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The Uniqueness of Western Civilisation

A product of modern European civilisation, studying problems of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances should be attributed the fact that in Western civilisation, and only there, have appeared cultural phenomena which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value.

Only in the West does science exist at a stage of development which we recognise today as valid. Empirical knowledge, reflection on problems of the cosmos and of life, philosophical and theological wisdom of the most profound sort are not confined to the West, though in the case of the last the full development of a systematic theology must be credited to Christianity under the influence of Hellenism, since there were only fragments in Islam and in a few Indian sects. In short, knowledge and observation of great refinement have existed elsewhere, above all in India, China, Babylonia and Egypt. But in Babylonia and elsewhere astronomy lacked the mathematical foundation which it first received from the Greeks and which makes its development all the more astounding. Indian geometry had no method of rational proof – another product of the Greek intellect, which was also the creator of mechanics and physics. Indian natural sciences, though well developed in observation, lacked the method of experiment, which was, apart from small beginnings in Antiquity, essentially a product of the Renaissance, as was the modern laboratory. Hence medicine, especially in India, though highly developed in empirical technique, lacked a biological and particularly a
biochemical foundation. A rational chemistry has been absent from all areas of culture except the West.

The highly developed historical scholarship of China did not have the method of Thucydides. Machiavelli, it is true, had predecessors in India; but all Asian political thought lacked a systematic method comparable to that of Aristotle, and was, indeed, deficient in rational concepts. Neither the anticipations in India (School of Mimamsa), nor the various extensive codifications, especially in the Near East, nor the Indian and other books of law had the strictly systematic forms of thought, so essential to a rational jurisprudence, of Roman law and of Western law under its influence. A structure like canon law is known only to the West.

A similar statement is true of art. The musical ear of other peoples has probably been even more sensitively developed than our own, certainly not less so. Polyphonic music of various kinds has been widely distributed over the globe. The co-operation of a number of instruments and also the singing of parts have existed elsewhere. All our rational tone intervals have been known and calculated. But rational harmonious music, both counterpoint and harmony, formation of the tone material on the basis of three triads with the harmonic third; our chromatics and enharmonics, not interpreted in terms of space, but (since the Renaissance) of harmony; our orchestra, with its string quartet as a nucleus, and the organisation of ensembles of wind instruments; our bass accompaniment; our system of notation, which has made possible the composition and production of modern musical works, and thus their very survival; our sonatas, symphonies, operas; and, finally, as means to all these, our fundamental instruments, the organ, piano, violin, and so on; all these things are known only in the Occident, although programme music, tone, poetry, alteration of tones and chromatons have existed in various musical traditions as means of expression.

In architecture, pointed arches have been used elsewhere as a means of decoration, in Antiquity and in Asia; presumably the combination of pointed arch and cross-arched vault was not unknown in the Orient. But the rational use of the Gothic vault as a means of distributing pressure . . . and above all as the constructive principle of great monumental buildings and the foundation of a style extending to sculpture and painting, such as that created during our Middle Ages, does not occur elsewhere. The technical basis of our architecture came from the Orient. But the Orient lacked that solution of the problem of the dome and that type of classic rationalisation of all art – in painting by the rational utilisation of lines and spatial perspective – which the Renaissance created for us. There was printing in China. But a printed literature, designed only for print and only possible through it, and, above all, the press and periodicals, have appeared only in the Occident. Institutions of higher education of all possible types, even some superficially similar to our universities, or at least academies, have existed (China, Islam). But a rational, systematic and specialised pursuit of science, with trained and specialised personnel, has only existed in the West in a sense at all approaching its present dominant place in our culture. Above all this is true of the trained official, the pillar both of the modern state and of the economic life of the West. He forms a type of which there have formerly only been suggestions, which have never remotely approached its present importance for the social order. Of course the official, even the specialised official, is a very old constituent of societies. But no country and no age has ever experienced, in the same sense as the modern Occident, the absolute and complete dependence of its whole existence, of the political, technical and economic conditions of its life, on specially trained officials. The most important functions of the everyday life of society have come to be in the hands of technically, commercially and above all legally trained government officials.

Organisation of political and social groups in feudal classes has been common. But even the feudal state in the Western sense has only been known to our culture. Even more peculiar to us are parliaments of periodically elected representatives, with government by demagogues and party leaders as ministers responsible to the parliaments, although there have, of course, been parties, in the sense of organisations for exerting influence and gaining control of
political power, all over the world. In fact, the state itself, in
the sense of a political association with a rational, written
constitution, rationally ordained law, and an administration
bound to rational rules or laws, administered by trained
officials, is known, in this combination of characteristics,
only in the Occident, despite all other approaches to it.

