----

4. Myths of European Cultural Integrity – The Renaissance

The period of the Renaissance is widely acknowledged as heralding the birth of modern Europe, with developments and innovations in the arts and learning contributing both to its self-perception as modern as well as to a retrospective labelling as such. The 'discovery' of the New World, in particular, as well as advances in science and medicine demonstrated – to themselves as much as to later generations – the superiority of their epoch over earlier historical periods. In building on the wisdom of the ancient world the scholars of the Renaissance developed branches of study concerned with the secular human condition that were later to be termed 'humanism', and then humanities. This saw the development of 'conceptual realism'[1] which was marked by the rise of theory and was linked to a pronounced emphasis on analysis and criticism. In this way, cartographical discoveries, secular humanism and social theory came to be seen not only as part of a European cultural movement, but as synonymous with it. As the prevailing modes of thought were altered so, in the arts, a distinctive image of the times was evoked and it is the art and architecture of the Renaissance which has most visibly endured through the ages as the cultural embodiment of this period. In this chapter, I examine the dominant discourse of the Renaissance as 'modern' and 'European' and assess the claims made by scholars with regard to its epochal significance, endogenous origins, and cultural integrity.

Wallace Ferguson (1948), in his classic study covering five centuries of interpretation of the Renaissance, argues that the problem of the Renaissance is a double problem concerning not only the *facts* of what occurred but also the *subjective interpretation* of these facts. In each age, he suggests, the histories of the Renaissance reflect the search for the origins of contemporary beliefs and values as mirrored in 'the actuality of an epoch of crucial

---

[1] Burke (1964) argues that the realism of historians such as Machiavelli was seen as a 'conceptual realism' which was associated with the Renaissance's shift beyond simply recording events to incorporating a sense of perspective as well. This was understood as distinct from 'medieval realism', he suggests, which was seen to be naturalistic and purely descriptive.

importance for the evolution of Western civilization' (1948: 386) and, by implication, for the world at large. Despite differences of interpretation, however, the centrality of the Renaissance to subsequent histories is without question. Nisbet (1973), for example, argues that scholarship on the Quattrocento approaches something very close to the routinization of charisma; that is, despite sustained critiques of the Renaissance from numerous angles, there has been little impact 'upon the prestige and prosperity of the Renaissance guild', in particular, its construction of the age of the Renaissance as heralding (or, at the very least, 'tilting' toward) the modern (1973: 474).

Over the last few decades, in part as a consequence of emerging debates on post-modernity, there has been further reconsideration of the relation of the Renaissance to the modern world and the contemporary present (see Trinkhaus 1970, Bouwsma 1979). This reconsideration has involved a shift of focus away from social and political institutions to an examination of the relation of the Renaissance to 'the skeptical, relativistic, and pragmatic strains in contemporary culture' (Bouwsma 1979: 10). As Greenblatt argues, the focus of study has shifted from looking at the history of the arts and learning in isolation to examining the ways in which this period has been formative in 'the shaping of crucial aspects of our sense of self and society and the natural world' (1980: 174-5). It is in the midst of anxieties as to what those senses of self, society, and the world mean that the Renaissance has been continually 'rediscovered' as the lens through which to attempt to understand the (European) roots of contemporary issues. For example, the tension between creativity and authoritarianism that is taken to define the human condition in modernity, as indicated in the previous chapter, is understood in terms of its roots occurring in the Renaissance idea of 'self-fashioning'; that is, the idea of 'man as creator of himself and the world' (Bouwsma 1979: 13). The autonomy of 'man' that this entails is regarded as having its first expression during this period (see, for example, the works of Montaigne 1993 [1575]), as is the 'de-sacralization' of authority that is taken to be its counterpart.

With questions being raised as to the continuing significance of the Renaissance to our contemporary age, the most commonly agreed upon interpretation has become that of the Renaissance as being the crucible for the emergence of the 'cultural codes' of modernity as

well as being the fundamental period of transition to the modern world.[2] As Toulmin argues in his overarching discussion of the emergence and development of the modern era, the 'Renaissance was evidently a transitional phase, in which the seeds of Modernity germinated and grew' (1990: 23). Locating the Renaissance in this way, enables scholars both to accommodate every anomaly and retain the specificity of the period by arguing, in comparison to other periods, for it to be one of unusual or accelerated transition (Bouwsma 1979).

In this chapter, then, I seek to understand the generally accepted construction of it as the origin of the 'cultural unity' of Europe and a period of transition to a distinctively modern world. The first section of this chapter looks at the place of the Renaissance in European historiography, briefly examining how it has been understood through the ages and the general claim as to why it is regarded as the 'birth hour' of modern Europe. The second section will look in more depth at two of the characteristics of the Renaissance that have led to its ascription as the birth of the modern, namely, the rediscovery of ancient texts, and the rise in theoretical and conceptual understandings of the world; it will further address the ways in which Europe was constructed in terms of its civilization (incorporating both the arts and learning) and politically (through its territorial organization and administration). The final section contests the iconic status of the Renaissance in the context of claims of it heralding a ruptural break inaugurating the modern and the supposition of a cultural unity, and implied supremacy, of Europe. This chapter is fundamentally concerned with using the work of historians of the medieval and early modern periods, scholars working on the printing revolution, global art historians, and others to challenge and reconfigure the dominant discourses of the Renaissance, and thus, of the idea of 'modern Europe'.

---

[2] While in the nineteenth century sociologists looked to the medieval period in order to provide a comparative offset to modernism and establish the comparative distinction between tradition and modernity (see Nisbet 1966: 15), later sociologists turned to the Renaissance as providing the cultural context for its subsequent emergence (Nisbet 1973; see also Stephen Toulmin 1990, John Scott 1995). Garner (1990) has also suggested that the classic historian of the Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt, should be understood as expounding 'sociological' themes precisely in so far as he is 'a theorist of modernity'.

I

Jacob Burckhardt (1990 [1860]), in the nineteenth century, enduringly associated the Renaissance with modernity and for many historians this was part of the self-understanding of the period itself. For example, John Hale argues that it was 'between the mid-fifteenth and the early seventeenth centuries [that] thoughtful men – at different times and in different places and with different reasons – came to see themselves as living in a period which, for all its dovetailing into the previous centuries, felt different' (1994: 592). Peter Burke concurs with this assessment arguing that although 'the Middle Ages never knew they were the Middle Ages … the Renaissance was quite conscious of the fact that it was the Renaissance' (1964: 2).

