

A Utopia of Eurasia: the Uses and Abuses of a Concept – a counter-reply to Chris Hann

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This piece contains a counter-reply to “Declining Europe: A Reply to Alessandro Testa,” which Chris Hann wrote in response to my article “On Eurasia and Europe.” My counter-reply is woven together with an extensive review of a long paper containing Hann’s more recent article “A concept of Eurasia” and the numerous replies that furnish the latter.

This paper should therefore be considered as part of a series consisting of: Hann’s work about the concept of Eurasia until 2016; my aforementioned article; and Hann’s counter-reply and his latest article on the subject.¹

While I thank Chris Hann for having engaged with my arguments and provided a reply to my article, I cannot overlook the serious flaws in the line of his argumentation. Moreover, since Hann’s counter-reply ends with a wish to consider his “A concept of Eurasia” as the reference work on the matter, I have undertaken a critical reading of it.

What I try to do in this piece is to show why the notion of Eurasia as developed and used for his heuristic purposes by Chris Hann does not stand on its own two feet, as several other scholars also believe (among whom are some of those who were invited to write a reply to “A Concept of Eurasia”). In fact, in spite of Hann’s enthusiasm about his concept of Eurasia, there seems to be a lively company of sceptics found in the disciplines of history and social anthropology.

“A concept of Eurasia” (Hann 2016) partly recalibrates and reformulates some of the arguments developed in “Towards a Maximally Inclusive Concept of Eurasia” (Hann 2014a) and in previous papers. It shows a less combative attitude towards trying to make the controversial concept a new theoretical standard in thinking and practising socio-cultural and historical anthropology. It is also less audacious: it seems to be holding its breath, surely because of the strict space constraints of a journal such as *Current Anthropology*. In other words, Hann’s definitive article about Eurasia to date seems to be more modest. As Günther Schlee has written: “on the whole, Hann seems to have been forced to abandon some of his stronger propositions” (Schlee 2016: 18), which can also be deduced from some stylistic details. For instance, terms preparing the reader to be exposed to a new grand theory – such as “imperative” and “maximally inclusive” – have been dropped. Most of the problems of Hann’s earlier formulations have nevertheless remained the same.

We find the first one – and perhaps one of the most serious – in the second page of his latest article, where Hann, after having introduced the “civilisational interconnectedness” of the Eurasian landmass, an interconnectedness intensifying “from roughly 1000 BC,” writes that “Eurasia is simply the name for a ‘supracontinental’ unity forged over the past three millennia” and that “recognition of Eurasia is no impediment to supplementary spatial, temporal, and socio-cultural categorizations within the larger entity” (Hann 2016: 2). Here, I will not repeat my position about this alleged “unity,” because it is sufficiently developed in “On Eurasia and Europe,” and my mind has changed little on the matter since then. I will only highlight that the “jump” Hann makes in the new article between “interconnectedness” and “unity” is little justified. It is not only a semantic *décalage*, but also an ontological one, for it has an evident reifying force. Hann seems to acknowledge the problematic

¹ Testa 2015, Hann 2015, Hann 2016. For previous works by Chris Hann about Eurasia, cfr. Testa 2015 and Hann 2016.

nature of asserting the “unity” of Eurasia when he writes, a few lines below the aforementioned words, that “this unity must not be exaggerated” (ibid.); the problem is that the word “unity” suggests very little else other than unity, which can hardly be “exaggerated:” either there is unity or there is not (the problematic nature of this “interconnectedness” becoming “unity” is also raised in de Pina-Cabral 2016: 16 and Gingrich 2016: 18 – especially in the latter).

Other examples can be made of the fact that, in spite of his pouring old wine in new wineskins, the basic flaws maiming Hann’s concept of Eurasia remain the same, the most important of which is that little historical and empirical evidence is presented about said “civilisational unity.” Apart from features and common developments – important as they may be – dating back to prehistoric or ancient times, the Silk Road,² the welfare state and the age of real socialism,³ there is little keeping Hann’s Eurasia united.

Considering the agricultural revolution and the transformation of the Axial Ages as more impactful in the cultural developments of the landmass than what happened in the following three thousand years (up until the other “unifying” period of real socialism), it is no wonder that Hann goes as far as to state that “at the Eurasian level, too, the basic criteria of unity in diversity are met, once one extends the time frame appropriately. It goes without saying that the diversity is greater than in the case of Germany or Europe, in terms of languages, religions, kinship, cuisine, and all the other things routinely investigated by anthropologists. But these are details” (Hann 2016: 24). I will leave it to the readers to decide whether these are only mere details, or whether the aforementioned things are only the details of a broader picture or rather the constitutional yet undervalued elements of the picture, as I am more disposed to believe. It should also be highlighted that Hann’s diachronic model in the (very) *longue-durée* is developed leaning extensively on the paradigm of the “Axial Age,”⁴ which is, however, problematic and widely debated (as stressed in Gingrich 2016: 15 and Schlee 2016: 18).⁵

Extending the time frame makes the picture bigger, no doubt about it, but not necessarily clearer or more convincing, because sometimes the more recent differences are actually those that count the most. Stretching the historical time frame in the spasmodic search of continuity and “unity” pretending that cultural differentiation (language, religion, kinship, and other elements that Hann deems secondary) is only epiphenomenal is not a very credible intellectual exercise, one which could eventually lead to anti-historical conclusions.