The same is true of the most significant force in modern
life: capitalism. The impulse to acquisition, pursuit of gain,
of money, of the greatest possible amount of money, has in
itself nothing to do with capitalism. This impulse exists and
has existed among waiters, physicians, coachmen, artists,
prostitutes, dishonest officials, soldiers, nobles, crusaders,
gamblers and beggars. One may say that it has been
common to all sorts and conditions of men at all times and in
all countries of the world, wherever the objective possibility
of it is or has been given... Unlimited greed for gain is not
in the least identical with capitalism, and is still less its spirit.
Capitalism may even be identical with the restraint, or at
least a rational tempering, of this irrational impulse. But
capitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever
renewed profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic
enterprise. For it must be so: in a wholly capitalistic order of
society, an individual capitalistic enterprise which did not
take advantage of its opportunities for profit-making would
be doomed to extinction.

Let us now define our terms somewhat more carefully
than is generally done. We will define a capitalistic economic
action as one which rests on the expectation of profit by the
utilisation of opportunities for exchange, that is, on peaceful
chances of profit. Acquisition by force is a different process.

Where capitalistic acquisition is rationally pursued,
calculation underlies every single action of the partners. For
the purpose of this conception all that matters is that an
actual adaptation of economic action to a comparison of
money income with money expenses takes place, no matter
how primitive the form. Now in this sense capitalism and
capitalistic enterprises, even with a considerable rationali-
sation of capitalistic calculation, have existed in all civilised
countries of the world, so far as documents permit us to
judge: in China, India, Babylonia, Egypt, Mediterranean

Antiquity and the Middle Ages, as well as in modern times.
These were not merely isolated ventures, but economic
enterprises which were entirely dependent on the continual
renewal of capitalistic undertakings, and even continuous
operations. However, trade especially was for a long time
not continuous like our own, but consisted essentially of a
series of individual undertakings. Only gradually did the
activities of even the large merchants acquire an inner
cohesion (with branch organisations, and so on). In any
case, the capitalistic enterprise and the capitalistic entre-
preneur, not only occasional but also regular, are very old
and were very widespread.

Now, however, the Occident has developed capitalism
both to a quantitative extent and in types, forms and
directions which have never existed elsewhere. All over the
world there have been merchants, wholesale and retail, local
or engaged in foreign trade. Loans of all kinds have been
made, and there have been banks with the most varied
functions, at least comparable to ours of, say, the sixteenth
century... Whenever money finances of public bodies have
existed, money-lenders have appeared, as in Babylonia,
Hellas, India, China and Rome. They have financed wars
and piracy, contracts and building operations of all sorts. In
overseas policy they have functioned as colonial entre-
preneurs, as planters with slaves, or directly or indirectly
forced labour, and have farmed domains, offices and, above
all, taxes. They have financed party leaders in elections and
mercenaries in civil wars. Their activities have been pre-
dominantly of an irrational and speculative character, or
directed to acquisition by force, above all the acquisition of
booty, whether directly in war or in the form of continuous
fiscal exploitation of the subject populations.

The capitalism of promoters, large-scale speculators,
concession hunters and, above all, the capitalism especially
concerned with exploiting wars, bears this stamp even in
modern Western countries, and some, but only some, parts
of large-scale international trade are closely related to it,
today as always.

However, in modern times the Occident has developed, in
addition to this, a very different form of capitalism which
has appeared nowhere else: the rational capitalistic organisation of (formally) free labour. Only embryonic forms of it are found elsewhere. Even the organisation of unfree labour reached a considerable degree of rationality only on the plantations and to a very limited extent in the slave workshops of Western Antiquity. In the manors, manorial workshops and domestic industries on estates with serf labour it was probably somewhat less developed. Moreover, developed domestic industries with free labour have definitely been proved to have existed in only a few isolated cases outside the Occident.

Rational, industrial organisation, attuned to regular market, rather than to political or irrationally speculative opportunities for profit, is not, however, the only peculiarity of Western capitalism. The modern rational organisation of capitalistic enterprise would not have been possible without two other important factors in its development: the separation of business from the household, which completely dominates modern economic life, and, closely connected with it, rational book-keeping. The development of capitalistic associations with their own accounts is also found in the Far East, the Near East and in Antiquity. But compared with the modern independence of business enterprises, those are only small beginnings. The main reason for this was that the indispensable requisites for this independence, our rational business book-keeping and our legal separation of corporate from personal property, were entirely lacking, or had only just begun to develop.

However, all these peculiarities of Western capitalism have derived their significance in the last analysis only from their association with the capitalistic organisation of labour. Even what is generally called commercialisation – the development of negotiable securities and the rationalisation of speculation, the stock exchange, and so on – is connected with it. For without the rational capitalistic organisation of labour, all this, so far as it was possible at all, would have nothing like the same significance for the social structure and all the specific problems of the modern Occident connected with it. Exact calculation – the basis of everything else – is only possible on a basis of free labour.

