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The Anthropocene and Anthropology: micro and macro perspectives

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Abstract

Noting a lack of consensus in the recent literature on the Anthropocene, this paper considers how social anthropologists might contribute to its theorizing and dating. Empirically it draws on the author's long-term fieldwork in Hungary. It is argued that ethnographic methods are essential for grasping subjectivities, including temporal orientations and perceptions of epochal transformation. When it comes to historical periodization, however, ethnography is obviously insufficient and proposals privileging the last half century, or just the last quarter of a century, seem inadequate. Influential theories which define "modernity" in terms of developments emanating from countries of the North Atlantic in the 16th-19th centuries (Gellner, Polanyi, Wolf) remain partial and Eurocentric. To comprehend the social preconditions of the Anthropocene in holistic fashion (the crucial contribution of comparative anthropology), it is necessary to follow Jack Goody and trace how the urban revolutions of the Bronze Age united Eurasia through the diffusion of new forms of economy, polity and cosmology.

Keywords:

Anthropocene, Eurasia, Hungary, Jack Goody, Socialism, Social Anthropology,

Anthropological approaches

The concept “Anthropocene” derives primarily from the innovative contributions of distinguished but unorthodox natural scientists. The basic paradigm is that of geology and the point is that human beings are in the process of upsetting the geophysical fundamentals of our planet. Given this focus on humans, it makes sense to extend the conversations to include those who study this species. Social scientists have played only a minor role in the debates to date, but this is beginning to change. This paper focuses on social anthropology, a branch of scholarship that has for the last one hundred years relied for most primary data on field research in small groups and networks. It is far from obvious how, if at all, research into geological time can be advanced by such ethnographic methods. Ever since Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas distanced themselves from 19th century evolutionism, the main currents of anthropology (at least in the Anglophone world) have swirled in the directions of synchronic (or at best “processual”) microsociology and cultural studies. To the extent that these schools have emphasized the diversity of humanity and carved it up into “societies” and/or “cultures”, the emergence of the Anthropocene arguably sounds the death knell of the discipline, since Anthropocene advocates tend to argue that the previous bases of socio-cultural difference are everywhere eroding before our eyes.

But according to an alternative, more generous vision of the “science of man”, anthropology has to be absolutely central to theorizing the Anthropocene. In addition to documenting human diversity as ethnographers, anthropologists have always been interested in philosophies of history, in the evolution of our species, and thus in the boundary between human “culture” and “nature”, the boundary that is palpably less stable in recent decades. Some of the impetus behind the emerging “Anthropocene anthropology” (Moore 2016) comes from concrete environmental challenges linked to climate change in particular “Anthropocene spaces”. But while “Anthropocene assemblages” in this sense are not truly global, much of the current enthusiasm for the term is more general and indeed “planetary”. It stems from

philosophers such as Bruno Latour and other theorists of the “posthuman” and of “interspecies relations”, among them anthropologists such as Anna L. Tsing (2015). There is a widespread sense that more and more human beings, not only well-educated scholars but also the people they study, have a more or less clear awareness of living in a new epoch or era, for which Anthropocene is increasingly accepted as the standard description.

With blogs and reading lists mushrooming and at least one new journal (*The Anthropocene Review*), the sudden popularity of the concept leads in some quarters to a backlash, with suggestions of over-simplification and bias. Anthropocene is considered by the distinguished feminist Science Studies scholar Donna Haraway to be a distortion due to its emphasis on just one species (“Humanosphere” is faulted for similar reasons), and within that species to reflect a peculiar Euro-American model of the world (Haraway et al 2015).¹ Haraway and Tsing are profoundly suspicious of “good Anthropocene people”, those locked into modernist ideologies who naively suppose that the Science of *homo sapiens* can resolve the present crisis (better seen as a transitional *event* rather than an era) through a “techno-fix”. For them, the concept of *Euclidocene* captures a hubris that can be dated back to the the Ancient Greeks. “Speculative fabulation” is what Haraway thinks humanities scholars and social scientists should bring to the conversations initiated by natural scientists. She herself is working on the *Chthulucene* (Sic) and defines Anthropocene as “the necessity of tragic domination of the secular project of phallic man” (ibid: 28).

