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# Long Live Eurasian Civ! Towards a new confluence of anthropology and world history<sup>1</sup>

Chris Hann

## *Abstract*

When socio-cultural anthropology was consolidated in the latter half of the nineteenth century, most practitioners adhered to evolutionist theory in unilineal forms. In the twentieth century, disciplinary specialization and an emphasis on fieldwork led many in the dominant schools to limit themselves to synchronic investigations of localised “cultures” or “societies”, with little or no historical depth. This paradigm shift was qualified for some decades by the vitality of diffusionist theory in the German-speaking countries, but eventually these too fell into disrepute. By the end of the twentieth century, socio-cultural anthropologists wishing to engage with the larger contours of human history outside evolutionist theory had to work out new approaches. This paper begins by reviewing the efforts of Ernest Gellner, Eric Wolf, David Graeber, and Jack Goody to re-engage with “big history”. Goody’s approach is the most promising foundation, but it pays insufficient attention to economic anthropology and to religion. It is argued that a “great dialectic” between market and redistribution can be traced back to the agro-literate Eurasian civilizations of the Bronze Age and the new belief systems of the Axial Age. In addition to its value as a heuristic for grasping *longue durée* Eurasian history, Karl Polanyi’s substantivist approach is pertinent to the present conjuncture of globalized capitalism. A renewal of historical economic anthropology, linking civilizational analysis to political economy, is one way in which anthropologists might contribute to the burgeoning agendas of world (or global) history; at the same time, such a perspective can be helpful in the interrogation of ethnographic data.

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**Keywords:**

Big history; Civilization; Economic anthropology; Eurasia; Ernest Gellner; Jack Goody; David Graeber; Karl Polanyi; socialism; redistribution; Eric Wolf.

**Introduction**

For most of the twentieth century, the main currents of socio-cultural anthropology were dominated by ethnography, i.e. field research. In North American cultural anthropology the seminal contributions were made by the German Franz Boas, who rejected universal evolutionary theory in favour of a limited historicism that investigated the emergence of particular cultures. Boas's equivalent in the British social anthropological tradition was the Pole Bronislaw Malinowski, who taught his students to be sceptical of all historical reconstruction and instead to prioritize functionalist explanations in the present. History was similarly eclipsed in the most influential French current, the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, where field research was supplemented (some critics would allege supplanted) by an emphasis on universals of the human mind. The development of anthropology in the German-speaking world was different, thanks especially to the vigour of diffusionist schools. But historicist notions of "cultural circle" led to excesses unwarranted by either field research or historical data, and these currents fell into disrepute following the Second World War. In recent decades, in Germany as elsewhere, anthropologists have prioritized the contemporary: they have studied particular socio-cultural groups and "local knowledge". Long-term affinities with North American approaches have been reaffirmed; after all, given the legacies of the Herderian counter-enlightenment Germany has the most distinguished philosophical pedigree for the particularist, relativizing approach.

In their different ways, all of these national traditions were reacting to the inadequacies of unilineal theories of social evolution, which had dominated anthropological theorizing in the nineteenth century (see Barth *et al* 2005). Fieldwork undoubtedly opened new vistas, but some practitioners were always aware of the limitations of a "snapshot" approach that left no room for serious historical contextualization. Later it came to be realised that even a sojourn of just one year could still be enough to generate insight into diachronic processes. But the problem of how to engage with the larger patterns of history remained. The

structuralist solution was the simplest. It consisted in asserting that the non-literate societies which were the traditional preserve of anthropology had no history at all, or at any rate not in the same sense that the “hot” societies of the West were “in history”.

In the early twenty-first century, there is a growing interest in going beyond localized ethnography and structuralist binaries to engage with the planetary flux of what I shall call big history. This revival is shaped by numerous factors, from innovations in scientific archaeology to public concern with climate change and the future of the Anthropocene. It seems self-evident that “stationary” fieldwork (as it is known in Germany) is woefully insufficient in a world in which people, ideas and technologies are ever more mobile and interconnected. But the mobile ethnographer, or even the stationary ethnographer who divides her time between multiple communities in a single urban location in pursuit of a “vertical slice” approach (Sampson 1984), remains imprisoned in shallow temporalities. For anthropologists who find little intellectual satisfaction in the kind of “multi-sited fieldwork” advocated by George Marcus (1995), engaging in new ways with history and historical sociology is an appealing alternative. This does not have to mean giving up on field research. It means collecting ethnographic data not solely with reference to ever-proliferating “flows” in the present, to be analysed with the application of whatever “theory” happens to be fashionable in the ethnographer’s intellectual community, but rather by asking how the data can be contextualised with regard to long-term patterns of socio-cultural resilience and transformation.

Of course, the bigger picture was not absent altogether from the major schools of the twentieth century. Louis Dumont, a towering figure in France, spent formative years in Oxford in the company of Edward Evans-Pritchard. But the latter’s mid-century opening to history was limited in scope and impact. In the United States Julian Steward theorised new models of multilineal evolutionism, and Marshall Sahlins abandoned evolutionary theory altogether to pioneer original models of anthropological history. It is impossible to do justice to all the influential voices. For the purposes of this paper I begin with a discussion of four influential professors of anthropology who, realising the limitations of fieldwork methodology, have sought in various ways to re-engage with big history. Space does not allow for comprehensive assessments of their contributions. To give the discussion some coherence, my exposition will be explicitly driven by my own interest in Eurasian commonalities, as an antidote to the Eurocentric narratives that continue to pervade both the humanities and the social sciences, including socio-cultural anthropology. Eurasia is here

understood as Asia and Europe combined (plus North Africa) (Hann 2016). To enhance coherence further, I shall argue that these welcome signs of re-engagement with big history on the part of four Anglophone anthropologists could, in each case, be strengthened by introducing the concept of civilization. I contrast the civilizational pluralism espoused by Marcel Mauss, and recently elaborated by Johann Arnason in historical sociology (Arnason 2018a, 2018b), with evolutionist approaches. For all its problematic associations, I show how the concept of civilization can be applied in Eurasia and, when grafted on to historical economic anthropology, help us to grasp the trajectory of our species in recent millennia. I argue that a combination of civilizational analysis and substantivist economic anthropology has more to offer than alternative approaches, such as world systems theory or *Kulturgeschichte*. It can help anthropologists to contribute to wider historiographical conversations, drawing on multiple theoretical traditions of their discipline, but without abandoning the particularism of the ethnographer

