

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE EXPANSION OF EUROPE

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1. *Overcoming Eurocentrism: the First Step*

One of the chief sources that inspired the international revival of the *World History*, which has been going on for about thirty years now, must certainly be seen in the reconceptualization in a polycentric key that has invested, in the same period, the field of studies dealing with «The Expansion of Europe».

This expression refers to the object of investigation privileged by a well-defined scientific and academic tradition, predominantly British or pan-Britannic, but with significant ramifications also elsewhere, like in the United States and the Netherlands, whose path has been followed, in earlier stages of their career, by paradigmatic exponents of the new global history like both Christopher Bayly and John Darwin.

It is worth trying to outline a summary profile of this scholarly tradition because the works of its today's best heirs suggest historiographical ideas which seem to me very useful in order to subtract the ongoing controversy about the role of Europe in the history of the modern and contemporary world to a false alternative in which this debate, especially here in Italy, risks too often to become entangled. I intend to refer to the false alternative between the polemical demand of «provincializing Europe» (which has been advanced in particular by the Indian post-colonial and subalternist historian Dipesh Chakrabarty) and the uncritical re-proposal, in reaction to the radical assault against Eurocentrism, of a European centrality which is undoubtedly in need of a profound rethinking.

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«The Expansion of Europe» is actually the name of a prestigious and long-lived examination paper set up by the Cambridge History Department in 1945. It echoed pretty obviously the phrase «The Expansion of England», that is the title of a famous course of lectures held in Cambridge at the beginning of the 1880s by the founding father of the British imperial historiography, John Seeley.

At the end of the nineteen-seventies the examination was split into a first part, which kept the old denomination of «The Expansion Europe», and a second part dedicated to the period after 1918, entitled «The West and the Third World» (but popularly known as «the West and the rest»). And the first part is the direct ancestor of the current Paper Twenty One of the Historical Tripos, *Empires in World History*, which corresponds to the course of World History dealing with the period from the Iberian colonization of the New World to the Great War (the Historical Tripos being the name given to the series of written examination which have to be passed by your younger colleagues in order to obtain the bachelor's degree in History at Cambridge).

According to the original program approved by the Council of the Faculty of History in April 1945 (a few weeks before the end of the Second World War in Europe), the courses related to the European expansion would have dealt «in outline with the political, economic and cultural contacts of the principal countries of Europe – including Russia – with the remainder of the world in the period since 1400» to the present.

The subject-matter of the teaching is described in a list of contents that can be read in *The Student's Handbook to the University and Colleges of Cambridge* for 1947. These are the great voyages of «exploration; the relevant missionary, humanitarian and political movements; the development of overseas trade and investment; the reaction of extra-European countries to European influence, including the effects on peasant economy of the opening of international markets and the industrialisation of colonial territories; the foundation of colonial empires, with the general features of the imperial policy of the principal European countries; the problems of native self-government; international relations in the colonial sphere, with the relevant military and naval history»¹.

¹ *The Student's Handbook to the University and Colleges of Cambridge*, supplement for 1946-47, Cambridge, University Press, 1947, p. 99; *Statutes of the University of Cambridge and Passages from Acts of Parliament*

In the next decade also the organization of the research at Cambridge was formally adapted to the introduction of this remarkable didactic innovation, with the launch of a specific research seminar on the history of European expansion.

But in order to fully grasp the meaning and the historiographical implications of these initiatives, it is essential to dwell for a few moments on the motivations put forward by their academic supporters and on the intellectual attitudes of some of the initial architects of their successful and rapid taking roots.

Among the latter, a prominent place certainly has to be given to the young John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, two eminent revisionist historians of British imperialism. Starting in 1953 (the same year in which they jointly published a very influential article written in four hands on *The Imperialism of the Free Trade* in the «Economic History Review»), and for about thirty years, Gallagher and Robinson held for the most part, simultaneously or in turn, the two introductory courses on the fundamental outlines of the European expansion before and after 1850, namely the series of lectures dedicated to the synthetic presentation and macro-historical contextualization of the phenomenon of the European expansion.

According to its proponents, the need to introduce the systematic study of the European expansion stemmed from the blatant inability of the colonial and imperial history that was taught at Cambridge to provide satisfactory answers to the questions raised by the momentous changes which were underway in the «European position in Asia and Africa» on the eve of decolonization. Many pupils and young teachers and researchers, including Gallagher and Robinson themselves, had recently had the opportunity of personally experiencing these epochal changes by serving in the armed forces on the different non-European fronts of the world war.

In their diagnosis, the fault of colonial history was its excessive concentration on the «imperial factor» and neglect of the role played by the colonized people, whom the events of the war and its aftermath were bringing to the fore.

The adoption of the broader category of «European expansion», in the place of that of «Expansion of England», responded first of all to a need of relativization and demythization

relating to the University; Ordinances of the University of Cambridge, to 1 October 1952, Cambridge, University Press, p. 206.

of the British imperial experience. But it was intended also to remedy a too narrow conception of colonial history still mostly focused in an almost exclusive manner on the victorious protagonism of European actors, so that – to quote again the testimony of Christopher Bayly referring to the state of things which subsisted at Oxford until the 1960s – «Indians and Africans were rarely more than a backdrop to the doings of colonizers, missionaries and merchants».

One of the main purposes of the introduction of the new paper was therefore to widen the analytical context in which the empire-building processes and the different types of European presence and influence in the world had to be studied, so as to include in it the contribution of non-European forces which were recognized now able to interact dynamically with the Europeans and to condition the deployment and the outcomes of their colonial initiatives.

A well-known historiographical exemplification of this approach, and of its vast methodological repercussions, is offered to us by the much-debated theory of imperialism advanced by Gallagher and Robinson themselves. An essential element of this theory is its vigorous emphasis on the «Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism». According to them, even at the height of the so-called «triumph (...) of European domination» in the final decades of the long nineteenth century, British and European expansion and colonial power constantly depended on a multitude of forms of «collaboration», and therefore of compromise and negotiation, actively involving non-Europeans, albeit in a subordinate position.

