefore, is an attempt to show that Europe did *not* have historical priority—historical superiority—over what we now call the Third World.

This may seem to be too ambitious a project for one small book. I am really making just one claim. I am asserting that a fundamental and rather explicit error has been made in our conventional past thinking about geography and history, and this error has distorted many fields of thought and action. I am going to present enough evidence to show that the belief in Eurocentric diffusionism and Europe's historical superiority or priority is not convincing: not well grounded in the facts of history and geography, although firmly grounded in Western culture. It is in a sense folklore.

States, and the like. Most newer textbooks enlarged the discussion of non-European history, and said something about the historical achievements of non-European cultures. Most textbooks gave a flavor of historicity, of evolutionary progress, to non-European history, thus departing from the older pattern, which dismissed these societies as stagnant and nonevolving. Asian societies were now described as having had an evolutionary motion, though a motion slower than that of Europe. Africa was still described as stagnant, history-less, prior to the colonial era. More salience was given to Asia. However, Africa and the Western Hemisphere still received little mention for eras prior to 1492. The pattern of place-name mentions in most (not all) texts and historical atlases still suggested a flow to the west and northwest, from the Near East to western Europe. And tunnel history dominated most textbooks in the most important matter of all, the question of "why," of *explanation*. Historical progress still came about because Europeans invented or initiated most of the crucial innovations, which only later spread out to the rest of the world. So the textbooks depicted a world in which historical causes were to be found basically inside the European tunnel of time, although historical effects were to be seen basically everywhere.<sup>4</sup>

Textbooks are an important window into a culture; more than just books, they are semiofficial statements of exactly what the opinion-forming elite of the culture want the educated youth of that culture to believe to be true about the past and present world.<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, European and Anglo-American history textbooks assert that most of the causes of historical progress occur, or originate, in the European sector of the world. Textbooks of the early and middle nineteenth century tended to give a rather openly religious grounding for this Eurocentric tunnel history. In later textbooks the Bible is no longer considered a source of historical fact, but causality seems to be rooted in an implicit theory that combines a belief that Christian peoples make history with a belief that white peoples make history, the whole becoming a theory that it is natural for Europeans to innovate and progress and for non-Europeans to remain stagnant and unchanging ("traditional"), until, like Sleeping Beauty, they are awakened by the Prince. This view still, in the main, prevails, although racism has been discarded and non-Europe is no longer considered to have been *absolutely* stagnant and traditional.

Schools are always a little behind the time when it comes to the teaching of newer topics and ideas. I wish I could report that the old notions about Inside and Outside are today just artifacts, still taught in some schools because of the usual lag between research and pedagogy, but which have been discarded by Real Scholars, those who pursue historical research and write the important and influential books on world history.

4. Monotheism appeared first in the Middle East.
5. Democracy was invented in Europe (in ancient Greece).
6. Likewise most of pure science, mathematics, philosophy, history, and geography.
7. Class society and class struggle emerged first in the Greco-Roman era and region.<sup>6</sup>
8. The Roman Empire was the first great imperial state. Romans invented bureaucracy, law, and so on.
9. The next great stage in social evolution, feudalism, was developed in Europe, with Frenchmen taking the lead.<sup>7</sup>
10. Europeans invented a host of technological traits in the Middle Ages which gave them superiority over non-Europeans. (On this matter there are considerable differences of opinion.).
11. Europeans invented the modern state.
12. Europeans invented capitalism.
13. Europeans, uniquely "venturesome," were the great explorers, "discoverers," etc.
14. Europeans invented industry and created the Industrial Revolution.

... and so on down to the present.

All of the propositions in this list are widely accepted tenets of European historical scholarship today, although (as we will see) there is scholarly dispute about some of the propositions. All of this means that you and I learned these things, perhaps in elementary school, perhaps in university, perhaps in books and newspapers. We learned that all of this is *the truth*. But is it? Clearly, some of these propositions are true. Some others are true with qualifications. But some, as I will argue in this book, are not true at all: they are artifacts of the old tunnel history, in which Outside plays no crucial role and Inside is credited with everything important and everything efficacious.

