

Eurasian Dynamics: From Agrarian Axiality to the Connectivities of the Capitalocene

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ABSTRACTS

Der einleitende Beitrag umreißt einen Rahmen, der die Dynamik der eurasischen Landmasse (flexibel definiert) in den Mittelpunkt der Weltgeschichte der letzten drei Jahrtausende stellt. Konzepte von Kulturraum, Zivilisation und Weltsystem werden kritisch überprüft. Besonderes Augenmerk gilt den Theorien der Achsenzeit, die sowohl religiöse als auch säkulare Varianten der Transzendenz umfassen, sowie deren Rolle bei der Legitimation politischer Institutionen. Diese Ansätze werden durch den Rückgriff auf den anthropo-archäologischen Materialismus von Jack Goody ergänzt, der die „alternierende Führung“ zwischen Ost und West betont. Der Fokus von Goody auf die wachsende städtische Differenzierung in den agrarischen Reichen der Bronzezeit kann erweitert werden, indem das Spektrum der Zivilisationen über die der intensiven Landwirtschaft hinaus ausgedehnt wird. Dieser Ansatz lässt sich mit theoretischen Erkenntnissen von Karl Polanyi gewinnbringend kombinieren, um eine neue historische ökonomische Anthropologie anzuregen, die es uns ermöglicht, verschiedene Varianten des Sozialismus auf die Formen der sozialen Inklusion und der „imperialen sozialen Verantwortung“ zurückzuführen, die in der Achsenzeit entstanden sind. Der Aufsatz argumentiert weiterhin, dass die eurasischen Zivilisationen, die die „große Dialektik“ zwischen Umverteilung und Marktaustausch hervorgebracht haben, angesichts der Widersprüche der heutigen neoliberalen politischen Ökonomie die beste Hoffnung sind, um die Spannungen des Kapitalozäns (angemessener wäre „Eurasiazän“) aufzulösen.

This introductory paper outlines a frame that places the dynamics of the Eurasian landmass (flexibly defined) at the centre of world history in the last three millennia. Concepts of culture area, civilization and world system are critically reviewed. Particular attention is paid to Axial Age theories, including both religious and secular variants of transcendence, and their role in

the legitimation of political institutions. These approaches are supplemented with recourse to the anthropo-archaeological materialism of Jack Goody, who emphasizes “alternating leadership” between East and West. Goody’s focus on increasing urban differentiation in the agrarian empires of the Bronze Age can be expanded by widening the range of civilizations considered beyond those based on intensive agriculture. This approach can be fruitfully combined with theoretical insights of Karl Polanyi to inspire a new historical economic anthropology that allows us to trace multiple varieties of socialism back to the forms of social inclusion and “imperial social responsibility” that emerged in the Axial Age. It is further argued that, in the light of the contradictions of contemporary neoliberal political economy, the Eurasian civilizations that launched the “great dialectic” between redistribution and market exchange are the best hope we have for resolving the tensions of the Capitalocene (which might be more appropriately termed Eurasiacene).

The papers gathered in this Special Issue illuminate multiple facets of the history of Eurasia and the world in the last three millennia.¹ While any starting point is in a sense arbitrary, for the purposes of theorizing Eurasia the most pertinent body of literature is that which has become known as Axial Age theory, which continues to generate debate.² Its most influential exponent was the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in the years immediately following the Second World War.³ Jaspers’ identification of an “axial” transformation in five distinct locations between the eastern Mediterranean and China across the Eurasian landmass in the five centuries between 800 BCE and 300 BCE was by no mean altogether without precedent in European historical narratives. If one strand in Enlightenment thought was to emphasize universal reason, with its apotheosis in Paris, another strand, with its primary intellectual centres in the German-speaking world, emphasized the plurality of human cultures and the unique value of each one of them. Further distinctions were drawn as various scholars pluralized the notion of civilization, while restricting its use to a limited set of “high cultures”. Anquetil-Duperron seems to have been the first to notice the coincidence of striking innovations in human cosmologies in the middle of the first millennium BCE.⁴ Numerous scholars pursued this line of enquiry in the course of the nineteenth century. The formulation of a “moral revolution” by Scottish