In this paper I steer clear of such speculative imaginings. After considering some of the alternative temporal classifications currently available, I turn to materials from my own field research in socialist and postsocialist Hungary to indicate both “objective” environmental changes that may reflect the onset of the Anthropocene and, crucially, the “subjective” factors that propel these transformations. In the following section I make the more general argument that the concept of the Anthropocene must be grounded in a theory of

social relations, the forte of the social anthropologist. To grasp the social relations (including both the belief systems and the macro-materialities) of the Anthropocene, it is necessary to go back much further in time, to the urban revolutions of the Bronze Age as theorized by Jack Goody.

Alternative Anthropocenes

The uncertainties in connecting social anthropology to the Anthropocene begin with the initial classifications. There is no consensus as to when the planet entered the epoch in which human interventions become decisive for its constitution.ⁱⁱ The name itself is still contested. Jason Moore (2015) argues for a more political notion of *Capitalocene*. Haraway and her interlocutors (2015) recommend a more specific focus on the dissemination of slave-based agriculture and offer the concept of *Plantationocene*. It is more common, at least for the moment, to date the onset of the Anthropocene to the emergence of *industrial* capitalism, and more specifically, to the intensified exploitation of fossil fuels as sources of energy from the end of the 18th century. For example, historian E.A. Wrigley writes of the transition in this period from an “organic economy” to one of sustainable growth in Britain (2016). This periodization coincides with the rubicon of Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation* (1944). Ernest Gellner’s turning point is similar, though he preferred to theorise Polanyi’s disembedded market society in terms of the rise of the nation-state and nationalism (Gellner 1983). Though neither Polanyi nor Gellner are typical anthropologists, they have had enormous influence on the discipline and the social sciences generally.ⁱⁱⁱ Even more influential in anthropology is the legacy of Eric Wolf, another scion of Central Europe who, influenced by the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, begins his account of world history with the rise of European overseas empires (Wolf 1982). All these works are broadly consistent with mainstream Western social theory from Marx, Weber and Durkheim to

Giddens, Habermas and Foucault. Socio-cultural anthropology is a stepchild of this European “modernity”, even as it devotes itself to the task of documenting the global socio-cultural diversity which this modernity is destined to destroy.

Scientists working with a stricter model of geophysical changes to our global environment and loss of biodiversity tend to see the Anthropocene as having a more recent origin. A great acceleration in human population and interventions in the environment after the Second World War led in less than half a century to massive changes in ecosystems that have already left a permanent mark on the planet (Waters et al 2016). Socio-cultural anthropology, too, experienced unprecedented expansion in these decades. Its mainstream practitioners in this Golden Age devoted themselves not to philosophy of history but to the documentation of unique lifestyles and the impact of exogenously determined change. Long after the demise of a specific “modernization” paradigm (perhaps best reflected in the early work of Clifford Geertz, e.g. Geertz 1963), and in spite of efforts in some places to draw a clear line between anthropology and “development studies”, accelerating social change was a leitmotiv in anthropological research. In Britain, no career exemplified the times better than that of Paul Stirling, whose pioneering fieldwork in an Anatolian village in the late 1940s was supervised by Evans-Pritchard (Stirling 1965). Following the villagers as they quit agriculture, in later decades Stirling studied processes of national and international migration, urbanization and the new forms of “cognition” which these transformed life-worlds opened up (see Hann 1994). Though he might have drawn a deep breath at the concept of Anthropocene, Stirling would perhaps have acknowledged it to be a fitting characterization of the epochal changes through which he lived, and which he sought to capture in his ethnographic studies.

