

# Preface: Recognizing Eurasia<sup>1</sup>

Chris Hann

## ABSTRACTS

Die Beiträge in diesem Heft werden in einem konzeptionellen Rahmen zusammengeführt, der dem anhaltenden Gewicht des Eurozentrismus entgegenwirkt, indem er auf langfristige Konnektivitäten und Gemeinsamkeiten in *Eurasien* aufmerksam macht. Dazu werden Ansätze auf Makro- und Mikroebene vorgestellt und maritime wie terrestrische Kommunikationsnetze und verschiedene Formen der politischen Gesellschaft untersucht – von den Agrarimperien der Antike bis zur heutigen Volksrepublik China. Die Autoren, die mehrere Nationalitäten und theoretische Traditionen vertreten, arbeiten in den Bereichen der Sozialanthropologie, der Area Studies, der Geschichtswissenschaft und der (historischen und politischen) Soziologie.

Presenting both macro- and micro-level approaches, exploring maritime as well as terrestrial networks of communication, and investigating diverse forms of political society from the agrarian empires of the ancient world to the People's Republic of China in our era, the essays in this special issue are brought together in a frame that counters the continuing weight of Eurocentrism by drawing attention to long-term connectivities and commonalities across *Eurasia*. The authors (representing multiple nationalities and theoretical traditions) work in Social Anthropology, Area Studies, History and (Historical and Political) Sociology.

1 This Special Issue derives from a panel at the Fifth European Congress on World and Global History (Budapest, 31 August – 3 September 2017). Our title was "Empires, exchange and civilizational connectivity in Eurasia". Dagmar Schäfer was among the presenters but was unable to write up her paper for this issue. We are delighted that Jack Goldstone was able to come on board to round off the set. My thanks to all authors for patiently revising their papers for this publication.

The world of the early twenty-first century is still very much in thrall to the idea of sovereign nation-states. However illusory this state model, given the entanglements of political economy, the consolidation of supra-national organizations, and massive power differentials, it remains entrenched. The nation-state is the hallmark of industrial modernity, in the same way that empire is taken to be the archetypal form of what Ernest Gellner theorized as the Agrarian Age. Gellner's philosophy of history has a materialist foundation, but the new order has a distinct emotional dimension in unprecedented forms of collective belonging. Whereas *Agraria* was characterized by complex multiculturalism, *Industria* creates homogenized linguistic and cultural units that have to be (for the efficient functioning of an industrial society) "congruent" with the political units.<sup>2</sup>

As the continuing interest in Geller's oeuvre indicates, these ideal types have been productive. But they have been found wanting in numerous respects. One complaint is that the genesis and dissemination of nationalism does not correlate well with the rise of industrialism. Another is that Gellner exaggerates the homogeneity of the nation-state and fails to deal with the new forms of migration and cultural diversity that seem endemic to mature *Industria*. New forms of imperialism have emerged in the wake of the formal dissolution of both "continental" and "overseas" empires in the course of the twentieth century, but Gellner does not investigate these, or their relation to global political economy. As a characterization of several thousand years of human history, the model of *Agraria* is similarly deficient. Can Gellner's favourite examples, the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire, really stand for empire everywhere, e.g. in East Asia? What about the many communities that did not practise any form of agriculture and were hardly integrated into the empires at all?<sup>3</sup>

Historians and anthropologists looking to grasp the contours of human history in more precise and comprehensive ways than Ernest Gellner evidently need more conceptual tools to do so. One helpful tool-box is that offered by historical sociologist Johann P. Arnason.<sup>4</sup> Building especially on Marcel Mauss's seminal theorizing of *civilisation* as a "family of societies", Arnason argues that civilizations are fluid macro social formations that are found throughout human history. Civilization is, of course, a problematic term due to the baggage it has accumulated, from the Enlightenment binaries that opposed "us" to savages, to contemporary notions of a liberal Christian Europe versus its multitudinous enemies. Most historians and social scientists have ignored it. This is particularly

2 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1983. See also Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book. The Structure of Human History*, London 1988.