Later research influenced by the so-called School of Cambridge has showed, among other things, how the imperative necessity of making sectors of the elites and other key strata of the native societies willing participants in the formal or informal control of the non-European peoples gave imperial government and domination the character of a «cross-cultural enterprise». This crucial circumstance offers a plausible explanation of why the representations of the non-European “Otherness” that can be found in the rhetoric of official legitimation of the imperial authority elaborated in the European Metropolis usually abstain from resorting (at least in the British case) to the most derogatory stereotypes of cultural differentialism and biological racism (even James Mill’s derogatory representation of the

Hindus didn't deny, after all, the possibility that the Hindus could be ultimately civilized) or to the language of the Kiplingean «white man's burden» This partially contradicts, or renders indispensable to rectify, Edward Said's well-known thesis about the relationship between colonial culture and colonial power. The exercise of colonial power did not necessarily imply the utter stigmatization of the colonized. We can see therefore how, in this case, the awareness of the interactive nature of the relationship of colonial power reveals itself an essential prerequisite for a truly historical, non-ideological approach to the theme of the culture of imperialism, which has risen to the top of the agenda of the European studies in the last generation.

At the very beginnings of the Cambridge School we may recognize therefore that very propensity to organically connect within the same interpretative framework the dynamics unfolding in the European and non-European scenarios of expansion, which we have already found, in a more developed form, in the work of Christopher Bayly and which we will find again in John Darwin's book on the global empires.

This methodological attitude suggests a second qualifying aspect of the Expansion Studies paradigm on which I would like to draw attention, and that I would define, in a first approximation, the synoptic ambition cultivated by the major exponents of the Cambridge tradition.

It is highly probable, of course, that the appeal exercised by the newborn discipline of «The Expansion of Europe» after the Second World War reflected to a large extent a growing interest for the knowledge of the extra-European worlds. The Expansion of Europe course provided the students with one of the rare opportunities to pursue this interest in the English universities at the time. We see here the prodromes of a trend that from the mid-nineteen-sixties would have continued in the most congenial form of the disciplinary autonomization of the regional studies (the so called area studies).

The fact remains that the Expansion of Europe course had been conceived and would have been kept alive until its explicit transmutation in the World History course which is presently taught at Cambridge for a more specific institutional purpose. This didactic purpose was to delineate the wider world historical and comparative horizon within which the more

specialized teaching and study dealing with individual non-European regions or the history of the British Empire and Commonwealth would have to find their place.

At the heart of the idea of «universal history» that informed the thought of the Cambridge historians after the Second World War, it is easy to see a persistent tendency to imagine the European expansion as a «many-sided» but intrinsically unitary phenomenon and to identify it, at the same time, with the vector of a process of «unification of the world» which, in the contemporary era, had reached the critical phase of its fulfillment.

This tendency dated back to the nineteenth-century historiography (Seeley himself, the founding father of Imperial History as an academic discipline, had been one among its foremost exponents during the Victorian age) and had recently resurfaced, in an updated form, in the writings of Arnold J. Toynbee.

Even for Gallagher and Robinson, in fact, the «expanding» entity, driven by the «expansive energies of Europe» and in particular of the British industrial society, was properly the «western civilization»; and the various dimensions of its expansion had to be regarded as «radiations» in different shapes of the same «social energies», and constituted therefore «interconnected» «parts» of a «whole».

Within this «totality», the European imperialism assumed a more informal or formal character according to the variable conditions of the extra-European areas which the civilizational movement impacted in its world-wide advance. Considered as an aspect of the expansion of Europe so conceived, British and European or Western imperialism fulfilled «the political function» of «integrating new regions» if and when its help was needed to this purpose – as it was not at all inevitable that always happened.

In its holistic impetus, the Cambridge school also conceives the temporal manifestations of the expansion of Europe as moments in one single centuries-old sequence of events that embraces together both the modern and the contemporary age and requires an appropriate internal periodization of its own. The historians belonging to this tradition see the ubiquitous spatial manifestations, both material and ideal, of the European expansion, as ramifications of «one great» geohistorical «movement». The national subcurrents of this movement, that is the expansions promoted by other European people and States, of which the English expansion would be «only the largest and the latest of a whole species», are regarded by

these scholars as contributions to a common «European» or «Western» historical work. Last but not least, the Cambridge School regards the European and neo-European irradiation poles and the non-European destination areas of the expansive movement as internal articulations of a single large, virtually ecumenical theater of transregional and transcultural interactions.

Such methodological propensities seem to have been particularly pronounced in John Gallagher, who was an academic mentor both to Bayly and Darwin. In Gallagher's intellectual personality, however, the holistic, «all-embracing» ambition coexisted, in a rare and fruitful combination, with a historiographical realism that appears indebted to the elitist empiricism and «anti-impressionist positivism» which came to dominate the British historiographical scene after World War Two under the influence of Lewis Namier (1888-1960).

It was in Gallagher's teaching to undergraduates, however, that his leaning towards macro-history found its most congenial vent. Some former pupils, including Darwin himself, who in *After Tamerlane* declared to have learned from Gallagher to consider world history «as a connected whole», have witnessed (or suggested at least) that Gallagher, as university teacher, availed himself of a «global» approach so as to make the expansion of Europe the reconstructive principle of a synthetic presentation of world history.

Gallagher used to inaugurate his annual preliminary course on the fundamental outlines of the European expansion by warning his listeners that the subject-matter of the lessons would actually lead him to deal with the entire «Tokyo to Tipperary (which is a town in Ireland, N.d.R.) group of civilizations».