Other anthropologists emphasize a still more recent period of acceleration. Without using the concept Anthropocene, Thomas Hylland Eriksen analyses the “overheating” which began following the end of the Cold War. Globalization is not new, but since 1991 it has

taken on a new intensity, not least in terms of climate change and its consequences for the environment (Eriksen forthcoming). The other dimensions explored in Eriksen's "Overheating" project at the University of Oslo are collective identities and economic dynamics. From his perspective, many of the phenomena subsumed in discussions of the Anthropocene are already reaching crisis proportions and action is required. While socio-cultural differences persist and some "aristocratic" anthropologists willfully cultivate classical paradigms of incommensurable cultural (or "ontological") difference, for Eriksen the key task of the social anthropologist is to grasp the multi-dimensional, *multiscalar* complexity of accelerating social change. Everything else is irresponsible. The death of the "old" anthropology was recognized by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). In the 21st century there can be no return to the old "tribal" world, but Eriksen remains loyal to an ethnography-based epistemology of "small places, big issues" (Eriksen 1996).

Building a community and commodification on the Great Hungarian Plain

Like that of Eriksen, my own work in socialist and postsocialist Eastern Europe, too, has always been ethnographically grounded. The futurist orientation of Marxist-Leninist ideology emphasized towns and industrial workers, but these subjects were relatively neglected in the Anglophone anthropology of this region (see Halpern and Kideckel 1983). Most monographs were community studies in one form or another. Only Katherine Verdery attempted to construct a general model of socialism (1996). She argued that it was characterized by an entirely different temporal order to that of capitalism. Contrary to the linear space-time compression of advanced capitalism, socialism according to Verdery had the effect of suppressing linearity and duration. In the second chapter of her book she analysed the "etatisation" of time in socialist Romania in the 1980s, when the inefficiencies of central planning condemned citizens to waste a great deal of their time in queuing up for goods, on

top of the time they wasted through taking part in parades and other collective rituals of socialism. On this account, socialist modernization formed a stark contrast to the capitalist modernization analysed by Stirling in Turkey.

My contemporaneous field research in Hungary, a very different form of socialism that allowed much greater scope to markets and material incentives, did not confirm Verdery's model. Returning frequently to Tázlár, the Great Plain village of my dissertation research in the 1970s, I have attempted a comprehensive outline in a recent paper (Hann 2015b). Without repeating the details here, I shall offer a brief outline of the history of this community, which is located midway between the rivers Danube and Tisza, near Hungary's border with Serbia. This "objective" history can be juxtaposed with the alternative scenarios for the commencement of the Anthropocene set out above, but I also want to stress changing subjective "spatio-temporalizations" (Munn 1986).

In the 18th century, following the withdrawal of the Ottoman Turks, Tázlár was still uninhabited and mostly infertile *puszta*. Feudalism was re-established throughout the country, but then gradually undermined in the course of the 19th century. With population expanding and no industrial jobs yet available on the periphery of European capitalism, resettlement of the "internal frontier" in locations such as Tázlár was an alternative to overseas migration to the North American frontier. Population soared to over 3000 in the first decades of the 20th century, mainly due to an influx of poor peasants who never stood a chance of creating self-sufficient family farms on the sandy soils of the interfluvium. They worked as day-labourers for more prosperous landowners and sent their children to live with such families as farm servants. Rich and poor alike lived mostly on scattered farms called *tanyák*. Many planted vines and fruit trees, a few wealthy absentee landowners experimented with forestry, and the landscape was transformed in other ways as well: but hardly in such a way as to warrant the

attribution of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. In the terms of Wrigley (2016), this rural economy remained overwhelmingly “organic” until well into the 20th century.

Although upper and lower hamlets took shape from the late 19th century, only in the socialist decades after 1949 did the latter become the nucleus of a village with modernized infrastructure. In addition to a school, culture house, and other state buildings, this new centre was the location of churches, agricultural and consumer cooperatives, and a water tower which made piped water available to all who were ready to abandon the *tanya* in favor of village residence. Despite these attractions, socialist mobilization strategies in the 1950s failed abysmally. Political campaigns against rich peasants and coerced collectivization alienated almost the entire rural population from the government. Relations improved in the 1960s, especially following the decision not to require villagers to join Soviet-style collective farms. The looser form of cooperative introduced in Tázlár and elsewhere on the interfluvium allowed for much continuity with the family farming of the pre-socialist era. In the 1970s and 1980s the cooperative assisted the accumulation strategies of its members by providing them with cheap fodder, tractor services and help with transportation and marketing. This “symbiosis” (Hann 1980, cf. Swain 1985) of family and socialist enterprise exemplified the compromises of Hungarian “market socialism” across the country.

