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Book Review: Austin Harrington German cosmopolitan social thought and the idea of the west: Voices from Weimar

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Austin Harrington *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West: Voices from Weimar*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 450 pages. ISBN 13: 978-1107110915 (£84.99).

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There is a perverse irony in that fact that the ‘Brexit’ vote in June 2016 seems to have become a trigger for British sociology – in its increasingly postcolonial incarnation – to start mourning the very idea of Europe that they have been incessantly trashing for the past couple decades. So much effort has been spent in blaming Europe for all ills within contemporary sociology, and so much energy has been devoted to criticising those who would uphold Europe’s positive contributions, that a genuine sense of loss for what we *all* are about to lose may yet take a while to fully sink in. The irony of the situation is only compounded by the fact that, while political motifs surely differ, this blasé attitude of ‘Europe is to blame’ is not altogether dissimilar to the one we witnessed in various parts of the political establishment that started caring about Europe all too late. Nobody can accuse Austin Harrington of any of this, however. Scholarly as well as politically, this book is fully committed to a democratic and indeed cosmopolitan idea of Europe that provided the fertile social and intellectual grounds on which sociology emerged in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century.

This is an ambitious book whose results are remarkable. Its goal is to reconstruct the *European outlook* that transpires, sometimes explicitly but often also implicitly, in the works of that fantastic generation of thinkers who, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (i.e. from the German unification in 1870-1 to the fall of the Weimar Republic in 1933) played the leading role in the establishment of the modern social sciences in that country. The book offers a rich and original account of the main intellectual coordinates that define the *oeuvre* of eight leading thinkers of that period: Ernst Curtius, Karl Jaspers, Karl Mannheim, Max Scheler, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies, Ernst Troeltsch, and Alfred Weber. Politically, these writers were committed to a ‘left-liberal-cosmopolitan humanism’ that Harrington describes as a ‘radicalism of the centre’ (p. 28, 35, 130). More concretely, this outlook was expressed in several social and political institutions that were taking shape at the time. On the one hand, they favoured novel forms of constitutional republicanism that sought to promote the rule of law, parliamentary democracy and social welfare as essential requirements in a modern political order. A legitimate democratic society required both wide participation in decision-making processes and institutions that worked for the amelioration of social and economic inequalities. On the other hand, in relation to international affairs, they all pushed for a new settlement that understands inter-state relations as regulated by international law – a position which, *inter alia*, meant also the rejection of imperialism as a viable political formation on both pragmatic and normative grounds. Underpinning these writers’ works we thus find a philosophical commitment to ‘universalist humanitarianism’ (p. 3) that is best understood as the rise of a new, modern, *transnational or cosmopolitan* idea of Europe.

The book is thematically organised in eight substantive chapters that look at the idea of the West as it was construed but also criticised at the turn of the last century (Ch. 1), the cultural and political specificities of Weimar Germany (Chs. 2 and 3); the role of World War I in the rise and demise of passionate nationalism, with a special emphasis on how the Great War allowed for the renewal of a genuinely European outlook (Ch. 4); the Roman heritage of European identity (Ch. 5), and questions of universal history (Ch. 6), humanism (Ch. 7) and nihilism (Ch. 8). The book closes with a chapter on questions of Europe and 'the West' then and now.