## EUROCENTRIC DIFFUSIONISM

### *Eurocentrism*

What we are talking about here is generally called, these days, "Eurocentrism."<sup>8</sup> This word is a label for all the beliefs that postulate past or present superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans (and over minority people of non-European descent). A strong critique of Eurocentrism is underway in all fields of social thought and this book is

There is, however, a problem with the word "Eurocentrism." In most discourse it is thought of as a sort of prejudice, an "attitude," and therefore something that can be eliminated from modern enlightened thought in the same way we eliminate other relic attitudes such as racism, sexism, and religious bigotry. But the really crucial part of Eurocentrism is not a matter of attitudes in the sense of values and prejudices, but rather a matter of science, and scholarship, and informed and expert opinion. To be precise, Eurocentrism includes a set of beliefs that are statements about empirical reality, statements educated and usually unprejudiced Europeans accept as true, as propositions supported by "the facts." Consider, for instance, the 14 propositions about Europe's priority in historical innovation which we listed above. Historians who accept these propositions as true would be most indignant if we described the propositions as "Eurocentric beliefs." Every historian in this category would deny emphatically that he or she holds any Eurocentric prejudices, and very few of them actually do hold such prejudices. If they assert that Europeans invented democracy, science, feudalism, capitalism, the modern nation-state, and so on, they make these assertions because they think that all of this is *fact*.

Eurocentrism, therefore, is a very complex thing. We can banish all the value meanings of this word, all the prejudices, and we still have Eurocentrism as a set of empirical beliefs.

This, in a way, is the central problem for this book. We confront statements of presumed historical and scientific fact, not prejudices and biases, and we try to show, with history and science, that the presumptions are wrong: these statements are false.

How is it that Eurocentric historical statements which are not valid—that is, not confirmed by evidence and sometimes contradicted by evidence—are able to gain acceptance in European historical thought, and thereafter survive as accepted beliefs, hardly ever questioned, for generations and even centuries? This is a crucial problem for historiography and the history of ideas. To deal with it satisfactorily would take us well beyond the scope of this book, the main concern of which is empirical history and geography. Yet the problem cannot be avoided here. Libraries are full of scholarly studies that support the Eurocentric historical positions we are rejecting and refuting in this book. The sheer quantity of this work, and the respect that is properly owed to the scholars who assembled it, makes it certain that one cannot convincingly refute these positions with the factual arguments that can be presented in one book. No matter how persuasive these arguments may be, they cannot be placed, so to speak, on one arm of a balance and be expected to outweigh all of the accumulated writings of generations of European scholars,

textbook writers, journalists, publicists, and the rest, heaped up on the other arm of the balance.

So, in this book, we must make a sort of two-level argument. The main level is the empirical one: What *did* happen inside and outside of Europe in the medieval and early modern centuries, and what connections *did* take place between the two sectors in that period? At the second level, we will look at some pertinent aspects of the history of Eurocentric ideas and the social context surrounding these ideas. This will be done mainly in the present chapter, which analyzes the nature and history of diffusionist ideas and concludes with a discussion of the process of social licensing by which these ideas gain currency and hegemony, and in Chapter 2, which rather systematically examines the most important arguments for European superiority prior to 1492 and to an extent discusses their historical genealogies.

Scholars today are aware, as most were not a few decades ago, that the empirical, factual beliefs of history, geography, and social science very often gain acceptance for reasons that have little to do with evidence. Scholarly beliefs are embedded in culture, and are shaped by culture. This helps to explain the paradox that Eurocentric historical beliefs are so strangely persistent; that old myths continue to be believed in long after the rationale for their acceptance has been forgotten or rejected (as in the arguments grounded in belief in the Old Testament as literal history); that newer candidate beliefs gain acceptance without supporting evidence if they are properly Eurocentric; and that, most generally, the Eurocentric body of beliefs as a whole retains its persuasiveness and power. But there is more to the matter than this. Eurocentrism is, as I will argue at great length in this book, a *unique* set of beliefs, and uniquely *powerful*, because it is the intellectual and scholarly rationale for one of the most powerful social interests of the European elite. I will argue not only that European colonialism initiated the development of Europe (and the underdevelopment of non-Europe) in 1492, but that since then the wealth obtained from non-Europe, through colonialism in its many forms, including neocolonial forms, has been a necessary and very important basis for the continued development of Europe and the continued power of Europe's elite. For this reason, the development of a body of Eurocentric beliefs, justifying and assisting Europe's colonial activities, has been, and still is, of very great importance. Eurocentrism is quite simply the colonizer's model of the world.