This last testimony provides us with a precious clarification about the true theme of the history of the European expansion, because it shows as the founders of the Cambridge School conferred a privileged status to a hemispherical space (to which they were uncertain whether ascribing or not Sub-Saharan Africa) that they regarded as profoundly different from the transoceanic new worlds.

Here, in the transoceanic new worlds to which has to be added Southern Africa, the Western civilizations expanded in the form of more or less homogenizing «gains» (i.e. acquisitions) which were promoted by the neo-European societies, that is, by the white

colonial societies created by immigrant form Europe and their descendants. In the Americas and Oceania the Western society expanded by pushing forward its frontiers.

In the Eastern hemisphere, on the contrary, the Europe expanded by establishing «contacts» with people which possessed a kind and a degree of civilization comparable with their own. The Western expansion in the extra-European world acquired in this case the character of «contacts between civilizations in space».

But this last circumstance has to be taken into the highest consideration not only because it peculiarly shapes the dynamics of expansion in the Old World in various ways. The fact is that the group of the Eurasian «civilizations» are ultimately the co-protagonists of a common history. This common history is given its structural unity, from a certain point onwards, by the «Western» expansion. At the same time, the common Eurasian history possesses a further meaning, which consists in the final convergence and reciprocal integration of the various regional societies into the contemporary global society.

To make altogether explicit the historical-universal assumptions which are at the basis of the originary paradigm of the historiography of the European expansion have been a couple of those non-British scholars, who, as I already mentioned, were involved in its launch alongside their British colleagues.

The most complete definition of the post-war concept of history of the European expansion (among those which are known to me) was given by the Dutch historian Henk Wesseling when he described the institutional mission of the homonymous Center («Geschiedenis van de Europese Expansie» in Dutch) which was created at the University of Leiden in 1974.

Studying the European expansion, according to Wesseling, amounted to concentrating research on the intertwining of a triple order of phenomena. The first theme was the «history of the encounters between different systems of civilization» generated by the European expansion. The second theme was the relationship of mutual «influence» that had established itself between these civilizations. The third theme was their «gradual growth towards a global, a universal system of civilization» (the modern and contemporary development of McNeill's «human community», in other terms).

A further tacit key element of the Expansion of Europe paradigm is vividly illuminated by an observation that I draw from an essay published in 1959 by the American scholar Philip Curtin, the great historian of the Atlantic slavery turned world historian in the subsequent phases of his professional career. Since the mid-nineteen-fifties Curtin himself had held in various universities of the United States a course on «The Expansion of Europe» later renamed «The World and the West». According to Curtin, the basic assumption of the new discipline was that during the modern and contemporary age «the impact of the West» had been «the most important single factor in the history of any single country» of the extra-European world which experienced it and therefore, at the same time, «the unifying factor» in the history of the extra-European world taken as a whole. Focusing on the «impact of Europe» the historiography of the expansion could therefore legitimately aspire to sketch an organic, general and «comparative» outline of world history as a whole.

The conceptualization of the expansion of Europe that was elaborated at the dawn of decolonization recognized therefore a real capacity to interact with the West to the non-Europeans (or at least to the «civilized» non-Europeans of the Eastern hemisphere). But it continued to rest on a theoretical framework that circumscribed their «agency» within very narrow limits. Non-European agency was mainly described in terms of reactivity or response of worlds which were in themselves stagnant to an exogenous jolt or challenge. This first, genuine attempt of overcoming Eurocentrism left largely intact old stereotypes, remounting in some respects to James Mill, in so far as it still relegated the past of the Oriental societies prior to the «encounter» with the West to a kind of historicity (or kinds of historicity) which was qualitatively different, if not antithetic, to European historicity.

The persistence and pervasiveness of such stereotypes should not be forgotten by those who today, faced with the opposite excesses of which the radical critics of historiographical eurocentrism are too often guilty, regret indiscriminately the time (which is after all, and fortunately, as far as I'm concerned, far from being yet over) when «in general historical representations Europe occupied a central place» - as the late Professor Giuseppe Galasso declared in one of his latest interviews.

I limit myself to an example taken from one of the university manuals of contemporary history on which I myself studied at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties. I refer to the

volume of Alberto Caracciolo on «the age of the bourgeoisie and revolutions» published by Il Mulino in 1979, which is an example - I immediately add - made in my eyes all the more significant by the authoritativeness and by the particular intellectual distinction of its eminent author.

Like Bayly's books on the *Birth* and the *Remaking* of the modern world, Caracciolo's book was part of a series published by Il Mulino whose other three volumes – on the Middle Ages, on the «formation of the modern world», on the «triumph and collapse of European dominance» between 1870 and the present – were also authored by big names of Italian and European historiography of the time such as Giovanni Tabacco, Alberto Tenenti and Pasquale Villani. The editorial project of the series presupposed (a little too optimistically, perhaps, even by the standards of the time) the existence of a potential market that was composed not only of «university students», but of a wider and growing audience of «cultured» readers, to whom the *General Presentation* of the series ascribed a keen interest in the «basic processes of the modern world».

To the questions posed to history by these readers the series promised to offer «overall but rigorous answers» in the form of «a carefully updated interpretive synthesis» and focused – let's note – on the history of «European civilization» considered «as a whole» spanning the «ten centuries» from the Middle Ages to the «late twentieth century». The four volumes of the series would have followed the «long process» of development of the West «in its successive expressions until today's crisis».

To mark the overall macro-historical framework of this series of university textbooks was therefore the conviction that students and readers could gain an adequate and intellectually satisfying understanding of the entire genesis of the modern and contemporary world – of their own world – by retracing, under the guidance of their distinguished authors, the stages which had prepared and rhythmized, in the course of a thousand years, the rise of Europe to the «gradual rule over all the known world», culminating in its nineteenth-century «triumph» and twentieth-century «collapse». The Eurocentric perspective adopted by the editors of the series was clearly stated indeed in its very title: *The European Civilization in World History*.

