Since the eighteenth century the social thought of the West has consistently sought out reasons why 'modernisation' should have taken place in Europe rather than in the East. That was the problematic of Karl Marx as it was of Max Weber. For the former, Asiatic exceptionalism put Asia out of the general line of development to modern society. For the latter, a whole array of fundamental features, caste, clan, economic ethic, made the East an unfavourable seedbed for capitalism. Those ideas have held sway in much historical thought, for example in work on the family which sees Europe, or north-west Europe, or sometimes even England, as having a family system ('a nuclear family') that favoured modernisation whereas in other parts of the world different family structures inhibited such developments.

Let us begin by insisting that there does exist a problem to be explained, namely, how did the West come to be so successful, firstly in the development of artistic and knowledge systems from the Renaissance onwards (for example, in the development of experimental science) and secondly, how did the West come to develop industrial capitalism? The two aspects are not independent, the first depending on developments in mercantile capitalism but they are separated in time and do not constitute a single event.

I have recently been considering this problem in a book that has recently appeared in English, under the title The East in the West (Cambridge, 1996). Its aim is simple. In Europe in sociological, political, historical and much anthropological theory, and in most everyday thought, the West is taken as the model for the process of social development leading to industrial capitalism and to modernisation more generally. Let me take for granted that notion in 'everyday thought' since this is almost by definition ethnocentric in whatever culture, certainly in advanced societies. Regarding anthropological discussions, there has been a constant attempt to see Indian and Chinese societies as following quite a different track from the West, one that does not and could not lead to modernisation, capitalism, industrialisation, because of persisting cultural features. Durkheim includes China in his essay on 'Primi-
tive Classification'; they classified the world in fundamentally different ways from us. Lévi-Strauss compares the Chinese kinship system with that of the Australian aborigines; they had basically different family structures from us. Chinese time concepts too have been seen as circular, primitive in comparison with the linear concepts of advanced societies. Equally the South Indian systems of marriage have been compared with those of the Kariara in Australia. Of course there are differences between the East and the West, but are they ones that make the development of modern institutions impossible and lead us to group the Asians with so-called 'primitives'? Or at least see them as so completely different from ourselves. For Dumont has also seen the Indian sub-continent as marked by hierarchy in opposition to the West's individualism, a hierarchy that is characterised by allocating superiority to the other worldly, to the Brahman, and hence ill-prepared for a modern economy.

Historians have tended to go even further in privileging the West; indeed many of them, especially English historians, privilege their own country because it did introduce industrialisation. To explain this development they look for deep-seated causes of a cultural kind, seeing for example English (or in some cases Anglo-Saxon) individualism as critical to the development of the modern world. That is a topic to which I will return, though I would wish to point to some fundamental disagreements about the historical record. Alan Macfarlane sees individualism as a peculiarly English quality which was instrumental in that country becoming the First Industrial Nation. That view has been challenged by a number of scholars, for example by Chris Wickham in his account of early medieval Italy.

The other major category of scholar involved in this discussion has been the sociologists, among whom I include Marx and Weber. Marx elaborated his sequence of development on the basis of Western European history, drawing a line from Germanic (or 'primitive') to ancient, to feudal, to capitalist forms of society. Weber accepted a similar sequence but looked in the East for more specific factors, often non-economic ones such as caste and kin groups, that may have blocked the developmental process, as well as ones that promoted that process in northern Europe. While there has been some criticism of these ideas, by and large they still hold sway among the vast majority of Western social scientists.

The notion of Western advantage was bolstered by looking at the religious ethic and giving value in the modernising process to the Protestant variety in its approach to economic matters. Demographic historians have seized on the family as constituting an important difference,
the nuclear family or household of the West as opposed to more extended varieties which are seen as collectivities that suppressed individualism and inhibited capitalism. Note that in these two respects, it was not only Europe that was being distinguished from Asia, but Protestant northwest Europe from the Catholic South, which in the analyses of Laslett and the successful Cambridge group of demographic historians was thought to have larger households, earlier marriage of women, and fewer extra-household servants (all three of which factors may be linked together). What these authors were concerned with at this point was the development of industrial capitalism, the factory system rather than mercantile capitalism which had of course a much wider distribution, and they interpreted modernisation in this highly specific way. So that all the many achievements of Italy, for example leading up to the Renaissance, which on the commercial level business historians like de Roover see as creating many of the institutions (banking, bills of exchange) that were basic to capitalism, all these were neglected. It is clear that capitalism in its mercantile variety, which for modern Europe developed largely in Italy, did not depend upon those demographic and social features that have been seen as distinguishing northwest Europe; Italy was much more advanced in Renaissance times than the area in which industrial capitalism later developed. That fact leads one to suspect the nature of the terms in which the discussion has taken place.

