

Introduction: Ways Out of the European War

Gregor Fitzi

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GREGOR FITZI

Introduction: Ways Out of the European War

The First World War (WWI) is the “seminal catastrophe” of the twentieth century (Kennan, 1989). During WWI, the course was set for the political-ideological battles of the “short century” lasting until 1989 and the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall (Hobsbawm, 2011). The course was set, too, for the appraisal of the role of intellectuals during the war. Two main lines of conflict can be observed here. Firstly, there is a generational conflict. Younger, critical intellectuals, who were directly faced with the call to arms, expected their official, and even more their secret masters to adopt a critical standpoint towards the irrationality of the conflict. Accordingly, they neither excused open enthusiasm nor cautious toleration of the older generation for the carnage in the name of holy sacrifice for the nation, as Benda described this in his eponymous work on the “treason of the intellectuals” (Benda, 1927). This portrayal of the “intellectuals at war” influenced the mainstream secondary literature following (Lukács, 1973). Since 1914, of course, a consistent group of the younger generation participated enthusiastically in the war mobilization. Many of them transfigured the senseless destruction of human life in the WWI trenches into an epic exaltation of violence and later became protagonists of the so-called “conservative revolution” in Germany (Schloßberger, 2018). Here, the name Ernst Jünger is representative of the entire group (2016). European intellectuals before 1914 were for this faction anyway the outdated expression of a “world of yesterday”. However, during the post-Second World War period the authors of the “conservative revolution” played a less influential role in interpreting the seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century. By contrast, the views of critics of the

intellectual behaviour – like Benda, Bloch and Lukács – remained a matter of fact (Landmann, 1976: 271).

The second line of conflict regarding the intellectual standpoint is ideological-political in nature. It is strictly related to the institutionalization of Marxism to a state-founding doctrine for the Soviet Union. From the 1920s, different influential Marxist authors endeavoured to found the theoretical opposition between classical sociology pre-1914 and the Marxist theory of society (Korsch, 1938; Lukács, 1923, 1954). In this context, the negative and undifferentiated representation of the way in which primarily classical sociologists like Durkheim, Simmel and Weber faced WWI could not become the object of critical inquiry. The main idea here was that from the beginning to the end of the conflict the “bourgeois intellectuals” joined uncritically in the chorus and hoped for the final victory of their respective motherland.

A fresh approach was called for on these matters by addressing the topic of the intellectuals and WWI both in an historical and critical way. This involves highlighting the variety of the intellectuals’ statements, their adherence to official nationalistic positions, their doubts, their changes of attitude, as well as their efforts to imagine possible “ways out of the war”. The centenary anniversary of WWI produced a cornucopia of publications about the intellectuals and the war, including a number of monographs on the main protagonists of the intellectual exchange during the war as well as (especially in France) new editions of their writings. Amongst others, these publications included an anthology on the Western European intellectuals at war, which was edited by Sarah Posman, Cedric Dijck and Marysa Demoor (2017), and one on the East European intellectuals edited by Tomasz Pudłocki and Kamil Ruzsala (2019). A volume about the intellectual attitude towards war during and beyond WWI was published in Italian (Pacelli, 2015). Nicolas Mariot dedicated a monograph to the encounter of the French intellectuals with their fellow soldiers in the trenches (2017), while Hinnerk Bruhns presented a German monograph on Max Weber’s complex position towards WWI (2017).

Furthermore, the new edition of Durkheim's *L'Allemagne au-dessus de tout* with the introduction of Bruno Karsenti (Durkheim, 2015) joined the French edition of Simmel's war writings *Face à la guerre, écrits 1914–1916* presented by Jean-Luc Evard (Simmel, 2015) as well as the French edition of Weber's war writings *Discours de guerre et d'après-guerre* edited and introduced by Hinnerk Bruhns (Weber, 2015). The three timely volumes became the object of a renewed debate about the sociologists and WWI. As for Simmel, his main war writings were already published in the collected works edition in 1999 (GSG 16: 7–58), and the inquiry into his positions during WWI continued without interruption since the pioneering works of Watier (1991) as well as Popp and Rammstedt (1995) and also until Simmel's centenary year of 2018 (Fitzzi, 2018: 156–160; Stebler, Watier, 2018). Other figures with a more eccentric position compared to the mainstream debate on the intellectual attitude to WWI were examined in 1995 by Toscano who proposed a comparison between Durkheim, Weber and Pareto. Moreover, Schloßberger's research on Troeltsch and Scheler showed that the traumatic experience of WWI initiated a debate about the possible integration of the values characterizing either "Western European civilisation" or "German culture" that were polemically opposed to each other during the war (2006).

