

The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power

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1 Introduction

The first five chapters of this book examine the long historical processes through which a new type of society – advanced, developed, and industrial – emerged. They chart in broad outline the paths by which this society reached what is now called "modernity." This chapter explores the role which societies *outside* Europe played in this process. It examines how an idea of "the West and the Rest" was constituted; how relations between western and non-western societies came to be represented. We refer to this as the formation of the "discourse" of "the West and the Rest."

1.1 Where and what is "the West"?

This question puzzled Christopher Columbus and remains puzzling today. Nowadays, many societies aspire to become "western" – at least in terms of achieving western standards of living. But in Columbus's day (the end of the fifteenth century), going West was important mainly because it was believed to be the quickest route to the fabulous wealth of the East. Indeed, even though it should have become clear to Columbus that the New World he had found was *not* the East, he never ceased to believe that it was, and even spiced his reports with outlandish claims: on his fourth voyage, he still insisted that he was close to Quinsay (the Chinese city now called Hangchow), where the Great Khan lived, and probably approaching the source of the Four Rivers of Paradise! Our ideas of "East" and "West" have never been free of myth and fantasy, and even to this day they are not primarily ideas about place and geography.

We have to use short-hand generalizations, like "West" and "western," but we need to remember that they represent very complex ideas and have no simple or single meaning. At first sight, these words may seem to be about matters of geography and location. But even this, on inspection, is not straightforward since we also use the same words to refer to a type of society, a level of development, and so on. It's true that what we call "the West," in this second sense, *did* first emerge in Western Europe. But "the West" is no longer only in Europe, and not all of Europe is in "the West." The historian John Roberts has remarked that "Europeans have long been unsure about where Europe 'ends' in the east. In the west and to the south, the sea provides a splendid marker . . . but to the east the plains roll on and on and the horizon is awfully remote" (Roberts, 1985, p. 149). Eastern Europe doesn't (doesn't yet? never did?) belong properly to "the West"; whereas the United States, which is not in Europe, definitely does. These days, technologically speaking, Japan is "western," though on our mental map it is about as far "East" as you can get. By comparison, much of Latin America, which is in the western hemisphere, belongs economically to the Third World, which is struggling – not very successfully – to catch up with "the West." What are these different

societies "east" and "west" of, exactly? Clearly, "the West" is as much an idea as a fact of geography.

The underlying premise of this chapter is that "the West" is a *historical*, not a geographical, construct. By "western" we mean the type of society discussed in this book: a society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern. Such societies arose at a particular historical period – roughly, during the sixteenth century, after the Middle Ages and the break-up of feudalism. They were the result of a specific set of historical processes – economic, political, social, and cultural. Nowadays, any society which shares these characteristics, wherever it exists on a geographical map, can be said to belong to "the West." The meaning of this term is therefore virtually identical to that of the word "modern." Its "formations" are what we have been tracing in the earlier chapters in this book. This chapter builds on that earlier story.

"The West" is therefore also an idea, a concept – and this is what interests us most in this chapter. How did the idea, the language, of "the West" arise, and what have been its effects? What do we mean by calling it a *concept*?

The concept or idea of "the West" can be seen to function in the following ways:

First, it allows us to characterize and classify societies into different categories – i.e. "western," "non-western." It is a tool to think with. It sets a certain structure of thought and knowledge in motion.

Secondly, it is an image, or set of images. It condenses a number of different characteristics into one picture. It calls up in our mind's eye – it *represents* in verbal and visual language – a composite picture of what different societies, cultures, peoples, and places are like. It functions as part of a language, a "system of representation." (I say "system" because it doesn't stand on its own, but works in conjunction with other images and ideas with which it forms a set: for example, "western" = urban = developed; or "non-western" = non-industrial = rural = agricultural = under-developed.)

Thirdly, it provides a standard or model of comparison. It allows us to compare to what extent different societies resemble, or differ from, one another. Non-western societies can accordingly be said to be "close to" or "far away from" or "catching up with" the West. It helps to explain *difference*.

Fourthly, it provides criteria of evaluation against which other societies are ranked and around which powerful positive and negative feelings cluster. (For example, "the West" = developed = *good* = desirable; or the "non-West" = under-developed = *bad* = undesirable.) It produces a certain kind of *knowledge* about a subject and certain attitudes towards it. In short, it functions as an *ideology*.

This chapter will discuss all these aspects of the idea of "the West." We know that the West itself was produced by certain historical processes operating in a particular place in unique (and perhaps unrepeatable) historical circumstances. Clearly, we must also think of the *idea* of "the West" as having been produced in a similar way. These two aspects are in fact deeply connected, though exactly how is one of

the big puzzles in sociology. We cannot attempt to resolve here the age-old sociological debate as to which came first: the idea of "the West," or western societies. What we can say is that, as these societies emerged, so a concept and language of "the West" crystallized. And yet, we can be certain that the idea of "the West" did not simply reflect an already-established western society: rather, it was essential to the very formation of that society.

What is more, the idea of "the West," once produced, became productive in its turn. It had real effects: it enabled people to know or speak of certain things in certain ways. It produced knowledge. It became *both* the organizing factor in a system of global power relations *and* the organizing concept or term in a whole way of thinking and speaking.

The central concern of this chapter is to analyze the formation of a particular pattern of thought and language, a "system of representation," which has the concepts of "the West" and "the Rest" at its center.

The emergence of an idea of "the West" was central to the Enlightenment, which was discussed at length in chapter 1. The Enlightenment was a very European affair. European society, it assumed, was the most advanced type of society on earth, European man (*sic*) the pinnacle of human achievement. It treated the West as the result of forces largely *internal* to Europe's history and formation.

However, in this chapter we argue that the rise of the West is also a *global* story. As Roberts observes, "Modern history can be defined as the approach march to the age dominated by the West" (Roberts, 1985, p. 41). The West and the Rest became two sides of a single coin. What each now is, and what the terms we use to describe them mean, depend on the relations which were established between them long ago. The so-called uniqueness of the West was, in part, produced by Europe's contact and self-comparison with other, non-western, societies (the Rest), very different in their histories, ecologies, patterns of development, and cultures from the European model. The difference of these other societies and cultures from the West was the standard against which the West's achievement was measured. It is within the context of these relationships that the idea of "the West" took on shape and meaning.

The importance of such perceived difference needs itself to be understood. Some modern theorists of language have argued that *meaning* always depends on the relations that exist between the different terms or words within a meaning system (see chapter 5). Accordingly, we know what "night" means because it is different from – in fact, opposite to – "day." The French linguist who most influenced this approach to meaning, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1912), argued that the words "night" and "day" on their own can't mean anything; it is the *difference* between "night" and "day" which enables these words to carry meaning (to signify).

Likewise, many psychologists and psychoanalysts argue that an infant first learns to think of itself as a separate and unique "self" by

recognizing its separation – its difference – from others (principally, of course, its mother). By analogy, national cultures acquire their strong sense of identity by contrasting themselves with other cultures. Thus, we argue, the West's sense of itself – its identity – was formed not only by the internal processes that gradually molded Western European countries into a distinct type of society, but also through Europe's sense of difference from other worlds – how it came to represent itself in relation to these "others." In reality, differences often shade imperceptibly into each other. (When exactly does "night" become "day"? Where exactly does "being English" end and "being Scottish" begin?) But, in order to function at all, we seem to need distinct, positive concepts, many of which are sharply polarized towards each other. As chapter 5 argues, such "binary oppositions" seem to be fundamental to all linguistic and symbolic systems and to the production of meaning itself.

This chapter, then, is about the role which "the Rest" played in the formation of the idea of "the West" and a "western" sense of identity. At a certain moment, the fates of what had been, for many centuries, separate and distinct worlds became – some would say, fatally – harnessed together in the same historical time-frame. They became related elements in the same *discourse*, or way of speaking. They became different parts of one global social, economic, and cultural system, one interdependent world, one language.

A word of warning must be entered here. In order to bring out the distinctiveness of this "West and the Rest" discourse, I have been obliged to be selective and to simplify my representation of the West, and you should bear this in mind as you read. Terms like "the West" and "the Rest" are historical and linguistic constructs whose meanings change over time. More importantly, there are many different discourses, or ways in which the West came to speak of and represent other cultures. Some, like "the West and the Rest," were very western-centered, or Eurocentric. Others, however, which I do not have space to discuss here, were much more culturally relativistic. I have elected to focus on what I call the discourse of "the West and the Rest" because it became a very common and influential discourse, helping to shape public perceptions and attitudes down to the present.

Another qualification concerns the very term "the West," which makes the West appear unified and homogeneous – essentially one place, with one view about other cultures and one way of speaking about them. Of course, this is not the case. The West has always contained many internal differences – between different nations, between Eastern and Western Europe, between the Germanic Northern and the Latin Southern cultures, between the Nordic, Iberian, and Mediterranean peoples, and so on. Attitudes towards other cultures within the West varied widely, as they still do between, for example, the British, the Spanish, the French, and the German.

It is also important to remember that, as well as treating non-European cultures as different and inferior, the West had its own *internal* "others." Jews, in particular, though close to western religious traditions, were frequently excluded and ostracized. West Europeans

often regarded Eastern Europeans as "barbaric," and, throughout the West, western women were represented as inferior to western men.

The same necessary simplification is true of my references to "the Rest." This term also covers enormous historical, cultural, and economic distinctions – for example, between the Middle East, the Far East, Africa, Latin America, indigenous North America, and Australasia. It can equally encompass the simple societies of some North American Indians and the developed civilizations of China, Egypt, or Islam.

These extensive differences must be borne in mind as you study the analysis of the discourse of "the West and the Rest" in this chapter. However, we can actually use this simplification to make a point about discourse. For simplification is precisely what this discourse itself *does*. It represents things which are in fact very differentiated (the different European cultures) as homogeneous (the West). And it asserts that these different cultures are united by one thing: the fact that *they are all different from the Rest*. Similarly, the Rest, though different among themselves, are represented as the same in the sense that *they are all different from the West*. In short, the discourse, as a "system of representation," represents the world as divided according to a simple dichotomy – the West/the Rest. That is what makes the discourse of "the West and the Rest" so destructive – it draws crude and simplistic distinctions and constructs an over-simplified conception of "difference."

2 Europe Breaks Out

In what follows, you should bear in mind the evolution of the system of European nation-states discussed in chapter 2. "The voyages of discovery were the beginning of a new era, one of world-wide expansion by Europeans, leading in due course to an outright, if temporary, European . . . domination of the globe" (Roberts, 1985, p. 175). In this section we offer a broad sketch of the early stages of this process of expansion. When did it begin? What were its main phases? What did it "break out" from? Why did it occur?

2.1 When and how did expansion begin?

Long historical processes have no exact beginning or end, and are difficult to date precisely. You will remember the argument in chapter 2 that a particular historical pattern is the result of the interplay between a number of different causal processes. In order to describe them, we are forced to work within very rough-and-ready chronologies and to use *historical generalizations* which cover long periods and pick out the broad patterns, but leave much of the detail aside. There is nothing wrong with this – historical sociology would be impossible without it – provided we know at what level of generality our argument is working. For example, if we are answering the question, "When did Western Europe first industrialize?," it may be sufficient to say, "During

the second half of the eighteenth century." However, a close study of the origins of industrialization in, say, Lancashire, would require a more refined time-scale. (For further discussion of this point, see the Introduction to part I.)