- 1 This paper derives from research supported by the European Research Council (Realising Eurasia: Civilisation and Moral Economy in the 21st Century, project no: 340854). The present attempt to deepen the historical framing of that project has been shaped by discussions at two meetings. The first was the panel “Empires, exchange and civilizational connectivity in Eurasia” at the Fifth European Congress on World and Global History (Budapest, 31 August – 3 September 2017). The second was a Workshop titled “Re-examining the idea of the Axial Age and Axial Civilizations”, 5th–7th April 2018 at the Swedish Collegium of Advanced Study at Uppsala. I am indebted to many participants at both of these meetings.
- 2 Johann P. Arnason, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock (eds.), *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden 2005; Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Cambridge, MA 2012; Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge, MA 2011.
- 3 Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, translated by Michael Bullock, first published in 1949, Abingdon, UK 2010.
- 4 Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, *Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre: contenant les idées théologiques, physiques & morales de ce législateur*, Vol. 1, Paris 1771. See also John Torpey, *The Three Axial Ages: Moral, Material, Mental*, New Brunswick, NJ 2017.

folklorist John Stuart-Glennie is one intervention that has become prominent in recent research. According to these arguments, new notions of *transcendence* (not necessarily in the form of a monotheistic God) initiated forms of normative regulation that promoted the solidarity of the community. While the contributions to Axial Age theorizing differ considerably, most can be understood as responses to the world domination of Western Eurasian powers, and then, more specifically, to the catastrophes which engulfed them in the twentieth century. Jaspers' formulations following the Second World War were a reaction to that cataclysm, comparable to that of Max Scheler following the First World War.⁵

Some aspects of axiality theorizing seem too vague to be tested. Some have suggested that the concept of Axial Age can be pluralized, for example by identifying the onset of industrialization or our ongoing digital revolution as equivalent moments of rupture.⁶ But this would hardly be compatible with the main thesis of Jaspers, which asserts a momentous shift in the capacity of human cognition, involving reflexivity, criticism and individuality, that cannot be matched by any later transformations. Jaspers was a German idealist philosopher, in a lineage established by Kant and Hegel. His vision is one that downplays the distinctive features of the five cases treated, as well as possible links between them. When its propositions are formulated as testable propositions, e.g. concerning the prevalence of new moralizing norms backed up by formal legal codes, the locations and centuries identified by Jaspers receive no clear confirmation in the historical-archaeological record.⁷

A second key field of ongoing debate is the connection between the new modes of thought and *politics*, more specifically the organization and legitimation of states larger in scale and more complex than any previous polities. No consensus has emerged concerning the links between empire and cosmology. Johann Arnason, one of the most influential contributors to the debates in recent decades, has concluded that it is impossible to identify any general pattern. The contrasts between the city states of Greece and the embryonic unity of China are so great that no concept of empire can be stretched to cover both; they require separate, singular narratives.⁸ In any case, conceptions of empire changed radically towards the end of the Axial Age, in the wake of Alexander the Great, as Krishan Kumar demonstrates in this issue. In later centuries, both land-based and maritime empires enabled the dissemination of goods and ideas and the trans-Eurasian mobility of their human carriers.

5 Max Scheler, *Krieg und Aufbau*, Leipzig 1916. Jan Assmann is currently writing a comprehensive account of these contributions and my discussion draws on his presentation at the Uppsala Workshop (see note 1).

6 Torpey, *The Three Axial Ages*.

7 Daniel A. Mullins et al, A Systematic Assessment of 'Axial Age' Proposals Using Global Comparative Historical Evidence, in: *American Sociological Review* 83 (2018) 3: 596-626.

8 Johann P. Arnason, Rehistoricizing the Axial Age, in: *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, eds. Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, Cambridge, MA 2012, pp. 337-65. While he does not consider axiality to be a "meaningful concept", Arnason retains "Axial Age" as an "Epochenbegriff". In his view, "redefinitions of the link between politics and religion" reveal a "common problematic behind the different patterns" found in the civilizations originally identified by Jaspers (Arnason, personal communication).

At this point it is important to clarify my understanding of Eurasia. Contrary to a substantial Russian historiography that privileges the role of the Russian nation in the forging of a vast intercontinental space, and certain Euro-American approaches which replicate this focus on an *interface* between Europe and Asia, the definition adopted here is one that rejects the *a priori* existence of Europe and Asia as distinct continents.⁹ This construction, which derives ultimately from the ancient Greeks, has no civilizational justification. The Eurasia which concerns us is not confined to the landmass conventionally described as Europe and Asia but includes the southern shores of the Mediterranean. At the same time, the historical model of Eurasia as “Old World”, based on the agrarian empires of temperate geographical zones, with their epicentre in Mesopotamia, is clearly not congruent with the entire territory of the world’s largest landmass. In the long history of intensifying connectivity, some regions were more involved than others. The civilizations of the steppe were of great importance, as Marie Favereau demonstrates in this issue. Vast expanses of ice and tundra were hardly incorporated in substantive ways until recent generations. Like the enclaves of “tribal” society that persisted in the heart of many agrarian empires, such regions formed “remote” parts of the Eurasian dynamic. But this kind of complexity does not invalidate generalizing about “Eurasian history” any more than the persistence of Sami nomadic cultures invalidates generalizations about the history of Europe. Conventional emphasis on the agrarian empires implies a concentration on the terrestrial, and on arteries of communication such as the original Silk Routes. This is clearly insufficient. Just as we need to look north of the agrarian empires to understand the contribution of the polities of the steppe, so we need also to look south and engage with the Indian Ocean World in order to grasp maritime connectivities. This is the subject of Burkhard Schnepel’s contribution to this issue. Our conception of Eurasia must be flexible enough to include the Swahili coast of Africa as well as the southern shores of the Mediterranean.¹⁰