The last decades of socialism were an era in which most villagers adopted new, forward-looking spatio-temporalizations, based on an ethos of capital accumulation and growth (Hann 2015b). They were no longer a separate “peasantry” but fully integrated into the national society for the first time, with good prospects of geographical and social mobility. Tázlár villagers were by no means enamored of socialist principles and deplored the diminution of their property rights by the cooperative. It was an unnatural, immoral blow not to be able to pass on land as private property to one’s children. But they were happy to benefit from the mechanical services which the cooperative made available, even while their own

farming activity remained largely “organic”. They were glad to be able to build themselves new houses with all mod cons, to acquire automobiles, and to organize large-scale wedding parties to demonstrate their prosperity and the value of rural life (Sárkány 1983). At the same time, while accumulating consumer durables and engaging in new forms of status competition locally, they used some of their wealth to endow their upwardly mobile children in the cities. Unfortunately there was also a negative dimension to this story of socialist commoditization: even in the 1970s, the expansion of conspicuous consumption was accompanied by the revival of old pathologies and social stratification; in particular, exploitative day-labouring again became prominent as private vintners expanded their vineyards.

This rural modernization began to stagnate even before 1990. It unraveled entirely soon after the collapse of socialism, due in part to a chaotic legal situation (privatization of the land and other assets was a lengthy process with highly inefficient outcomes) but also to the loss of the old COMECON markets for agricultural commodities, especially wine. The era which Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016) conceives generally as one of overheating is in Tázlár an era of cooling: the cooperative was liquidated, and agricultural production has fallen in every branch. The subsidies received after EU membership (2004) do not compensate for those lost with the collapse of the socialist symbiosis after 1990. Many of the houses constructed in the last decades of socialism are now up for sale at prices which do not even cover the cost of the raw materials. But with few job opportunities available locally, many young people have no choice but to seek work elsewhere in the EU, London being the most favored destination. The village is therefore losing population rapidly and much arable land has reverted to rough pasture for sheep, or been degraded by the constantly shifting sand dunes of this region.^{iv}

Politically, the majority of villagers nowadays support the *Fidesz* party of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Hann 2016b). Opposition from the left is negligible (almost no one

owns up to having been a member of the Communist Party in the past). Critique from the far right is virulent: the only political poster in the village during the three elections of 2014 urged support for the *Jobbik* party. The spatio-temporalizations have now been reversed. The promise of a consumerist future, earned through intensive labour in vineyards and pig-sties, is seen to have failed. Instead, both *Fidesz* and *Jobbik* promote nationalist messages celebrating the past greatness of the Hungarian nation, always a martyred victim, be this vis-à-vis Turks, Austrians, Germans, Russians or – the principal enemy today – the European Commission. After six decades of secular education in the village, control of the primary school has recently been handed over to the Roman Catholic Church. School rituals are held in the church instead of the Culture House and every classroom has a crucifix on the wall. Instead of looking to upward mobilities based on individuals' free choices and abilities, parents and grandparents bemoan the enforced long-term absence of their children and grandchildren, the demise of the large wedding parties (many couples no longer bother with a marriage ceremony at all), not to mention the winter pig-stickings, the mutual aid in housebuilding, and the intense sociality of village life. People say that it is cheaper to buy meat and most garden produce in the large new supermarkets of nearby towns than to produce it oneself, so even everyday subsistence activities have declined. In today's market capitalism, status competition through consumption continues; almost everyone has television, and many have access to the internet and private cars; but there is no disguising the fact that the village is in decline, that an era has come to an end (cf. Vidacs 2015).