The literary renaissance, which is argued to have begun in the fourteenth century with scholars such as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio marking a sharp break with medieval traditions, is integral to the conception and formulation of the idea of the Renaissance being a revival under the influence of classical models (Bradner 1962 [1953], Panofsky 1960). Consciously turning away from the presumed chaos of the Dark Ages, these scholars are believed to have searched for, and tenaciously perused, the forgotten texts of the classical world to see what could still be usefully learnt from authors such as Plato, Aristotle, and Virgil. With the knowledge gained from these texts scholars hoped to reconstruct the ancient world – a society they believed initially to be superior to their own but nearer to their concerns than the preceding medieval centuries had been – and thereby usher in a new age, one that was, and would be, labelled 'modern' and would ultimately be understood as superior even to the ancient world.

The position, however, is less unequivocal than Hale and Burke propose. In using the term 'renaissance' or rebirth, contemporary scholars and thinkers, such as Petrarch and Vasari, were primarily referring to an idea of *cultural* revival. This narrow definition did not prevail with their heirs and successors. As Panofsky argues, the 'gradual expansion of the humanistic universe from literature to painting, from painting to the other arts, and from the other arts to the natural sciences produced a significant shift in the original interpretation' (1960: 18, see also Gouwens 1998). Further, it was not until Michelet (1967 [1847]) entitled the seventh

volume of his *History of France*, 'The Renaissance', that it was 'conceived as a period in the history of European civilization, a period with a distinctive spirit, sharply contrasted with that of the Middle Ages' (Ferguson 1948: 177). In characterizing the period as one of 'the discovery of the world, the discovery of man', Michelet anticipated Burckhardt's subsequently more celebrated association of the Renaissance with the development of the individual and the birth of the modern (Burke 1990, Ferguson 1948). Burckhardt, in turn, saw the Humanists as 'mediators between their own age and a venerated antiquity' (1990 [1860]: 135) who sought to bring the insights of the ancient Greeks to life again in their own time and, then, to surpass them.[3]

Gilmore (1960), among many others, has argued that Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* is the most important work in the creation of the dominant, modern conception of the Renaissance. The prevailing understanding of the key terms 'Renaissance' and 'Humanism', as well as notions of the 'development of the individual' and 'the discovery of the world and of man' were provided by Burckhardt's magisterial study and there is a keenly felt sense 'that the Renaissance was something created by Burckhardt' (Nauert Jr 1995, Ferguson 1948: 212). This claim is supported by the fact that virtually all subsequent histories of that period could not but refer to his work as the key point of reference, whether in agreement or disagreement (see, for example, Symonds 1897, Ferguson 1948, Kristeller 1974, Burke 1964). One of the more recent histories of the Renaissance, John Hale's (1994) *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, acknowledges the seminal importance of Burckhardt's study in the adaptation of its title and organizes its chapters around Europe, Renaissance, and Civilization – capturing the themes integral to Burckhardt's earlier study.

Burckhardt's primary thesis was for the Italian Renaissance to be seen as the key turning point in the history of European civilization, an endogenous turning point which he believed

---

[3] Although the claim has occasionally been made that, because they were intent on restoring a lost condition, it is difficult to see the men of the Renaissance as anything other than conservative – for example, with regard to the Reformation, Elton makes the argument that: 'it is idle to credit the age with the beginning of modern times (in itself a sufficiently uncertain term) if only because its intellectual leaders looked determinedly back rather than forward' (1990: 21) . However, it is important to highlight that the recovery of the wisdom of the ancients was not undertaken for its own sake, but in the context of wanting improvement in the present. The modern 'discoveries' of Copernicus and Columbus were believed to have enlarged the realm of the known world and, in doing so, to have surpassed the achievements of the ancients. This contributed, in large part, to their sense of difference from, and superiority over, the ancient world (see Pagden 1993).

was to have 'world-wide significance' (1990 [1860]: 120). Burckhardt argued that the political condition in which Italy had been left after the struggle between the popes and the Hohenstaufen in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had allowed the emergence, 'for the first time', of 'the modern political spirit of Europe' which was epitomized by 'the growth of individual character' (1990 [1860]: 20, 100). This spirit was seen to be responsible for the 'most elevated political thought and the most varied forms of human development' and confirmed the 'modernity' of the Italian states (1990 [1860]: 65). Thus, in terms of the Renaissance, it was not the revival of antiquity alone which was of importance for Burckhardt, but also the high stage of individualism that was indicated by the cosmopolitanism of the Italian political situation and the importance of this for European (and global) civilization as a whole (1990 [1860]: 100, 120).

Rusen suggests that the idea of 'the continuity of the European mind, … [of] the cultural unity of Western civilization from the ancient past until his own time' was a dominant motif in Burckhardt's work (Rusen 1985: 239). It was only by integrating 'the breakdown of the cultural continuity in the age of revolution with an historical unity of Western civilization' that Rusen suggests Burckhardt was able to establish the prevailing historical identity of 'modern man' (Rusen 1985: 239-40). Later scholars, drawing on Burckhardt's analysis, further established the Renaissance as being 'a complete break with the Middle Ages' and hailed it 'as the dawn of the modern world' (Ralph 1973: 5). John Hale's definition of the Renaissance, as the recovery of 'the sounds of classical antiquity after the long medieval winter that closed in with the loss of Rome to the barbarians' (1994: 189), elegantly, if ultimately misleadingly, encapsulates the dominant themes of the Renaissance as modern and as European and it is to the exposition of these themes that the chapter now turns.

II

The characterization of the Renaissance as 'the birth of the modern' has usually rested upon its claim to have rediscovered the ancient texts, deemed to have been lost during the Middle Ages, and its concomitant search for new knowledge. Panofsky, for example, suggests that while '[t]he Middle Ages had left antiquity unburied … The Renaissance stood weeping at its

grave and tried to resurrect its soul' (1960: 113). The humanists of the long sixteenth century looked back to antiquity as the fount of all meaningful knowledge and drew on their meagre resources to augment the study and appreciation of that heritage. In doing so, they were also seen to have developed new modes of thinking and new branches of study that were oriented to enriching life in the present. As Kristeller argues, Renaissance Humanism was 'a scholarly, literary, and educational ideal based on the study of classical antiquity' which, in time, established the humanities as 'a broad area of secular learning and secular thought … independent of (not contrary to) both theology and the sciences' (1962: 22).[4] The rise in theoretical and conceptual understandings of the world engendered by these shifts, together with an increased emphasis on textual analysis and criticism, have often been cited as demonstrative of the unique mindset of the Renaissance scholars (see Gouwens 1998). Burckhardt, for example, talks often of the 'genius of the Italian people' and reveres the contributions of men such as Petrarch and Boccaccio, whom he believes to be a new class of men in the world maintaining a new cause, Humanism (1990 [1860]: 120, 138). Together with subsequent advances in the sciences and geography, these developments were seen to be responsible for the shift from veneration of the ancient world to a feeling of superiority over it (see Butzer 1992, Headley 2000). As Pagden argues, 'both Copernicanism and the discovery of America … cast a long and menacing shadow over the authority of the whole of the ancient corpus' (1993: 92) and contributed, in large part, to a sense of decisive epochal change.