#### **Four styles in anthropological “big history”**

It is beyond doubt that in the course of the last century academic historiography in many languages has made enormous strides beyond perspectives constrained by particular nation-states (or regions, or empires) to engage in myriad creative ways with world (or global) history. Much of this work has found audiences among anthropologists, from the French *Annales* school to Subaltern Studies and postcolonial critique. But it is not clear how anthropologists, who may be equally dissatisfied with synchronic case-studies and the straitjacket of evolutionary theory, are to participate in conversations with historians. The following examples will show how four anthropologists have attempted to write “big history” without becoming historians

#### ***Ernest Gellner (1925-1995)***

I begin with the Prague-born social anthropologist Ernest Gellner.<sup>2</sup> Gellner’s original academic specialization was philosophy. He shifted allegiance in the 1950s, initially to sociology, and finally to social anthropology, fulfilling what had become the minimal criterion for an anthropological career by conducting fieldwork in the High Atlas. The

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<sup>2</sup> Personal disclosure: Gellner examined my doctoral dissertation in 1979 and was my Head of Department at Cambridge University between 1984 and 1991. See Hall 2010 for an excellent biography.

monograph which resulted (Gellner 1969) is widely considered to be an elegant example of the British “structural functionalist” school. It was not distinguished either by thick description<sup>3</sup> or by an engagement with big history. In later writings, through successive elaborations of a “pendular” model which he derived ultimately from Ibn Khaldun, Gellner proposed a long-term explanation of the distinctive features of the Islamic world (Gellner 1981). By focusing on the “puritan” doctrine at the core of the religion, which privileged direct communication between the believer and the deity, he tried to account both for the modernity of Islam and for the strength of “fundamentalism” in places where the benefits of modernity were unequally distributed. Nowadays, two decades after his passing, Islam is still commonly perceived to be a problem for “Western civilization”. But Gellner’s work is seldom quoted. He did not undertake significant research with historical sources to support his theoretical arguments.

If we set aside the work on Islam, Gellner has another, quite distinct claim to be regarded as a pioneer of a renewed confluence between anthropology and history. As befitting a Central European intellectual, he developed a “philosophic history”, presented in most detail in the work *Plough, Sword and Book* (Gellner 1988). This is very far removed from the empiricist monographs of tribal societies that Gellner admired most in the British school. It was perhaps closer in spirit to Herder’s *Auch eine Philosophie der Menschheit*, but Gellner’s philosophy is less burdened with empirical detail (there are almost no dates), and it is universalist rather than relativist. The structure is tripartite (Gellner liked to describe himself jocularly as a “Trinitarian”). The three epochs can be distinguished from each other with reference to technology; but Gellner is careful to avoid privileging an “economic base” in the manner of Marx and Engels. In his history, the “means of coercion” and the “means of communication” are just as important, along with a more mysterious variable called “cognition”. The first and longest epoch was that of hunter-gathering; Gellner was intrigued by the evidence for egalitarian bands as a social form, seemingly confirming the notion of “primitive communism,” but otherwise has little to say about this era. It was followed by *Agraria*, which takes many forms, including the great empires of preindustrial Eurasia in which literacy played an important role (and for which Plato stands as the archetypal theorist). The third epoch was *Industria*, which began in North-West Europe in the eighteenth century, and features the nation-state as its exemplary political form. Gellner argued that the “high culture” of the nation, homogenized through language and education, is necessary to meet the

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<sup>3</sup> Of the kind carried out a little later in Morocco by Clifford Geertz (Geertz, Geertz and Rosen, 1979)

functional needs of industrial society. This particular argument (elaborated in several overlapping works over several decades) has had a lasting impact on studies of nationalism. But it is fair to say that it has not had a lasting impact on anthropology. The same is true of his analysis of Marxist-Leninist socialism as an “ideocracy” and his enthusiasm in the last years of his life for the concept of “civil society” (Gellner 1994).

The main factor limiting Gellner’s appeal to anthropologists (apart from his penchant for wordplay and philosophical abstraction, which make him difficult to read) is a deep-seated Eurocentricity. Ernest Gellner subscribed to dominant trends in Western social theory which, whether Marxist or Weberian in inspiration, took it for granted that Western Europe had made a unique breakthrough to modernity within roughly the last half millennium. He is far from alone in this position among anthropologists. But the very explicit way in which Gellner celebrated the “European miracle” made colleagues in anthropology wince. They also had reservations about his harsh criticism of the relativist position, as exemplified by the Geertzian school. Gellner preferred systematic positivist comparison to the “local knowledge” privileged by most anthropologists of his generation. He certainly expected his students to understand local categories (what Malinowski had termed the “native point of view”); but he thought that good dissertations in anthropology should go beyond hermeneutics to attempt some form of social scientific explanation. His history of humanity was also a history of cognitive evolution: “we” (referring to the members of a putative Western civilization, though the word civilization is not theorised in his writings) are manifestly superior to the pre-industrial peoples we have traditionally studied. Gellner was careful to make it clear that he did not intend this claim in a moral sense. He simply thought it was incontestable that Western science and technology were vastly more powerful than anything the world had known previously. For most anthropologists, in the era of postmodernism, Gellner’s modernist hubris sounded like a return to the evolutionism of the nineteenth century. This was not an attractive way to overcome the limitations of localized ethnography. For all the brilliance of his provocations, Ernest Gellner’s philosophical history, like his work on Islam, has few advocates today.

