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**Kultur and Civilisation: the Tradition of Deutsche Wissenschaft and Weimar Cosmopolitanism. A Review Essay on German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West. Voices from Weimar, by Austin Harrington. Cambridge University Press, 2016, 439 pp.**

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# Kultur and Civilisation: the Tradition of Deutsche Wissenschaft and Weimar Cosmopolitanism

## A Review Essay

by Pierangelo Schiera

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A book like this did not exist but had to be written. Must have been a hard book to write and does not make for easy reading. It covers many different areas, some of them only occasionally and superficially, but always reveals a strong sense for their connections, all revolving around the book's central theme. The *Voices from Weimar*, are evoked to promote a serious understanding of the German "social thought" of the 1920s and of the later Twentieth century which, if it had been more generally accepted, might have avoided the Nazi tragedy.

But here lies also – let us say immediately – the main weakness of the book. With the founding of the University of Berlin in 1811, had began its course in Germany an academic educational machine which had no precedent – aside perhaps from the original medieval system or the *ratio studiorum* of the Jesuits. Its operations were to accompany for over a century (1911 is the year when, again in Berlin, was founded the *Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft für die Förderung der Wissenschaften*, active today as the *Max Planck Gesellschaft*) the key moments in the German political unification on the one hand, and the ascent of the bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*) as a dominant class in the new State on the other. The machine in question was inspired by an idea of science so noble and penetrating that, even though it referred back to the idealistic conception of a human being capable and willing to know (the Kantian *sapere aude!*), in the situation at hand it relied completely on the state for the organization and realization of science, at the level both of research and teaching. Thus was established, during the Nineteenth century and above all in the second part of it the praxis-idea

of *Deutsche Wissenschaft*, a real trademark for German cultural superiority around the world [Schiera 1987].

Of this Austin Harrington is obviously aware, but does not much talk about it, although his book is dedicated to the best social “scientists” of the Weimar Republic who were a product and at the same time co-producers of that “science”. He prefers to use the intriguing category of Fritz Ringer [1969], imputing the political indifference of Weimar to an “apolitical mandarine mentality”. In fact, German professors have been (and to some extent remain) more than simply the members of an *academic community*, rather they are functionaries (*Beamte*) responsible for one of the main articulations of the political system, because science remains the very basis of the German “bourgeoisie” *Bildung*. It was indeed the distinctive political significance of that science, as an authentic constitutional factor of the German *Königsreich*, that paradoxically reduced that of individual scientists, now far removed from the mythical idea of the *politischer Professor* that had characterized the “liberal” times of the *Vormärz* and the failed Revolution of 1848. Hence my conviction that to understand Weimar as well as its breakdown, it is necessary to investigate not just *voices*, but the whole apparatus that generated them, that is the academic as a corporate entity; and this can only be done beginning with that massive thinking head that German science constituted.

Present on the battle-field at Sedan and at Versailles for the declaration of the *Deutsches Königsreich*; then again on the battlefields of World War One in order to uphold the German “cultural prerogative”, what remained of all this under the Republic of Weimar? This question does not find an answer in Harrington’s book, indeed it is not even posed, since he is thoroughly concerned with the bigger (and distinctively cosmopolitan) issue of the clash between *Kultur* and *Civilisation* on the one hand, and on the other with the single performances, more philosophical than technical, of his *voices*.

In my own view, instead, one should take into account that third pillar of the material constitution of the German nation state – next to army and bureaucracy – in order to assess the significance of the breakdown of the Hohenzollern dynasty and of the second Empire. In my opinion, doing so would result in the following judgment: the “political professor” of *Vormärz* and of 1848 is made dispensable, at unification, by the politicization of academic science. In the end this weakens the overall significance of politics proper, if understood as the direct engagement of the citizenry in the running of public affairs. Even after the Great War, science continues, essentially, to being the business of legitimating the existent conditions; it supports (for example through the content of the Weimar charter) the on-going political-constitutional development, but at the same time it complies with the directives of the new power

holders. This development is further promoted and accelerates when a large number of “professors” of Jewish origins, who, having been forced into exile, took on a great role in criticizing from the outside the Nazi system and fostering the resistance to Hitler. Those remaining in Germany had a weak voice, too remote and faint for the German *Oeffentlichkeit* to hear it, much less attune itself to it.

