The Legacy of World War I

The war which should have ended all wars did not result in a period of international stability. After tumultuous years, in which European powers had demonstrated their own vulnerability to an emerging global public sphere, the cultural fundamentals of colonial rule had been greatly weakened. Unfulfilled expectations for a rather sudden end of all empires set off significant protest movements in many colonized or semi-colonized societies. Decolonization movements or anti-imperialist protests ranged from Egypt to India and from China to Korea. The Soviet Union and the founding of the Third Communist International were also important reasons why the international status quo was no longer without significant counter-visions after 1918. Even though it had become evident during the years after the war that the Bolshevik Revolution would not spread like an international wildfire, fundamental changes to the international system seemed more likely. In the midst of an international climate in which ideological alternatives had started to organize themselves, it was difficult to consider radical counter-visions to the status quo of world order as mere abstract visions for a distant future.

During the years following the Great War the world witnessed a growing presence and influence of globally organized ideologies. Prominent examples are the myriad of liberal movements aspiring for a global community of nation states based on democracy and a market economy. Whereas the United States and other Western governments actively promoted a wide range of international liberal movements, the Soviet Union started to position itself as a revolutionary epicenter, as a champion and supporter of socialist movements around the world. Stronger than before the war, domestic political visions and movements were related to internationally circulating conceptions of the world order and entangled in trans-regional, if not worldwide networks.

A significant amount of scholarly literature has already been produced on the international spread of socialism – its support channels, underlying social forces, cultural adaptations and intellectual transfers. To a lesser degree scholars have studied the international dimensions of other ideologies, ranging from Wilsonianism to anarchism.\textsuperscript{2} Compared to the international agenda of other intellectual and political currents, positions that sought to retain some cultural traditions may appear to have been more closely related to local contexts. Karl Mannheim, for example, tended to connect discourses of defending cultural heritage with «conservatism», and he saw their societal bases among the losers of globalization.\textsuperscript{3} Much of Mannheim’s interpretation has been challenged, and the great diversity of «traditionalisms» or «conservatisms» have been explored and differentiated by the academic community to such a degree that many scholars are now quite reluctant to use both terms in a descriptive manner.

Since scholarship focused on comprehending the complexities, competing political affiliations and social forces of conservative ideas at a local level, research has so far largely neglected the question of their trans-cultural dimensions. Yet many advocates of cultural alternatives to the West were more than local counter-movements to global discourses and trends. Furthermore, concepts and objectives commonly associated with «traditionalism» were also prominent among rather left-wing groups, and in this case they could acquire a particular trans-cultural agenda. Particularly after the Great War there were multifaceted approaches of creating trans-regional networks among politically concerned and culturally sensitive intellectuals searching for cultural alternatives to Western modernity. As an example of the complex, trans-cultural affiliations of some traditionalist discourses this article will discuss the rather erudite circles of «cultural cosmopolitans», formed around prominent intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore or Romain Rolland. These circles dedicated much energy to international publications, translations and lecture tours which were supposed to spread their concerns and ideas to a worldwide audience. It is important to note that this worldwide audience shared certain experiences; for example, it had to deal with the Great War as a global symbolic event, and live with the subsequent global polarization of political ideologies and visions of the world order.

As the example of certain traditionalist or conservative intellectual groups will show, movements cautioning against the dominant creed in modernization were commonly characterized by some kind of effort of defending local traditions. However, this does not mean that traditionalist movements were necessarily supporters of political and cultural parochialism. Quite to the contrary, some circles of cul-


\textsuperscript{3} K. Mannheim, Konservatismus. Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des Wissens (Frankfurt am Main, 1984).
tural cosmopolitans actively advocated the idea of civilizational learning and globalizing cultural traditions, provided that it would occur in pluralistic and not in homogenizing ways. These circles of cultural cosmopolitans were connected with each other through trans-national networks, and they cooperated across different continents. Furthermore, they shared many conceptual elements with more parochial (but equally internationally connected) traditionalist groups, but still their position on trans-cultural collaboration and trust distinguished both groups.

**Traditionalism, International Order, and the Question of Cultural Diversity**

After the Great War, the belief that other societies had to learn from the «West» in order to be able to guard themselves against the West was a major facet of socio-political consciousness in large parts of the non-Western world. The distrust of the West as a political and economic power center was not fully accompanied by efforts to seek distance from its alleged civilizational program. In that sense, nationalism could embody both learning from the West and the effect to mobilize resources in order to survive in an international arena dominated by the West.⁴ For example, the objectives of most anti-colonial movements were primarily focused on national sovereignty, economic justice as well as racial equality. With the exception of India and some other minor cases, the topos of cultural liberation was not a prominent theme in most movements that strove for an end to colonial rule.

In large parts of the international public the «West» as a stereotyped cultural concept and political symbol therefore remained largely intact. During the 19th century, the linguistic geo-cultural connotations of the «West» had moved towards the economic, political and cultural center of the world in many languages: «Western» seemed to symbolize the transformative powers of time. In early twentieth-century China, for example, the terms «the West» (xifang), «evolution» (jinhua) and later «modernity» (xiandai) were used almost synonymously with each other.⁵ After World War I, the dominant discourse of the «West» continued to be parallel by notions of the «East» as a geo-cultural counter-concept. The East came to symbolize the antidotes to alleged Western characteristics such as marginalization, the lack of economic dynamism, historical agency and cultural stagnation.