### ***Eric Wolf (1923 – 1999)***

The second anthropologist I wish to discuss is another Jewish son of Central Europe (born in Austria, childhood in the Sudetenland) whose life was messed up in a big way by National Socialism. Whereas Gellner’s family stayed in Britain, Eric Wolf moved on in 1940 to the USA. After military service back in central Europe in the last years of the war, he received a

thorough training in Boasian cultural anthropology. The concept of culture was important for him throughout his career. Unlike Gellner, Wolf also paid serious attention to the concept of civilization. The major figure in persuading American anthropologists of that generation that they could not take their face-to-face communities as microcosms of a larger unit was Robert Redfield, who theorized peasantries as “part societies” within larger civilizational wholes. Like Redfield, Wolf cut his teeth as a fieldworker in Mexico. Drawing also on Alfred Kroeber, until the mid-1960s Wolf was distinctly sympathetic to the civilizational approach (Wolf 1967).

At this point Marxism intervened and Eric Wolf took up the concept of “mode of production” as the key to explaining not just the backwardness of peasantry but world history in general. The culmination of this work was *Europe and the People Without History* (1982). By substituting the concept of “tributary mode of production” for the problematic stages of slavery and feudalism in Marxian historical materialism, Wolf offered an explicitly revisionist take on the orthodox evolutionary schema. Recognizing the Eurocentric bias implicit in the notion of a stagnant “Asiatic mode of production”, he proposed that East Asia, too, was characterized by the tributary mode. This establishment of structural equivalence between East and West contrasted with the Eurocentrism of Ernest Gellner.

There were, however, certain similarities between these transplanted Central Europeans. Wolf too can be characterized as a Trinitarian: his schema of kinship mode, tributary mode and capitalist mode corresponded closely to Gellner’s Stone Age, *Agraria*, and *Industria*. Moreover, Wolf too was convinced that a fundamental breakthrough had occurred quite recently in human history, and that an expansionist Europe was the key to this rupture. Influenced by the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, the chronology of his opus magnum starts in 1400 and the very title reveals his basic binary. His rich accounts of civilizational encounters around the world before the industrial revolution focus on European imperialism, including the imperialism that took Europeans into South and East Asia. There is little to indicate that India and China had their own long histories of imperial expansion and wealth accumulation in the Indian Ocean world and in the interior of Asia. In effect, by sleight of hand Asia is subsumed into the category of the “people without history”.

Towards the end of his life Wolf moved away from his reliance on “mode of production”, but he did not embrace either Eurasia or civilization. Instead he returned to “culture”, combining it with a neo-Marxist concept of ideology to analyse three extraordinary cases of “dominance and crisis”: the Kwakiutl, the Aztecs and Nazi Germany (Wolf 1999). It



is a fascinating study that asks anthropological questions of historical materials, but this posthumously published work does not aspire to offer a coherent historical narrative.

***David Graeber (b. 1961)***

I now jump generations to consider another American, born in 1961, who is perhaps the most prolific and widely read historical anthropologist of our age. David Graeber was a doctoral student of Marshall Sahlins, the distinguished Chicago anthropologist who has spent decades working out an elaborate methodology for combining attention to events with a concept of cultural structure (Sahlins 1985). In applying this methodology rigorously, Sahlins restricts himself to Polynesia (both intra-civilizational, i.e. regional ethnohistory, and inter-civilizational encounters, notably those of Captain James Cook with the natives of Hawai'i). In contrast to his teacher, David Graeber tackles the big picture of world history. More overtly than is the case with Gellner and Wolf, his approach is imbued by his politics. When his opus magnum *Debt: The First 5000 years* was published in 2011, the anarchist Graeber was preoccupied with the organization and theorization of the protest movement “Occupy Wall Street”.

The extreme financialization of capitalism in recent decades may help to explain why David Graeber puts money, rather than production, at the centre of his long term history. The history he tells is very much a Eurasian one. It begins with the use of “virtual credit money”, exemplified by the records found on cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia around 3500 BCE. This is already an era of markets, in which human beings themselves are increasingly transacted as commodities. Slavery and violence are, in Graeber's account, crucial to the transition from earlier forms of “human economy” (in which value emerged out of human relations through gift exchange) to impersonal market economies.

This phase of world history, in which commodity economies begin to challenge and subvert human economies, is hardly unique to Eurasia. Graeber adduces many examples from Africa and elsewhere. His narrative becomes more specifically Eurasian from around 800 BCE when, in the course of the Axial Age, coins and precious metals begin to replace earlier credit instruments. This era extends in Graeber's schema through to 600 CE, by which time Islam is up and running as the third of the great Abrahamic faiths. It is an age in which the ideology of the market is ascendant, and yet simultaneously the new religions with their novel moral codes ensure the creation of a space for altruistic transfers or charity, contradicting the logic of the market.