Let me be clear. I do not wish to deny that from 1780 on, possibly earlier, north-western Europe outstripped the rest of the world in certain important respects. It is the nature of the explanation that troubles me. In looking for the causes of these developments, sociologists and others have tended to seek out permanent, deep-seated cultural variables, forgetting that what they need to explain is a temporary state of affairs. For not only did southern Europe outdo the north at an earlier period, but I argue that before the Renaissance, China was in some ways more advanced than the West. What these long-term cultural explanations of ‘modernisation’ tend to do is to primitivise the East on a permanent basis, by making them more despotic almost by nature, or by seeing them as having elementary forms of kinship, time-reckoning, social relations and conceptual rules generally. In this and other ways scholarship has taken a wrong turn which I argue has influenced not only our understanding of the East but our understanding of ourselves.

One specific way it went wrong was in terms of ‘rationality’, modes of reasoning. Max Weber argued that capitalism required a special form of Western rationality, the rationality of world mastery, which others did
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not have. I begin with an examination of forms of logic, which are formal procedures for reasoning, arguing that while Evans-Pritchard maintained all societies have their own logical systems (none are pre-logical in the Levy-Bruhl sense), there is certainly something different about the formal procedures developed by Aristotle and the Greeks which defined logic for many centuries to come. I argue that the development of formal logic, especially in the shape of the syllogism which Aristotle favoured as a means of proof, as a procedure for sequential reasoning, was made possible by writing which enables one to make explicit and formalise the implicit procedures of oral cultures.

However we find the syllogism not only in Greece but in other literate cultures, in an embryonic form in Mesopotamia (as Jean Bottéro has argued) and well beyond the Near East in India as well as in the Buddhist logic of China and Japan where there are a variety of forms of syllogistic reasoning, some of which sound very much like children’s games.

My conclusion is that forms of logic and sequential reasoning are no strangers to Eastern cultures and there is no need to assume a special form of Western rationality that permits us rather than them to modernise. Indeed when we look around the world today (as distinct from the time of Marx and Weber), we see that there is something important lacking in any discussion which seizes on a supposedly deep-rooted cultural feature to explain a temporary state of affairs. If you attribute developments to the Protestant ethic, how are you going to explain what has happened more recently in Japan or China without perceiving the equivalent of the Protestant ethic in Buddhism or in Confucianism? Similarly with so-called Western rationality.

Interestingly for my argument, there was no continuous Aristotelian tradition in the West. That was in fact partly mediated by the East, at least the Near East. Andalusia in the south of the Iberian peninsula remained in Arab hands until 1492, long after the Christians had re-established themselves in the north. It became the channel for much to pass from the Arab and the Near Eastern world to the ‘West’, especially by way of the Jewish element of the population. Of particular significance was the work of the Muslim-Jewish scholar Ibn Rughd (1126-1198), known in the West as Averroës, who produced perhaps the most important scholarly work of the Middle Ages and contributed to the rise of Scholastic philosophy (1). He commented upon virtually all the works of Aristotle at a time when the West did not know many of them. His Commentaries were translated into Latin at the beginning of

the thirteenth century and became well-known in European universities; for four centuries, from 1230 to 1600, it was he who 'incarnated philosophical rationality in the Christian West'. In this perspective the philosophical rationality of the West owed its genesis to a Muslim-Jewish scholar from Moorish Spain. What he did was to lead the West to a return to the works of Aristotle, written some 1500 years earlier and now resurrected, reborn. No clearer demonstration could be given of the devastating loss in knowledge that struck the post-Roman, Christian West and of the fact that it required the help of the Muslim world to revive. For me the importance lies in the fact that we cannot take the Western model as leading in a teleological manner from ancient society to the modern ('capitalist') world as is often assumed. Progression was blocked; the Middle Ages suffered from a loss of knowledge. Moreover it is an error to see the East as a case of a failed progression (Asiatic stagnation) and then to look round at Oriental societies to search out the blocking factors in their cultures, and at the Occident to uncover the favourable ones. The East was well ahead of the West in many spheres as has been shown over the last few years by Needham’s monumental study of science in China.

