

Declining Europe: A Reply to Alessandro Testa

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I thank Alessandro Testa for his erudite engagement with various pieces published over the last decade in which I have broached the concept of Eurasia.* I am glad that he recognizes the continuity in my usage, and that he agrees with me concerning the importance of historical Eurasia since the Bronze Age, as discussed by Jack Goody. We disagree concerning Europe. Testa sometimes writes as if I were trying to eliminate Europe altogether and theorise solely at the level of Eurasia. This is not the case: for me Europe is one important macro-region of Eurasia, an entity which includes the multiple macro-regions of “Asia” and also North Africa. I argue that Europe should not be viewed as a separate *continent*, the equivalent of Asia. Such a position to my mind epitomises Eurocentrism, which has pernicious effects in many fields and should have no place in anthropology. The Eurocentrism of Alessandro Testa is a rather strong variant since he gives a clear precedence to the Catholic and Protestant West. Given its traditional area remit, it is generous of this journal to give so much space to an author who evidently considers Europeans with an eastern Christian background to be at best second class, latching on as latecomers to an identity that, in the narrative that Testa endorses, has its “cradle” in the Latin Christianity of the Middle Ages.

Testa is right to note (63) my reluctance to formulate any general “hypothesis” of Eurasian interconnectedness to be tested in empirical research. At the Halle Max Planck Institute we are socio-cultural anthropologists; almost all our projects, including my personal research, are fieldwork-based. Eurasia is not salient in the nitty-gritty analysis of data, not even in the current European Research Council (ERC) project, to which Testa returns several times. Rather, it forms the background of all our projects, the historical frame or “optic”. We think it is high time to substitute Goody’s long-term perspective on the Eurasian landmass in place of the Eurocentric views of global history that tend to dominate, even within anthropology. Testa does not contest the premise of common evolutionary trends and connectivity across Eurasia over thousands of years. Since no serious scholars question this, it seems unnecessary to develop a hypothesis – a bit like an astronomer hypothesizing that the earth is round.

I have much sympathy with Testa’s declared commitment to a realist epistemology. For me, this is what makes the “deep time” approach so valuable, but when Testa invokes narratives of European identity such as those of Jacques Le Goff, I think he lapses into a world of representations with which even Czechs and Poles have difficulty in connecting, let alone the great majority of eastern and southern Slavs, not to mention the Balts. Certainly Milan Kundera (also writing in Paris) offered influential cultural accounts of (Central) Europe. I find such constructions of historical regions fascinating, but exploring narratives within one macro-region is a very different pursuit from investigating structural patterns (immaterial as well as material) across the Eurasian landmass. The scope of Georges Dumézil (yet another Parisian) is evidently less parochial than the visions of Le Goff and Kundera, but leaving aside the reservations many scholars have concerning the validity of the Dumézil mythological model throughout the Indo-European linguistic world, this can hardly be a suitable starting point for a comparative perspective embracing *all* of the macro-regions affected by the Bronze Age revolutions.

Those structural affinities (well summarised by Testa himself) are entirely compatible with civilizational diversity. Even allowing for the fact that our department’s explorations of civilization are still a “work in progress,” this part of Testa’s essay seems unnecessarily confusing, not to say obtuse and contradictory. He claims that I use the term civilization “mainly declined in the singular” but gives no evidence. All his citations indicate a plural usage. He does not explain why a Maussian approach is inappropriate within the parameters

of Eurasia. The main reason for looking to Mauss is precisely to escape from “closed” models of the Spengler-Huntington type (see Hann 2011, 2012; the former text was a guest editorial in the newsletter of the Royal Anthropological Institute, where the influence of Sid Meier’s computer games is noted on the cover of the issue). Testa’s assertion of “flagrant and deep cultural differences” within Eurasia is to me redolent of Huntingtonian rhetoric. Nowhere in his essay does he tell us what these differences might be. I argue, in contrast to Testa, that the alleged differences between Europe and Asia do not stand out from the internal diversity to be found within each of these spurious “continents”.

