



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Jack, Max, Three Karls and Sundry Supporters (the REALEURASIA Pantheon)

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Introduction

The contributions of Jack Goody to social anthropology, and to historical social science in general, are legion. They will not be summarised here. In this post, drafted as the opening remarks of our first REALEURASIA Workshop (July 19th – July 21st 2015), before news reached us of Goody's death on July 16th, I engage only with his significance for our project. Goody was an arch critic of Max Weber. We have found it possible to learn from them both. After juxtaposing them critically, I go on to pay more brief attention to some other significant figures in the “pantheon” of our project.

Jack and Max



Jack Goody during a talk he gave at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, chaired by Chris Hann, June 2004.

Jack Goody (1919 – 2015) was an anthropologist who devoted the first two decades of his long academic career primarily to the ethnography of a distinctive region of Northern Ghana. But even in his first major work *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (1962) he explored questions of property transmission in a comparative sociological context, which included European history. In a series of influential works he developed a macro-level contrast between Africa south of the Sahara and the more differentiated societies of Eurasia, characterised by plough agriculture over many millennia. In roughly the last two decades of his life Jack Goody

focused primarily on “alternating leadership” *within* Eurasia, as East and West took it in turns to pioneer new technologies, along with new forms of economy, polity and social organization at all levels. No other anthropologist (and few scholars in any discipline) has sustained such a powerful critique of Eurocentrism, i.e. of theories which distort world history by denying the long-term unity, at least since the Bronze Age, of the entire Eurasian landmass (for what I presume to be his last clear statement on the fundamental issues see Goody 2015).

This does not mean that we read Goody uncritically. Whereas he follows Gordon Childe in locating the crucial innovations in a Bronze Age urban revolution, more recent archaeological evidence suggests that the emergence of stratified complex societies has to be pushed back several millennia into the Palaeolithic. Goody emphasizes the changing balance between East and West and the flow of goods and techniques. He pays less attention to other macro-regions, or to the political institutions which shaped both the functioning of local economies and the links between them. He has little to say about religious beliefs and practices, playing down the role of ideas generally (Hann 2015).

What REALEURASIA takes from Jack Goody is above all his vigorous critique of Eurocentrism. Together with historical sociologists such as Johann P. Arnason, we view Europe not as a continent, the equivalent of Asia, but as a macro-region, the equivalent of South or Central Asia, or perhaps of China. It is instructive to argue about the boundaries of such units because the unity of Eurasia does not imply the sameness of its peoples. At what levels and according to which criteria is it worth exploring the differences? Goody is less interested in this question, to which many answers are possible. We have opted to start with the civilisational geography of Max Weber (1864 – 1920), which accords considerable weight to the “world religions” of recent millennia. Weber remains one of the most influential of Western social theorists. For Jack Goody, however, he exemplifies Eurocentrism, the “theft of history” by a temporarily dominant West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore, whereas religious ideas are central to the sociology of Max Weber, Goody sees them as superficial traits transmitted arbitrarily in multiple directions, certainly not the determinants of technological innovation and economic or political expansion.

There are strong grounds for supporting Goody’s view on this point. The large literature generated by Weber’s account of the relationship between a Protestant ethic and the “spirit of capitalism” has failed to confirm any causal relationship between post-Reformation Christian churches and economic behaviour. Weber’s more cautious diagnosis of “affinities” and his less developed observations on the “economic ethic” of the other world religions have also been massively criticised. And yet the Weberian edifice does not go away. Its resilience seems to be related to the tenacity of the religions themselves, defying the predictions of most versions of secularisation theory. Many people feel that religion is the source of their most basic values,

their “moral background” in the terms of Gabriel Abend (2014), no matter that armies of social scientists are unable to find this confirmed in behaviour. For anthropologists, concerned to understand meanings as well as to explain actions, these religious ideas may still be worth taking seriously. For example, we may look closely at the ways in which they are invoked, by particular groups of actors in particular social contexts, to shape the human economy on an everyday basis, and to legitimise the inequalities which emerge from it, which appear to be gaining strength everywhere under contemporary neoliberalism.