Eurocentrism is the colonizer's model of the world in a very literal sense: it is not merely a set of beliefs, a bundle of beliefs. It has evolved, through time, into a very finely sculpted model, a structured whole; in fact a single theory; in fact a super theory, a general framework for many

smaller theories, historical, geographical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical. This supertheory is *diffusionism*.

## *Diffusionism*

When culture change takes place in a human community, that change can be the result of an invention that occurred *within* this community. Or it can be the result of a process in which the idea or its material effect (such as a tool, an art style, etc.) came *into* the community, having originated in some other community, in some other part of the landscape. The first sort of event is called "independent invention." The second is called "diffusion."<sup>9</sup> Both processes occur everywhere. So far so good. But some scholars believe that independent invention is rather uncommon, and therefore not very important in culture change in the short run and cultural evolution in the long run. These scholars believe that most humans are imitators, not inventors. Therefore diffusion, in their view, is the main mechanism for change.

The scholars who hold this view are called "diffusionists." Whenever they encounter a cultural innovation in a particular region, they are inclined to look diligently for a process of diffusion into that region from somewhere else, somewhere the trait is already in use. For instance, the fact that the blow-gun is traditionally used among some Native American peoples as well as some Old World peoples is explained by diffusionists as being the result of the diffusion of this trait from the Old World to the New: the New World people, they believe, probably did not invent the trait for themselves. Why? Because they probably were not inventive enough to do so. A larger form of this same diffusionist argument claims that the great pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas must be, ultimately, the result of transpacific or transatlantic diffusions, because these civilizing traits (agriculture, temple architecture, writing, and so on) were found much earlier in the Old World than the New, and Native Americans probably were not inventive enough to think up these things on their own.<sup>10</sup> Some scholars, those who have been traditionally described as "extreme diffusionists," believe that all civilization diffused from one original place on earth: some of them think that this original source of civilization was ancient Egypt, others place it somewhere in Central Asia (for instance, the Caucasus region—which scholars used to think was the original home of the "white" or "Caucasian" race).<sup>11</sup>

The debates between diffusionists and their opponents have been going on for more than a century in anthropology, geography, history, and all fields concerned about long-term, large-scale cultural evolution.<sup>12</sup> The

invention. This does not necessarily mean that they have a general propensity to favor diffusion as a causal formula. Sometimes the specific issue can be a very major problem. For instance, some scholars argue that important West African culture traits diffused across the Atlantic to America before 1492. Whether they are right or wrong in this matter, they are not arguing any sort of Eurocentric diffusionism, nor do they necessarily favor diffusion over independent invention in other contexts. But most scholars who are consistent diffusionists are also Eurocentric diffusionists.

Now I will describe Eurocentric diffusionism in somewhat formal terms as a scientific theory. That theory has changed through time, but its basic structure has remained essentially unchanged. I will describe what can be called the classical (essentially nineteenth-century) form of the theory, leaving until a later section of this chapter a discussion of the not very dissimilar modern form.

Diffusionism is grounded, as we saw, in two axioms: (1) Most human communities are uninventive. (2) A few human communities (or places, or cultures) are inventive and thus remain the permanent centers of culture change, of progress. At the global scale, this gives us a model of a world with a single center—roughly, Greater Europe—and a single periphery; an Inside and an Outside. There are a number of variants of this two-sector model. Sometimes the two sectors are treated as sharply distinct, with a definite boundary between them. (This form of the model is the familiar one. It is sometimes called the “Center–Periphery Model of the World.”) Another form sees the world in a slightly different way: there is a clear and definite center, but outside of it there is gradual change, gradual decline in degree of civilization or progressiveness or innovativeness, as one moves outward into the periphery. Another variant depicts the world as divided into zones, each representing a level of modernity or civilization or development.<sup>15</sup> The classical division was one with three great bands: “civilization,” “barbarism,” and “savagery.”