To dwell on the past does not mean that Tázlár villagers are somehow reversing time (as some anthropologists of time have alleged in other contexts), or yearn to re-institutionalise an era of pre-socialist ontological securities. In their everyday practical lives, they have the same consciousness of linearity as humans everywhere (including the Romanians studied by Verdery, whose time was crudely appropriated by their state in the 1980s). While rejecting the

collectivist values of socialism, even conservative inhabitants of Tázlár acknowledge the positive transformations accomplished by the 1980s. Parents did not ask for their school to be handed back to the most powerful of the local religious denominations. Rather, village leaders felt compelled for financial reasons to initiate a step that many considered to be retrograde, as the only way to secure the *future* of their local school in the face of population decline.

One might interpret these developments as the conclusion of a relatively benign cycle: as a result of what Hungarians call the “system change”, which many scholars gloss as the end of the Cold War, the infertile *puszta* of the Danube-Tisza interfluvium is gradually returning to its pristine pre-19th century condition and jettisoning its superfluous human population. Some recent developments will, however, leave a long-term mark. Let me mention just two problematic commodities: water and plastic.

The water tower in the village centre was a prime symbol of the new socialist civilization from the 1960s onwards. Following a mediatized outcry about possible health hazards, the quality of the drinking water which now reaches the majority of Tázlár households by pipe has recently been improved. The supply is metered, though some households still rely on traditional wells for meeting irrigation needs in their gardens. A drastic lowering of the water table is not caused primarily by household consumption and personal hygiene, but by the intensification of agriculture which began in the later socialist period. This was a product of both socialist investments and private enterprise. The latter continues strongly in some districts, albeit not in Tázlár. Agricultural demand for water is complemented nowadays by increased recreational use, as those who use surviving *tanya* buildings as weekend homes sink new wells in order to be able to create lawns as green as those which have become status symbols in the village centre. Although the causalities are not at all clear (at least to the villagers), the upshot is that the two lakes of the village, in which I can remember fishing and swimming (unperturbed by the leeches that locals claimed to fear)

in the 1970s, are now mostly dry, and the harvesting of reeds is no longer a profitable economic activity. This is hardly an anthropogenic catastrophe on the scale of sinking islands or other “Anthropocene spaces”, but it is nonetheless indicative of significant ecological change.

Second, it is worth drawing attention to the only surviving economic unit of the agricultural cooperative, a small plastics factory housed in a building that served in pre-socialist times as the Roman Catholic elementary school in the lower hamlet. One of the distinctive features of Hungarian collectivization was the freedom granted to cooperatives, especially after the economic reforms of 1968, to set up non-agricultural sideline activities on a commercial basis (Swain 1985). The looser form of cooperative established in Tázlár was slow to follow this path, but in the 1980s it launched units for the manufacture of shoe-uppers and for plastic bottles and bags; both branches were already well established in other villages of the interfluvium. The jobs thus created in the village were greatly appreciated, especially by women, who constituted the majority of the labour force. The shoe unit collapsed along with agricultural markets in the early 1990s. The plastics factory, however, was acquired by its cooperative leaders in the course of decollectivization (at a price that greatly undervalued its assets, according to envious critics). It made some of its workers redundant and pays wages that barely reach the prescribed national minimum; but at least it has remained viable, and this has earned its owner-manager triumvirate the respect of most villagers. In 2015 this factory gave work to 16 persons, making it by far the largest employer in the village, with business links extending throughout the country. It has not been too hard hit by the general economic crisis since 2008, because this factory specializes in the bottom end of the market, which has remained relatively stable. Villagers are not bothered by the fact that these forms of plastic persist in the environment for a long time, perhaps to be discovered by future archaeologists and geologists: a good symbol of the Anthropocene?

The social relations of the Anthropocene

In the previous section I have tried to show, with examples from the village of Tázlár, how ethnographic details can feed into grasping the bigger picture of historical change.

Ethnography is indispensable for capturing the subjective imaginaries of human populations.

In the case of Tázlár, archival documents offer some insights into the spatio-temporalizations of 19th century immigrants to the *puszta*; through oral histories I was able to glean some data about how villagers experienced the first, repressive decade of socialist power in Hungary.

