Introduction

> In the geographical survey, the course of the World's History has been marked out in its general features. The *Sun* – the Light – rises in the East . . . Then inactive contemplation is quitted for activity; by the close of day man has erected a building constructed from his own inner Sun; and when in the evening he contemplates this, he esteems it more highly than the original external Sun. For now he stands in a *conscious relation* to his Spirit, and therefore a *free* relation. If we hold this image fast in mind, we shall find it symbolizing the course of History, the great Day's work of Spirit. The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning.
>
> Hegel[1]

Until recent times, countries of the world located in some sense outside "the West" – outside of that region thought usually to comprise the dozen or half-dozen most powerful inland states of the two northern Atlantic coastlines, or Europe and North America – have invariably been considered in some degree defective in world-historical "development".

In the sense extolled by Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, of 1831, the West's developmental superiority in world history has recurrently been viewed as something inexorable: as inexorable almost as the apparent westward movement of the sun over the face of the earth.

Still today, it might be said, traces of a kind of pre-Copernican phenomenology of the westward progress of history measured by the sun's advance over the earth seem to linger in some dominant social-science definitions of concepts of "development", "modernity" and "modernization". Countries in some way exterior to this space of the West have been seen, and to some extent continue to be seen, to "lag behind", as if before some ever-receding horizon, some ever-regressing movement of the sun, that simultaneously seems to mirror the very progress of history – from East to West.

Yet critical thinking increasingly registers a sea-change to these assumptions today.

[1] Hegel 1831: 133–4/103.

Scholarship mostly underlines that any appearance of delayed development of non-Western countries may have to do just as much with invidious Western-centred frames of perception as with matters of intrinsic developmental complexity of the regions concerned. Today, new academic fields such as postcolonial studies and new branches of existing disciplines – from sociology to anthropology, history, political science, philosophy and literary studies – emphasize diverse relationships to modernity and development around the world, each reflecting different cultural idioms of transformation, divergent from familiar Western models of experience.

The present book addresses some classic issues of such Western-centred or "Eurocentric" peculiarities of Western thought about world history, but does so from a premise that while numerous Western traditions suffer from shortcomings in this regard, not *all* do so. Some Western traditions of social thought, this book argues, essentially survive problems of "Eurocentrism" and continue to suggest ways in which these problems can be tackled directly in the present day.

In particular, this book holds that from the later nineteenth century onwards – a half-century or so after the breakdown of Hegel's and other European metaphysical systems of thought from the Enlightenment and early romantic periods – thinkers in Germany and German-speaking countries elaborated rich ideas about the pitfalls of what is today termed "Eurocentrism", some seven or eight decades before this slogan rose to academic centre-stage in the later twentieth century. As I explore in this book, by the close of the nineteenth century through to the revolutionary years of the First World War and the Weimar Republic, intellectual life in Germany sees the genesis of movements with an unparalleled alertness to facts of relativity, contingency and fragility of knowledge-claims in European world-pictures. Arguably more penetratingly than elsewhere in the Western world at this time, German currents, ranging from historicism to phenomenology to *Lebensphilosophie* to the sociology of knowledge (*Wissenssoziologie*) and the sociology of civilizations (*Kultursoziologie*), impart a recognition that Western scientific culture and Western claims to universal validity stand challenged by a multitude of diverse total standpoints of thought and knowledge across global social-historical space.

Differently from any purely ideological and obscurantist mood of anti-Westernist cultural nationalism prominent in popular books of the age, such as Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* or Thomas Mann's *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* (both published in 1918), sophisticated sources of German thought at this time express a profound consciousness of difficulties of evolutionistic, positivistic and rationalistic constructs of mind still dominant in French, British and American scholarly traditions at this time, which untruthfully tend to place Western experiences at the head of events of world history.

Though still not fully familiar to current Anglophone contexts of debate and underappreciated even among some German-language forums, these sources, I claim, reveal a direct normative interest to dispute today about the place of the West and Western civilization in world history. Emerging from a country not wholly at the centre of Western Europe at this time and increasingly involved from the later nineteenth century onwards in an antagonistic relationship to the three most powerful countries of the West – to France, Britain and the United States – these bodies of thought satisfy a new appetite today for ways of thinking about global social change that engage with questions of cultural or civilizational difference and that surmount both Eurocentric modernist constructs typical of Western social-science research from early stages of the post-1945 era and more diffusely "postmodernist" constructs characteristic of later phases of the twentieth century.