Graeber's dialectic between "bullion" and credit money continues through the Middle Ages, a category which he applies right across Eurasia. After 1500 the rise of the European empires ushered in a renewed dependence on silver and gold, which persisted until late in the twentieth century. Religious restraints on market logic weakened, while violence and plunder increased. Contrary to previous eras in which credit money was more significant than metal, in our neoliberal age of virtual money there is as yet no sign of a jubilee to benefit those at the bottom of the hierarchy. This is the context in which Graeber argues not for socialist transformation (which has been tried and obviously failed) but for a thorough-going anarchism, to establish conditions in which all citizens can practise "everyday communism".

Although Eurasian societies feature prominently in Graeber's 500 pages, the term itself is not mentioned. Civilization is introduced only once: the evolutionist, universalist definition advanced by the *philosophes* in pre-revolutionary France is firmly rejected. Compared to Gellner and Wolf, David Graeber makes more use of (other anthropologists') ethnographic materials to illustrate his arguments. Europe is significantly less dominant in this version of big history; but the imposition of a European temporality on the rest of Eurasia and the world is questionable to say the least.

### ***Jack Goody (1919 – 2015)***

I shall dwell longer on the work of Jack Goody, because in my opinion he offers more balanced and fertile foundations for a new macro-level historical anthropology than any of the other anthropologists I have discussed.<sup>4</sup> After re-reading various works of Goody since his passing, my respect for the way in which he connects anthropology to big history has deepened.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, whereas each of the others I have considered presented his views in a single-volume synthesis, Goody's contributions are more fragmented. Moreover he is not always more precise than Ernest Gellner when it comes to dates. After summarising his arguments, in the following section I shall develop a critique.

Jack Goody began his career as an ethnographer of the acephalous, non-literate LoDagaa of northern Ghana in 1950 when this country was still a British colony called the Gold Coast. Two themes emerged from this fieldwork to shape many of his later influential

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<sup>4</sup> Goody was Gellner's immediate predecessor as Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge. Second disclosure: he was my doctoral adviser and I knew him quite well over many decades. See Hann 2017b for an extensive memoir in which I elaborate and provide references for the arguments outlined below.

<sup>5</sup> See Hart 2015 for an insightful analysis of Goody's late work.

contributions. One was the accident that allowed him to commit to paper a long myth of the LoDagaa (knowledge of which was secret and restricted to members of the Bagre association). In later field research in the 1960s Goody recorded the myth again using modern equipment. Not only did the technology affect the way in which the myth was narrated, but Goody realised that the content had changed significantly in just a few years. It became clear to him that literacy as a “technology of the intellect” enabled a more systematic approach to knowledge than was possible through oral transmission alone. The gradual spread of different forms of writing became the core of Goody’s critique of the structuralist binary of Claude Lévi-Strauss between “hot” societies with a history and “cold” societies outside it (a dichotomy basically congruent with the old German distinction between *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker*). In place of such binaries, and the structuralist predilection for logical games, Goody argued for more careful attention to divergent historical paths, as shaped by the mode of communication (Goody 1977).

But the means of communication were insufficient to construct a comprehensive philosophy of history. Goody agreed with Gellner that the *means of destruction* were also of great importance (in West Africa this meant paying attention to the use of horses as weapons, and later to guns). But the *means of production* were more important still. In his field research Goody (advised by Meyer Fortes) did not pay close attention to economy. He did, however, note a distinction between two local communities (LoWilli and LoDagaba) in terms of the way movable property was transmitted between generations. Among the former all assets were transmitted through the patriline, but among the latter, movable goods were passed down through matrilineal kin groups, thus institutionalising a principle of double descent. Goody never solved the local puzzle within the LoDagaa communities; but these observations led him to reflect on the importance of property transmission on a larger scale, and eventually to contrast the patterns of Europe and Asia on the one hand with those of sub-Saharan Africa on the other. From the perspective of an ethnographer of Ghana, the differences within Eurasia were insignificant. Thus the “woman’s property complex” (or “diverging devolution”) was found throughout the agricultural empires of Eurasia (Goody 1990). It was exemplified in the prevalence of dowry, a “vertical” form of pre-mortem inheritance, whereas the transfer of bridewealth “horizontally” between kin groups was the characteristic form of marriage payment in Africa. The deeper cause for differences in the mode of inheritance lay in the material base: whereas the plough became the dominant technology of agriculture in Eurasia, cultivation in sub-Saharan Africa relied primarily on the simpler technology of the digging stick, which allowed women to play prominent roles in production. In Africa, land was

available in abundance but surpluses were small and social stratification was weak or non-existent. This contrasted with larger surpluses and more differentiated societies, characterized by fine cultural discrimination, in the cities of Bronze Age Eurasia. Goody had discovered the “urban revolution of the Bronze Age” when reading the archaeologist Gordon Childe in the library of the prisoner-of-war camp in Eichstätt during the Second World War. Though he later criticised the unilineal evolutionism of the Marxist prehistorian, he accepted the fundamentals of Childe’s account (which derived ultimately from Lewis Henry Morgan). For Goody as for his illustrious predecessors, the “rise of civilization” meant the emergence of stratified urban societies in prehistory.