The following four pages are devoted to a reprise and development of the chapter “Historical, Religious, and Geographical Dimensions” in “On Eurasia and Europe,” which was meant to show how problematic, from these standpoints, Hann’s proposal was and still is. I will add further arguments in response to Hann’s reply (Hann 2015) and reformulation (Hann 2016), which are still not convincing, in my opinion. In so doing, I will also comment upon and use arguments developed by other scholars in their reply to “A Concept of Eurasia,” because, although formulated

² In his last article, Hann insists a great deal on the Silk Road and its historical role in “interconnecting” different areas of the landmass. But so did, say, Greek philosophy, Roman expansion, and Christianity, all of which are either omitted or undervalued by Chris Hann. But is the Silk Road really so much more important than those and other historical factors of connection and division, contact and contrast, among Eurasian peoples?

³ Hann’s theorisation about socialism and post-socialism is of course mature, and always acute. For instance, talking comparatively about the “social market” and welfare states, Hann offers a provoking and inspiring “revisionist” commentary, again building on Polanyi’s former theorization, according to which “the Cold War in Eurasia, commonly represented as a contest between totalitarian central planning on the one hand and liberal individualist free markets on the other, is thus better seen as a struggle between two variants of socialism, M-L-M [Marxist-Leninist-Maoist] and ‘electoral’” (Hann 2016: 5).

⁴ Another enthusiastic supporter of the paradigm of the “Axial Age” is the economic anthropologist David Graeber (Graeber 2011).

⁵ A substantial and rather convincing critique of the notion has recently been offered in Assmann 2014.

at different times and independently from one another, both their criticism and mine resonate in many respects.

The historical and religious problems are interwoven. They correlate with the periodisation problem of the Axial Age, which has been mentioned previously. In his last article, in fact, Hann talks of the “world religions” (among which is Ebraism) “that can be traced back to the Axial Age” (which here is stretched to include Christianity and Islam, according to Bellah and Joas 2012; Hann 2016: 4). This is the only conceptual framework used by Hann to theorise about religions in Eurasia. I had already pointed out the weaknesses of this approach (Testa 2015: 66, 78-79), which Hann named differently, referring to “Abrahamic monotheisms” instead of “world religions” (I will return to this in a moment). Hann replied to my critique as follows: “Testa also disapproves of my reference to ‘Abrahamic monotheisms.’ Here I can only note that the Pope himself (surely an honorary European though admittedly by origin a migrant from the global South) on a recent trip to Africa proclaimed that Christians and Muslims were brothers and sisters” (Hann 2015: 90). As far as I know, the Bible says that the Earth was created by a god a few thousand years ago – a time span that clashes with Hann’s periodization about Eurasia. So I would not use the Pope or any other religious authority as the ultimate source for the history of religions in Eurasia – to any extent, cherry-picking the Pope’s opinions will not make many anthropologists and historians change their opinion about religions in Eurasia. The point here, though, is not my disapproval, but the fact that the paradigm of “Abrahamic monotheisms” has been profoundly criticised and abandoned in the most recent *scientific* (and not theological) scholarship about religion (Hughes 2015). There are certainly good reasons, though, for the Pope not to abandon it. Moreover, I think that Hann, in spite of what he wrote in his counter-reply, is very well aware of these problems, because in his 2016 work, he dropped any reference to “Abrahamic monotheisms,” which we still find in his works from 2012 and 2014 (Hann 2012: 92-93; Hann 2014a: 9).

Another problem Hann and I have concerns one of said “world religions:” Christianity and the time of its development as a political power and identity catalyser, i.e. the Middle Ages. Here, Hann wrote of myself as “an author that evidently considers Europeans with an eastern Christian background to be at best second class, latching on as latecomers to an identity that, in the narrative that Testa endorses, has its ‘cradle’ in the Latin Christianity of the Middle Ages” (Hann 2015: 89). This is not true: nowhere can a similar claim be found or deduced in any of my writings. Besides accusing me unjustly, Hann contradicts himself, because on the one hand he remarks, correctly, how for centuries the term *Christianitas* (which had its centre in Rome before the Schism) was the most used word for *Europa* (Hann 2012: 90), then refuses the obvious consequence of this statement: that the medieval process of European identity construction was, indeed, mainly a matter of Western Christianity (which is not a “narrative” I endorse, but the conclusion of many scholars, especially historians: Chabod 2010 [1961]; Delanty 1995; Le Goff 2003). In the eminent opinion of William Jordan: “Europe was where Latin Christians – Roman Catholic Christians – dominated the political and demographic landscape” (Jordan 2002: 75), but of course Hann is free not to believe in this or in any other well-established historical fact. So, acknowledging or supporting such a historical hypothesis, as I do, has nothing to do with considering today’s “Europeans with an eastern Christian background to be at best second class.” This is simply a false syllogism.

In general, both in Hann’s latest article and in Hann’s “A Concept of Eurasia,” there seems to be little space for the consideration of the historical importance of religions. This can be explained with the same argument I used in my previous article: religions and religiously-grounded cultural differences more generally must be “underestimated” because historically (especially between the two “constitutional” events of the latter of Hann’s mentioned works: the Axial Age and Socialism) they constituted some of the most powerful factors of inner differentiation within Eurasia. In fewer words, his assumption works like a sluice: the less important religion is made, the more “unity”

emerges from the landmass.⁶ This could be one of the reasons why, as David Wengrow has noted, in Hann's Eurasia "the Middle East is mostly absent" (Wengrow 2016: 20). The European Middle Ages could be absent for the very same reason, as I already stated before and have stated elsewhere.⁷ Still, the "civilisational" and global historical importance of what scholars commonly refer to as the "Middle Ages" in Europe and in the Middle East can hardly be overestimated, let alone overlooked.