Not originally essentially illiberal in political orientation, numerous key instances of early twentieth-century German social thought, I argue, can be recovered from the fraught context of their time and shown to demonstrate that no contradiction need exist in principle between convictions of cultural diversity of claims to knowledge and moral authority on the one hand and respect for universalistic norms of international law on the other. They can be shown in this sense to indicate how Western discourse can be contested and even rejected on the global stage, but not in a way that need imply any inevitable relapse into forms of cultural and political nationalism or extreme relativism, fundamentalism or romanticism of identities. They illuminate how universalistic questions of societal modernity and maturity can be offset by observations of cultural and civilizational plurality and how such observations can in turn be understood and upheld without loss of purchase on matters of the reasonable shared ends of humanity.

German thought and the West

Early twentieth-century German national intellectual criticism of "the West", it must be admitted, stands largely as a reactionary force of the age – viewed at least strictly in historical, period-limited terms.

It is well known that at the outbreak of war in August 1914 and for many months thereafter, a German complex of resentment of the Western European powers asserted itself in the writings of numerous authors in the discourse of a war for national Spirit (*Geist*) and national Culture (*Kultur*) – over against something perceived as the decadent, individualistic "civilization" (*Zivilisation*) of France, Britain and America.

German *Kultur*, it was believed, stood for "inner" values of the mind and soul, for unconditional goods and ends, whereas *Zivilisation* promoted merely "exterior" values of utility, manifested in the preoccupation of the French and

especially the British with industry and commerce. Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and Thomas Mann's *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* stand out today as two of the most potent promulgations of this discourse at the end of the war and for much of the 1920s.

Ninety-three writers signed a petition entitled "An die Kulturwelt", on 4 October 1914, evoking mortal threats to German national community posed by Western European materialism.[2] Resonant for many in this would be Germany's national "wars of liberation" from the Napoleonic yoke a hundred years previously, in the golden age of Goethe and Schiller and the early romantic era. The historian Friedrich Meinecke saluted the war effort in this spirit as a response to highest national imperatives; and in 1916 the commentator Johann Plenge wrote influentially of a contest of the "Ideas of 1914" and the "Ideas of the 1789".[3] Germans, Plenge affirmed, were to embrace a war for organic state community and solidarity, over against corrupt French, English and American egoistic doctrines dressed up as natural right.

Much of this rhetoric would be inseparable from wider popular notions of the degeneracy and spiritual poverty of the West. Clichés and slogans about English cant and hypocrisy and "Americanization" as a bloodless noxious influence would feed on notions of an international conspiracy of Jewish financiers and their servants in the political class, bent on destruction of everything authentic, organic and substantial in German life. Even the word "intellectual" (*Intellektuelle*), like *Zivilisation* and the often anti-Semitically coded word "cosmopolitan", carried a stigma of the foreign, of the cold, rootless and rationalistic, and usually would be eschewed in favour of phrases such as *geistige Menschen*, *geistige Arbeiter* or *die Geistigen*. Imported from France after the Dreyfus Affair, the word would gain widespread acceptability in German-language writing only by the second half of the 1920s at the earliest.[4]

More concretely and geopolitically, agitation for recuperation of territories forfeited at the Treaty of Versailles would form a mainstay of resurgent German ideological animosity to the victorious Western powers throughout the period – becoming the driving impulse behind Gustav Stresemann's diplomatic strategy as Foreign Minister from 1923 to 1929 and notoriously the major pretext for Hitler's promises of *Lebensraum* in the following decade.

Yet not all German criticism of Western Europe at this time, I want to urge in what follows, can be appraised solely through this nationalist political lens.

