

## REPRESENTATIONS OF EUROPEAN CULTURE. FROM GOETHE TO ELIAS

*Charle, C. (2024) L'Europe des intellectuels. Figures et configurations, XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Paris: CNRS Editions.*

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Christophe Charle has devoted many important comparative studies to the history of European cultures. By skillfully varying his scales of analysis, he has brought to light the relationships and “discrepancies of the times” characterizing this history.

*L'Europe des intellectuels* aims to complement these overviews through an analysis focused on the role played by some intellectuals (in the broad sense) and their representations of European culture in the period spanning 1820-1940. These figures are Goethe, Berlioz and Liszt in the first part, Émile Zola in the second, and various representatives of the early 20th century, notably Norbert Elias, in the third. Charle considers their points of view to be particularly significant, as their positions

allow them a vision of the space in which they are located. The main sources used are correspondence, information on reading practices, and testimonies from agents.

The international fame that Goethe enjoyed in the 1820s, the translations of his works, and the tributes – books, reviews, letters, visits – he received from many foreign writers helped him to conceive the “utopia of a European intellectual field” and the possibility of a *Weltliteratur*, at a time when his classicism and openness to foreign cultures were being called into question by the leaders of Romanticism. His reflections on the effects of French centralism and German polycentrism stem from his interest in French culture and in the historical factors of its domination. European culture at that time, notes Charle, “was a socially narrow world, due to limited access to education, reading, and printing for the greatest number” (p. 77). But Goethe already noted (with concern) the emergence of a dualism within the field of production, between the most autonomous positions and those making concessions to market demand, such as Walter Scott and Victor Hugo.

The trajectories of Liszt and Berlioz show that the enlargement of Europe and the intensification of musical circulations enabled a certain emancipation of musical creation and encouraged fruitful encounters between different traditions.

But composers, compared to writers and painters, remained more dependent on state patronage and social elites. Furthermore, musical nationalism created new barriers.

Emile Zola's foreign correspondence reveals the relationship between his continental fame, boosted by his mobilization for Dreyfus, and his Goethean vision of Europe as a common, pacified homeland. The diversity of foreign reactions to Dreyfusism confirms the hypothesis that reception depends to a large extent on the logics specific to the field of reception. In Austria, for example, Zola was not supported by Karl Kraus, but by the mainstream liberal press, against which Kraus was fighting.

In the following period, intellectual life undoubtedly became more international, with regard to avant-garde groups (particularly in fields such as art and music), university networks, scientific conferences and journals. But the struggles of a few pacifist Europeanists, such as the historian Charles Seignobos and Jules Romains, and the creation of institutions like the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, the League of Nations and the International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation, could do nothing to counter the involvement of intellectuals in the First World War and the rise of nationalisms.

The final chapter underlines the “constant detachment” that characterizes the autobiographical accounts of Norbert

Elias, whose existence was marked by war, persecution, forced exile and belated recognition. Elias tends to omit or minimize his youthful commitments, notably his temporary membership of a Zionist association in 1914, and his patriotism and voluntary mobilization in 1915. He declares that he has always avoided taking ideological and/or partisan positions. According to Charle, he tends to retro-date the “detachment” he claimed as a researcher, contrasting it to “involvement” which he considered an irrational attitude; and this concern for “detachment” sheds light on Elias's choice of themes distant from his historical experience, such as court society and the process of civilization.

Charle does not limit himself to analyzing the views of a few famous figures. Thanks to his broad perspective, his controlled use of sources and his mastery of an impressive bibliography, he succeeds in situating individual representations within the historical “configurations” that make them possible and explain them. He thus traces the main factors which have favoured or, on the contrary, hindered the construction of a Europe of culture.