This serious neglect is also manifest in an earlier piece on Eurasia by Hann, a chapter published in a reference work, *Companion to the Anthropology of Europe* (Hann 2012), where he writes: "The central narratives of Europe were consolidated much later (than in ancient times), following the expansion of Christianity. The assemblage uniting the fragmented peoples of Eurasia's western peninsula was known as *Christianitas*, not *Europa* (author's emphasis). The primary "Other" at this (unspecified) time was not the Oriental but the Pagan. With the coming of the Reformation [...]" (Hann 2012). This is how Hann summarises and treats a thousand years of European history between the late-antique and the Reformation, i.e., the Middle Ages – not only hastily and insufficiently, but incorrectly. Incorrect is in fact that Europe "was known as *Christianitas*, not *Europa*," for the two terms were interchangeable for centuries, and besides, Europa was widely (and probably even commonly) used to describe "Eurasia's western peninsula" as early as in the late Early Middle Ages, which is to say from the eighth century onwards (Chabod 2010 [1961]; Delanty 1995; Jordan 2002; Le Goff 2003). Incorrect, again, is that the "Other" was the "Pagan", and not the "Oriental." "Pagan" was a derogatory term used mainly to refer to polytheists during Early Christianity and then to all other non-Christian peoples in Europe, mainly in northern Europe, up to the Late Middle Ages (an "inner Other," just like the Jews, the "heretics" and the "witches" later in time).⁸ The typical European late-medieval "Others" were instead the "Saracens" (Latin "*sarraceni*" and similar variants in vulgar languages, or "*moros*" in the once Islamic Iberian lands), namely the Muslim Arabs (on these problems the reference work is *L'Occident médiéval face à l'Islam: l'image de l'autre*, Sénac 2000).⁹ Against them, the Western Christians took up arms and went to war several times during the Late Middle Ages, namely during the crusades (one of which also turned against the Eastern Christians, with the sack of Constantinople by an army led by the Venetians, in 1204). Besides, throughout medieval times, all these and other non-Christian peoples were also more generally called infidels and "*gentiles*" by the clergy, the latter term used following the usage that the

⁶ Besides the historical arguments, there are also ethnographic ones: in all the places where I have undertaken intensive ethnographic fieldwork (central Italy, 2010-2011, Czech Republic, 2013-2014, Catalonia, 2016-2018), religion is still an important factor in the construction of local and national identities: Castelnuovo in Italy with its variation of "Southern Catholicism" (de Martino 2015 [1959]); Solsona in Catalonia for its relatively high number of believers (Catholics) and for its being an episcopate in a very small town (circa 9.000 inhabitants); Hlinsko v Čechách, in the Czech Republic, where the (alleged) lack of religiosity of its population is often proudly remembered as one of the local (as well as national) characteristics – which is still a manner of using religion for identity purposes.

⁷ "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" (Testa 2015: 64).

⁸ The question of paganism as a descriptive but also normative category used for different purposes by different authors and social groups throughout Western history is a *vexata quaestio*. A recent assessment of the historiographical debate is in Cameron 2010, 15-25. See also Testa 2009, Dowden 2008, 20-23, and Testa 2014.

⁹ One of the causes of the emergence of this division is that during the entire Middle Ages and Early Modern Times the "Saracens" first, then the Ottomans afterwards, were even more aggressively expansionist and "imperialist" than the Christian kingdoms, their dominions stretching from the Iberian peninsula to Persia, the Mediterranean islands and, later, up into the Balkans and the Carpathian mountains. Even though one cannot but sympathise with the "liberating" agenda of post-colonial anthropology, notably with Edward Said's moral *j'accuse*, ignoring history for the sake of respecting academic correctness is no solution: affirming that the main "Others" during the Middle Ages – and in some contexts way into the Modern Era – were the Muslim peoples of the southern shores of the Mediterranean is no "Orientalising" argument, but a historical fact.

Jews employed to indicate non-Jewish peoples (Levy, George-Tvrtković, and Duclow 2014: 107): so much for Hann's usage of history.

As for geography and geopolitics, in "A Concept of Eurasia" these notions remain as problematic as they were in the previous articles. Some of these problems, which I pointed out in my initial response in 2015, have indeed been recognised by others as well: "The question of boundaries remains difficult. Although Hann hints at recent literature distinguishing between central and peripheral parts of Eurasia, it would seem, empirically, that many parts of the continent do not fulfill the criteria set out. Kinship organization remains a strong political principle, frequently opposed to the state, in much of the landmass, and in the arid and semiarid regions covering much of Eurasia, nomadic forms of political organization have been predominant" (Eriksen 2016: 13). Using another argument that I had used before (Testa 2015: 67, 74), but independently, the same scholar continues: "That socialist Hungary had commonalities with social democratic Britain is not very surprising; it would be more exciting to read about the commonalities between, say, Japan, Kazakhstan, and Greece" (Eriksen 2016: 13). This is a more difficult task, which in fact is avoided by Hann, who insists instead in highlighting the painful divergences and inequalities within Europe. And today, Europe, for Hann, means primarily the European Union.

A critique of the European Union can be found in almost all of Hann's writings of the last 10 years. It is no wonder that we find it in both his reply (Hann 2015) and his latest reference article (Hann 2016). In his last analysis of the European Union political project (Hann 2016: 22-23), he is probably right in thinking that "it has been aborted" under the pressure of several factors: the selfishness and greed of the northern countries; the originally flawed financial architecture of the Union combined with the destabilizing effect of the last financial crisis (2007-2017); mass migration from outside its borders; and the rise of populism, mainly as a reaction to the previously mentioned factors. However, this political failure does not make European history less distinguishable, or "Eurasian unity" more plausible.