Just as, or rather because, the world has known no rational organisation of labour outside the modern Occident, it has known no rational socialism. True, we can find elsewhere examples of municipal control of the economy, and of food supply policy, mercantilism, welfare policies of princes, rationing, governmental regulation of economic life, protectionism and laissez-faire theories (as in China). The world has also known socialistic and communistic experiments of various sorts: family, religious, or military communism, state socialism (in Egypt), monopolistic cartels and consumers’ organisations. But although we can find everywhere market privileges of cities, companies and guilds, and all sorts of legal differences between town and country, the concept of the citizen has not existed outside the Occident, and that of the bourgeoisie outside the modern Occident.* Similarly, the proletariat as a class could not exist, because there was no rational organisation of free labour under regular discipline. Class struggles between creditor and debtor classes, landowners and the landless, serfs or tenants, and conflicts between trading interests and consumers or landlords, have been occurring everywhere in various combinations. But even the Western medieval struggles between putters-out and their workers had only rudimentary parallels in other civilisations. The modern conflict of the large-scale industrial entrepreneur and free wage labourers has no equivalents anywhere.

In a universal history of culture the central problem for us is not . . . the development of any form of capitalist activity as such: the adventurer type, or capitalism involved in trade, war, politics, or administration as sources of gain. It is rather the origin of sober bourgeois capitalism with its rational organisation of free labour. The problem is that of the cultural origins of the Western bourgeois class and of its peculiarities: a problem which is certainly closely connected with that of the origin of the capitalistic organisation of labour, but is not quite the same thing. For the bourgeois as a class existed prior to the development of the peculiar

* It must be remembered that ‘citizen’ and ‘bourgeois’ originally simply meant ‘townsman’. (S.A.)
modern form of capitalism, though, it is true, only in Western civilisation.

The modern Western form of capitalism is dependent on science, especially the natural sciences based on mathematics and exact and rational experiment. On the other hand, the development of these sciences and of the technology resting upon them now receives important stimulus from these capitalistic interests in its practical economic applications. It is true that the origin of Western science cannot be attributed to such interests. Calculation, even with decimals, and algebra have been used in India, where the decimal system was invented. But it was only fully utilised by the developing capitalism in the West; in India it did not lead on to modern arithmetic or book-keeping. Nor was the origin of mathematics and mechanics determined by capitalistic interests. Yet the technical utilisation of scientific knowledge, so important for the living conditions of the mass of people, was certainly encouraged by economic considerations, which were extremely favourable to it in the Occident. But this encouragement was derived from the peculiarities of the social structure of the Occident. We must hence ask, from what parts of that structure was it derived, since not all of them have been of equal importance?

Among those of undoubted importance are the rational structures of law and of administration. For modern rational capitalism needs, not only the technical means of production, but also a calculable legal system and an administration based on formal rules. Without them, an irregular, shady, speculative and purely commercial capitalism as well as other kinds of politically involved capitalisms are possible, but no rational enterprise under individual initiative, with fixed capital and certainty of calculations. Such a legal system and such administration have been available as a framework for economic activity only in the Occident. We must, therefore, inquire where that law came from. Among other circumstances, capitalistic interests have in turn undoubtedly also helped, but by no means alone nor even principally, to prepare the way for the predominance in law and administration of a class of jurists specially trained in rational law. But these interests did not themselves create that law. Quite different forces were at work in this development. And why did not capitalistic interests do the same in China or India? Why did not scientific, artistic, political, or economic development there move on to that path of rationalisation which is peculiar to the Occident?

In all these matters it is a question of the specific and peculiar rationalism of Western culture. Now by this term very different things may be understood, as the following discussion will repeatedly show. There is, for example, rationalisation of mystical contemplation, that is, of an attitude which, viewed from other departments of life, is specifically irrational, just as much as there are rationalisations of economic life, of technique, of scientific research, of military training, of law and administration. Furthermore, each one of these fields may be rationalised in terms of very different ultimate values and ends, and what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another. Hence rationalisations of the most varied character have existed in various departments of life and in all areas of culture. To characterise their differences from the viewpoint of cultural history it is necessary to know which aspects are rationalised, and in which direction. It is hence our first concern to work out and to explain the genesis of the special peculiarity of Occidental rationalism, and of its modern form. Every such attempt at explanation must, recognising the fundamental importance of the economic factor, above all take account of economic conditions. But at the same time the opposite relationship must not be left out of consideration. For though the development of economic rationalism is partly dependent on rational technique and law, it is at the same time determined by the ability and disposition of men to adopt certain types of practical rational conduct. When these have been obstructed by spiritual obstacles, the development of rational economic conduct has also met serious inner resistance. The magical and religious forces, and the ethical ideas of duty based upon them, have in the past always been among the most important formative influences on conduct.