These comparative arguments were comprehensively outlined with respect to the “domestic domain” in a succinct work which drew on George Peter Murdock’s *Human Relations Area Files* to complement the results of decades of field research that Jack and Esther Newcomb Goody had undertaken in Ghana (Goody 1976). At this stage in his career, Goody was no longer very active as a fieldworker. While distancing himself from the neo-Marxist currents popular in this era (and enthusiastically embraced by Eric Wolf), he nonetheless concludes his statistical path analysis by attaching primacy to the economy. Causality flows in the main from agricultural technology to modes of property transmission, and then on to marriage patterns and finally to kinship terminologies, the most “dependent” variable.<sup>6</sup>

In the last decades of his long life, Goody returned to Gordon Childe in countless articles and books critiquing Eurocentric theories of modernity. He argued, contrary to the dominant European theories, that Chinese merchants were using sophisticated techniques to deploy “capital” for long-distance commercial activities in the Indian Ocean world long before western Eurasians (Iberians and Northern Europeans) had embarked on their own processes of expansion. It was therefore a mistake to seek the origins of capitalism in sixteenth century European religious doctrines (Weber) or fourteenth century European financial practices (Braudel). It was no less inadequate to begin the narrative of modernity with the European Renaissance, or with later scientific and industrial revolutions, since all

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<sup>6</sup> For a summary visual representation of the path analysis see Goody 1976: 39. Although kinship was a field to which Goody had made many contributions, the distinction between the classificatory patterns of sub-Saharan Africa and the more individualising or “isolating” terminologies of societies practising plough agriculture was hardly new. The connection between “descriptive” terminology and the inheritance of property had been noted by Morgan more than a century before (*ibid*: 19).

these phenomena had their equivalents in the Orient. According to Goody, it is necessary to recognize “alternating leadership” between East and West, and structural commonalities in economy and society across the entire landmass of preindustrial Eurasia (Goody 2010). In these later works, the specification of causal chains through statistical analysis gives way to more open-ended enquiries into particular aspects of culture. The general framework is still that of Childe; Eurasian urbanised societies are characterized by a high degree of literacy and proto-bourgeois connoisseurship. In laying down these foundations for a new historical anthropology, Goody was critical not just of the Western periodization of history (especially the transitions into and out of feudalism) but of Western social theory in general.<sup>7</sup>

Given the breadth of Goody’s compass, it was inevitable that some authors and themes would receive more attention than others. His work on the mode of communication and his contributions to studies of the “domestic domain” are likely to stand the test of time. These remain important areas in which future anthropological work can contribute to the writing and refinement of world history. But certain areas are neglected. First, for all his concern to highlight the causal significance of plough agriculture, Goody’s engagement with economy neglected production and more generally what might be termed the political economy of what he termed (mimicking the Eurocentric historians) the “Eurasian miracle”. Second, Goody’s antipathy toward considering religion as a causal variable, which dates back to his first fieldwork in Ghana, leads him to neglect the significance of what has been termed the “religio-political nexus” (Arnason 2013) in the legitimation of power. If these two weaknesses can be addressed, we shall be in a position not only to operationalize Jack Goody’s “big picture” historical anthropology for preindustrial Eurasia, but to apply it to our own moment in history.

## **Historical Economic Anthropology in Eurasia: the Great Dialectic**

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<sup>7</sup> It was not his intention to “bash Europe”. In his most sustained scholarly elaborations of the argument, he shows respect for the major Western scholars he considered responsible for the “theft” of the history of the rest of Eurasia (Goody 1996, 2006). The exception is Norbert Elias, where personal animosities following encounters in Ghana led to an emphatically negative judgement.

Goody was respectful of the work of Eric Wolf (though not of world systems theory) and also that of his Cambridge successor Ernest Gellner; however, the latter was criticized for an “essentialist”, Eurocentric bias (Goody 2012: 298-9)

So strongly did Jack Goody's contrast between Eurasia and sub-Saharan Africa emphasize the technological base of the economy that neo-Marxist critics sometimes accused him of "vulgar materialism". He responded by suggesting that those who privileged the relations of production at the expense of the forces (material conditions) were "vulgar idealists" (Goody 1980). But to note the impact of the plough and the changing role of women as "hoe culture" is supplanted by more intensive agriculture were hardly original contributions; similar points had been made by numerous earlier scholars.<sup>8</sup> Goody did not follow the numerous Germans and Austrians who had paid close attention to work (Spittler 2008); nor was he persuaded by contemporary neo-Marxists seeking to operationalize the concept of mode of production. Instead, in most of his later publications he was content to privilege the realm of exchange. In this respect he resembles David Graeber, though Goody emphasizes the steady expansion of "merchant cultures" rather than a dialectical theory of money.

Karl Polanyi, too, was often criticised for neglecting production and privileging exchange. Goody was dismissive of Polanyi's "substantivist" economic anthropology, with its roots in the writings of the German Historical School. He argued to the end of his life that the substantivist categories were "misleading" because grounded in an ahistorical, anti-market philosophy (Goody 2006: 41-4; 2012: 280-1). But it is unfair to caricature Polanyi as a romantic who denies the necessity for markets. Market exchange is one of the main "forms of integration" of the economy for the substantivists. While recognizing the historical expansion of impersonal forms of exchange, it is possible at the same time to attend to the ways in which commercial relations are shaped and regulated, both by state institutions and through evolving moral norms. In this respect, David Graeber is a more interesting guide than Goody. But Graeber sees only the repressive aspect of the state. Both he and Goody overlook Polanyi's notion of "redistribution". This was put forward as a second form of integration (Polanyi 1944, 1957). In Polanyi's typology, forms of integration (his third type is the highly problematic "reciprocity") co-exist, but one is dominant. For him, redistribution is a type exemplified by centralized chiefdoms. But what if we extend it to cover increasingly inclusive forms of societal redistribution in Eurasia from the Axial Age onwards, from the charity inspired by new religious precepts in *Agraria* to the taxation-based redistribution implemented in *Industria* through the welfare state?

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<sup>8</sup> Especially in the German ethnological tradition; Goody was familiar with the work of Hermann Baumann (Baumann 1928) but in his definitive work in this field (Goody 1976) he prefers to cite the later work of development economist Ester Boserup.

