

Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Two Strategies for Challenging Eurocentrism

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Nowadays being critical of Eurocentrism, or seeking to “provincialize Europe”—more generally, trying to dislodge Europe from its privileged place in our thought—is no longer a marginal project, but one that engages growing numbers of scholars. Partly as a result, how this is done varies greatly. Schematically, it is possible—as I have done in my title—to identify two distinct strategies that have been adopted for challenging Eurocentrism. The aim of this brief essay is to contrast these, clarify the intellectual presumptions and entailments of each, and then briefly—as one who writes squarely within postcolonial theory—to outline what I see as the advantages of my own chosen path.

Works in historical or political sociology by Jack Goody (1996), Andre Gunder Frank (1998), Samir Amin (1989), James M. Blaut (1993) and John Hobson (2004), all their significant differences notwithstanding, have a common agenda. They retell the history of the emergence of the modern world in such a way that Europe no longer occupies a position of centrality; they challenge what we might call the “conventional narrative,” in which modernity begins in Europe and then spreads gradually to the rest of the world through colonialism, trade and armies. In the alternative version(s) that seeks to displace the conventional narrative, the development of capitalism and modernity is not a tale of endogenous development in Europe, but of structural interconnections between different parts of the world that long predated Europe’s ascendance and, moreover, provided the conditions for that ascendance. Andre Gunder Frank writes, “Europe did not pull itself up by its own economic bootstraps, and certainly not thanks to any kind of European ‘exceptionalism’ of rationality, institutions,