The volume of the series authored by Alberto Caracciolo has a paragraph entitled «The European civilization takes off», in which a student could read that, starting from the

industrial revolution, which Caracciolo located yet in the second half of the eighteenth century, there had emerged in the world a division of mankind into two parts. There was «a part of humanity» which remained «underdeveloped», by which Caracciolo meant that it was «nailed to a substantial stasis and repetition of its own condition». And there was «another» part which was «involved», on the contrary, «in an ascending dynamic, in short in a practically uninterrupted “development”». The developed and developing part of mankind, moreover, was rising to «a dominant position over all others» parts which were still underdeveloped, including those peoples - «Muslims or Indians, Chinese and Japanese», who «retained (...) the elevated levels of their traditional civilizations», despite the immobility and the cyclicity of their histories».

The category of «traditional», understood as the opposite and the antithesis of «modern» and «progressive», is central to the general vision of the European expansion advanced by Gallagher and Robinson. Their macro-historical ideas are brilliantly summarized, in their characteristic non-academic if not anti-academic writing style, in the epilogue of another four-handed essay on *The Partition of Africa* which was published in 1962 in the *New Cambridge Modern History*.

According to the co-authors, the European expansionism and imperialism of the long nineteenth century had been «the engine of social change» in the «totally not-European» regions of the world, namely Asia and Africa. And these past transformations promoted by the European expansion were at the roots of the «world revolution» which was unfolding on the contemporary scene, that is decolonization and the rise of the post-colonial State.

Gallagher and Robinson described indeed «colonial nationalism» itself as both a product and an «auxiliary» of the social changes triggered by the Western global empires, so much so that «colonial nationalism» had to be regarded as «the continuation of imperialism by other means».

The European expansion had unleashed gigantic «disruptive forces upon the indigenous structures». In this way it had fulfilled the function, «of the first importance» from a world-historical point of view, «to wear down or to crack open the casings of societies» which had been «governed hitherto by traditional modes». The «many-sided» European expansion had subjected these traditional non-European cultures and societies to the rough treatment,

based on «cuffs» and «hustles», which was necessary in order to remove them from the «postures of tradition» and to introduce them into «a new era of change» and «transformation».

The impact force of the expansion of Europe had therefore triggered and favoured «rapid» processes of «social mobility», formation and «rise of new elites», «change of values», conflicts between traditional potentates and «emerging groups». In these ways the Western expansion had put Asians and Africans in front of what Gallagher and Robinson called, with an expression borrowed from Arnold Toynbee, «the Western question».

In a book published in 1922, entitled *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey. A Study in the Contact of Civilizations*, Toynbee had drawn attention to the fact that the Expansion of Europe had forced upon the civilized non-Europeans (or non-Westerners, in the case of the Russians) a choice concerning what attitude to assume towards Europeanizing modernization and towards all those groups - Europeans or non-Europeans - who were promoting and carrying on it. This dilemma, this «Western question», and the different responses evoked by it, was the most single important process unfolding on the contemporary political scene.

And it is precisely in the various possible «responses» to the inescapable «challenge» represented by the «Western questions» that Gallagher and Robinson in 1962 (as already Toynbee since 1922) identify the limited terrain of exercise of the restored historical «agency» of the non-Europeans. This means that Gallagher and Robinson circumscribed the field of the global – that is, the field of interaction and integration between the «civilizations» entered into «contact» with each other following the European expansion – exclusively to the phenomena pertaining to the chain of actions and reactions started by the European initiative (compare this to Christopher Bayly's emphasis on the role played by non-European modernities in preparing the ground for the transition to global modernity during the long nineteenth century).

It goes without saying that the option towards which the two English scholars manifested their greatest sympathy was not the «romantic, reactionary» «response» of the «Zealot», fundamentalist movements that reacted to the «shock» of Western-induced change by integrally opposing it, such as, for example, the theocratic Sudanese Mahdism.

Gallagher and Robinson showed a strong appreciation toward a range of «more positive responses» to westernization that saw as protagonists the much more «deft nationalisms of Egypt and the Levant» (that is of the Ottoman Empire), the Confucian Occidentalism of the so-called «Scholars of New Learning» committed to modernize the late nineteenth-century imperial China, the different sections of the Indian National Congress of the origins (who pursued a program of modernizing nation-building without severing India's connection with the British Empire) as well as «the separatist churches of Africa» (that is the autochthonous, non-missionary Churches created by the initiative of the indigenous Christian Africans themselves).

This second type of response amounted to an attempt made by non-Europeans to make use of the resources of various kinds put at their disposal by the encounter with the Western civilization in order to «re-form their personality and regain their powers by operating in the idiom of the westerners». They opted, in other terms, for a strategy of «sophisticated collaboration», by virtue of which the non-Europeans themselves became the agents of European expansion and strove at the same time to decline it according to their own cultural codes and to bend it to their own interests.

According to the «ex-centric» interpretation of imperialism advanced by Gallagher and Robinson, the novelty of the local crises produced by the «proto-nationalist awakenings» ultimately imputable to the consequences of the previous phases of the expansion of Europe (such as, for example, the nationalist revolt headed by Colonel Urabi which provoked the British military intervention in Egypt in 1882) played a crucial role in determining the late nineteenth-century turn towards «formal» imperialism.

Starting from the eighteen-eighties, it became more likely than in the past that the Europeans could choose to impose their «formal» control on extra-European territories rather than keeping to the methods of «informal imperialism». It was so because the expansionists did not prove to be sufficiently «creative» and audacious to adapt themselves to the changed conditions of «collaboration» with the non-Europeans that the expansion itself had generated. They failed to adopt also towards the new, modernizing «emerging groups» – in a form corresponding to the novel, unprecedented social and cultural characteristics of these group – their old policy which had consisted in negotiating an

alliance with the «more dynamic» elements in the extra-European society in order to ensure optimal conditions for the expansion at the minimum cost.

