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Essai sur l'origine des différences de mentalité entre
Occident et Extrême-Orient / Un certain sens du concret

Paris, Éditions du Portique, « Carnets », 2008, 85 p.

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- 1 The republication of the essay by André-Georges Haudricourt (which first appeared in 1962, and was later revised) on the differences in mentality between the East (pastoral, abstract) and the Far West (agricultural, concrete) is to be welcomed. He makes a case for significant differences between the life and works of the two, between the pastoralist and the gardener. In a quotation that heads the editor's, Jean-François Bert's, accompanying essay, he declares that contrary to most Marxists, his materialism begins with nature and with the concrete. Certainly his analysis of East-West difference in relation to the emphases of the agricultural economy is important and adds something to a study of usual modes of production, which he regards as too abstract.
- 2 However, Haudricourt pays due obeisance to the notion of modes of production in the Marxist sense as well as to the other differences between East and West. His analysis is based upon the distinction between the two and the progression of the West to capitalism. The discussion of the East and the West in terms of horticulture-pastoral

reinforces this dichotomy and the difference between the two, on which Marx's developmental sequence and so much of recent western thinking is based. Haudricourt not only phrases the difference in terms of that between the farmer and the herder but generalizes that in relation to a difference in 'mentalities'. However, the use of such a term tends to 'spiritualize' the nature of the question. That is contrary to the 'materialist' approach which Haudricourt makes initially and it generalizes the problem so that the term 'mentality' is made to cover a variety of other differences including those in philosophy (p. 29), and in forms of authority (p. 33) among others.

- 3 The trouble with this procedure is that firstly, too much is seen to depend upon the initial distinction between the herder and the agriculturalist. Secondly, while important differences are rightly to be attributed to these modes of livelihood, there is much more overlap than the author allows, especially in Europe. Historically, the form of domestication of animals and plants cannot be said to succeed another; they both occurred in the Neolithic Revolution, with specialist pastoralists emerging out of the new dispensation. But for most societies, at least in the west, the breeding of animals and the cultivation of plants was combined in one system of agricultural exploitation. So it was in India and all these eastern societies except China that made use of animal traction and the plough. His variables are too simplified to apply to most of the farming system of the Eurasian continent. Moreover by using 'mentality' as one of these variables, he runs the danger of falling into a mentalistic mode of explanation, though in fact he generally seems to be using the term descriptively. But it is misleading and will not do even in this capacity. In fact there are many more similarities in the development of literate societies of Eurasia, east and west, than Haudricourt (or Marx) allowed for.