Approaches to Macro-History

The concept of Eurasia is a challenge to powerful narratives in history and the social sciences that oppose a stagnant Orient to a dynamic Occident and, more fundamentally, tradition to modernity. It is not just the notion of “continent” that needs to be questioned. Concepts such as “society” and “culture” are also problematic to the extent that they reflect the prominence of the nation-state as a hegemonic form of polity in our era.¹¹ Many attempts have been made to correct the distortions that arise from these blinkers, in order to move global history to a more truly universal level.

9 Chris Hann, A Concept of Eurasia, in: *Current Anthropology* 57 (2016) 1: 1-27.

10 This point was emphasized at the Budapest panel by Dagmar Schäfer.

11 Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences, in: *Global Networks* 2 (2002) 4: 301-334.

The concept of culture area constitutes a significant contribution from socio-cultural anthropology. It can be traced back to the German-speaking countries before the First World War under the name *Kulturgeschichte*.¹² Ethnologists, as they came to be known at the time, often based in museums where they were confronted with artefacts of diverse provenance, worked out rigorous methods for reconstructing the likely paths of their diffusion. Some emphasized the constraints set by the material environment, others were more interested in kinship and domestic organization, others again in rituals and cosmological beliefs. Eventually, following the so-called “fieldwork revolution”, a great deal of twentieth-century anthropology was devoted to the investigation of how all of these fitted together to form holistic localized societies. Meanwhile to grasp larger scales the concept of culture area was developed in North America. It was associated with the quantitative analyses enabled by the “Human Relations Area Files,” developed by George Peter Murdock.¹³ This database has been continuously refined but, in a discipline that is nowadays primarily oriented to the gathering of new ethnographic data, it has acquired a largely historical (even antiquarian) character. It might be supposed that the accelerated flows of globalization would revive interest in diffusionist methods and the potential for identifying culture areas in the twenty-first century; but this does not seem to be happening. In Eurasia as elsewhere, the older ethnological approaches are more useful to archaeologists engaging with prehistory than to global historians. In anthropology, the concept of culture area has been largely relegated to disciplinary history.

The concept of civilization warrants more careful inspection. Definitional uncertainty and normative associations have dogged this term since it was coined in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Despite these confusions, a plural, non-normative concept of *civilisation* was productively developed by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss in the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵ This drew on their familiarity with contemporary work in German ethnology, but it was intended to capture much more than the museological traits which dominated *Kulturgeschichte*. A *civilisation* was a “family of societies” and non-literate aboriginal Australia furnished excellent illustrations. *Civilization* was a macro-level complement to *society*, the master concept of Durkheimian sociology. In this sense, it was potentially applicable to all human societies in time and space. However, although Mauss returned to the theme after his uncle’s death, his later writings on the subject remained fragmentary. As Johann Arnason has shown, the civilizational dimension has been of considerable importance in French anthropology down to the present day, even if the word itself is seldom employed. But it has been explored selectively in regions such

12 The best known variant of German diffusionist theory is the *Kulturkreislehre* of the Vienna School of Pater Wilhelm Schmidt. See Andre Gingrich, *The German-speaking Countries*, pp. 59-15 in *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, Fredrik Barth et al., Chicago 2005.

13 George P. Murdock, *Ethnographic Atlas*, Pittsburgh, PA 1967.

14 Johann P. Arnason, *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Conditions*, Leiden 2003.

15 See Nathan Schlanger (ed.), *Techniques, Technology and Civilization*. Marcel Mauss, New York 2006.

as Amazonia, remote from the prime locations of recent planetary transformations in Eurasia.¹⁶