And a relevant aspect of this diminished creativity was the deafness of the West to the authentic historical significance of the turbulences that manifested themselves in the wider world – the Europeans' unwillingness to read in the extra-European tensions and crises anything else than «the signs of decrepitude and crack-up». For Robinson and Gallagher, on the contrary, the whole range of the late nineteenth-century «awakenings» (including, that is, the Zealots' more seemingly archaic responses to the Western question) reveals the existence in the Afro-Asiatic societies of «growth points», of fruitful seeds which were destined to mature in the «modern struggles against foreign rule» and in the colonial nationalism which was called to carry forward the Promethean work initiated by industrial imperialism.

It is only too evident, if we follow attentively Gallagher's and Robinson's argument, and take also into account the eloquent metaphors which corroborate its logic, that the only possible «growth points» to be found in the non-European soil still completely coincided, for the founders of the Cambridge School, with the seeds implanted *ex novo* by the Western historical enterprise.

2. The Expansion of Europe in the Perspective of the New Global History

Until now I've insisted on the unsurpassed limits of the genuine efforts which were made by the founding fathers of the Cambridge School in order to overcome the Eurocentric approach to the theme of the expansion of Europe. To underline these conceptual limitations is essential for exactly measuring and qualifying the further progress made by their pupils and successors, among whom Christopher Bayly and John Darwin, in the direction of a more complete de-ideologization and historicization of the phenomenon of European expansion.

The profound «rethinking» of which «The Expansion of Europe» has been made the object since the mid-nineteen-eighties is well illustrated by the title and by the program of the today's course of *World History* in which, as I've already mentioned, the examination paper

instituted in 1945 has progressively evolved at Cambridge since then: *Empires in World History from the Fifteenth Century to the First World War*.

As can be seen from various syllabuses published in the last years, the architects of the course (among which Bayly, who was Professor of Imperial History at Cambridge from the early nineteen-nineties to the beginnings of the last decade) continue to believe that the empirical study of causes, phases and modalities of the ascent of the «European and Atlantic world» to a «dominant» position «in the world economy and world politics», with particular reference to «what (...) that dominance meant for the rest of the world», is able to provide a unifying theme for the history of humanity during the period in which «the modern world came to be». But a crucial didactic innovation has to be seen in the fact that the course now proposes to deal with these issues by considering «the “expansion of Europe”» (the expression appears in inverted commas in the particular syllabus I’m quoting from) in close connection with the «major changes and developments» which also took place «in other world societies» of Eurasia, starting from the phase of consolidation of the great Asian empires during the early modern age and until the initial emergence the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries colonial «nationalisms».

In the revised and updated version that has taken shape in recent years, the expansionist paradigm reveals itself, in other words, in substantial agreement with the primary methodological requirement of the coeval revival of World History, which consists in an invitation to reimagine the intensified cross-cultural interactions catalyzed by the western initiative, from which the globalized society of our time emerges, like the convergence, the confluence and the coalescence of the histories – of all the histories and of the whole histories – of a plurality of dynamic macroregional spaces.

This means that, on one hand, the *Empires in World History* course, as well as the works of synthesis that share its changed conceptual structure (like Bayly’s *The Birth of the Modern World* and Darwin’s *After Tamerlane*), continues to employ as an indispensable narrative axis the histories of the European colonial empires, including (like the original Expansion of Europe course) the «multiple geographical directions of the Russian expansion». And yet the *Empires in World History* course professes and prides itself not to be «a European-centered course», not only because it emphasizes the transregional «movement of ideas, peoples and

trades» which «bypass Europe», involving, that is, two or more other historical regions, but also and in the first place because – as declared in one of syllabuses – «it stretches the compass of empire» so as to include among the factors to be taken into account in order to understand the making of the modern world the «strategies of expansion» related to the early modern processes of empire-building and culture-building promoted also «by the Ottomans, the Mughals and the Qing and other polities beyond the West».

The *Empires in World History* course does not cease, therefore, to reserve «central stage» to the phenomena of «resistance and adaptation of non-European peoples to western economic penetration, political dominance and evangelization», and to the «non-western modernities» or «religious resurgences» (in the case of Islam, for example) which emerge from them. It is worth repeating that the attention paid to the non-European or non-Western responses is not in itself a novelty in the tradition of the Cambridge School.

The real and very important novelty has to be seen in the fact that the «reactions» to the European expansion are no longer interpreted solely as a function of the «social change» induced by the «impact of Europe». The non-European reactions are regarded now, at the macro historical level, as moments and phases of pre-existing, prolonged and uninterrupted currents of historical life and activity which saw the «non-European peoples» as their agents and protagonists.

I have to repeat also, in order to avoid misunderstandings, that in the new historiography of the expansion of Europe the revaluation of the performances of non-European «cultures, economies and states» does not aim at calling in doubt the relative exceptionality of the European case and the temporary, contingent centrality and preponderance of the Europeans in the hierarchies of world power. On the methodological plan, this further step forward in the overcoming of Eurocentrism reflects the scientific need to reconsider the periodization, the geography, the morphology, as well as the legacies left to the present, of the global interactions which mark the rise and decline of European dominance in the light of the empirical results of area studies. The growing research conducted in this field has documented the presence in the rest of Eurasia, during the centuries of the early modern age and prior to the actual «impact of the West» on its regions, of endogenous dynamics of change which were for long time considered an exclusive prerogative of Europe.

We may disagree with Bayly's opinion that these other early modern Eurasian transformations can be regarded as «passages to modernity» which went parallel or were analogous to the European development. What remains true is that, within the theoretical horizon of the Cambridge School, such early modern Afro-Eurasian changes strongly suggest two new questions: what is the actual historical relationship, if any, between the acquisition by Europeans of the control of a particular area of the Eurasian world and the previous and long-lasting transformations in which this particular area now appears to have been involved? And in which ways, if any, did the antecedent endogenous changes contribute to defining the real terms in which the «Western question» arose for the Eurasian societies and influenced the «reactions» of their elites to the «challenge» of Europeanization?