Addressing, first, the recovery of ancient texts, we see that whereas the medieval humanists had simply accumulated, the Renaissance humanists were said to have discriminated. As Grafton argues, the revival of the classical heritage was 'not only about the discovery of what was lost but the expunging of what was false' (1991: 162). It was with this 'ability to detect the corrupt and the spurious', that the humanists were said to have 'created a critical art without literary precedent' (Grafton 1991: 162). The rise in historical consciousness is another factor that is used by scholars, such as Gilmore (1952) and Panofsky (1960, 1991), to

---

[4] The emergence of these secular modes of learning have often been used to argue for the Renaissance itself being seen as a secular movement with the humanist challenge to the Church's monopoly over education being seen as a prime example of this shift away from the importance and authority of religion. This, however, misses the fact that the Church, and Christianity more generally, continued to play an important role in both social and political affairs and that there was no necessary decline in religious sentiment in this period (see Ferguson 1953).

attest to the birth of modernity in the time of the Renaissance.[5] For Gilmore, 'the ability to place oneself in time with respect to an age as a whole, [and] the awareness of historic distance' came out of the development of a sense of perspective within humanist thought (1952: 201). Panofsky further attributes the development of abstract historical thought to the fact that '[t]he classical past was looked upon, for the first time, as a totality cut off from the present; and, therefore, as an ideal to be longed for' (1960: 113). The capacity to see the past from a fixed distance and the sense of temporal location paralleled the growth of perspective in painting and mirrored the optical effects obtained by Renaissance artists (Eisenstein 1969: 36, 37). In this sense, it is argued, the development of a single and individual viewpoint in art was transposed into historical scholarship and to cartographical advances.

Turning to the art of the Renaissance we see that it has commonly been defined by the conscious break from what were perceived to be the Gothic and Byzantine vulgarities of the recent past and the attempts to recapture and build upon the glories of the traditions of the ancient world. It is generally believed that the attempts to achieve congruence between art and reality, and a reappraisal of the relationship between the two during this period, produced a lasting foundation for the changed appearance of European art and architecture that has endured to the present day (see Vermeule 1964, Muir 1979, Panofsky 1991). The ability of Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael to rationalize 'an image of space which had already earlier been unified' and to combine beauty and harmony with correctness was seen as a repudiation of the ancient authorities and as another sign of the emergence of 'the modern' as distinct and superior to the ancient world (Panofsky 1991: 63, 72, Gombrich 1995 [1950]); this was particularly so, given the application of perspective in contemporary cartography and its implications for the ensuing 'voyages of discovery' (Headley 2000). The achievements in this field, particularly of the Italian artists (who were often also cartographers), supported the increasingly widespread notion of having entered a new period of accomplishment where the 'sense of consistent improvement … led to the word "modern" to be used with increasing frequency' (Hale 1994: 587).

---

[5] On the development of historical consciousness in this period and its relationship to later European historiographical trends, see Bouwsma (1965).

The radical transformation of scientific ideas within sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe was further taken to indicate a fundamental rupture from both preceding modes of thought and other cultural groups (see Boas 1962, Ben-David 1965).[6] Samuel Purchas writing in the early seventeenth century, for example, believed contemporary Europe to be the sole home of the 'Arts and Inventions' and argued that 'Alas, China yeelds babes and bables in both [printing and gunpowder] compared with us and ours: the rest of the World have them borrowed of us or not at all' (quoted in Hay 1957: 121). The medieval centuries were similarly assumed to have contributed little to the subsequent development of science and technology and the 'Scientific Revolution' is generally constructed as a singular event without external contributions or influences. The changes that are deemed to have occurred were brought about, or so Butterfield argues, 'by transpositions that were taking place inside the minds of the scientists themselves' (1957: 1). This is echoed by scholars such as Alexandre Koyré who believed that during the period of the Renaissance 'human, or at least European, minds underwent a deep revolution which changed the very framework and patterns of our thinking' (1958: v). Cook further suggests that, for Koyré, 'science emerged from "the mathematization (geometrization) of nature" and from no other source but this shift in pure thought' (Cook 1993: 46).

Advances in science combined with expanding knowledge of the globe to initiate a shift in the way the world itself was conceptualized within European thought. In the context of the various 'voyages of discovery' associated with this period, Headley argues that they 'served to establish the peculiarly universalizing character of geography as a new knowledge that could be exploited for religious, political, economic, and military purposes upon a global stage' (2000: 1130; see also, Parry 1963). From an earlier vision of the world, dependent on the accumulated knowledge of the ancients, the Bible and the Church Fathers, Europeans now had to refigure that world to include a new continent of which no prior mention had been made. This called into question the authority of the ancients and, in doing so, initiated the epistemological search – culminating in Descartes – for a new basis from which authority could be said to derive. As Pagden (1993) suggests, the reconstruction of geographical

---

[6] Rice and Grafton's claim that '[o]nly modern western civilization has produced a fully developed science … so different and so much more successful than the sciences of the ancient Greeks, the medieval Arabs, the Indians, and the Chinese' (1994 [1970]: 18) is not uncommon within the mainstream literature on the subject.

understandings alongside the unsettling of customary intellectual practices added to the general ferment of the period and contributed in no small part to the sense of being modern, and superior.

As has been discussed, then, the claims made for the 'modernity' of the Renaissance rest in its recovery of ancient texts, the emergence of Humanism and the development of historical consciousness, and the seemingly innovative movements in the arts and science together with the 'discovery' of the New World. These movements and events, as well as being understood as 'modern, also contributed to the establishment of a distinct European identity. The emergence of a network of artists across Europe, for example, who borrowed from each other and had a degree of familiarity with developments across schools and regions, is often regarded as crucial to the development of Renaissance art as well as to subsequent understandings of Europe based on a common cultural identity (see Gombrich 1995 [1950], Hale 1994). For Pagden (2002), the bringing together of Europe 'as a unity' was further facilitated by the association of science with philosophy and, for Headley (2000), with the conjuncture between Christianity and the universalizing impetus of geographical knowledge (see also Butzer 1992). The perceptions of cultural commonality and superiority that these aspects subsequently engendered were intensified through the establishment of a geographically bounded understanding of Europe that focused on both its sense of difference from those it encountered abroad (or regarded as different as a consequence of religion, for example, the 'othering' of Jews and Muslims within Europe) as well as its internal territorial organization and administration.