To be sure, the war and its bitter aftermath would radicalize multiple constituencies of German society in different ways, some in the direction of an

[2] See Böhme 1975: 47–9; Lepenies 2006: 6–26.
[3] *Die deutsche Erhebung von 1914* (Meinecke); cited in Timms 1986: 304; also Meinecke 1906; *1789 und 1914: Die symbolischen Jahre in der Geschichte des politischen Geistes* (Plenge), 1916; repr. in Böhme 1975.
[4] Bering 1978.

even more venomous loathing of the West than before. Yet it needs to be understood that the war could also move significant numbers of writers to think in new, more distanced and reflective ways about national cultural and intellectual histories as bearers of normative identities in the present. By 1915 the war's carnage would induce at least some authors to retreat from the belligerent fervour and catalyse a recognition of a more universal plight of peoples. Numerous voices would realize that no true campaign for *Kultur*, or no true struggle for values of culture and humanity, could ever honourably have permitted mass violence to be unleashed in its name, and that any struggle for *Geist*, or for nobility and integrity of mind, had to be conducted with the greatest caution and in a framework that respected basic principles of international solidarity. In this sense, the war's transformative experience could move important cases of writers to embrace *another kind* of salient battle with the West: a more reasoned, more principled, more philosophical battle, disabused of complexes of resentment.

Thus the thesis I want to defend in this book is that beyond anything reducible to mere ideological commonplaces of the age, certain distinct cores of interest persist in German literary and intellectual antagonism with the West of the Weimar and late Wilhelmine years, with a period-transcendent normative relevance to current concern. In the best sense of what remains of Hegel's philosophy today, intellectual developments in German history of this period retain a significance that can orient and inform humanistic thinking and scholarly work in the present day, even in all their problematic period-specific political entanglements. Every reason exists to discern in these developments an outstanding depth of insight into the questionability of Western metaphysical and teleological social theories that place Western experiences at the forefront of the unfolding of the species and ignore alternative rival visions of history and the cosmos borne by other civilizational regions of the earth.

In the writings of numerous German intellectuals of this period, I contend, it is possible to chart a certain philosophical voice of dissidence that – to rework a phrase of the contemporary Indian-American scholar, Dipesh Chakrabarty – "provincializes Europe", and yet does so from a position immanent or interior to, rather than essentially exterior to, European academic traditions.[5] In the same sense today in which contributors to postcolonial studies speak of a growing relativizing or decentring effect of non-Western parts of the world on historic Western cultural centres, so German cosmopolitan social thought of the Weimar years decentres, relativizes or "provincializes" European consciousness from a location *immanent* to European intellectual history.

In the same sense, indeed, in which the German literary city of Weimar stood in Goethe's time in a "provincial", "peripheral", "off-centred" relationship to

[5] Chakrabarty 2000.

the great metropolitan cities of the age – to Berlin, Paris or London, or to what Goethe in 1826 called the "world city" or *Weltstadt* – so German thought as a whole in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stands in a relation of sceptical distance to the claims and presumptions of Western European thinking about "universal history". And in so doing, it communicates, "dialectically", potentially a more truthful perspective on this universal history, by reminding Western European thought of its own culturally specific context of particularity – even as this very perspective may itself run every risk of collapsing back into the "merely provincial", inward-looking horizon of romantic nationalism.

To air this thesis is not, I should underline, to assert that German thought of the Weimar years represents some exclusive or exhaustive source of guidance on these issues today. Clearly, very similar arguments can be made, and are being made frequently today, on behalf of other global spaces and places of contention with the West – from Delhi to Beijing to Buenos Aires to Johannesburg to countless other global centres of intellect, or also to other historic literary cities such as, say, Dublin, Budapest or Warsaw with very comparable relationships to dominant imperial regions a century or so in the past.

But the thesis I propose here nonetheless maintains that German intellectual confrontation with the West in this period retains a complexity that is unmatched in its time and that today offers some fertile resources for any reflection on questions of what it might mean for Western civilization not only to respond constructively to challenges posed to itself by other world cultures and civilizations but also, reflexively, to overcome cognitive myopias from a standpoint internal to its own historic systems of thought – to decentre *itself* on the stage of world history.

Frequently misunderstood by some émigré commentators after 1945 on the left and right, and unjustly seen as lapsing into forms of proto-nihilism, many strands of German cosmopolitan social thought from the Weimar and late Wilhelmine years about civilizational relativity in human history record a vital sense of multiple discordant claims over absolute or paramount being in human existence and of the fundamental hurdles that arise therefrom for any shared will of modern societies to sustain generalizable values of truth and morality in public life on the global arena. In an extended sense, these sources can be seen to describe a kind of pole of eastward-looking self-questioning in the self-reflection of the West at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even as products of a nation embroiled at this time in its own internal dynamic of assimilation, marginalization and ultimate destruction of unwanted others – in some of the worst atrocities of nineteenth-century European settler colonialism, and in the launching of the two World Wars of the twentieth century – these sources nonetheless stand as the cipher of a kind of thorn of discontent in the body of the West, and in this sense are the symbol of a kind of articulated

national reality of Sigmund Freud's famous title of 1930: the "discomfort" or "discontent" with, of and in, Western civilization (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*).[6]

Social theory and the relevance of Weimar

At the forefront of this book are principally nine academic personalities. They are: the two sociologists and brothers Max Weber (1864–1920) and Alfred Weber (1868–1958); the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918); the theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923); the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936); the philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928); the sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947); the philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969); and the literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius (1886–1956).