In contrast to the analysis of culture areas, civilizational analysis has been a more interdisciplinary enterprise. When it comes to Eurasia, the work of historians has been complemented by sociologists and many others. Not all embraced the term civilization and those who did, most famously Braudel, often did so loosely and ambiguously.¹⁷ Working in a Weberian tradition, Shmuel Eisenstadt theorized agrarian empires as an ideal-type and later supplemented this political sociology with an engagement with Axial Age ideas.¹⁸ By the end of the twentieth century the concept of civilization had been taken up by other, more powerful voices. The most influential was that of political scientist Samuel Huntington, who soon after the end of the Cold War proclaimed that the old East-West rift was now being replaced by a “clash of civilizations.”¹⁹ This usage was diametrically opposed to that of Arnason, and behind him of Mauss, Durkheim and many others, for whom civilizations are never the closed, essentialized entities projected by Huntington. Whether or not the term civilization is considered to be too contaminated by its Enlightenment origins and its associations in the contemporary public sphere to be deployed analytically in historical analysis, it does raise other problems. From the point of view of political economy, it is open to the same principled objection as the idealist notion of Axial Age: to focus on civilization is to neglect the realities of material existence. The most influential attempt to identify larger units of analysis in order to transcend particularist (cultural) boundaries, irrespective of their level (societal or civilizational), is the world-system approach of Immanuel Wallerstein.²⁰ Wallerstein has devoted most of his career to analysing the “modern world-system” of capitalist accumulation since the sixteenth century. He insists, however, that his method can be adapted for the study of earlier periods. The terminology is confusing because not even the modern world-system embraces the entire world (though this is nowadays belatedly coming about in the course of accelerating globalization). Rather, “world-system” refers to a complex constellation of “world-economy” and “world-empire” in which the “world” is the signifier of connectivity. According to Wallerstein, the modern world-system is characterized by the endless accumulation of capital. This has been made possible by an interstate system in which particular polities (Great Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States in the twentieth) exercise hegemony, but not as a “world-empire” in the manner that, for example, the Romans (discussed in this issue by Kumar) or the Chinese dynasties (discussed

16 Johann P. Arnason, *Mauss Revisited: The Birth of Civilizational Analysis from the Spirit of Anthropology*, in: *Civilizational Analysis and Anthropology. Eurasian Explorations*, eds. Johann P. Arnason and Chris Hann, Albany, NY 2018, pp. 1-33.

17 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th century*, 3 vols., Berkeley 1982–84. See also Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, New York 1993.

18 Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*, New York 1963; Idem, *Axial Age Civilization and the Axial Age Reconsidered*, in: *Axial Civilizations and World History*, eds. Johann P. Arnason et al., Leiden 2005, pp. 531-64; see also Sheldon Pollock, *Axialism and Empire*, *ibid.*, pp. 397-450.

19 S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 1996.

20 For a mature outline, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-systems Analysis. An Introduction*, Durham, NC. 2004.

by Goldstone) formed world-empires. World-empires are a threat to the logic of capital accumulation because they are liable to disturb the norms of the world-economy. From this perspective, the most exciting question in the geopolitical debates of our era is whether the ancient civilization of China is currently morphing not simply into the new dominant player in the interstate system but into a world-empire capable of changing the rules of the game at the planetary level. In any case, the recent rise of the People's Republic poses a challenge to the caesura that has dominated the work of Immanuel Wallerstein. He acknowledges that key diagnostic features of commodity economy (including money, credit and wage-labour) were present in East Asia in ancient times, but distinguishes these earlier forms from fully-fledged capitalism. Following Braudel, he maintains that capitalist modernity began only in the age when the far West of the landmass entered the most dynamic period in its history. But if we remove the ubiquitous hyphens from the conceptual apparatus provided by Wallerstein and aim instead, in the spirit of a universal history, to explain planetary transformation, then the case for privileging Western Eurasia is by no means obvious. It is necessary to acknowledge the technologies of production and communication developed in the course of inter-civilizational encounters across and at the edges of the landmass over a much longer period.

The Materialist, Anthro-archaeological Approach of Jack Goody

The social anthropologist Jack Goody arrived at a concept of Eurasia by a distinctive route that privileged neither ideas and moralities in the manner of the Axial Age theorists, nor political economy in the manner of the Marxists. Goody analysed production and consumption in the context of a comprehensive vision of technologies of communication and evolving social relations, with particular attention to domestic organization and the intergenerational transmission of property. From his perspective, the classical philosophical texts of the Axial Age are explicable by the development of literacy (however restricted), rather than some prior tectonic shift in human mental and moral capacities. For Goody, while human social relations are continuously in flux, certain key elements of cognition are universal to our species. Changes in this domain are for investigation by evolutionary biologists rather than historians or social scientists. Compared to the proponents of axially, Jack Goody is therefore a gradualist. He is sceptical of terms such as modernity and capitalism, and never embraced any of the conceptual frameworks discussed in the previous section.

