

On Eurasia and Europe*

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Abstract: This paper sets out to discuss the objects/areas/models/notions of Europe and Eurasia from the standpoint of a critical historical anthropology, in order to assess their intellectual usefulness, heuristic validity, and correspondence to actual social and historical realities. This will be done through reviewing and assessing the concept of Eurasia as it is developed in the recent works of Chris Hann. By confronting his arguments, I will articulate why the notion of Eurasia and its ontological status in this form is not entirely conceptually and historically convincing, even if it is thought-provoking (or even politically desirable). I will explain why considering Europe as a part of a macro-region – instead of as a macro-region itself – is not convincing, and thereby reaffirm the specificities which make Europe a discernible object/area/model/notion of historical-anthropological study; specificities that for the time being prove it heuristically unsuitable and unsustainable to substitute the notion of Europe with that of Eurasia (or “Western Eurasia”), as Chris Hann seems to advocate.

Keywords: Europe, Eurasia, Asia, Civilization

Introduction

Over the last few years, there has been a revival of the notion of Eurasia, certainly in the fields of economics and politics, but especially within the academy. In Europe, this academic revival has had a precise epistemological framework: historical anthropology; and a precise protagonist: Chris Hann.

Hann is an eminent voice in current anthropological debate. He is the director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, which in the last 15 years has produced excellent historical and anthropological knowledge, especially about Europe and Asia. One of the research foci of the Institute is in fact currently the history, archeology, and anthropology of the Eurasian landmass.

A recent visiting fellowship sparked my interest in the debate around the concept of Eurasia and pushed me to articulate my position in relation to it. After reading Hann’s works on Eurasia, I found myself in disagreement with his assertive (“imperative”, in his own words) notion of Eurasia. As a student of what I like to call the historical anthropology of Europe, I decided to write this critical piece as a reaction not only to some of Hann’s arguments, but also to reaffirm and develop some of the reasons why Europe should not be given up – or underestimated – as a distinctive object/ area/ model/ notion.

In other words, I will make clear my own arguments supporting a “reaction” that Hann has already encountered, as he observes in a recent publication: “Other social scientists and historians suspect me of ‘Europe bashing’. Any relativizing of unique accomplishments, for example by suggesting that Europe might be more fruitfully analyzed historically as Western Eurasia, is seen in some quarters as a heresy. [...] The reactions of fellow anthropologists to my Eurasianism vary from polite tolerance of my eccentricities (e.g. my

penchant for the concept of civilization, which is of course open to debate) to emphatic rejection on the grounds that these constellations in Europe and Asia have nothing to do with the traditional subject matter of socio-cultural anthropologists. The majority, at least in the Anglo-sphere (which maintains a peculiar hegemony thanks in part to the simplicity and versatility of the English language), has difficulty in addressing a historical Eurasia.” (Hann 2014a, 66)

I do not come from the Anglo-sphere, and I come from historical studies, but I have no difficulty in addressing historical Eurasia. Furthermore, as far as I know, the palpable nervousness and uneasiness of other colleagues for Hann’s “Eurasianism” has not produced, so far, and at least to my knowledge, a piece of writing directly addressing his main arguments. This is, therefore, one of the aims of this article.

The publications I will address are some programmatic works Hann has recently published about Eurasia: 1) a chapter published in *The Anthropology of Europe* edited by Peter Skalník (Hann 2005); 2) another chapter recently published in the collective book *A Companion to the Anthropology of Europe* (2012), 3) the Max Planck Institute Working Paper “Towards a Maximally Inclusive Concept of Eurasia” (2014b); 4) the very recent and short manifesto: “Imperative Eurasia” (2014c); 5) The research project presentation “Realising Eurasia: Moral Economy and Civilisational Pluralism in the Twenty-First Century” (2014a); 6) and most recently: “REALEURASIA: The research group and the point of departure” (2014d).

The Historical Anthropology of Eurasia

As an anthropologist with an academic background in history (of religions), I have been positively impressed by Chris Hann’s historical-anthropological method. I applaud his declension of historical anthropology and his way of linking general economic patterns with historical developments in a way that strongly reminds me of Eric Wolf’s and Jack Goody’s research methods. I share his epistemological standpoint, which can be summarized with his proposing (I quote) “an alternative vision of the discipline [anthropology] in which anthropologists pay equal attention to other epochs and other forms of imperialism, and, together with archaeologists, sociologists and global historians, seeks to develop a truly comparative science of humanity” (Hann 2014b, 22).

That said, it is not always clear to what extent, in Hann’s thought, long-lasting (*long-durée*) similarities in modes and patterns of production, labor-relations, and state-models can help us to explain the huge cultural (or “superstructural”, if one prefers) differences that manifestly have divided and continue to divide Eurasian peoples today. In other words, one might be cautious about this new historical anthropology of Eurasia because of the possible underestimation of genuinely distinctive cultural trends and features, especially in their interconnections with economic, material, and/or institutional aspects. It is Hann himself who admits this aspect of his doing and leading research into Eurasia: “Rejecting the notion of continental difference, the project emphasizes connections and the ultimate unity of the Eurasian landmass in recent millennia” (Hann 2014a: 59). However, the main purpose of this paper is not to review Hann’s method, which has developed over more than three decades of research, but to express reservations about his conclusions and his general proposal about

Eurasia as a heuristic and holistic model. Following from this, it is crucial to examine the relationship between the two concepts of Europe and Eurasia.

Proposing a few arguments in favor of a non-imperative use of the notion of Eurasia, and also in favor of a critical use of Europe, I will try to link these ideas to the contents of Hann's publications. I will remain grounded in anthropological and historical considerations, theories, and conclusions, and not – or only incidentally – in the political ones, which actually populate many pages of Hann's writings, and especially almost half of his most important publications on the matter to date: "Towards a Maximally Inclusive Concept of Eurasia."

Another general and necessary remark concerns the ideal addressees and even the very scope of Hann's work on Eurasia. In principle, that of the strong and mutually influential connectedness of Eurasian cultures is a theory or a working hypothesis to be proved; however, it has not been presented as such in the majority of Hann's writings. In fact, the research project ("REALEURASIA"), which is at the base of Hann's late insistence and acceleration on the necessity of adopting the notion of Eurasia on a wider level is only the final component of a research apparatus which sometimes appears to have been completed before the emergence of the research project.

In fact, even though REALEURASIA is presented as a research project in progress, and as a heuristic hypothesis, in the texts under discussion here, Hann's arguments and considerations are more assertive and sometimes even conclusive than conjectural. This could be just a rhetorical strategy, but in my opinion, the way he discusses the data and the empirical evidence in these writings is not typical of hypothesizing. Nowhere have I found a statement along the lines of questioning his idea of what Eurasia is or should be. And this applies not only to the content of these writings, but also to their titles, which hardly suggest any doubt about the object in question (think about "Imperative Eurasia", for instance, or even "REALEURASIA" itself). This is evident even in a paper that should be manifestly preliminary like "REALEURASIA: The research group and the point of departure" (Hann 2014d). This paper shows rather openly that the aim of the research group is basically to confirm Hann's assumptions, and that Eurasia is treated more like a given to be confirmed than a hypothesis to be tested: a given that exists as an entity endowed of a proper unity which is not only geographical, but also cultural. It is not a coincidence, then, that we find the same "working" concepts and ideas already fully developed in his 2005 and 2012 chapters.

Since Hann's assumptions are often presented as conclusions, instead of as hypotheses – with the partial exception of the last paper, "REALEURASIA: The research group and the point of departure," in the writing of which Hann could have arguably taken into consideration some of the criticism which he has been subjected to after the recent publication of "Towards a Maximally Inclusive Concept of Eurasia."