We can date the onset of the expansion process roughly in relation to two key events:

- 1 The early Portuguese explorations of the African coast (1430–98); and
- 2 Columbus's voyages to the New World (1492–1502).

Broadly speaking, European expansion coincides with the end of what we call "the Middle Ages" and the beginning of the "modern age." Feudalism was already in decline in Western Europe, while trade, commerce, and the market were expanding. The centralized monarchies of France, England, and Spain were emerging (see chapter 2). Europe was on the threshold of a long, secular boom in productivity, improving standards of living, rapid population growth, and that explosion in art, learning, science, scholarship, and knowledge known as the Renaissance. (Leonardo da Vinci had designed flying machines and submarines prior to 1519; Michelangelo started work on the Sistine Chapel in 1508; Thomas More's *Utopia* appeared in 1516.) For much of the Middle Ages, the arts of civilization had been more developed in China and the Islamic world than in Europe. Many historians would agree with Michael Mann that "the point at which Europe 'overtook' Asia must have been about 1450, the period of European naval expansion and the Galilean revolution in science"; though as Mann also argues, many of the processes which made this possible had earlier origins (Mann, 1988, p. 7). We will return to this question at the end of the section.

2.2 Five main phases

The process of expansion can be divided, broadly, into five main phases:

- 1 The period of exploration, when Europe "discovered" many of the "new worlds" for itself for the first time (they all, of course, already existed).
- 2 The period of early contact, conquest, settlement, and colonization, when large parts of these "new worlds" were first annexed to Europe as possessions, or harnessed through trade.
- 3 The time during which the shape of permanent European settlement, colonization, or exploitation was established (e.g. plantation societies in North America and the Caribbean; mining and ranching in Latin America; the rubber and tea plantations of India, Ceylon, and the East Indies). Capitalism now emerged as a global market.
- 4 The phase when the scramble for colonies, markets, and raw materials reached its climax. This was the "high noon of Imperialism," and led into World War I and the twentieth century.

- 5 The present, when much of the world is economically dependent on the West, even when formally independent and decolonized.

There are no neat divisions between these phases, which often overlapped. For example, although the main explorations of Australia occurred in our first phase, the continent's shape was not finally known until after Cook's voyages in the eighteenth century. Similarly, the Portuguese first circumnavigated Africa in the fifteenth century, yet the exploration of the African interior below the Sahara and the scramble for African colonies is really a nineteenth-century story.

Since we are focusing on "formations," this chapter concentrates on the first two phases – those involving early exploration, encounter, contact, and conquest – in order to trace how "the West and the Rest" as a "system of representation" was formed.

2.3 The Age of Exploration

This began with Portugal, after the Moors (the Islamic peoples who had conquered Spain) had finally been expelled from the Iberian peninsula. Prince Henry "The Navigator," the pioneer of Portuguese exploration, was himself a Crusader who fought the Moors at the battle of Ceuta (North Africa; 1415) and helped to disperse the Moorish pirates who lurked at the entrance to the Mediterranean. As Eric Newby explains:

With the pirates under control there was a real possibility that the Portuguese might be able to take over the caravan trade – an important part of which was in gold dust – that Ceuta enjoyed with the African interior. In the event, the attempt to capture this trade failed . . . And so there emerged another purpose. This was to discover from which parts of Africa the merchandise, particularly the gold dust, emanated and, having done so, to contrive to have it re-routed . . . to stations on the Atlantic coast in which the inhabitants would already have been converted to Christianity and of which the King of Portugal would be the ruler. (Newby, 1975, p. 62)

This comment pinpoints the complex factors – economic, political, and spiritual – which motivated Portuguese expansion. Why, then, hadn't they simply sailed southwards before? One answer is that they thought their ships were not sufficiently robust to endure the fierce currents and contrary winds to be encountered around the curve of the North African coastline. Another equally powerful factor was what is called the "Great Barrier of Fear" – evident, for example, in the belief that beyond Cape Bojador lay the mouth of Hell, where the seas boiled and people turned black because of the intense heat. The late-medieval European conception of the world constituted as much of a barrier to expansion as technological and navigational factors.

In 1430, the Portuguese sailed down the west coast of Africa, hoping to find not only the sources of the African gold, ivory, spice, and slave trades, but also the legendary black Christian ruler, "Prester John." In stages (each consolidated by papal decree giving Portugal a monopoly

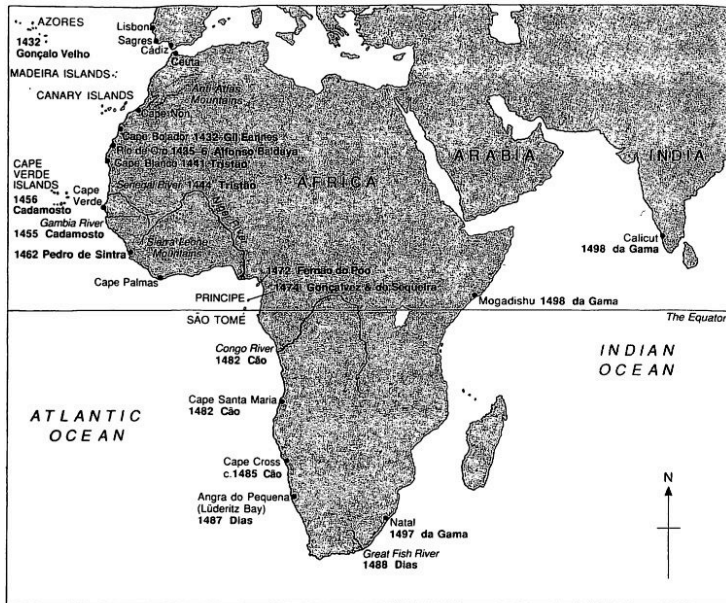


Figure 6.1 Portuguese expansion

"in the Ocean Sea . . . lying southward and eastward"), the Portuguese pushed down the African coast, and past the "Great Barrier of Fear." In 1441, the first cargo of African slaves captured by Europeans arrived in Portugal – thereby beginning a new era of slave-trading.

In 1487/8 Bartolomeo Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope and Pedro da Covilhão, taking the caravan route overland, reached the Sudan from where he sailed to India (1498). Later, Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa and then, with the aid of a Muslim pilot, across the Indian Ocean to the city of Calicut (1497–8). Within ten years Portugal had established the foundations of a naval and commercial empire. Displacing the Arab traders who had long plied the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, they established a chain of ports to Goa, the East Indies, the Moluccas, and Timor. In 1514, a Portuguese mission reached Canton (China), and in 1542 the first contact was made with Japan.

By comparison, the exploration of the New World (America) was at first largely a Spanish affair. After long pleading, Columbus, the

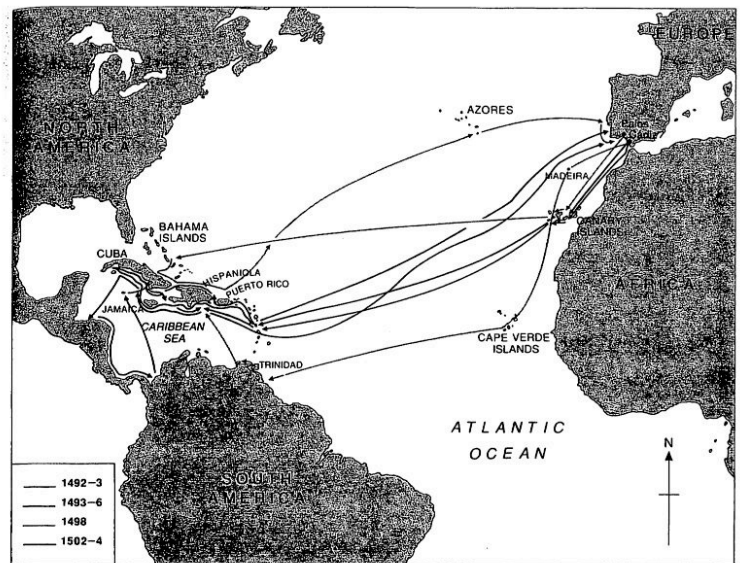


Figure 6.2 The voyages of Christopher Columbus

Genoese navigator, finally persuaded King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to support his "western Enterprise" to find a westerly route to the treasures of the East. Deliberately under-estimating the distance of Asia from Europe (he chose the shortest of a number of guesses on offer from medieval and classical sources) he sailed into the "Green Sea of Darkness" in 1492. In four remarkable voyages he became the first European to land on most of the islands of the Caribbean and on the Central American mainland. He never relinquished his belief that "I am before Zaiton (Japan) and Quinsay (China), a hundred leagues, a little more or less" (Columbus, 1969, p. 26). The misnamed "West Indies" are a permanent reminder that the Old World "discovered" the New by accident. But Columbus opened up a whole continent to Spanish expansion, founded on the drive for gold and the Catholic dream of converting the world to the Christian faith. Shortly afterwards, Amerigo Vespucci (to whom the American continents owe their name) sailed north to Carolina, and south along the coast of Brazil to Rio, Patagonia, and the Falkland Islands.

In 1500 a Portuguese called Pedro Cabral, sailing to India, was blown out into the Atlantic and landed fortuitously on the coast of Brazil, giving Portugal her first foothold in what was to become Latin America. The threatened Spanish-Portuguese rivalry was aggravated by papal decrees favoring the Spanish, but was finally settled by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), which divided the "unknown world" between the Spanish and the Portuguese along a line of longitude running about 1500 miles west of the Azores. This line was subsequently revised many times and other nations, like Spain's arch enemy and Protestant rival, England, greedy to partake of the riches of the New World, soon made nonsense of it with their buccaneering exploits and raids along the Spanish Main. "Nevertheless," as John Roberts observes of the treaty,

... it is a landmark of great psychological and political importance: Europeans, who by then had not even gone round the globe, had decided to divide between themselves all its undiscovered and unappropriated lands and peoples. The potential implications were vast ... The conquest of the high seas was the first and greatest of all the triumphs over natural forces which were to lead to domination by western civilisation of the whole globe. Knowledge is power, and the knowledge won by the first systematic explorers ... had opened the way to the age of western world hegemony.
(Roberts, 1985, p. 194)

In 1519-22, a Portuguese expedition led by Magellan circumnavigated the globe, and Sir Francis Drake repeated this feat in 1577-80.

The early Spanish explorers of the New World opened the way to that ruthless band of soldier-adventurers, the Conquistadors, who completed the conquest of Central and South America, effecting the transition from exploration to conquest and colonization.

In 1513 Balboa, having explored the northern coast of South America, crossed the Isthmus of Darien to the Pacific. And in 1519 Cortés landed in Mexico and carried through the destruction of the Aztec empire. Pizarro pushed south through Ecuador to the Andes and Peru, and destroyed the Inca empire (1531-4), after which Orellana crossed the continent by way of the Amazon (1541-4). The Conquistadors were driven by the prospect of vast, unlimited fortunes. "We Spaniards," Cortés confessed, "suffer from a disease that only gold can cure" (quoted in Hale, 1966, p. 105).