Goody spent the first decades of his academic career as an Africanist, working in small, non-literate, non-centralized communities in what is now northern Ghana.²¹ From here, forms of production, consumption, kinship organization and social stratification in agrarian societies across Eurasia looked very similar, in comparison with the simpler,

21 For an introduction to the work and life of Goody, see Chris Hann, John Rankine Goody, 1919–2015, in: *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy* XVI (2017): 457–81.

more egalitarian forms of sub-Saharan Africa. In Africa, for example, marital payments generally took the form of “horizontal” transfers between kin groups rather than “vertical” transfers to endow the new couple, the paradigmatic form across Eurasia. Bride-wealth consisted in the circulation of valuables between groups that were more or less equal in status, whereas dowry constituted a form of pre-mortem inheritance in significantly more differentiated societies. The position of women, notably their role in systems of production and property, reflected this structural difference.²²

Goody traced these differences back to technologies of production. Both Eurasia and Africa had experienced the Neolithic, but only in Eurasia had intensive forms of agriculture based on the plough produced the surpluses necessary for new forms of urban life to emerge and flourish. In stressing the urban revolution of the Bronze Age, Goody was following archaeologist Gordon Childe (whose Marxist version of prehistory he had first read in a German prisoner of war camp). This chronology posits the era of decisive change well before the centuries identified by Jaspers and other Axial Age theorists. Goody was unswervingly loyal to the Childean account, which he saw as free of the Eurocentric bias of the many social theorists and historians he criticised in his own late work. Goody’s last major book was a return to materialist first principles in which he explored the significance of “the search for metals” and the techniques of their mining and processing for the larger story of the emergence of “capitalism”, from prehistory to the industrial era.²³

Apart from his pioneering contributions to the study of kinship and domestic organization, Goody augmented Childe’s materialism in two further ways. First, he paid more attention to commerce and consumption. Without denying parallel invention in different Eurasian locations where similar material transformations were under way, he emphasizes the role of commercial relations (“merchant cultures”) for the transmission of *knowledge*, over and above the exchange of specific goods and technologies. The demand to consume and display luxury goods is associated with “connoisseurship” on the part of urban elites, which Goody views as an embryonic form of bourgeois social emulation. Following a pioneering investigation of the relationship between haute cuisine and social class in Eurasia, his definitive demonstration of these forms of distinction was a massive study of flowers.²⁴

A second field in which Jack Goody significantly embellished the archaeological accounts concerned technologies of communication, above all literacy. This was a salient theme in his oeuvre from early days, when he realised how rapidly changes could take

22 Jack Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-industrial Societies of Eurasia*, Cambridge 1990.

23 Jack Goody, *Metals, Culture and Capitalism: An Essay on the Origins of the Modern World*, Cambridge 2012. Others have been more critical of Childe in this regard: see David Wengrow, Comment to Hann’s article: The Concept of Eurasia, in: *Current Anthropology* 57 (2016) 1: 20. See also Maxime N. Bami, The Invention of Prehistory and the Rediscovery of Europe: Exploring the Deeper Intellectual Roots of Gordon Childe’s Neolithic ‘Revolution’ (1936), in: *Journal of World Prehistory* (forthcoming).

24 Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*, Cambridge 1982; *The Culture of Flowers*, Cambridge 1993.

place in the orally transmitted myths of the LoDagaa in Northern Ghana. Writing created the possibility to advance knowledge more systematically, including science and technology. In early formulations Goody thought that alphabetic scripts, notably that of the Greeks, heralded the breakthrough. Later he conceded that logographic representations, as in East Asia, could have the same implications for the organization of society and the development of science.²⁵ He revisited the theme of literacy throughout his career, consistently opposing the hypothesis of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who contrasted “savage thought” to the thought of modern humans. Alongside differences in technology and the devolution of property, new technologies of communication were central to his account of the emergence of more complex and differentiated forms of society. But human beings themselves did not become new creatures in the relatively short time span of these developments. The capacities for “moralizing punishment” and “universal” abstraction celebrated by the Axial Age theorists are present in oral cultures (not merely latent); they are susceptible to intensification when new possibilities arise to store knowledge in textual forms, but the changes are gradual and hardly “axial”.

Historical Economic Anthropology: From Imperial Social Responsibility to Socialism

In this section, following a critical assessment of Goody’s own critique, I move to a synthesis with the help of a very different thinker. Goody’s work on metals and on the merchant cultures of the Indian Ocean world as well as the terrestrial routes is consistent with that of scholars such as Johann Arnason, who emphasize inter-civilizational encounters.²⁶ He is right to place considerable weight on connectivity, and to remind Western readers that the main features of contractual social relations, “rational” entrepreneurship (including credit and double-entry accounting) were all present in East Asia before the Common Era. They were not “inventions” of the West, any more than notions of democracy, civil society and the *Rechtsstaat* are the unique prerogative of Western Eurasia. Goody is also right to note that clerical literati could, in certain times and places, promote education and critical attitudes to existing knowledge, while at other times their influence was conservative and even repressive. In general, however, he downplays the significance of ideational (or ideological) factors.

