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Toby E. Huff. *Intellectual Curiosity and the Scientific Revolution: A Global Perspective*
Intellectual Curiosity and the Scientific Revolution: A Global Perspective by Toby E. Huff
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Toby E. Huff. *Intellectual Curiosity and the Scientific Revolution: A Global Perspective*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xiv + 354 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$90 (cl), \$27.99 (pbk). ISBN: 978-1-107-00082-7 (cl), 978-0-521-17052-9 (pbk).

Toby Huff's latest book is a history of failure, lack, and stagnancy. *Intellectual Curiosity and the Scientific Revolution: A Global Perspective* is essentially one long argument, summarized in the book's introduction: "the modern world and the modern mentality were born in the Western world in the seventeenth century. That transformation grew out of long-evolving trends; once they came together in the scientific and Industrial revolutions, they established the demarcation between East and West, developed and developing, that was to persist for hundreds of years" (17).

Huff spends the remaining 302 pages elaborating on this point. In the course of twelve chapters and an epilogue, Huff provides what often reads as a capsule history of great men and moments of the Scientific Revolution in seventeenth-century Europe, culminating in each case with a demonstration of the failure of China, India, or the Ottoman empire (with the identity of those entities remaining fairly constant through the course of the book) to match or duplicate those accomplishments. Part 1 is a detailed study of the invention of the telescope and its travels to China and the Muslim world. Part 2 is a brief comparative study of Islamic, Chinese, and Western modes of higher education in early modernity. Part 3 extends the argument of the earlier chapters by enriching the story with several case studies: anatomy and microbiology, atmospheric pressure, and magnetism and electricity, before a final pair of comparative chapters on astronomical and physical sciences, and a conclusion.

What makes this a global perspective is Huff's effort to show the ultimate failure of contemporary states — Ming and Qing China, Mughal India, and the Ottoman Empire — to understand, appreciate, or develop the scientific innovations of early modern Europe. The reasons for this failure, according to Huff, range from a "curiosity deficit" in the East, to a lack of adequate literacy or educational infrastructure, to an absence of a freedom of the presses comparable to that of Europe. Though "it would be pleasant to think," as Huff claims, "that all the peoples of the world shared equally in the extraordinary advance of thought signified by the scientific revolution" (8), his book attempts to show that there is no factual basis for such a claim. Other recent interventions in something that might be called a global history of science approach the project by urging more attention to local contexts of innovation and understanding outside of a dominant Eurocentric approach: see, for example, "Focus: Global Histories of Science," *Isis* 101 (2010), 95–158. After starting in Europe with a story of genius and innovation, Huff does introduce his readers to non-European local contexts of seventeenth-century natural knowledge. He does so, however, in order to demonstrate the failure of European ideas, scholars, and innovations to take root outside of Europe: the book's global perspective thus reads as a history of non-Western inadequacy and ignorance.

The potential dangers and weaknesses of this kind of comparative, civilizational approach have been elegantly articulated elsewhere, and the interested reader can

easily consult both those critiques and Huff's responses. (See George Saliba, "Seeking the Origins of Modern Science?" *Bulletin for the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 1.2 [1999], and the ensuing response and rejoinder in *BRIIFS* 4.2 [2002].) I will not repeat them here. Does Huff's approach reflect a deep understanding and familiarity with the nuances and major source materials of each of the literatures and topics under study? No, but it would be unfair to ask that of an author attempting the kind of broad comparative project undertaken in this book. Huff does succeed in bringing together major works in the history of the Scientific Revolution with secondary literature on many local traditions of early modern science.

Intellectual Curiosity and the Scientific Revolution is an argument for Western exceptionalism, and it makes its case vigorously and relentlessly. If that appeals, you will find much of interest in Huff's synthesis of Weberian sociology with the secondary literature from an impressive range of historical studies of science and technology across civilizations and cultures. If not, I would recommend two options: consider assigning Huff's strongly argumentative work for one strongly argumentative week of a graduate seminar on comparative history of science; or read something else.

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