The Spanish proceeded to push up into what are now New Mexico, Arizona, Florida, and Arkansas (1528-42). Meanwhile, further north, other nations were also busy exploring. John Cabot, a Venetian sailing under English patronage, landed at Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and New England (1497-8). In 1500-1, the Portuguese Corte Real, and in 1524 the Italian Verrazano, explored the Atlantic seaboard of North America. They were followed in 1585-7 by Sir Walter Raleigh, and a number of British colonies were soon established: Newfoundland (1583), Roanoke (1585), and Jamestown (1607).

Yet further north, British explorers such as Gilbert, Frobisher, Davis, Hudson, and Baffin (1576-1616) tried in vain to find an alternative

route to the East via a north-west passage through the Arctic seas. This quest was partly responsible for the opening up of North America, and Dutch, French, and English colonies sprang up along the Atlantic seaboard. Nevertheless, the serious exploration of Canada and North America was led largely by the French: Cartier, Champlain, and their followers exploring the St Lawrence river, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi river down to the Gulf of Mexico (1534-1682).

The Spanish and Portuguese established an early presence in the Far East, and soon the Spanish were exploring the Pacific, colonizing islands, and even commuting out of Manila in the Philippines to the west coast of America (1565-1605). But the Dutch and the English set out to flout the Spanish and Portuguese commercial monopolies. The British East India Company was founded in 1599, the Dutch East India Company in 1602. After their independence from Spain in 1584, the Dutch became one of the most powerful commercial nations, their East Indies trade laying the basis for the flourishing of Dutch *bourgeois* culture (Schama, 1977). From a base in the old spice empire, the Dutch reached Fiji, the East Indies, Polynesia, Tasmania, New Zealand, and in 1606 were the first Europeans to catch sight of Australia. Over the next thirty years they gradually pieced together the Australian jigsaw-puzzle, though the Australian coast was not completely mapped until after Cook's famous voyages (1768-79) to Tahiti, the South Pacific, and the Antarctic.

By the eighteenth century, then, the main European world-players - Portugal, Spain, England, France, and Holland - were all in place. The serious business of bringing the far-flung civilizations they had discovered into the orbit of western trade and commerce, and exploiting their wealth, land, labor, and natural resources for European development had become a major enterprise. (China and India remained closed for longer, except for trading along their coasts and the efforts of Jesuit missionaries.) Europe began to imprint its culture and customs on the new worlds. European rivalries were constantly fought out and settled in the colonial theaters. The colonies became the "jewels in the crown" of the new European empires. Through trade monopolies and the mercantilist commercial system, each of these empires tried to secure exclusive control of the flow of trade for its own enrichment. The wealth began to flow in: in 1554 America yielded 11 percent of the Spanish Crown's income; in 1590, 50 percent.

2.4 Breaking the frame

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, then, Europe broke out of its long confinement. What had bottled it up for so long? This is a difficult question to answer, but we can identify two sets of factors - the first, material, the second, cultural.

Physical barriers to the East The Middle Ages represented an actual loss of contact with and knowledge of the outside world. Alexander the Great's conquests (336-323 B.C.) had taken the Macedonian-Greek armies as far east as the Himalayas. Only his troops' reluctance

prevented him from reaching what he believed to be the limits of the inhabited world. The Roman Empire stretched from Britain to the Arabian deserts. But in the Middle Ages Europe closed in on itself. It retained some knowledge of India (especially among Venetian traders), but beyond that lay unknown territory. Though every port and trade route on the Mediterranean was mapped, the basic contours of other seas and continents were shrouded in mystery. For example, though Europe bought great quantities of Chinese silk, transported by caravan across Central Asia, it took little interest in the great civilization from which the silk came.

A key factor in this was that, after the seventh century A.D., "sea-routes and land-routes alike were barred by the meteoric rise of Islam, which interposed its iron curtain between West and East" (Latham, 1958, p. 8). It was Arab middlemen who brought eastern goods to the European sea-ports of the Mediterranean and Black Sea to sell. The Crusades (1095–1291) were the long, and for a time unsuccessful, struggle of Christian Europe to roll back this "infidel threat." But just when, at last, Europe seemed to be winning, a thunderbolt struck from a quarter unexpected by both Islam and Christendom: the invasions of the Mongol and Tartar nomads from the Central Asian steppes (1206–60), which left a trail of devastation in their wake. However, Islam suffered even more than Christendom from the Tartar invasions and, in the thirteenth century, the eastern curtain lifted briefly.

During this interval, the Venetian Marco Polo and other members of his family undertook their famous travels to the court of the Great Khan, China, and Japan (1255–95).

Marco Polo's *Travels* with its tales of the fabulous wealth of the East played a decisive role in stimulating the European imagination to search for a westerly route to the East, a search that became increasingly important. For soon the eastern opening became blocked again by the rise of a new Islamic power, the Ottoman Empire; and China, under the Ming dynasty, once more turned inwards.

This had profound effects. It stimulated expansion westwards, favoring the European powers of the Atlantic seaboard (Spain, Portugal, Britain, Holland, and France). It also tended to isolate Western from Eastern Europe – a process reinforced by the growing split between Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) Churches. From this point onwards, the patterns of development within Western and Eastern Europe sharply diverged.

The barriers in the mind A second major obstacle to the East lay in the mind – consisting not only of the sketchy knowledge that Europeans had of the outside world, but of the way they conceptualized and imagined it. To the north, they believed, there was "nothing – or worse . . . barbarian peoples who, until civilized by the church, were only a menace" (Roberts, 1985, p. 117). To the east, across the plains, there were barbarians on horseback: Huns, Mongols, and Tartars. To the south lay the shifting empires of Islam, which, despite their early tolerance of Christianity and of the Jews, had advanced deep into Europe – to Poitiers and Constantinople, across North Africa and

into Spain, Portugal, and southern Italy. The cradle of European civilization and trade was the Mediterranean. In the eastern Mediterranean, there was Byzantium – a civilization which was part of Christendom. But, as we said, the Catholic and Orthodox churches were drawing farther apart as the centuries passed.

For what lay beyond, Europe relied on other sources of knowledge – classical, biblical, legendary, and mythological. Asia remained largely a world of elephants and other wonders almost as remote as sub-Saharan Africa. There were four continents – Europe, Africa, Asia, and "Terra Australis Incognita" ("The Unknown Southern Land") – the way to the latter being judged impassable. On medieval maps, the land mass crowded out the oceans: there was no Pacific and the Atlantic was a narrow, and extremely dangerous, waterway. The world was often represented as a wheel, superimposed on the body of Christ, with Jerusalem at its hub. This conception of the world did not encourage free and wide-ranging travel.

2.5 The consequences of expansion for the idea of "the West"

Gradually, despite their many internal differences, the countries of Western Europe began to conceive of themselves as part of a single family or civilization – "the West." The challenge from Islam was an important factor in hammering Western Europe and the idea of "the West" into shape. Roberts notes that "The word 'Europeans' seems to appear for the first time in an eighth-century reference to Charles Martel's victory [over Islamic forces] at Tours. All collectivities become more self-aware in the presence of an external challenge, and self-awareness promotes cohesiveness" (Roberts, 1985, p. 122). And Hulme speaks of "... the consolidation of an ideological identity through the testing of [Europe's] Eastern frontiers prior to the adventure of Atlantic exploration. . . . A symbolic end to that process could be considered Pius III's 1458 identification of Europe with Christendom" (Hulme, 1986, p. 84).

But in the Age of Exploration and Conquest, Europe began to define itself in relation to a new idea – the existence of many new "worlds," profoundly different from itself. The two processes – growing internal cohesion and the conflicts and contrasts with external worlds – reinforced each other, helping to forge that new sense of identity that we call "the West." In the following extract Michael Mann offers an explanation of European development by making a series of historical generalizations about long-term socio-economic and religious factors:

Why is "Europe" to be regarded as a continent in the first place? This is not an ecological but a social fact. It had not been a continent hitherto: it was now created by the fusion of the Germanic barbarians and the north-western parts of the Roman Empire, and the blocking presence of Islam to the south and east. Its continental identity was primarily Christian, for its name was Christendom more often than it was Europe.

Europe was undoubtedly a place where competition flourished, but why? It is not "natural." . . . In fact, competition presupposes two further forms of social organization. First, autonomous actors must be empowered to dispose of privately owned resources without hindrance from anyone else. These actors need not be individuals, or even individual households, enjoying what in capitalist societies we call "private property." . . . But collective institutions also qualify, as long as they have a responsible authority structure empowered to dispose of its resources for economic advantage, without interference from others, or from custom – then the laws of neoclassical economics can begin to operate. . . .

Second, competition among actors on a market [basis] requires normative regulation. They must trust one another to honour their word. They must also trust each other's essential rationality. These normative understandings must apply not only in direct interaction but right across complex, continental chains of production, distribution and exchange. . . .

European social structure supplied these requirements. The social structure which stabilized in Europe after the ending of the barbarian migrations and invasions (that is, by AD 1000) was a multiple acephalous federation. Europe had no head, no centre, yet it was an entity composed of a number of small, cross-cutting interaction networks. These, based on economic, military and ideological power, each differed in their geographical and social space and none was itself unitary in nature. Consequently no single power agency controlled a clear-cut territory or the people within it. As a result most social relationships were extremely localized, intensely focused upon one or more of a number of cell-like communities – the monastery, the village, the manor, the castle, the town, the guild, the brotherhood and so on. These collectivities had a power autonomy guaranteed by law or custom, an exclusivity of control over "their" resources. They qualify, therefore, as "private" property owners. . . .

Whatever this extraordinary multiple, acephalous federation would achieve, it was unlikely to be organized stagnation. Historians over and over again use the word *restless* to characterize the essence of medieval culture. As McNeill puts it, "it is not any particular set of institutions, ideas or technologies that mark out the West but its inability to come to a rest. No other civilized society has ever approached such restless instability. . . . In this . . . lies the true uniqueness of Western civilization" (McNeill, 1963, p. 539). But such a spirit need not induce social development. Might it not induce other forms of stagnation: anarchy, the Hobbesian war of all against all, or *anomie* where the absence of social control and direction leads to aimlessness and despair? We can marry the insights of two great sociologists to guess why social development, not anarchy or *anomie*, may have resulted.

First Max Weber, who in noting the peculiar restlessness of Europe, always added another word: *rational*. "Rational restlessness" was the psychological make-up of Europe, the opposite of what he found in the main religions of Asia . . . Weber located rational restlessness especially in Puritanism. But Puritanism emphasized strands of the Christian psyche which had been traditionally present. . . . Christianity encouraged a drive for moral and social improvement even against worldly authority. Though much of medieval Christianity was piously masking brutal repression, its currents of dissatisfaction always ran strong. We can read an enormous literature of social criticism, visionary, moralistic, satirical, cynical. Some is laboured and repetitious, but its peak includes some of the greatest works of the age – in English: Langland and Chaucer. It is pervaded by the kind of psychological quality identified by Weber.

But to put this rational restlessness in the service of social improvement probably also required a mechanism identified by another sociologist: Emile Durkheim. Not anarchy or *anomie* but normative regulation was provided at first primarily by Christendom. Political and class struggles, economic life and even wars were, to a degree, regulated by an unseen hand, not Adam Smith's but Jesus Christ's. . . . The community depended on the general recognition of norms regarding property rights and free exchange. These were guaranteed by a mixture of local customs and privileges, some judicial regulation by weak states, but above all by the common social identity provided by Christendom. . . .