This story needs to be viewed as part of an even broader question – that of *modernity* itself, to be dealt with in its various understandings: in particular, the German (Central-European) one, and the Anglo-French-American (Western) one. This theme is only marginally within Harrington’s scope, whose main concern is rather the “crisis” which modernity itself undergoes between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth century. Yet the aspect of it we mentioned boils up, as it were, under the title of his book, and leads to the hypothesis that even in Weimar there were representatives of a “Cosmopolitan Social Thought” which echoed the wide and diverse components of Western thinking and contrasted – however unsuccessfully – the peculiar traits (*Sonderweg*) of the German trend.

As one follows the book’s argument, it appears that in fact many of the names coming up for discussion could not easily be matched by any on the international horizon, in number as well as in quality. The names of Simmel, Scheler, Curtius, Buddeberg, Jaspers; of Alfred Weber (but to a considerable consent also his brother Max), Tönnies, Troeltsch, Mannheim; even those of Heidegger, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, play indispensable roles in the book’s contents. Who could expect more? Yet, what seems to be missing is a deeper consideration of the very essence and destiny of modernity, the real Phoenix of Western history.

The German *Moderne* is the one that, having emerged from the wonderful complexity of the Romantic moment, develops imperiously from 1848, from the liberal revolution to the great economic growth of the *Gruenderjahre*, from unification and the defeat of France to the Empire and so forth. If so, one may well say that it amounts to a German challenge to, or perhaps a victory over, the *civilization* and the *modernity* rooted in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which in turn is undergoing a crisis and attempts to transcend itself even in the West (*Modernism*) but with different traits than in Germany. It is here that play their role Nietzsche, later Spengler and perhaps even Freud. Max Weber, in fact, provides at the same time the great celebration of the German *Moderne* and of the end of the Western *Modernity*.

Harrington himself seems engaged in arguments more sensitive to undergoing developments of a material nature, especially social and economic ones unfolding from the end of the Great War. In their context, however, he reveals the persistence, in the “voices of Weimar” of an *Occidentalism* which in his view distances them from

the national-revanchist atmosphere which followed the Germany's defeat and the crisis.

Such an atmosphere, to the extent that it existed, was partly justified – not only by the economic sanctions inflicted on Germany by the Versailles treaty, but also by cultural sanctions imposed upon it. In France, above all, had emerged a resentful conviction that the primary cause of the Prussian superiority in the middle of the Nineteenth century and of the German one in its second half, lay in the extent to which the country had undertaken a mobilization of cultural resources focussed on the organization of the state – a process which had its protagonist first in the University systems and subsequently in the organization of the *Deutsche Wissenschaft*. One can see this from the extent to which, particularly in the 1920s, the great machinery that ran international scientific congresses and conventions systematically ostracised German scientists.

The *Deutsche Wissenschaft* included the social sciences too, under the name of *Sozial- und Staatswissenschaften*. It comprised, besides the forms of “social thought” which is the main concern of Harrington's book, disciplines such as those concerning of Law (*Rechtswissenschaft*) and national economics (*Nationaloekonomie*), which had become well-organized in the past, and still enjoyed an old tradition evoking much respect. One might also mention the status achieved more recently by the “geographical perspective” which emerges in works by Carl Rittel and Friedrich Ratzel, and points up the legitimating function their creature – geopolitics – came to play [Consolati 2016].

In sum, German scholarship dealing with state and society represented a vast and detailed territory, and seen as a whole performed a significant role of political legitimation. In this, until the advent of Weimar, had played a key role such scholars as Gustav Schmoller and Otto Gierke, absent from the bibliography in Harrington's book. It is difficult to justify the omission of such a vast body of work – which had antecedents in the Romanticism of the early Nineteenth century, but had subsequently undergone the intellectual experiences labelled respectively as “Realismus” and “Rationalismus” [Dilcher 2017] – from a book dealing with *Social Thought*, whatever its emphasis on the “Weimar-cosmopolitan” aspects.

Having characterized in somewhat different terms the context of Harrington's thinking in this book, I may straightforwardly restate my opening sentence: there was previously no such book, and it needed to be written. Reading it is not an easy matter, because of the Author's itinerary not to miss any plausible detour, challenging the reader to achieve an all-around sense of the Weimar experience. The ultimate topic “German thought and the West” is addressed by nine dense chapters, with utterly persuasive effects. The dilemma *nationalism vs cosmopolitanism* is not easily grasped

and is likely to generate misunderstandings on both sides. Remains valid, in any case, Harrington's insight that both its two components need close attention, that they really existed and, in many cases, seriously controverted with one another over "the West". Further complications derive from the occasional significance of a theological issue – for instance, Ernst Cassirer's contrast between a *Freiheit* of German-lutheran origin and a *Form* largely of Latin inspiration. One might further recall the attitude taken by Thomas Mann, in sources ranging from his often cited *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* [1918] to the periodical he founded in exile (1937-1940),<sup>1</sup> or from his brother's previous statement [H. Mann 1932]: "Only a 'government of the academy', a new Comtean *pouvoir spirituel* might rescue the European world from impending perdition."