From rationality I turned to book-keeping, partly because of the play of words with ragioneria in Italian, partly because literacy was involved in both, and partly because Weber and other German scholars saw one of the foremost examples of Western rationality as being the double-entry book-keeping that first emerged in Italy in the fourteenth century. That was described by Weber and others as a rational, scientific form of keeping accounts, essential to the development of capitalism and the modern world.

There were certainly advantages for some operations in a double-entry system. But it is difficult to see this as making the difference between 'scientific', 'rational' forms of book-keeping and others. The line is drawn too heavily to the exclusive advantage of Europe. The facts must make us modify our view. Firstly, many commercial and even industrial firms in Europe continued to use single-entry right into the nineteenth century. So it could not have been that essential.

Secondly, book-keeping had started with the keeping of books, in other words with writing itself. It was certainly an important innovation for commerce as anyone will appreciate who has seen traders in an oral culture trying to cope with a multitude of credit transactions. Literacy made it possible to extend the numbers of transactors and the number of transactions without having the well-nigh impossible burden of trying to store these in memory. In Mesopotamia writing was used very early
on for such commercial purposes. Indeed a French scholar, Schmandt-Bessaret, has argued that the shapes of tokens used in neolithic markets in the Near East were the real precursors of writing. Merchants would later place these tokens in a clay envelope to send along with goods to a distant purchaser in order to act as a kind of bill of lading, to certify the number and nature of the goods being sent. Later still the tokens were actually impressed upon the wet clay to show what was in the envelope and finally the tokens themselves were omitted, leaving only the representation of the tokens, in a form of writing.

Accounts were also kept of trading expeditions in which a number of individuals took part to raise capital and share the risks. The profit and loss could be worked out and shared among the participants in the joint venture. Once again this institution was a precursor of the Mediterranean *commenda*, whereby merchants took shares in an enterprise, sometimes seen as critical to the development of early capitalism in Europe with its joint stock companies, but in fact a feature of all complex literate trading systems, sometimes using family members, sometimes unrelated traders.

These early accounts were of course in single-entry, but they developed complex forms. In order to try and find out what could be done with single-entry, I spent a short time in a traditional *pedhi*, accounts office, of a firm in Ahmadabad in Western India that managed a number of cotton mills. These were modern enterprises, exporting to Europe and employing modern machinery on a completely industrialised basis. Yet by using a number of ledgers (just as we find in the early Italian records), they could keep track of their accounts and work out a balance sheet.

The method was in some ways less efficient than double-entry (which on the other hand is more complex to manage) but it served its purpose and did not prevent the development of mercantile and indeed industrial capitalism. There was certainly nothing irrational or non-rational about this form of book-keeping.

Thirdly, while double-entry is associated with the name of the Italian monk, Pacioli (his work is dated 1494), Europe is not the only place to have invented the system. Something very similar was developed for commercial purposes, apparently independently, in Southern China. We do not know the date, but in a rather similar commercial environment to Renaissance Italy we find continual improvements made in the forms of accounting.

Improvements they are. We should not look upon them as quantum leaps of which only the West was capable because of its superior ration-
ality, but as particular advances made against a similar background of commercial activity in literate societies.

For at that period, when Italy was making significant cultural advances in Europe, China and to some extent India were in fact the leading commercial powers in the world. When the Portuguese arrived in India, their ships were smaller than the local variety, their traders were less important; they were amazed at some of the towns they encountered and at the productivity of the handloom cloth industry which provided the bulk of their exports to Europe. It was the same with China. Marco Polo wondered at the size and significance of the Southern Song capital which he called ‘the greatest town on earth’, far and away bigger than Rome. Like India, China had developed considerable proto-industrial activity, especially in silk and above all in ceramics. Just as the French word indiennes for coloured cotton textiles comes from India, so the English derive their word china from the porcelain of that country, indicating the dominance of the East for these two highly important commodities for which the West could at first offer only gold and other bullion in exchange (as in the Roman period for spices, silks and perfumes, about which the moralists loudly complained). Just as large quantities of hand-painted cottons came to Europe after the opening of the sea route, so did similar quantities of porcelain, transforming the domestic environment and the tastes of the inhabitants. Significantly, factory production of consumer products in Europe began with the copying of Indian textiles in Manchester and of Chinese porcelain in Delft in Holland and the Potteries in England.