Goody may go too far when he asserts that religious ideas played no significant role in themselves, or that they were less important in promoting Eurasian connectivity than the decentralized activities of merchants.²⁷ He shies away not only from religion but from a consideration of *politics* in the broadest sense. Traders did not operate in a political vacuum. Whether in relatively small city-states or large-scale imperial formations, they

25 Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Cambridge 1986.

26 Goody does not use the vocabulary of civilizational analysis.

27 This tendency is conspicuous in a late short synthesis: Jack Goody, *The Eurasian Miracle*, Cambridge 2010.

were always constrained by secular power holders (as Favereau and Bellér-Hann demonstrate in this issue). Changes in the legitimation of power, in the relations between secular and religious officials where these have become differentiated, and in the cosmologies linking both to the wider society, must all be taken into account. One way to open up a more comprehensive approach is to return to the holistic economic anthropology of the polymath Karl Polanyi.²⁸ In the “substantivist” approach that he elaborated in the 1950s, Polanyi argued that the study of economy must embed the phenomena of production, distribution and exchange in wider societal contexts. Formalist theories in terms of choice-making to maximise profit or utility were rejected in favour of approaches that paid close attention to history. Polanyi himself never worked out a coherent philosophy of history, and he certainly did not work with a concept of Eurasia. What he offers is a general theory of economy that combines material and moral-ethical aspects, and a basic tool-kit for analysis. The central tools are ideal types which he variously called “principles of economic behaviour” and “forms of integration.” These are combined in different ways in different social formations. The three types that he retained in his mature work (having dropped the category of “householding”) were reciprocity, redistribution and (market) exchange.²⁹

For my purposes here, the most interesting types are redistribution and market exchange. Redistribution is characterized by Polanyi as the flow of resources into a centre and their reallocation. His illustrations are taken from historical and ethnographic sources. They include the tribal chief who gathers valued objects together before distributing them to the community (sometimes destroying some or even all of them in the course of elaborate rituals). Redistribution, then, is nothing new in human history. Polanyi eschews evolutionist theory, but there is nonetheless a clear sense in which, in technologically simple societies lacking a political centre, the main form of integration is reciprocity. Redistribution is a principle that emerges later but retains its prominence, even in complex industrial societies, as a counter to the principle of market exchange. Polanyi’s major work investigated the catastrophic consequences of the “disembedding” of the economy from social contexts in the *laissez-faire* “market society” of Britain in the nineteenth century.³⁰ He was a committed socialist (albeit an unorthodox one), who believed to the end of his life (Polanyi died in 1964 in Canada) that redistribution in the form of central planning, as practised by the Soviet Union and its allies, including his native Hungary, was the only conceivable way to redeem the world from the iniquities of capitalist class society. Polanyi never embraced historical materialism or any other theory that smacked of economic determinism. But he recognized the affinity between the new secular princi-

28 The synthesis advanced here draws on Chris Hann, *Long Live Eurasian Civ. Towards a New Confluence of Anthropology and World History*, in: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 142 (2017) 2: 225–44.

29 Karl Polanyi, *The Economy as Instituted Process*, in: *Trade and Market in the Early Empires: Economies in History and Theory*, eds. Karl Polanyi et al., Glencoe, IL 1957, 243–70.

30 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*, New York 1944.

ples of socialism, enunciated by the prophet Karl Marx, and the earlier doctrines of Jesus Christ, the prophet of Christianity.³¹

From the perspective of Polanyi, the market society of the nineteenth century was an unprecedented distortion of the long-term dialectic between redistribution and market economy. On this occasion the “double movement,” whereby society responded to the utopian illusion of the “self-regulating market,” led ineluctably to Fascism and the catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century. It is sometimes argued that Polanyi’s call for a “great transformation” was answered shortly after the publication of his *opus magnum* with the post-war settlement and the consolidation of welfare states throughout Western Europe during the next thirty years. Closer inspection of his writings suggests that his socialism was more radical. Redistribution in the guise of socialism was the dominant form of integration across Eurasia in the last decades of his life, when drastic social transformations were implemented even in very remote regions of the landmass, often in the most brutal ways. The milder forms of Western Europe were perhaps exemplified in Scandinavia. Yet Polanyi seems to have doubted that the latter could serve as a general model. Tinkering with capitalism through interventionist policies to regulate markets and ensure higher standards of welfare would not bring more than temporary relief. In the long run, the reformist policies of liberal democracies would only deepen the contradictions of capitalism. This diagnosis was to be confirmed with the rise of neoliberal ideology and the dissolution of the regulatory institutions of Bretton-Woods within a decade of Polanyi’s death.