The argumentative strategies employed in order to answer these questions are well illustrated by John Darwin's book *After Tamerlane. The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400-2000*. Darwin's work is based on a long experience of teaching imperial and global history not at Cambridge but at Oxford (where Gallagher, his mentor, had moved for a period from 1963 to 1970). It represents the largest and, in my opinion, the most successful attempt realized up to now of reorganizing the overall field of the Expansion studies. In addition to covering a vast subject-matter, Darwin's work presents a historiographic structure that is both highly synthetic and, at the same time, very articulate and complex. Moreover, we fail to do justice to the book if we neglect to take fully into account how Darwin deals with the properly European, metropolitan and international sides of the expansion. Postponing a more balanced and detailed reconstruction of the whole conceptual framework of Darwin's intellectual *tour the force*, I will briefly examine two aspects of his book which show with particular clearness the enlargement of the category of «dynamic interaction» and the redefinition of the expansionist paradigm pursued by the most recent representatives of the Cambridge School. These two topics are 1) Darwin's interpretation of the genesis of British domination in India between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries and 2) Darwin's interpretation and evaluation of the attempts at «self-strengthening» through the adoption of «European methods» which were made by the Empires and States of the «Afro-Asian world» during the nineteenth century.

Darwin is not a specialist of pre-colonial and colonial India, but his analysis of the connections between the history of Indian society and the European imperial expansion in the Asian subcontinent shows a clear affinity and complementarity with the somewhat controversial theses which have been advanced by the current of Indianist studies which counted among its major representatives Chris Bayly.

Darwin inserts the formation of the British Empire in South Asia in the broader context of a turning point in the balance of power between European and non-European societies, which can be located in the eight decades or so between the Seven Years War and the First Opium War. The «Eurasian revolution» – as Darwin calls it – coincides essentially with the initial phase of the prolonged transition process between two types of «global connectivity».

The first type – the starting point of the transition process – consists in the global network woven by the Europeans in the quarter of a millennium following the beginning of the oceanic explorations, during which among the societies of Eurasia there persisted, however, a situation of «equilibrium».

The second type of «global connectivity» – the (temporary) point of arrival of the transition started from the «Eurasian revolution» – is, for Darwin, the «limited» «Europa-centric» «global imperial order» that emerged in the decades preceding 1914, which was sapped at the foundations by the First World War and its aftermath (cfr. *infra*), but was destined to survive, albeit on a reduced scale, in very precarious conditions and at the price of considerable modifications, until the Second World War and the decolonization.

The «Eurasian revolution» is indeed the period in which the economic and technological effects of the industrial revolution began to modify, to the advantage of the Europeans, the relations between the West and the rest of Eurasia. But another component of primary importance of the Eurasian revolution (and an essential prerequisite for the take off and the maximizing of the global impact of industrialism) lies for Darwin in a two-phased «geopolitical revolution». Its first phase is marked by the progressive intensification, radicalization and globalization of the inter-European struggles culminating in the defeat of Napoleon. The second, post-Congress of Vienna phase sees the tendential limitation of the international and ideological conflict between the European states, that left the two lateral

Powers of the system, i.e. England and Russia, relatively free to pursue their expansionist «ambitions» towards the East.

On the broader extra-European stage (which includes, let's never forget, the New World) the «geopolitical revolution» had the result of shattering the barriers that, still in the first half of the eighteenth century, decisively hampered European expansion. The defeat of France, for example, weakened the resistance that the indigenous societies of North America had been able to continue to oppose to the advance of the white settlement colonialism by exploiting the inter-European rivalries and brought to an end the mercantilist compartmentalization of world trade preparing the terrain for the advent of free trade.

In another sector of the non-Eurasian «"Outer World"», the sector of the globe comprising «the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, island South East Asia and Oceania» – the inter-European competition of this period also provided an incentive for the annexation of Oceania to the area at disposal to the European settler societies for the construction of the colonial «neo-Europes».

But as far as the equilibrium between the regional societies of the Old World is concerned, the further revolutionary geopolitical novelty of the period was that European Powers proceeded, for the first time, to the building of «territorial empires in Asia and Africa», among which the one built by the East India Company.

In the case of India, it appears even more clear that the geopolitical revolution, given its chronology, precedes and is relatively independent from the advent of industrialism. Territorial empire-building in the subcontinent turns out to be the result of the synergic interweaving that now for the first time establishes itself between European history and Asian history, between the increased expansive movement of Europeans and certain peculiar regional conditions and dynamics that can ultimately be traced back to the *Pax Mughalica* of the early modern age and to the crisis in which it had entered in the late seventeenth century. For Darwin, recent historiography has falsified and debunked the «simplistic black legend» which for so long credited the idea that in the half century before the battle of Plassey (1757) and the acquisition of the «Diwan» of Bengal by the East India Company (1765) India had sunk into a chaos of «political disintegration», «economic decline» and anarchy from which only the British conquest could raise it. And a correct diagnosis of the

crisis of the Mughal Empire, which has been made both indispensable and possible by historical research, is precisely the key to a more realistic understanding of the specific historical meaning that the «Eurasian revolution» assumes in the subcontinent.

To summarize it in brief, Darwin subscribes to the thesis that, starting from the Fifties and Sixties of the eighteenth century the East India Company, driven among other things by the rivalry between England and France, was compelled or caught the opportunity to become part of a number of contending States into which the Mughal imperial space had been disarticulating itself for some time.