Although Polanyi himself did not engage with long-term historical or evolutionary arguments, it can be fruitful to approach the history of the last three millennia in terms of a tension between the principles of market and redistribution. Perhaps it is possible to speak of a great dialectic. I hesitate to demarcate epochs of Eurasian history in the way that Graeber periodizes according to the monetary form; the demarcations are bound to vary from one macro-region to another. But a case can be made that twentieth century socialism represented the culmination of efforts to subordinate the commercial principle (not new, but massively boosted by industrial capitalism) to the principle of redistribution, based on communitarian ethical foundations. Some form of socialism, whether Maoist, Marxist-Leninist, or “electoral” (Goody 2003), dominated across the entire Eurasian landmass until the 1980s. In the last half century the principle of the market has made a strong recovery, (notably in the United States, where the values of a universalist welfare state were never embraced). It looks likely that post-Brexit Britain will lurch further in this direction. But even the European Union that Britain is in the process of leaving today is far less redistributive (either within its member states or between them) than EU leaders envisaged a mere generation ago. In the present conjuncture the forms of redistribution urged by Polanyi (and also John Maynard Keynes and many others) are threatened by a dramatic swing of the pendulum away from community towards individualist, pro-market ideologies. These remarks might appear far-removed from the historical anthropology of preindustrial Eurasia. But my point is that the increasingly fragile institutions of “social Europe” need to be placed in the context of the long-term history of “social Eurasia”, an aspect missing in Goody’s treatment.

A second weakness in Jack Goody’s historical anthropology is the neglect of religion and its socio-political implications. This can be traced all the way back to his doctoral fieldwork, when he was unable to confirm those theories (stemming from Durkheim and Fustel de Coulanges) that privileged ancestor worship as an ultimate cause of group cohesion and social organization. He also rejected Max Weber’s argument concerning the importance of Protestant doctrines for the genesis and expansion of modern capitalism. Goody does not succeed in reconciling the “internal” oscillation he detects in the world religions (between periods of zeal that limit the scope for advancing scientific knowledge and periods of tolerance which allow religious institutions and their specialists to innovate in secular spheres) with long-term “alternating leadership” between East and West (Goody 2010). He paid little attention to the new forms of “jealous God” (Gellner 1988) which emerged in the Axial Age and to the role of this deity in legitimating new forms of hierarchical but simultaneously redistributive and inclusive polity. Yet, as emphasized by Graeber, religious ideologies of

selflessness and justice arose in response to market ideologies of profit, and thus fed in to the great dialectic identified above. From this angle, socialism can be located in the tradition of the world religions: one which brought the transcendental to earth in a novel way, by proclaiming that correction of the evident abuses of unequal human society could be attained on this earth.

These heady, speculative connections, like my references above to contemporary politics, are anathema to ethnographers of the Malinowski or Boas ilk. But the macro hypotheses that emerge from this kind of historical anthropology can be helpful at the micro level as well. I have stressed the example of socialism because I have done most of my own field research in countries which claimed to be socialist, or to have been socialist in the recent past. I worked in villages in Hungary and Poland, where central planning and class-based ideologies legitimating collective ownership clashed with the evolved institutions of market economy and private property. I found that the “market socialism” implemented in Hungary following the reforms of the 1960s worked a great deal better than socialism in Poland or any other country of the region. “Goulash socialism” represented a combination in Polanyi’s homeland of the redistributive and market exchange forms of integration. In Hungary and elsewhere, well-documented nostalgia for the sociality of the brigade, the security of employment, and gender policies, suggest that overall the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist (M-L-M) variants of socialism were not as bleakly oppressive as their political opponents have painted them. Coordinated team projects of the kind we have organized at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in the last two decades can provide a basis for cautious generalization about the limitations of both (neoliberal) capitalism and (M-L-M) socialism in their more ideological variants.<sup>9</sup> These ethnographic investigations document particular instances of (and local commentaries on) the great dialectic identified above. The dialectic continues to unfold, sometimes in surprising ways. In East Asia, for example, in large countries that still claim to be socialist, although the market principle has expanded dramatically since the 1980s, the state is currently extending welfare provision in ways comparable to the redistributive schemes of social democracy in Western Eurasia (Europe) in earlier generations (Endres and Hann 2017).

## **Civilizations in Eurasia**

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.eth.mpg.de/>



Can M-L-M socialism, which in the previous section I suggested might be categorized as a new form of religion, also be considered as a *civilization*? As noted, this concept does not feature significantly in the mature anthropological work of any of the four scholars I have discussed (it was considered seriously only by Eric Wolf, but he abandoned it in the 1960s). Jack Goody distinguishes on occasion between a “popular” use of the term to assert one’s own superiority over the other, and a defensible scientific use in which civilization refers to an evolutionary stage or a type of society, defined by a list of criteria. The archaeologist Gordon Childe offered such a list and Goody was generally willing to follow this usage. At the same time, like many other scholars, he occasionally writes casually about Eurasian agrarian civilizations in the plural.<sup>10</sup>

The term is obviously contested and loaded, but it has a rich tradition in historical sociology (Arnason 2003, 2018a, b). Johann Arnason makes a strong case for salvaging the plural definition. His “civilizational analysis” draws on a multiple sources, notably sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt’s notion of a “civilizational dimension”:

the civilizational dimension of human societies involves the intertwining of cultural visions of the world with institutional frameworks of social life, and thus, more specifically, with forms of social power. Civilizational analysis is, first and foremost, the comparative study of such configurations. (Arnason 2018a: 1)

The concept of civilization, these sociologists argue, is needed to complement the notions of “society” and “culture” in the repertoire of the social sciences. All of these terms have problematic value-laden associations (culture and society are suspect due to the slippage which results nowadays in their being identified with the “nation-state”). For Arnason, the richest charter for the civilizational approach is the skimpy but seminal work of Durkheim and Mauss a century ago (see Schlanger 2006). The French sociologists drew on German ethnological sources but offered much more than the *Kulturgeschichte* approach of the museologists Fritz Graebner and Bernhard Ankermann. Rather than mapping the diffusion of artefacts in order to identify culture areas or *Kulturkreise*, Durkheim and Mauss emphasized the integration of communities. Their concept of *civilisation* was put forward to complement their foundational concept of society (Arnason: 2018b). Civilizations are to be understood as

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Goody nowhere pays serious attention to advanced forms of agriculture outside Eurasia. He criticises “deterministic” attempts to explain the unique developments of Eurasia through geography and ecology, notably those of Jared Diamond. See Goody 1998: 16-21.