As figures sensitive to values of pluralism in cultural and historical life, all of these authors subscribed to a broadly cosmopolitan milieu of German political self-understanding in the period. Several cultivated links to the new German liberal party founded at the end of the war in November 1918, the German Democratic Party (DDP), and expressed sympathies for the policies of the largest and most important governing coalition party of Weimar Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Sizable biographical scholarship now exists on most of these writers; and on at least one personality in particular, Max Weber, the literature is voluminous. However, my central claim in this book is that in most cases, far from enough has been done so far to put these authors' ideas to further theoretical and analytical *use* – to further creative conceptual elaboration in debates specifically about Europe and the West and their place in world history.

Across all these figures' diverse writings, it is possible, I claim, to define a more or less distinctive body of ideas that speak directly in a more or less unanimous voice to concerns of the present.

Certainly, some of the authors under discussion would be more initially hostile to the new German republican order of November 1918 and to the leadership of the Social Democrats than others. Some would be more trusting than others of cosmopolitan humanist visions of solidarity between nations and of the thought of Europe as some kind of supra-national space above historic imperial "great-power" states. Some would retain closer ties to the church and to religious orientation than others, and some would write more enthusiastically than others about the future and feasibility of traditional German educational values of *Bildung* or humanistic self-cultivation.

But all nonetheless shared some basic liberal political understandings, including first and foremost a conviction of the importance of democratization,

[6] Freud 1930 (*Civilization and its Discontents*).

parliamentarization and constitutionalization in German public affairs. All felt a profound sense of the desuetude of the old imperial order, and almost all knew one another on a close or personal basis, in many cases by dint of connections to the University of Heidelberg, at this time Germany's perhaps single most vibrant provincial university city.

With the exception of Georg Simmel (who died in late September 1918), all witnessed the decisive formative years of the new polity, and, though almost all had been fervent patriots at the war's outbreak, all would go on to publish widely against nationalist belligerence in later stages of the conflict and would plead assiduously for European peace, conciliation and solidarity. Though all (except Simmel) shared in a near-universally felt anguish of German citizens at the emerging terms of the Treaty of Versailles, all endorsed at least the spirit of the fundamental principles of international law invoked at Versailles. Though some, tragically, would not live to experience the new polity for much longer than a year and a half (Max Weber) or for four years (Troeltsch), many contributed substantially, even in a very short period, to the shaping of progressive cultural forces of the age – as charismatic public speakers and teachers, and some also as holders of positions of public office.

Most crucially for my concerns here, all essentially shared a contention that Germany, in engaging constructively with Western European traditions of liberal-democratic political thought, did not have to surrender its own sense of *national cultural historical difference* with "the West". All, in essence, maintained that Germany, in learning from Western European contractarian or natural rights-based theories of the foundations of political legitimacy, born of the spirit of the English, French and American revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, did not have to renounce its generally more expressivist or more communalist conception of the state as concrete protector and educator of the common civic life of the people. Germany could trace its own unique path to liberal parliamentary democracy and modernity and preserve, nurture and assert its own historically particular sense of highest priority in public life without sacrificing universalistic legal, moral and political norms as such. It could remain open to the West and to Western universalistic conceptions without copying or emulating specifically Western cultural models of institutional organization. It could in this sense continue to champion its own national idea of *Kultur*, in the sense *broadly* evoked by Thomas Mann and others during the war, and not have to defer to some abstract international scheme blind to definite national differences of normative self-understanding, such as in the sense of the partisanship for French republican politics espoused polemically after 1915 by Thomas's brother, Heinrich Mann.