The main conclusion is unmistakable. The most powerful and extensive sense of social identity was Christian, though this was both a unifying transcendent identity and an identity divided by the overlapping barriers of class and literacy. Cross-cutting all these were commitments to England, but these were variable and, in any case, included less extensive dynastic connections and obligations. Thus, Christian identity provided both a common humanity and a framework for common divisions among Europeans. . . .

The Christian achievement was the creation of a minimal normative society across state, ethnic, class and gender boundaries. It did not in any significant sense include the Eastern Byzantine Church. It did, however, integrate the two major geographical areas of "Europe", the Mediterranean lands with their cultural heritage, their historic and predominantly *extensive* power techniques – literacy, coinage, agricultural estates and trading networks – and north-western Europe with its more *intensive* power techniques – deep ploughing, village and kin solidarities and locally organized warfare. If the two could be kept in a single community, then European development was a possible consequence of their creative interchange. (Mann, 1988, pp. 10–15)

In contrast to Mann, John Roberts brings cultural and ideological aspects to the fore:

Europeans . . . now [took] a new view of themselves and their relation to the other peoples of the globe. Maps are the best clue to this change . . . They are always more than mere factual statements. They are translations of reality into forms we can master; they are fictions and acts of imagination communicating more than scientific data. So they reflect changes in our pictures of reality. The world is not only what exists "out there"; it is also the picture we have of it in our minds which enables us to take a grip on material actuality. In taking that grip, our apprehension of that actuality changes – and so does a wide range of our assumptions and beliefs.

One crucial mental change was the final emergence of the notion of Europe from the idea of Christendom. Maps show the difference between the two. After the age of discovery, Jerusalem, where the founder of Christianity had taught and died, could no longer be treated as the centre of the world – where it appeared on many medieval maps. Soon it was Europe which stood at the centre of Europeans' maps. The final key to a new mental picture was provided by the discovery of the Americas. Somewhere about 1500 European map-makers had established the broad layout of the world map with which we are familiar. In the fifteenth century, Europe had usually been placed in the top left-hand corner of attempts to lay out the known world, with the large masses of Asia and Africa sprawled across the rest of the surface. The natural centre of such maps might be in any of several places. Then the American discoveries slowly began to effect a shift in the conventional arrangement; more and more space had to be given to the land masses of North and South America as their true extent became better known. . . .

By the middle of the century the new geographical view of the world had come to be taken for granted. It was given its canonical expression in the work of Mercator . . . Mercator's new "projection", first used in a map in 1568, . . . drove home the idea that the land surface of the globe was naturally grouped about a European centre. So Europe came to stand in some men's minds at the centre of the world. No doubt this led Europeans for centuries to absorb unconsciously from their atlases the idea that this was somehow the natural order of things. It did not often occur to them that you could have centred Mercator's projection in, say, China, or even Hawaii, and that Europeans might then have felt very different. The idea still hangs about, even today. Most people like to think of themselves at the centre of things. . . . Mercator helped his own civilisation to take what is now called a "Eurocentric" view of the world. (Roberts, 1985, pp. 194–202)

Roberts argues that maps are "fictions" which "reflect changes in our pictures of reality." His larger claims, however, focus on the centrality

of Christianity to the idea of "Europe." For centuries, the concepts "Europe" and "Christendom" were virtually identical. Europe's cultural identity – what made its civilization distinct and unique – was, in the first instance, essentially religious and Christian. Eventually, the idea of "Europe" acquired a sharper geographical, political, and economic definition. This brought it closer to the modern, secular concept of "the West." However, the West has never entirely lost touch with its Christian roots. The encounter with the new worlds – with *difference* – actually reinforced this new identity. It promoted that "growing sense of superiority," which Roberts calls a "Eurocentric" view of the world.

3 Discourse and Power

We have looked at the historical process by which an idea of "the West" emerged from Europe's growing internal cohesion and its changing relations to non-Western societies. We turn, next, to the formation of the languages or "discourses" in which Europe began to describe and represent the *difference* between itself and these "others" it encountered in the course of its expansion. We are now beginning to sketch the formation of the "discourse" of "the West and the Rest." However, we need first to understand what we mean by the term "discourse."

3.1 What is a "discourse"?

In common-sense language, a **discourse** is simply "a coherent or rational body of speech or writing; a speech, or a sermon." But here the term is being used in a more specialized way. By "discourse," we mean a particular way of *representing* "the West," "the Rest," and the relations between them. A discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed.

A discourse does not consist of one statement, but of several statements working together to form what the French social theorist, Michel Foucault (1926–84) calls a "**discursive formation**." The statements fit together because any one statement implies a relation to all the others: "They refer to the same object, share the same style and support 'a strategy . . . a common institutional . . . or political drift or pattern'" (Cousins and Hussain, 1984, pp. 84–5).

One important point about this notion of discourse is that it is not based on the conventional distinction between thought and action, language and practice. Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But it is itself produced by a practice: "discursive practice" – the practice of producing meaning. Since all social practices entail *meaning*, all practices have a discursive aspect. So discourse

enters into and influences all social practices. Foucault would argue that the discourse of the West about the Rest was deeply implicated in practice – i.e. in how the West behaved towards the Rest.

To get a fuller sense of Foucault's theory of discourse, we must bear the following points in mind.

1 A discourse can be produced by many individuals in different institutional settings (like families, prisons, hospitals, and asylums). Its integrity or "coherence" does not depend on whether or not it issues from one place or from a single speaker or "subject." Nevertheless, every discourse constructs positions from which alone it makes sense. Anyone deploying a discourse must position themselves *as if* they were the subject of the discourse. For example, we may not ourselves believe in the natural superiority of the West. But if we use the discourse of "the West and the Rest" we will necessarily find ourselves speaking from a position that holds that the West is a superior civilization. As Foucault puts it, "To describe a . . . statement does not consist in analysing the relations between the author and what he [*sic*] says . . . ; but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it [the statement]" (Foucault, 1972, pp. 95–6).

2 Discourses are not closed systems. A discourse draws on elements in other discourses, binding them into its own network of meanings. Thus, as we saw in the preceding section, the discourse of "Europe" drew on the earlier discourse of "Christendom," altering or translating its meaning. Traces of past discourses remain embedded in more recent discourses of "the West."

3 The statements within a discursive formation need not all be the same. But the relationships and differences between them must be regular and systematic, not random. Foucault calls this a "system of dispersion": "Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever . . . one can define a regularity . . . [then] we will say . . . that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*" (Foucault, 1972, p. 38).

These points will become clearer when we apply them to particular examples, as we do later in this chapter.

3.2 Discourse and ideology

A discourse is similar to what sociologists call an "ideology": a set of statements or beliefs which produce knowledge that serves the interests of a particular group or class. Why, then, use "discourse" rather than "ideology"?

One reason which Foucault gives is that ideology is based on a distinction between *true* statements about the world (science) and *false* statements (ideology), and the belief that the facts about the world help us to decide between true and false statements. But Foucault argues that statements about the social, political, or moral world are rarely ever simply true or false; and "the facts" do not enable us to decide

definitively about their truth or falsehood, partly because "facts" can be construed in different ways. The very language we use to describe the so-called facts interferes in this process of finally deciding what is true and what is false.

For example, Palestinians fighting to regain land on the West Bank from Israel may be described either as "freedom fighters" or as "terrorists." It is a fact that they are fighting; but what does the fighting *mean*? The facts alone cannot decide. And the very language we use – "freedom fighters/terrorists" – is part of the difficulty. Moreover, certain descriptions, even if they appear false to us, can be *made* "true" because people act on them believing that they are true, and so their actions have real consequences. Whether the Palestinians are terrorists or not, if we think they are, and act on that "knowledge," they in effect become terrorists because we treat them as such. The language (discourse) has real effects in practice: the description becomes "true."

Foucault's use of "discourse," then, is an attempt to side-step what seems an unresolvable dilemma – deciding which social discourses are true or scientific, and which false or ideological. Most social scientists now accept that our values enter into all our descriptions of the social world, and therefore most of our statements, however factual, have an ideological dimension. What Foucault would say is that knowledge of the Palestinian problem is produced by competing discourses – those of "freedom-fighter" and "terrorist" – and that each is linked to a contestation over power. It is the outcome of *this* struggle which will decide the "truth" of the situation.

You can see, then, that although the concept of "discourse" side-steps the problem of truth/falsehood in ideology, it does *not* evade the issue of power. Indeed, it gives considerable weight to questions of power since it is power, rather than the facts about reality, which makes things "true": "We should admit that power produces knowledge . . . That power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute . . . power relations" (Foucault, 1980, p. 27).

3.3 Can a discourse be "innocent"?

Could the discourse which developed in the West for talking about the Rest operate outside power? Could it be, in that sense, purely scientific – i.e. ideologically innocent? Or was it influenced by particular class interests?

Foucault is very reluctant to *reduce* discourse to statements that simply mirror the interests of a particular class. The same discourse can be used by groups with different, even contradictory, class interests. But this does *not* mean that discourse is ideologically neutral or "innocent." Take, for example, the encounter between the West and the New World. There are several reasons why this encounter could not be innocent, and therefore why the discourse which emerged in the Old World about the Rest could not be innocent either.

First, Europe brought its own cultural categories, languages, images, and ideas to the New World in order to describe and represent it. It tried to fit the New World into existing conceptual frameworks, classifying it according to its own norms, and absorbing it into western traditions of representation. This is hardly surprising: we often draw on what we already know about the world in order to explain and describe something novel. It was never a simple matter of the West just looking, seeing, and describing the New World/the Rest without preconceptions.

Secondly, Europe had certain definite purposes, aims, objectives, motives, interests, and strategies in setting out to discover what lay across the "Green Sea of Darkness." These motives and interests were mixed. The Spanish, for example, wanted to:

- 1 get their hands on gold and silver;
- 2 claim the land for Their Catholic Majesties; and
- 3 convert the heathen to Christianity.

These interests often contradicted one another. But we must not suppose that what Europeans said about the New World was simply a cynical mask for their own self-interest. When King Manuel of Portugal wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain that "the principal motive of this enterprise [da Gama's voyage to India] has been . . . the service of God our Lord, and our own advantage" (quoted in Hale, 1966, p. 38) – thereby neatly and conveniently bringing God and Mammon together into the same sentence – he probably saw no obvious contradiction between them. These fervently religious Catholic rulers fully believed what they were saying. To them, serving God and pursuing "our advantage" were not necessarily at odds. They lived and fully believed their own ideology.

So, while it would be wrong to attempt to reduce their statements to naked self-interest, it is clear that their discourse was molded and influenced by the play of motives and interests across their language. Of course, motives and interests are almost never wholly conscious or rational. The desires which drove the Europeans were powerful; but their power was not always subject to rational calculation. Marco Polo's "treasures of the East" were tangible enough. But the seductive power which they exerted over generations of Europeans transformed them more and more into a myth. Similarly, the gold that Columbus kept asking the natives for very soon acquired a mystical, quasi-religious significance.