Until the advent of the Portuguese, with their superior armaments, Chinese and Indian merchants dominated the South Seas and the Indian Ocean which formed an eastern world system of its own. We find Chinese pottery on the East Coast of Africa and Indian cloth was traded there in pre-Portuguese times, just as it had been with Indonesia and Indo-China. These easterners were then the great voyagers, traders and explorers of the major part of the world, to which Europe, during the Middle Ages, especially Western Europe, was a backward appendage. We are used to seeing the Mediterranean as the centre of the commercial and intellectual worlds. But in the Middle Ages and before, that was not at all the case. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe suffered a great decline in trade, in the production of goods and especially in the production of knowledge. The view of Europe as the sole centre of the entrepreneur, the pioneer, the individualist, the thinker, needs radical revision, and not only for this earlier period.

Let me turn to the question of the individual and individualism which plays so important a part in sociological discussions of the rise of
capitalism and the world expansion of the West. When the term ‘individualism’ came into the vocabulary of European languages (c. 1830) in England, it was used in a pejorative way, by the Right to describe the atomisation of contemporary society, by the Left as antithetic to socialism. It was Tocqueville who gave it a more favourable tone in his treatment of democracy in America. ‘Individualism... (he wrote) disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends’ (2). That was what capitalism, modernisation, entrepreneurship needed.

The genealogy of this supposed quality is subject to major disagreements. The British anthropologist Macfarlane sees it as essentially English, a product of the German woods. The French anthropologist Louis Dumont argues that it was Christian. While Indians, constrained by family, caste and religion, can be seen as individuals-in-the-world, it is only in Christianity, a society based on the equality of all believers, that we find the true institutionalisation of individualism, ‘individuals-in-relation to God’. What Protestantism did was to apply this religious concept to secular life, to the world of capitalist individualism (3). For Dumont this quality distinguishes Europe from India and China, and from Islam too, and paves the way for capitalism. Medieval historians like Morris (1972) have seen the notion of individualist structures as established in Europe in the eleventh and twelfth century (4). The art historian Burckhardt, who developed the idea in his The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860), saw individuality as something emerging from the flowering of the ‘free personality’ in Renaissance Italy, especially Florence, whereas in earlier societies man was conscious of himself only through some general category (5). For the literary critic Ian Watt, individualism has nothing peculiarly English or Anglo-Saxon about it; Don Quixote and Don Juan were Spanish, Faust German; all three adopted a posture of ego contra mundum (6). All were Europeans, from the south as well as the north.

In northwest Europe others tended to see the matter differently. The theologian Ernst Troelsch claimed that ‘the really permanent attainment of individualism was due to religious, and not to a secular movement, to the Reformation and not the Renaissance’ (7). The distinctive note of Puritan teaching was individual responsibility, not social obligation.

(2) Tocqueville, 1981, II, chapter 2.  
One major reason for this lack of consensus is that the concept of individualism is a very broad one which has to be interpreted in a contextual sense. What is it one is being individualistic about? Experience in other cultures does not lead to the impression that Indians or Chinese are overpowered by caste or kin in the way that Dumont and before him Weber (and numerous others) assumed, that is, in a way that would prevent them becoming entrepreneurs. Indeed the streets of European cities today give the lie to such notions. It is true that what we might well regard as the institutions of civil society are easier to escape from in a pioneering or mercantile economy such as we find in the early modern West; there was more scope for personal freedom. But similar opportunities existed elsewhere and threw up individuals, especially ‘on the margins’ of other societies, including eastern ones. That is true of the Northwest Frontier of India and it is true of the Water Margins in China, the home of the bandits who are by calling strongly individualistic.

There is a good case for seeing a type of individualism as a characteristic feature of its literate societies (writing is more individualistic than talking) and especially of its literary products, such as the major myths of Western society, as Ian Watt has maintained in a recent account. We get that impression partly because of the nature of literary invention after the Renaissance with its cultivation of the novel and the drama, which often require heroic characters that stand up against the world.

In any case the critical question for world history is whether or not this characteristic can emerge in a society when it is presented with a new challenge, such as capitalist activity, mercantile or industrial. And today we see that it can do so in many places, in Hong-Kong and in Ahmada bad, as in Senegal and in Hausaland.