3 The scholarly literature on empires is vast and rapidly expanding. Major recent contributions include Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire. How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World*, Princeton 2017; Hans-Heinrich Nolte, *Kurze Geschichte der Imperien*, Wien 2017. Nolte specifies rigorous criteria for recognizing an empire and covers altogether fourteen imperial or quasi-imperial polities. The USA is classified as a "globale Nation" rather than an "Imperium". Nolte has little to say concerning the European Union, though this polity is nowadays vigorously critiqued as a "liberal empire" by some of its own citizens (notably the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán).

4 Johann P. Arnason, *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions*, Leiden 2003. Johann P. Arnason and Chris Hann (eds.), *Anthropology and Civilizational Analysis: Eurasian Explorations*, Albany 2018.

true of German scholarship, due to the continuing legacy of the binary that opposes *Zivilisation* to *Kultur*.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the concept of civilization is potentially helpful in accounting for the rise and decline of Eurasian agrarian empires, discussed in this Special Issue by Krishan Kumar. The pastoral nomads of the steppe represent another type of civilization, but, as Marie Favereau stresses in the following contribution, the case of the Mongols can only be grasped in terms of their intimate connections with sedentary neighbours. This particular civilizational encounter was evidently conducive both to enhanced trade across the Eurasian landmass and substantial intra-civilizational economic transformations. It is a similar story in the Indian Ocean World explored by Burkhard Schnepel. For many centuries, and again in our era, civilizational boundaries in this vast region reflected the expansion of Chinese influence. The interaction of Europeans and Asians which followed the maritime expansion of the West can also be fruitfully approached through Arnason's language of civilizational encounters. The micro-level study by Ildikó Bellér-Hann shows that the oasis of Qumul is a Silk Road hub where different civilizations have overlapped during millennia (in recent centuries primarily those of China and Islam). Finally, though he uses the term culture rather than civilization, in his contribution Jack Goldstone shows how consciousness of imperial traditions influences the power holders who are managing the rejuvenation of China that is unfolding in the twenty-first century.

I discuss civilizational analysis in more depth in the paper that follows. Adding the dimension of civilization helps to correct the inadequacy of a model that theorizes modernity in terms of the transition from empires to nation-states. But it is also necessary to address the geographical imagination that assigns both to "continents". When problems arise in doing so, not only with Alexander the Great but also in more recent centuries in the case of Russia, instead of questioning the notion of continent (a relatively recent artefact of Western Eurasian historical writing), we tend to say that the Russian Empire and its successors (including the present Federation) straddle two continents. But the history of the Eurasian landmass in recent millennia does not support the binary that opposes Europe to Asia.

In the opening paper I elaborate a multidisciplinary approach that synthesizes the perspectives of Jack Goody (especially concerning "alternating leadership" between East and West) and Karl Polanyi (who offers the tools to analyse a very long-run dialectic of market exchange and redistribution). I begin with the concept of Eurasia, which has not been adequately theorized hitherto and is frequently used ideologically. I argue that attention to the common characteristics and connectivity of Eurasian civilizations is an indispensable corrective to the Western Eurasian (European) bias that has infected so much historiography, including that of the social sciences since their inception. Mainstream accounts (at least in the Euro-American narratives) of world history have long been constructed on the premise of a breakthrough in Europe. Ernest Gellner was one of

5 Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2 vols, Basel 1939 (second edition 1969).

many scholars who subscribed to the notion of a “European miracle.”<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of the twentieth century, when the club of wealthy, successfully modernizing East Asian states was joined by the People’s Republic of China, the Eurocentrism of the dominant narratives began to be questioned.<sup>7</sup> Alternative models with quite different spatial and temporal characteristics were put forward. The pendulum continues to swing: in recent years, it is possible to detect a “pushing back” against those accused of belittling the unique contributions of Europe.<sup>8</sup>

The dust has not yet settled on these debates and perhaps it never will. A satisfactory account of human history will need to combine investigations of socio-economic conditions (including demographic variables and labour productivity) with analysis of ideas and ideologies, including religions. Universal history aspires to transcend the particular contexts of its genesis and does not flatten out important sources of difference. But later analysts will always seek to disentangle the local roots of even the most ambitious attempts to grasp the general and the universal. For the purposes of theorizing Eurasia, the most pertinent body of literature is that which has become known as Axial Age theory. I assess the debates surrounding this concept and its prominent place in civilizational analysis in my paper below.