Finally, the discourse of "the West and the Rest" could not be innocent because it did not represent an encounter between equals. The Europeans had outsailed, outshot, and outwitted peoples who had no wish to be "explored," no need to be "discovered," and no desire to be "exploited." The Europeans stood, vis-à-vis the Others, in positions of dominant power. This influenced what they saw and how they saw it, as well as what they did not see.

Foucault sums up these arguments as follows. Not only is discourse always implicated in power; discourse is one of the "systems" through which power circulates. The knowledge which a discourse produces

constitutes a kind of power, exercised over those who are "known." When that knowledge is exercised in practice, those who are "known" in a particular way will be subject (i.e. subjected) to it. This is always a power-relation. (See Foucault, 1980, p. 201.) Those who produce the discourse also have the power to *make it true* – i.e. to enforce its validity, its scientific status.

This leaves Foucault in a highly relativistic position with respect to questions of truth because his notion of discourse undermines the distinction between true and false statements – between science and ideology – to which many sociologists have subscribed. These epistemological issues (about the status of knowledge, truth, and relativism) are too complex to take further here. (Some of them are addressed further in part III.) However, the important idea to grasp now is the deep and intimate relationship which Foucault establishes between discourse, knowledge, and power. According to Foucault, when power operates so as to enforce the "truth" of any set of statements, then such a discursive formation produces a "regime of truth."

Let us summarize the main points of this argument. Discourses are ways of talking, thinking, or representing a particular subject or topic. They produce meaningful knowledge about that subject. This knowledge influences social practices, and so has real consequences and effects. Discourses are not reducible to class-interests, but always operate in relation to power – they are part of the way power circulates and is contested. The question of whether a discourse is true or false is less important than whether it is effective in practice. When it is effective – organizing and regulating relations of power (say, between the West and the Rest) – it is called a "regime of truth."

4 Representing "the Other"

So far, the discussion of discourse has been rather abstract and conceptual. The concept may be easier to understand in relation to an example. One of the best examples of what Foucault means by a "regime of truth" is provided by Edward Said's study of *Orientalism*. In this section, I want to look briefly at this example and then see how far we can use the theory of discourse and the example of *Orientalism* to analyze the discourse of "the West and the Rest."

4.1 Orientalism

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said analyzes the various discourses and institutions which constructed and produced, as an object of knowledge, that entity called "the Orient." Said calls this discourse "Orientalism." Note that, though we tend to include the Far East (including China) in our use of the word "Orient," Said refers mainly to the Middle East – the territory occupied principally by Islamic peoples.

Also, his main focus is French writing about the Middle East. Here is Said's own summary of the project of his book:

My contention is that, without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought and action. This is not to say that Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient, but that it is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when that peculiar entity “the Orient” is in question. . . . This book also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self. (Said, 1985, p. 3)

We will now analyze the discourse of “the West and the Rest,” as it emerged between the end of the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, using Foucault's ideas about “discourse” and Said's example of “Orientalism.” How was this discourse formed? What were its main themes – its “strategies” of representation?

4.2 The “archive”

Said argues that, “In a sense Orientalism was a library or archive of information commonly . . . held. What bound the archive together was a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective. These ideas explained the behaviour of Orientals; they supplied Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics” (Said, 1985, pp. 41–2). What sources of common knowledge, what “archive” of other discourses, did the discourse of “the West and the Rest” draw on? We can identify four main sources:

1 Classical knowledge: This was a major source of information and images about “other worlds.” Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.) described a string of legendary islands, among them Atlantis which many early explorers set out to find. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) and Eratosthenes (c. 276–194 B.C.) both made remarkably accurate estimates of the circumference of the globe which were consulted by Columbus. Ptolemy's *Geographia* (2nd century A.D.) provided a model for map-makers more than a thousand years after it had been produced. Sixteenth-century explorers believed that in the outer world lay, not only Paradise, but that

“Golden Age,” place of perfect happiness and “springtime of the human race,” of which the classical poets, including Horace (65–8 B.C.) and Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 17), had written.

The eighteenth century was still debating whether what they had discovered in the South Pacific was Paradise. In 1768 the French Pacific explorer Bougainville renamed Tahiti “The New Cythera” after the island where, according to classical myth, Venus first appeared from the sea. At the opposite extreme, the descriptions by Herodotus (484–425 B.C.) and Pliny (A.D. 23–79) of the barbarous peoples who bordered Greece left many grotesque images of “other” races which served as self-fulfilling prophecies for later explorers who found what legend said they would find. Paradoxically, much of this classical knowledge was lost in the Dark Ages and only later became available to the West via Islamic scholars, themselves part of that “other” world.

2 Religious and biblical sources: These were another source of knowledge. The Middle Ages reinterpreted geography in terms of the Bible. Jerusalem was the center of the earth because it was the Holy City. Asia was the home of the Three Wise Kings; Africa that of King Solomon. Columbus believed the Orinoco (in Venezuela) to be a sacred river flowing out of the Garden of Eden.

3 Mythology: It was difficult to tell where religious and classical discourses ended and those of myth and legend began. Mythology transformed the outer world into an enchanted garden, alive with misshapen peoples and monstrous oddities. In the sixteenth century Sir Walter Raleigh still believed he would find, in the Amazon rain-forests, the king “El Dorado” (“The Gilded One”) whose people were alleged to roll him in gold which they would then wash off in a sacred lake.

4 Travellers' tales: Perhaps the most fertile source of information was travellers' tales – a discourse where description faded imperceptibly into legend. The following fifteenth century German text summarizes more than a thousand years of travellers' tales, which themselves often drew on religious and classical authority:

In the land of Indian there are men with dogs' heads who talk by barking [and] . . . feed by catching birds. . . . Others again have only one eye in the forehead. . . . In Libya many are born without heads and have a mouth and eyes. Many are of both sexes. . . . Close to Paradise on the River Ganges live men who eat nothing. For . . . they absorb liquid nourishment through a straw [and] . . . live on the juice of flowers. . . . Many have such large underlips that they can cover their whole faces with them. . . . In the land of Ethiopia many people walk bent down like cattle, and many live four hundred years. Many have horns, long noses and goats' feet. . . . In Ethiopia towards the west many have four eyes. . . . [and] in Eriopia there live beautiful people with the necks and bills of cranes. (quoted in Newby, 1975, p. 17)

A particularly rich repository was Sir John Mandeville's *Travels* – in fact, a compendium of fanciful stories by different hands. Marco Polo's

Travels was generally more sober and factual, but nevertheless achieved mythological status. His text (embellished by Rusticello, a romance writer) was the most widely read of the travellers' accounts and was instrumental in creating the myth of "Cathay" ("China" or the East generally), a dream that inspired Columbus and many others.

The point of recounting this astonishing mixture of fact and fantasy which constituted late medieval "knowledge" of other worlds is not to poke fun at the ignorance of the Middle Ages. The point is: (a) to bring home how these very different discourses, with variable statuses as "evidence," provided the cultural framework through which the peoples, places, and things of the New World were seen, described, and represented; and (b) to underline the conflation of fact and fantasy that constituted "knowledge." This can be seen especially in the use of analogy to describe first encounters with strange animals. Penguins and seals were described as being like geese and wolves respectively; the tapir as a bull with a trunk like an elephant, the opossum as half-fox, half-monkey.

4.3 A "regime of truth"

Gradually, observation and description vastly improved in accuracy. The medieval habit of thinking in terms of analogies gave way to a more sober type of description of the fauna and flora, ways of life, customs, physical characteristics, and social organization of native peoples. We can here begin to see the outlines of an early ethnography or anthropology.

But the shift into a more descriptive, factual discourse, with its claims to truth and scientific objectivity, provided no guarantees. A telling example of this is the case of the "Patagonians." Many myths and legends told of a race of giant people. And in the 1520s, Magellan's crew brought back stories of having encountered, in South America, such a race of giants whom they dubbed *patagones* (literally, "big feet"). The area of the supposed encounter became known as "Patagonia," and the notion became fixed in the popular imagination, even though two Englishmen who visited Patagonia in 1741 described its people as being of average size.

When Commodore John Byron landed in Patagonia in 1764, he encountered a formidable group of natives, broad-shouldered, stocky, and inches taller than the average European. They proved quite docile and friendly. However, the newspaper reports of his encounter wildly exaggerated the story, and Patagonians took on an even greater stature and more ferocious aspect. One engraving showed a sailor reaching only as high as the waist of a Patagonian giant, and The Royal Society elevated the topic to serious scientific status. "The engravings took the explorers' raw material and shaped them into images familiar to Europeans" (Withey, 1987, pp. 1175-6). Legend had taken a late revenge on science.

4.4 Idealization

"Orientalism," Said remarks, "is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice." "In addition," he adds, Orientalism "designate[s] that collection of dreams, images and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line" (Said, 1985, p. 73). Like the Orient, the Rest quickly became the subject of the languages of dream and Utopia, the object of a powerful fantasy.

Between 1590 and 1634 the Flemish engraver Theodor de Bry published his *Historia Americae* in ten illustrated volumes. These were leading examples of a new popular literature about the New World and the discoveries there. De Bry's books contained elaborate engravings of life and customs of the New World. Here we see the New World reworked - re-presented - within European aesthetic conventions, Western "ways of seeing." Different images of America are superimposed on one another. De Bry, for example, transformed the simple, unpretentious sketches which John White had produced in 1587 of the Algonquin Indians he had observed in Virginia. Facial features were retouched, gestures adjusted, and postures reworked according to more classical European styles. The effect overall, Hugh Honour observes, was "to tame and civilize the people White had observed so freshly" (Honour, 1976, p. 75).

A major object of this process of idealization was Nature itself. The fertility of the Tropics was astonishing even to Mediterranean eyes. Few had ever seen landscapes like those of the Caribbean and Central America. However, the line between description and idealization is almost impossible to draw. In describing Cuba, for example, Columbus refers to "trees of a thousand kinds . . . so tall they seem to touch the sky," sierras and high mountains "most beautiful and of a thousand shapes," nightingales and other birds, marvellous pine groves, fertile plains and varieties of fruit (quoted in Honour, 1976, p. 5). Columbus's friend, Peter Martyr, later used his descriptions to express a set of rich themes which resound across the centuries:

The inhabitants live in that Golden World of which old writers speak so much, wherein men lived simply and innocently, without enforcement of laws, without quarrelling, judges and libels, content only to satisfy Nature . . . [There are] naked girls so beautiful that one might think he [sic] beheld those splendid naiads and nymphs of the fountains so much celebrated by the ancients.

(quoted in Honour, 1978, p. 6)

The key themes in this passage are worth identifying since they reappear in later variants of "the West and the Rest":

- 1 the Golden World; an Earthly Paradise;
- 2 the simple, innocent life;
- 3 the lack of developed social organization and civil society;
- 4 people living in a pure state of Nature;

5 the frank and open sexuality; the nakedness; the beauty of the women.

In these images and metaphors of the New World as an Earthly Paradise, a Golden Age, or Utopia, we can see a powerful European fantasy being constructed.

4.5 Sexual fantasy

Sexuality was a powerful element in the fantasy which the West constructed, and the ideas of sexual innocence and experience, sexual domination and submissiveness, play out a complex dance in the discourse of "the West and the Rest."