“families of societies”); their form and scale are continuously changing, both through internal developments and as a result of inter-civilizational encounters. In the societies outside Eurasia considered by Durkheim and Mauss, drawing on data provided by pioneer ethnographers, this cohesion was provided by religion. It is no coincidence that the first programmatic statement of Durkheim and Mauss on civilization was published at the same time as Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

But the French sociological concept of *civilisation* was not meant to be restricted to the preliterate societies studied by ethnologists. Mauss and Durkheim proposed a universal tool, one that could also be applied where quite different forms of social life and religion had emerged, accessible to us through written sources. Following them, we might set about tracing a large number of *civilisations* in Eurasia, from reindeer herders in the far north to hunter-gatherers and swidden cultivators in the tropical zones, with shifting configurations of agro-literate empires and city-states in between. This generalization of the concept opens up a vast field of enquiry for anthropologists to document both the internal dynamics of these formations and inter-civilizational encounters. This usage is obviously very different from the old evolutionist concept; it presupposes nothing as far as directionality is concerned, and has no obvious purchase on the kinds of questions that animate global history.

By contrast, other scholars continue to restrict the notion of civilization to complex formations exhibiting features such as urbanization and literacy. For example, Bruce Trigger (2003) has proposed a concept of “early civilization”.<sup>11</sup> Rather than offer a list of criteria in the manner of Gordon Childe, Trigger proposes that early civilization “be summarily defined as the earliest and simplest form of *class-based* society” (2003: 46; italics in original). His examples range from ancient Mesopotamia to the Yoruba kingdom of Southwestern Nigeria in the nineteenth century. His latest Eurasian example of an early civilization is Northern China (Western Zhou) in the first centuries of the first millennium BCE.<sup>12</sup>

Neither Trigger’s sampling of early civilizations from around the world nor a juxtaposition within the Eurasian landmass of every imaginable type of “family of societies”

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<sup>11</sup> Compared with the examples discussed by Durkheim and Mauss, the formations in question might more appropriately be called “late”. In any case, Trigger’s use of “early civilization” is explicitly evolutionist. “It assumes the existence of less complex societies, some of which developed into early civilizations, and more complex ones, which either developed out of early civilizations or grew up alongside of and ultimately replaced them” (2003: 40).

<sup>12</sup> Shnirelmann (1989) is a comparable study that analyses the emergence of primary centres of food production in other parts of the world and rejects the Eurasia-centrism of Childe.

in the manner of Marcel Mauss offer a helpful starting point for anthropologists wishing to engage with global historians in accounting for “modernity”. We can, of course, learn a great deal from ethnohistorical and archaeological reconstructions of the movement of people and ideas among even the most remote populations. Ultimately, the history of our species hangs together. The “hot” agro-literate societies of Eurasia were never hermetically cut off from their “cold” neighbours. Moreover it is well-documented that the interconnectivity of Eurasian *Agraria* was crucially mediated by civilizations with radically different forms of economy and polity, notably Mongolian pastoral nomads (Arnason 2015, Sneath 2007). Nevertheless, in the light of what was argued in the previous section, following Childe and Goody, I argue that the new dynamic or great dialectic is fundamentally a product of stratified, centralized agrarian polities. The key elements that receive insufficient attention in their accounts are political economy and religion. When due account is taken of the Axial Age literature (Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrok 2005), it makes sense to introduce a distinction between early civilizations and those later social formations in Eurasia in which the “civilizational dimension” was determined primarily by a world religion.<sup>13</sup> The dangers inherent in this approach are obvious, especially given the current geopolitical climate in which closed, religion-based civilizations are commonly held to be the root cause of terrorist violence and intolerance more generally. Yet to foreground religion is consistent with Durkheim and Mauss, who frequently imply a “privileged relationship” between a *civilisation* and its religious forms (Arnason 2018b).<sup>14</sup>

When this religion-inflected concept of civilization is grafted on to the historical economic anthropology outlined above, the question arises as to how far it is permissible to speak of common *Eurasian civilization*. Has the civilizational pluralism that characterized *Agraria* across Eurasia, which through “alternating leadership” eventually gave rise to modern *Industria*, now been replaced by a far-reaching consensus on such fundamental cultural and institutional matters as inclusive citizenship? My proposal is that the economies, polities and religions of Eurasia interacted in the course of what I have termed the great dialectic to produce something unique that by no means dissolved earlier civilizational differences, notably religious markers, but did at least greatly diminish their significance. David Graeber argues that the expansion of impersonal markets was only made possible by

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<sup>13</sup> The concept is associated primarily with Max Weber, who in addition to *Weltreligion* made frequent use of *Kulturwelt* (this was the closest he came to embracing a concept of civilization – see Arnason 2018a).