As regards methodology, Harrington seeks to avoid an intellectualistic approach to the authors that he is analysing, and advances an approach (he calls it "normative social theory") focused more on how their production relates to the prevailing historical circumstances. Giving the great theoretical calibre of the protagonists, this is not an easy task, perhaps impossible to perform if (as the Author does) one excludes from *social thought* fields like law or economics, in spite of their significance in terms of scientific production, the way they were organized as disciplines, or their political legitimacy. In any case, what becomes paradigmatic in the book is the conflict it posits between the warm and passionate *Geist* of the German *Kultur* (Central-East-European) and the cold and rational criterion of *Zivilisation* (Western-European-Atlantic). Paradoxically, however, it often translates the Germanic expression *Kultur* into the Anglo-Saxon *Civilization*.

The latter is said to be based on "Western European contractarian or natural rights-based theories of the foundation of political legitimacy." The former does not prospect a revolution but much prefers a reform [Koselleck 1975], and is largely focussed on a State no longer paternal and protective as Kant viewed it (Harrington characterises it as the "concrete protector and educator of the common civil life of the people"), but becomes more and more intrusive and bureaucratic (see Max Weber's "steel-hard casing").

It is not possible, here, to follow closely the internal analysis by Harrington of his *Voices from Weimar*. One may just say that, given his point of view, the book interestingly presents a new, original understanding of the debate – more cosmopolitan than national – that took place in Germany right after the Great War. It points up correctly many aspects of the general atmosphere surrounding all his authors, comparing them insightfully with one another and relating them constantly to their cir-

<sup>1</sup> *Mass und Wert: Zweimonatsschrift fuer freie deutsche Kultur* (Zürich, 1937-1940).

cumstances. One can only admire how Harrington renders “contemporary” so many complex and diverse intellectual products.

In fact, “making it all contemporary” is the dominant concern of his whole research effort, which sometimes goes beyond the strict post-war circumstances and prospects the significance of the whole Weimar experience for ourselves. In fact he views many of the problems we have to face today as constituting what he considers a sort of “new Weimar”. A major example is the intense crisis undergone, today, by the European Union, thus by a unification process which had been successful in the previous decades. “Avoiding a new Weimar” appears, at the end of the book, as its overriding concern.

What lies on the horizon is the mysterious phenomenon “globalization”, from which Harrington derives a further theme. While the modernization process, whose development he has been following within the relationship between German culture and Western civilization, has always had chiefly Western features – present if not always dominant in Weimar – we have to ask ourselves how the further advances of modernization will take place in the context of globalization.

One implicit component of Harrington’s discourse appears to be a tendency to “Westernize” the world as a whole. He refers to Edward Said only once, labelling him as a “later Twentieth century post-colonialist critic”, overlooking the fact that for him mythologizing the *West* was the aim of the whole phenomenon (literary, scientific and political) called *orientalism* [Said 1978].

Shouldn’t we consider, or hope for, in the future, a cosmopolitanism somewhat disconnected from the *Idea of the West*? Someone has even suggested the necessity for a “provincialization” of the Western world. Others are suggesting a methodological de-nationalization of the social sciences – sociology in first place – with respect to how they are still mainly practiced in (national) Western countries.

Harrington’s considerations advance at a different level. From page 96 to page 344 he intended to relate the authors previously attracting his attention to the problematic – again political, economic and social – of post-war Germany, comparing them both with one another and with the problems they had to face. Such as: how to re-establish democracy with a republican content; how to understand “nation”; how to revisit the “roman-germanic” nexus; how to relate historicism and religion with respect to universal history: finally, how to confront the contrast between *humanism* and *nihilism* which had played a decisive role in activating the nazist experience.