When Captain Cook arrived in Tahiti in 1769, the same idyll of a sexual paradise was repeated all over again. The women were extremely beautiful, the vegetation lush and tropical, the life simple, innocent, and free; Nature nourished the people without the apparent necessity to work or cultivate; the sexuality was open and unashamed – untroubled by the burden of European guilt. The naturalist on Bougainville's voyage to the Pacific said that the Tahitians were "without vice, prejudice, needs or dissention and knew no other god but Love" (Moorhead, 1968, p. 51). "In short," Joseph Banks, the gentleman-scientist who accompanied Cook, observed, "the scene that we saw was the truest picture of an Arcadia, of which we were going to be kings, that the imagination can form" (quoted in Moorhead, 1987, p. 38). As Cook's biographer, J.C. Beaglehole, remarks, "they were standing on the beach of the dream-world already, they walked straight into the Golden Age and embraced their nymphs" (quoted in Moorhead, 1968, p. 66). The West's contemporary image of tropical paradise and exotic holidays still owes much to this fantasy.

Popular accounts by other explorers, such as Amerigo Vespucci (1451–1512), were explicit – where Columbus had been more reticent – about the sexual dimension. New World people, Vespucci said, "lived according to Nature," and went naked and unashamed; "the women . . . remained attractive after childbirth, were libidinous, and enlarged the penises of their lovers with magic potions" (quoted in Honour, 1976, p. 56).

The very language of exploration, conquest and domination was strongly marked by gender distinctions and drew much of its subconscious force from sexual imagery (see figure 6.3). In figure 6.3, "Europe" (Amerigo Vespucci) stands bold and upright, a commanding male figure, his feet firmly planted on *terra firma*. Around him are the insignia of power: the standard of Their Catholic Majesties of Spain, surmounted by a cross; in his left hand, the astrolabe that guided him, the fruit of western knowledge; behind him, the galleons, sails billowing. Vespucci presents an image of supreme mastery. Hulme comments that, "In line with existing European conventions, the 'new' continent was often allegorized as a woman" – here, naked, in a hammock, surrounded by the emblems of an exotic landscape: strange plants and animals and, above all, a cannibal feast (see Hulme, 1986, p. xii).



Figure 6.3 Europe encounters America (van der Straet, c. 1600)

4.6 Mis-recognizing difference

Said says that "the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (Said, 1985, p. 42). How was this strong marking of difference constructed?

Europeans were immediately struck by what they interpreted as the absence of government and civil society – the basis of all "civilization" – among peoples of the New World. In fact these peoples did have several, very different, highly elaborated social structures. The New World the Europeans discovered was already home to millions of people who had lived there for centuries, whose ancestors had migrated to America from Asia across the neck of land which once connected the two continents. It is estimated that sixteen million people were living in the western hemisphere when the Spanish "discovered" it. The highest concentration was in Mexico, while only about a million lived in North America. They had very different standards and styles of life. The Pueblo of Central America were village people. Others were hunter-gatherers on the plains and in the forests. The Arawaks of the Caribbean islands had a relatively simple type of society based on subsistence farming and fishing. Further North, the Iroquois of the Carolinas were fierce, nomadic hunters.

The high civilization of the Maya, with its dazzling white cities, was based on a developed agriculture; it was stable, literate, and composed of a federation of nations, with a complex hierarchy of government. The civilizations of the Aztecs (Mexico) and the Inca (Peru) were both large, complex affairs, based on maize cultivation and with a richly developed art, culture, and religion. Both had a complex social structure and a centralized administrative system, and both were

capable of extraordinary engineering feats. Their temples outstripped in size anything in Europe, and the Royal Road of the Incas ran for nearly 2000 miles through mountainous terrain – further than the extent of the Roman empire from York to Jerusalem (see Newby, 1975, pp. 95–7).

These were functioning societies. What they were *not* was “European.” What disturbed western expectations, what had to be negotiated and explained, was their *difference*. As the centuries passed, Europeans came to know more about the specific characteristics of different “native American” peoples. Yet, in everyday terms, they persisted in describing them *all* as “Indians,” lumping all distinctions together and suppressing differences in one, inaccurate stereotype (see Berkhofer, 1978).

Another illustration of the inability to deal with difference is provided by Captain Cook’s early experience of Tahiti (1769). The Englishmen knew that the Tahitians held property communally and that they were therefore unlikely to possess a European concept of “theft.” In order to win over the natives, the crew showered them with gifts. Soon, however, the Tahitians began to help themselves. At first the pilfering amused the visitors. But when the natives snatched Banks’s spyglass and snuff-box, he threatened them with his musket until they were returned. Cook’s crew continued to be plagued by incidents like this. A similar misunderstanding was to lead to Cook’s death at the hands of the Hawaiians, in 1779.

The first actual contact with local inhabitants was often through an exchange of gifts, quickly followed by a more regular system of trade. Eventually, of course, this trade was integrated into a whole commercial system organized by Europe. Many early illustrations represent the inauguration of these unequal exchanges (see figure 6.4). In Theodor de Bry’s famous engraving of Columbus being greeted by the Indians, Columbus stands in exactly the same heroic pose as Vespucci (“Europe”) in van der Straet’s engraving. On the left, the Cross is being planted. The natives (looking rather European) come, bearing gifts and offering them in a gesture of welcome. As Columbus noted in his log-book, the natives were “marvellously friendly towards us.” “In fact,” he says, disarmingly, “they very willingly traded everything they had” (Columbus, 1969, p. 55). Subsequent illustrations showed the Indians laboring to produce gold and sugar (described by the caption as a “gift”) for the Spaniards.

The behavior of the Europeans was governed by the complex understandings and norms which regulated their own systems of monetary exchange, trade, and commerce. Europeans assumed that, since the natives did not have such an economic system, they therefore had no system at all and offered gifts as a friendly and suppliant gesture to visitors whose natural superiority they instantly recognized. The Europeans therefore felt free to organize the continuous supply of such “gifts” for their own benefit. What the Europeans found difficult to comprehend was that the exchange of gifts was part of a highly complex, but different, set of social practices – the practices of reciprocity – which only had meaning within a certain cultural context. Caribbean practices were different from, though as intricate in their



Figure 6.4 Columbus being greeted by the Indians (de Bry, 1590)

social meaning and effects as, the norms and practices of European exchange and commerce.

4.7 Rituals of degradation

The cannibal feast in the corner of the van der Straet engraving (figure 6.3) was an intrusive detail. It points to a set of themes, evident from the first contact, which were, in fact, the reverse side – the exact opposites – of the themes of innocence, idyllic simplicity, and proximity to Nature discussed earlier. It was as if everything which Europeans represented as attractive and enticing about the natives could also be used to represent the exact opposite: their barbarous and depraved character. One account of Vespucci’s voyages brought these two sides together in the same passage: “The people are thus naked . . . well-formed in body, their heads, necks, arms, privy part, feet of women and men slightly covered with feathers. No one owns anything but all things are in common. . . . The men have as wives those that please them, be they mothers, sisters or friends . . . They also fight with each other. They also eat each other” (quoted in Honour, 1976, p. 8).

There were disturbing reversals being executed in the discourse here. The innocent, friendly people in their hammocks could also be exceedingly unfriendly and hostile. Living close to Nature meant that

they had no developed culture – and were therefore “uncivilized.” Welcoming to visitors, they could also fiercely resist and had war-like rivalries with other tribes. (The New World was no freer of rivalry, competition, conflict, war, and violence than the Old.) Beautiful nymphs and naiads could also be “warlike and savage.” At a moment’s notice, Paradise could turn into “barbarism.” Both versions of the discourse operated simultaneously. They may seem to negate each other, but it is more accurate to think of them as *mirror-images*. Both were exaggerations, founded on stereotypes, feeding off each other. Each required the other. They were in opposition, but systematically related: part of what Foucault calls a “system of dispersion.”

From the beginning, *some* people described the natives of the New World as “lacking both the power of reason and the knowledge of God”; as “beasts in human form.” It is hard, they said, to believe God had created a race so obstinate in its viciousness and bestiality. The sexuality which fed the fantasies of some, outraged many others. The natives were more addicted, it was said, to incest, sodomy, and licentiousness than any other race. They had no sense of justice, were bestial in their customs, inimical to religion. The characteristic which condensed all this into a single image was their (alleged) consumption of human flesh.

The question of cannibalism represents a puzzle which has never been resolved. Human sacrifice – which may have included cannibalism – was associated with some religious rituals. There may have been ritual sacrifice, involving some cannibalism, of captured enemies. But careful reviews of the relevant literature now suggest that the hard evidence is much sketchier and more ambiguous than has been assumed. The extent of any cannibalism was considerably exaggerated: it was frequently attributed by one tribe to “other people” – who were rivals or enemies; much of what is offered as having been witnessed first-hand turns out to be second- or third-hand reports; the practice had usually just ended months before the European visitors arrived. The evidence that, as a normal matter of course, outside ritual occasions, New World Indians regularly sat down to an evening meal composed of juicy limbs of their fellow humans is extremely thin (see, for example, the extensive analysis of the anthropological literature in Arens, 1978).

Peter Hulme (1986) offers a convincing account of how cannibalism became the prime symbol or signifier of “barbarism,” thus helping to fix certain stereotypes. Columbus reported (January 13, 1493) that in Hispaniola he met a warlike group, whom he judged “must be one of the Caribs who eat men” (Columbus, 1969, p. 40). The Spanish divided the natives into two distinct groupings: the “peaceful” Arawaks and the “warlike” Caribs. The latter were said to invade Arawak territory, steal their wives, resist conquest, and be “cannibals.” What started as a way of describing a social group turned out to be a way of “establishing which Amerindians were prepared to accept the Spaniards on the latter’s terms, and which were hostile, that is to say prepared to defend their territory and way of life” (Hulme, 1986, p. 72).

In fact, so entrenched did the idea become that the “fierce” Caribs

were eaters of human flesh, that their ethnic name (Carib) came to be used to refer to anyone thought guilty of this behavior. As a result, we today have the word “cannibal,” which is actually derived from the name “Carib.”

4.8 Summary: stereotypes, dualism, and “splitting”

We can now try to draw together our sketch of the formation and modes of operation of this discourse or “system of representation” we have called “the West and the Rest.”

Hugh Honour, who studied European images of America from the period of discovery onwards, has remarked that “Europeans increasingly tended to see in America an idealized or distorted image of their own countries, on to which they could project their own aspirations and fears, their self-confidence and . . . guilty despair” (Honour, 1976, p. 3). We have identified some of these **discursive strategies** in this section. They are:

- 1 idealization;
- 2 the projection of fantasies of desire and degradation;
- 3 the failure to recognize and respect difference;
- 4 the tendency to impose European categories and norms, to see difference through the modes of perception and representation of the West.