Historical, Religious, and Geographical Dimensions

Chris Hann's idea of what Eurasia is, and the tools he has used to construct it, have been basically shaped by four theoretical and methodological matrices: "'civilisation' in the universal spirit of Marcel Mauss; [...] Max Weber's work on 'world religions' [...] and *Wirtschaftsethik*" (Hann 2014d, pages not numbered); the concept of moral economy as developed by E. Thompson; and, probably the major source of inspiration, the work and

thought of Jack Goody, an intellectual milestone frequently mentioned by the author¹. I will later address the notion of Eurasia that results from the synergy of these different sensibilities and the applications of the methods that result from them, but I will start instead by pointing out some flaws that, I think, characterize Hann's standpoint on one of the two elements that form his conception of Eurasia: Europe.

The historical framework that informs much of Hann's theory and definition of Europe in Eurasia is sometimes too simplistic, especially with regard to the (historical) representations of Europe, "Europeanness," and the intellectual legacy of Europe. For example, when he writes that "Much has been done in recent decades to spread awareness of European heritage – a common history that is said to originate in Hellenistic Greece, before transferring to Rome, stalling for roughly a millennium (the 'dark ages'), and then bounding forward into the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the scientific and industrial revolutions which have together contributed to the uniqueness of this continent" (Hann 2014b, 8), he fails to specify that this is not only a "common history" that "is said to" say something, but a historical pattern that would be roughly subscribed to by many – if not most – historians. This level of constructivism in terms of historical data seems to be at odds with Hann's proclaimed hostility towards post-modern and other deconstructivist threads of thought. His position is difficult to accept if we consider its implications, which require a short *detour*: in the last few decades, there has been a tendency in anthropology towards the systematic deconstruction of social things called "narratives" and "discourses." This was part of a broader epistemological and theoretical turn in the field of social sciences. However, it has sometimes had the negative side effect of disqualifying the work of historians, or even openly dismissing it as being the outcome of an operation of reification of the past and of an epistemologically indefensible trust in the sources for the sake of telling something true about it. The opinions on the matter diverge, but my opinion is that historians do not produce only representations, reifications, and poetics of history and memory, but also interpretations of – and an approximation of truth about – what has *actually* happened in times past. Beyond the socially constructed filter of narratives and discourses there is always a thing called reality, and as social scientists what we are supposed to do is, beyond assessing the filter amongst other things, try to grasp that reality. In addition, the historical reality of the process briefly outlined by Hann cannot be questioned and dismissed so easily, as if the agreement of the historians on the development of a "European heritage," as Hann puts it, had only been the result of a reifying speculation.

Another historical flaw in Hann's argumentation concerns the Middle Ages: there is hardly a sole line in his various works that I have read which is devoted to that historical period so commonly associated with European history. My conclusion is that either he voluntarily neglects it for the sake of his argument of Eurasian strong connectedness (unlike the ancient times, the Middle Ages has in fact been a long period of great differentiation between Europe and Asia, as is well known), or he simply underestimates the importance of medieval times. Yet several eminent historians have demonstrated how the Middle Ages has been the cradle of both European identity and of (a sense of) European cultural unity².

As I said, this disinterest for the medieval times is probably motivated by Hann's will of stressing times and patterns that show a greater amount of similarities in Eurasian history. This however reveals a tension in his construction of Eurasia between the diachronic

dimension of a “very” *longue durée* and that of more recent historical times: for Hann, the agrarian revolution that took place millennia ago in Eurasia must be considered as a more unifying factor or element than later religious or cultural “revolutions” that on the contrary set Europe and Asia apart from each other. But on the basis of which scientific principles do we decide which factors were (and are) more unifying or more differentiating than others? Certainly, as Goody teaches us, there are few things in world history as important as the Eurasian revolutions in modes of production and distribution during the Mesolithic, the Neolithic and then in archaic and ancient times, and the social structuring and inventions that resulted from those revolutions (literacy, labor differentiation, urbanism, monotheism, etc.). There is no doubt about that. The problematic point, for me, is that I cannot see how these can constitute better arguments to build up a new idea of Eurasia if set against – or in the light of – more “recent” developments: for instance, those that happened from the late ancient times until the 20th century, when another factor occurred that somewhat unified again, at least politically and economically, some Eurasian lands: communism.

The fact of Hann having mainly worked in and studied post-socialist countries has led him, in my opinion, to overestimate two broad and apparently mutually exclusive dimensions:

First, the indubitable but remote *très longue durée* factors that have associated Eurasians’ cultural and material life in the “deep time” of prehistory (and immediately following millennia). In other words, I think that Hann overestimates the common Eurasian patterns of the times before the end of the ancient world in relation to the present situation – otherwise those patterns are obviously very important and hardly to be ever overestimated if looked at from a historical perspective. Conversely (and coherently), he underestimates the cultural differences that have developed and taken place – and united or divided peoples – in Eurasia in the last 1500 years and especially before the 20th century.

Second, the unifying (past) entity and (current) legacy of the socialist world, conceived, as Milan Kundera once wrote, as both an “Eastern” “block” but also as a “mass” partly enclosing eminently European geo-cultural elements³. I will return to this mark of Hann’s thought later.

Another paradoxical misinterpretation (or rather omission) of historical data seems to characterize Hann’s ideas about religions in Europe and appears manifest in the following statement: “The implicit identification of modern Europe with western Christianity could not be sustained and was definitively abandoned with the accession of two more large Orthodox nations (Romania and Bulgaria) into the European Union in 2007,” (Hann 2014b, 8) in which the author does not consider that this “implicit identification,” surely unsustainable or at least highly problematic today, has nevertheless been *explicitly* advocated by intellectuals and thinkers from the 9th century (at least) until the 21st, and was present, as Jacques Le Goff has very well shown, not only amongst the elites but both in “high culture” and in “popular

culture” already in the late Middle Ages⁴. In short, that “implicit identification” has been at work, if not in 2007 and later, surely during the previous millennium of European history.

This historical fact brings me to another important element of the European identity of heritage that is under question here: that of the “myth of Rome,” which is to say, the declensions of the ideas of Rome (or “Romanness”) as unifying elements in the construction of the idea of Europe (but also, as is well known, for less noble political reasons)⁵. The “myth” is present, although differently declined, from the historical figure said to have been the first “father of Europe,” Charlemagne⁶, through the medieval hegemony of the Papal state, to the Germanic Holy *Roman* Empire, to the Renaissance; from the massive use of a Roman Republican imaginary during the French Revolution and later in the Risorgimento, to the re-interpretation and incorporation of Roman Imperial elements by Nazism and Fascism. Somehow, in all the most important cultural movements and critical moments in European intellectual and political history, some sort of reference to ancient Rome has been made.

Hence, from a purely representational point of view, for the sake of the historical argument, and putting aside the discriminating charge that this consideration bears with respect to the present European Union and its potential new members, European roots are Christian and Roman because for centuries Christianity, “Romanity,” and Europe have been used as homologue concepts or even synonyms, both in Europe as well as outside Europe. To continue with the dendrological metaphors, the roots may not be Christian (or only partly so), and the leaves and upper branches could well be recognized as most surely not, but the trunk definitely is.

Along the same lines, I’m not convinced by Hann’s use of the category of “Western Christianity” (differences between Catholicism[s] and Protestantism[s] can be at least as wide as those between any of them and the Orthodox Church) and by his claim that differences between Islam and Christianity – in the perspective of the *long durée* of course – should be deflated because, as he writes, both systems are “variations of Abrahamic monotheism [which] have common origins in the Near East” (Hann 2014b, 8)⁷. I do understand that, from the author’s perspective, religions – or rather religious or religious-related differences – must be “underestimated” because they constitute the main factors in the construction of Orientalized and Orientalizing representations of Westernness and Easternness (and therefore of Europe and Asia). Besides, by shrinking the differences between the Abrahamic monotheisms to the level of variations of a sole religion, we suddenly have another, quite unexpected element of Eurasian connectedness (the three main monotheisms, which emerged from a single one). However, in my opinion his claim cannot be sustained. “Variations of Abrahamic monotheism” is a weak conceptualization if applied to categorize and define Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (whatever we mean, today, by those terms) because, despite the indubitable common origins, the history, theologies, practices, inner differentiations, moral systems, and world-views of the three Abrahamic monotheisms are so different that no scholar of religion, I believe, would consider them as simple “variations” of a pristine, pre-existing one⁸. The argument is weak if set against historical evidence, but also and probably especially in relationship to contemporary times: the difference between, say, Southern-Italian Catholicism, the Persian Sufi, the Haredi Israelis, and a sect of Ukrainian Satanists are probably as wide as those between any of said religions and non-Abrahamic ones. More concisely: over the last 15 centuries the “variations of Abrahamic monotheism” have

represented and expressed factors of division, and not unification, in/of the Eurasian continent.