But only for the years since 1976, as a participant observer, have I acquired a deeper, more reliable understanding of how social transformations are locally experienced. I can recall vividly the bitterness of an old man in the 1970s who could never come to terms with the appropriation of his patrimony by the cooperative, or the visceral anger of those who lost their jobs with the collapse of that cooperative in the 1990s. Is this kind of knowledge pertinent to Anthropocene debates? Is it helpful in deciding between three candidates for its onset?

The evidence in Tázlár offers some support for the scientists who point to a recent origin (Waters et al: 2016). After centuries of “organic” backwardness and underdevelopment, this region of rural Hungary underwent accelerated change in the form of a “socialist civilizing process” between the 1960s and the 1980s. Whereas Eriksen (2016) suggests that a multi-dimensional intensification or “overheating” set in globally from 1990 onwards, in Tázlár this is an era of economic decline, following the earlier frenzy of expanding production and consumerist accumulation. I highlighted the declining water table and expanding plastic production because of their evident environmental significance. In both cases, the innovation began in the socialist decades and has continued unabated in the postsocialist era.

But of course, macro-historical periodization cannot be based on evidence from a single community. While I defend my case-study as an instructive setting in which to analyse modern Hungarian history, and even the rise and fall of socialism more generally, it is not a universal microcosm. We need a bigger perspective, one that predates the 18th century, or other alleged caesurae of Western modernity theories. The social relations of market capitalism one observes in Tázlár today bear the marks not only of the accumulation and status competition of the immediate socialist past, but also of pre-socialist immigration histories in the Carpathian Basin, and behind them, of thousands of years of social evolution in Eurasia. With this preposterous claim I turn to an understanding of world history that avoids the pitfalls of Eurocentrism and theories of “modernity” that (even when presented in the guise of “multiple modernities” in the manner of Eisenstadt 2002) continue to take the West as its template.

To the best of my knowledge, Jack Goody (1919 – 2015) never engaged with the concept Anthropocene, but I suggest that his vision (inspired by the prehistorian V. Gordon Childe) of a “Eurasian miracle” (Goody 2010) in the form of an urban evolution in the late Bronze Age can help us to grasp the emergence of the human social relations that form the essential substratum of the Anthropocene. This is how the historicizing social scientist can respond to the master sciences of geology, biology and chemistry in the current debates. The Anthropocene presents comparative social anthropologists with an opportunity to complement their ethnographies with a truly *longue durée* account of how our planet has come to be where it is today.

Let me explain. Goody started out as an ethnographer of highly egalitarian societies in sub-Saharan Africa. He realized that a range of domestic institutions and modes of property transmission distinguished Africa from both Europe and the great civilizations of Asia (Goody 1976). In terms of the spread of plough agriculture, the search for metals (and

consequent scarring of landscapes), and above all patterns of status differentiation in both town and countryside, East and West had much in common over millennia. In the endowment of daughters to preserve their status, as in the emergence of a differentiated haute cuisine, or the use of flowers, Eurasian societies differ from the more collectivist, egalitarian societies of black Africa, where the chief (if there is one) seldom dines or dresses more richly than his most menial subjects (if there is a social hierarchy at all). In Eurasia, status emulation in the realm of consumption is facilitated by the constant expansion of trade networks, in the course of which not only goods but technologies and ideas of all kinds are disseminated in all directions. The West had no inherent teleological priority over the East. This is confirmed in the recent resurgence of China as a global power, following the “Great Divergence” (Pomeranz 2000) which allowed the West to open up an unprecedented but ultimately ephemeral gap in the 19th century. Yet generations of Western historians and social theorists have written modern world history as a uniquely European miracle, and we still struggle to overcome these legacies (Goody 1996, 2006; cf. Delanty 2006).

