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**A Critical Archaeology  
of Cosmopolitan Thinking**

**Return to the Interwar Years**

**Edited by**

**Daniel Meyer and Gérard Raulet**



**Duncker & Humblot · Berlin**

DANIEL MEYER / GÉRARD RAULET (Eds.)

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# **Introduction: A Critical Archaeology of Cosmopolitan Thinking**

## **Return to the Interwar Years**

*Daniel Meyer and Gérard Raulet*

Cosmopolitical thought can be traced back to antiquity, but Diogenes of Sinope's provocation was above all directed against submission to the laws of *one* city. There is no authentic cosmopolitical thought before the modern era, or even really before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The openness of the previous centuries to the World corresponded to the peak of colonial conquests and was part of the Old Regime's paradigm of thought, according to which the expansion and influence of a State were a reflection of its power. It is significant that Kantian critique also inaugurates a real cosmopolitical conversion of thought. *The Idea of a universal history from a cosmopolitical point of view* (1784) anticipates the demand that Ulrich Beck formulated much later in the context of globalization: even if cosmopolitanism is not a reality, or even a possibility, at least it is thinkable and forces us to change scale. "Think global".

Was the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, as cosmopolitical as it claimed to be? It is only among its heirs, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose linguistic interests went beyond the horizon of western cultures, and among the Romantics, who were fascinated by the Indo-European myth, that cosmopolitanism really developed, all the more so because the emerging nation-states were perceived by the Romantics as abstract social devices. Contrary to popular belief, cosmopolitanism is not an idea or an ideal of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but an idea born in the century of world trade, the 19<sup>th</sup>. Paradoxically enough, it is in what is seemingly the most hostile context that a thought of the World emerged and freed itself from both the moralism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the pragmatism of the 19<sup>th</sup>, in a dialectical mode which Marxist thought exhibits particularly well. It was the catastrophe of the First World War that forced even the most recalcitrant, notably in Germany and Austria, to consider change of scale as necessary, as well as the need to develop a thought of the World. It is from this perspective that we must examine the vagaries of cosmopolitan thinking during the interwar period.

The doubts one may have about historical schematizations apply to the interwar period, which enjoys an ambivalent prominence in historiography, more than to any other. Known for the eruption of cultural modernity, it also embodies a kind of fatal interlude preparing the worst. However, it is in this period, which is ironically that of the rise of nationalisms, that pacifism and cosmopolitical thought experienced a profound revival. While, with the progress of the Bolshevik revolution, socialist inter-



nationalism asserted itself as an alternative to the weakness of Western democracies, the various dominant intellectual paradigms within the latter fuelled a redeployment of the cosmopolitical problematic. Neo-Kantianism converted its ambiguous position during the Great War to a resolute commitment to peace and the League of Nations. It largely dominated the philosophical and legal terrain, as can be judged from the contributions gathered in this volume, at the risk of saturating it. But as a result, we are in danger of not seeing the wood for the trees. For Neo-Kantianism was rivalled by the very different phenomenological approaches of Husserl and Scheler, who partly drew on it but also, on the one hand, deployed (as Husserl did progressively) a thought of the World, an ontology that could rise to the cosmopolitan challenge of Modernity, and, on the other hand (as was the case with Scheler), invented original political paths that aimed at anchoring the ontological revolution in the concrete ground of existing political and cultural realities, coming to terms with Christianity and tradition for instance.

Indeed, the philosopher Max Scheler bases his philosophy of history on the idea that the Great War inaugurated a globalized approach to the problems – and, for this founder of philosophical anthropology, it is not only a political but also an epistemic turning point: only now, man, this adventurous being stemming from a “misstep of evolution”, measures the whole terrible scope of his destination, which is to be the bearer of a project of harmony with the human cosmos and with the universal cosmos. Such is the program of the *Ausgleich*, of the re-foundation of all balances, political, social and ecological. Significantly, this new cosmopolitanism also includes the contribution of the “rest of the world” and resolutely reaches beyond Western-centred thought.