In the present ERC project we are working primarily with Weber’s concept of the world religions (as well as his notion of “economic ethic,” Thompson’s concept of “moral economy” and various other ideas). But civilization must not always be equated with religion. In the future we shall develop alternative models, some of them perhaps more amenable to the *aires* of Mauss, whose writings on this subject are rooted in older ethnological traditions. It is certainly necessary to adjust models of civilization (and/or historical region) according to scale and ecological zone. By “central zones” and “unifying core” I think it is obvious that I meant the vast spaces between East and West which Goody himself tends to neglect in some of his books, including Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Fertile Crescent, where the Bronze Age innovations originated (see Hann 2015 for further critical comments on Goody). For the later integration of the landmass, the steppes of Kazakhstan and neighbouring regions really are very important (Arnason 2015); the nomadic civilizations obviously differed structurally from those of sedentary people, with whom they nonetheless maintained very close links.

Space does not allow me to comment on all the misreadings. Testa is not comfortable with the category “Western Christianity” but it is widely used in the sociology of religion and the fact that there is diversity within the West hardly invalidates this binary. By almost any possible criterion, there is much more diversity within the eastern Christian world. It is just that few Western scholars have even a basic grasp of this fact – a good example of the bias that continues to infect our research, in this case anthropological studies of Christianity (Hann and Goltz 2010). Testa also disapproves of my reference to “Abrahamic monotheisms,” Here I can only note that the Pope himself (surely an honorary European though admittedly by origin a migrant from the global South) on a recent trip to Africa proclaimed that Christians and Muslims were brothers and sisters; I cannot imagine that Pope Francis would deny the seniority of elder Jewish siblings.

Testa complains about my vocabulary as well as my arguments. Unfortunately, it is hard to write social science English without abusing words of Latin origin. No doubt my use of “imperative” (Hann 2014c) is degenerate and so primitive is English grammar that it has no declensions. In this guest editorial, published to coincide with the opening of the Tallinn conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in 2014, one part of my polemical purpose was to draw attention to increasing US dominance of the discipline in Europe. More importantly, this was a time of crisis in European political economy (focused on the Euro), when countless politicians in Western Europe (not to mention some of our hosts in Estonia) were redrawing the boundaries of Europe to exclude Russia. Against this background, I argued for a different perspective, one diverging from the world view of NATO and the principal institutions of global capitalism. As in other journalistic contributions over the years, I was simply trying to show why, in my opinion, it is *imperative* for anthropologists to consider other frameworks, in particular that of Eurasia.

“Maximally inclusive” is another phrase which draws the ire of Alessandro Testa. In the geographical sense it means simply “as large as possible.” (If Testa is aware of a usage of Eurasia that is more expansive than mine, I would be glad to have the reference. I am familiar with Marshall Hodgson’s lumping of Africa in a common space, but he terms this Afro-Eurasia.) I also use the term to refer to the inclusion of citizens in a polity and propose this as a commonality across Eurasia. Contrary to Testa, I do not think this sort of inclusion is an

attribute of all human communities; “demand sharing” among hunter-gathers is something very different. My interest here lies in differences within the industrialized world. Welfare states have been established in many settler societies in recent centuries from Argentina to New Zealand; but they are obviously derivative. There is, however, one powerful post-Columbian state that almost daily provides some evidence that these inclusive values are not universal. I refer of course to the USA, the wealthiest state on the planet, which is not ready to guarantee its own citizens the basic entitlements which refugees from one Eurasian country take for granted when they arrive in another. If this example of different values at the level of super-continent does not suffice, let me add gun controls (I write these lines in December 2015 on the day after the San Bernardino massacre).

There are many excellent reasons for teaching our students more about the rise of complex societies in Eurasia over the last four or five millennia, instead of privileging the last four or five centuries and a European notion of modernity. The macro-region of Western Eurasia (i.e. Europe) did indeed set the pace economically and politically from the sixteenth century. This spurt had nothing to do with Charlemagne, nor with later heroes of the Italian Renaissance or the French Enlightenment. Industrialization and finance capitalism were highly specific to the North-West of the macro-region, not a pan-European phenomenon (and the economic development of Europe remains extremely uneven to this day). The recent rise of China is a vivid reminder that “the great divergence” is ephemeral. European contributions in recent centuries are nested within the longer time frame of “alternating leadership” between East and West. This particular phrase is associated with Jack Goody (2010), but similar arguments have been made by numerous distinguished scholars in global history.