However anyone who has worked with another culture knows very well that the notion of the individual is not confined to the West. Evans-Pritchard spoke of the spirit of individualism among the Nuer of the Sudan and the experience of any serious fieldworker tells the same story. Ideas to the contrary belong to the kind of highly ethnocentric vision that cannot differentiate one Chinese from another. They all look the same, part of a collective horde with fixed customs, as distinct from us who differ as between ourselves, everyone an individual, acting rationally. That ethnocentric notion, decked out in scholarly garb, lies behind many developmental schemata that see the world as shifting from collective to individual institutions, for example, in land tenure or in the family. Such general assumptions ignore context. It is true that some collective rights to land disappear with advanced agricultural systems,
but our methods of production in manufacture are in many ways much more collective than those of simpler societies, as are other aspects of our social environment, including the notion of social welfare and pensions.

The sequence of development, from collective to individual, lay at the back of some of Marx's thinking and it has dominated much historical work on the family, where the extended families of peasant societies are seen as giving way to the nuclear families, with their individualism, of modern ones. When the Cambridge Group of demographic historians started to examine parish records in England, they discovered that as far back as they went (to the sixteenth century), there was no evidence of extended households (they were dealing in size of households rather than of families) in that country. This led some to argue that that country was therefore particularly prepared for the Industrial Revolution which sociologists like Parsons have seen as requiring (ideologically and practically) a small nuclear family. Later historical demographers extended this privileged area from England to north-west Europe, the cradle of capitalism, drawing a contrast with Southern and Eastern Europe which was never seen as having made it in the same way (even though clearly the South had done so earlier on).

The argument is misconceived in several ways. It is true that by the Middle Ages Europe had lost most of the wider unilineal descent groups (clans and lineages) which were characteristic of much of the Mediterranean region in pre-Christian times. Not entirely however. Christiane Klapisch has spoken of lineages in Florence, others among the Grimaldi of Genova, while Maria Courouci has found them in Corfu. And they were present until recently in mountainous areas such as Scotland and parts of the Balkans. But Germanic peoples do not seem to have had clans of this kind, organising kinship in bilateral kindreds instead, tracing relationships through both mother and father. Gradually these kindreds too became less significant as the state took over some of their functions (for example, vengeance) and as the church organised its own form of spiritual kinship.

But while the range of kinship ties shrank, they were never restricted to the nuclear family alone. In any case, although sociology and folk wisdom in the West suggested that the small family, the nearest thing to the individual, was central to the development of capitalism, favouring as it did the entrepreneur, the evidence from contemporary Japan and especially from China and India shows that capitalism, industrial now, mercantile then, can take root perfectly well in societies with more inclusive types of family structure. Indeed some observers have sug-
gested that these societies display a kind of 'collective capitalism' as distinct from the 'individual' variety of the West precisely because kinsfolk are very much to the fore in the business arena. Yet according to Weber, Parsons and many others that activity should be dominated by bureaucratic criteria, by non-family recruitment, favouring the family in any way being seen as nepotic, that is, sinful and inefficient. However, not only at the wider family level but even at the yet more inclusive one of corporate lineages and castes, these groups could become heavily involved in business and did not simply block development as Weber and others suggested. Faure's analysis of the Southern Chinese lineages as business corporations shows this very well; they accumulated money from members and they invested in a variety of activities, including business transactions, hoping to make a profit for the benefit of members, rather like other charitable bodies.

We find the same spirit in a caste of bankers, the Chettiar of south India, studied by Rudner. These money-lenders operated very successfully at home and abroad in south-east Asia. In the Chinese case the lineage served as a means of accumulating investment capital; in the Indian situation, the Chettiar could borrow money at better rates among caste members because of the element of trust that existed between them and no doubt because of the control exercised by the caste council, and it could then lend this money to outsiders at a higher rate of interest. In other words there were certainly some advantages in collective groups as far as raising money and getting advantageous rates were concerned. Trust entered in as a commercial factor.

