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Origin and Historical Process of Modern Europe: Part One

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Abstract

Europe made the earliest contribution to modern civilisation and modernisation of Europe has long drawn attention from the academic world. This article conducts an investigation into the origin and historical process of modern Europe from a macroscopic perspective, in order to develop better understanding of the connection between European history and modern civilisation. It first illustrates the historical background against which modern Europe originated. Then it interprets the historical process of Europe's modernisation in respect to economy, culture, politics, and technology. The outcomes and significance of Europe's modernisation are discussed at the end. This study also reveals obvious continuity of European history and its impact on the modern world.

Keywords: Modernisation, Europe, Origin, Historical Process, Civilisation

1. Introduction

As an area in which the industrial society emerged for the first time in history, Europe made the earliest contribution to modern civilisation. Modernisation of Europe, therefore, has long drawn attention from the academic world and many researchers have carried out studies to examine this historical phenomenon. This study conducts an investigation into the origin and historical process of modern Europe from a macroscopic perspective, in order to develop better understanding of the connection between European history and modern civilisation. The framework of this study is as follows: First, the historical background against which modern Europe originated will be illustrated briefly. It covers the period from ancient Greece to the Middle Ages (this section is included in Part One). Second, the historical process of Europe's modernisation in respect to economy, culture, politics, and technology will be interpreted. Then, the outcomes and significance of Europe's modernisation will be discussed at the end of this study (these two sections are included in Part Two).

2. Background

The history of Europe's modernisation was widely included in the macro-history writings, e.g., Spielvogel (2010), Stavrianos (2006), and Toynbee (2005). These kinds of studies usually place a special emphasis on this topic so

as to show its historical significance for the establishment of modern world in the context of historical changes at the macro-level. Moreover, many studies of historical sociology also discussed this issue from different angles, e.g., social form, politics, and culture (Anderson, 2016a; 2016b; Moore, 2013; Skocpol, 2007; Tilly, 2012; Weber, 2010). Besides, some researchers inspected it from the perspective of economy and technological change as well, e.g., Cameron and Neal (2012) and Gerschenkron (2012). Based on the previous research, this study will pay close attention to the origin and historical process of modern Europe, and reveal obvious continuity of European history and its impact on the modern world. The research method characterised by narrative history is employed to reach the goal of study.

3. The Origin

Although the concern of this study is modernisation of Europe, it is going to begin with an account of ancient history. Since Europe is viewed as a unit of world civilisation system, it becomes necessary to first illustrate the civilisation roots of this unit. This is equal to an investigation of a person, on which the parents and home environment both have produced effects in terms of biology and culture. For modern Europe, it concludes two civilisation sources: ancient Greece and Christianity.

3.1 Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece is regarded as the earliest source of Western civilisation. Toynbee once attributed the predecessor of Western civilisation to Greek civilisation (Toynbee, 2005) and called it “Greek model,” which was culturally unified but politically divided. He created this model by comparing ancient Greece and ancient China. The centralised political system and “grand unification” of ancient China has been strengthened in history since the Qin Dynasty, while the political division formed in ancient Greece has become the mainstream form in European history. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, political division has become its historical norm, although ambitious people tried to rebuild its glory, e.g., Charlemagne. In contrast, ancient Greeks have always had a cultural impact on the development of Western civilisation, even after Christianity, as a foreign culture, was introduced into Europe at that time. This is an outcome brought about by its cultural unity.

Ancient Greece was geographically located in the Aegean Sea and the southern end of the European continent. Its civilisation can be traced back to Crete in the Mediterranean. The geographical environment is considered as one of the reasons for the characteristics of Greek civilisation. Objectively speaking, the geographical environment of ancient Greece was not comfortable. It was hard enough anyway. But it was this reality that provided opportunities for the ancient Greeks, which inspired their creativity (Toynbee, 2005). This uniqueness of the ancient Greece can be interpreted as “active” and “open,” which is also the characteristic of Western civilisation. Frank Thilly (1995) has commented this characteristic and concluded that the geography was connected to economic progress, the development of trade, industry and commerce, the rise of cities, the accumulation of wealth and the refinement of division of labour, which has had a dramatic effect on the social, political, cultural, and religious life of ancient Greece and opened the way for a new civilisation. Such natural and social conditions was helpful to stimulate wisdom and will, broaden people’s vision, activate the spirit of criticism and thinking, lead to the development of unique personality and promote different progress in all aspects of thought and action.

