



Austin Harrington, *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West. Voices from Weimar.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 440 pages

William Outhwaite

Volume 21, Number 1, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041341ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041341ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Outhwaite, W. (2017). Review of [Austin Harrington, *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West. Voices from Weimar.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 440 pages]. *Simmel Studies*, 21(1), 125–129. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041341ar>

methods and objectives they pursue, for Longo it is by now obvious that the former, as the science of human beings in society, contains within it such a markedly humanistic component that it cannot be viewed as alien to literary and artistic discourse. On the contrary, literature is an important and, in some cases, essential support for a discipline otherwise destined to be lost in the search for an absolute and universalizable objectivity that voids its richness and dramatically reduces its analytical perspectives.

William Outhwaite

Austin Harrington, *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West. Voices from Weimar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 440 pages.

One way of reading this superb book is as a counter to “slippery slope” accounts of German thought such as Georg Lukács’ 1955 *Destruction of Reason*, subtitled *The Path of Irrationalism from Schelling to Hitler*. Lukács portrayed Simmel, Max Weber, and Karl Mannheim as offering no alternative to, or even encouraging, imperial German irrationalism culminating in its fascist apotheosis; he speaks of “capitulation” and rebukes Simmel particularly for his closeness to *Lebensphilosophie*. Harrington instead points up the strength of liberal traditions of thought in Germany, despite their defeat in 1933. Against the image of the unpolitical German intellectual, dating back to Thomas Mann and recently restated by Wolfgang Iser in *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (2006) – see Harrington’s critique on pages 336-347 – he shows that many of these intellectuals *were* politically active. Even Simmel and Max Scheler were hardly unpolitical; Max Weber expected to be selected in 1918 as a parliamentary candidate for the Deutsche Demokratische Partei, co-founded and chaired by his brother Alfred, who directed the Heidelberg Institut für Sozial- und

Staatswissenschaft, and Ernst Troeltsch was a DDP member of the Prussian Parliament and briefly a junior minister.

More controversially, Harrington argues that many of these liberal intellectuals were cosmopolitan, not just in their Europeanist orientation (particularly strong in Simmel, the French literature scholar E. R. Curtius and the sociologist Theodor Buddeberg) but also, more precisely, in their sceptical or even hostile attitude to the “West” before and after Germany’s defeat in 1918. Unlike the aftermath of World War II, when the “*Westbindung*” of the Federal Republic was widely accepted, “protest at the West” was a strong theme in Weimar, across the political spectrum:

[...] while the liberals’ opposition to Northern Atlantic political and economic culture shared with the conservatives a certain sympathy for ideas of social tradition and order, it would look askance in equal measure at the conservatives’ virulent anti-Americanism on the one hand and tendencies to obscurantist mystification of the Orient – in both a positive romantic variant and a negative racial-chauvinist strand – on the other (p. 25).

These Weimar liberals, Harrington argues, developed a nuanced critique of the West which is highly relevant to concerns in the present century over Eurocentrism.

There are many dimensions to this rich argument (and to the sentence just quoted). First, we have to ask how these thinkers mediated between the nationalism they had nourished in the war (and Max Weber retained till his death, despite his virulent critique of the *conduct* of the war) and a more cosmopolitan orientation. Their nationalism was of course not just anti-Western (with the West meaning mainly France, Britain and the US) but also anti-Russian, with the complication that Russia now stood not only for authoritarian and theocratic reaction before 1917 but also for Bolshevik adventurism. Simmel’s death removed him from this dilemma, though he was clearly moving in a cosmopolitan direction (pp. 144-152); Max Weber, who lived

long enough to see the beginnings of Weimar, clung to his nationalist conception of power politics, while Max Scheler by 1925 was welcoming the emergent “*Kosmopolitismus der Kulturkreise*” (p. 154) and Alfred Weber was arguing for a European federation (p. 165). I am not sure, though I cannot argue this here, that what Harrington calls the critique of the West is not more of an effort to problematise it, along with conceptions of the East and the self-understanding of Germany itself, substantially driven by losing the war and a context of defeat analysed for example, by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in *The Culture of Defeat* (2003).

Second, for Germany there have always been two Easts, partly fused in the image of Russia. German orientalism was more muted and often more positive in its judgements than the colonially framed orientalisms of Britain and France. *Universalgeschichte*, although the term was originally English, caught on in Germany and was pursued from the late 18th century, including by the thinkers discussed by Harrington in chapter 6: both Webers, Troeltsch, Scheler, Jaspers and Norbert Elias. On the other hand, there was a strongly colonialist attitude to Russia and the other countries to the east of Germany, where it claimed and often enjoyed a dominant position (see, for example, Gregor Thum’s *Traumland Osten*, 2006). The Nazis put this into practice, but it was long foreshadowed in the notorious tradition of *Ostforschung* and the stakes were raised with the establishment of independent states in the region after the Versailles settlement.

Both Webers paid close attention to Russia, as did Troeltsch and Scheler, with all of them except Max Weber looking for ways of mediating between East and West. Overall, however, and this is my third point, “Europe” seems to mean western Europe, with thinkers oriented particularly to France (Curtius), Italy (Simmel) or the English-speaking world (especially the US for Max Weber). This is perhaps clearest in the case of the least known of the thinkers Harrington examines: Theodor Buddeberg (1895-

1969), a Bielefeld clothing merchant and honorary professor at Göttingen. Buddeberg's "sociology of European thought", a 25-page article of 1927 which seems to be his only published work, aimed to show how, despite the individualism of Europe and the European state system, the principles of mutual respect and a will to understand one another opened up the possibility of European thought becoming a legally coordinated "political power" corresponding to Europe's developing economic integration. Even here, in a text which could have been written twenty years later, the high points of the national division of intellectual labour in Europe are listed as "Spanish dogmatics[?], Italian humanism, English empiricism, French rationalism and the German idea of the organic". For Simmel, too, the axis was a North-South one. "European civilization", Simmel wrote in 1917, "produced two different solutions to the concept of the individual as a mirroring of ego and world – a Romantic solution and a Germanic solution" (see Harrington, 2016: 194-205).

I have not attempted, and nor would it be possible here, to give a full sense of the richness of this remarkable book. Harrington has certainly demonstrated the interest of all these thinkers, the parallels in the ways they engaged with these issues, and their prominence in the intellectual and political life of Germany and Europe. The political polarisation of Weimar and its gradual drift to the right have been fully documented, but as Harrington shows, there was a strong intellectual centre, and it, and the Republic itself, were not doomed to fail. In his defence of Jaspers (pp. 293-99), and in chapter 8 (pp. 300-344), Harrington questions the notion of an intellectual shift to the right in Weimar Germany paralleling its political evolution. "Fascism remained a product of the hollowing out of modern political civilization under conditions of pronounced socio-economic insecurity not of modern political civilization *per se*" (p. 321).

Finally, however, we might ask if there was something in liberalism itself, rather than this specifically German intellectual

version, which weakened its political impact. It was after all Karl Mannheim who pointed to the way in which both conservatism and Marxism converged in their critique of liberalism for its over-rationalistic and thin account of politics and political commitment. Perhaps though, as Klaus Eder argued in his *Geschichte als Lernprozess? Zur Pathogenese politischer Modernität in Deutschland* (1985), the problem was not the weakness of German liberalism but the strength of its competitors and opponents. As liberal political values currently succumb to a wave of populist nationalism across what we can still call the free world, it is worth mentioning that, since the publication of this book, Austin Harrington has been tirelessly campaigning against the insanity of “Brexit” which, like Trump, has shown us that Weimar is not as long ago as it seemed early last year.