Problems come not only with history, but also with geography. In fact, many of the patterns that Hann observes and collects in order to construct his model of Eurasia can be observed also in other, post-colonial contexts, for example in South America⁹. And this without mentioning other, more “cultural” features that mix up and complicate the question of Eurasian connectedness: for example, Argentinian political history, language, religion, literature and “high culture” in general, and state system as well, have much more in common with Spain and Italy than the latter have with China, Vietnam or Mongolia. In this case, historical and cultural (both “material” and “immaterial”) similarities transcend geographical barriers, or better, transcend the ocean, which seems to circumscribe the ideal and material limits of Hann’s Eurasia. Needless to mention the same kind of affinities between countries like Canada and the USA and Great Britain or France – it would be a self-evident and rather trite argument. After all, if in the construction of a newly conceived geo-cultural and geo-political model (Eurasia), it is not a problem to “jump” from Cambodia to Iceland or from Japan to Sardinia, why not “jumping” to the other side of the ocean?

The consideration of these problems brings me to one conclusion: doubtlessly, the “mere” geographical unity of the Eurasian landmass is one of the rather uncontroversial unifying elements that Hann uses to conceptualize and delimit Eurasia. But why should we consider geographical unity more relevant than cultural affinities (or diversities)?

From another point of view, taking into consideration “connectedness” (in general) in the very recent times has become a rather complicated matter, because of the utterly new and unique characteristics of the post-modern world, in which “connectedness” as a category useful for understanding historical phenomena and processes has lost much of its power of explanation (one might go as far as to say that it simply makes very little sense to talk about connectedness in an interconnected, liquid reality where the technologies developed during the late-industrial and post-industrial era have totally changed the very nature of all kinds of connections¹⁰). However, historical arguments do keep their explanatory force: contacts, links and reciprocal influences have happened for millennia in the Eurasian super-continent, but, after all, are these contacts and influences comparable, in nature, number, and depth, to those that in the post-Columbus world (and especially in the last 200 years) have connected Europe and the Americas? After all, a great part of American population is of European origin, whereas the same cannot be said for the peoples living in “Eastern Eurasia.”

In modern times “Western Eurasia” has had at least as many “links” with the Americas as with “Eastern Eurasia,” so why should we accept the prominence of an Eurasian paradigm that emphasizes long-term but loose connectedness over a Western one that emphasizes more recent but stronger affinities? I frankly opt for neither of them, as I consider that of Europe to be a much more convincing and historically-grounded model than both that of “Eurasia” and “the West” (in the “Atlanticist” connotation of the term), despite its inner contradictions and the obvious consideration that all models and paradigms are but a necessarily approximate representation of the realities to which they refer¹¹.

Besides the geographical and historical problems, there is also a methodological one at stake here, namely concerning the extent to which we can stretch and flex historical and geographical elements for contingent interpretative needs. This is, again, very evident if we

consider another example: what about the similarities that “macro-areas” share with other “macro-areas?” Many Indonesian and generally southern-eastern Asian cultural features are, as is well known by anthropologists, linked and related to the Australian islands (Melanesia and Micronesia especially); northern Arabia has always been connected with northern African regions and peoples, and southern Arabia with sub-Saharan ones; the Arctic people of Greenland share much with their relatives in Terranova, Canada, Alaska and even North-eastern Siberia. (Incidentally, the Bering Strait is not mentioned at all in Hann’s articles, which are otherwise so full of contacts). Moreover, what about the Mediterranean, another disputed “cultural macro-area,” about which, both anthropologists and historians have been arguing for decades without coming to any shared conclusions¹²? One might say that agricultural and other remote cultural revolutions, and socialism, are the only relevant factors that Hann considers in his attempt to construct a model of Eurasia – all the others being secondary for him. Anyhow, why claim for an “inclusive” approach (remember Hann’s title: “Towards a Maximally Inclusive Concept of Eurasia”) which, after all, excludes as many areas (if not more) as it includes? It seems to be that such an approach shows a high degree of arbitrariness.

Sometimes, in Hann’s speculation, the geographical dimension clashes helplessly with the historical one. Consider this statement: commenting on the discussions about the “divides” usually evoked in the historical and anthropological debate about Europe and/or Asia, Hann concludes that “yet the unifying core of Eurasian civilisations lay in the central zones” (Hann 2014b, 15). I wonder what he is referring to. What have Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan ever unified? Which “civilisations” (I will soon return to this notion) have these geographical areas (more than the national entities themselves) ever expressed that justify such a radical historical and political statement? What kind of cultural influences have the people who lived and live there ever had on, say, the Japanese or the Flemish people, in the last 2000 years? Even if the Indo-Europeans or the Proto-Indo-Europeans themselves had originated there (which is quite unlikely and surely controversial) some 7000 to 8000 years ago, how would this historical consideration ever be used as an evidence of a “unifying core”?

This leads us to the first set of conclusions. First, in Hann’s studies discussed here, and especially in the most recent ones, there is one thing which is almost never mentioned despite its importance for an anthropological discourse: namely flagrant and deep *cultural differences* amongst Eurasian people¹³; second, cultural differences of course divide European peoples within Europe as well, but these differences are surely not as deep and relevant as those between “Western Eurasians” and “Central” and “Eastern Eurasians.” Even though cultural differences are not “measurable” or completely comparable because they are not made of a quantifiable essence that varies in intensity and degree, so to speak, people nonetheless recognize what is “more different” than something else. As anthropologists, we cannot avoid the methodological imperative of recognizing and explaining cultural differences. There are ways to do so, like that developed and discussed by Christoph Brumann in his well-known paper “Writing for Culture” (Brumann 1999). If we put together cultural traits and features in the schematic manner which he proposed in that article, we would probably see that a certain socially and historically determined number of them (that we could call “cluster[s] of features”) delineate cultural patterns that make it possible to

legitimate an operation that is socially, politically, religiously, and economically done anyway: the making of boundaries. A so-delimited and patterned “European culture” would definitely be less fuzzy and vague, and more theoretically sustainable and discussable. At least, there would be some empirical evidence – albeit “patternized” and schematized – to support the idea of a greater cultural homogeneity or resemblance on a European, rather than Eurasian, scale¹⁴.

As a matter of consequences, if differences do exist, and if we eventually do establish boundaries, areas, and limits anyway, because this is what humans do, , why should we replace a working, reasonable and even, I would say, eminent object/area/model/notion like Europe with another less consistent, more arbitrary and more problematic like that of Eurasia?

One answer can be found in the consideration of one of the purposes (if not the ultimate goal) of the last of Hann’s writings, but also of the REALEURASIA research project itself: not only to establish the theoretical foundations of a new anthropological turn in the study of European and Asian people, but also (or rather mainly) to propose a political and economic solution to destabilize or even overcome global capitalism through the political and economic unification of the super-continent under the sign of the struggle against the free market. This is evident, for example, when he writes, “REALEURASIA will thereby illuminate the prospects for the institutionalization of a long-term unity” (Hann 2014a, 65), and that “it is high time to look beyond Europe and negotiate an epochal compromise with the other macro-regions of Eurasia,” (Hann 2014a, 65)¹⁵ and that in order to challenge neoliberal capitalism. This is not the place, however, to discuss the political breath of Hann’s proposal – to which I frankly I am also inclined – although I will come back to it again towards the end of this article-- for now it is instead necessary to address another very important aspect of Hann’s Eurasia: its “civilizational” dimension.