As I said, when talking about contemporary matters, Hann tends to overlap Europe and European Union: "[...] this was a time of crisis in European political economy (focused on the Euro), when countless politicians in Western Europe [...] were redrawing the boundaries of Europe to exclude Russia" (Hann 2015: 89), or "Here I can only report that, as someone who has lived in different parts of Europe throughout his life, I have a very different impression. In spite of all the top-down initiatives and the vast sums that have been invested in promoting a European cultural identity [...], what strikes me wherever I go in the macro-region is how very limited this remains in popular consciousness" (Hann 2015: 91). On this ground, when accusing me of Eurocentrism (Hann 2015: 86), he presumes and takes for granted my support for the European Union as it is nowadays. This is, again, wrong. Nowhere do I state anything of the sort. In other words, not only does Hann confuse – intentionally or not – Europe with the European Union, but he also confuses my claim that European identities exist whereas no Eurasian identity does, with proof of my support for the EU. As far as his line of reasoning goes, I could therefore call him a supporter of the Soviet-nostalgic project of Vladimir Putin called the Eurasian Economic Union, the only current institution that could be considered, with a great effort of imagination, the Eurasian equivalent of the European Union. Hann is of course very well aware of the problem of the political usages of the notion of Eurasia, and especially its appropriation by Russian nationalists. He writes, "Yet it cannot be denied that the term Eurasia has also been used (some say abused) of late by Russia, notably by President Vladimir Putin, who instigated the Eurasian Economic Union in 2011" (Hann 2012: 97; Hann 2016: 21; Hann 2014a: 5); this mild comment is counter-balanced by a more recent one: commenting on the "extreme nationalist doctrines within Russia," Hann clarifies that "this notion of Eurasia has nothing in common with the concept proposed in this article" (Hann 2016: 9).¹⁰ So, Hann seems to

¹⁰ The Eurasian Economic Union, as well as other concepts of Eurasia and forms of "Eurasianism" are discussed in Vinokurov, Libman 2012, Martínez 2013, and Benovska-Sabovka 2016. Both these texts highlight the political

be bothered by the association of his Eurasia with Putin's Eurasia, but so am I by his apodictic association of myself with the EU.

In one of the chapters of "A Concept of Eurasia," called "Beyond Atlanticist Anthropology" (Hann 2016: 7-8), Hann articulates a call to decentralising our analytic gaze from (and on) Europe, in order to avoid Eurocentrism. This is, of course, and again, old wine in a new bottle; it has been the task of post-colonial anthropology for more than thirty years. However, most of the scholars Hann cites, the people he engages with daily, the place where he comes from and where he works, and, most importantly, the principles and theories he uses to build his arguments (among which are socialism, the welfare state, cosmopolitanism, and many others), are all or mostly products of European modern history. In other words, Hann's moral and ideological framework relies on a set of notions and paradigms developed and spread *in* and *from* Europe during the last few centuries. If I am a Eurocentric, I certainly am in good company here. Alas, much of anthropological science is produced in the West, and a big chunk of it in Europe. Even the research project about Eurasia led by Hann, "Realising Eurasia: Civilisation and Moral Economy in the 21st Century," is supported by the European Research Council (Seventh Framework Programme, 2014–2019) – not by Chinese, Russian, or other Eurasian financial resources. Hann could start "'reorienting' toward China (Frank 1998) or 'provincializing Europe,'" as he wishes (Hann 2016: 7), by proposing, say, to relocate the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology to other areas of Eurasia, for example in North Korea, or in Kyrgyzstan. This would indeed be a unique way to experience the unity of Eurasia.

As previously stated, Hann accuses me of Eurocentrism, "which has pernicious effects in many fields and should have no place in anthropology" (Hann 2015: 89). Here, several clarifications are needed. Nowhere in my "On Europe and Eurasia" (Testa 2005) do I talk of what he calls "stomach-turning rhetoric" about "European values" (Hann 2015: 92) (he must refer to values like democracy, socialism, and cosmopolitanism); nor do I claim any "uniquely European 'miracles' in the past" (*ibid.*). I do not believe in miracles, but in historical and cultural dynamics, and I do not refuse what is genuinely or even uniquely European just for the sake of political or academic correctness. Therefore, calling me Eurocentric is not wrong, but it is important to understand what type of Eurocentrism I endorse. To this task I devote the following few paragraphs.

Ideas such as Law, the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Capitalism and Socialism, and Fascism have emerged in Europe during its history. This doubtless happened also because of contacts and connections with the Near and the Far East, the southern shore of the Mediterranean, as well as, later, with the cultures of the New World. Still, these things, which shaped the modern world for better or for worse, emerged in Europe, and not in other areas of the Eurasian landmass. Hann writes that "the macro-region of Western Eurasia (i.e. Europe) did indeed set the pace economically and politically from the sixteenth century. This spurt had nothing to do with Charlemagne, nor with later heroes of the Italian Renaissance" (Hann 2015: 91) in response to my mentioning Charlemagne and the Italian Renaissance (Testa 2015). I find this statement an astonishing declaration of an anti-historical attitude. How could Europe ever achieve that "pace" economically and politically without the unification and the reforms promoted by Charlemagne in the VIII and IX centuries, or without the moral, scientific, technical, political, and spiritual renovation brought by the Italian Renaissance, without which there would have been no sixteenth century political and economic spurt – or rather no sixteenth century as we know it *tout court*? The historical consequences of the rule of Charlemagne and of the Italian Renaissance can hardly be overestimated at the level of global history. Without Charlemagne and/or the Italian Renaissance, there would have been no Industrial (or French) Revolution or industrialisation, no bourgeoisie or socialism, and therefore no modern times, or contemporary history, as we know it. Hann claims to be using history as one of the main epistemological inspirations and methods for his concept of Eurasia, but one may wonder what kind of historical knowledge can lead to such gross misconceptions.

stratification, of which westerners and Europeans are mostly unaware, of the notion of Eurasia and the political projects associated with it.

