

REVISITING THE IMAGINATIONS OF EUROPE AND THE WORLD

- Coming to Terms with Teleologies and Assessing Cosmopolitanism

Helsinki, Finland, 26-28 April 2010

The network on *Between Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Europe, Human Rights, Sovereignty* (Birkbeck College, University of London) and the research project *Europe between 1815 and 1914* (Helsinki University/Renvall Institute and Erik Castrén Institute) will hold a joint conference offering critical historical and theoretical perspectives on cosmopolitanism and European expansion as well as on teleological understandings of Europe.¹

“The new world order promotes the constitutional protection of individual rights, representative government and market economics. The end of the cold war has led to a general agreement about the universality of western values and has placed human rights at the core of international law. Human rights have become the driving force of international relations, a way of conducting politics according to ethical norms. At the same time, critical scholarship in history, politics, law and economics has argued that a new imperial dispensation is emerging which has undermined the sovereignty of smaller states. Important political, normative and policy implications are involved in this debate between those promoting cosmopolitanism and those who detect the emergence of a new form of imperialism.”²

The research network on *Between Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Europe, Human Rights, Sovereignty*, supported by The Leverhulme Foundation, examines this debate in the fields of law, international politics, legal theory and political philosophy, and brings together some of the best-known critical theorists in the world to analyze the future of the international order in its historical, political and economic contexts. The work is pursued through five interrelated themes: cosmopolitanism; the history of human rights; international law and humanitarianism; economic policies and human rights; and the geo-political, economic and institutional role of Europe.

The ERC-sponsored research project *Europe between 1815 and 1914* focuses on the period between the Peace of Vienna (1815) and the outbreak of the “Second European Thirty Years War” (1914). The century 1815-1914 was the pre-war historical ground on which the peace of 1945 and our present conception of Europe were built. It testifies at least as much to conflict and fragility as to progress. The century is traversed by a series of tensions in the political, cultural, social, economic and legal fields and struggles between the protagonists of different conceptions of European modernity. The legal and political basis for a new European order established at the Congress in Vienna was what was called the European concert. The Treaty in Vienna opened an era that lasted until 1914 in which wars in Europe decreased, whereas the number of civil wars increased and “the Revolution’ came to no end” (Koselleck 1969:199-229).

¹ The conference is also supported by the Centre of Excellence in Global Governance Research at the University of Helsinki, www.helsinki.fi/oik/globalgovernance/glo/

² Birkbeck project plan, forthcoming at www.bbk.ac.uk/law/research/resprojects/

The point of departure of *Europe between 1815 and 1914* is that a good part of the present deficit of legitimacy of European institutions emerges from a deeply a-historic view of Europe's past. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a more realistic history that rejects any teleological understanding of Europe as a self-propelling project on steady march towards a predetermined goal. Instead, the fragility of European peace and progress needs to be highlighted. Recent attempts to look for historical analogies to the EU in the American constitutional convention in Philadelphia in 1787 or in the German-Roman Empire, which collapsed in 1806, bypass the 19th century European experience of violent nation building and global expansion. This circumvention – and the theoretical foundation of Europe in teleological modernisation and globalisation theories – has led to a-historical understandings of Europe's past that disturbs our ability to plan for its future.

The project is in particular investigating three European fields of tension:

- between constitutions as instruments for restoration and reform/revolution, between monarchical sovereignty and people's sovereignty;
- between geopolitics and global law;
- between the social and the economic, between the fiction of the state and the fiction of the market.

The research network *Between Cosmopolitanism and Empire* and the project *Europe between 1815 and 1914* join for the conference *Revisiting the Imaginations of Europe and the World: Coming to Terms with Teleologies and Assessing Cosmopolitanism* in an effort to explore the intersection of cosmopolitanism and Europe's self-perception during a crucial period of modernity.

In ways both intentional and unintentional, self-perception is revealed by language. By naming and conceptualizing, the subject apprehends itself and its surroundings, and delineates its reality. "Social, political and legal structures do not pre-exist their formulation. Their meaning is a matter of discursive struggle on conceptualisation."³ Consequently, this process does not take place in isolation, and prevailing vocabularies and ideologies, along with their historical accretions, supply important parameters for the individual and social processes of conceptualization and imagination.

Vocabularies and ideologies may be used instrumentally, and they may also be challenged. "The discursive struggle for interpretative power of key concepts [is] the engine of politics."⁴ The process is open-ended, and there is always something at stake. An historical perspective can both underscore the fluidity and openness of conceptual spaces and simultaneously help reveal specific legal and political entanglements within European self-understanding.

The nineteenth century was marked by the gradual decline of old empires and the rise of new ones, resulting in a political, legal and economic re-ordering of the European space in the search for stability. At the beginning of the period, the language of natural law began to weaken in the face of the emergent vocabularies of economics, geopolitics, and global law. Natural law's persuasiveness in articulating foundational social values began to decline; so, too, did a particular vision of universalism, one closely allied to the cosmopolitan self-understanding. However, the intrinsic dichotomies that had long suffused natural law were not necessarily resolved by this decline, but rather incorporated into the newly ascendant vocabularies.

The three sections of the conference will critically discuss teleological understandings of Europe and explore the transformations of cosmopolitanism since the 18th century as well as of the imaginations of Europe from within and from without. How can we establish more open and expansive, and thus inclusive,

³ EReRe research plan, www.helsinki.fi/erere/

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understandings of European legal and political developments, ones that emphasise both the entanglements arising from the temporal and linguistic co-existence of different normative registers and their respective commitments, as well as the overall fragility? How can we understand 18th century cosmopolitanism? What sort of 'settlement of accounts' with the natural law tradition takes place around the turn of the century? How is the cosmopolitan legacy carried on in other vocabularies during the 19th century? How do the individual and collective actions of European states reveal this reconfiguration? Refiguring the self can also entail reconceptualising and reconstructing one's external relations, and this theme will be explored in the second section, *Refiguring Europe From Without*, which also will reflect on empires and imperialism. How are the prominent European vocabularies of economics, global law and geopolitics exported, and how are they received in Latin America, Africa and Asia? How are they refigured by local contexts, and what kind of criticism do they face?

In the final panel of the conference, *Cosmopolitanism and Teleologies Revisited: Legacy & Future*, the themes of the conference will be explored in relation to present day political realities, and assessed with regard to the future work of the Birkbeck network and the Europe between 1815 and 1914 research project.