



Into the Home Straight of REALEURASIA

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Given the balance of the *Realising Eurasia* project it was a very happy coincidence that, when the first two dissertations were defended at the Martin Luther University (Halle-Wittenberg) just before Easter 2019, one should be set in Christian Scandinavia and the other in Buddhist Southeast Asia. Congratulations to Anne-Erita Berta, whose dissertation was titled “Entrepreneurs Against the Market: Morality, Hard Work, and Capitalism in Aarhusian Independent Businesses,” and to Laura Hornig, whose title was “On Money and *Mettā*. Economy and Morality in Urban Buddhist Myanmar.”

In accordance with the general framework of the project, both students worked in urban locations of medium size: Aarhus in Denmark (A-E Berta) and Patheingyi in Myanmar (L. Hornig). Each took considerable trouble to outline the long-term civilizational context, paying equal attention to political economy and to what we term the “moral background”. The latter included careful scrutiny of religion. Anne-Erita Berta found that very few of the entrepreneurs and shopkeepers with whom she worked were active practitioners of the state faith, Lutheran Protestantism. But they were nonetheless very strongly committed to the transmission of certain values to their children, including hard work and frugality, values with an obvious affinity to familiar stereotypes of the “protestant ethic”. More surprisingly, she found that these “petty entrepreneurs” were very supportive of the egalitarian values of Danish society and content to pay the high taxes that make this social democracy viable.

While its colonial and postcolonial history could hardly differ more from the Danish case, Laura Hornig too (as she documents in her latest blogpost) found that many small businessmen, like Buddhists generally, were more than ready to give up part of their income for the benefit of others. They do not like to do so in the form of taxes, for they do not as yet trust their state to redistribute wealth fairly. But the donations they make within the merit-making cosmology of Buddhism are increasingly directed to more secular goals, including social services that in Scandinavia are provided by the trusted institutions of the “welfare state”. As in Scandinavia, the fragile democratic institutions of Myanmar afford individual citizens a high degree of autonomy; but here too the space for collective values, for redistribution to benefit the weaker

members of the community, is considerable. In neither of these instances does the urge to bequeath the business to the next generation dominate the strategizing of family firms (though in the Myanmar case members of the Chinese minority may approximate such a model more closely).



Late evening: Laura Hornig (holding the Easter bunny) and committee members Kirsten Endres, Chris Hann and Ward Keeler.

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Early morning: Anne-Erita Berta begins her defence at the university.

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Before the year is over we are confident that further dissertations of the Realising Eurasia project will open up many more comparative horizons. It is hard to feel the same degree of confidence concerning the political futures of Europe and Asia, which are more uncertain than they have been in a long time. Will the European Union elections in May result in a more legitimate level of supra-state governance than Western Eurasia has known hitherto? Or will populist Danes join Hungarians and others by voting in large numbers for “Eurosceptic” parties? If so, will China be able to exploit the weaknesses of Europe to expand its economic penetration of this part of the landmass? No one can be sure where the United Kingdom will be in twelve months from now. But whether or not the UK remains united, whether or not it has finally left the EU, these islands remain will part of Europe in the deeper sense of our project, just as the whole of Europe remains an integral part of Eurasia.

Just as interesting as Britain at this particular moment is the case of Ukraine. With the overwhelming defeat of the arch-nationalist Poroshenko in the recent presidential election, here is a chance for political rapprochement with east and west alike. Could an inexperienced President Zelensky dare to insist on solutions that would bring Ukraine and Russia *together* into a Union where both belong? Or will Brussels and Washington continue to obstruct repair of violent divisions for which the West bears the major responsibility? Alas, experience indicates that the latter is much more likely, that the EU carrots will be offered only to Kiev.

With a little more political vision, our leaders in this part of the landmass might judge this an opportune moment to transcend what political scientist Richard Sakwa calls the “Atlantic system” – the institutional arrangements that continue to trap the EU in Cold War pathologies, nearly three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹ Instead we have spent this Spring celebrating 70 years of NATO and new arms races are being launched. The message that I draw from the micro-level insights of the first REALEURASIA dissertations goes in the opposite direction: we need to recognize ancient legacies of collective values across our landmass, rooted ultimately in peaceful relations, in obligations to care for strangers, and (in modern parlance) “social citizenship”.

Note

¹ Richard Sakwa (2017): *Russia Against The Rest. The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.