Recognizing the primacy or the uniqueness of some “typically” European features does not mean to endorse the primacy of Europe, or, worse, justify the horrible things that some of these features have provoked or influenced (colonialism, fascism, etc.). But refusing them would be an exercise in anti-history. Instead, what I try to do is to understand them and use them to build a critical Eurocentrism, since I believe that escaping from the latter is, for a European, unavoidable anyway. I find it naive and hypocritical to believe that one – anthropologist or not – may simply rip him/herself out of his/her background, like Baron Munchausen pulling himself out of the mire by his own hair, pretending to become a de-territorialised human being by virtue of reading anthropology articles and spending a few years in some village in a foreign land. Moreover, I do not see how Eurasia would be any more cosmopolitan than Europe, since it also excludes as many lands and peoples as it includes, as I have already argued elsewhere, in spite of Hann’s advocacy for “maximal inclusiveness.”¹¹ In any case, no matter how powerful these and other rites of passage into the condition of self-proclaimed cosmopolitans (or rather, Eurasians), we remain intellectually or even emotionally (or nostalgically) attached to “European things” like the Enlightenment, liberalism or state-socialism, and, precisely, cosmopolitanism. These are the reasons why I have always found the idea of a cosmopolitan “critical ethnocentrism” as developed by Italian anthropologist de Martino (2002 [1977]), or rather “critical Eurocentrism” more fascinating. This, as I write in another paper, could also be called “Cosmopolitan Eurocentrism, if I am permitted the oxymoron; in other words, a methodological Eurocentrism that could go hand in hand with moral Cosmopolitanism” (Testa 2016c: 373).

Hann’s opinions and mine also diverge in the “chess game, in which the pieces ‘culture,’ ‘civilisation,’ and ‘society’ have gone through numerous exchanges of geographic and semantic space” (Sahlins 1999: 400). Hann nicely writes that my treatment of the problem of civilisation “seems unnecessarily confusing, not to say obtuse and contradictory” (Hann 2005: 89). I cannot but invite readers to explore it in my 2015 work (Testa 2015: 69-73), to see if they find it confusing, obtuse, or contradictory. The authors I base my discussion about the notion of civilisation on in that article are Arnason, Mauss, Huntington, Hann himself, and others. I truly hope that the source of my confusion about civilization does not come from the reading of any of said authors.

There is no Eurasian civilization. Hann acknowledges this, and prefers the usage of the term in the plural or in its adjective forms. In global history there are indeed, I think, more or less recognizable European or Asian civilizations, but none of them was truly sitting at the conjuncture of the two worlds, or truly representing or reproducing the single (or common) features of all the others. In other words, in spite of Hann’s efforts, we are still waiting for Eurasian characteristics and *aires de famille* so ample and unique to embrace the entire landmass, thus making his Eurasian civilisation or cluster of civilizations distinguishable. The characteristics Hann hypothesizes about and uses in his writings about Eurasia are by no means sufficient to make Europe less distinguishable, and Eurasia more so (some of these characteristics have been already mentioned and commented upon in the previous pages; others are in the following). These last considerations offer me a chance to answer another of Hann’s pieces of criticism. In “On Europe and Eurasia,” I talk of “flagrant and deep cultural differences” (Testa 2015: 68) within Eurasia. Hann is not happy with this opinion of mine, and writes “Nowhere in his essay does he tell us what these differences might be” (Hann 2015: 90). My reaction to Hann’s skepticism is that when something is either empirically or intuitively self-evident, there is no need to theorize or hypothesize about that – a bit like an astronomer hypothesizing that the earth is round.

¹¹ “Why claim for an ‘inclusive’ approach which, after all, excludes as many areas as it includes?” (Testa 2015: 68). This point resonates in several of the replies to Hann’s latest article: “In spite of recurrent historical and current empirical contrary examples, Hann believes that Eurasia is the best source of ideologies and utopias of inclusion. In the globalized world, it is hard to maintain that one single locus or collective subject, no matter how complex it may be, is able to provide universal political answers” (Lins Ribeiro 2016: 17).

Let me return briefly to three of the characteristics that, in Hann's opinion, make Eurasia a distinguishable "family of society" (Hann 2016: 2) characterized by "civilizational interconnectedness" (ibid.).

In 2014, Hann wrote: "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 2014b, pages not numbered). This "deepest" hypothesis still underlines and sustains the 2016 article (see especially pp. 4-6), although differently formulated: "The key fact is that a succession of Eurasian civilisations developed new combinations of redistribution and exchange, or of state and market [...]. They legitimated these structures through ideals of socio-political inclusion, including the concept of democracy itself" (Hann 2016: 4); "At this moment, the need to rediscover Polanyi's notion of the human economy, and through him the original Eurasian perspective of Aristotle becomes urgent once again" (Hann 2016: 6). Markets and the illusory *homo economicus* would be the perversions of other, more authentically Eurasian principles, which historically manifested themselves as intellectual or political inventions such as democracy or socialism and were used to tame the "free" market and other exclusive or "disembedding" (Hann 2016: 4, commenting on Polanyi 1944) modes of political economy. In 2015, I asked rhetorically if it is not true that practically all non-capitalistic societies of the past and the present had or have had such moral principles (Testa 2015: 76-77). They 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.