The ongoing research about the intellectuals and WWI presents a more differentiated image of their "patriotic engagement". Moreover, it reveals that since 1915 different European intellectuals more or less explicitly started a critical reflection about the war, thus suggesting alternative ideas concerning the possible "ways out" of the conflict that had split Europe into enemy countries. The aim of the present volume of *Simmel Studies* is to describe some variations about the intellectuals' ideas concerning WWI by highlighting how the social scientists laboured on this topic, so that Simmel's war writings can also be contextualized within a broader debate. The contributions on Durkheim, Pareto, Weber and Simmel, which are compiled in the present volume, must therefore be prefaced by remarking, on the one hand, how

they demonstrate some common aspects of the attitude of the classical sociological authors to WWI. Despite all the contrasts, which emerge from their personal and national positioning on the war, they soon started to define the kind of framework in which a reordering of Europe after the war could be possible. Whereas social sciences analysis about the causes of WWI were few during the conflict, so for example Lederer's inquiry on the "Sociology of the World War" constitutes one of the rare exceptions in this regard (1915), different conceptions of the possible "ways out of the war" can be detected since 1915. The majority of the contributions revolves around a theoretical conception of Europe as the lost common ordering structure of the countries involved in the conflict. The formulations are generally prudent, veiled and saturated with nationalist spirits. Nevertheless, they express a subliminal common conviction that even after WWI a renewed "European order" might have been not only possible but also necessary. Yet, on the other hand, the individual ideas about the grounding of this possible new order diverge from each other.

With Karsenti we can observe that Durkheim developed a conception of Europe as a normative-juristic space to which the social sciences should contribute by valuing the "good" and fighting against the "bad heritage" of the German moral sciences. Weber, for his part, proposed an exquisitely political conception for a "way out" of the war that was founded on the idea of Europe as a balance of power in which Germany had to play its historical role after becoming a political power at the end of the nineteenth century. As Bruhns observes, since 1916 Weber's central sorrow in this respect was to grant the overall conditions for peace and argue against the tendencies that claimed excessively aggressive war goals in Germany. Simmel, instead, founded a more cultural ideal of Europe by grounding it on the scholarly and ethical heritage of the republic of letters that was lost because of the "war hatred". Nevertheless, this republic could be reconstructed starting from the "cultural longings" that the European countries had for each other. Here, understanding

which events led Simmel to abandon his early convictions about the “good reasons” for Germany having entered into the war (Fitzi) as well as the inquiry into the critical conception of modernity, which Simmel shared with the movements of life reform (Portioli), help to shed light on the backdrop for his conception of the cultural ideal of Europe as a way out of the war. Finally, Pareto had an eccentric position in the debate. His reflection was of a more general, anthropological character and focused on the relationship between rationality and irrationality as motivations of human behaviour. As Toscano remarks, Pareto’s reflection about the war thus merged with the formulation of his *Treaty of General Sociology* that suggested social science as a means to overcome the societal tendencies to irresolvable conflicts (1935).

The public engagement of the social scientists during WWI and their reflection about the ways out of the war were also shaped by the historical-biographical dimension of the war experience, as all the contributions in this volume underline. Durkheim and Simmel both passed away before the end of the war, so that their statements have the character of an analytical projection about the period after the war. Weber could still observe the difficulties in the making of a new European order after WWI and commented on them critically, until he became a victim of the Spanish flu in June 1920. Pareto lived long enough to become engaged in the early debate about Italian fascism in the aftermath of the political schisms generated by the war. The parable of the intellectuals’ reflection on the political-ideological trajectories set through the experience of WWI closes with the reflection by liberal intellectuals like Troeltsch and Scheler on the early Weimar Republic. These representations concern the possible synthesis between the two cultural traditions of so-called “German culture” and “Western European civilisation” that had been instrumentally opposed during the war (Harrington 2016). A contribution on this topic was planned for this volume by Matthias Schloßberger who was sadly prevented from doing so because of ill health. For similar reasons, regrettably Otthein Rammstedt’s contribution

about Simmel and WWI also could not be included in the volume. *Simmel Studies* and all those involved in its research take this opportunity to wish both authors a swift and full recovery.

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