Civilizations

As already mentioned, the research project that Hann is currently leading is titled “Realising Eurasia: civilisation and moral economy in the 21st century.” The words “civilization” and “civilizational” recur often in the Hann’s writings, especially in those about Eurasia. They have a crucial methodological and theoretical importance in Hann’s thought, up to the point that he has written “The key unit of analysis [of the research project] is ‘civilisation’ in the spirit of Marcel Mauss [...]. Potentially applicable anywhere on the planet, in this project the concept of civilization will be operationalized primarily with reference to religion in the familiar heartlands of Asia and Europe” (Hann 2014a, 59). It is important for Hann to evoke Marcel Mauss because neither of his other main intellectual references developed a theory of civilization or relied substantially on Mauss’ theorization, as Hann openly admits¹⁶. Paradoxically, however, although Hann explains in some length what he means with the notion of civilization and derivative words, his explanation is far from sufficient to justify the heuristically potent use that he exhibits, a use which elevates the civilization/civilizational to the dignity of the main paradigm for comprehending macro-areas on the level of the *longue durée*, and that of Eurasia in particular¹⁷. Furthermore, a tension exists, according to my understanding of Hann’s terminology and theorization, between the

postulated methodological range of the notion of “civilization” and its actual use in the author’s writings.

It is evident as in earlier writings that Hann was seeking a term that would be useful for describing his rediscovered Eurasian unity, but which would also transcend the merely geographical scope of the super-continent, and that at the same time would be less conceptually problematic or controversial than “culture,” “society,” and “civilization” itself. It is in fact he who, at the time, pointed out the risk of using the trite word “civilization”: “*Civility* [author’s emphasis] has an etymology that ties it to a specific part of Eurasia, but ultimately it is a good term to work with because it cannot be reified as a physical, cartographical entity in the way that the moderns concepts of civilisation and culture are routinely abused” (Hann 2006, 12). From “civility,” evidently too ambivalent and even vague, to “civilization,” the step must have been short, especially because shortly afterwards (in the years 2008-2009) he rediscovered Mauss, and then the reading of Mauss by Jóhann P. Arnason.

In the following years and up until the penultimate publication of the works about Eurasia discussed here, Hann has used the word “civilization,” mainly declined in the singular, as a short-cut expression to define Eurasian historical and cultural features and “connectedness” as he sees it. In the very last text, though, the use in the singular has almost disappeared, probably because of the criticism to which, in the meantime, he must have been subject (a criticism which is also openly evoked when he writes that other anthropologists have been skeptical about his “penchant for the concept of civilisation.” (Hann 2014a, 66) In this last text, in fact, we find written that “our project is constructed in such a way as to emphasise the plurality of civilisational traditions in Eurasia over several millennia.” (Hann 2014d, pages not numbered) Both the adjectival (remember A. Appadurai’s famous but rather banal statement?¹⁸) and the plural forms can be read as a concession to the detractors of Eurasia and the notion of “civilization,” although it is my opinion that the phrasing “plurality of civilisational traditions in Eurasia” obscures rather than clarifies the nature and the scope of the “unit” that is sought by the author.

It is no mystery, after all, that since the 1980s anthropology has grown skeptical and more critical of earlier well-established (or at least widely used and abused) notions like culture, society, community, religion, tradition, etc. That of civilization is no exception, and is surely one of those, which have often fallen under the axe of post-structuralist criticism (and sometimes over-criticism). The criticism to a certain use of the word civilization can actually be found much earlier: in Mauss’ thought itself (Mauss 1929), but also in that of Fernand Braudel, who wrote about the matter in an article published in the fifties (Braudel 1969 [1959])¹⁹. Frankly, I have a serious problem with the notion of civilization, especially if used in the singular. I have expressed this uneasiness in another publication, but before explaining my personal position, it is necessary to return to Hann’s own words, in particular to a very significant assertion about the notion of civilization. He writes “civilisation” is “the key unit of analysis [...] in the spirit of Marcel Mauss.” (Hann 2014a, 59) The expression “key unit” is obviously a very strong one. But why does he evoke only Mauss among the many who in those same years used that very same category? Actually, despite overtly summoning Mauss in support of his position, Hann’s idea of what civilization is or should be

is built partly on Mauss's own speculation, and partly (and actually mostly) on Jóhann P. Arnason's²⁰.

For Mauss, civilizational facts are social facts, and as such objects of investigation for sociologists, anthropologists, and historians. They are social facts of a peculiar nature, because, according to him, "Les 'phénomènes de civilisation' [...] ont tous une caractéristique importante: celle d'être communs à un nombre plus ou moins grand de sociétés et à un passé plus ou moins long de ces sociétés" ("The 'civilization phenomena' [...] have all an important aspect : that of being shared by a more or less significant number of societies and of being characteristic of a more or less deep past of those same societies"; Mauss 1929, 7)²¹. A civilisation is therefore "*un ensemble suffisamment grand de phénomènes de civilisation; [...] un ensemble suffisamment grand et suffisamment caractéristique pour qu'il puisse signifier, évoquer à l'esprit une famille de sociétés* [author's emphases]" ("a totality of phenomena big enough to make a civilization; [...] a totality of phenomena big enough to signify and call to mind a family of societies"; Mauss 1929, 10). Choosing a rather impressionistic but highly (and literally) evocative phrasing ("signifier," "évoquer à l'esprit"), Mauss builds his definition on principles of resemblance, connectedness, persistence, and sharedness. Elsewhere, he evokes also another, similar category, that of "*Une aire de civilisation* [author's emphasis]" (Mauss 1929, 18)²². In Arnason's words, M. Mauss' last definition of what a civilization is would be along the lines of "a hyper-social system of social systems" (Arnason 2003, 463). Thus, along with other typical and at the time already "classical" ways of conceiving cultural formation and definition, the Maussian option adds (even though implicitly) concepts like those of connectedness, permutability, and long-term cultural legacies (the analytic notion of "*longue durée*" was still to be developed). Therefore, more than a duplicate of the notion of culture, that of Mauss could be conceptualized as a categorization which does not "simply" overlap the notion of culture, but which also establishes a veritable theory of meta-culture. Although differently discussed, this "culturalist" property of Mauss' theorization is noted by Arnason himself, who rightly calls it an "underlying culturalist bent." (Arnason 2003, 73)

Let us not linger more on assessing Mauss' own theorization. This task has already been achieved by Arnason and we need not repeat his arguments here. In the end, it can be said that Mauss' suggestions are surely redolent and thought provoking, but not theoretically and analytically fully convincing. Arnason himself, after all, points out more than once that in his essay Mauss is quite unsystematic, and sometimes even close to contradiction²³. No wonder then that the category of civilization has ever since been criticized and opposed, to varying extents, by historians and anthropologists, until being virtually abandoned, as an analytic one, for decades, before being positively reevaluated by Arnason first, then by Hann²⁴.