These questions resonate in one of the more recent reactions to Hann's "deepest hypothesis:" "I cannot very well see how the values of communality characterize Eurasia more than Africa, Oceania, or the Americas" (Pina-Cabral 2016: 16). Hann does not provide an answer to this problem in any of his replies; a problem which weakens Hann's Eurasian exceptionalism and consequentially his claim for Eurasian "unity;" a problem concerning the "deepest hypothesis" of an ongoing, substantial research project, which should raise many doubts about both the hypothesis and the project.

A similar counter-argument can be made about another of Hann's Eurasian "specificities:" the welfare state – both in its socialist "eastern" and "western" versions: state socialism and the European variant of Keynesian liberalism, which was experimented in several countries and at several times between the Second World War and the rise of neoliberalism during the seventies of the last century and afterwards. The welfare state, just like real socialism, has not only *not* been experimented with and implemented in Eurasia only, but in many other countries from Australia to South and North America during the twentieth century (Cuba being probably the principal counter-example, or at least one that comes to one's mind immediately). Once again, Hann's Eurasian exceptionalism and unity seem to sit on no historically exceptional or unique features.

As for the reiterated appeal to investigate a "Eurasian mental space", which he evokes in the same terms as in his previous article (Hann 2014a, 17; 2016, 8), it will receive no attention here as I believe that it represents a merely speculative construction – in simpler words: no such thing exists under the sun.

Problems also exist at the methodological and epistemological levels, especially with regard to the kind of disciplinary approaches Hann does *not* consider or use in his heuristic endeavor. In his fight for Eurasian exceptionalism against European exceptionalism, Hann admittedly follows Jack Goody's steps. As with Goody, Hann's manner of conducting anthropology is hugely influenced by global history. His grasp of historical and historiographical matters raises questions, though. I have already pointed out some of the curious outcomes of his reading of the history of religions, for example concerning Abrahamic religions, or European history, including concerning his treatment of the Middle Ages, or his opinion that Charlemagne and the Renaissance did not have important consequences in political and economic matters in modern European history. Not surprisingly, he considers Jacques Le Goff a proposer of "narratives of European identities," a scholar characterised

by a methodologically “parochial” vision (Hann 2015: 89), a view that stridently contrasts with that of most historians, who rightly consider Le Goff (1924-2014) “one of the most brilliant and influential medievalists” as well as “one of the greatest European historians,” as Lisa Bitel wrote in her review of *The Birth of Europe* (Le Goff 2003) in the *Journal of British Studies* (Bitel 2006). Here, nevertheless, the real object of Hann’s criticism seems not be Le Goff, and perhaps not even myself; what Hann truly dislikes, are the “narratives of European identities.” These are, in Hann’s view, mainly a top-down invention of the Eurocrats, with little or no social reality at the popular level. Another very curious idea. No wonder that in his writings about Eurasia we indeed find no reference to scholars such as Sharon Macdonald, Peter Niedermüller, Lisanne Wilken, Ullrich Kockel, and many others that could be mentioned who have been working extensively on the problem from ethnographic and anthropological perspectives. We only find one reference to Chris Shore in Hann 2014, precisely about a book deconstructing top-down identity policies operated by the EU, which, important as they may be, are only one tile in the mosaic. Hann writes, “though he ostensibly aligns himself with Eric Wolf, Marshall Sahlins and Christoph Brumann, it seems to me that Testa’s intellectual home may be with these ‘European ethnologists’ [“these” does not refer to anybody in the text from which I extract this passage, and seems to be more a derogatory adjective, especially coupled with the quotation marks otherwise inexplicably encircling “European ethnologists”].” He then continues: “In any case, his is a very different anthropological undertaking from that practised at our Institute. If the ultimate yardstick for Testa is a vivid presence of ‘the idea of Europe’ in popular culture, this seems hard to reconcile with the materialist realism he espouses earlier in his article” (Hann 2015: 91). Here I will not even linger on the abstruse idea that studying “the idea of Europe” or European identities cannot be coupled with materialist realism – I just wonder what Antonio Gramsci would have thought of such statement. What strikes me is the evident negative connotation born by European ethnology in Hann’s argument, a connotation probably based on the creed that ethnologists are a “lesser version” of economic anthropologists, i.e. scholars unable to produce as good a knowledge as, say, that produced at the Max Planck Institute in Halle (I will return to this). Of course, Hann is free to believe that he practises a superior type of anthropology. But we are also free to disagree. Indeed, European Ethnology (or the Anthropology of Europe, for those who still have problems in conceptualising them as different disciplines) is a well-established discipline populated by serious scholars who do not deserve Hann’s scorn.

Elsewhere, Hann writes: “There are many excellent reasons for teaching our students more about the rise of complex societies in Eurasia over the last four or five millennia, instead of privileging the last four or five centuries and a European notion of modernity” (Hann 2015: 91). I couldn’t agree more. But that is primarily the task of archaeologists and historians, and only secondarily of anthropologists. Elsewhere in the same article Hann writes: “At the Halle Max Planck Institute we are socio-cultural anthropologists; almost all our projects, including my personal research, are fieldwork-based” (Hann 2015: 89). But can one do fieldwork-based research among the Eurasian farmers of the first millennia BC? How does a focus on Eurasia “over the last four or five millennia” and a focus on “fieldwork-based research” go together? Perhaps the Max Planck Institute in Halle hides a time machine in its basement.