These strategies were all underpinned by the process known as **stereotyping**. A stereotype is a one-sided description which results from the collapsing of complex differences into a simple “cardboard cut-out.” Different characteristics are run together or condensed into one. This exaggerated simplification is then attached to a subject or place. Its characteristics become the signs, the “evidence,” by which the subject is known. They define its being, its *essence*. Hulme noted that,

As always, the stereotype operates principally through a judicious combination of adjectives, which establish [certain] characteristics as [if they were] eternal verities [“truths”], immune from the irrelevancies of the historical moment: [e.g.] “ferocious”, “warlike”, “hostile”, “truculent and vindictive” – these are present as innate characteristics, irrespective of circumstances; . . . [consequently, the Caribs] were locked as “cannibals” into a realm of “beingness” that lies beyond question. This stereotypical dualism has proved stubbornly immune to all kinds of contradictory evidence. (Hulme, 1986, pp. 49–50)

By “**stereotypical dualism**” Hulme means that the stereotype is split into two opposing elements. These are two key features of the discourse of “the Other”:

- 1 First, several characteristics are collapsed into one simplified figure which stands for or represents the *essence* of the people; this is stereotyping.

- 2 Second, the stereotype is split into two halves – its “good” and “bad” sides; this is “splitting” or *dualism*.

Far from the discourse of “the West and the Rest” being unified and monolithic, “splitting” is a regular feature of it. The world is first divided, symbolically, into good–bad, us–them, attractive–disgusting, civilized–uncivilized, the West–the Rest. All the other, many differences between and within these two halves are collapsed, simplified – i.e. stereotyped. By this strategy, the Rest becomes defined as everything that the West is not – its mirror image. It is represented as absolutely, essentially, different, *other*: the Other. This Other is then itself split into two “camps”: friendly–hostile, Arawak–Carib, innocent–depraved, noble–ignoble.

5 “In the Beginning All the World was America”

Writing about the use of stereotypes in the discourse of “the Other,” Sander Gilman argues that “these systems are inherently bi-polar (i.e. polarized into two parts), generating pairs of antithetical signifiers (i.e. words with apparently opposing meanings). This is how the deep structure of the stereotype reflects the social and political ideologies of the time” (Gilman, 1985, p. 27). He goes on to say:

With the split of both the self and the world into “good” and “bad” objects, the “bad” self is distanced and identified with the mental representation of the “bad” object. This act of projection saves the self from any confrontation with the contradictions present in the necessary integration of “bad” and “good” aspects of the self. The deep structure of our own sense of self and the world is built upon the illusionary [*sic*] image of the world divided into two camps, “us” and “them”. “They” are either “good” or “bad”.
(Gilman, 1985, p. 17)

The example Gilman gives is that of the “noble” versus the “ignoble savage.” In this section, we examine the “career” of this stereotype. How did it function in the discourse of “the West and the Rest”? What was its influence on the birth of modern social science?

5.1 Are they “true men”?

The question of how the natives and nations of the New World should be treated in the evolving colonial system was directly linked to the question of what sort of people and societies they were – which in turn depended on the West’s knowledge of them, on how they were represented. Where did the Indians stand in the order of the Creation? Where were their nations placed in the order of civilized societies? Were they “true men” (*sic*)? Were they made in God’s image? The point

was vital because if they were “true men” they could not be enslaved. The Greek philosophers argued that man (women rarely figured in these debates) was a special creation, endowed with the divine gift of reason; the Church taught that Man was receptive to divine grace. Did the Indians’ way of life, their lack of “civilization,” mean that they were so low on the scale of humanity as to be incapable of reason and faith?

The debate raged for most of the fifteenth century. Ferdinand and Isabella issued decrees saying that “a certain people called Cannibals” and “any, whether called cannibals or not, who were not docile” could be enslaved. One view was that “they probably descended from another Adam . . . born after the deluge and . . . perhaps have no souls” (see Honour, 1978, p. 58). However, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), the priest who made himself the champion of the Indians, protested vigorously at the brutality of the Spaniards in putting Indians to work as forced labor. Indians, he insisted, *did* have their own laws, customs, civilization, religion, and were “true men” whose cannibalism was much exaggerated. “All men,” Las Casas claimed, “however barbarous and bestial . . . necessarily possess the faculty of Reason . . .” (quoted by Honour, 1978, p. 59). The issue was formally debated before Emperor Charles X at Valladolid in 1550.

One paradoxical outcome of Las Casas’ campaign was that he got Indian slavery outlawed, but was persuaded to accept the alternative of replacing Indians with African slaves, and so the door opened to the horrendous era of New World African slavery. A debate similar to that about the Indians was held about African slavery prior to Emancipation. The charter of the Royal Africa Company, which organized the English slave trade, defined slaves as “commodities.” As slavery expanded, a series of codes was constructed for the Spanish, French, and English colonies governing the status and conduct of slaves. These codes defined the slave as a *chattel* – literally, “a thing,” not a person. This was a problem for some churches. But in the British colonies the Church of England, which was identified with the planters, accommodated itself to this definition without too much difficulty, and made little effort to convert slaves until the eighteenth century. Later, however, the Dissenters in the anti-slavery movement advocated abolition precisely because every slave was “a man and brother” (see Hall, 1991).

5.2 “Noble” vs “ignoble savages”

Another variant of the same argument can be found in the debate about the “noble” versus the “ignoble savage.” The English poet John Dryden provides one of the famous images of the “noble savage”:

I am as free as Nature first made man,
E’re the base Laws of Servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble Savage ran.
(*The Conquest of Granada*, I.I.1.207–9)

Earlier, the French philosopher Montaigne, in his essay *Des Cannibales* (1580), had placed his noble savage in America. The idea quickly took hold on the European imagination. The famous painting of "The Different Nations of America" by Le Brun in Louis XIV's (1638–1715) Versailles Palace was dominated by a "heroic" representation of an American Indian – grave, tall, proud, independent, statuesque, and naked (see Honour, 1978, p. 118). Paintings and engravings of American Indians dressed like ancient Greeks or Romans became popular. Many paintings of Cook's death portrayed both Cook and the natives who killed him in "heroic" mold. As Beaglehole explains, the Pacific voyages gave new life and impetus to the idealization of the "noble savage," who "entered the study and drawing room of Europe in naked majesty, to shake the preconceptions of morals and politics" (in Moorhead, 1987, p. 62). Idealized "savages" spoke on stage in ringing tones and exalted verse. The eponymous hero in Aphra Behn's novel *Oroonoko* (1688), was one of the few "noble" Africans (as opposed to American Indians) in seventeenth-century literature, and was fortunate enough to have "long hair, a Roman nose and shapely mouth."

"Heroic savages" have peopled adventure stories, Westerns, and other Hollywood and television films ever since, generating an unending series of images of "the Noble Other."

The "noble savage" also acquired sociological status. In 1749, the French philosopher Rousseau produced an account of his ideal form of society: simple, unsophisticated man living in a state of Nature, unfettered by laws, government, property, or social divisions. "The savages of North America," he later said in *The Social Contract*, "still retain today this method of government, and they are very well governed" (Rousseau, 1968, p. 114). Tahiti was the perfect fulfillment of this preconceived idea – "one of those unseen stars which eventually came to light after the astronomers have proved that it must exist" (Moorhead, 1987, p. 62).

The French Pacific explorer Bougainville (1729–1811) had been captivated by the way of life on Tahiti. Diderot, the philosopher and editor of the *Encyclopédie* (see chapter 1), wrote a famous *Supplement* about Bougainville's voyage, warning Tahitians against the West's intrusion into their innocent happiness. "One day," he prophesied correctly, "they [Europeans] will come, with crucifix in one hand and the dagger in the other to cut your throats or to force you to accept their customs and opinions" (quoted in Moorhead, 1987). Thus the "noble savage" became the vehicle for a wide-ranging critique of the over-refinement, religious hypocrisy, and divisions by social rank that existed in the West.

This was only one side of the story. For, at the same time, the opposite image – that of the "ignoble savage" – was becoming the vehicle for a profound reflection in European intellectual circles on the nature of social development. Eighteenth-century wits, like Horace Walpole, Edmund Burke, and Dr Johnson, poured scorn on the idea of the noble savage. Ronald Meek has remarked that contemporary notions of savagery influenced eighteenth-century social science by generating a critique of society through the idea of the noble savage; "It is not quite

so well known . . . that they also stimulated the emergence of a new theory of the development of society through the idea of the *ignoble savage*" (Meek, 1976, p. 2).

The questions which concerned the social philosophers were: What had led the West to its high point of refinement and civilization? Did the West evolve from the same simple beginnings as "savage society" or were there different paths to "civilization"?

Many of the precursors and leading figures of the Enlightenment participated in this debate. Thomas Hobbes, the political philosopher, argued in *Leviathan* (1651) that it was because of their lack of "industry . . . and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of commodities" that "the savage people in many places of America . . . live at this day in [their] brutish manner" (Hobbes, 1946, pp. 82–3). The English satirist Bernard Mandeville, in his *Fable of the Bees* (1723), identified a series of "steps" or stages in which economic factors like the division of labor, money, and the invention of tools played the major part in the progress from "savagery" to "civilization." The philosopher John Locke claimed that the New World provided a prism through which one could see "a pattern of the first ages in Asia and Europe" – the origins from which Europe had developed. "In the beginning," Locke said, "all the World was America" (Locke, 1976, p. 26). He meant by this that the world (i.e. the West) had evolved from a stage very much like that discovered in America – untilled, undeveloped, and uncivilized. America was the "childhood of mankind," Locke claimed, and Indians should be classed with "children, idiots and illiterates because of their inability to reason in abstract, speculative . . . terms" (quoted in Marshall and Williams, 1982, p. 192).

5.3 The history of "rude" and "refined" nations

The "noble-ignoble" and the "rude-refined" oppositions belonged to the same discursive formation. This "West and the Rest" discourse greatly influenced Enlightenment thinking. It provided the framework of images in which Enlightenment social philosophy matured. Enlightenment thinkers believed that there was *one* path to civilization and social development, and that all societies could be ranked or placed early or late, lower or higher, on the same scale. The emerging "science of society" was the study of the forces which had propelled all societies, by stages, along this single path of development, leaving some, regrettably, at its "lowest" stage – represented by the American savage – while others advanced to the summit of civilized development – represented by the West.

This idea of a universal criterion of progress modelled on the West became a feature of the new "social science" to which the Enlightenment gave birth. For example, when Edmund Burke wrote to the Scottish Enlightenment historian William Robertson on the publication of his *History of America* (1777), he said that "the great map of Mankind is unrolled at once, and there is no state or gradation of barbarism, and no mode of refinement which we have not at the

same moment under our view; the very different civility of Europe and China; the barbarism of Persia and of Abyssinia; the erratic manners of Tartary and of Arabia; the savage state of North America and of New Zealand" (quoted by Meek, 1976, p. 173). Enlightenment social science reproduced within its own conceptual framework many of the preconceptions and stereotypes of the discourse of "the West and the Rest."

The examples are too voluminous to refer to in detail. Meek argues that "No one who reads the work of the French and Scottish pioneers [of social science] of the 1750s can fail to notice that all of them, without exception, were very familiar with the contemporary studies of the Americans; that most of them had evidently pondered deeply about their significance and that some were almost obsessed by them. . . . The studies of Americans provided the new social scientists with a plausible working hypothesis about the basic characteristics of the "first" or "earliest" stage of socio-economic development" (Meek, 1976, p. 128). Many of the leading names of the French Enlightenment – Diderot, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Turgot, Rousseau – used the studies of early American Indians in this way.

This is also the case with the Scottish Enlightenment. In Adam Smith's *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (1759), American Indians are used as the pivot for elaborate contrasts between "civilized nations" and "savages and barbarians." They are also pivotal in Henry Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), John Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771), and Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767).