The territorial organization of the geographical area known as Europe has frequently been understood as having its own internal dynamic that has both created a sense of unity within it and differentiated it from other areas. Michael Mann, for example, argues that over the course of the second millennium the territory of the western Roman empire fused with the lands of the Germanic peoples into a socio-geographical unity called Europe that 'contained a single set of interrelated dynamics' (1986: 373). These 'dynamics', in Mann's explanation, were all endogenous processes with the dominant ones being Christendom, the development of the early modern state and economic power and trading networks. While there was no head or centre to this entity there were 'a number of small, crosscutting interaction

networks' of which he argues Christendom was the most extensive (Mann 1986: 376, 377). This was then believed to have provided the mainstay for a sense of European unity until the collapse of Rome following the schism of Protestantism and the outbreak of religious wars in the seventeenth century.

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 led to the inception of a new multi-state system which was characterized by the simultaneous centralization and impersonalization of political power, that is, states were now more likely to act independently of papal authority and the Church's role as the arbiter of international affairs was greatly reduced (Pagden 2002).[7] This separation between religion and state, as well as the emergence of theories of sovereignty, has been seen as uniquely European and as constituting a key aspect of European identity. Hay, for example, argues that these developments brought about a practical unity in the European political scene and that, combined with the political idealism of the time, 'contributed to the further self-awareness of Europe' (1957: 118). Pagden further suggests that this, more than any other event, 'distinguished the European states from such non-European sovereign bodies as the Ottoman or Ming empires' (2002: 9) and provided the subsequent lodestar for unity, together with the emergence of capitalism and the development of the national state (Strath 2002: 392). These latter, more recent endogenous developments, (to be discussed in more detail in the following two chapters) have been understood to have laid new tracks, not only for Europe, but also the world (Mann 1986: 412, 446).

Having considered the historiography of the Renaissance and addressed the various aspects that are taken to substantiate the claims made for it heralding the birth of modern Europe, the chapter now turns to a critical examination of these dominant interpretations.

---

[7] Within the discipline of International Relations it has been suggested that, regardless of the different traditions to which theorists may belong, they all agree that 'the Westphalian treaties were a decisive turning point … [formalizing] relations between modern sovereign states' (Teschke 2003: 2). Even the few scholars who do contest this particular thesis, however, do not call into question 'the development and dynamics of the European states-system' (Teschke 2003: 4) but rather, simply question the dominant interpretations of it.

III

For Burckhardt and many subsequent historians, as has been discussed above, 'the significance of the Renaissance was that it was the beginning of the modern world … *the great divide*' (Burke 1964: 133). It heralded not only the beginning of the modern age for these historians but the beginning of the tripartite *model* of ages – namely, the ancient, the medieval, and the modern – and the problem of transition between stages. As all periodizations are based on understandings of continuity and change, and the establishment of historical epochs relies on both an agreement on long-standing continuities within that epoch and clearly demarcated moments of transition between them – where old continuities are dissolved and new ones forged (Green 1995: 101) – such conceptual terms can be seen to operate as purifying devices maintaining the coherence of the scheme at the expense of the diversity of human experience encountered. Diversity is typically taken to institute an organizational problem for the writing of world history and even those scholars, who, as was argued in previous chapters, 'recognize' difference, continue to constitute it as a problem to be located in a scheme of unifying laws and regularities that are predominantly taken from the Western experience – past, or 'other', societies are located according to how, and to what extent, they differ from the modern West. Periodization, then, similar to other classificatory schemes, is seen as an expedient approach to a complex situation and one whose intrinsic difficulties will be further discussed at the close of this chapter. [8]

Looking at the Renaissance, then, we see that in the twentieth century there was growing disquiet with the interpretation of it as heralding a qualitative historical break. The claim made for it to be seen as 'a uniquely brilliant epoch of civilization and the point of departure for the modern age' has increasingly been called into question (Ralph 1973: 6). The contrast that had previously been posited between the 'dark' Middle Ages and the enlightened Renaissance dissipated as scholars confirmed the continued presence of medieval traits

---

[8] The attempt to establish common ancestry through the classification of languages over time is one such example – Olender (1994), for example, discusses how the search for the 'original' language of Adam and Eve led to the 'purification' of European languages by, at various times, de-emphasizing Oriental, Semitic, and other influences. To make any sense, boundaries have to be drawn creating internal consistency and coherence even if these boundaries do not relate accurately to languages as they are used. Said further states that the emphasis on demonstrating that radical and ineradicable differences between languages 'set the real boundaries between human beings … forced vision away from common, as well as plural, human realities' (1978: 233).

within the civilization of the Renaissance itself (Kristeller 1974).[9] Kristeller's (1974) work on Renaissance Humanism and culture, for example, has been integral to the re-examination of the place of medieval traditions within what have commonly been understood to be 'new' intellectual movements (see also, Trinkaus 1970, Nauert Jr 1995). Further, a substantial body of literature has been established that contests the uniqueness of the Renaissance in light of earlier renascences within Europe, for example, the Carolingian or twelfth century renaissance (see Sanford 1951, Haskins 1957, Brooke 1969, Trompf 1973, Sullivan 1989).

One of the dominant claims for the Renaissance to be seen as unique rests in its 'discovery' of the texts of the ancients. Elisabeth Eisenstein asks, however, why humanists should 'be credited with 'discovering' ancient works that were obviously known already to some medieval scholars since they were found in the form of medieval copies?' (1969: 46); and, it could be argued further, were also known to scholars within the Greek and Islamic worlds, both contemporaneously and in the medieval period. Eisenstein suggests, then, that 'finding a text' and making it 'generally available' are two very different things and that this difference, attributable to the invention of the printing press, is what actually differentiates the sixteenth century renaissance from the Carolingian revival or that of the twelfth century.

> Given a classical revival that was still underway when new preservative powers were brought into play, one might expect that this revival would pose peculiar problems. Since it was initiated under one set of circumstances and perpetuated under wholly different ones, it would probably begin by resembling previous revivals and yet take an increasingly divergent course (Eisenstein 1969: 27).