Having been trained as a historian for my BA and MA, and having earned a Ph.D. in Anthropology (and subsequently having done both textual and archival investigations as well as intensive fieldwork in Italy, the Czech Republic, and Catalonia), I find Hann’s methodological claims contradictory, but not the epistemological assumptions that move his aims, which are on the contrary transparent and consistent. The fact of privileging the historical-anthropological study of politics and economics on the *longue durée* over other spheres of social life (religion, languages, art and aesthetics, spare time and *Alltagskultur*, and others) allows Hann to pretend to have discovered his black diamond, Eurasian unity, which can hardly even be imagined with respect to those other domains.

Ethnologists and anthropologists study and discuss not only economic structures and patterns, but also narratives, identities, and ways in which people imagine their past, their present, and their

future. All these things, as I claimed before and as I repeat here, are absent in Hann’s theorization about Eurasia, a theorization where we can see the effort to highlight structures and patterns, but where the peoples get lost in the process. It is little surprise: since there are no people who consider themselves “Eurasians,” there can be no ethnographic grasp of them (when Hann writes that “‘Eurasia’ has become prominent in public discourse outside the academia” [Hann 2016: 1], he does not elaborate further). In Hann’s political dream, Eurasia exists outside academia, namely in an unspecified “public discourse”, and it is actually Europe which lacks popular consistence. What I can report, having myself lived in different parts of Europe throughout my life,¹² is that this popular consciousness indeed exists, and is more or less historically stratified according to the context, although its observation, study, and interpretation may not be as plain as the EU top-down policies claim or wish. On the other hand, there is no Eurasian identity to construct or deconstruct, also because in global history, European and Asian societies have often constructed themselves in opposition to each other – we cannot but hope that this will change in the future, but the main object of scientific research cannot be reduced to hopes, or the future. The evidence for this claim of mine (that the notion of Europe exists at popular level outside the academia) can be found in almost all my recent publications (Testa 2014a, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, and 2017c). I invite Hann to offer evidence of *his* claim (that the notion of Eurasia exists outside the academia).



IMAGE DEPICTION: Europe depicted as a Queen in Sebastian Münsters’ *Cosmographia*, 1570 (Werner 2009). In Hann’s theorisation about Eurasia, the problem of the construction of European identities is dismissed as a mere example of top-down social engineering – mostly with reference to European Union policies. Processes of European identity construction throughout European history up to our times, which are the object of a rich scholarship, are ignored. I imagine this is because Hann considers European ethnology a second-class discipline (Hann 2015: 91).

The political dream of Hann is “a pan-Eurasian coming-together of peoples, as a prelude to a true world society” (Hann 2015b: n. p.). The main argument in “On Eurasia and Europe” was that we, as scholars, cannot confuse a political dream with an analytical argument; nor can we try to sell

¹² More precisely in Italy, France, Estonia, Germany, Czech Republic, Austria, and Spain.

our peers – let alone non-scholars – the former as it were the latter. At least Hann has openly questioned whether his “Eurasian political-economic unity” shall remain just a utopia or become the prelude to a fussier “world society” based on principles of solidarity, inclusion, and anti-capitalism (Hann 2016: 7; similar argument in Hann 2014a: 17). It is interesting to see, in the conclusions to two of his most important writings about Eurasia, how this postulated unity is projected as a utopian future, instead of being shown to lie back in the past. It is, in the end, Hann’s utopian dream that pastes together his puzzled vision of Eurasia. As I wrote, one can be sympathetic with this dream. I am, and so are others that may be as critical of Hann’s concept of Eurasia: Gingrich has written that “Sharing Hann’s sympathies with a priority for these values, however, is not necessarily identical with supporting his notion of ‘Eurasia’ as a vision” (Gingrich 2016: 14); and Eriksen, asking whether Hann’s Eurasia actually adds more to the Eurasia of his predecessors: “yet in the end it appears chiefly as a political argument about a need in Europe (and North America) to engage with Asian countries – especially Russia, but also China – in a more equitable way” (Eriksen 2016: 12). Nevertheless, the main problem pointed out a few lines earlier remains: it is the problem that haunts most of the second half of my “On Europe and Eurasia” (Testa 2015), and which is never fully tackled by Hann, even though he is obviously aware of it: “If Eurasia is the product of a political utopian dream, why should we consider it as an academic, critical notion [an analytic concept]? And why should we abdicate, on this basis, that of Europe?” (Testa 2015: 76), an argument which resonates in Schlee’s criticism: “Statements about the past can be subjected to historical criticism, statements about the present to empirical scrutiny. Self-declared “utopias” are immune to all this” (Schlee 2016: 18).¹³

Before coming to a conclusion, there is one last issue that I would like to raise in these final pages, an issue which, again, resonates in the work of other colleagues: Hann’s arrogant and patronising tone when debating with colleagues, and the meaning of this tone.

His arrogance in replying to his peers has actually already been noticed, for instance in relation to an exchange, which also took place in *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, between Michał Buchowski and Chris Hann (Buchowski 2004; Hann 2005). Hann’s tone in his reply was described by Hana Červinková as “patronising” and characterised by a “position of superiority” (Červinková 2012: 158).

In his reply to my article, apart from an accommodating sentence at the very beginning, where Hann gives me some credit for my engagement, calling it “erudite” (Hann 2015: 89), his rhetoric is, as said, arrogant and patronizing. This is probably due to the irritation of having to reply to a young scholar working from a much lower level of academic seniority. And yet, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this paper, many of my arguments and critical points resonate in those offered by several other (senior) scholars in their replies to Hann’s “A Concept of Eurasia” (Hann 2016), most of which have been formulated differently, independently, and later than mine. Nevertheless, in spite of my comments and arguments resonating in theirs, theirs have been cordially welcomed as “rich” (Hann 2016: 20), whereas mine (or at least some of mine) are dismissed as “confusing,” if not “obtuse” (Hann 2015: 89). Maybe this is because, unlike the other respondents in *Current Anthropology*, I joined the discussion uninvited? Or could it be because of our different academic seniorities?