My argument concludes by considering an alternative binary to that which celebrates the achievements of Western Europe and its offshoot in North America vis-à-vis the East and the rest of the world. Instead of “the West versus the rest”, I suggest that the old dichotomy “old world versus new world” might offer a better understanding of the dilemmas of our moment in history. When President Donald Trump shuts down his government and (in his 2019 State of the Union address) rails against “socialism” as being incompatible with the values of the American people, he is rhetorically positioning himself (cleverly and effectively, in the eyes of seasoned commentators) for the next presidential election in 2020. At the same time, he is drawing attention to oceanic chasms, because the blatant denigration of government and ideals of collective responsibility and solidarity is hardly conceivable in the rooted civilizational traditions of either Western or Eastern Eurasia. Of course, other states of the New World are much closer to endorsing the models that have evolved in the Old World; it is not inconceivable that they will eventually prevail in the USA. But nor is it inconceivable that an individualist, pro-market nexus, punctuated by phases of populist protectionism, will undermine the solidarities which evolved to contain libertarian impulses in the Old World. In this precarious contest, it is all

6 Eric L. Jones, *The European Miracle. Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, Cambridge 1981; John A. Hall and Jean Baechler (eds.), *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism*, Oxford 1988.

7 Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills (eds.), *The World System. Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?*, London/ New York 1993; Jack Goody, *The East in the West*, Cambridge 1996; André Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley 1998; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton 2000; Jack Goldstone, *Why Europe?*, New York 2008.

8 Peer Vries, *Via Peking back to Manchester: Britain, the Industrial Revolution, and China*, Leiden 2003; Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal about the Future*, New York 2010; Jürgen Kocka and Marcel Van der Linden (eds.), *Capitalism. The Reemergence of a Historical Concept*, London 2016.

the more important to recognize commonalities across the civilizational pluralism of Eurasia. At present the contrast to the USA is starkly evident on issues such as climate accords, universal health care and pensions, not to mention access to weapons for the citizenry. But the most important challenge is responsible regulation of the economy and world trade in the interests of social justice and planetary stewardship.

The issue continues with a wide-ranging overview of empires by historical sociologist Krishan Kumar, who emphasizes the aspirations to “universalism” that distinguish (world) empires from other types of political community. The enduring exemplar is that of Alexander the Great. We owe most of what we know about Alexander to the Romans, but of course his empire was not limited to the eastern Mediterranean. Alexander conquered and tried to integrate the Achaemenid Persian Empire, he was a reference point for Mauryan India, later for the entire Muslim world, and even for those Europeans who reached the Orient by maritime routes. Noting not only the spatial connectivities that resulted from commercial and military encounters but also the complex temporal continuities through which imperial social orders are reproduced, Kumar concludes that we can speak of “a continuous experience of empire across the entire Eurasian landmass” since the Axial Age.

The empires explored by Kumar are familiar to us in the sense that they represent forms of “high culture” based on literate, sedentarized populations with large cities and complex divisions of craft labour. Not all Eurasian empires conformed to such a model. Historian Marie Favereau explores the steppe empire created by Chinggis Khan and maintained over a century by his descendants. She shows that it is erroneous to approach the century-long Mongol Peace with the paradigm (contentious with reference to its primary object) of Pax Romana. Rather, Favereau invites us to begin with the distinctive concepts and cosmology of the Mongols themselves, in order to grasp how the expansion of trade in “luxury” items fed into redistribution and the reproduction of status hierarchy in Mongol society. Both foreign and Mongol merchants were supported by the khans and their administrations at multiple levels. Merchants were granted access to the *yam* network of communications and incentivized to settle permanently in new ports of trade. When maritime links to China via the Persian Gulf became problematic due to the decline of the port of Tabriz, in the 1330s the Venetians responded by accepting the initiatives of the Jochid khan and further developing the northern, terrestrial route. While long distance trade between China and Europe was the ultimate goal of many merchants, Favereau shows that the institutional supports created by the Mongol rulers were simultaneously conducive to commerce on more modest local and regional scales throughout this Eurasian space.