This shared contention should be of interest to current debates in global social studies for many reasons. It should be important for requiring us once again to think critically about an already much disputed notion of some link

between German eighteenth- and nineteenth-century national cultural differences with Western Europe and the rise of National Socialism in German politics and society after 1930 – the notion of some long-term German deviant developmental path in modern European history, called the "special path" or German *Sonderweg* thesis.[7] To engage with German liberal-cosmopolitan rather than nationalist or reactionary conceptions of German national particularity in the 1920s should again make us realize how much the notion of some egregiously divergent path of German history prior to 1945 begs too many questions about whether British, French or American national political development in the period can be considered more "normal", "healthy" or "functional" than Germany's and about how far oppressive, violent and anti-democratic aspects of these countries' own histories as colonial empire states, too, can appropriately be left out of the picture.

But more than this, these Weimar thinkers' conceptions should be of note for the light they shed on attempts by other countries around the world today and in recent history to define similarly independent and autonomous relationships to the West, without either rejecting universalistic liberal principles or conforming purely to Western cultural models. For such countries, too, no less than for early twentieth-century Germany, the precept must remain that modernization and Westernization are not synonymous concepts and that to modernize in a broadly liberal-democratic, pluralistic direction need not be to Westernize or to copy specifically Western institutional recipes. To modernize and to liberalize need not be to tread some great "long road West" – in the sense of the phrase of an influential textbook history of modern Germany since 1800 by Heinrich August Winkler, read today by many thousands of university undergraduates and high-school students.[8]

Early twentieth-century German social-science writers, I argue, can illuminate for us in these respects a quite typical dilemma of many countries that today feel themselves invidiously positioned in global political affairs relative to Western dominant discourse. They can remind us of the extent to which there can be strivings for developmental pathways in modern world history that resist Western centres of power, authority and cultural influence but that do not fundamentally reject principles of universal humanitarian law and morality. They can inform us of the many important senses in which different kinds of principled struggle can occur with the West – even "spiritual", even "holy" kinds of

[7] Kocka 1988.
[8] Winkler 2000 (*Der lange Weg nach Westen: Deutsche Geschichte*); a two-volumed work published by the Munich-based press C. H. Beck but printed notably under the auspices of the German Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Bureau of Political Education), a government organ of the Federal Republic created in 1952, originally as part of the de-Nazification process.

struggle – that need not *per se* take a violent nationalist, ideological, racist or religious fundamentalist form.

Today Germany stands as the European Union's most powerful nation-state, with a population of 81 million and a gross domestic product (GDP) of some $3,636,000 million in 2014. Seemingly repudiating everything in its political past, from imperial Prussia to Weimar to the Third Reich to Soviet communism in the former GDR, contemporary Germany builds on a position of political and economic strength traceable in no small degree to the former western Federal Republic's prior geopolitical situation as a key anti-communist bulwark in Europe nurtured by American military muscle and reconstruction funds. And in recent years this same Germany has, in at least some perceptions, succeeded in influencing Eurozone fiscal policy profoundly to the benefit of its own export-led economy in ways that have enabled it to win in peace the kind of dominance of the continent it had long been feared for accomplishing in war.[9]

Any aspect of such dominance might seem to make the kind of emphatic tribute I am seeking to pay to German ideas in this book somewhat perverse. But the opposite is the case, I want to make clear here.

Among the many complex causes of current German power on the European stage, it needs to be underlined, are matters having next to nothing to do with German cultural and intellectual history of the last 150 years or so. Indeed among these causes may be a series of policies of German governments since 1945 oriented more or less consciously toward devaluation or disavowal of this history in national educational and cultural programme setting. Current German power in Europe remains political in effect but not political in *source*, in the sense of informed by a culturally distinctive tradition of nationally debated ideas – for any suggestion of a German nationally distinctive cultural and intellectual tradition, and of a role for such a tradition to play in politics, has been viewed with suspicion in mainstream government-led circles since the Federal Republic's creation in 1949. Repeatedly, often by quite tenuous chains of association, numerous strands of German nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural and intellectual history have been burdened with interpretations assigning toxic degrees of proximity to, and responsibility for, National Socialism in the country's political past – with the result that much German autochthonous cognitive tradition has tended to be devalued or otherwise stripped of any politically relevant interest or educational role.

To register this dispensation as a problem for Germany today, as I do here, is to wish to record a voice of dissent from Germany's Weimar past not only at the regime that followed Weimar but also at the next after that: at the type of highly Westernized and at the same time internally socially divided

[9] Cf. Müller 2012; Beck 2012.