But the «centrifugal» forces which, in the case of the Mughals as well as in the partially analogous case of the Ottomans, favoured the disintegration of the Islamic empire were the product of processes of modernization of the Indian society which had been encouraged by the grandiose constructive work of unification, pacification and internal organization of India initiated by the Timurids in the sixteenth century (such as demographic growth, extension, specialization and commercialization of the agriculture, integration of India in the networks of the long-distance world trade – both terrestrial and oceanic –, development of the manufacturing activity, urbanization, rise of a class of landowners linked to localities and forms of mercantile capitalism).

At the roots of the political changes which formed the presuppositions and the background for the advent of European colonialism there was therefore a shift in the balance of power in the subcontinent to the advantage of new peripheral élites, that were directly or indirectly the protagonists of a «new phase of Asian state building» whose most distinctive feature was an attempt to adapt the ideology and the institutions of the imperial epoch to the «regional» (i. e. provincial) scale.

The ultimate origins of European domination are to be searched, in short, in the transformation of the Company into an «Indian power» – into one of those Asian states of a new type which were at the same time the gravediggers, the continuators of the work and the would-be heirs of the Mughal Empire.

Understanding to which extent European expansionism in India was in the condition and revealed itself capable of intercepting and exploiting for the purposes of *empire-building* pre-existing currents of indigenous political, social and economic change also constitutes,

for Darwin, the indispensable premise for trying to answer the historiographical problem posed by the «exceptionality» of the Indian case.

In India, in fact, the process of colonial conquest, precociously started around the middle of the eighteenth century, prolonged itself without interruption and «more completely than in almost every other part of Afro-Asia» until the eve of the rebellion of the sepoys in 1857-1858.

Conquest was carried on, in other terms, well into the new period of the history of expansion which can be located between «the first epoch of global imperialism» from 1760 to 1830 and the «new imperialism» of the late nineteenth century. During these intermediate half century or so, the British and the Europeans showed themselves reluctant to proceed to new territorial acquisitions in «Afro-Asia» (this happened, after all, in India too, where, after the Great Mutiny, the British made the choice to let the remaining “princely states” survive as polities governed by native rulers on which they exercised their ultimate control through methods of «indirect rule»).

Generally speaking – Darwin argues – in order that the growing disparity of the respective levels of power could translate itself into the imposition of an effective European control over Afro-Asian peoples and territories it was necessary that certain minimal conditions of possibility realized themselves. The most basic of them pertained, on one side, to the circumstances of those peoples and territories, on the other side, to the willingness of metropolitan countries to shoulder the burdens of colonial conquest and government. The reasons of the presence of these conditions in Indian society are not to be found in its backwardness, but, on the contrary, in those conspicuous traits of «modernity» that were the legacy of the pre-colonial period.

India’s «openness» to world trade and the sophistication of its commercial and financial life meant that English merchants, whose activity was not confined to port cities like in the Canton system in China, could conduct their business directly with prosperous indigenous merchants and bankers who were much freer from the control of indigenous potentates than their Chinese counterparts. In maritime India, therefore, the Company could always count on the alliance with (and on the collaboration of) local economic élites for whom the investment opportunities offered by the British had become increasingly important.

But even more obvious (so obvious as to be most often overlooked) is the extent to which the special advantages that the Company could exploit to expand its power into the huge continental mass of inland India stemmed from «developments» that India had known in the course of early modern age.

As we have already seen, India possessed an extensive and efficient credit system, thanks to which the East India Company was able to pay its wars without having to draw only on its commercial resources, but also rely on the services of Indian bankers.

Furthermore, starting from the acquisition of the right to collect taxes in Bengal, the Company could employ the monetary revenue deriving from the consolidated system of taxation of land of Moghul origin (which presupposed in turn a sufficiently commercialized and monetized economy) in order to meet the costs of its fiscal-military apparatus without falling into the vicious circle of imperial oversizing. In this way, the Company could pursue a strategy of territorial expansion which sustained itself at the expense of the Indian society itself rather than the English taxpayer.

Even the well-known dependence of the Company's army on the recruitment of a vast indigenous infantry, which had to be loyal, of course, to its foreign employer, presupposed the modernizing process by which, especially in the great central-northern plains of India, soldiering had become a profession, overcoming the feudal or tribal logic which prescribed that a soldier should be primarily a loyal follower, owing personal allegiance to a military leader who was at the same time his lord or clan chieftain.

But alongside this more numerous category of indigenous «collaborators», the most significant manifestation of the openness, fluidity and social dynamism from which European expansion benefited in India remain for Darwin the extraordinarily rich and various range of regional élites among which the British colonizers could select their strategic partners - from the ancient diasporic communities of Farsi merchants in Bombay to the new educated Hindu middle class who was supplanting the older Muslim elites at the top of Bengali society.

Some historians, including Bayly, starting from historiographical premises which are very similar to the theses subscribed to by Darwin, have gone a long way in attempting to overturn the stereotype of an «immobile» India, «ready to allow itself to be subdued» by a foreign conquest of which it would be a purely passive «spectator and victim». They seem

inclined to believe that the active «collaboration» of components of Indian society in the construction and functioning of the European colonial regime should be read as the continuation, in other forms, of an attempt which was already being made by the modernizing élites of a world vibrant with change and innovation to remedy its political instability and to modify the balance of power in the subcontinent to their own advantage.

Darwin does not exaggerate to this point the co-protagonism of the indigenous historical actors in the making of the colonial society. On the other hand, there is no doubt that even for him the reason why the European expansion succeeded in India was that it responded to needs arising from historical transformations promoted by the «local forces» to which it, in turn, was obliged to «rely».

As described in *After Tamerlane*, European imperialism announced itself – to paraphrase an aphorism by Gallagher and Robinson that I mentioned earlier – as «the continuation of the Indian way to modernity by other means».

The theme of the continuity and «resilience» of the long-term stories of the Ottoman, Persian, Chinese and Japanese Empires in the period *after* the «Eurasian revolution» plays a central role also in the pages that Darwin's book dedicates to the «answers» which the respective dominating élites gave to the «challenge» of Europeanization (which is the second topic on which, as mentioned, I would call attention at this stage).

