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*Renaissances: The One or the Many?* by Jack Goody

Review by: Carla S Nappi

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## Reviews

Jack Goody. *Renaissances: The One or the Many?*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. x + 322 pp. + 8 color and 2 b/w pls. index. append. chron. bibl. \$78 (cl), \$27.99 (pbk). ISBN: 978-0-521-76801-6 (cl), 978-0-521-74516-1 (pbk).

As more scholars in the humanities and social sciences incorporate a global perspective into our research and teaching, many of us find ourselves revisiting basic issues of methodology. We worry about the transportability of local schemes of periodization, the perils of over-generalization in writing comparative studies, and the difficulty of moving beyond the classic humanistic framework of “the West and the Rest.” *Renaissances: The One or the Many?* is Jack Goody’s latest intervention in these issues, part of an ongoing attempt to remedy what he describes as a prevailing ethnocentrism and teleology in the writing of history.

*Renaissances* is essentially one long argument. While the Italian Renaissance was unique in European history, Goody maintains, it is just one example of a general sociological phenomenon that has occurred in many literate cultures. A written record provides a culture with a means of reading its own past, which can result in an efflorescence of scientific and artistic knowledge. This combination of “looking back” and cultural rebirth is what Goody calls a “renascence.” After an introduction that lays out the basic elements of this thesis, Goody examines examples of cultural efflorescence paired with “looking back” (at one’s own cultural history) or “looking around” (at knowledge from other cultures) in Islam, Judaism, India, and China. Additional chapters recount the non-European contributions to the flowering of European medical knowledge in early modern Montpellier, focusing on Islamic influences, and argue for the global importance of secularization in undermining the dominance of “hegemonic religion” and making renascence possible.

Strictly speaking, *Renaissances* is not a book about the Renaissance: it is instead a comparative study of the phenomenon of sociocultural rebirth throughout world history, both within and outside of Europe. It largely consists of local case studies (some written with Stephen Fennell) that serve as historical laboratories in which Goody tests his thesis, usually by making a high-speed road trip through the history of the literate culture of a particular area of the globe, while keeping an eye out for the major factors he identifies as critical to renascence. Literacy is the seed of cultural efflorescence, he argues, as it provides the means and materials for “looking back.” Economic prosperity and trade nourish the soil by providing leisure time for study of the past, and by fostering commercial relationships that produce contacts with other cultures. These contacts, along with technologies like paper and printing, increase the circulation of both goods and knowledge. Cultures do not fully blossom, however, until they come out of the shadow of the religious hegemony of monotheistic creeds — which (according to Goody) tend to limit the creation of knowledge in the arts and sciences — and into the light of secularism. Not all of

these factors occur in all of the cases that Goody explores, and but together they function as a basis for his comparisons.

Goody's prose is elegant, his erudition is astounding, and he rigorously argues his case with clarity and courage. He succeeds more often than not in his effort to replace a Eurocentric account of world history with a more balanced comparative perspective, and he convincingly demonstrates that the Renaissance in Europe was shaped by non-European cultures, which themselves experienced parallel and striking renaissances. Despite this, not all readers will be persuaded by Goody's arguments. Some will worry that the narrative depends on and reifies conceptual binaries, rather than challenging them: arts/sciences, East/West, reason/faith. Some will feel that the ghost of Joseph Needham haunts these pages, as Goody occasionally gets bogged down in proving the non-Western origins of ideas and technologies in his efforts to provide a corrective to Eurocentrism. Some readers may be skeptical of the use of Orhan Pamuk's fiction to discuss the history of figurative imagery in the Islamic world (118–20 and occasionally thereafter), or take issue with Goody's characterization of religious hegemony in literate cultures.

Read the book anyway. *Renaissances* makes a strong case for reexamining the way scholars in the humanities and social sciences think about the history of Europe in the world, and it will teach you something regardless of your academic specialty. It is rare to find a monograph that is so passionately argued, and motivated by such a clear authorial vision. Whether the reader agrees or disagrees with Goody's approach, the book will provide a basis for lively discussion of the issues at stake. It would make an excellent text in graduate or upper-level undergraduate seminars in comparative history, world history, or early modern studies.

CARLA S. NAPPI  
University of British Columbia