



**MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE**  
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

# In Memoriam: Jack Goody (1919–2015), Eurasia and Europe

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*"Jack often reminded me that, until the 16th century, China was by far the most advanced in many domains before entering a decline that lasted until the 20th century, but that, from the standpoint of the overall history of Humankind, this in no way authorizes the conclusion that there might exist a definitive split between the East and the West. The history of the past twenty years has proved him right. Increasingly we are seeing societies, like China and India, declare their intention to continue to modernize but without becoming Westernized. In an effort to combat this Western self-deception, Jack was intent on showing what we share with the East since the Bronze Age, when we were all part of what he called Eurasia."*

*Maurice Godelier*

*Prix de l'Académie Française; CNRC Gold Medal; Alexander von Humboldt Prize for Social Sciences*

Almost a year after his passing, family, friends and colleagues came from many parts of the world to celebrate the life and work of Jack Goody at a "memorial event" at St John's College, Cambridge, on Saturday 2 July 2016. Several distinguished colleagues unable to attend in person sent messages that were reproduced in the [programme](#). The above lines of Maurice Godelier are extracted from his personal tribute to a departed friend.

It was primarily a day for emotional remembrance rather than dispassionate scientific assessment. Martine Segalen, who had delivered [the 2016 Goody Lecture](#) in Halle just a few weeks before, outlined the reception of Goody by anthropologists and historians in France. She also noted his hospitality at "chateau Goody" in the Lot: Jack Goody loved France "et la France l'aimait aussi".

Gilbert Lewis and Alan Macfarlane were Lecturers in the Department of Social Anthropology throughout the period in which Jack Goody was William Wyse Professor. Lewis classified this

period as the middle phase of Goody's professional career. Having come to anthropology by force of circumstance (formative encounters during the Second World War and the availability of research grants), the first phase was dominated by kinship studies and by Africa. In the third phase, after his retirement, Goody travelled extensively and his research came to focus increasingly on Eurasia. Alan Macfarlane helped the audience to visualise the astonishing productivity of the last three decades by constructing two piles of books on the stage. The pre-retirement pile was impressive by any normal standards, but Macfarlane needed a rucksack to carry the physical products of what I think of as the "Eurasia years".

The afternoon was not lacking in intellectual provocation. Maurice Bloch discussed Jack Goody's lifelong struggle to keep social anthropology aligned with the social sciences, in an era in which the majority of his colleagues were moving away from general questions about humanity and concerning themselves instead with symbols and meaning in cultures that they tended to study as isolates. Bloch highlighted Goody's inspirational work on literacy while pointing out that, from his own point of view, it did not take sufficient account of the differences between alphabetic and logographic systems of writing.

After paying personal homage to his most important mentor, Alan Macfarlane also injected a note of criticism. He explained why he disagreed fundamentally with his "proto-father" concerning the social characteristics of Eurasia in the wake of the Bronze Age: whereas Goody emphasized similarities across the landmass, Macfarlane was more impressed by the differences. For economist Partha Dasgupta, too, it was frustrating that his "guru" at St John's steadfastly declined to acknowledge the uniqueness of the West.

Of course, it is precisely this vision of Eurasian connectivity and underlying unity that makes the work of Jack Goody foundational for our "Realising Eurasia" project. This vision stemmed from the teaching of archaeologist Glyn Daniel at St. John's, and from his earlier reading of Gordon Childe in a Bavarian prisoner-of-war camp. He seems to have overlooked the western, orientaling bias that archaeologists today detect in the work of the great prehistorian. In any case, from Goody's later perspective as an ethnographer in Africa, the similarities between west and east across the Eurasian landmass seemed far more striking than the differences. The roots of this theory, which was materialist in that it emphasized technological innovation and property transmission, flourished from the early 1970s onwards (e.g. in his work with Stanley Tambiah contrasting bridewealth and dowry). The plant then flowered gloriously after his retirement, when he moved ever more adventurously outside what Lewis referred to as the traditional "garden" of social anthropology. This late work, including volumes such as *The East in the West* (1996) and *The Theft of History* (2006), is the culmination of his distinctive philosophy of history.

Jack Goody's widow Juliet Mitchell took up these themes indirectly in her closing remarks.

Barely a week after the British vote to leave the European Union, visitors to Cambridge University could safely assume that their local interlocutors were still reeling, that they disapproved of Little Englander sentiments, and that they were anxious about what was going to happen next. Mitchell emphasized that the same wartime experiences which had made Jack Goody turn to anthropology had also made him a convinced European. The Lodagaa of Northern Ghana, among whom he lived for over two years, were always a touchstone for Jack Goody. But his anthropology was “bottom-up” in a more fundamental sense. All critique of Eurocentrism in our scholarly traditions notwithstanding, Goody was a European in the sense that he was committed to building bridges beyond his own nation-state, including links to former enemies such as Germany.<sup>i</sup> Ultimately, according to Mitchell, Jack Goody was convinced that, deep down, human beings are all the same. Only Fascists emphasize the uniqueness of particular localized groups.

## Note

<sup>i</sup> Goody was an adviser to the Max Planck Society in the years preceding the establishment of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle in 1999. In December 2001 he delivered the very first keynote lecture in our permanent buildings when opening a conference on “Family Organisation, Inheritance and Property Rights in Transition: comparative historical and anthropological perspectives in Eurasia” (Goody 2003).

## Reference

Goody, Jack 2003 “Sorcery and Socialism” in Hannes Grandits and Patrick Heady (eds.), *Distinct Inheritances. Property, Family and Community in a Changing Europe*. pp. 391-408. Münster: LIT.