This is not the only reason for taking Weber seriously. His notion of the *Wirtschaftsethik* does not follow directly from theological dogma but requires the investigator to operationalise ideas with reference to institutions, secular as well as ecclesiastical. His broad approach to stratification invites us to consider the dimensions of status and honour as well as economic (market) position. While recognizing the importance of rational utility maximization in some spheres of behaviour and value, Weber analyse the relative importance of these spheres historically. He does not view the human being as a calculating *homo economicus* and prioritises the social and institutional context in his empirical studies. This is particularly important for our project, with its focus on economic behaviour in households and small businesses in which the value sphere of kinship plays an important role. Above all, Weber’s call for *Verstehen* can be best realised through long-term ethnographic immersion. All this helps to explain why he has remained an important figure for so many anthropologists in recent generations, including economic anthropologists. Despite the Eurocentrism, correctly identified by Jack Goody, and political orientations which many scholars today may find repellent, Max Weber still has much to offer. REALEURASIA researchers may be no more successful than their predecessors in pinpointing causal links between religious ideas and economic behaviour. If the emerging Eurasia of the 21st century, with its centre of gravity moving rapidly eastwards, reveals no clear evidence of civilisational variation in economic behaviour, that will be an interesting result. But it is also possible that our efforts to link the moral background to the human economy will illuminate significant differences in the ways in which power is exercised and hierarchies legitimated.

Three Karls

Three giants of economic anthropology, none of whom identified primarily with this discipline or sub-discipline, share the first name Karl. They also share a Eurocentric bias. In the case of Karl Marx (1818 – 1883), this was every bit as extreme as was the case with Max Weber. But, as with Weber, Marx offers insights and tools which remain endlessly productive. His analysis of exploitation and surplus value has been much criticised and his influence on international politics has undoubtedly waned since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. His evolutionist schema, adapted from Lewis Henry Morgan and codified after Marx’s death by Friedrich Engels, does

not stand up to scrutiny, though it underpinned the intellectual production of Soviet ethnology for many decades. Marx's emphasis on the class struggle looks to be misplaced in the light of the emergence of welfare states, affluent workers and forms of social differentiation that lend themselves better to Weberian analysis than to a conceptual schema which focuses on the ownership of the means of production. It is especially hard to see how the Marxian categories can be operationalised at the level of small urban businesses where, as with peasants, the unit of production coincides with the unit of consumption and exploitation is veiled by ties of kinship and marriage and gender ideologies.

Yet other strands in the legacy of Karl Marx and his many followers may prove extremely useful to REALEURASIA. One would be to look closely at the labour process in terms of various aspects of alienation, including subjective experiences that can only be broached through the long-term familiarity built up during field research. Another would be to trace the interaction (or "articulation") of different modes of production, notably the domestic and that of an increasingly powerful globalized capitalism. In this neoliberal era, many political economists have linked financialisation to falling rates of profit in the "real economy" in ways that make the original Marxian analysis seem prescient. Anthropologists can investigate contemporary processes of dispossession and reveal how the Marxian notion of class obtains renewed pertinence during our moment in history (Carrier and Kalb 2015).

Though little appreciated nowadays, at least in the Anglophone world, Leipzig's most distinguished professor of economic history Karl Bücher (1847 - 1930) does not owe his place in the REALEURASIA pantheon to local patriotism on our part. Bücher was a major figure in the German Historical School, a scholar who resisted the efforts of contemporaries in several other parts of Europe in the late nineteenth century to shift away from classical political economy. The new forms of theorising placed the discipline of economics on an apparently more scientific footing by abstracting from sociological questions of distribution and moral questions of equity and justice. Bücher insisted that taking account of the historical context was always essential, even to understand the *Nationalökonomie* of industrial capitalism. His own evolutionist schema is no more satisfactory than that of Marx and some of Bücher's ideas, such as his postulate of an "individual search for sustenance" as the most primitive form of labour, have been definitively refuted. Yet Karl Bücher had a considerable influence upon later generations of researchers, including Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss. His enquiries into social and ritual aspects of work, though entirely based on secondary materials, set a standard that was seldom matched by later fieldworkers (Spittler 2008).