Throughout the text, Harrington discusses both well-known sources and materials that will be relatively unknown in English-speaking circles. He then uses these to reinterpret some of these writers' theses in relation to ideas of Europe, West, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. We find, for instance, wonderful depictions of Simmel's cosmopolitan and universalistic tropes as they emerge through his arguments on reciprocity, self-examination, individual autonomy and ethical uniqueness (p. 97, 143-52, 196-8). For writers like Curtius, Jaspers, or Alfred Weber, Harrington focuses on their *critique* of nationalism and rejection of the undying antisemitism of German elites, and on their views of imperialism as a retrograde political form. Tönnies and Manheim, for their part, may have been less outspoken about their commitment to cosmopolitanism but they were very much in favour of the idea of a global public sphere (p. 110, 156-9) and the fact that modern democracy and rationalism were enhanced, and become viable, through greater interaction among different social groups (p. 272-9). Harrington convincingly demonstrates that a great strength of this early generation of sociologists is that their radical centrist position did not succumb to ideological polarisation. Given the crises that devastated Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, the importance of the centrist position put forward by sociology is usually but also wrongly downplayed vis-à-vis those better known movements from both right and left that seemed to carry the day (p. 60-84). All these early sociologists, however, were as opposed to right-wing conservatism as they were sceptical of Marxist revolutionary politics. It is to early sociology's credit, Harrington contends, that it embraced the principles of democracy, republicanism, egalitarianism and openness right at the time when they were mostly being dismissed from both left and the right as mere bourgeois ideology (p. 22-45, 304-21). From this there follows what is arguably a more general proposition for sociology as a whole: A common thread that underpins these writers' positions is that sociology must put itself at the service of public debate. The original promise of sociology was that of becoming a privileged medium for 'contemporary collective self-reflection' (p. 11). To take an example from the first meeting of the German Sociological Society in 1909, Ferdinand Tönnies argued there that sociology's call be interpreted as a dual incarnation of the oracle of Delphi: 'know thyself'. On the one hand, sociology's call to reflect on social life takes place *within* society itself; on the other hand, the knowing subject that exercises that reflective capability can be no other than humanity as a whole (Tönnies 2005). Every time sociology loses sight of the relevance of these democratic ideals and reflexive attitude, the impact is felt not only in a distorted

portrayal of our discipline's past but, more importantly, in our own attitude towards its present challenges and future promises.

In what follows, I should like to concentrate on four sets of issues.

The first is perhaps the main critical comment I have on the execution of the book. Among the wealth of materials and sources being discussed, its analytical focus gets somewhat lost in the various ways in which such terms as 'Europe', 'the West', 'cosmopolitanism', etc. are used throughout. Whether, how, and why a genuinely *European* perspective may be depicted as universalist (p. 97) cosmopolitan (p. 73-4) transnational (p. 143) or even international (p. 145-6) remains a question the book does not address. One possible explanation is that these are equivocations that transpire in the materials themselves: for instance, questions of cosmopolitanism can emphasise a universalistic sense of belonging as shared membership to the human species or a more particularistic understanding of certain traits that are specific to an idea of European identity. But at stake here is the analytical and indeed normative purchase of choosing any of these concepts not so much in relation to our reconstruction of the past but in the way we adopt them for our current concerns.

The second has to do with a reassessment of the role of modern natural law theory in the rise of sociology (Chernilo and Fine 2013). On the one hand, Harrington convincingly shows the importance of Ernst Troeltsch's contribution to re-thinking of the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of sociology (p. 115-20, 159-62, 183-9, 244-52). In an argument that coincides with Hans Joas' (2013: 97-139) illuminating use of Troeltsch's work as developing an 'affirmative genealogy' of human rights, Harrington also showcases Troeltsch's view that we ought to *separate* the religious and secular contents in modern natural law theory so that we can make fruitful use of its most important normative intuition: a genuinely universalistic idea of humanity (Troeltsch 1958). It is becoming increasingly apparent that we still require a fuller examination of Troeltsch's work to understand the normative foundations of modern institutions. On the other hand, Harrington criticises Leo Strauss, Karl Löwith and Eric Voegelin for having thrown the towel with regards to Europe's ability to renew itself democratically after the war (p. 33, 300-9, 328-36). This is perhaps a bit harsh: biographically, their key writings – Löwith's *Meaning in History*, Voegelin's *New Science of Politics* and Strauss' *Natural Right and History* – were all written between 1949 and 1951 and as an immediate reaction to ten years of persecution, war, and eventually exile. Intellectually, I have argued elsewhere that they were not so much sceptical about the *intrinsic worthiness* of modern democratic values and institutions as they doubted the belief that these values were self-evident – let alone self-positing. Rather than a straightforwardly *conservative* critique of modernity *à la* Heidegger or Schmitt, their re-appropriation of the tradition of natural law argued against the arrogance of thinking that these values could be upheld as if no lessons had to be learnt from the tragedies of European experience itself (Chernilo 2013: 39-70).

