

April 30, 1954

To the Editor, *Far Eastern Quarterly*

Dear Sir:

In the issue of the *Far Eastern Quarterly* dated February, 1954, there is an interesting account by Dr. Wertheim of the work of Dr. van Leur, whose death at an early age in the battle of the Java Sea was a sad loss to scholarship, for he was evidently a man who combined insight and erudition in a high degree.

In a footnote to his article Dr. Wertheim is kind enough to say that the general picture arrived at in my *The Western World and Japan* coincides in some essential points with van Leur's theories. But he feels that it is "rather unsatisfactory owing to a lack of thorough-going sociological analysis of the nature of Asian trade."

If I comment briefly upon this passage, it is not, I assure you, because my feelings are hurt. I am too old, too resigned to my own numerous shortcomings, to be upset by any criticism. But what does disturb me is a certain condescension among sociologists which the phrase just quoted seems to reveal.

So far as labels go I am a historian, struggling—I confess—with many problems beyond my capacity to solve. But I am entitled to protest when somebody (to quote an eminent Dutch historian, G. J. Renier) "tries to burden history with all the problems of the universe." The great mediaevalist Pirenne long ago warned against the danger of "drowning history in sociology," and it seems to me that this is what Dr. Wertheim is trying to do when he says that a historian's conclusions are unsatisfactory because they do not arise from a thorough-going sociological analysis. Leaving aside the question whether sociological judgments can claim any kind of finality, I cannot agree that a sociologist has any right to expect a historian to encumber his work with sociological detail. A thoughtful historian will reach his conclusions by considering as many aspects of his subject as his competence allows, and he will not weigh too heavily upon a single technique of enquiry.

I might add that, before writing the book to which Dr. Wertheim refers, I had devoted much time to study of the history of Asian trade, and that in my professional career I was obliged to take a close interest in international commerce. I was much influenced by the knowledge thus acquired in forming my general conclusions on the historical issues to which the book was addressed.

There is another point in Dr. Wertheim's article which, though it has no direct bearing upon the question of the functions of the historian, is not entirely irrelevant in this context. He speaks of the "Europe-centered view which up to now has dominated Western historical writing on Asia." If he would leave out the words "on Asia" I could agree with him; but on the whole I should say that Western historians writing about Asian countries have for many generations past dwelt upon the power and quality of the great civilizations of the East and tended even to overestimate them. Here again, it seems to me, the

sociologists are looking down their noses at the poor historians and claiming that it was they, the sociologists, who first discovered that the "miracle of Greece" was not the only miracle in human history. I notice that Professor Emerson, in his article in the same issue of the *Far Eastern Quarterly*, mentions "the active work of Western scholars in re-creating a forgotten past" for Asian peoples.

Historians revolt! You have nothing to lose but your brains.

GEORGE SANSOM