In concluding this retrospective about the academic notion of "civilization," I think that it offers no particular theoretical advantages, and, on the contrary, lends itself to the same sort of criticism as that of culture, but on a much broader scale. This implicit flaw is evident in the case of Eurasia if compared with other similarly constructed "entities." For example: for the sake of brevity, but also with some historical plausibility, we can name that of the Nuer a "culture," and that of the Sumer a "civilization," because of their being characterized by a relatively well-circumscribed vital space, relatively homogenous cultural forms and

modes of production, but also, in the second case at least, by a *longue-durée*, a certain level of trans-local connections with other groups, and a well recognizable life-cycle (emergence, development, disappearance). These characteristics are manifestly lacking in the case of Eurasia: it lacks precisely those “*aires*,” those common traits that would make it possible to individuate a “family of society” in the spirit of Mauss. Eurasian societies, past and present, are too different to be associated by one and the same civilizational mark²⁵. In other words, even if in principle the notion of civilization functioned perfectly as a theoretical tool – and it does not –, the traits associating Eurasian cultures and societies would still remain too few: the proto-Indo-European language, if it ever existed, disappeared millennia ago, and anyway it covered only a relatively small portion of the landmass; the agrarian revolution of the Neolithic is even further away; the invention and the circulation of the principle of the transcendent monotheism has borne a highly conflictual offspring whose representatives do not recognize themselves as siblings (and it is, anyway, a far too abstract argument to constitute a convincing element of connectedness). Later, much later, Socialism has ephemerally united some Eurasian lands and countries for a few decades, but it has probably produced (or side-produced) more differences and gaps than common patterns amongst them. Therefore, with respect to the use of “civilization” and relative derivative in Hann’s works, I believe that whether we use Brumann’s or Mauss’ or whichever other constructivist approach to building up the “object/area/model/notion” of Eurasia, it remains theoretically unsustainable to think of the Eurasian continent in terms of a family of connected civilizations. Or, if we choose to do so, we would immediately run into problems about positioning other continents and civilisations, as discussed above. Save cosmopolitanism, and besides some very broad commonalities and patterns that actually associate Eurasian peoples (as well as many other peoples around the world), from at least the Middle Ages on there is no historical and anthropological ground to find or construct any deeper, “ultimate unity,” as Hann writes. (Hann 2014a: 59)

To complicate the matter, “civilization” has in the time of its scholarly *damnatio memoriae* transcended his academic scope to become a “popular” category²⁶. Before considering some of the outcomes of this reinterpretation, let us step back once again to its proto-anthropological use: as an academic category, before Mauss it had been used with an evolutionistic connotation by Edward Tylor, and with a romantic one by Spengler. These two connotations have somewhat been rediscovered in a completely different domain, which I have recently studied.

Sid Meier’s Civilization series of videogames are one of the most beloved and award winning in the history of computer games. The game, originally published in 1991 (*Sid Meier’s Civilization*²⁷) has come to its fifth edition (*Civilization V*) and has sold millions of copies²⁸. In its publisher’s words: “Created by legendary game designer Sid Meier, *Civilization* is a turn-based strategy game series in which you attempt to build an empire to stand the test of time. Become Ruler of the World by establishing and leading a civilization from the dawn of man into the space age. Wage war, conduct diplomacy, discover new technologies, go head-to-head with some of history’s greatest leaders, and build the most powerful empire the world has ever known.”²⁹

In the nineties *Civilization* was considered “the deepest, most rewarding PC game of all time.”³⁰ A few years later, when the third game was published, it was welcomed by *Time*

magazine as “the greatest game of all time.”³¹ Nowadays it is still a highly influential and widespread mass cultural product, which not only amuses, but also shapes people’s conceptions of history and cultural dynamics³². It is, nevertheless, also a rather controversial commercial product: “*Civilization* has been criticized for perpetuating American myths of benevolent capitalism and frontier expansion” (Bachynski, Kee 2009, 2). From a Foucauldian perspective, Kacper Poblócki has written that “*Civilization* is the first bold attempt to simulate the whole human history in computer software. Ambitious as it sounds, the game nevertheless does not go beyond reproducing models of social change well known, and extensively criticized, in twentieth-century social science.” (Poblócki 2002, 164) The author shows how in the first three episodes of the series, those which, as we have seen, contributed to build up the fame of *Civilization* as “the greatest game of all time,” the best path leading to victory is to try to reproduce not the general history of “civilizations,” whatever one may mean by this, but to reproduce the history of “Western civilization.”³³

The games of the *Civilization* series offer a political interpretation of world history, but also a vision of the past, which is partial, fragmented, and counter-factual. It also produces non-historiographic, monolithic, stereotypical, and, in the end, essentialized representations of past civilizations, in a way that strongly resembles not only XIX century historiography but also that of Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington 1996). Thus, while recent trends in historiography (and anthropology) are oriented towards trying to de-essentialize and criticize reified historical and social representations, like those of monolithic “civilizations,” some popular trends, for example those expressed by the videogame *Civilization*, go in the very opposite direction.

This digression about the notion of civilization in a particular field of popular culture had the purpose of showing how ambiguous or even “dangerous” it can become if wrongly manipulated. Analytic notions, with or without a history of stratified interpretations and uses, nowadays easily pour outside the academic jar, to freely circulate in the outer world. This is natural and, to a given extent, even suitable. Caution should be used, though, in deeming these notions “imperative,” or as ultimate tools for the understanding of historical and social matters, as they could also be considered “imperative” and “ultimate” in other, less noble senses: think of the rhetoric and political use that George W. Bush has made of the Huntington theses on the “clash of civilizations”, although the author’s arguments had not been conceived to support Bush’s “War on Terror.”

Further Considerations and Conclusions

In the last part of this article, I will outline a few conclusive and recapitulative observations about the methodological procedures and the historical or theoretical foundations of Hann’s approach, and about the social and representational connotations of his notion of Eurasia.

In justifying the heuristic (and political) shift from a (capitalist) West to a (post-socialist) Eurasia, Hann seems to commit the same error that he is elsewhere pointing out: on the one hand he claims that “The modern world system is not just the product of the rise of the West,” (Hann 2014b, 18) on the other, that “Eurasia, too, is a part of the whole, but it is different from a conventional area because it is the sole super-continent and has a unique

priority in world history,” (Hann 2014b, 18) Why this polarization? Why can Eurasia have a priority in world history, whereas the West, whatever this means, cannot have any kind of priority in the modern world system? According to which criteria are these priorities set? (Besides, can Eurasia be considered the sole super-continent? What about the Americas, which clearly constitute another super-continent?)

Sometimes Hann’s “utopian” dreams become manifest and pour into his arguments: to quote just two examples, what does he refer to with the phrase “the familiar heartlands of Asia and Europe?” (Hann 2014a, 59) Which heartlands? And to whom are they familiar? The steppe of Siberia is not familiar to those who live in the tropical rainforest in Vietnam, and Irish green and wetlands are not familiar to those who live in the Arabian deserts. Those heartlands are probably familiar to anthropologists, who travel far and wide establishing links and associations between them and other lands and peoples, but definitely not to ordinary European and Asian people. The same goes for the “Eurasian mental space” that he evokes, when he writes, “We are free to theorise and investigate empirically a *Eurasian mental space* [author’s emphasis].” (Hann 2014b, 17) Of course everybody is free to theorize about everything, but I believe that even the most audacious scholar of *mentalités* would not dare investigate the “Eurasian mental space.” This expression is surely evocative, but frankly, I would like to know more about the boundaries and the characteristics of such space, and whether and why it is more correct or workable than that of a hypothetical “European mental space.”

Hann espouses Jack Goody’s “critique of centuries of Eurocentric scholarship” (Hann 2014d, pages not numbered) and is skeptical of most claims for European exceptionalism. Many scholars of post-colonial studies, and anthropologists more in particular, would probably subscribe to this approach. However, challenging Eurocentrism should not result in denying what Europe is or was, or has been, nor in creating another hypothetical category just to replace the former one, because otherwise, in order to avoid a reification of Europe – a typical concern of what has been called “the post-colonial nervousness over making Europe special” (Macdonald 2013, 20) – we risk a reification of a highly disputable “Eurasian civilization,” which, moreover, is partly constructed upon an image of Asia as a “unity” which is in turn quite “imagined”³⁴.