All aspects of ancient Greek social and cultural life also showed their characteristics. Greek politics have experienced a process from tribalism to aristocracy and oligarchy, and then to democracy (Thilly, 1995). Its political form is called “city-state system.” That is, the political subject of ancient Greece was composed of scattered and independent city states, which was also the result of its special geographical characteristics. Stavrianos (2006) explained that due to the lack of vast plains like the Middle East, India, or East Asia, as the basis for agricultural economic and political integration, Greece’s mountainous terrain separates various economic units from each other, and finally forms a relatively independent political unit. Ancient Greece, Therefore, did not develop into a centralised empire of grand unification, and remained fighting, active and turbulent all the time. Among the city states, the two most typical city states are Sparta and Athens. The former was a very closed “agricultural-military” state, while the latter was famous for trade economy and democratic politics. Greek

civilisation we know today may be largely represented by the political culture of Athens. Nevertheless, the characteristics of ancient Greece are also reflected in its internal spirit. This is a “cold” spiritual trait with reflection and criticism, which was embodied in Ancient Greek philosophy. It is the clearest mark of ancient Greek culture: free criticism and rationalism, and it was even reflected in the paper written by Hippocrates (Stavrianos, 2006).

3.2 Ancient Rome

From the perspective of historical development of Western civilisation, ancient Greek culture, as the foundation of Western civilisation, has been regarded as an advantage. Along with the aforementioned reasons, the advantage is also attributed to an appropriate geographical distance from the early developed civilisations, so the Greeks can effectively absorb their achievements (Stavrianos, 2006). After that, they spread their civilisation fruits to the surrounding areas. The political system in ancient Greece not only brought vitality to its own development, but also paid for it. Alexander III, a Macedonian, finally conquered the city states and established a short-lived empire. Within the scope of this empire, Greek culture spread, and this period is called “Hellenisation.” The next to conquer the Greeks were the Romans. But unlike the Greeks, the latter created a unified country centered on the Mediterranean coast and maintained it for hundreds of years. Although the Romans were the conquerors from a political and military point of view, the Romans were conquered culturally by the Greeks. For the Romans, the Greeks with more exquisite thinking had a sense of superiority. The Romans imitated ancient Greece in many aspects of culture, from sculpture to mythology and legend, from poetry to philosophy. Bertrand Russell (1963) once described this relationship with vivid comparison. He mentioned that when the Romans first encountered the Greeks, they found themselves more savage and ruder, and the Greeks were incomparably superior to them in many ways: in handicraft and agricultural technology; in all kinds of knowledge necessary for an excellent official, in conversation and the art of enjoying life, in all aspects of art, literature and philosophy. The only advantages of the Romans were military technology and social solidarity. The relationship between the Romans and the Greeks was similar to that between the Prussians and the French in 1814 and 1815. However, the latter example is only temporary, while the former situation lasted a long time.

The final collapse of the Roman Empire was an obvious sign of the decline of classical civilisation. At that time, it was filled with a sense of end in Europe. At the end of ancient Rome, at least people had a deep understanding of this tendency at the spiritual level, and frequent unrest arose in all aspects of society. From the perspective of economics, the collapse of the Roman Empire, which marked the decline of classical civilisation, has its own reasons. Slavery in ancient society hindered the progress of social production from two aspects: the efficiency based on slave labour is inherently low, and this mode of production also hinders all possibilities for the improvement of technology (Cameron and Neal, 2012). The civilised world in Europe seemed to be going the old way of ancient Egypt, but there were two factors that made it come back to life. The first was the invasion of “barbarians” including Germanic tribes, The other is the role of Christianity (as a foreign civilisation), whose scope of influence not only includes the area of Greek civilisation, but also involves the Germanic barbarian tribes (as external invaders). The combination of these factors eventually led to the rise of modern Western civilisation in Europe (Toynbee, 2005).