It is not necessary, here, to present a summary of the book. It must be read and appreciated as simply one of the best syntheses known to myself of German political thought within the first third of the Twentieth century. Its significance lies in the extent to which it does not offer mono-disciplinary treatments of the

various approaches it addresses; but neither does it develop a narrative where the all phenomena, however diverse, are seen in the light of how the whole story eventuated in an overriding final outcome. The different authors discussed preserve their own distinctive methods and themes, and all receive the same attention, although one may detect Harrington's own preference for positions such as Karl Mannheim's or Alfred Weber's, considered more open-ended and productive. It is enough to quote a judgment of his, perhaps overly enthusiastic:

It is possible to speak of Germany within the late Wilhelmine phase and especially during Weimar as the first intellectual culture of the Twentieth century to enunciate a consciousness of globalization – of ever-increasing planetary integration of economies, cultures and societies in its philosophical significance for Western self-understanding.

However, one should acknowledge the Author's stress on the contrast between reason (*rational-egoist self-interest*) and spirit (*Geist and politics*) as two alternative engines for a *cosmopolitan idea* of the West, though he continues to evoke and stress what one may call an intensification of national identity.

The remarkable scope of Harrington's reading of the Weimar moment – so emblematic in its insuperable contradictoriness – of German history, and especially of its *Social Thought* cannot be seriously questioned by pointing up an occasional lack of consistency between this and that judgment the Author offers, very sharply and sometimes provocatively, on various aspects of the action of his theme. Every detail is indeed kept under control by the strong unitary vision of a *cosmopolitan spirit*, whatever the divergences in its conception between the two empires of the West (USA and United Kingdom, a "Janus-faced empire born of both entrepreneurial creativity and pragmatic utilitarian rationality" [Max Weber]) and of the East (from Tsarism to the "promise of revolution" [Lukàcs]). The crucial position Central-European Germany held within this context – a single one whatever such divergences – allows Harrington to challenge the view that a "weimarian nihilism" may have opened the doors to national socialism. It would have been better, in my opinion, to trace the roots of this cultural situation in the great contrasts present in the German culture of the late Nineteenth century, for instance between the great works – possibly somewhat underestimated today – of the *Kulturgeschichte* in the historiographic area and the *Erdkunde* in the new "geographic perspective" (neither Karl Lamprecht nor Friedrich Ratzel are mentioned in the *Index* of the book). Would deserve mention, in this context, the *Nationalökonomie* or the Historic School of Legal Studies, given their role in producing the great German sociology, especially at the hands of Max Weber, both an economist and a jurist.



In my view, significant as it may have been, Schiller's great saying in 1789 ("Was heißt und zu welchem Ende" – where *End* is not *Zweck* and it has more to do with *Soul* than with *Form* – studiert man Universalgeschichte?) should not be treated as a unique source of the trajectory of the German thought from Enlightenment to Nazism. If anything, one should wonder how and why the dissolution of the European phenomenon of modernity, degenerated in Germany to the extent of causing that worldwide cataclysm of reason whose historical trajectory ended with the atomic bombing of Japan. This is an authentic crisis of modernity. (Harrington talks about *societal modernity*, referring to Max Weber's exemplary account of the great world civilizations and its view of the superiority of the Western world – "nur im Okzident!"). It cannot be imputed to the Weimar experience, but its causes can be traced to the whole epoch that followed the end of the *ancien régime*.

As well as in the *Introduction*, it is in the last chapter, with the significant title *Protesting the West: yesterday and today*, that Harrington expresses the deeper intent of his study. Certainly the history of the Western world did not end with either the Shoah or Weimar. But perhaps "German national liberal thought of the Weimar years" can still teach us a great deal, in view of its cosmopolitan component as against the merely national one. This opens up new, perilous horizons of great relevance to the theme of modernity. Should we expect of the future only one modernity or more of them, competing with one another? Some important themes are linked to this issue. For example the issue of a social science which can overcome *methodological nationalism*, or that of globalization as a *philosophical-historical totality*. We can add that of the *Spectres of the East*. All themes currently confronted by the most recent neo-marxist critique on the one hand, on the other by the important perspective provided by *post-colonial studies*.