Prior to the advent of printing, Eisenstein (1969) suggests there had been no methodological recording of knowledge which would ensure that it would be passed on (with more accuracy than had previously been the case) from one generation to the next. Transcribed books were so few that if they were destroyed or lost there was a danger that the knowledge they contained would be lost forever. Thus, the primary aim of scholars was to ensure the survival of valued texts through laborious copying. Since the availability of scribes capable of reproducing texts was limited, the development of printing meant that texts could be

---

[9] Rabil, in the introduction to his 'Renaissance Humanism' states that: 'On the basis of the most comprehensive study of its sources ever undertaken Kristeller effectively established the claim that humanism is part of a rhetorical traditions that has been a continuous aspect of western civilization since classical antiquity. Moreover, humanism has specific roots in the medieval culture from which it arose' (1988: xiii).

reproduced more efficiently and the range of available books was expanded. This was because the number of available manuscripts had always been limited to human capabilities and the whims of those who patronized the scribes. With the advent of the printing press more neglected texts could be produced 'providing individual readers with access to more works – not necessarily new ones, just more of them' (Eisenstein 1968: 114).

The awareness that, previously, texts had become corrupted and that some had been lost intensified the concern that the 'ancient texts recovered by the humanists were not again "lost", … destroyed, progressively corrupted, transplanted or mislaid' (Eisenstein 1969: 44). This meant that the texts that were available to the latter renascence 'had been enhanced by an order of richness' (Grafton 1991: 176) in that printing 'arrested textual corruption, fixed texts more permanently, and enabled them to accumulate at an accelerated rate' (Eisenstein 1969: 24). It was primarily this shift in the quantity and quality of texts available to scholars that Grafton (1991) suggests constituted the 'new' scholarship attributed to the Renaissance. With 'men of learning' being freed from simply copying old texts, in their attempts to retrieve and preserve fragments of the past, energies could then be turned towards building on the work of their predecessors. They could go beyond copying and memorizing to analyzing, discussing, and exploring what else might still be learnt from the recovered texts. Johns (1998) argues that it is necessary to understand these labours, facilitated by the emergence of print, in order to fully appreciate the significance of the printed book and the transformative consequences associated with it. He suggests that the 'fixity' ascribed to print by some authors, notably Eisenstein, was not an inherent property of print, but was part of the *culture* of print that emerged through varying practices, representations, and conflicts between authors, printers, and the reading public.

The claim to have established a critical art without precedent, then, does not take into account the fact that textual criticism, cross-referencing between one book and another, did not become widely possible until scholars had ready access to a variety of books and had confidence in the integrity of the texts they were consulting.[10] Similarly, with the claim to

---

[10] The key issue here, for Johns (1998), is the creation of confidence in the printed word for, as he suggests, such trust in not *inherent* in the texts themselves, but has to be generated in complex social contexts constituted by both printing and reading practices. Thus, the issue is less, as Eisenstein (1969) suggests, about the 'fixity of knowledge' than, as Johns argues, persuading sufficient people of the integrity of that knowledge.

have developed a unique historical consciousness, Eisenstein suggests that it was not until there was the means to attempt to fix knowledge and to know with more certainty the order in which texts had been composed that the past could be understood in terms of order: 'Records have to be permanently arranged in a uniform sequence before any portion of the past, classical or not, can be seen across definite intervals or from a fixed distance' (Eisenstein 1969: 35, 36). The texts that we now situate chronologically were encountered by earlier scholars in a state of disarray. It is not surprising, therefore, that, with the increased production of books, Humanism, during the later years of the Renaissance, appeared better able 'to survey and to appreciate the totality of the arts and the sciences in a large historical perspective' (Kelley 1988: 261). While it is argued that history writing itself, during this period, 'became more analytical and politically and psychologically more sophisticated than the medieval chronicles had been' (Burke 1964: 50), this is less a quality of mind than circumstance. When, with scribal culture, the main concern had been to preserve knowledge the emphasis was probably more on recording events; as printing made that concern less urgent, it was possible to begin looking at what more could be done with the information available.

The introduction of mass printing techniques further made discussion over distance easier as page numbers and diagrams could be cited from identical copies and scholars were able to correspond with each other with a certainty that they were considering the same issues (Hale 1971: 189). This 'turned intellectual work as a whole into a cooperative instead of a solitary human activity … [enlarging] the amount of intellectual effort applied to individual problems' (Rice and Grafton 1994 [1970]: 8). The use of Latin as the language of intellectual exchange created a community of scholars which, as Jardine suggests, was largely congruent with the Christian world, helping to create 'an ethos of intellectual *amicitia* – the bond of shared humane preoccupations' (1996a: 18). Even if individual scholars were geographically far apart the increased use of paper facilitated written communication and was thus integral to the establishment of the perception of being culturally united in a common pursuit of knowledge. However, any new 'republic of letters' was more extensive and 'hybrid' than is represented within ideas of it as a singular European phenomenon. The transmission of culture and exchange of ideas that resulted in the development of Renaissance Humanism 'was part of a continuous process of cross-cultural fertilization … [based on] a shared

heritage and a set of academic interests in common, rather than a 'movement' with conscious ambitions and intellectual goals' (Jardine 1996b: 59). That this 'cross-cultural fertilization' has been written out of subsequent histories of the Renaissance tells us more about those histories than the histories tell us about the Renaissance.

In their search for origins and the subsequent construction of lines of heritage, scholars constructed a self-definition as European in terms of the sources they acknowledged and those they did not. While most historians of this period locate the Renaissance as primarily, and most importantly, concerned with classical antiquity, its sources and its ideals (Kelley 1991), this retrospective construction fails to acknowledge the admiration felt by the men and women of the Renaissance for Egypt – and the Orient more generally – as culturally older than the Greeks and thus closer to the truth in their terms (Bernal 1987: 157). In searching for the sources of wisdom and the arts, scholars in the Renaissance 'looked behind Christianity to pagan Rome, behind Rome to Greece; but behind Greece there was Egypt' (Bernal 1987: 153).

Scholars such as Kraemer (1984) and Makdisi (1989), further point to the influence and contribution of Islamic scholars, both to the emergence of the humanities and to particular understandings of humanism. As Sabra argues, for example, medieval Islamic scholars had engaged with the works of the ancients – in fact, he writes that 'Aristotle had always been an authority, indeed the foremost authority, for Islamic philosophers' (1984: 138) – and were driven by similar theoretical concerns as those of the later Renaissance and Humanist thinkers. Other scholars have similarly commented on both the intellectual contribution of the Islamic world to learning and scholarship within Europe and more widely, as well as their role in 'preserving' writings of ancient civilizations, Greek, Roman, and Oriental (Kraemer 1984, Bernal 1987, Makdisi 1989, El-Bushra 1992). Joll, for example, notes that 'it was through the intellectuals of the Arab world that much of the teaching of European classical antiquity found its way back into the stream of European cultural development' (1980: 8).