Goody’s philosophy of history can be extended beyond the “Eurasia versus Africa” binary and made more general or planetary. The phenomena of “luxury” goods and status competition, and the emotions which accompany them such as envy and shaming, are surely present as a potential in all human groups. Some societies go to extraordinary lengths to avoid any intrusion of hierarchy (e.g. Clastres 1989, writing about Amazonia). Most of the documented “tribal” societies in the ethnographic record do have significant elements of hierarchy but they still lack an ethos of private property accumulation and transmission. Far from acquiring more possessions, honour and prestige usually dictate that one should give valuable objects away (Mauss 1990). Classical pre-capitalist manifestations of “the gift” have nothing in common with the modern sense of giving as disinterested or even altruistic behaviour. In Chris Gregory’s reformulation, a “gift economy” is one composed of

reciprocally dependent actors concerned to reproduce their communities through consumption activities. Their productivity is low because they are not concerned with efficiency in the sense of the modern economy, made up of independent utility-maximising individuals and profit-maximising companies (Gregory 2015).

Gregory develops his contrast between the gift economy and the commodity economy with regard to their coevalness in Papua New Guinea, where the former experienced an “efflorescence” in the colonial era. He steers well clear of world-historical speculation. But his model is well suited to capturing the transformation of human social relations which took root in the major Eurasian civilizations of the late Bronze Age. We should not be surprised that the great thinkers of these civilizations did not themselves understand the changes that were taking place, though they doubtless had some inkling. Aristotle’s emphasis on the well-managed, self-sufficient estate (*oikos*) is a response to the fact that, in the Greek society of his era, impersonal markets were already inaugurating the new ethos. It took another two millennia before European thinkers such as Bernard Mandeville and the later Adam Smith dared to contradict the premises of the gift economy, asserting that the self-interest of individual actors is *beneficial* to their collectivity. This is the ethos of unlimited wants and infinite growth which leads directly into the Anthropocene; but the underlying changes in social relations were already well established by this point.

Capitalism, then, does not originate in the era of the industrial revolution, or of the spread of plantation agriculture, or in the centuries immediately preceding these developments. As Goody argues (2004), following scholars of the German Historical School and others, its origins must be traced back to the emergence of new forms of stratification and “merchant cultures” dedicated to the accumulation and transmission of capital assets, both “horizontally” through space and “vertically” through inheritance, in the deep past of Eurasian connectivity. The social preconditions for the global Anthropocene were created by the emergence of these

commodity economies, but even within Eurasia this process was slow and uneven. As Gregory makes clear, the ideal types of gift and commodity are not mutually exclusive. Economic anthropologists have specialized in detecting elements of an older “gift economy” in the interstices of economies dominated by the market and ideologies of accumulation and growth. Such elements lingered in the village of Tázlár, described above, as in other “peasant” communities, until recent times. Some of them (e.g. pig-sticking hospitality and weddings) experienced a late efflorescence in the decades of market socialism. But today these have faded and we are left with a declining community that is dominated by commodity economy and rather anomic social relations, similar to those which have long prevailed in urban settings.

Goody’s account is immensely stimulating but, in addition to generalizing his insights with the help of Gregory’s political economy, two further modifications or extensions seem necessary. First, while Goody pays attention to both production and consumption and emphasizes the market mechanisms that link them, he rather neglects political institutions in the civilizations with which he is concerned. The self-interest of the proto-capitalists was countered by measures to maintain social cohesion, such as public expenditure financed by taxation. Eventually, social inclusion came to embrace ever larger territories and ever more dimensions of human needs. The history of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialism in the 20th century was a part of this process. It can be understood as a “double movement” in the sense of Karl Polanyi (1944), a response to the “disembedded” market society of industrial capitalism. This counter-current to the market did not originate in the era of the steam engine and poor relief measures in Britain, as is sometimes argued. Socialism, in its electoral as well as its Marxist-Leninist-Maoist guise, is the pinnacle of the Polanyian principle of redistribution, which developed in interaction with the logic of the pure market over millennia

(Hann 2015c, 2016a). The social relations of the Anthropocene, as we now experience it on a planetary scale, are the product of this dialectic.