We can see that the particular geopolitical situation of Germany and Austria at the end of the First World War seems to generate a particularly original cosmopolitical perspective, where an acute awareness of crisis seeks to situate the thought of the world in a modality that is not solely carried by an end-of-war optimism. There is no lack of critical voices either – witness Heidegger, who comes from this whole movement, but also those inspirers or actors of “cultural pessimism” that we will be careful not to forget: Freud and Spengler.

If the war had made the world inhospitable, *unheimlich*, for him, the cosmopolitical pacifism to which Freud adhered from 1915 onwards would not make his unease disappear once peace had returned. The 1920s are, as we know, the years when he developed the “second topic” and the death drive. Destruction is inherent to the process of civilization because it is inherent to the vital process itself. Already in his 1919 essay he writes: “The ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, Sigmund: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey, London 1953, Vol. XVII, p. 220 (Freud, Sigmund: Das Unheimliche, in: Gesammelte Werke, Vol. 10: Schriften aus den

Spengler is also a man of his time, the time of the “primacy of foreign policy”;<sup>2</sup> but his global thinking takes the form of a morphology of cultures that juxtaposes them in their singularity. Civilizations are like monads without windows, whose pre-established harmony does not ensure their integration into the historical whole. Sometimes invoked as an inspiration by multiculturalists, he is, on the other hand, also denounced as the herald of the conflict of civilizations.<sup>3</sup> Faced with the idealist current strongly represented in the political thought of the interwar period, the only internationalism that he knows is imperialism<sup>4</sup>: that of the Faustian Western civilization first of all, which will nevertheless have to give way to the thirst for conquest of younger people. The world empire which Spengler prophesizes will come into being around 2100 should enter into decadence around 2200. For high cultures resemble the waves of the ocean: they are born, expand and then disappear, “and the mirror-like water once more finds solitude and sleep.”<sup>5</sup>

The panorama proposed in this collection of studies does not claim to be exhaustive. It constitutes a kind of exploration of the currents that made up those times. The archaeological enterprise that we aim to achieve consists in readjusting the landmarks of the history of ideas, which are implicitly also economic, political and cultural value judgments.

In particular, we would like to explore the hypothesis that, in the chronology of the history of political ideas and culture, the caesura between the eras did not occur in 1900 but in 1918. The year 1918 marked not only the end of a political and geopolitical world, in the sense that states (and especially supra-state monarchies like Austria-Hungary) ceased to constitute an intangible reference, but also the moment when “the World” became the scale of political thought. The globalization of thought is reflected in both a feverish outbreak of geopolitical considerations and projects which, despite the hopes raised by Wilson’s program and the League of Nations, are not, for the most part, optimistically oriented towards the future: On the one hand, there is the Spenglerian typology in *The Decline of the West*, on the other, projects that can be called defensive, because they go beyond the national framework to seek stabilization at a regional level—Keyserling’s “spectral analysis of Europe” (*Das Spektrum Europas*), Count Coudenhove-Kalergi’s *Panuropa-Bewegung*, Friedrich Naumann’s *Mitteleuropa*, etc.

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Jahren 1917–1920, ed. by Anna Freud, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, p. 231: “Das Unheimliche sei jene Art des Schreckhaften, welche auf das Altbekannte, Längstvertraute zurückgeht”).

<sup>2</sup> It was probably the Agadir crisis in 1911 that served as the initial spark for the Decline of the West. Cf. *Farrenkopf*, John: Die Welt in der Krise. Spengler und zeitgenössische Philosophen der internationalen Beziehungen, in: Gang, M./Merlio, G. (eds.), Spengler – Ein Denker der Zeitenwende, Frankfurt am Main and others 2009, p. 67. It is also known that Henry Kissinger wrote his doctorate on Spengler in 1951.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Crépon*, Marc: L'imposture du choc de civilisations, Paris 2002.

<sup>4</sup> *Spengler*, Oswald: Der Untergang des Abendlandes, Vol. I: Gestalt und Wirklichkeit, München 1923, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Spengler*, Der Untergang des Abendlandes, p. 143.