However, during the 1920s a fair number of rather influential circles took a more distanced attitude towards the trajectories of a kind of internationalism which seemed to globalize the European experience rather than parochializing it. In the aftermath of the Great War, a growing number of public intellectuals were more critical of the institution of the nation state and the widespread belief in Western

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⁴ A rich account of research approaches is provided by C. Calhoun, «Nationalism, Modernism and Their Multiplicities», in *Identity, Culture and Globalization*, ed. E. Ben-Rafael and Y. Sternberg (Leiden, 2001), 445–470.

learning. Some networks of prominent scholars, writers and artists even advocated
civilizational alternatives to Westernization and promoted visions of world order,
which were partly based on the alleged spiritual foundations of China, India or
other traditions. Many influential figures such as the Nobel Prize (Literature) win-
ners Romain Rolland, Rudolf Eucken and Rabindranath Tagore believed in the
necessity of spreading other cultural traditions in order to stabilize a world that
had been greatly imbalanced by the expansion of the West and its cultural after-
shocks. These, as well as many other advocates searching for cultural alternatives to
Westernization programs were often associated with conservative or traditionalist
circles. Indeed, the conceptual world and agendas of these cultural cosmopolitans
drew heavily on philosophical traditions, which in many societies were labeled as
«conservative».

For the European context it has already been long established that all forms of
traditionalism and conservatism need to be understood as modern phenomena.
Conservatisms reacted at least partly to modernization processes and movements,
which means that they were all intrinsically connected with the program of moder-
nity. In other words, they generally differ from traditional paradigms, as they con-
stitute traditionalistic counter-movements against an otherwise dominant trend.
Traditionalism in the modern sense emerged roughly at the same time as dis-
courses of modernization. In Europe, for example, criticism of an empty, purely
materialistic form of modernity had a long tradition, dating at least back to the
«Storm and Stress» period. Therefore, it is no surprise that comparable discourses
on cultural authenticity emerged in various societies when ideas of Westernization
grew more influential in the public sphere. For that reason, conservative dis-
courses in Europe arose during the French Revolution, whereas in China compara-
ble programs of consciously preserving tradition in face of Western influences
became prominent only more than a century later. As modernization ideologies
were found almost all over the world during the first decades of the Twentieth cen-
tury, traditionalist ideas had indeed turned into a global phenomenon that could be
observed in societies not tightly connected with each other.

The range of currents commonly comprised as «traditionalism» or «conser-
vatism» was highly diverse and could range from democratic to anti-democratic
movements as well as from anti-national positions to camps supporting extreme
nationalism and fascism. Nevertheless, the bulk of real or alleged «traditional-
isms» had certain key concepts in common. For example, its proponents tended
to be composed of groups who argued that neither a single individual nor a new
generation could possess greater wisdom than historically grown socio-cultural
orders. Furthermore, the value of societies that were allegedly firmly rooted in the

6 For an overview see for example B. Girvin, The Right
in Twentieth Century Conservatism und Democracy
(London, 1994).
past was held in high esteem against the rhetoric of revolutionary changes seeking to eradicate the traditional heritage. A typical element of traditional or conservative rhetoric implied that changes had to come about through moderate reforms and organic growth, not through revolutionary developments. Historical ruptures, as promoted by many advocates of extreme Westernization, were criticized as perilous because any social order was considered to be dependent on mores and values that had to grow historically, and could not be rationally designed. For this reason, traditional forces sought to defend and protect, in fact, to «conserve» their tradition against a predominant trend of seeking the new and the possible. Against the program of freeing men from unquestioned authorities, conservatives maintained the importance of organic or primordial ties. And against the Enlightenment creed in the sole power of reason they defended the importance of feeling or the «soul». In the opinion of these groups, the «West» was not an empty space, but rather a destructive force able to dissolve traditional ties under the aegis of liberation and progress.

In many cases, traditionalist or conservative thought pursued very local agendas, which claimed to defend some notion of «tradition» against international influences. However, this did not imply that movements trying to protect «tradition» and historical heritage operated exclusively within national or regional boundaries. Some forms of conservative or traditionalist cosmopolitanism advocated cultural alternatives on a global level. Particularly in the aftermath of the Great War one can observe a rising prominence of cosmopolitanism, which drew heavily on conservative or traditionalist elements of thought. Even though networks and intellectual crossovers between traditionalist thinkers can be observed far earlier, the experience of World War I served as a common reference point in traditionalist discourses. It also created new types of audiences and support structures on which international networks could thrive.

For cultural cosmopolitans the implications of the Great War were far greater than the mere possibility of decolonization and national independence. In the opinion of these scholars and artists, the Great War did not only give political hope for societies positioned at the very margins of a rapidly progressing world. According to them, the war had to be understood as a global event with the potential of reversing the civilizational hierarchies that had largely been acknowledged by the world’s elites in the past. So far, only a fair number of public intellectuals had emphasized the fact that the atrocities along the European frontlines, widely discussed in the world’s newspapers, had pointed out a major paradigm: Europe, having previously been an almost unchallenged center at the head of a worldwide transformative process, had imploded. For some prominent observers, World

War I questioned the eschatology of progress – just as the concomitant poverty and the social unrest in many European countries relativized the role of Europe as a major reference space for the rest of the world. These notions usually remained confined to elitist circles and did not become dominant themes in a wider public.