For Darwin, the «success story» of Japan (which starting from the 1868 Meiji Revolution reacted to the «Western question» by undertaking an original experiment in modernization from above) is not to be considered as an *unicum* with respect to a series of failed attempts to stop the decline and disintegration of the other Eurasian empires. Darwin rather represents the Japanese case as the extreme of a *continuum* of reforming initiatives whose balance sheets show, in varying degrees, some not negligible lights in the middle of the prevailing shadows.

Again, the essential point in Darwin's argument is that the uninterrupted legacy of the experiences of «consolidation», «reconstruction», «expansion», «exceptional transformation» experienced by all the non-European imperial spaces (or non-Western imperial spaces if we include also Russia in their number) in the age of the Eurasian

equilibrium made available to them decisive resources for resisting in some measure «the impact of the West» during the nineteenth century.

The resources they had accumulated during the early modern age allowed the Ottoman, the Persian, the Chinese and the Japanese Empires to escape, after all, the fate of foreign conquest that had befallen the Mughals, leaving in turn important legacies to the nation States which succeeded them and which survive until now as key protagonists of contemporary (and future) world politics. But also in the very different cases of India or Egypt the legacies of the imperial past allowed the respective conquered or semi-conquered societies «to retain or construct a distinctive identity that transcended the limits of a colonized culture».

In all the other cases, «the states that the Europeans faced» during their nineteenth-century expansion «were anciens régimes in need of renewal, not broken-backed states that had fallen to pieces». The Qing and Ottoman statesmen and intellectuals who were called upon to deal with the «Western question» could count, not unlike their Japanese (or Russian) counterparts, on «tenacious traditions of political and cultural autonomy».

This last important circumstance allowed them to escape the rigid alternative between having to succumb to the expansion of the Europeans for refusing to adopt «European-type armies, bureaucracies, schools and technologies» and jeopardizing internal «solidarity» and «social cohesion», which were equally indispensable to the survival of their kingdoms, through the imposition to their subjects of «an alien blueprint» that was incapable of arousing their «loyalty». The Eurasian modernizers were able to «graft new European political methods on to the original stock» of a historical past which was still alive. And this helped ensure that their efforts were not completely lost or a mere factor of further weakening and decline of the Eurasian Empires.

The reforming seasons that followed each other after the two Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) in the history of the Chinese Empire, dominated by the foreign Manchu dynasty since the middle of the seventeenth century, preserved and renewed the «huge residual strength» that China derived from the possession of a «unified culture» and a «working political system». The so-called *yangwu* movement of the 1860s-1880s, for example, pursued a devolution policy which favoured the hegemony of the provincial gentry in the countryside

and its integration into an imperial élite made more homogeneous by an increasing rate of sinicization (that means the growing presence in it of the ethnic Chinese, or *Han*, element).

These Westernizing initiatives are therefore to be counted among the key factors of the «resistance» that imperial China was ultimately able to oppose to its degradation to a «mere semi-colonial periphery» of the «Eurocentric world system». The Qing Empire was able to retain to the end almost unchanged the borders it had reached at the top of its «expansion» in the eighteenth century (which are still largely those of contemporary China) and to transmit to the subsequent Republican period (from 1911 onward) its own «idea of China», which is still recognizable under the new appearance of *Han* nationalism.

Similarly, even in the case of the eternally moribund Ottoman Empire – the nineteenth-century «sick man of Europe» – Western domination remained after all an «unfinished business». Its «Anatolian core» could survive the «partition» that had been planned by the winners of the First World War to transform itself, largely cleansed of its Christian minorities, in the new Turkish national state erected «on the foundations of the Ottoman reforms». What made all this possible – at least in those parts of the Ottoman State where the necessary preconditions of «cultural cohesion» existed – was precisely the cumulative effect of a policy aimed to the «deliberate grafting of Western technique on to the social and political structure» of the Empire that had been adopted by Ottoman reformers, modernizers and Westernizers since the early decades of the nineteenth century.

In John Darwin's general view of modern and contemporary history, the «resilience» revealed by non-European societies and cultures to the «impact of the West» confirms the original polycentric character of the Eurasian space. But this conclusion provides us at the same time, according to Darwin, with a historical precedent which authorizes us to suppose (or strengthens our actual perception) that this geo-historical space, even in our era of hyper-globalization, will continue to oppose «resistance» to cultural homogenization and to the hegemony of «a single great ruler». On the other hand, as I have tried to point out, in Darwin's updated version of the old expansionist paradigm, the «resilience» and the polycentrism of contemporary Eurasia are fed in various ways by the same European expansion, configuring themselves as a result of the mutual interaction and permeation between European and non-European histories.

The most recent outcome of the Cambridge tradition therefore points a way out from the too often ill-posed problem concerning the place to be assigned to Europe and European studies in global historiography to which I alluded before (*supra*,). I will try to formulate it by using, entirely instrumentally and without any pretension of hermeneutical correctness, a quotation taken from an essay by the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga.

Writing around the mid-nineteen-thirties, Huizinga maintained that European civilization is the first to consider «its past the past of the world», that «our history is the first to be world-history». The phrase in itself can be understood in different ways (in the sense, for example, that in an era of planetary interdependence, there is no history, no people in the world whose past does not become relevant, at least virtually, for us). But Huizinga's words can also mean that European civilization, during its modern and contemporary «axial age» of expansion, has inscribed significant parts of its past in the past of the whole world.

This implies that any scholar or student or citizen sincerely interested to understand the characters and the problems of the contemporary world (whether he be a European or not) cannot neglect to study, among many other things, the indelible traces impressed by the European expansion in the past of each of the human groups coexisting in the globalized society with the realistic spirit and the ethical tension inherent to the historical discipline.