

Europeanists during the Interwar Period

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ABSTRACT

The Europeanists of the interwar period, deeply marked by World War One and obsessively fearing decline, saw the notion of a united Europe, and French-German rapprochement in particular, as the only way of maintaining lasting peace on the continent. They formed a heterogeneous series of more or less organized movements with very diverse aims, and were joined by intellectuals and isolated militants. Although their often highly ambitious political projects hardly translated into concrete reality, the same was not true of a number of more limited and realistic economic initiatives. Confronted by the crisis, totalitarian regimes, and the spectre of a new global conflict, the 1930s saw the scattering of the Europeanist galaxy.



The post-World War One period was favourable to the affirmation of the European idea, which until then had mostly been the domain of isolated thinkers and militants. “We civilizations, we now know that we are mortal,” Paul Valéry called out in *La crise de l’esprit* in August 1919. In the context of the mental demobilization that followed four years of intense nationalist propaganda, for many the Great War was seen at the time as a fratricidal conflict that had opposed peoples from the same continent, united by centuries of shared history. The war had to destroy Europe on the material, economic, demographic, and moral level before the different peoples who constituted it became aware, amid hardship and suffering, of the force of what united them, and the fragility of their civilization. Europeanism—the term appeared for the first time in 1915 in the writings of Jules Romains—had its origins both in the desire to bring together the countries of Europe in order to establish the conditions of a lasting peace, and to fight against a decline in the face of emerging new powers such as the United States and Japan, a decline the symptoms of which were henceforth quite visible. *S’unir ou mourir* [Unite or Die] was the title of the book that Gaston Riou published in 1929, as well as the choice that imposed itself on an entire generation of intellectuals, militants, journalists, industrialists, and businessmen, often with highly different profiles, who contributed in the 1920s to building what Robert Frank has identified as a “first golden age of European engagement.”

This profusion of initiatives and movements, programs and goals, lacking any coordination on either the national or European level, was simultaneously the strength and the weakness of 1920s Europeanism. Numerous projects of a political and/or economic order, ranging from simple cooperation to a more developed union, blossomed notably beginning in 1924, in the favourable context of the French-German rapprochement initiated by the Dawes Plan and the Locarno Treaties. This was the case, for example, for the Comité français de coopération européenne, founded in 1927 by the mathematician and radical congressman Émile Borel, which in the framework of the League of Nations advocated a strengthened cooperation in police and monetary policy matters among European powers centered around France, Germany, and Great Britain, notably among foreign ministers. This remained within the framework of traditional interstate cooperation, and on the whole was not very revolutionary, and therefore acceptable for governments. The Pan-European Movement, probably the most famous of the interwar Europeanist movements, was founded in 1923 by the Austrian aristocrat Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, an inexhaustible militant who devoted his life to this undertaking. It had a program that followed an entirely different logic. Coudenhove defended the idea of a politically and economically united Europe bringing together all of the continent’s countries, with the exclusion of Great Britain and the USSR, which were considered as global and competing powers. In his opinion, this united Europe was the only one able to resist the pressure of the other “blocks,” and especially to contend with the communist danger. The first Pan-European Congress, which took place in Vienna in 1926, was a success, gathering more than 2,000 participants, including numerous intellectuals, writers, industrialists, and businessmen. Much more restricted but not less developed was the project of the Dane Christian Heerfordt, who gave priority to the community of civilization, and included Great Britain and its dominions, thereby going beyond the geographic notion of Europe as a continent.

Alongside these programs, too ambitious to be pursued, were much more realistic projects of a strictly economic order, which fell within what Gérard Bossuat has identified as a “Europe of the possible.” The European Customs Union, founded in 1925 by the economist Charles Gide, advocated the very gradual reduction of general customs tariffs in successive stages, the establishment of a common external tariff, as well as the signing of multilateral trade agreements among European countries. Louis Loucheur, along with the steel maker from Luxembourg Émile Mayrisch, preferred the contractual approach, and through the signing of cartel agreements advocated the organizing of sectorial European markets: the International Steel Cartel thus fixed production quotas in 1926 for German, French, Belgian, Luxembourger and Saarland steel factories, thus prefiguring in certain ways what would be the future ECSC, albeit in a private context.

The political leaders at the time were too attached to a strict conception of sovereignty to adopt Europeanist ideas. Only Aristide Briand, in his famous speech of September 5, 1929 at the League of Nations, spoke of “a kind of

federal link” that would unite “peoples who are geographically grouped, such as the peoples of Europe.” One may nevertheless wonder about the real convictions of Briand, who sought first and foremost to maintain a lasting eastern border for Germany, and who quickly tempered his remarks by pointing out that the “association” created therein would in no way affect the sovereignty of the nations taking part. The memorandum of May 1, 1930 that developed the project remained within the framework of interstate cooperation, with structures very similar to those of the League of Nations. The economic, political, and social crisis that struck the continent at the time hastened its demise.

The 1930s saw the ebb of Europeanism, which could not propose concrete and immediate solutions to the crisis, and which was hardly large enough to oppose totalitarianism. The majority of its partisans, overcome by disarray and confusion, struggled to continue believing in their convictions, as Stefan Zweig was nevertheless able to do. Some disengaged in order to dedicate themselves to causes they deemed more urgent, such as Julien Benda, who joined the Front populaire. Others persisted in believing in a French-German rapprochement and, again in the name of a united Europe, in compromising themselves with Nazi Germany, such as Jean Luchaire and so many others, whose path led to Briandism and collaborationism. Finally, others such as Carlo Rosselli or Thomas Mann looked to Europeanism, conceived as a humanism, in order to mobilize the crowds and to have them stand against fascism, considering that the idea of a united Europe could only spread in the context of democratic values, something that seemed obvious after 1945, but which was not so during the interwar period.

Illustration explanation: Aristide Briand as Moses after the Exodus, arriving in view of the “Promised Land,” followed by a group of heads of state and government from the primary countries of Europe. In 1931, the “United States of Europe” was a prospect that seemed more inaccessible than ever, over which we may wonder whether the sun depicted here is rising or setting.

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