Testa puts his cards on the table in his final section: it is not in the writings of Dumézil, Le Goff or Kundera that we discover Europe, but “Europe actually exists in social life.” Here I can only report that, as someone who has lived in different parts of Europe throughout his life, I have a very different impression. In spite of all the top-down initiatives and the vast sums that have been invested in promoting a European cultural identity (including history books, public holidays, street names and the Museum of European Cultures), what strikes me wherever I go in the macro-region is how very limited this remains in popular consciousness. Liberal elites who claim to be the best Europeans nowadays wince at the rhetoric of leaders such as Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, the self-appointed defenders of European values. It is not difficult to understand why in many parts of Eastern Europe “European” has entered popular discourse as an indication of a quality product (e.g. compared with flimsy Chinese equivalents). But it is also increasingly deployed pejoratively, as a synonym for remote oppressive bureaucracy, no less wasteful and corrupt than local and national bureaucracies.

In the recent past I have enjoyed some collaboration with scholars in fields such as “empirical cultural studies”, who have built up a vast literature “in search of Europe” in everyday life (see Hann 2013). Though he ostensibly aligns himself with Eric Wolf, Marshall Sahlins and Christoph Brumann, it seems to me that Testa’s intellectual home may be with these “European ethnologists.” In any case, his is a very different anthropological undertaking from that practised at our Institute. If the ultimate yardstick for Testa is a vivid presence of “the idea of Europe” in popular culture, this seems hard to reconcile with the materialist realism he espouses earlier in his article. On this basis, Europeans can have no grounds to quibble if, with state education systems inculcating nationalist messages, a much larger Chinese population asserts that the Middle Kingdom has always been a more advanced civilization (or even *the* civilization, singular) vis-à-vis the barbarians of the West. If, however, we stick with Jack Goody, we can recognize both spatial concepts such as Middle Kingdom and temporal concepts such as Middle Ages for the parochial constructs they are.

Testa is right to emphasize the links between my scientific perspective and my politics (with which he claims to sympathise). The evidence suggests to me that attempts to sustain

strong welfare states and democracies are currently flagging throughout Europe. This cannot be disguised by stomach-turning rhetoric about European values, or by grossly exaggerated claims about uniquely European “miracles” in the past. In 2015 over a million people have struggled to reach security and to better their lives in what remains the most prosperous peninsula of the landmass, in circumstances which have exposed bitter internal divisions within the macro-region and within individual states. No easy solution is in sight but we could make a start by rejecting Eurocentrism, discarding Cold War blinkers, and instead building scientifically and politically on the deeper foundations of Eurasian history – *without* indulging in the fantasy of constructing a collective identity “we Eurasians”.

*** Note on sources**

The selection of texts reviewed by Testa is curious. Four are in-house publications of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in the year 2014 (the Focaal Blogpost, Hann 2014e, was first published at the departmental REALEURASIA blog). Hann 2014a and 2014d are two versions of the same text introducing the REALEURASIA project (the latter being a later internet version of the former, published when recruitment had been completed). Max Weber is important for us in this project, but this extremely Eurocentric sociologist is emphatically not to be put on a par with Jack Goody as a scholar of Eurasia. Testa is right to see the 2014 Working Paper as the fullest outline to date of the concept of Eurasia. It was prompted by the Advisory Board of our Institute, new members of which urged me in Spring 2014 to set out once again general parameters of our department that I had already elaborated to their predecessors more than a decade earlier. That earlier in-house text found its way into a book (Hann 2006). To my mind, that book would have been a more appropriate baseline for Testa’s review than the chapters he cites from 2005 and 2006. The definitive version of the 2014 Working Paper will be published in *Current Anthropology* in February 2016, accompanied by the usual critical forum.

To sum up: rather than offer an inventory of all the places where the dread word surfaces (in further scintillating blogposts and seminal book reviews), I think most readers of this journal wishing to inform themselves of my concept of Eurasia can content themselves with the 2006 monograph and the 2016 journal article; everything between these brackets can be safely overlooked or forgotten; including the present exchange.

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