Twentieth century socialism is not merely a reaction to uneven development in the era of industrial capitalism. It certainly is that, but at the same time it embodies a principle of transcendence whose roots must be traced to the universalist principles that received their first elaborate legitimation in the Axial Age. We can speculate on the ultimate origins of this principle. While cooperation and sharing are well documented in “tribal” societies, the agrarian empires of Eurasia (and also the Mongol empire analysed in this issue by Favereau) carried collective organization forward on a new scale. These polities are characterized by the violent extraction of resources and by extremes of economic exploitation, including slavery. But they are also marked by new solidarities and by the consolidation of systems of tribute and taxation that did not depend solely on coercion. This is where the approaches of the classical Axial Age theorists are invaluable. Without subscribing to notions of “moral revolution” and without denying the possibility of “transcendence” in non-literate societies, we must recognize new forms of social inclusion and legitimation in the agrarian empires. The Chinese Emperor enjoys the Mandate of Heaven, but he also carries the burden of responsibilities for all of his people. For many centuries, *charity* on the part of religious and economic elites was more important than the actions of states with little or any fiscal capacity. But increasing differentiation and class inequality were accompanied by new forms of inclusion and belonging that

31 See Gareth Dale, *Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left*, New York 2016. See also Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and the Critique of Capitalism*, Princeton, NJ 2017.

found their ethical justification in the nexus where politics and religion came together. In the oasis of Qumul, as described by Bellér-Hann in this issue, officials, merchants and rulers alike were expected to be devout in their faith and generous in their support of the society's weaker members. If "corporate social responsibility" is the euphemistic label for the compensatory activities of capitalist corporations, the dominant economic agents of the industrial era, the ethos of the agrarian empires in Eurasia, precursors of the secular ideals of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialism, might be described as one of imperial social responsibility.³²

A New Eurasian Age?

I noted that the interventions of Karl Jaspers in the late 1940s were a significant effort to move beyond teleological narratives that privilege one civilizational tradition. How do the prospects for a trans-Eurasian universal history look seventy years later? No contemporary political entities correspond exactly to the civilizations identified by Jaspers. China comes closest, but Jaspers would surely be disturbed by the way in which the Party ideologists have seized upon his notion of axiality in recent years, deploying it not in a universalist spirit but in Sinocentric terms to assert the antiquity of the Chinese.³³ The present assertiveness and cultural nationalism of the Middle Kingdom (vividly demonstrated by Jack Goldstone in his contribution to this issue) must be grasped against the background of a dominant "Western" constellation. Euro-American intellectuals have invested heavily in a world order they generally term liberal, which is built on "democratic politics" (implying a plurality of political parties), "human rights," and, in the economic domain, far-reaching scope for the principle of the "free market". But what if the constellation surrounding the political economy of neoliberal globalization is not universal at all, just an ideology that masquerades as such? I have suggested in the preceding section that at the core of Eurasian history we need to recognize unprecedented notions of responsibility, solidarity and social citizenship. Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialism appears retrospectively as an aberration, because its pseudo-universalism failed in reality to show sufficient respect for the individual human personality that first moved centre-stage

32 Redistribution is put forward as a general if not universal analytic term by Polanyi. In this issue it is taken up most explicitly by Favereau for the case of the Mongols. Nonetheless, the consolidation of communitarian responsibility on an unprecedented scale is primarily an innovation of the political societies which flourished across Eurasia in the wake of pioneering transformations in Mesopotamia and Egypt. This notion of responsibility is related to the notion of "prosocial behavior" in the model advanced by Mullins et al ("A systematic assessment"). However, the latter is misleading to the extent that it implies a general transformation of social action. In fact, the sphere of egotistical action associated with impersonal markets becomes more prominent at the same time. This is the micro-level tension that underpins the "great dialectic" between redistribution and the market at the macro-level of social evolution. See Chris Hann, *The Anthropocene and Anthropology: Micro and Macro Perspectives*, in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 20 (2017) 1: 183-96; Idem, *Making Sense of Eurasia: Reflections on Max Weber and Jack Goody*, in: *New Literary History* 48 (2017) 4: 685-99.