<sup>14</sup> One form of this privileged relationship was the ritual and ideology that accompanied the civilization of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialism discussed above. If that civilization is generally considered to have failed, Scandinavian social democracy surely represents a more successful variant.

state power, based ultimately on control of violence. But rather than sweeping both state and market aside in a utopian anarchy of “everyday communism”, socialist and social democratic redistribution in Eurasia in recent generations can be viewed as the culmination of a long-term ratcheting upwards of democratic polities with strong welfare states. From this point of view, social democracy is a form of secular religion rooted in common values and a *balance* between the principles of market and redistribution in which neither exercised Polanyian dominance.

But this balance and these values are currently threatened. The wealthiest country in the world is not capable of establishing a redistributive welfare state that would satisfy the minimal expectations of Eurasian citizens. It is doubtless too simple to suggest that the US under President Donald Trump has abandoned its Eurasian civilizational heritage. The market-individualist elements emphasized by the mainstream of the Republican Party were a part of the great dialectic in the Old World. We cannot exclude the possibility that these elements (to which Gellner (1994) attaches the name of Friedrich Hayek) will eventually triumph in Eurasia too. They are antithetical to the “social Eurasia” elements on which I have focused, the principles which receive support from field research in the postsocialist era, and to which I attach the name of Karl Polanyi. Perhaps the most likely scenario is that this great dialectic, which inaugurated the transition to what many scholars now recognise as the era of the Anthropocene (Hann 2017a), will continue for some time yet, albeit in new forms.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is based on the premise that anthropologists can make distinctive contributions to wider historiographical debates concerning the emergence of the globalized world of today, without losing their identity as anthropologists. This is not to belittle the value of other kinds of historical anthropology, such as those which focus on specific cultural encounters in particular places and epochs. Many instructive lessons may emerge from the structuralist ethnohistory of Marshall Sahlins in Polynesia. The *Kulturgeschichte* of Fritz Graebner (1911) laid out a methodology that has proved useful to later ethnographers (e.g. Schlee 1989); it should not be repudiated simply because it was abused by some later practitioners of *Kulturkreislehre*. But I have focused on a macro-level dynamism that cannot be captured through diffusionist classifications and cartography. World (or global) history is an exciting field but even its most influential practitioners have remained in thrall to Western and Euro-

American narratives. Anthropological approaches in the spirit of Jack Goody (who began his career as an Africanist) can help to correct this bias.

To privilege three thousand years of agrarian empires in Eurasia rather than five or six hundred years of European history is to adopt a different stance from that which has dominated historiography and the modern social sciences. But with every year that passes, evidence from Asia suggests that even the “great divergence” (Pomeranz 2000) that opened up in the nineteenth century did not disturb the long-run model of alternation between East and West. The temporal schema of Goody’s “Eurasian miracle” is long, but it is shorter than that of David Graeber, who begins his history of debt and commodity economies many centuries earlier. Gordon Childe’s urban revolution has somewhat different dates in different regions. It was well under way five thousand years ago in Mesopotamia, Graeber’s baseline. However, the early Eurasian civilizations enter a more advanced phase towards the end of the Bronze Age. Diversity persists, both in terms of culture and institutions, but following the “urban revolution” these Eurasian civilizations exhibit ever more commonalities. There is a steady intensification of inter-civilizational connectivity, with occasional regressions, but a long-term upward spiralling. The centuries before and after the onset of the Iron Age (in Europe around 1200 BCE) witness a steady advance in terms of Childe’s technical criteria for civilization (including literacy). The onset of the Axial Age a few centuries later is crucial, because the new patterns of society and political economy were embedded in new beliefs and values. The great dialectic of market and redistribution which has produced the world that seven billion humans share in the early twenty-first century derives from this Eurasian history. Certainly, the Eurasian landmass is inhabited by many other civilisations in the Maussian sense; certainly “early civilizations” developed in many locations outside Eurasia; but these never became so interconnected and they did not develop comparable institutions and ideological systems.

The concept of civilization can thus be operationalised by anthropologists in a variety of ways. It can be used in a relativizing plural sense in the spirit of Mauss for the entire range of human societies. Anthropologists will continue to collaborate with archaeologists, linguists and other scholars to analyse both intra-civilizational relations and inter-civilizational encounters. Multiple civilizations can intermingle within a common territory. The traditions of diffusionist theory remain useful for this work. But the term civilization can also be used with reference to more limited sets, such as that identified by Bruce Trigger, or earlier by Max Weber with reference to the world religions. In the epoch privileged by Childe and Goody it is

possible to identify a new type of agro-literate civilization across the Eurasian landmass, the dynamics of which eventually changed the complexion not just of this landmass but of the planet. Goody's quest for "the origins of the modern world" (Goody 2012) is thus relevant to problems facing humanity in the era of the Anthropocene .

It remains only to clarify that "Eurasian civ" in my title is not a misprint. The vulgar abbreviation of "civilization" was popularized (so I am told by graduates of universities in the United States) through introductory courses titled "Western civ". Generations of North American students (including anthropologists) were taught to understand their own position in the world as the culmination of a narrative that celebrated the uniqueness of "the West". This is the teleological narrative against which Jack Goody crusades. In this paper I have been critical of his failure to integrate a comprehensive historical economic anthropology and the Axial Age literature into his analyses. Yet Goody's general approach to comparative big history is consistent with the civilizational analysis of the historical sociologist Arnason. Both scholars are careful to avoid a deterministic master variable, preferring to leave plenty of room for contingency and multiple pathways. I conclude that more systematic attention to civilization, beliefs and values as well as institutions and political economy, is the most promising way to promote the cross-fertilization of anthropology, comparative sociology and world history in years to come. The history of our discipline offers many useful foundations; at the same time, anthropological perspectives on the big picture can be continuously invigorated by field research at the micro level.

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