The omission of extra-European influences and historical interactions from virtually all histories of the Renaissance seem to suggest that after the decline of classical Greek and then

Roman culture the legacy of the ancients lay untouched, simply awaiting recovery by the men of the Renaissance (Harding 1998: 28, see also Keita 1994). The idea that these texts may have been circulating in Islamic and other cultures is not thought of as significant and contributions made by such scholars are ignored and left out of the retrospective construction of a linear, isolationist heritage of knowledge and learning. Further, the idea that these texts 'found their way *back*' suggests an exclusively European claim to a heritage that did not understand itself in such terms. The ancient Greeks were not 'European' and, as much as Greek learning was influenced by Eastern cultures so they in turn borrowed from Greece in their common engagement in the advancement of knowledge (see Gershevitch 1964, Fakhry 1965, Hourani 1976).

The fundamental, irreducible cultural differences that are posited between 'medieval' and 'modern' and between 'European' and 'other' have been strongly contested throughout this chapter. Eisenstein, interrogating the commonly held understanding of the Renaissance as 'unique', suggests that it was less the experience and more what became of it under the impact of the new preservative powers of the printing press that was unprecedented (1969: 27, 45). Thus, it could be argued that there was no qualitative difference between the Renaissance and the earlier Carolingian revival or that of the twelfth century; and nor was there a qualitative difference between the Renaissance and 'the effort to renew the study of the Confucian classics that grew up in the lower Yangtze region of China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (Grafton 1991: 44-5). What there was, was an historically contingent process that produced an outcome that was different quantitatively by an order of magnitude and which ultimately had a qualitative effect. The problem has been, however, that the qualitative effect has been seen in isolation, abstracted from wider interconnections, and been regarded as a process occurring due to internal developments in the mindsets of the Europeans themselves. In contrast, it could be argued that Humanism and the cultural transformation that is commonly known as the Renaissance make no sense unless we see at their core the impact of the preservative qualities of the printing press. It was, in part, the advent of this invention, itself originating in China and being carried to Europe in the Middle Ages by the Arabs (Gilmore 1952: 187) – and the corresponding shift from a scribal to a typographical culture – which facilitated a sustained revival and ultimately

produced fundamental changes in the prevailing intellectual models of continuity and change.

Moving on to address the arts, we see that travel was regarded as an integral aspect contributing to the distinctiveness of the Renaissance as it was seen to improve artistic techniques and styles. Yet the artists were only ever assumed to have travelled within what is now understood as Europe. In discussing where these changes were taking place Hale, for example, cites Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, England, Spain, Poland, and Russia (1971: 263). Recent scholarship is, however, beginning to contest this isolationist history: 'editors of a recent collection of reprints maintain that, between 1400 and 1700, there were over 250 descriptions of Egypt by Western travellers' suggesting that travels to Egypt were at least as common as those to Greece (Bernal 1987: 157). Not so recent scholarship, such as that by Frothingham (1895), has similarly pointed to the diffusion and movement of artistic styles and artists in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries between Italian cities, Egypt, Islamic centres – both in Europe, for example, in Spain, and further afield – and the Byzantine civilization. The Renaissance works of art that are so admired today were, in their time, similarly valued within, what Jardine (1996b) calls, a vigorously developing worldwide market based on multilateral exchange and diffusion in which art was both traded as a commodity and exchanged for, and as, inspiration.[11] Thus, contesting the commonly held notion that the emergence and development of Renaissance art was fundamentally an endogenous European phenomenon without influence or inspiration from elsewhere.

Even while the Byzantine and Holy Roman empires collided, learned scholars, artists, and traders from both sides continued to collaborate and exchange goods, ideas and artefacts. An analysis of sixteenth-century art-based transactions undertaken by Jardine and Brotton 'reveal a pragmatic engagement between East and West in which each fully acknowledged the participation of the other' (2000: 61). This leads the authors to argue that cross-cultural exchange ought to be seen as the norm and not as an exception. Further, they suggest that the dominant understanding of the formation of cultural identity as a purely internal

---

[11] Maya Jasanoff (2005) provides an excellent account of how these markets in commodities, and particularly in collectibles, were developed and extended from both 'sides' through imperial expansion in the following centuries.

phenomenon ought to be discarded as it was more plausibly 'formed out of direct encounters between artefacts exchanged amongst international communities at distinct geographical locations' (2000: 133). By analysing the manner in which luxury goods and commodities circulated during the period of the Renaissance they have been able to establish how, instead of being culturally divorced from activities in Europe, places like Istanbul, Persia, China, Japan, and India were actually intricately connected through common political and commercial interests (see also Boxer 1984, Scammell 2000). With these possibilities and their implications, Jardine and Brotton argue, 'comes the inevitable recognition that cultural histories apparently utterly distinct, and traditionally kept entirely separate, are ripe to be rewritten as shared East/West undertakings' (2000: 8).

Alongside goods and commodities, ideas and mental constructs also flowed across political boundaries and '– even if they found specific local expression – enable us to see that what we are dealing with are not separate and comparable, but connected histories' (Subrahmanyam 1997: 748). The introduction of trade in firearms and other commodities between Japan and Portugal in the sixteenth century, for example, was accompanied by discussions on the immortality of the soul (and attempts at conversion to Christianity) between Portuguese Jesuits, such as Francis Xavier, and local religious leaders, such as the Zen-bonze, Ninshitsu (see Laures 1952, Pacheco 1974, Boxer 1984). Further, Perlin, argues that

> in the medieval centuries there existed a vigorous interchange of Indian, Muslim and European astrological and cosmological ideas, repeated between the 15th and 17th centuries when traffic in Latin and vernacular manuscripts accompanied the chemical and alchemical, astrological and astronomical ferment in intellectual Europe (1994: 98).

This calls into question the East/West divide that is constantly read back through history and also problematizes the cultural binaries associated with some postcolonial analyses of Orientalist discourse (Jardine and Brotton 2000: 61), a problematization that is developed throughout this book.

