DECOLONIZATION OF CONCEPTS

ANTONY BLACK

University of Dundee

The purpose of this article is to reconsider how we should describe social and political phenomena that are outside our own immediate cultural experience; this is related to the problem of how to make intercultural comparisons. Phenomena outside our own immediate cultural experience include our own historical past—in my case the European past, including (to make matters more complicated) the “Western” past of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman antiquity. It would avoid many simple errors if we started off assuming that the past of our own culture, hardly less than the pasts of other cultures, is alien or opaque to us. Geneticists tell us that, if we go back roughly three generations, we have no more in common with our ancestors than with any other human beings. This may not be precisely true in cultural matters, since traditions are transmitted in different ways. They can, however, be invented and then diffused with the appearance of antiquity;¹ and we should not assume that this cannot take place with remarkable rapidity even in pre-modern times. We should, therefore, beware of regarding cultural phenomena of more than a very few generations ago as being immediately transparent to us.

And, indeed, who are “we”? Do “we” not, even as contemporaries, ascribe significantly different meanings, depending on our social grouping and individual outlook, to a whole range of social and political phenomena and ideas, such as “family,” “nation,” “justice,” “people,” and “state”? More obviously problematic is how we should describe historical phenomena in cultures other than our own. Yet this question, too, is seldom systematically confronted. We assume too lightly that even words currently used to describe apparently “ordinary” phenomena in our own culture can be used for the same purpose in other cultures. This deludes us into thinking such phenomena are similar when they are not—the assumption of univocality. Words referring to social phenomena not found in the West, for example “nomad,” may

¹ E.J. Hobsbawn, The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge, 1983).
present less of a problem, at least in the sense that there is no tempt-
tation to confuse them with phenomena with which we are immedi-
ately familiar.²

The historian who was most aware of the need for special precision
of terms and usage was Marshall Hodgson. Indeed, as we shall see,
he is the writer who has most effectively carried forward the enterprise
of Weber. Hodgson's approach to world-historical studies addressed
many of the problems to be discussed here and produced suggestive
solutions: for example, the terms "Islamdom," "cited society," and
"pre-axial," "axial," and "post-axial." His proposals were worked out
in the process of writing one of the greatest works of historical writ-
ing in this and perhaps any age.³ Attention has again recently been
drawn to these problems by Michael Chamberlain in a study on the
role of the household in Middle Eastern society. He shrewdly observes
that the use of terms like "the state," "the army" and "administration"
run the risk of "anachronism and confusion" and "often lead historians
to use "corruption," "usurpation," and "illegitimacy" as explanatory
devices when the entities and institutions they study do not function
as expected."⁴

These problems are magnified if one attempts any kind of compar-
ison between European and other pasts; they are multiplied almost to
infinity if one attempts global history. The following discussion draws
on selected examples that are intended to indicate the problems; it is
by no means an exhaustive list, which should certainly include trade
and capitalism, and could be extended almost indefinitely. I will draw
special attention to, and take examples mainly from, European and
Middle Eastern or Islamic history, since my present work is to com-
pare their histories of political thought.

Everyday Language

We use many words to describe the action of human beings towards
one another as if they were epistemologically transparent, such as

² Anatoly Khazanov, Nomads and the Outside World (Cambridge, 1984), a major work
of intercultural sociological history.
³ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization,
3 vols. (Chicago, 1974), vol. 1, 45-57. Hodgson's Rethinking World History (Cambridge,
1993) is reviewed pp. 82-6 below.
⁴ Michael Chamberlain, Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350
(Cambridge, 1994), 1.