The basic model of diffusionism in its classical form depicts a world divided into the prime two sectors, one of which (Greater Europe, Inside) invents and progresses, the other of which (non-Europe, Outside) receives progressive innovations by diffusion from Inside. From this base, diffusionism asserts seven fundamental arguments about the two sectors and the interactions between them:

1. Europe naturally progresses and modernizes. That is, the natural state of affairs in the European sector (Inside) is to invent, innovate, change things for the better. Europe changes; Europe is “historical.”
2. Non-Europe (Outside) naturally remains stagnant, unchanging,



traditional, and backward. Invention, innovation, and change are not the natural state of affairs, and not to be expected, in non-European countries. Non-Europe does not change; non-Europe is "ahistorical."

Propositions 3 and 4 explain the difference between the two sectors:

3. The basic cause of European progress is some intellectual or spiritual factor, something characteristic of the "European mind," the "European spirit," "Western Man," etc., something that leads to creativity, imagination, invention, innovation, rationality, and a sense of honor or ethics: "European values."

4. The reason for non-Europe's nonprogress is a lack of this same intellectual or spiritual factor. This proposition asserts, in essence, that the landscape of the non-European world is empty, or partly so, of "rationality," that is, of ideas and proper spiritual values. There are a number of variations of this proposition in classical (mainly late-nineteenth-century) diffusionism. Two are quite important:

- a. For much of the non-European world, this proposition asserts an emptiness also of basic cultural institutions, and even an emptiness of people. This can be called the diffusionist *myth of emptiness*, and it has particular connection to settler colonialism (the physical movement of Europeans into non-European regions, displacing or eliminating the native inhabitants). This proposition of emptiness makes a series of claims, each layered upon the others: (i) A non-European region is empty or nearly empty of people (hence settlement by Europeans does not displace any native peoples). (ii) The region is empty of settled population: the inhabitants are mobile, nomadic, wanderers (hence European settlement violates no political sovereignty, since wanderers make no claim to territory. (iii) The cultures of this region do not possess an understanding of private property—that is, the region is empty of property rights and claims (hence colonial occupiers can freely give land to settlers since no one owns it). The final layer, applied to all of the Outside sector, is an emptiness of intellectual creativity and spiritual values, sometimes described by Europeans (as, for instance, by Max Weber) as an absence of "rationality."<sup>16</sup>
- b. Some non-European regions, in some historical epochs, are assumed to have been "rational" in some ways and to some degree. Thus, for instance, the Middle East during biblical times was rational. China was somewhat rational for a certain period in its history.<sup>17</sup> Other regions, always including Africa, are unqualifiedly lacking in rationality.

Propositions 5 and 6 describe the ways Inside and Outside interact:

5. The normal, natural way that the non-European part of the world progresses, changes for the better, modernizes, and so on, is by the diffusion (or spread) of innovative, progressive ideas from Europe, which flow into it as air flows into a vacuum. This diffusion may take the form of the spread of European ideas as such, or the spread of new products in which the European ideas are concretized, or the spread (migration, settlement) of Europeans themselves, bearers of these new and innovative ideas.

Proposition 5, you will observe, is a simple justification for European colonialism. It asserts that colonialism, including settler colonialism, brings civilization to non-Europe; is in fact the natural way that the non-European world advances out of its stagnation, backwardness, traditionalism.

But under colonialism, wealth is drawn out of the non-European colonies and enriches the European colonizers. In Eurocentric diffusionism this too is seen as a normal relationship between Inside and Outside:

6. Compensating in part for the diffusion of civilizing ideas from Europe to non-Europe, is a counterdiffusion of material wealth from non-Europe to Europe, consisting of plantation products, minerals, art objects, labor, and so on. Nothing can fully compensate the Europeans for their gift of civilization to the colonies, so the exploitation of colonies and colonial peoples is morally justified. (Colonialism gives more than it receives.)