However, the radical contrast of so-called collective capitalism with Europe's individualistic approach is quite misleading. The latter notion is part of our mythology, represented most clearly in Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, who, marooned upon a desert island, managed to maintain life and eventually escape, by devoting himself all alone to hard work. In fact early mercantile capitalism, in whatever country, depended heavily, if not on collective groups, at least on ties within the extended family for similar reasons that we have seen in Asia. The Italian bankers in Tudor England who organised much of the export of wool and cloth on which the prosperity of the country largely depended, were cousins of bankers in Tuscany or Lombardy; one of the main streets of the City of London is still known as Lombard street. Bankers did not work as individuals so much as in family groups, like the Rothschilds, the Fuggers or Barclays, with people whom they could trust (rather than bureaucratically-recruited outsiders who were more of a risk) and with those from whom they could raise money. They did not
always operate on an individualistic or even only nuclear family basis, though they often did that. The fact the business was a family one meant their planning was based on the longer term, rather than the short term interest of shareholders, more concerned with the annual profit and loss.

That is particularly true of banking but is also the case with trading and manufacturing. Even where firms were set up by individuals, they may utilise inherited capital (or the wife's dowry), and they obviously soon become family businesses when sons and daughters get involved; the business is what sustains the family, like a farm, while the family sustains the business. Indeed the most successful commercial enterprises in Britain today, found prominently in every High Street, namely Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury’s, consistently have family members on the board as well as among the managers. Even though they have public shares issued on the stock exchange to raise cash, many shares are owned by the family who retain a measure of control. What is true of commerce is also true of industry. Far from there being any incompatibility between family ties, even extended ones, most firms contain a strong family component. It has been estimated that 90 per cent of firms in that very successful manufacturing economy, Taiwan, are based on the family. What is perhaps more surprising is that even in the most prominent capitalist power in the West, the USA, the figure is not very different, and includes not only small firms but large ones like Ford, Seagram's, IBM, which are marked by family participation at various levels. Participation also brings conflict and feuds of course. It is just this double-edged family participation in business that forms the basic plot of soap operas the world over, of Dallas in the USA, Galsworthy’s Man of Property in England, and I have seen much the same not only in France but also in India.

My argument here is that in making a radical contrast between the collective East and the individualised West we have blinded ourselves to the operation not only of Eastern societies, but also of our own, not only in the past but in the present too. In the past we have tended to neglect the role that ties of kinship can and have played in the development of mercantile and industrial production and exchange. Although Tocqueville included the family in his notion of individualism, others do not but aim at an absolute Crusoe-like individualism, seeing a depersonalised bureaucracy as the model. In the present we have moved closer systems of welfare that stress the direct relationship between the single individual and the state, leaning towards an atomisation of social life. Every person has rights to welfare. As a result of the increasing demands
from the old and from single parents, even the role of the state in such matters has now tended to become reduced because of the spiralling costs. The problem is that when state support is insufficient because others object to high taxation, which is a form of social sharing, the responsibility for maintaining the old, and in many cases the young (or anyone in a crisis, for example through unemployment) falls inevitably on the family who are being encouraged, in Britain for example, to fill the gap and take up roles that earlier were standard within it but have subsequently been devalued. There is a complete contradiction here with the insistence on absolute individualism. Under these changing conditions it is likely to be those southern societies in Europe, the ones who were considered malplaced to meet the Industrial Revolution because of their wider family ties that are likely to come off best. The so-called amoral familism of Italy, so frowned upon among others by the American observer, Banfield, is likely to prove an asset rather than a disadvantage. For obvious reasons, the family has always been an important factor in social organisation, remained so under earlier capitalism and continues to be, in changing forms, today.

We can look at the history of the landmass of Europe and Asia in two ways. We can lay stress upon the division into two continents with two substantially different tracks of development, the Occidental and the Oriental. The Occidental derives from the classical tradition of the Mediterranean societies of Greece and Rome, culminating in the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution of Western Europe. The Oriental on the other hand is seen to come from quite ‘other’ sources and to have quite other characteristics. Alternatively, we can place the emphasis on the common heritage of both parts of Eurasia from the urban revolution of the Bronze Age, with its introduction of new means of communication (the written word), of new means of production (of advanced agriculture and crafts, including metallurgy, the plough, the wheel, etc.) and of new forms of knowledge. The account that is embodied in much Western sociological theory, history and humanities stresses the first and the resulting division of the continents into West and East. Without wishing to deny the specificity of cultural traditions, including that of Europe, it is easy to exaggerate these claims, especially when our own society (very successful in these latter centuries) is involved. That is what I maintain has happened in much of Western thought and scholarship. The distinctiveness has been blown up at the expense of the similarities, distorting not only the understanding of the Orient but of the Occident too.
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