Doubts about the West as a global teaching civilization were particularly widespread among intellectuals in Europe, where the intellectual climate of the early Interwar Period was characterized by both a sense of gloom and doom as well as fears of overall decay. Many European thinkers argued that the events between 1914 and 1918 proved that the West’s claim to be a superior civilization was futile. Poets and thinkers such as Romain Rolland, René Guénon, José Ortega y Gasset, Hermann Hesse and Paul Valéry called for the salvation of Europe from a modernity that was – in their eyes – superficial, purely technological and rational: Their claims, in that way, were dangerously naïve and brutal. In their opinion, the bloodshed revealed the destructive potential of modernity that could evoke a previously unimaginable degree of savagery and barbarism. The intellectual tradition of doubting the possibilities of European modernity had already grown stronger around the fin de siècle, or the «age of anxiety». The experience of World War I fed these intellectual currents in Europe, which now often pointed to «Western civilization» as the main cause of the war.

For some European intellectuals who shared a doubtful attitude towards «Western civilization», trying to defend Europe against the world was thus not a viable option. By contrast, they envisioned a global community based on shared concern, mutual support and learning from each other. The proponents of cultural cosmopolitanism tended to believe that the global sociology of knowledge had to be altered in order to foster inter-cultural dialogues. First and foremost it seemed to be necessary for them to cultivate an intellectual and artistic elite, which no longer primarily belonged to a national culture, but identified themselves with the world at large. Visions of an intellectual world citizenship dated back to the Enlightenment Period, but it was after the Great War when some of the most prominent European intellectuals undertook concrete efforts to promote cross-cultural understanding. For example, the French writer Romain Rolland, who tried to combine socialism with other, often mystical worlds of thought, advocated a «Universal Declaration of the Independence of the Spirit». The declaration called for intellectuals to abandon their close relationship with the state and dedicate their work to the interests of humanity as a whole. It was Rolland’s intention to...

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8 See M. Adas, Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Domination (Ithaca/N.Y, 1989).
9 See for example J. D. Spence, The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds (New York, 1998), ch. 5.
10 For more details on Rolland and the cultural context of his time see D. J. Fisher, Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement (New Brunswick/N.J., 2003).
spread the declaration as an inter-cultural manifesto, which would be signed by less than a handful of intellectuals per country. In the same letter to the Indian poet and fellow Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Rolland wrote that it was his declared aim to let Asian thought «take more and more regular part in the manifestation of the thought in Europe» and seeing a «union of these two hemispheres of the spirit».

However, in spite of all his international contacts, Rolland’s aim to unite thinkers and artists from all over the world was still more a vision than a lived experience. This can be seen from the very fact that in the same letter in which he invites Tagore to sign the «Declaration of the Independence of Human Spirit», he asks the Indian poet to recruit additional signatories from Asian countries. At the time he was writing the letter, Rolland had assembled an impressive range of signatories, but all of them were members of Western societies. Nevertheless, the contact between Rolland and Tagore, who later enthusiastically endorsed the declaration, is an example of how international networks between similar thinking intellectuals began to develop. Personal contacts between well-connected figures could usually tie different regional networks into each other. Then these persons tried to promote their visions for alternative world orders and forms of modernity together.

**Advocates of Alternatives to Western Modernity and Their Networks**

It would not be right to maintain that trans-national networks advocating alternatives to Western modernity were only initiated by European intellectuals. The myriad of pan-movements, for instance, purposely tried to establish ties between non-Western intellectuals and politicians in order to break the dominant European position in the creation of political ideologies as well as world visions. Examples for non-Western networks of this kind are the close ties between some Japanese Pan-Asianists and likeminded intellectuals in the Middle East. Rabindranath Tagore also advocated Pan-Asian visions, but his vision of an «Eastern» cultural unity remained embedded in a cosmopolitan concern for the world at large. His notion of «Asia» was less orientated towards the ideas of a Spenglerian civilization

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11 Rolland explains this declaration in two letters to Rabindranath Tagore, date April 10th and July 9th, 1919. Published in the source collection A. Aronson and K. Kripalani, eds., *Rolland and Tagore* (Calcutta, 1945), 20–24.


that could be transformed into a political alternative to Western powers. Quite to
the contrary, for him the self-realization of Asia was inseparably connected to the
globalization of Asia. A culturally confident Asia, Tagore believed, would engage in
a process of cultural cross-fertilization with the West and other parts of the world.

On an international level, no other intellectual symbolized a non-Western cos-
mpolitanism, which advocated an «Eastern» healing from the supposedly burned out, decaying European civilization as prominently as the Indian Nobel Prize Lau-
reate Rabindranath Tagore did. The Indian poet conducted international lecture
tours in more than 35 countries in five continents around the time of World War.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to Romain Rolland, his close contacts included Thomas Mann, William Butler Yeats, Robert Frost, Mohandas Gandhi, Albert Einstein, the Japanese poet
Noguchi Yonejiro as well as the prominent thinkers Liang Qichao and Zhang Jun-
mai. Like Rolland, Tagore actively sought to reshape the global sociology of intel-
lectual knowledge by turning his school in Santiniketan into a world university,
where studies should no longer be affected by mental or geographical bound-
aries.\textsuperscript{16} He hoped that a truly global intellectual elite in its best sense would emerge
from this school.