I shall be equally brief concerning the third Karl. Though Karl Polanyi has strong claims to be viewed as the seminal figure in the emergence of economic anthropology as a (sub-)discipline, I have written about him in this blog before (<http://www.eth.mpg.de/3764645>

[/blog_2015_04_30_01](#)) as well as in other places (e.g. Hann 2014). Polanyi is crucial to REALEURASIA because of his historically contextualised critique of market society. He is not immune to the Eurocentrism virus, or to the dangers of exaggerating the changes wrought by the industrial revolution in 19th century Britain. One negative result of his teaching was the tendency of many followers to assume that investigation of contemporary industrialized economies, being “diesembedded” from their moral and social contexts, could be left to the mainstream economists. Economic anthropologists have long corrected this error. Like Karl Bücher, and indeed Weber, this Karl was engaged all his life in a dialogue with Karl Marx. He could not accept what he understood as the crude economic determinism of Marxism. Yet in many ways he drew inspiration from that tradition, e.g. in his conception of the “fictitious commodities” of land, labour and money. Like the other key members of the pantheon, his theoretical toolkit transcends the limitations of his own empirical works and biases that become readily intelligible when assessed in the context of his turbulent biography (Dale forthcoming).

Sundry Supporters

We start with Aristotle, a particular favourite of Karl Polanyi, because he is the origin of a long line of theorising the human economy in terms of the flourishing of community, as opposed to the impersonal laws of the market. The self-sufficient Greek *oikos* is the origin of our word for economy, but the meaning of economy today could hardly be more different (Hann and Hart 2011; see also my post at this blog: http://www.eth.mpg.de/3740215/blog_2015_03_23_01).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) may seem a more surprising choice because he is more commonly associated with political theory than with the economy; but the analysis he offered of the origins of private property in *A Discourse on Inequality* was the inspiration for much later theorising and deserves to be remembered today in an age when the gini coefficients to measure inequality are rising so sharply almost everywhere in the world. There is another, more subtle reason for remembering Rousseau. His notion that *pitié* for one’s fellow human being was more fundamental to human nature than ego-focused utility maximization found a prompt echo in the early Adam Smith’s concept of *sympathy*, and also in Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Einfühlung*. The influence of these moralists faded quickly, most notably in Adam Smith’s later endorsement of the compelling logic of the division of labour and the market. But it never disappeared completely. The legacy of Rousseau can be found in the sociology of Émile Durkheim and also in the work of his nephew Marcel Mauss (1872 – 1950). We salute Mauss not only for the moral message he puts forward so strongly at the end of his *Essai sur le don* (1925) but also for his commitment to the study of human society through the identification of “total social facts” such as potlatch or *kula* exchange, and finally for his elaboration of the notion of *civilisation*, as a correction to theorising which focused too

narrowly on particular “we groups”.

I have discussed the case of Bronislaw Malinowski, the original ethnographer of the Melanesian *kula*, in another earlier post (http://www.eth.mpg.de/3802431/blog_2015_06_15_01). It is not straightforward, because although some sections of his Trobriand monographs appear to implement the substantivist agenda articulated by Polanyi a generation later, Malinowski was never able to carry forward the contextualising emphasised by Karl Bücher, his teacher in Leipzig in 1908-9, into a coherent theory. He earns his place in the pantheon for the emphasis he laid on ethnographic work, even though his own data collection often fell short of the standards he set, especially in the study of “haggling” and other non-ritualized forms of exchange.

Finally a place must be found in the pantheon for a distinguished historian of early modern Britain, E. P. Thompson (1924 – 1993). Thompson collaborated with Jack Goody in the 1970s in research into transformations of property devolution in rural societies. He is better known nowadays among economic anthropologists for the concept of “moral economy”, another key term in the REALEURASIA vocabulary. It is being stretched, deconstructed and reconstructed, in many different ways at present, by scholars in many disciplines. Through our comparative projects we hope to restore some coherence to the debates. We may do at multiple levels. We shall explore moral economy within the household and networks of kin and affines. Expanding the focus to include diverse forms of local community, we shall also consider a spectrum of more or less voluntary associations. In none of our case studies will it be possible to ignore the impact of the nation-state, but we shall pay more attention to the resilient influence of civilisational influences in the domain of religion and ritual. Finally, at the highest level we hypothesize the existence of a pan-Eurasian moral economy, based on inclusive notions of welfare and citizenship, which contrast with the prevailing moral economy of what is for the time being still the world’s most powerful state, the United States of America.

Postscript

It has not escaped my attention that this pantheon consists entirely of deceased white European males! The researchers of REALEURASIA are encouraged to use this blog in the months and years ahead not only to introduce their field sites but to introduce key thinkers from their respective regions or civilisations to correct the appalling limitations of my own education.

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