If a certain degree of essentialization and reification is, alas, inevitable and inherent in the knowledge we produce as social scientists and historians – let alone those produced by other disciplines –, the only thing we can do is try to reflect on it and be critical about it. This “sad but necessary” approach is at least that which I share and try to make operative in my own research, following the example of those who have openly advocated it (mainly scholars who have been critical of the so-called post-structuralist or post-modern fashions: Eric Wolf, Marshall Sahlins, and Christoph Brumann amongst others³⁵).

Personally, I find that one of the main objections that can be moved to the notion of Eurasia is that it is a purely speculative construct, whereas the notion of Europe actually exists in social life: it is used by people, discussed in many cultural niches and contexts, disputed, loved or hated, and thus determining or producing social poetics and practices. It is evident that this actual dimension of Europe on the level of social life cannot be explained with only the institutionalization of the European Union. On the contrary, the institutionalization process should be understood in the light of its social pre-conditions and

considered as one of the products of a pre-existing social awareness of cultural and historical connectedness amongst European peoples.

From an ethnological point of view, my argument is that the everyday life of many groups is influenced by the very idea of Europe, not only by its institutional framework, whereas the same cannot be said of the idea of Eurasia. Deconstructing Europe has been a major task for anthropologists and cultural historians since at least J. Boissevain's famous chapter published in 1975 (Boissevain 1975) (if not since Chabod's book about the history of the "Idea of Europe", Chabod 2010 [1961]). Conversely, in a sense, there is nothing to deconstruct about Eurasia: as a social idea, imaginary, discourse or narrative, it is virtually completely absent outside the sphere of political and academic debates. Therefore, when Hann rhetorically asks, "since Eurasia was never politically unified in the past, why even speculate about such a unity today?" (Hann 2014a, 67) my answer would be that we would speculate – and we actually speculate – about Eurasia in purely academic terms, whereas Europe exists and has existed in the "mental space" of Europeans for centuries. As Susan Gal has convincingly argued, "for most inhabitants of the continent, 'Europe' is less a geographical region or unique civilization than a symbolic counter of identity." (Gal 1991, 444) The same cannot be claimed for Eurasia.

The "realization" and "institutionalization" (Hann's words) of Eurasia would be done not only for economic purposes, but also on account of principles of cosmopolitanism and inclusiveness, and to challenge growing phenomena of stereotypization, discrimination, and racism; phenomena that have arisen again especially in Europe in direct proportion to the worsening of the economic crisis and with the relatively recent rise of mass migration within its borders and from the outside. These "realization" and "institutionalization," however, would be an utterly top-down process, bearing a striking similarity to the creation of the European Union, and definitely not comparable to that of a nation-state – rather a negation of the latter. It is true that there was also no popular demand for the EU (and apparently, there is still none). Nevertheless, as I have already affirmed, there was and there is a popular consciousness of being European that has developed over at least some 1000 years. On the other hand, it is inevitable to take cognizance of the fact that there is neither a popular demand for a Eurasian Union nor a popular consciousness of being Eurasian.

In other words, where is the perception of people – or better, where are the people – in Hann's theorization? Where are the shared characteristics, on a Eurasian level, of their daily lives, their tastes for popular music, their preferences in clothing, literature, arts, their often speaking similar languages or languages that at least have plenty of "family resemblances" (which is the norm in Europe at least). These are not trivial arguments, in my opinion, or at least they should not be such for an anthropologist. True, striking are the "structural similarities between developments at the western and eastern ends of the Eurasian landmass," (Hann 2012, 99) but even more striking is how greatly the "civilisational" paths of these two ends have diverged, how different the outcomes of those structural similarities have been, how socially, religiously, and culturally dissimilar the different parts and ends of the supercontinent have become.

One of the most sensitive points concerns the final aim of Hann's proposal. As I said, I do not want to engage in the genuinely political arguments that populate his recent writings,

but I think that I can offer a few words on the conceptual and ideological (in the broad sense of the word) motivations that sustain them.

The cosmopolitan sentiments that animate the Eurasian project are obviously noble and sharable. They should help orient the ethic of every anthropologist. How could it be otherwise? They also nourish the political ones, as is evident in the following sentences: “I view such a Eurasia as the prelude to a unified world society, based on the values of inclusion,” (Hann 2014c, 3)³⁶ and “REALEURASIA will thereby illuminate the prospects for the institutionalization of a long-term unity.” (Hann 2014a, 65) The methodological problem, at least from my point of view, is that one thing is trying to be cosmopolitan and to implement a cosmopolitan attitude in everyday life or even politically, but another thing is underestimating cultural differences on the basis of a political assumption, dream, or claim (the hope for the advent of a unified global political system is a political claim, not a scientific argument). To put it differently, I am skeptical about transforming humanitarian, attitudinal and political wishes and wills into methodological tools used for “realizing” (reifying) the notion of Eurasia and turning it into a socio-historical reality (one continent, one civilization, one unit, one political union).

Values of inclusiveness and cosmopolitanism should always orient our behavior, endeavor, and ethical principles, not only as anthropologists but especially as social animals endowed with symbolic thought and with the biggest power on Earth to hurt and destroy. However, this does not imply that as scholars we should abdicate the will for objectivity (or better the will for reaching, through our studies, an approximation of truth about reality) on the basis of those principles. What we are supposed to do as anthropologists, I believe, is first and foremost to understand social life (and possibly pass the information to those who can change it for the better). If Eurasia is the product of a political utopian dream, why should we consider it as an academic, critical notion? And why should we abdicate, on this basis, that of Europe?

As we already know very well at this point, Hann often uses the word “unit” in a variety of circumstances and declensions, usually to signify the civilizational unity (but also the uniqueness) of Eurasia. Unity requires unifying principles. We know some of them, since they have been critically discussed so far. However, there is at least one place where Hann admits that there is one such a principle which is more important and “deeper” than others: “the deepest hypothesis of the project is [...] one which posits commonalities: in their different ways and styles, each one of these [Eurasian] civilisations was founded on moral principles opposed to an ethic of short-term market maximization.” (Hann 2014d, pages not numbered) There are several questions that arose in my mind when I read this strong statement. First, was capitalism not developed in Europe first, and was modern Europe not one of “these civilizations”? The oblivion of that portion of Eurasian history is obviously instrumental to Hann’s aims, but is it historically convincing? Second, is it not true that practically all pre-capitalistic and non-capitalistic societies of the past and the present, and throughout the world, had or have had such moral principles? If we assume the “ethic of short-term market maximisation” as one of the principal characteristics if not the main one of capitalistic (especially post-modern) societies, it comes as a consequence that non-capitalistic societies, having non-capitalistic moralities, would constitute a principle of opposition to that ethic. But these moralities can be found everywhere around the world, not only in Eurasia.

Moral principles opposed to an ethic of short-term market maximization would therefore lose all their power of being representative of a truly unique Eurasian historical or anthropological pattern. The “deepest hypothesis of the project” might well be true, but it does not work as a decisive argument for supporting any Eurasian specificity: if we assume that, as is easily demonstrable, non-capitalistic or even anti-capitalistic values and systems existed, have existed and exist throughout the world, how can this constitute a specific characteristic of the Eurasian continent?

I share one of Hann’s central ideas, which is the necessity to find a way for “taming the markets for the benefit of people everywhere and their environments.” (Hann 2014d, pages not numbered)³⁷ This approach should be supported, especially nowadays, after the disasters brought by the last crisis caused by the capitalist financial system, which at least has had the positive side-effect of awakening some consciences to the actual social and ecological dangers of *laissez-faire*. With regard to this matter, I have especially appreciated Hann’s convincing and sharp criticism of A. Giddens and D. Garland in one of his last pieces of writing (Hann 2014b)--two thinkers oblivious to Eastern forms of the welfare state – and also, apparently, of socialist models of the state *tout court*³⁸.