Tagore regarded World War I as the logical consequence of historical and cul-
tural tendencies that had been inherent in European civilization for a long time. He blamed colonialism as one of the main causes of the alleged disease of Euro-
pean civilization – a disease which had become acute during the war. In ways
very similar to later non-Western critics of the West such as Aimée Césaire and
Frantz Fanon, Tagore pointed out the sharp contrast between colonial rule and
imperialism on the one hand and European discourses of liberation on the other.
Based on such incompatibilities, Tagore concluded that Europe’s civilizational pro-
gram had been facing growing self-contradictions. According to him these widen-
ing rifts were only lightly disguised by colonial rhetoric, which claimed that Euro-
pean dominance really meant to the world in general. For example, in a letter
written in 1915 to the English clergyman C. F. Andrews, his long-term friend and
trustee, Tagore states:

«The gravest danger is when Europe deceives herself into thinking that she is
helping the cause of humanity by helping herself ...Thus Europe, gradually and
imperceptibly, is losing faith in her own ideals and weakening her own moral
supports ...Will Europe never understand the genesis of the present war, and
realize that the true cause lies in her own growing scepticism towards her own
ideals – those ideals that have helped her to be great? She seems to have exhausted
the oil that once lighted her lamp.»\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} For more details see U. D. Gupta, \textit{Rabindranath Tagore. A Biography} (New Delhi, 2004).
\textsuperscript{16} He announced this plan during a public lecture
in Santa Barbara, California in 1917. See K. Dutta
and A. Robinson, \textit{Rabindranath Tagore. The Myriad-
Minded Man} (New York, 1995), 204.
\textsuperscript{17} Published in R. Tagore, \textit{Letters to a Friend} (London,
1928), 61–63.
Tagore’s appeal to what he saw as «true European ideals» needs to be seen in conjunction with the fact that he did not support any kind of blunt anti-Westernism. Yet on many occasions Tagore lamented on the destructive processes emerging from the trajectories of European history. For example, he offers his view of the devastating effects of Western civilization during a visit to a battlefield of the Great War in 1921, where he compares the ruins at the site to the desolation in other cultures.¹⁸ Not unlike Max Weber’s hypothesis of an «iron cage of modernity», Tagore identified the decline of the human factor, the rise of mechanical organization and the growth of impersonal societies as a severe European cultural malady. In a private conversation with Romain Rolland in 1926, Tagore argued that the continued disintegration of Europe’s social and administrative bodies after the Great War made the rise of charismatic anti-democratic leaders more likely because they at least symbolized a human factor.¹⁹

During the 1920s, Tagore actually regarded nationalism as the most immediate destructive force in Europe and the world’s most dangerous sociopolitical development. During his international lecture tours that led him to Europe, Japan, India, China, and many other parts of the world, he tirelessly warned against nationalism as a form of identity and statehood carrying extremely negative potentials. According to him, nationalism had in a large part contributed to international antagonism, greed and ruthlessness that finally culminated in the Great War. He predicted that it would cause additional disasters if it continued expanding.²⁰ In his famous work «Nationalism», published in 1917 and containing critical analyses of the situation in India, the West, and Japan, Tagore writes:

«The Time has come when for the sake of the whole outraged world, Europe should fully know in her own person the terrible absurdity of the thing called ‹nation›. The nation has long thriven upon mutilated humanity ... In this war the death-throes of the nation have commenced. Suddenly, all its mechanism going mad, it has begun the dance of Furries.»²¹

His attitude towards nationalism put Tagore at odds with many political forces of his age, also in his own country. In 1916, he narrowly survived an assassination attempt by radical Indian nationalists, and even his quite close relationship with Gandhi was strained by their disagreements over questions on nationalism. Gandhi believed that nationalism was a necessary historical stage and that the masses

¹⁹ Very telling is a conversation between Rolland and Tagore in 1926 which followed Tagore’s brief rapprochement with Mussolini and was recorded by Rolland. Published in Aronson/Kripalani, eds., Rolland and Tagore, 20–24.
²⁰ A very interesting source of Tagore’s understanding of nationalism is a letter to the painter William Rothenstein written on October 26, 1917. Published in U. D. Gupta, Rabindranath Tagore. A Biography (New Delhi, 2004), 92–93.
needed to be rallied with religious or political symbols rather than with abstract ideas. As an alternative, Tagore advocated the promotion of objective reasoning through educational programs to allow people to recognize the artificial character and destructive potentials of patriotism and the institution of the nation state in general.  

These differences between Gandhi and Tagore regarding the question of nationalism reveal how complex and twisted the debates on modernity and tradition, the West and the rest, had become. Tagore, the great advocate of Eastern «remedy» against Western civilization, openly supported rationalism and scientism, and he did so – at least partly – by referring to them as consequences of the Enlightenment project. For him, nationalism contradicted the Western tradition of scientific reasoning and methodological doubt because it partly relied on constructed images of tradition. According to Tagore, national traditions were not only invented but also represented obstacles on the way towards inter-cultural cosmopolitanism. Tirelessly, he emphasized that India and other cultures should embrace the positive, liberating potentials of Western civilization – potentials from which Europe had departed. Against Indian or Hindu nationalists, Tagore argued that multi-culturalism had always been a distinctive feature of the Indian past, and rather than India adopting nationalism from the West, the South Asian subcontinent should serve as a source of inspiration for a peaceful international community. For this reason he was highly critical of Gandhi’s tendency to criticize Western civilization in toto, which was part of the prominent Indian’s quest for a cultural purification of India.

Disagreements over the question of nationalism also put Tagore at odds with powerful political and cultural currents in other non-Western societies. In his lecture tours in China and Japan in 1916 and 1924, for example, the first Indian Nobel Prize Laureate was received with great curiosity by the intellectual circles. However, soon after his arrival in both countries, the severe contrast between his position and the great majority of his audience became apparent. On the traditionalist side of the political spectrum, Tagore’s Pan-Asian notions of «Eastern civilization» upset conservative Confucian scholars such as Gu Hongming, who was still loyal to the Qing-dynasty and blamed the Buddhist influences in China for the decline of the Middle Kingdom since the Song-dynasty.