And there is still another form of interaction between Inside and Outside. It is the opposite of the diffusion of civilizing ideas from Europe to non-Europe (proposition 5):

7. Since Europe is advanced and non-Europe is backward, any ideas that diffuse into Europe must be ancient, savage, atavistic, uncivilized, evil—black magic, vampires, plagues, “the bogeyman,” and the like.<sup>18</sup> Associated with this conception is the diffusionist myth which has been called “the theory of our contemporary ancestors.” It asserts that, as we move farther and farther away from civilized Europe, we encounter people who, successively, reflect earlier and earlier epochs of history and culture. Thus the so-called “stone-age people” of the Antipodes are likened to the Paleolithic Europeans. The argument here is that diffusion works in successive waves, spreading outward, such that the farther outward we go

the farther backward we go in terms of cultural evolution. But conversely, there is the possibility that these ancient, atavistic, etc., traits will *counterdiffuse* back into the civilized core, in the form of ancient, magical, evil things like black magic, Dracula, etc.

The main oppositions between the two sectors can be shown in tabular form. The following contrast-sets are quite typical in nineteenth-century diffusionist thought:

<i>Characteristic of Core</i>	<i>Characteristic of Periphery</i>
Inventiveness	Imitateness
Rationality, intellect	Irrationality, emotion, instinct
Abstract thought	Concrete thought
Theoretical reasoning	Empirical, practical reasoning
Mind	Body, matter
Discipline	Spontaneity
Adulthood	Childhood
Sanity	Insanity
Science	Sorcery
Progress	Stagnation

What I have described thus far is, of course, a highly simplified version of the diffusionist world model. We will add qualifications and modifications as we proceed, and in particular we will see that there are significant differences between the classical form of diffusionism and the modern form of the model.

So much for what diffusionism is. What does it *do*? In this book I will show in some detail how diffusionism has shaped our views of history, both European and non-European. Later in the present chapter and in Chapter 2 I will show some of the concrete influences of diffusionism on theories outside of history, some in psychology, some in geography, some in economics, some in sociology.

But this discussion will be more meaningful after a different question has been addressed. This is the question of how and why diffusionism became such a foundation theory in Western thought. To this question we now turn.

## THE COLONIZER'S MODEL

Perhaps all civilizations have a somewhat ethnocentric view of themselves in relation to their neighbors, believing themselves to

they had been there from the start, unless, that is, polygenists were right and some human groups had been created separately from, and perhaps much earlier than, Adam and Eve. This gave room for wide-ranging theorization about the way cultural differences had evolved. Paralleling this change was a general rejection of the literal biblical beliefs about the original nature of human society. Culture was now (after midcentury) quite generally seen as a product of evolution from very primitive beginnings, exemplified in the notion of a primordial "stone age." (According to the Old Testament, humans had possessed advanced technology, including agriculture and the use of metals, in the days of Genesis.)

The reasons for the rapid crystallization of beliefs about non-Europeans are complex, but the most important underlying reason was the progress of colonialism. This produced two effects in particular. One was a flood of information about non-European people and places, such that, for the first time, a coherent—though highly distorted—description could be given in the European literature about non-Europeans, both civilized and "savage." The second reason was a practical, political and economic interest in proving certain things to be true, and other things untrue, about the extra-European world and its people. The two processes were tightly interconnected.

Colonialism in its various forms, direct and indirect, was an immensely profitable business and considerable sums of money were invested in efforts to learn as much as possible about the people and resources of the regions to be conquered, dominated, and perhaps settled, and to learn as much as possible about the regions already conquered in order to facilitate the administration and economic exploitation of these regions. The nineteenth century was the age of scientific exploration—Darwin in the *Beagle*, Livingstone in Africa, Powell in the Rockies, and so on—but the sources of support for these efforts tended to be institutions with very practical interest in the regions being studied. Paralleling all of this was the great surge of missionary activity that supported some exploration (including Livingstone's) but most crucially led to the gathering of important, detailed, information about ethnography, languages, and geography by hundreds of dedicated missionaries throughout the non-European world. Also of great importance were the detailed