Second, in addition to grasping the material factors which structure these Eurasian polities, in terms of state power as well as production and consumption, it is important to recognize how the principle of redistribution (or social solidarity) is supported by beliefs (cosmologies). Jack Goody did not probe the significance of Axial Age innovations, which responded to increasing inequalities of power and wealth by setting up “universalist” principles of moral transcendence. It is not too fanciful to interpret the Abrahamic faiths as precursors of the secular eschatology of socialism, with its even more emphatically progressive temporal orientation. The great mistake of the socialists and their fatal handicap in comparison with traditional religions (as Ernest Gellner used to enjoy pointing out – see e.g. Gellner 1994) was to promise that salvation could be achieved in *this* world.

Conclusion

Anthropologists are currently joining in the debates launched by natural scientists with a curious mixture of environmentalist commitment and playful imaginative reflection at multiple levels, ranging from conceptual critique to global political economy. In this paper I have argued that, even in places where the term itself remains unfamiliar, the familiar method of ethnographic research can shed light on uneven processes of acceleration and deceleration, overheating and cooling, taking place in the world today. Only ethnography affords access to subjective spatio-temporalizations, which form a central concern of the discipline of anthropology. On the Great Hungarian Plain, temporalities changed rapidly in the era of market socialism as villagers began to accumulate goods with an unprecedented frenzy, and they changed again after the collapse of socialism, when this region again became marginal to

capitalist Europe. Such perceptions are relevant to reflexive theorizing of the Anthropocene, a concept that has acquired significant political and symbolic force (even if most scientists ignore the social feedback and insist that their rigorous measurements and classifications proceed on another plane). The subjective orientations and socio-economic motivations and aspirations of Hungarian villagers unfamiliar with the word Anthropocene must also be embedded in a philosophy of history. I have refrained from taking a final position on the thorny issue as to when exactly the onset of the Anthropocene should be dated. Each of the three main options on offer (post-industrial revolution, post-Second World War, post-Cold War) has some plausibility. Instead I have argued, following Goody, that anthropologists should collaborate with archaeologists and global historians to grasp the *social preconditions* for the emergence of the Anthropocene. This is a pan-Eurasian story which begins in the late Bronze Age. Industrial capitalism, the Great Divergence between East and West in the 19th century, the modernization paradigms of the 20th (both socialist and capitalist), and the postmodern “overheated” globalization of the 21st, are all to be understood as recent consequences of these beginnings.

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Notes

ⁱ For further suggestive materials see the project “Living in the Anthropocene”, led by Anna Tsing at the University of Aarhus, 2013-2018: <http://anthropocene.au.dk>

ⁱⁱ The Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy has recently published a progress report that confirms “the case for a new epoch” (Waters et al 2016). The authors conclude that further research is necessary to formalize temporal boundaries but express a preference for “a beginning in the mid-20th century ... ranging from 1945 to 1964”.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a comparison of Polanyi and Gellner emphasizing the significance of their Central European background for their philosophies of history, see Hann 2015a.

^{iv} The official figure on 1st January 2015 was 1773; given the prevalence of non-recorded migration, the number of actual residents is probably significantly lower.

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Author biography

Born and brought up in South Wales, Chris Hann studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford and Social Anthropology at Cambridge. His first book was based on his dissertation research on the Great Hungarian Plain (*Tázlár: a Village in Hungary*, Cambridge, 1980). Later he carried out fieldwork in Poland (*A Village Without Solidarity; Polish peasants in years of crisis*, New Haven, 1985) and in Turkey (*Turkish Region; State, market and social identities on the East Black Sea coast*, Oxford, 2000, with Ildikó Bellér-Hann). His current ethnographic research is located in Xinjiang, China. Hann specializes in the (post-)socialist world, and in economic anthropology more generally (*Economic Anthropology; History, Ethnography, Critique*, Cambridge, 2011, with Keith Hart); *Oikos and Market. Explorations in Self-Sufficiency after Socialism*, New York, 2015, with Stephen Gudeman). After teaching positions in Britain at the Universities of Cambridge and Kent (Canterbury), Hann moved in 1999 to Halle to take up the position he continues to hold as a Director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

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