22 An interesting source in this context is a report by C. F. Andrews about a conversation between Tagore and Gandhi. In: R. Rolland and M. Gandhi, Romain Rolland and Gandhi Correspondence. Letters, Diary Extracts, Articles (Delhi, 1976), 12–13.

23 For more details see A. Sen, «Tagore and his India», in idem, The Argumentative Indian. Writings on History, Culture & Identity (New York, 2005), 89–120.

24 See Gupta, Rabindranath Tagore, ch. 3.

25 Some contemporary critics of Gandhi pointed out that many measures of the Indian independence movement such as boycotts, mass demonstrations and strikes were directly inspired by developments in Europe.
However, by far the strongest opposition to Tagore’s presence in China arose from radical student organizations related to the May Fourth Movement. Tagore even cancelled part of his planned lecture tour because of negative press coverage as well as massive student protests demanding him to leave the country. Many public voices criticized Tagore for diluting the potential of national self-strengthening by appealing to vague notions of Eastern and Western culture.\textsuperscript{26} Many progressive groups regarded Tagore’s appreciation of cultural and historical heritages in Asia as an impediment on the way towards national sovereignty, which would again entrap China in a state of paralysis.\textsuperscript{27} The creed in the promises of profound Westernization was particularly popular among the younger generation of students who either had the chance to study abroad or were exposed to foreign education in Chinese institutions of higher learning.\textsuperscript{28} Consequently, many Chinese intellectuals interpreted Tagore’s professed cultural cosmopolitanism as a perpetuation of both, the alleged stasis of the Chinese past and the suppression of the colonial era. According to their view, only national independence could ensure a profound and dignified future of China – a future free from the control of traditional elites and Western powers. To many leading May Fourth figures the political tasks and potentials of patriotism centered on learning from the West, for example by adopting concepts such as ethnos, citizenship, or territorial sovereignty.\textsuperscript{29} Consequently, any program based on multi-culturalism, cosmopolitanism, and complexity was seen as a threat to the construction of a unified nation state, which – as the more reflective proponents of the May Fourth movement were well aware of – needed to resort to somewhat artificial, essentialized notions of nationhood and peoplehood.

Tagore’s activities went squarely against a powerful social and intellectual tide, which professed to sweep away those domestic and international structures, which allegedly had led to the crisis of China.\textsuperscript{30} In China and in many other political cultures the Great War even strengthened the political groupings fighting for a more tightly knit, homogenous nation state. After 1919, Chinese politics became more mass-based, and discourses of national humiliation tended to accompany the


\textsuperscript{27} For example Yu Zhi, «Taige’er yu dongxi wenhua zhì pipan» (Tagore and the Criticism of Western and Eastern Cultures), \textit{Dongfang Zazhi} 18 (1921). Reprinted in Z. Guanglin, ed., \textit{Zongguo mingjia lun Taige’er} (Beijing, 1994), 1–5.

\textsuperscript{28} A statistical analysis is provided by H. Huang, \textit{The Chinese Construction of the West, 1862–1922: Discourses, Actors and the Cultural Field}, Ph.D. diss., (University of North Carolina, 1996).


calls for national self-strengthening.\textsuperscript{31} In addition to aforementioned India, other political cultures such as Turkey \textsuperscript{32} or Korea \textsuperscript{33} also started to follow similar trajectories, which was certainly a major factor in the marginalization and criticism Tagore and his supporters faced in many non-Western societies. For instance, on a lecture tour through Japan in 1924, Tagore had similar experiences as in China. Nationalist activists had grown influential enough for Tagore to interrupt his visit and cancel a number of public appointments.\textsuperscript{34}

Tagore’s reception in Europe was more positive, even though his influence remained confined to the upper echelons of society. Yet he was received with great honors in leading circles as he did not only meet political figures like the English king and the French president, but also the crème de la crème of Europe’s artistic and intellectual life. A limiting factor to Tagore’s reception in Europe was that many of his followers tended to admire a very stereotyped image of him: A sage and mystic man from the East. This orientalizing image of the Indian poet was often shattered in Tagore’s lectures in the West when he appealed to the values of the Enlightenment, which led to great disappointment amongst his audience.\textsuperscript{35} Nevertheless, Tagore remained greatly encouraged by his reception in Europe, while at the same time he was discouraged by the public reaction to his visits in East Asian societies. He drew the conclusion that the world was entrapped in a tragic geo-cultural development, while the European public was becoming more and more ready to learn from the East, Asian societies were more gravitating towards nationalism and scientism.\textsuperscript{36} Tagore’s impression of the path of European political cultures may have reflected the climate of opinion within the erudite circles with which he mainly conversed. The growing influence of anti-democratic, militaristic right-wing forces in European societies certainly did not suggest a growing cosmopolitanism in European political cultures at large.

Other prominent intellectuals also shared the idea that non-Western traditions needed to be globalized in order to create a stable international community. One of Tagore’s main partners in China was the prominent Chinese historian Liang Qichao, at that time arguably the most prominent senior intellectual in China. The experience of the Great War accentuated certain transformations in the intellectual


\textsuperscript{32} See S. Capgaptay, \textit{Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?} (New York, 2006).

\textsuperscript{33} On the role of the March First Movement in the nationalist historiography of Korea see G. Podoler, «Revisiting the March First Movement: On the Commemorative Landscape and the Nexus Between History and Memory», \textit{Review of Korean Studies} 8, 3 (2005), 137–154.