My third question focuses on the most famous and influential intellectual of this generation – but one who does not figure centrally in Harrington's work.

Somewhat polemically but also rather convincingly, Max Weber is portrayed as an exceptional character when it comes to representing the social and political milieu of this generation. The older of the Weber brothers emerges as far less liberal in social issues, far less democratic in political matters, and far more nationalistic in international affairs than any other of the writers that are discussed in the book (p. 80, 120-5, 143, 166-79, 190-3). Harrington accepts that Weber's methodological writings should not be read as an expression of Eurocentrism and, to that extent at least, his work is complementary to his brother Alfred's programme of a sociology of culture as a *critique* of Eurocentrism (p. 108-10, 229-43). Harrington also discusses Karl Jaspers' influential interpretation at that time, which spoke highly of Weber's work because of its non-nationalistic outlook (p. 296, 308). Yet the book reconstructs how, in terms of concrete policy suggestions, and in particular when it came to issues of foreign policy, Max Weber did endorse strong nationalistic positions throughout his life. On this, Harrington is prepared to accept the nationalistic equivocations of, say, Simmel or Scheler at the beginning of the war, while Weber's comments are subject to much harsher judgements – incidentally, a similar assessment can be made in relation to Durkheim's writings in France before and during the war (Fournier 2013: 663-724). The criticisms seem justified given Weber's continuous interest and participation in political questions. Yet the key point that remains is that this wave of nationalist fervour was as vocal as it was short-lived: within 18 months, most writers had turned against the war effort.

The final argument that I would like to make goes back to the question of Europe. Perhaps the book's most important contribution is the strong case that it makes for its re-evaluation: Europe becomes 'less an object, essence or substance than an epistemic situation *from* which knowledge of global cultural life was to be sought' (p. 52). To Harrington, the development of a European perspective is not *ipso facto* a form of Eurocentrism: "Europeanism" is not always, and need not always be, "Eurocentrism" (p. 54). In fact, the opposite is the case and this claim appears in different ways throughout the book. In relation to nationalism, Harrington accepts that nations and nation-states were sometimes reified and treated as substantive units (p. 46-9) and yet the development of genuine national constellations *requires* self-reflection: 'national particularities always sought, as conditions of their growth, conversation and self-recognition of themselves in others' (p. 80; see also 225). Indeed, by the end of World War I, it was not uncommon to hear calls for the sublation of nationalism as the main vehicle for social and political mobilisation: 'several German writers argued that peace in Europe might have been better served not by Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations but by an attempt to give legal expression to the sense of a more continent-centred medium of European solidarity anchored in the experiences of deep transnational European historical heritage' (p. 180). On the one hand, the practical purchase of these reflections pushes directly in the direction of a *critique* of European colonialism

The crimes of European colonialism had stemmed from a dwindling of European ethical self-understanding into particularistic national predatory actions by atomized competitive states. The inhumanity of

colonialism in this sense had stemmed not from 'too much Europe' but from too little reflective appropriation of the moral experience and maturity that European peoples gained from a thousand years of shared history (p. 261)

On the other hand, the philosophical underpinnings of this position lead to the vindication of the conceptual and methodological universalism that is central for this writers' generation

All European writing about world history in the present day needed in this sense to be not essentially less but *more* universalistic than hitherto: more scrupulously, more self-searchingly so. Universal history could be honoured and revisited: not abandoned but rescued, even and especially as its pursuit hitherto revealed time and again the fallibility of European ideas (p. 265-6)

The debate on the origins of sociology does not enjoy of good health: let's pause and think for a second that, in the 21st century, the idea of 'dead white men' is being treated by many as a serious analytical category. In that context, this excellent book surely deserves a paperback edition to make it more widely available; it is a timely reminder of what serious scholarship can achieve. Even more importantly, it calls for the reinvigoration of those humanist values and principles that made sociology a worthy intellectual tradition over a century ago – the very values that are now under threat in the UK as much as in Europe itself.

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