The contribution which this debate about "rude-refined nations" made to social science was not simply descriptive. It formed part of a larger theoretical framework, about which the following should be noted:

- 1 It represented a decisive movement away from mythological, religious and other "causes" of social evolution to what are clearly recognizable as material causes – sociological, economic, environmental, etc.
- 2 It produced the idea that the history of "mankind" (*sic*) occurred along a single continuum, divided into a series of stages.
- 3 Writers differed over precisely *which* material or sociological factors they believed played the key role in propelling societies through these stages. But one factor assumed increasing importance – the "mode of subsistence":

In its most specific form, the theory was that society had "naturally" or "normally" progressed over time through four more or less distinct and consecutive stages, each corresponding to a different mode of subsistence, these stages being defined as hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce. To each of these modes of subsistence . . . there corresponded different sets of ideas and institutions relating to law, property, and government and also different sets of customs, manners and morals. (Meek, 1976, p. 2)

Here, then, is a surprising twist. The Enlightenment aspired to being a "science of man." It was the matrix of modern social science. It provided the language in which "modernity" first came to be defined. In Enlightenment discourse, the West was the model, the prototype, and the measure of social progress. It was *western* progress, civilization, rationality, and development that were celebrated. And yet, all this depended on the discursive figures of the "noble vs ignoble savage," and of "rude and refined nations" which had been formulated in the discourse of "the West and the Rest." So the Rest was critical for the formation of western Enlightenment – and therefore for modern social science. Without the Rest (or its own internal "others"), the West would not have been able to recognize and represent itself as the summit of human history. The figure of "the Other," banished to the edge of the conceptual world and constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation, of everything which the West stood for, reappeared at the very center of the discourse of civilization, refinement, modernity, and development in the West. "The Other" was the "dark" side – forgotten, repressed, and denied; the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity.

6 From "the West and the Rest" to Modern Sociology

In response to this argument, you may find yourself saying – "Yes, perhaps the early stages of the 'science of man' were influenced by the discourse of 'the West and the Rest.' But all that was a long time ago. Since then, social science has become more empirical, more 'scientific.' Sociology today is, surely, free of such 'loaded images'?" But this is not necessarily the case. Discourses don't stop abruptly. They go on unfolding, changing shape, as they make sense of new circumstances. They often carry many of the same unconscious premises and unexamined assumptions in their blood-stream.

For example, some of you may have recognized in the Enlightenment concept of "modes of subsistence" the outline of an idea which Karl Marx (1818–83), a "founding father" of modern sociology, was subsequently to develop into one of the most powerful sociological tools: his theory that society is propelled forward by the class struggle; that it progresses through a series of stages marked by different modes of production, the critical one for capitalism being the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Of course, there is considerable divergence between the Enlightenment's "four stages of subsistence" and Marx's "modes of production." But there are also some surprising similarities. In his *Grundrisse*, Marx speaks in broad outlines of the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and capitalist or bourgeois modes of production. He argues that each is dominated by a particular social class which expropriates the economic surplus through a specific set of social relations. The Asiatic mode (which is only sketchily developed), is that to which, in Marx's

view, countries such as China, India, and those of Islam belong. It is characterized by: (a) stagnation, (b) an absence of dynamic class struggle, and (c) the dominance of a swollen state acting as a sort of universal landlord. The conditions for capitalist development are here absent. Marx hated the capitalist system; nevertheless, he saw it, in contrast with the Asiatic mode, as progressive and dynamic, sweeping old structures aside, driving social development forward.

There are some interesting parallels here with Max Weber (1864–1920), another of sociology's founding fathers. Weber used a very dualistic model which contrasted Islam with Western Europe in terms of modern social development. For Weber, the essential conditions for the transition to capitalism and modernity are: (a) ascetic forms of religion, (b) rational forms of law, (c) free labor, and (d) the growth of cities (see chapter 5 above). All these, in his view, were missing from Islam, which he represented as a "mosaic" of tribes and groups, never cohering into a proper social system, but existing under a despotic rule which absorbed social conflicts in an endlessly repeating cycle of factional struggles, with Islam as its monolithic religion. Power and privilege, Weber believed, had been kept within, and rotated between, the ruling Islamic families, who merely siphoned off the wealth through taxation. He called this a "patrimonial" or "prebendary" form of authority. Unlike feudalism, it did not provide the preconditions for capitalist accumulation and growth.

These are, of course, some of the most complex and sophisticated models in sociology. The question of the causes and preconditions for the development of capitalism in the West have preoccupied historians and social scientists for centuries.

However, it has been argued by some social scientists that both Marx's notion of the "Asiatic" mode of production and Weber's "patrimonial" form of domination contain traces of, or have been deeply penetrated by, "Orientalist" assumptions. Or, to put it in our terms, both models provide evidence that the discourse of "the West and the Rest" is still at work in some of the conceptual categories, the stark oppositions and the theoretical dualisms of modern sociology.

In his studies of *Weber and Islam* (1974) and *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (1978), Bryan Turner has argued that both sociology and Marxism have been unduly influenced by "Orientalist" categories, or, if you lift the argument out of its Middle Eastern and Asian context, by the discourse of "the West and the Rest":

This can be seen . . . in Weber's arguments about the decline of Islam, its despotic political structure and the absence of autonomous cities. . . . Weber employs a basic dichotomy between the feudal economies of the West and the prebendal/patrimonial political economies of the East. . . . [He] overlays this discussion . . . with two additional components which have become the staples of the *internalist* version of development – the "Islamic ethic" and the absence of an entrepreneurial urban bourgeoisie.

(Turner, 1978, pp. 7, 45–6)

Marx's explanation of the lack of capitalist development in the East is very different from Weber's. But his notion that this was due to the "Asiatic mode of production" takes a similar path. Turner summarizes Marx's argument thus:

Societies dominated by the "Asiatic" mode of production have no internal class conflicts and are consequently trapped within a static social context. The social system lacks a basic ingredient of social change, namely class struggle between landlords and an exploited peasantry . . . [For example] "Indian society has no history at all."

(Turner, 1978, pp. 26–7)

Despite their differences, both Weber and Marx organize their arguments in terms of broad, simple, contrasting oppositions which mirror quite closely the West–Rest, civilized–rude, developed–backward oppositions of "the West and the Rest" discourse. Weber's is an "internalist" type of explanation because "he treats the main problems of 'backward societies' as a question of certain characteristics *internal* to societies, considered in isolation from any international societal context" (Turner, 1978, p. 10). Marx's explanation also looks like an "internalist" one. But he adds certain "externalist" features. By "externalist" we mean "relating to a theory of development which identifies the main problems facing 'developing' societies as external to the society itself, which is treated as a unit located within a structured international context" (see Turner, 1978, p. 11). In this chapter, we have adopted an "externalist" or "global" rather than a purely "internalist" account of the rise of the idea of the West.

However, these additional features of Marx's argument lead his explanation in a very surprising direction. "Asiatic"-type societies, he argues, cannot develop into modern ones because they lack certain preconditions. Therefore, "only the introduction of dynamic elements of western capitalism" can trigger development. This makes "capitalist colonialism" a (regrettable) historical necessity for these societies, since it alone can "destroy the pre-capitalist modes which prevent them from entering a progressive historical path." Capitalism, Marx argues, must expand to survive, drawing the whole world progressively into its net; and it is this expansion which "revolutionizes and undermines pre-capitalist modes of production at the periphery of the capitalist world" (Turner, 1978, p. 11). Many classical Marxists have indeed argued that, however stunting and destructive it may have been, the expansion of western capitalism through conquest and colonization was historically inevitable and would have long-term progressive outcomes for "the Rest."

Earlier, we discussed some of the forces which pushed a developing Western Europe to expand outwards into "new worlds." But whether this was inevitable, whether its effects have been socially progressive, and whether this was the only possible path to "modernity" are subjects increasingly debated in the social sciences today (as is discussed in part III). In many parts of the world, the expansion of western colonization has *not* destroyed the pre-capitalist barriers to

development. It has conserved and reinforced them. Colonization and imperialism have *not* promoted economic and social development in these societies, most of which remain profoundly under-developed. Where development has taken place, it has often been of the "dependent" variety.

The destruction of alternative ways of life has not ushered in a new social order in these societies. Many remain in the grip of feudal ruling families, religious elites, military cliques, and dictators who govern societies beset by endemic poverty. The destruction of indigenous cultural life by western culture is, for most of them, a very mixed blessing. And as the human, cultural, and ecological consequences of this form of "western development" become more obvious, the question of whether there is only one path to modernity is being debated with increasing urgency. The historically inevitable and necessarily progressive character of the West's expansion into the Rest is no longer as obvious as perhaps it once seemed to western scholars.

We must leave these issues as open questions at this stage. However, this is a useful point to summarize the main thrust of the argument of this chapter.

7 Conclusion

In the early chapters of this book, we looked at how the distinctive form of society which we call "modern" emerged, and the major processes which led to its formation. We also looked at the emergence of the distinctive form of knowledge which accompanied that society's formation – at what the Enlightenment called the "sciences of man," which provided the framework within which modern social science and the idea of "modernity" were formulated. On the whole, the emphasis in those chapters was "internalist." Though the treatment was comparative – acknowledging differences between different societies, histories, and tempos of development – the story was largely framed from within Western Europe (the West) where these processes of formation first emerged.

This chapter reminds us that this formation was also a "global" process. It had crucial "externalist" features – aspects which could not be explained without taking into account the rest of the world, where these processes were not at work and where these kinds of society did not emerge. This is a huge topic in its own right and we could tell only a small part of the story here. We could have focused on the economic, political, and social consequences of the global expansion of the West; instead, we briefly sketched the outline history of that expansion, up to roughly the eighteenth century. We also wanted to show the *cultural* and *ideological* dimensions of the West's expansion. For if the Rest was necessary for the political, economic, and social formation of the West, it was also essential to the West's formation both of its own sense of itself – a "western identity" – and of western forms of knowledge.

This is where the notion of "discourse" came in. A discourse is a way of talking about or representing something. It produces knowledge that shapes perceptions and practice. It is part of the way in which power operates. Therefore, it has consequences for both those who employ it and those who are "subjected" to it. The West produced many different ways of talking about itself and "the Others." But what we have called the discourse of "the West and the Rest" became one of the most powerful and formative of these discourses. It became the dominant way in which, for many decades, the West represented itself and its relation to "the Other." In this chapter, we have traced how this discourse was formed and how it worked. We analyzed it as a "system of representation" – a "regime of truth." It was as formative for the West and "modern societies" as were the secular state, capitalist economies, the modern class, race, and gender systems, and modern, individualist, secular culture – the four main "processes" of our formation story.

Finally, we suggest that, in transformed and reworked forms, this discourse continues to inflect the language of the West, its image of itself and "others," its sense of "us" and "them," its practices and relations of power towards the Rest. It is especially important for the languages of racial inferiority and ethnic superiority which still operate so powerfully across the globe today. So, far from being a "formation" of the past, and of only historical interest, the discourse of "the West and the Rest" is alive and well in the modern world. And one of the surprising places where its effects can still be seen is in the language, theoretical models, and hidden assumptions of modern sociology itself.

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