\textsuperscript{34} Compare S. N. Hay, \textit{Asian Ideas of East and West. Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China, and India}, (Cambridge, 1970), ch. 4.

\textsuperscript{35} For more details see Sen, «Tagore and his India», in idem, \textit{The Argumentative Indian}.

\textsuperscript{36} Compare Hay, \textit{Asian Ideas of East and West}, 132, 202, 307.
biography of Liang.\textsuperscript{37} Whereas earlier Liang had been a strong advocate of Western learning and even Social Darwinian thinking, he was now adamantly opposed to juxtaposing the West as a teaching civilization with the rest as an array of learning civilizations. The great Chinese scholar was even able to gain some personal insights into Europe’s post-war situation, since he was among the cultural delegates of the Chinese mission at the Versailles Peace Conference. During his stay he traveled extensively through various countries where he met likeminded European intellectuals such as Romain Rolland, René Guénon and Rudolf Eucken, philosopher at the University of Jena and Nobel Prize Laureate in literature.\textsuperscript{38} After his return to China, Liang published a book entitled \textit{Impressions of My Travels in Europe}\textsuperscript{39} that contained descriptions of European devastation and poverty. Many passages contrast the dire conditions in Europe with the situation in Chinese cities that had experienced a brief economic boom during the war.\textsuperscript{40} Liang used this contrast to demonstrate to his audience how the war had at least partly reversed the global hierarchies of material wellbeing and social stability.

Even more challenging to discourses on Western supremacy was the intellectual malaise, the sense of loom and doom that Liang thought to have discovered in Europe. In Liang’s \textit{Impressions Europe} no longer figured as a confident, strong civilization, but rather as a highly disoriented culture on the brink of collapse. This theme appears in different forms throughout the book. In one part, Liang compares European culture and its non-Western followers with a group of disoriented travelers in the desert, who are desperately approaching some vague shadow. This shadow, a metaphor for the belief in the omnipotence of science and rationalism, finally reveals itself as chimera, leaving European civilization lost, confused, pessimistic, and agoraphobic in the desert. In his attempt to unmask the belief in science, Liang also discusses Social Darwinism, whose basic parameters he had once accepted as a universal doctrine that could ultimately help improving the human condition. In Liang’s post-war travelogue, however, Social Darwinism appears as a basis for aggressive philosophies that helped to generate mentalities in which militarism, imperialism and collective greed could thrive.\textsuperscript{41}

Similarly to Tagore, Liang Qichao was convinced that Europe’s belief in universal laws had emptied the base for any kind of communal belief and value systems. In his opinion, the triumph of materialism over idealism, of wealth and power over
spiritual factors, had reduced the value of the human in European culture and had eroded the notion of any kind of higher purpose beyond selfish desires and the struggle for survival. He further emphasized that the Great War, which according to him «had almost annihilated human civilization», was only the first major eruption of the conflict potentials inherent in European civilization. To illustrate his point, Liang’s travel report contains descriptions of the political upheavals and Socialist revolutions in several European countries during the months following the November armistice. In this context Liang predicts that class warfare may well follow nationalist and imperialist wars in the future, potentially throwing the continent into another series of severe conflicts. He even states that the greatest danger to European civilization may arise from a merger between nationalistic and socialist movements.42

The critical assessments of the situation in Europe, which characterize much of the Impressions, particularize the European experience and break with the notion that the Western experience ought to be universalized. Today Liang’s warning calls to Chinese society not to go down the European path may be understood as calls for an alternative form of modernity avant la lettre. He repeatedly points out that China and many other cultures have the potential to learn from the trajectories of European history and avoid their disastrous consequences by strengthening their own spiritual, ethical and communal traditions. This implies that for Liang non-Western cultures now had a choice to find their own ways to development and modernity, and the experience of World War I could serve as an important landmark for the elites outside of Europe. Since, according to Liang, non-Western decision-makers have had the advantage of learning from the disasters in Europe, being a late developer was turned into an international asset. As he feared to awaken the same Faustian forces in China that had already ravaged Europe, Liang was quite opposed to the revolutionary rhetoric43 of many groups associated with the New Culture and May Fourth Movements.

However, Liang not only aimed at a revision in civilizational hierarchies, but also regarded cross-cultural learning as a tangible possibility, if not a necessity.44 Particularly after the Great War, he repeatedly emphasized that elements of Chinese and other non-Western cultures were just as general as European modernity. In his opinion, the spiritual, ethical and communal traditions of China, for example, had the potential to put up a balance to the chaotic, restless energies generated by the modernizing forces in Europe. For Liang, a process of inter-cultural learning could eventually lead to a more stable, just and balanced world order. His notion of a world community, which should be partly or even decisively shaped by Chinese cultural elements, already had a certain tradition in China. Already in the

42 Liang Qichao, «Ouyou Xinying lu», part 1, section 5.
43 Liang Qichao, «Ouyou Xinying lu», part 1, section 6.
44 See also Tang Xiaobing, Global Space, ch. 5.
Since the 1980s, Greater China has witnessed a sharp rise in academic studies of Kang Youwei. A rather recent example is the biography by D. Zheng, Kang Youwei (Hong Kong, 2000).


For more facets of these diverse groups see G. Müller, «France and Germany after the Great War: Businessmen, Intellectuals and Artists in Non-governmental European Networks», in Culture and International History, ed. J. Gienow-Hecht and F. Schumacher (New York, 2003), 97–114.