If the steppe lands to the north played a key role in the intensification of connectivity across Eurasia, so too did “seaborne empires” to the south. Social anthropologist Burkhard Schnepel, engaging with the interdisciplinary field of Indian Ocean Studies, reminds us of the importance of Chinese explorers, diplomats and traders (above all Admiral Zheng He in the early fifteenth century). The Western Europeans who arrived on the scene later misrecognized the “polycentric” political systems they encountered

in South Asia. The port cities of the Srivajaya empire (Malacca Straits) were a notable example, more akin to the Hanseatic League than to a centralized European monarchy. Schnepel analyses these cities as hubs in dense networks of “connectivity in motion,” both in relation to each other and to their respective hinterlands. He goes on to illustrate “the art of hubbing” on the island of Mauritius, where he has conducted long-term field research. After deconstructing the “ethnic” categories conventionally used to denote collective identities, Schnepel concludes at the level of “individual and family hubbing” with a close-up analysis of continuity and change among Franco-Mauritians since the late eighteenth century.

Ildikó Bellér-Hann brings us back to the heart of terrestrial Eurasia with her case study from the Silk Road oasis of Qumul (Chinese: Hami) in what today is the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China. This Silk Road hub lies at the boundary between sedentary agriculturalists and the steppe to the north. Of greater significance for Bellér-Hann is its location on an east-west boundary. Qumul is positioned at the extreme eastern edge of the Turkic-Muslim world. A Muslim dynasty maintained a degree of autonomy from the expansive Chinese empire until 1930, but contemporary elites are obliged to construct regional and ethnic identities within the dual constraints of socialist ideology and Beijing’s concerns over Uyghur secessionism. The indigenous narratives extracted by Bellér-Hann from a recently published biographical dictionary of “outstanding personalities” of the oasis make little use of Silk Road imagery and do not invoke grand geostrategic projects. Bellér-Hann shows, however, that the subjects treated are deeply embedded in transregional and transnational networks. Methodologically the analysis of these life-histories constitutes an original example of relational history, in which grand narratives, whether of the kind proffered by Jack Goody or by nationalist politicians in the reform era of the PRC, are connected to the level of metis and the perspectives of local actors. These biographical texts offer rich seams of data concerning tradition, stability and social change in a province that is currently subject to extraordinary repressive measures, apparently designed to ensure the definitive assimilation of the Uyghurs into the Chinese nation-state.

Jack Goldstone concludes the issue with an assessment of how the present rulers of this polity are endeavouring to restore its traditional standing as the “middle kingdom”, central to trade and politics not just in Eurasia but in the world. The Belt and Road Initiative of President Xi Jinping is a massive investment programme with military and geostrategic as well as economic and technological implications for the planet. It proclaims distinctive messages, which can be interpreted as forms of “soft power” (exemplified by Confucius Institutes) that contradict the assumptions of Euro-American liberal social science. According to Goldstone, imperial China was never the monolithic political unity that the West frequently imagined it to be. But while the old dynastic empire proved incapable of meeting modern challenges in the nineteenth century, now, in the twenty-first century, the communist-led nation-state is well on the way to confirming the validity of Jack Goody’s long-term model of alternating leadership. These processes are currently transforming the life worlds of ethnic minority citizens in cities such as

Qumul/Hami, discussed in the paper by Bellér-Hann. What this new phase of Chinese hegemony or world empire (without the hyphen) might mean for the planet in the era of the Anthropocene (also known as the Capitalocene but perhaps, as I shall argue, best viewed as the *Eurasiacene*) remains to be seen.

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