The development of 'Western science' was another key factor in the promulgation of the 'divide' between the medieval and the modern. Focusing on one of the commonly cited figures of the Scientific Revolution, however, we see that, as Marie Boas argues, Copernicus was not in fact 'a pioneer, and attempted nothing that others had not tried before, for many

astronomers [had] used ancient opinion to refute Ptolemy' (1962: 69). Copernicus himself stated that he was not interested in revolutionizing astronomy nor in creating 'a new heaven and a new Earth. For him, it was better to explain the nature of the old ones more exactly' (Boas 1962: 89). Thus, his achievements were based less on new observations and more on the ability to consult texts systematically and work with previously disparate bodies of knowledge. These included texts from 'non-European' sources such as works by the Islamic scholars, Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi and Ibn ash Shatir, of whom mention has only recently been begun to be made in studies of Copernicus' mathematical astronomy (Bernal 1987: 156). The failure to acknowledge the contributions made by 'non-European' cultures trivializes the achievements of their scientific and technological traditions and perpetuates the myth of the source 'of the growth of European science and technology as lying entirely within Europe' (Harding 1998: 31, 36).

Further, as opposed to understanding the Scientific Revolution in terms of there having been 'a shift in pure thought', it is perhaps better to think of it in terms of the transformation in the number and quality of texts available for consultation. Due to the advances made in printing, as discussed earlier, Copernicus had ready access to more texts on the same topic than his predecessors could ever have hoped for. Scholars were no longer required to travel to search for remnants of knowledge located in disparate libraries, monasteries, and other repositories of books and manuscripts but were more likely to have collections themselves, or at least access to collections, that were fuller than they had ever previously been. The bringing together of diverse texts, interpretations, and commentaries allowed contradictions and similarities to be identified more quickly and then begin to be worked through in a systematic fashion. As Eisenstein argues, perhaps 'the most significant contribution made by Copernicus was not so much in hitting on the "right" theory as in producing a fully worked out *alternative* theory and thus confronting the next generation with a problem to be solved rather than a solution to be learned' (Eisenstein 1983: 223). Focusing simply on European mental abilities and talents, in terms of explaining the development of scientific knowledge across the ages, is not the most adequate means of understanding what was going on. Even if looking for the explanation of such phenomena in abilities of particular races was not itself inherently problematic, such talents can only ever be retrospectively determined based as they are on the outcomes of processes as opposed to the nature of the processes themselves.

Having looked at various alternative histories and theoretical challenges to the main presuppositions of what has been deemed to have made the European Renaissance unique within world history, I now turn to examine the construction of the idea of Europe itself. Michael Mann acknowledges that a major difficulty in articulating particular histories is that countries and cultures were rarely autonomous. Islam, for example, had been in contact with many other cultures and had influenced and been influenced by them in turn. Another obstacle in the way of arguing for social change as systemic, he suggests, 'is that the sources of change are geographically and socially "promiscuous" – they do not all emanate from within the social and territorial space of the given "society"' (1986: 503). Having made these arguments, however, Mann then turns on the next page to write 'European dynamism was systemic. … it characterized Europe as a whole, indeed integrating its diversities into one civilization' (1986: 504). Though there may have been differences between north-western Europe and the Mediterranean region, he continues, 'the same spirit pervaded the continent' (1986: 504). The extent to which this pervasive understanding of the emergence of 'political Europe' is an adequate interpretation of the period will now be discussed.

Latin, as the repository and instrument of the dominant culture, is seen to have marked a clear linguistic frontier between Latin Christendom and its Celtic, Slav, Greek, and Muslim neighbours; it also, however, according to Moore, created a distinction between the elite and the masses (1997: 596). The tensions that manifested themselves across the continental landmass thus could be argued as being less to do with proto-national and proto-ethnic sentiments and more to do with the creation and promulgation of a high culture by elites who overrode local values and solidarities in the process (Moore 1997: 597). Further, that the existence of Latin as a common language across Europe did not preclude cultural exchange with non-Latin countries is highlighted by Subrahmanyam. He asserts that the ability of the Mughal ruler Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar to converse with the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio Monserrate in the mid-sixteenth century (year 989 of the Hegiran calendar) on matters pertaining to the coming millennium 'points to the permeability of what are often assumed to be closed "cultural zones", and the existence of vocabularies that cut across local religious traditions' (1997: 746, 748).

Further, while Christendom, and then Christianity, has been seen as the key aspect of cultural unity for much of Europe through the centuries this has occurred in the context of the largely unrecognized historical presence of a substantial number of non-Christian Europeans (Rodríguez-Salgado 2005). Along with significant Jewish populations, it is necessary also to take into account the history of Spain, which had been Muslim for a number of centuries, as well as European Muslims in the Balkans, south-eastern Europe and, perhaps contentiously, Turkey. Like Russia – the other great geo-political entity that stands in a relation of perpetual inclusion and exclusion with Europe 'proper' – Turkey has been a part of the political system of Europe historically even if it has not been recognized as culturally European (Yapp 1992). This further constitutes an ongoing aspect of European (and Muslim) discussions about the nature and limits of Europe. To the extent that Turkey, as with the Ottoman Empire before it, is constructed as a mirror with which to reflect an understanding of Europe back to itself (Yapp 1992), so Arabs, and others, have used 'Europe' for similar purposes (Al-Azmeh 1992; see also Raychaudhuri 2002 [1988]).

The construction of Islam as 'other' to Europe occurs in the context of a history of Muslim expansion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries from Spain and the Balkans in the West to India and Indonesia in the East and across much of Africa to the south (Lewis 1990). As such, Yapp (1992) argues that it was only when Christian fears about Muslim conquest receded, that secular markers of a specifically 'European' identity began to emerge. Mann similarly sets up the expulsion of the Viking, Muslim, and Hun marauders from the continent as a key aspect in the construction of Europe (1986: 377), but how can one be sure who were the marauders and who were there by virtue of 'legitimate' conquest?[12] Bartlett in his book, *The Making of Europe*, has documented how expansionary activity was rife in the Middle Ages and that conquest and settlement were seen as formative periods, often becoming mythologized as founding moments, in a society's history (1993: 92). Can a marauder only be defined retrospectively, then, in terms of one who did not succeed in conquering? Gellner writes 'I like to imagine what would have happened had the Arabs won

---

[12] Bartlett documents how 'Frank' came to refer to westerners as settlers or on aggressive missions away from home and writes that it 'is hence entirely appropriate that when the Portuguese and Spaniards arrived off the Chinese coasts in the sixteenth century, the local population called them *Fo-lang-ki*, a name adapted from the Arabic traders' *Faranga*. Even in eighteenth-century Canton the western barbarian carried the name of his marauding ancestors' (1993: 105). It could further be suggested that the English 'foreigner' came from the Hindi 'ferengi' meaning outsider.

at Poitiers and gone on to conquer and Islamize Europe. No doubt we should all be admiring Ibn Weber's *The Kharejite Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*' (quoted in Mann 1986: 503).