A similar argument is made by V. Berghahn, Europe in the Era of Two World Wars. From Militarism and Genocide to Civil Society (Princeton/N. J., 2006), 72.


It hardly needs to be mentioned that such cosmopolitan efforts had to face the growing opposition against worldwide collaboration. However, the growing dichotomy between parochialism and cosmopolitanism, which characterized the Interwar Period, was not necessarily divided along the border of ideological positions. Quite to the contrary, the tension between international and anti-international political attitudes could run through ideological or intellectual camps. Not all advocates of cultural learning and transnationalism, however, were primarily driven by the ideals of peaceful cultural dialogue. For example, some European networks of thinkers, politicians and businessmen also advocated the possibility that the continent should find alternatives to the current political, cultural and economic order, which would give protection against challenges by other world regions. Here the dismantling of national antagonisms was not seen as a step towards a harmonious global community, but rather as a defensive measure against allegedly mounting challenges from the outside world, most notably a stereotyped «West».

In the opinion of the more exclusivist branches of traditionalism, the Great War had primarily taught that Europe needed to be put back onto its old cultural pedestals and rediscover its original civilizational «spirit». This would allow the marred continent to return to a past in which it had been internally stable and globally unchallenged. In the eyes of many observers the imperialist system’s global logic of the pre-war era was still largely intact, even though its main protagonists had been weakened. The very fact that no new viable world order had been
established during the years immediately following the Great War seemed to confirm that national, regional or civilizational strength was the key remedy for those feeling disadvantaged by the international system.

A less traditionalist thinker with little sympathy for global cosmopolitanism – who was nevertheless in close contact with the circles around Romain Rolland, Rabindranath Tagore and Liang Qichao – was Rudolf Eucken, a Jena philosopher and Nobel Prize laureate. As one of the leading representatives of neo-idealism, Eucken had been among the many German intellectuals who, during the outbreak of the war, had professed the superiority of German «Kultur» over the materialistic civilizations of the «West». He and likeminded thinkers had interpreted the Great War as a decisive battle, and they saw it as Germany’s duty to save humankind from the empty forces of rationalism and materialism. Eucken’s neo-idealism was closely tied to the concept of national community and some sort of state metaphysics that defined the nation less as a composite of autonomous individuals, but rather as an organism with its own «inner world». This meant that in reality Eucken’s philosophy represented a very reduced version of idealism, which did not include elements such as Kantian pacifism or Hegelian liberalism.

The defeat of Germany in the Great War made Eucken pursue his objectives by cultural arguments rather than advocating military means. After 1918 he continued to argue that a fulfilled life had to be more than materialistic and dynamistic; it had to encompass both inner and outer aspects, both material and idealist elements. His writings remained characterized by grave concerns about the breakdown of social mores and communal values under the impact of outside influences, particularly from the United States and Britain. Eucken sought to mobilize inner, spiritual and communal values that could function as bulwarks against the alleged corrosive forces of scientism, mercantile traditions, Epicureanism and utilitarianism. One of his telê during the post-war period was to forge a cultural alliance against «Western civilization». This objective of a cultural alliance differed significantly from the efforts of thinkers like Tagore or Rolland, who thought that a better global community absolutely needed to include a new «West» and could not be constructed around the societies of Britain and the United States.

Such political differences notwithstanding, Eucken was in close contact with many cultural cosmopolitans around the globe, and he assembled quite a substantial number of followers at his institute in Jena. Among his visitors was Zhang Junmai (otherwise known as Carsun Chang), a Chinese philosopher who had

50 A good insight into Eucken’s thinking and the interpretation of the Great War can be found in his work Lebenserinnerungen (Leipzig, 1922), particularly 24–26. Eucken’s treatise Zur Sammlung der Geister (Leipzig, 1913) was meant to prepare Germany for war.

51 For more details see Meiße, China, ch. 3–1.
spent the early years of the war in Germany and Britain and returned to Europe as a cultural advisor for the Chinese delegation in Versailles. Zhang was so impressed by Eucken’s thinking that he decided to stay in Jena for several years in order to work on several common projects with the German Nobel Prize Laureate. Zhang and Eucken even co-authored a book titled The Problem of Life in China and Europe, which was published in Germany and in China – in the former under the original title Das Lebensproblem in China und Europa. In essence, this work called for German idealism and Confucianism to join forces and to serve as counterbalance to materialism and empty rationalism. Like other works by Zhang Junmai and Rudolf Eucken, this joint publication advocated a continued modernization but warned against blindly following the British and the American way, which supposedly robbed human beings of their freedom of will and turned them into slaves to the forces of the market and the state.

After his return to China, Zhang Junmai continued to pursue his intellectual agenda. In later writings, such as in his monograph My Political Impressions During My Stay in Europe From 1919–1921, Zhang warned against the Europeanization of China, while at the same time he emphasized that positive elements from the West had to be incorporated into Chinese culture without altering its key characteristics. Like Liang Qichao, and unlike Eucken, he believed that Europe, after having suffered heavy blows, had the potential to learn from the East. His notion of «Eastern culture» was heavily influenced by European idealist and anti-materialist philosophy, which during the 1920s was also represented by thinkers such as Henri Bergson and Emile Boutroux. Zhang was particularly intrigued by the fact that neo-idealist philosophers tended to emphasize spiritual cultivation and the scholar’s social role as a moral authority figure. Zhang deemed these ideals to be compatible with central tenets of Confucian philosophy, which he sought to revive in spite of the strong pro-Westernizing movements among Chinese students. Only in the mid-1930s, after the experience of the rise of National Socialism, Zhang distanced himself from German idealism.