3.3 The Middle Ages

At the time of the decline of classical civilisation, the spiritual and cultural significance of Christianity was clear in history. With the disintegration of civilised society, spiritual unrest and turbulence occurred. It was more obvious in the lower class of society (Toynbee, 2005). The turmoil in the mental world will create strong spiritual needs. Although there were many ways to respond to these needs, e.g., theatrical performance and literature, religion had a unique charm in this regard, and its role was irreplaceable. Christianity was one of the many religions that penetrated the society when the Roman Empire was gradually weakening, and it was also the most successful in terms of historical results. Christianity first found audiences in the lower class of the Roman Empire, then its believers emerged in the upper class of the Empire. Some characteristics of this religion, as a higher religion, explain its great success in spread. At any rate, Christianity is a religion with universalism, which is a common feature of all higher religions (Toynbee, 2005). Hence, Christianity was successfully spread in the region of Greek

civilisation, although it originated from a different civilisation. Christianity creates a significant spirit, which is a spiritual training course that stresses inner cultivation. In order to obtain spiritual salvation, inner spiritual transformation becomes the most important Christian belief (Thilly, 1995). The most prominent point in the Christian spirit is: it has changed people's views on the negative aspects of social life. Christianity endows "ordinary," "lowly" and "suffering" in life with a morally positive meaning. These factors, which had been regarded as tragedies, were then covered with a "sacred" religious aura (Palmer, Colton, and Kramer, 2010). It enabled people to remain humble in the face of various situations. This is a great contribution of higher religions (Christianity is one of them) to the development of civilisation. At the same time, the spiritual world supported by Christianity also shows its similarity with the spirit of ancient Greece, that is, rationalism. The Christian world is an orderly world with a clear structure controlled by God. The process of recognising this world is the process of rejecting irrational thinking, and the demonised cosmic power has also been denied. Whereas, rationalism in Christianity was expressed in a more poetic way (Stromberg, 2005). Obviously, this spiritual structure had a great impact on the social and political development of Europe. The Christian world separated itself from the secular power centre, and then created a new centre of power, which laid the foundation for blocking totalitarianism and cultivating liberalism (Palmer, Colton, and Kramer, 2010).

The triumph of Christianity in Europe announced the beginning of a new social form, that is, the medieval society which would last for a thousand years. It is completely different from the ancient society represented by Greece and Rome in all aspects of economy, political organisation, daily life, and spiritual activities. The scope of its civilisation also spread from the Mediterranean society to the Germanic tribes in Northern Europe. Although it is known as the "dark ages," the Middle Ages did play the role of womb, in which modern Western civilisation was bred in Europe. Modern Western civilisation is an important result of the intersection of Greek civilisation and Christianity originated from another civilisation. The Middle Ages can be regarded as a slow process of intersection of the two civilisations in Europe (Figure 1). In the process, the cultural heritage of ancient Greece was fully absorbed (Stromberg, 2005).

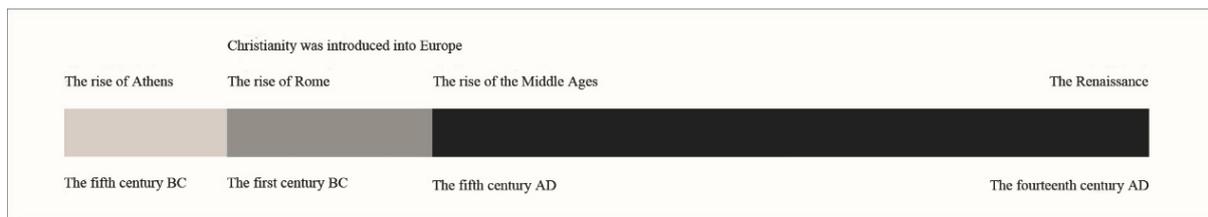


Figure 1: Timeline of the origin of modern Europe

4. Conclusion

This study conducts an investigation into the origin of modern Europe. It concludes that although modernisation of Europe started in the fourteenth century, its origin rooted in ancient Greece and the Middle Ages. Ancient Greece is regarded as the earliest source of Western civilisation, and ancient Greeks has always had a cultural impact on the development of Western civilisation. Then, the Romans created a unified country centred on the Mediterranean coast. Although the Romans were the conquerors from a political and military point of view, the Romans were conquered culturally by the Greeks and became the inheritor of ancient Greek culture. Finally, Modern Europe has evolved from the Middle Ages, and the evolution is long and extremely complex. The Middle Ages played the role of womb, in which modern Western civilisation was bred in Europe. Modern Western civilisation is an important result of the intersection of Greek civilisation and Christianity originated from another civilisation. It can be regarded as a slow process of intersection of the two civilisations in Europe, which was heading towards modern civilisation.

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