Another distinguishing characteristic of Europe has been understood to be its movement towards political and administrative integration of previously localized and fragmented units within a wider, civilizational complex known as Europe. Moore argues, however, that the events and developments that are traditionally seen to have contributed to the formation of Europe as an autonomous civilization 'had an essential Eurasian context' (1997: 599, see also Braudel 1977). Discussing the emergence of urban centres in north-western Europe, for example, Moore argues that this 'was an aspect of the general recovery after the decline of late antiquity … which was precipitated by the simultaneous expansion and meeting of the Tang and Islamic worlds' (1997: 599). The changes that are seen to have occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries within Europe were not once-and-for-all changes and were not limited to Europe. The 'circulation of powerful myths and ideological constructs relating to state formation existed in early modern Eurasia, and … these often transcended the boundaries defined for us retrospectively by nation-states' (Subrahmanyam 1997: 759). This raises the question for Moore of whether, instead of discussing the developments taking place within western Europe as purely local or regional affairs, we should instead regard them as aspects within the reshaping of civilization within Eurasia after the decline of its ancient empires (1997: 600). Moore argues that the long-term changes, which underpin accounts such as those by Michael Mann discussed above, ought to be seen 'as recurring intensifications rather than as the once-for-all changes associated with the categories in which classical social theory has tended to discuss comparative history' (1997: 600). In discussing 'state formation' in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and then in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Moore writes that the differences that are commonly ascribed to these events 'are differences of degree, not of kind' (1997: 600).

IV

It can be seen that the dominant discourse that sets up the period of the Renaissance as the birth of the modern as well as the birth of Europe has been increasingly challenged by medievalists and historians of the early modern, those interested in the printing revolution, global art historians, critics of comparative histories, and others. It has been demonstrated that the dominant understandings of the Renaissance, upon which the majority of social theorists base their theoretical and conceptual understandings of the world are, at best, inadequate, partial representations of the historical period in question. With this, it is not suggested that there is ever a perfect or complete understanding but, rather, that there are more plausible interpretations of what happened than those currently in use. Accepting that there are plural interpretations of events does not necessarily imply that all interpretations are equal, as has been argued both in the Introduction and earlier in this chapter, but that it is necessary to examine the contemporary plausibility of historical accounts within the communities engaged with them. Opening up earlier readings does not 'falsify' what had been thought previously, or replace it with a 'truer' account, but serves to expose the politics by which it came to dominate our understandings today. This then allows us to see how and why particular aspects of that history were illuminated or occluded. Again, as stated earlier, this is not to suggest that there is a 'complete' history which can be known but that it is in the process of 'knowing' history that we know ourselves: that is, a reflexive approach to history provides greater opportunities for discerning more adequate contemporary understandings where, as was discussed in the Introduction, adequacy is determined in terms of the present as opposed to trying to establish a more accurate reading of the past.

> We have to recognize as best we can the purposes built into and encrusted upon the essences
> and categories we use, and we have to assess as best we can how well those purposes fit our own
> (Carrier 1995: 26).

As Said writes in *Orientalism*, the growth of knowledge is not merely additive or cumulative, it 'is a process of selective accumulation, displacement, deletion, rearrangement and insistence within what has been called a research consensus' (1978: 176). Extending Said's criticisms of 'Oriental Studies' to historical inquiry at large provides one way of opening up the possibility of rethinking histories today: in particular, Said's critique of 'Oriental Studies' as having

constructed an image of the Orient that rested on presumptions of it being 'absolutely different' and 'a closed system', impermeable to change regardless of 'empirical' findings or 'the actualities of the modern Orient' (1978: 177), can be usefully drawn into other fields of inquiry. Addressing the Renaissance we see how a dominant understanding, established in the nineteenth century, set the cultural parameters of what was understood to be modern and European. The establishment of the Renaissance as a temporal period with a defined spatial location further compounded the intellectual boundaries that were drawn upon a particular historical reading. Ascribing the aspect 'modern' to a particular Europe, for example, made the task of subsequent scholarship about the demonstration of its absolute difference and internal coherence: further, adapting Said, the very designation of something as 'modern' involved an already pronounced evaluative judgement on oneself and the other about whom one spoke (1978: 207).

Classification on the presumption of a concrete referent makes the 'other' appear to be in need of explanation and diverts attention away from that which is understood to always, already exist. Where Orientalism, the discourse of the West on the Orient, is about understanding the 'other' what it ignores in the process are the assumptions of the self against which the 'other' is distinguished; that is, it fails to consider the assumptions of *Occidentalism* that are also present in its articulations (see Wang 1997; Venn 2000). In terms of the Renaissance, the establishment of a common cultural understanding of 'modern Europe' can be seen to have deflected attention away from the fundamental ambiguities inherent in such a project and the focus was instead on shaping representations on the basis of difference. These differences, however, are not only situated within a common frame, but relative differences are elevated to the status of absolutes. Further, as Carrier notes in the context of anthropology, despite the 'twin and opposing characterizations of the modern West and societies in other times and places' used within the discipline, 'the Western half of this dialectic is [usually] hidden' (1995: 3, 4). The 'occidentalists' of anthropology, and other social science disciplines, unthinkingly accept a particular version of the West as a valid representation of its core (Carrier 1995: 13) – and it is this acceptance that is being challenged here in the rethinking of the Renaissance.

To restate the underlying argument of this chapter: the ways in which we understand the past have implications for the social theories we develop to deal with the situations we live in today. By widening the context of that historical understanding we expand the knowledge available to us in the development of contemporary theoretical models. If most theory today is predicated on the uniqueness of Europe, which in turn derives from an understanding of the Renaissance as an endogenous, epochal event of particular significance, then calling that radically into question upends most theory. This then provides a clearing from which we can begin to look at the world again and begin to imagine new forms for the future. Keith Jenkins's view that the failure of historical methodology ought to be celebrated as it is *this* which allows 'radical otherness to come, [and] new imaginations to emerge' (2003: 5) is not accepted. Rather it is asserted that only through recognizing the constituted 'other' as always and already present in history, but written out of it, can we begin to move towards the development of human communities which provide the space for the full expression of human creativity – however we choose to define that. As Jardine and Brotton state: 'Our shared histories mean that we inhabit a cultural environment rich with possibilities for future fruitful collaborations and contestation' (2000: 185). In looking at East-West understandings today it is important to remember both that this is not the first instance of engagement and that the West does not come to this cultural encounter 'as the inevitable senior partner' (Jardine and Brotton 2000: 184). This particular interpretation arises from a defined historical moment and one which has been seriously called into question in this chapter.