**Traditionalist Reactions to World War I – Towards a Global Perspective**

The differences between thinkers such as Eucken on one hand and Tagore or Rolland on the other hand accentuate the agenda of cultural cosmopolitans around the time of the Great War. Whereas Eucken was closer to extreme conservative, nationalist and militarist discourses, the latter were dedicated pacifists who questioned the constructed character of tradition. Tagore, Rolland and their intellectual
circles emphasized notions such as culture and tradition, but they led these concepts away from their affiliations with right-wing politics. They agreed with more radical conservatives that the experience of the Great War had shown the necessity to balance allegedly modern achievements such as technology, rationalism and scientism with historically rooted customs and mores, which—in their eyes—the Enlightenment project could not generate. However, in contrast to many conservative forces they were adamantly opposed to cultural protectionism, anti-Westernism, as well as efforts of combining the notion of tradition with that of the nation state. In this aspect, their activities can be seen as a part of the growing significance and field of action of non-governmental organizations committed to some forms of international cooperation. Historians are only beginning to explore the range of non-diplomatic efforts to stabilize the international order as well as their roots in wider political cultures.

In many cases, cultural cosmopolitans also operated with stereotyped notions of what constituted the cultural cores of geographical or civilizational entities such as China, India, «East» or «West». However, given their emphasis on cross-cultural dialogues, these cosmopolitans did not adhere to Spenglerian visions of cultural essence. In other words, these circles cautioned against operating with too narrow definitions of concepts such as «nation» or «tradition», while at the same time they advocated a greater appreciation of «otherness». Given the dynamic parameters of their intellectual frameworks, these cultural cosmopolitans around the time of the Great War can be seen as precursors to certain branches of postmodern and postcolonial discourses, which appeared decades after World War II.

In the opinion of thinkers like Tagore, Rolland and Zhang the cultures of India, China and other parts of the world were just as universalizable as those of the West. In fact, they needed to be spread to the West in order to stabilize a highly imbalanced civilization. Many cultural cosmopolitans aimed at a synthesis between Western modernity and other cultural traditions, and their opposition to nationalism distinguished them from the far more influential circles of internationalists who basically hoped for a global community within the parameters of the Westphalian System. The latter remained committed to the global project of

55 Among the latter were international relief organizations, forums for intercultural dialogue, political alliances, international trade associations, inter-religious groups as well as academic and student networks that were spanning across cultural boundaries. Yet these non-governmental organizations typically did not challenge the institution of the nation state in any significant way either, but rather regarded its existence as a necessary precondition to worldwide stability. For more details see A. Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, 1997), ch. 2. See also A. Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, 2002), ch. 1 and 2.

56 In a recent work the Chinese intellectual Wang Hui distinguishes between cosmopolitans and internationalists in the Chinese Republic. According to him Kang Youwei needs to be understood as cosmopolitan, whereas figures such as Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong were internationalists. H. Wang, *Xiandai zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* (*The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*) (Beijing, 2004), vol. 1b, particularly 520–723.
the nation state and sought to build an era of global equality, peace and dignity on its fundaments. Particularly their critique of nationalism put the representatives of cultural cosmopolitanism at odds with the climate of political opinion in many parts of the world. This could even lead to the hostile reactions, which Tagore experienced during his visits to Japan and China.

The postulates to universalize alternative cultures were not only meant to be contributions to the international debates on the future of world order. Rather, the quest for pointing out the global implications of Chinese or Indian traditions needs to be seen in the context of domestic debates on Westernization and the future of society and culture. Pro-Westernization forces such as the Chinese May Fourth Movement or Kemalism in Turkey, for instance, tended to argue that local traditions needed to be overcome in order to prepare their country for an ever-more closely entangled international community. By arguing that the West and the global community in general could also greatly benefit from certain aspects of Chinese tradition, thinkers such as Liang Qichao also sought to upgrade the value of Confucianism and other teachings in the eyes of their Chinese opponents. In other words, cultural cosmopolitans offered an alternative solution to the breakdown of dichotomies such as inner and outer, or indigenous and foreign, which societies such as China or India had experienced during the decades before the Great War. All contemporary political and intellectual milieus were forced to redefine their own societies and traditions in a global context, and they did so in radically different ways. Whereas anti-cosmopolitan conservatism was at one end of the spectrum, the globalization of cultural alternatives stood at the other end.
Auf der Suche nach Alternativen zur Moderne –
Transkulturelle Ansätze nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg


A la recherche d’alternatives à la modernité occidentale –
Les approches transculturelles après la première guerre mondiale

Cet article montre comment après la première guerre mondiale des alternatives culturelles à la modernité occidentale furent propagées non seulement au niveau local, mais encore dans des réseaux globaux. Dans ce contexte, certains discours dotés de contenus traditionnalistes se trouvaient, comme aujourd’hui les théories postcoloniales, plus près du camp politique de gauche que de mouvements de la droite conservatrice, qui recouraient pourtant eux aussi au concept de tradition. Comme exemple de ces thèses, l’article discute des activités des «cosmopolites culturels» qui défendaient l’idée d’échanges culturels et d’apprentissage réciproque contre les mouvements nationalistes et les tendances «occidentalisantes». Les Prix Nobel Romain Rolland et Rabindranath Tagore interprétèrent par exemple la première guerre mondiale comme une catastrophe de la civilisation occidentale qui devait être atténuée par le recours à d’autres traditions.

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