In conclusion, I would like to stress, again, that my criticism has been exercised on a set of publications that present Hann’s ideas about Eurasia as conclusions, not – or only marginally – as working hypotheses to be tested through the REALEURASIA research project. Some of his assumptions and conclusions have actually already acquired a rather dogmatic connotation, up to the point of being considered by their author as imperative. I do not share this eagerness for a radical conceptual as well as political shift from Europe to Eurasia. I think that the object/area/model/notion of Eurasia Hann wants to suggest and implement requires more scholarly and analytic arguments and, especially, a basis of more indisputable social historical realities (cultural patterns, structures, factors, phenomena, and processes) than those mentioned and discussed by the author in the pieces of writing I have commented on here. On the other hand, I think that all the attempts to individuate these realities will be doomed to fail, for Eurasian cultures, civilizations, and peoples, have differentiated too much from each other following the end of the ancient world.

Nevertheless, Hann’s works and arguments remain thought-provoking, and the debate itself very stimulating. Theorizing and problematizing about these issues cannot be but healthy for the field of historical anthropology of Europe and Asia.

* This article should be considered as an outcome of the project “Enhancement of R&D Pools of Excellence at the University of Pardubice” (CZ.1.07/2.3.00/30.0021), financially supported by the European Social Fund and the Czech Ministry of Education and of the individual research project M 1828-G22, financed by the FWF (Austrian Science Fund) and undertaken at the University of Vienna. It has been written during the final months of 2014 and the first months of 2015 at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale and in Prague, and it has been revised and finalized during the last months of 2015 in Vienna. I am grateful to Christoph Brumann, Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, James R. Dow,

Małgorzata Biczysk, Jonathan Riches, Jakub Štofáník, Giuseppe Tateo, and Diána Vonnák for their comments on the first draft. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author only.

¹ Jack Goody seems to be the main reference from the first paper taken into consideration here (Hann 2005, 57) to the last one (Hann 2014d, *passim*).

² To quote just the necessary: see the central pages of Chabod 2010 (1961); more recently and convincingly, Jordan 2002, Le Goff 2003.

³ See, for instance, Kundera 1984. This article is a highly controversial piece of writing produced by a highly controversial author in a particular and dramatic moment of his life. This biographical background should not be overlooked in the reading of it. Said article, if not convincing as a piece of historiography, could however be read as “ethnographic” evidence, as it also certainly shows and gives shape to certain sentiments *à l’époque* undoubtedly diffused – and actually still widely present nowadays in relation to those times, at the least in the Czech Republic – about the “abduction” of portions of Europe by the eastern communist countries.

⁴ For the identification of “*Christianitas*” with “Europe”, and their conscious or unconscious overlapping and interchangeability for centuries, see the publications quoted in the note n. 2.

⁵ The topic has been explored in different works; cfr. Giardina, Vauchez 2008.

⁶ Many historical figures linked to the imagination of – or even factual attempts to build – a unified Europe (Frederick Barbarossa, Louis XIV, Pope Pius II, Napoleon, Jean Monnet) have considered Charlemagne the first “father” of Europe. In a document dating back as early as the 9th century, he is entitled “*Rex Pater Europae*”.

⁷ Hann makes a similar point in Hann 2012, 93. His conclusion, there, is that, in the anthropology of Eurasia, “there are no grounds for privileging the European expansion of Christianity [over that of Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism] in this context [i.e. Eurasia]”. After the end of the Middle Ages, though, Christianity becomes mainly a matter for historians of Europe (and the Americas), and anyway, why should not a scholar privilege Christianity while studying the formation of the European identity?

⁸ Commenting the publication of one of his last book, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (Hughes), Aaron Hughes, and eminent scholar of Jewish and Islamic studies and the editor of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, has recently stated that “‘Abrahamic religions’ is an invented term. Like all of our terms and categories in the academic study of religion it does not name something in reality, but represents a sort of wish of fulfilment. If Jews and Muslims and Christians – the so-called “Abrahamic religions” – can be shown to possess the same essence, spirit, ethos, or whatever else we may want to call

it, then it is often safely assumed that we have found a common core that exists beyond the most recent depressing headlines, and, of course, beyond history. [...] But, and this is the key point, there is absolutely no historical precedent for this term – Jews, Muslims, and Christians have been killing one another for centuries over the proper understanding of Abraham, among other things. What they most decidedly have not done is hugged one another based on this figure, nor have they sat down at what we today dub as “Abrahamic salons” to talk about perceived common beliefs” (Hughes 2015).

⁹ A parallel between post-socialism – one of the main factors that associates Eurasian societies and states in Hann’s thought – and post-colonialism has already been developed: see Chari, Verdery 2009.

¹⁰ Hann himself makes this point, elsewhere, when he writes: “in the economically globalised world of the twenty-first century it can make no sense to delimit any geographical entity, not even one of this scale” (Hann 2014a, 67). And yet he does so.

¹¹ I am taking for granted that the reader comprehends that, here and elsewhere in this article, said notions and models (“Eurasia”, “Europe”, “The West”, etc.) can be thought of and analyzed from at least three different epistemological perspectives: 1) purely geographical, 2) historical, 3) representational (that is to say, in terms of geographies that are “imagined”, like C. Shore writes, or “symbolic”, in M. Herzfeld’s words – Shore 1999, Herzfeld 2009). The latter is of course the perspective usually preferred by cultural anthropologists, who by now know very well, however, that also the geographical study can never be purely so, insofar as, as A. Gupta and J. Ferguson have written, “the experience of space is always socially constructed” (Gupta, Ferguson, 1992, 11).

¹² If we do not want to consider as a conclusion the following statement: “the solution we suggest lies in avoiding the definition of the Mediterranean area as an *object* of study. Instead, we consider it as a *field* of study” (Albera, Blok 2001, 23). A statement which, as it has been rightly argued, does not solve any of the many problems related to the foundation of the Mediterranean as an autonomous historical and/or anthropological notion.

¹³ The preeminence of historical political and economic patterns over cultural ones – rhetorically assuming, for the sake of brevity, that the latter can be separated from the former – comes from Chris Hann’s interpretation of Jack Goody’s method: “He [J. Goody] is more interested in a sociological historicizing of the emergence of the modern world than in postulating cognitive, cultural or ontological differences between human populations” (Hann 2014d, pages not numbered).

¹⁴ Brumann’s perspective does not collide with a constructivist and genealogical approach; on the contrary, it can complement and inform it. With the phrase “constructivist and genealogical approach”, with regard to the study of Europe, I refer mainly to a nowadays well-established scholarly tradition whose main contributions to date, in my opinion, are the

following ones: Bloch 1928, Chabod 2010; Fabre 1993, Frykman, Niedermüller 2003, Macdonald 2013, Niedermüller, Stoklund 2001, Padgen 2002, Shore 1999, Wilken, 2012.

¹⁵ The final pages of this text are the most vibrant of political momentum. In the very last page, Hann states that “the future not only of the ‘welfare state’ but of human *society* [Author’s emphasis] in its most elemental sense is currently threatened by the neoliberal ‘race to the bottom’” (Hann 2014a, 67).

¹⁶ For example when he writes that “Goody does not theorise civilisation” (Hann 2014a, p. 60), and, elsewhere, that “REALEURASIA will draw together the political, the economic, and the religious in a civilisational frame. This was the frame of Max Weber himself, though he did not theorise the concept of civilisation and relied on such vague terms as *Weltkultur*” (Hann 2014d, pages not numbered).

¹⁷ The places where such an explanation is developed, is, basically, Hann 2014a, 60-61. A few lines can also be found in Hann 2014d.

¹⁸ “If *culture* the noun seems to carry associations with some sort of substance in a way that appear to conceal more than it reveals, *cultural* the adjective moves one into a realm of differences, contrasts, and comparisons that is more helpful [author’s emphases]” (A. Appadurai, *Modernity at large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1996, p. 12).

¹⁹ For instance, F. Braudel criticized the criteria, often quite arbitrary, with which certain renowned historians (namely O. Spengler and A. Toynbee) had constructed and represented past civilisations.

