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What does it mean to go beyond Eurocentrism?

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To borrow a classic phrase from the Maoist tradition, our REALEurasia project 'walks on two legs'. As part of our efforts to contribute to the unfinished project of comparative historical economic anthropology in Eurasia (Hann 2015), the doctoral students undertake detailed anthropological fieldwork across a number of civilisationally representative sites. However, we also consider the bigger picture and the longer term. As part of my postdoctoral work, and building on my interests in different conceptualisations of global history, I had the opportunity to organize a workshop on a larger historiographical question.

Our project is based on exploring the possibilities of a Eurasian perspective in the *longue durée*. For global history, these authors have represented influential and pioneering critiques of Eurocentrism, and have contributed to the rise of what one might call an 'anti-Eurocentric school' of historiography. Although the most influential exponents of this 'school', such as Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin, Janet Abu-Lughod, and John Hobson by no means share a common historical narrative, their commonality is their strident critique of what they see as a Eurocentric bias in the writing of global history. The briefest possible summary of their common view could be this: that what Kenneth Pomeranz has called 'the Great Divergence' (Pomeranz 2000) between Europe and the rest of the world has been, according to these authors, inappropriately retrojected into history. The subsequent self-promoting image of Europe, and the denial of history, agency, or technological and economic development to non-Europe, or sometimes the non-West threatened to distort our view of the origins of that 'divergence', and some even question – as did Jack Goody – whether it made sense to speak of such a divergence at all. The works of these scholars subsequently rebalanced our view of history and shifted our perspective from internal sources of European greatness to a consistent interaction between the various macro-regions of the world, and thereby did away with what James Blaut called 'the colonizer's model of the world' (Blaut 1993).

Or so the story goes. But if this school had a rise, it has also had a decline: although their work has contributed to a new interest among even orthodox economic historians in the development of the non-European world, as exemplified by the many comparative studies of European and Chinese economic historical development, it failed to become a new mainstream. The various anti-Eurocentric polemicists ended up proposing considerably different alternatives to what they saw as the dominant Eurocentric paradigm, but they failed to develop any particular one to the degree that it could carry a consensus. For this reason, our workshop aimed to address the question: given that one can readily agree that it is an intellectual and even political necessity to go beyond 'Eurocentrism' (inherently a negative term, in any case), how would one go about doing so? And what does Eurocentrism actually mean? Is there a meaningful opposition between a bad Eurocentrism and a good Eurasianism?

On my invitation, a number of prominent global historians and historical sociologists gathered at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle to a workshop called 'beyond the Eurocentrism debate'. Beyond the debate, that is, not just the concept. As the intentionally provocative opening remarks by Peer Vries made clear, it is all too easy to ritualistically denounce Eurocentrism, something which only the most dyed-in-the-wool Whiggish economic historians would explicitly defend. (Although as the examples of Niall Ferguson, David Landes, and Thomas Friedman make clear, such people are not without their influence in the wider world, however modest their status within global history.)

Peer Vries opens the workshop.

A better question might be to ask what we mean by the 'Europe' that is centered in this perspective. Although a variety of different schools of thought in contemporary historiography of the field were represented at the workshop, an important conclusion of the discussion was the need to clarify the concept of Europe itself. As several speakers noted, when one says 'Europe' in these polemics, one often actually means 'northwestern Europe', and sometimes even the more nebulous concept of 'the West', which corresponds to no particular geographical coordinates at all. If from the point of view of our project's Eurasian focus Europe emerges as simply a macro-region, or perhaps a subcontinent (as south Asia is habitually called), it behooves us all the more to remember the great diversity of economic and social institutions and historical experiences *within* this region: between North and South, East and

West, Mediterranean and Atlantic, and so forth. Moreover, many of the great critics of Europeanism have themselves been 'Europeans', as our 'pantheon' of Jack, Max, and the three Karls all the more illustrates.

To go beyond Eurocentrism remains essential, for in the context of a resurgent right wing appealing to 'Judeo-Christian Europe', a continuing 'Western' imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa, and the revival of the vocabulary of the Cold War in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine it is evident that the geo-historical framing of our thoughts matters as much as ever, however globalized the world may have become. But to give this effect means to think beyond Eurocentrism, not merely anti-Eurocentric: it means to realize that for some historical purposes, certain parts of Europe may have had more in common with other parts of the world than with other parts of the same macro-region, and to recognize Europe as a construction of convenience, hiding as much internal diversity as any other part of Eurasia. For this reason, it is encouraging that much of our discussions were based on further developing new thinking in terms of space and time in the Eurasian and indeed world historical context. If we can reconceptualise how we think about trends, networks, and larger causal patterns across the Eurasian landmass and across the great oceans, the political geographies whose names are derived from European antiquity may no longer be so relevant. While at the macro-level networks may replace retrojection of modern nation-states, at the micro-level we may better understand the differences within Europe as part of larger patterns. Going beyond Eurocentrism, it is clear, cannot be just a rhetorical affair of 'provincializing Europe': it requires interdisciplinarity creativity and attention to the details of historiographical method and conceptualisations. One promising step in this direction might be the increasing popularity of 'deep history' or 'big history'; another the joining of social, historical, and anthropological dimensions in the study of particular commodities through global space and time, in the tradition of influential monographs on sugar (Mintz 1985) or cod (Kurlansky 1997).

Lively discussion during the workshop 'Beyond the Eurocentrism Debate'.

We can therefore plausibly say that recent attempts at reconceptualising Eurasia within global history have sought in different ways to navigate between the polemics of the anti-Eurocentric school and the technological-demographic determinism of traditional economic models of historical change. For the purposes of economic anthropology, it is fascinating to see two

parallel developments in this: on the one hand the revival of ideas about the relationship of markets, elite political rule, and economic transformation that draws explicitly from Marx and Polanyi, and on the other hand the increasing significance of institutionalist economics. are concerned with explaining the importance of wider sociocultural and moral structures and serve to stress the importance of qualitative shifts in these spheres for understanding the functions and operations of markets in different times and places.

These perspectives try, each in its own way, to reintroduce into their models the importance of the embeddedness of causally significant economic phenomena such as long-distance trade in Eurasia or the emergence of finance capital in the Dutch Republic and the UK. In so doing, they are forced more and more to delve into the social and 'cultural' context of economic activity. This opens up an excellent opportunity for productive exchange of theories and insights between (global) economic historians or historical sociologists and the tradition of economic anthropology. Such exchanges have not in recent years been very fertile. The possibility of renewing these traditions, where anthropological perspectives on the meaning of the economic exceed the small scale of particular field sites and address larger historiographical problems of differentiation and continuity in economic life, is too important to be missed.

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