The problematic spectrum opened up at the end by Harrington is very broad, and it could have not been otherwise given the ambitions of his book. It is remarkably open-minded as concerns the research field called – with reference to the Indian artists *Santiniketan* – "Contextual Modernism", the import of which is the necessity of different *modernisms*. Of course today's Europe is not the Weimar of the 1920s, but it induces Harrington to worries suggested by the Weimar experience. It is not a question of *comparing-and-contrasting*, but of understanding the cultural dimension of an era as not just incidental or secondary even vis-à-vis the material dimensions. Next to, or even before, economic, social and economic factors, men's awareness of their own times plays a most significant role in producing collective orientations concerning those very factors. And that cultural dimension must be considered as a whole, as a prime, constitutive component of any historical situation. Imparting such broad scope to an historiographic perspective seems to me the greatest merit of

Harrington's research. It treats Weimar's *Social Thought* as an indicator of Weimar's tragedy, and impressively analyses its internal makings as well as its historical origin from the great tradition of German thought. But it also captures a salient aspect of its effects, by detecting the vicissitudes of the relationship, within it, between cosmopolitanism and *Weltgeschichte*, universal history.

According to Harrington this aspect was not properly handled by its protagonists. Beyond the "trahison des clercs" – which Harrington captures emblematically in the two contrasting figures of Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss – what got lost in the 1930s was Musil called "a sense of possibility" – that is, a degree of confidence in modernities, not necessarily in conflict with one another and especially not absolutely tied to the supremacy of economics over the aesthetic and political aspects of life. The Weimar years were really most productive – over Europe at large, and in view of clearly trans-national if not cosmopolitan objectives – in the many-sided artistic debates that involved the so called *avant-gardes* in continuous and creative interactions. But this movement was not able to affect the understandings of political life, where if anything gained maximum resonance Carl Schmitt's "concept of the political", focussed exclusively on the priority of exceptional decisions as to who was friend and who was foe. Unavoidably this led to an escalation doomed to produce, in the end, totalitarian and fascist outcomes, which exploited and activated nationalistic passions.

Harrington is right to insist that in order to understand such outcomes and their catastrophic results, a scholarship focussed on Weimar may be of greater use than one focussed on Nazism. I totally agree with him on the necessity of identifying indicators (or mirrors) of politics different from the ones emphasized today by the global media system, whose whole message aims to foster the interests of industrial and financial corporations. I am also convinced that one should search for such indicators as far away as possible from the "center" of the "globe", but rather in its peripheries or suburbs.

As suggested by the title of the famous book by Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* [2000], I feel that only by reaching such "suburbs" one can capture the necessary *cosmopolitan spirit*. But I also think that this could not be constituted only by poetry and philosophy nor by science and art. One should instead initiate new "political discourses" focussed on "possible" things to do, bearing in mind that political possibility must always respond to two constraints, the necessity of *doctrines* and the necessity of *institutions*. In other words, the "politically possible" must be capable of realizing itself in concrete terms, not constitute merely a *flatus vocis* or a *flatus ratiōnis*. It should be grounded on *cross-cultural contacts*, but also avail itself of appropriate institutional supports, available in the many, diverse political contexts which a number of global agencies are currently organizing. My own "discourse"

sees no contradiction between what is global and what is peripheral, but on the contrary assumes that each realm interacts with the other. One can regain a sense for both identities and differences in a perspective that is not nationalistically closed, but pluralistically open – only on this premise one can foster the “possibility” of a non-totalitarian future.

Totalitarianism is another expression not much found within Harrington’s work. It remains useful as a pointer to the permanent risk of a denial of the necessity of politics, even without that denial’s extreme embodiment such as Fascism and Nazism. Even cosmopolitanism could generate such a risk, unless it admits and fosters the various “modernisms” we mentioned, as long as these are dealt with reference not only to their historic-artistic or aesthetic meaning, but also to the doctrinal and institutional developments cosmopolitanism presupposes. Only in this way, I think, one can secure the survival of an unconventional treatment of “constitutional history”, of which Harrington’s great work is a valuable exemplar, worth of being replicated in others of the multiple “instances” now present within the “suburbs of the world”.

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## **Kultur and Civilisation: the Tradition of Deutsche Wissenschaft and Weimar Cosmopolitanism**

A Review Essay

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Abstract: The article offers a critical reading of Austin Harrington's monumental book *German Cosmopolitan Thought and the Idea of the West: Voices from Weimar*, praising it as one of the best, and methodologically sophisticated, reconstruction of German social and political thought within the first third of the Twentieth century, but also emphasizing the pitfalls of studying "voices", i.e. discourses without embedding them in historically specific institutional complexes – in this case the German academic system conceived and practiced as a crucial articulation of the political system.

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*Keywords: Social Theory; Political Theory; Weimar Republic; Cosmopolitanism; University; Science & Politics.*

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