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## Rethinking Culture, Area, and Comparison from the Axial Age to the Contemporary Multi-centric World

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Culture areas and *Kulturkreise* (culture circles) once provided the heuristic base for organizing local ethnographic particulars for theoretical comparative ends. While these concepts have gone out of fashion, the importance of regional foci persists in anthropology. Regional specifics, differences, and forms of connectedness are important dimensions of anthropological fields and of local social practices and politics, as are reflections how to conceptualize such relations, differences, and specifics. Most anthropologists, maybe discounting those who study global cosmopolitans,<sup>1</sup> would agree that at least one regional specialization in terms of ethnographic and historical knowledge, language, and cultural competence grounded in long-term field experience is a necessary prerequisite for anthropological knowledge production. For this reason, regional or areal logics still organize central parts of anthropological practice, whereas the theoretical underpinnings of such practice have come under severe criticism and are in need of renewed inquiry and debate.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hannerz (2004).

## Culture: the making, unmaking and remaking of an anthropological concept

**Carola Lentz**

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**Abstract:** Culture is a key concept in anthropology, but has also long become integral to how social actors conceive their own identities and group boundaries. In the context of identity politics culture is often understood as existing in more or less closed systems of values, norms, and world views that determine human action. How should anthropologists respond when a concept so central to their own discipline is practically 'naturalised' in public political discourse? How should they react in face of the overwhelming culturalisation of research perspectives in neighbouring disciplines, where culture has become so all-encompassing that practically everything becomes culture and the term's analytical value is eroded? Can and should culture be retained and further developed as an analytical category, and if so, how? In what ways can it serve as a concept that facilitates fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration? This paper discusses these questions by first presenting a brief, highly selective overview of the varied history of the anthropological culture concept, including the moments when it was subject to trenchant critique. Then it considers why anthropology as a discipline should retain culture as a key analytical concept, and what challenges anthropologists face in reformulating the term in a post-essentialist, constructivist manner.

*[concepts of culture, cultural anthropology, group boundaries, interdisciplinary dialogue, politics of difference]*

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# “Civilizations”, Eurasia and the *Hochkultur*gürtel: An Essay about how to subdivide the world in terms of cultural history and what to explain with the units thereby created<sup>2</sup>

Günther Schlee

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**Abstract:** Cultures as discrete, isolated, countable units have been contested in anthropological writings in recent decades. Few anthropologists would now subscribe to a notion of humankind being the sum of culturally and neatly defined sub-units.

This scepticism about cultural classification on different scales has not done away with the need for just such classification. We need to discuss who is more or less similar to whom in terms of language, economic behaviour, religion, or whatever in order to explore co-variation: what else changes if one of these features changes?

The present paper discusses alternative ways of subdividing the world into cultural units. The major focus is on Hann's notion of Eurasia being somehow different from the rest and made up by a number of civilisations that differ less from each other than one would expect if they were found anywhere on the globe (“the unity of the landmass”) (Hann 2008:147). Another focus is on civilisation belts running all around the globe. Yet further delineations of regions meaningful for anthropological purposes are discussed in passing. Generally, the question is how and under which methodological conditions the units thus constructed can be used for the anthropological study of variation and co-variation.

*[cultural distance, high cultures, kinship terminologies, Kulturkreise]*

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Michael Banton, Keebet von Benda-Beckmann, Aleksandar Bošković, John Eidson, Ernst Halbmayer and Patrick Heady for comments on different versions of this paper and in particular J. Christoph Winter, who taught me a great deal at an earlier stage of my career and to whom I owe valuable hints for the present paper. Chris Hann has made some helpful clarifications. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of those whose help I acknowledge.

## Long Live Eurasian Civ! Towards a new confluence of anthropology and world history<sup>3</sup>

Chris Hann

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

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

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<sup>3</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Graduiertenkolleg “Archäologie vormoderner Wirtschaftsräume” at the University of Cologne on 16 December 2016, and to the Centre for Global Studies of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague on 5 April 2017. I thank both audiences, especially Richard Bussmann (Cologne) and Marek Hrubec (Prague), and also Ernst Halbmayr and an anonymous reviewer for this journal. My greatest debt over many years is to Johann Arnason; but none of these scholars should be held responsible for the way in which I adapt and combine the concepts of civilization and Eurasia in this paper. It derives from a European Research Council grant: “Realising Eurasia: Civilisation and Moral Economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Grant agreement no. 340854: REALEURASIA).

## Local comparisons. Buddhism and its others in upland Laos

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**Abstract:** Comparison is not only the foundation of anthropology, but may even be a human universal. It is a practice that emerges from the perception of cultural difference. Therefore, not only modern academics compare – comparison is always embedded in specific cultural relationships. This article shows how Rmeet uplanders in northern Laos and Jru' in the south employ comparison when they talk about ethnic and religious difference. In particular, they compare their own ritual system with translocal and national Buddhism. They thus practice comparison in the sense that comparison is part of transcultural relationships and the valorization of cultural representations. This occurs in a framework of distinctions between Buddhism and its manifold “animist” others, which provides two bases of comparison – the otherness inbuilt into Buddhism and the adaptability of animism. Uplanders thus find themselves cast in the position of Buddhism's other and construct the relationships in terms of reversible hierarchies.

*[Buddhism, animism, Laos, Rmeet, Loven]*

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## The Culture Area as Boundary Object

**Cora Bender**

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**Abstract:** The article discusses regionalization as a powerful sociocultural and academic technique by critically reviewing two formations of the area-approach, namely the emergence of the Culture Area as a “boundary object” (Star and Griesemer 1989) after the demise of the Fur Trade and the closing of the Frontier at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the emergence of Area Studies as a cooperation of anthropology with foreign policy agendas during the Cold War. Against the backdrop of this history, is it possible to regain the area-concept and put it to alternative uses in an age of globalization? The indigenous people inhabiting the former Fur Trade area successfully reclaimed regionalism from the 1980s on.

*[Regionalization, Culture Area, Area Studies, Boundary Object, History of Anthropology, Native Cultures of North America, Ojibwe]*

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