²⁰ J. P. Arnason’s theorisation on Mauss is presented at length in the book *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions* (Arnason 2003; see pp. 67-86, and more in particular 71-76). Hann’s debt on Arnason’s reading of Mauss is evident if we consider Arnason’s own recapitulation of what civilisation is “in the spirit of M. Mauss”: “Durkheim and Mauss saw civilizations as multisocietal groupings; they vary in size, complexity and level of uniformity, but in principle, their integrative capacities transcend those of single societies. The same applies to the temporal dimension. To extend a metaphor used by Durkheim and Mauss: civilizations are families of societies, and as such they also encompass generations of societies in the sense that they retain their unifying features throughout successive historical phases” (Arnason 200, 218). This last consideration about the diachronic value of the notion of civilisation is particularly significant with respect to Hann’s own theory and usage of the notion of civilisation.

²¹ As a consequence, “Les phénomènes de civilisation sont ainsi essentiellement internationaux, extra-nationaux. [...] Un phénomène de civilisation est donc, par définition comme par nature, un phénomène répandu sur une masse de populations plus vaste que la tribu, que la peuplade, que le petit royaume, que la confédération de tribus. [...] En effet, ces

faits ont toujours une extension en surface, une géographie, plus vaste que la géographie politique de chaque société; ils couvrent une aire plus large que la nation” (Mauss 1929, 8-9).

²² This reference to an “aire de civilisation” seems to be more a characteristic of the *Zeitgeist* of the time than a genuine product of Mauss’ categorisation. In fact, we find a similar notion in the philosophical theorisation of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, roughly in the same years (more precisely in 1930) wrote of “*Familienähnlichkeit*” (Wittgenstein 1998, p 14). The parallel is even more interesting if we consider that the Austrian philosopher used this notion of “family resemblance” commenting precisely on a book about “civilisations”, and arguably the most famous of the time: *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* by Oswald Spengler (1922), a book that was actually discussed precisely by Mauss in his previously cited work.

²³ Paradoxical is, for example, the “nested” character that some civilisations would assume, according to Mauss: “Ainsi, quant à nous, nous enseignons depuis longtemps qu’il est possible de croire à l’existence fort ancienne d’une civilisation de toutes les rives et de toutes les îles du Pacifique; à l’intérieur de cette civilisation très étendue, assez effacée, on peut, et sans doute on doit distinguer une civilisation du Pacifique Sud et Central; et à l’intérieur de celle-ci, on aperçoit nettement une civilisation malayo-polynésienne, une polynésienne, une mélanésienne et une micronésienne” (Mauss 1929, 11). How is then possible, *au juste*, to distinguish a civilisation, if it has other civilisations within it? How to measure the historical depth and significance of each in relation to each other and to civilisations “out of the nest”? How to evaluate the “civilisational value” of the common features amongst “kin-civilisations” (those belonging to the same “family of civilisations”) and/or non-kin ones? No answers about these questions are to be found in neither M. Mauss’s nor Hann’s reflections.

²⁴ It is Hann himself who bitterly considers how the study of “families of societies [...] died out almost completely in the second half of the 20th century” (Hann 2014d, pages not numbered). The point is that, in my opinion, he fails to recognise the good reasons why this happened.

²⁵ Hann’s use of Mauss and Arnason’s speculations is audacious, since he boldly transcends the limit of the notion itself (as set by Mauss at least), using it to indicate an entire super-continent, which is of course characterized by long-term similarities and connections, but also by manifest profound long-term differences (no wonder, in fact, that Mauss himself does not mention Eurasia as an example of civilisation, and prefers to mention relatively smaller and more recognizable ones – the Byzantine empire, China, etc. –, not daring to include Eurasia amongst them).

²⁶ A non-academic use of the term “civilisation” has obviously existed before recent times. This use was even a heuristic concern of Mauss himself: the last part of his article cited so far is in fact called “Sens ordinaires du mot civilisation” (Mauss 1929, 19-24).

²⁷ Also known as *Civilization* (MicroProse 1991). All the other games are also named after the series creator, Sid Meier, but they are usually referred to without mentioning “*Sid Meier’s*”. From now on I will do the same.

²⁸ According to Wikipedia, the *Civilization* franchise has so far sold some 8 million copies, with arguably as many copies (if not more) illegally produced and distributed (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization_%28series%29, accessed February 3 2015).

²⁹ <http://www.civilization.com/>, accessed October 11 2014.

³⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization_%28series%29#Reception, accessed October 12 2013.

³¹ *Time* magazine article quoted in Pobłocki 2002, 171.

³² There exists a long-lasting academic debate about whether – and to which extent – such a cultural mass product contributes to historical and anthropological imagination and representations. I have recently participated myself in this debate: Testa 2014; see also, in relation to the game *Civilization* only, Chapman, 2013 and Pobłocki 2002.

³³ The Author’s conclusions are severe: for him, Sid Meier’s philosophy of history is characterized by a “crude determinism, and very much in the Hegelian vein [...]. The *telos* is well known. In the case of Hegel it was the Prussian state [...], the fetish-object of Meier’s fantasies is the ‘ultimate empire’, the state that resembles most the end product of all human advancement, namely the United States of America” (Pobłocki 2002, 167).

³⁴ This argument has also been made recently by Sharon Macdonald, who openly evokes Hann’s “Eurasia” and her subtle uneasiness about it (Macdonald 2013, 20). Actually, this argument also reminds me of that used by Clifford in his mild but intelligent critique to Said’s *Orientalism*, which, be it said between the lines, necessarily presupposes a hypothetical “Westernism” (Clifford 1988, 255-76). Hann himself has noted this apparent aporia: “The purpose of this chapter is therefore *not* [Author’s emphasis] to substitute a reified notion of Europe [...] with an equally indefensible notion of Eurasian unity” (Hann 2012, 99). Still, the use of the word “unit” to refer to Eurasia, as well as the controversial notion of “civilization” (especially in the singular) are to be found often in his writings. Actually, giving fundamentals to the principle of a united Eurasia and of a Eurasian unity seems to be one of the tasks of the entire scholarly production of Hann over the last few years, so I wonder whether the last cited statement should be considered as solely rhetorical. It can also be argued that, if a danger of reifying or “ontologysing” Eurasia exists, the verb “realizing” in the research project title “Realising Eurasia” and the adjective “real” that furnishes the title abbreviation “REALEURASIA” surely make it more present. Few things produce an “effect of reality”, as Ronald Barthes has called it (Barthes 1968) – and therefore a “realification” – more than the verb “realise” and the adjective “real” themselves, regardless of the author’s intention. Nevertheless, the conflict between the reality of things supposedly Eurasian and the sense of reality emanating from the academic notion of Eurasia is too tough to be resolved as Hann has tried to do so far.

³⁵ See, to quote only one significant work where such a position is advocated by the mentioned authors, Brumann 1999, Sahlins 1999, Wolf 2001.

³⁶ The relationship between cosmopolitanism and Eurasia is made clearer and articulated further in Hann 2005.

³⁷ The same point is made, with slightly different phrasing, in Hann 2014b, 18, and in Hann 2014a, 67.

³⁸ Much along the same lines is another recent paper containing a very sharp and convincing geo-political analysis: Hann 2014e. Similar arguments, although expressed differently and starting from the assessment of different data and on the basis of different assumptions, can be also found in the works of another scholar, geographer and expert of world economic history: David Harvey (see, for instance, Harvey 2005 and 2014). These considerations seem particularly urgent nowadays, when also the EU seems to have totally abdicated its mandate to operate on behalf and for the benefits of European people, to become instead a means for corporate interests. The fact that the Euro is nowadays the nth means of dispossession in the hands of “the markets” is beyond any reasonable doubt. Even in times of deep and long-lasting crisis, the capital is well equipped to preserve its hegemony, as it has been recently and definitely demonstrated in Piketty 2013.

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