33 Hainer Roetz emphasized the paradoxical invocation of Axial Age theorizing in contemporary China at the Uppsala meeting.

in the philosophical texts of the third millennium BCE. Embryonic forms of mixed economy, representative politics and generalized provision for the weaker members of the community seem to be intrinsic characteristics of the polities that took shape in the Axial Age. The principles of Confucianism, nowadays revived in Xi Jinping Thought, and those of economist Milton Friedman, cited for contrast to Xi in the paper of Goldstone in this issue, mark the extremes of a spectrum that is common. There is a broad consensus across Eurasia today, from Brussels to Beijing, that markets are indispensable, but that it is no less essential to maintain the essentials of a welfare state that looks after all of its citizens, and takes seriously its responsibilities to the natural environment.

Of course, such concerns are not confined to Eurasia. But it is impossible to overlook the fact that, under its 45th President, the hegemonic state of the current era is pushing in the opposite direction. Donald Trump and the Republican Party claim to have an electoral mandate for policies that will *reduce* many citizens' access to social insurance and pensions.³⁴ Meanwhile China, in spite of its authoritarianism and the fact that its GNP per capita remains greatly inferior, is steadily improving collective welfare provision in the direction pioneered in the last century by Western Eurasia. President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Accords of 2015, to which the rest of the world declares its adherence, is another sign that established geo-political and military affiliations are increasingly out of kilter with the socio-cultural preferences (values) of citizens. This President calls upon the states of Western Eurasia to which he is bound in a military alliance to increase their "defence" budgets to the level of his own, while pursuing economic and social policies that accentuate the inequalities that the great majority of European citizens deplore. Has his policy of "America first" disturbed the links between the United States and Eurasia fundamentally? Together with the result of the Brexit referendum in Britain, is this not evidence that Polanyi's dialectic between the market and redistribution has entered a new phase, demanding more radical solutions than the Keynesian compromises of Bretton-Woods? Is it not high time to translate the commonalities of Eurasian "big history," above all civic-imperial principles of responsible inclusion, into a contemporary common cause against the follies emanating from the White House?

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, some scholars are seeking to move political debate to a new level. It is argued across a range of disciplines that humanity has already had such a far-reaching "geological" impact on the earth that we have entered a new age, that of the Anthropocene. By contrast, Jason W. Moore has popularized

34 Hans Joas has objected (at the seminar in Uppsala, see note 1) that I paint an unwarranted contrast between the USA and Eurasia. He is surely right to point out that the USA owes a great deal to European religious and political systems, and that this country had made substantial contributions to what I am characterizing as a Eurasian dialectic (notably in promoting ideals of individual freedom and human rights). Many citizens of the USA share the pro-welfare state preferences to those of Eurasian citizens – and others around the world. But I think it is more than a matter of a perverse electoral system that prevents these predilections from being implemented. Frontier conditions and slavery created a variety of capitalism in North America that, despite its Protestant roots, could not lead to the kind of morally embedded redistributive economies that have evolved in Europe, which I see as closer to societal aspirations throughout Eurasia.

the concept of Capitalocene.³⁵ For this US sociologist cum political ecologist, it is the capitalist mode of production which is responsible for the irresponsible devastation of so much of our fragile planet in recent centuries. Moore begins his narrative with mercantile capitalism in the fifteenth century. Like so many others, including the majority of neo-Marxist thinkers (including Wallerstein), he thus remains fundamentally within the familiar Europeanist paradigm. But this is inadequate in at least two ways. E. A. Wrigley has demonstrated that the most important caesura in world history takes place *later* than suggested in the standard Europeanist narratives, namely in the eighteenth century, when an “energy revolution” based on the exploitation of fossil fuels enables the transcendence of “organic” economy.³⁶ Secondly, and this is the main argument of this essay, the Europeanist narrative misses the earlier transformations that were indispensable for all that has happened on Earth in the last half-millennium. Goody shows us that the social relations of the capitalist mode of production must be traced back to the urban revolution of Bronze Age Eurasia. Polanyi offers tools to analyse the dialectic of global history that began in this era, and to evaluate this dialectic. The label Anthropocene implies that humanity everywhere bears responsibility for the predicament of the planet today. This is grossly unfair to the vast majority of humanity, above all indigenous peoples all over the world. From this angle, the concept of Capitalocene has its attractions. But the very notions of capitalism and modernity are saturated with Eurocentric bias, and for this reason Moore’s term is misleading. The present era in the history of our planet might be more accurately identified as the *Eurasiacene*. It originated with specific human populations and technologies in Eurasia. These have long spread to embrace the entire world, but the states of Eurasia constitute the best hope we have of finding solutions; this is a universal responsibility.

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35 Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, London 2015. See also Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland 2016.

36 E. A. Wrigley, *The Path to Sustained Growth: England’s Transition from an Organic Economy to an Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge 2016.