Hann’s arrogant and patronising tone has another application in the usage of the adjective “curious” – a usage that I have taken the liberty to reciprocate in this piece. In his reply, he writes that “the selection of texts reviewed by Testa is curious” (Hann 2015: 92). The following lines in that text are devoted to reminding the reader that all the pieces I used in my article had either been published in places different from where I read and cited them or were “in-house publications of the Max Planck Institute” (ibid.). Now, these considerations do not make my selection devoid of any legitimacy, nor do they make it “curious,” for what matters is this: I reviewed all of his pertinent writings, with the exception of a book containing, again, previously published material (which I

¹³ Günther Schlee is also very critical of Hann’s Eurasia. In Schlee, 2016, he makes a few very critical points, and he also refers to other works of his where such criticism has been developed further.

mostly engaged). As for the “in-house” publications, they are not “in-house” at all: in fact, they are available for consultation and download on the internet, on the website of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle,¹⁴ and also for free in printed, “take-away” form at the location of the Institute, which is a public institution which is obliged to make the results of its research publicly available.

The previous considerations lead us to a final and more urgent remark. While reading his counter-reply for the first time, one thing that came to my mind was less the image of a thoughtful scholar – perhaps understandably pinched by the received criticism – than that of a sovereign outraged at my act of *lèse-majesté*. I was therefore not surprised to read, a few months later, a series of research papers exposing the power relations and the subordinate working conditions of researchers at the Max Planck Institute in Halle, which is led by three directors, one of whom is Chris Hann himself (Peacock 2016). In one such paper, Julie Billaud, a former post-doc at the same Institute, does not hesitate to call the academic system at the Max Planck Institute in Halle a “Kingship,” where sectors or departments are led by a “sovereign Director,” a “King,” or a “Director-King” (Billaud 2016: 124). In light of all this, Chris Hann’s manners and tone do not cause any surprise: they are those of a “sovereign” at the top of an institutional pyramid, one of the “Kings” of the “monarchic” system of the Max Planck Institute in Halle (Billaud 2016). This also happens in spite of the fact that, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this paper, the argument of a young scholar like myself coincides with those of more senior scholars with whom Hann exchanges willingly, politely, and, one could say, horizontally. The conclusion is that while he seems to advocate more horizontal and inclusive relations in political matters, in academic matters his endeavour leans, on the contrary, toward establishing vertical relations and conforming to – and reproducing – hierarchy.

I will close this review article with further remarks on some of the issues discussed in the previous pages.

That Europa forged its identity during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times, often in opposition to various “others” (the Jews, the Orthodox Christians, the Arabs, and more) is no curious opinion of mine, but a well-established historical fact. Hann may call this Eurocentrism; others call it history. My argument is not to “exclude” from European history the presence of the influence of the “otherised” areas and peoples on the basis of medieval symbolic geographies or other similar curiosities, as Hann seems to suspect. Far from that: mine is of course no essentialist or orientalist attitude, and as an anthropologist with a background in history, I am only too aware of the huge contributions that other societies and cultures – mainly from the Near East – have brought to Europe throughout its history – and vice-versa. Not to mention the eminently “Eurasian” Indo-European common heritage, which I do not neglect and which I have discussed in great detail in a recent publication (Testa 2016d; Hann credits me for my usage of the Dumézilian comparative paradigm [Hann 2015: 89]). But symbolic geographies sometimes persist in people’s minds, in spite of anthropological calls for cosmopolitanism and openness. And, as anthropologists or historians, we cannot but record and interpret what people think or thought.

Eurasian geographical unity is a self-evident given, but there is no empirical evidence, historical or ethnographic, that any “unity”, actual or representational, of the peoples living on the landmass (call them societies, cultures, civilizations, or whatever else) has ever existed. The importance of the technological revolutions and the ideological inventions of the third to first millennia BC can hardly be overestimated, no doubt. Likewise, the Silk Road and other ways of trading goods and exchanging ideas have connected the peoples in the different corners of the landmass, as did real socialism, albeit for a shorter time. Nevertheless, these unifying elements – some of which are not, moreover, only “Eurasian” – are counter-balanced by many other elements of division and differentiation, and in the end they only achieve, in my opinion, to prove a unity that remains purely hypothetical in theory and merely utopian in practice.

¹⁴ <http://www.eth.mpg.de/3976190/2016>.

In conclusion, Hann's reply (Hann 2015) to my article (Testa 2015) is perhaps effective rhetorically, but weak in content. He points out some flaws in my line of argumentation and offers some rather haphazard considerations, but he also neglects or avoids replying to some of the most important problems raised in my piece. In fact, these problems persist in Hann's last reference work to date about Eurasia (Hann 2016), an article which is nevertheless better structured, more refined, and in a way more convincing than its predecessors. However, as I have tried to show in this paper, and as pointed out and discussed by other scholars in the replies to his last article, most of the serious problems and flaws that weaken his concept of Eurasia remain.

Sitting on the arguments developed in my original article (Testa 2015), then formulated independently by some of the scholars who reacted to Hann's latest article about Eurasia (Hann 2016), this piece offers new evidence that the concept of Eurasia as developed by Chris Hann is more utopian than scientific. This obviously undermines its suitability as an analytical tool, and therefore its heuristic usefulness.

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