



## **Changing fears in European geopolitical discourses from the First till the Second World War: Halford Mackinder, Isaiah Bowman and Arnold J. Toynbee**

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When we look at the developments in the international relations and in the political thought of the 20th century, we notice the acceleration of political processes that originated in the previous imperialistic century (Hobsbawn 1987; Hobsbawn 1994; Bayley 2004) and the crisis of some fundamental institutions. The 20th century cannot be understood only in its relation of continuity to the previous century. The emerging of mass politics, the growing of mass culture, the revolutions in the old European colonies, the end of European primacy in the international relations and the consolidation of new hegemonies and of the balance of powers in the world politics: these are just some of the political phenomena, that reveal not only the transformation of the idea of national State, as it was developed after the Westphalian Treaty, but also the need to overcome the old political language, based on the primacy of the European State and State-system. Moreover the 20<sup>th</sup> century begins and ends with devastating conflicts, that create and nourish ever lasting fears and anguishes.

This contribution aims at exploring one aspect of the “production” of fears in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, analysing the period between the Two World Wars, namely a crucial turning point in the history of the geopolitical and political thought and reconstructing the genesis of the fears concerning the Western civilisation and Europe, that have originated from the end of the Second WW till now.

In particular, it is noteworthy to look at the transformation of the geopolitical image of the West at that time, and to the Western representations of other political cultures and civilizations. The years between the two World Wars reveal the instability of the political order stated by the Treaties of Paris, in particular, the precariousness of the postwar divisions of Europe into small and medium-sized national States, in particular, in Eastern Europe. The League of Nations, the first structured European international institution whose task was to guarantee stable relations between the European States, was bound to dissolve after a short time because of its political weakness and poor authority. At the same time the British Empire clearly showed signs of collapse: “The whole world is rocking,” stated the Colonial Secretary Alfred Milner in 1919 (quoted in Hyam 2006: 32). Britain, as well as Europe, from that moment onwards openly lost her pivotal role in the cultural, political and economic fields. More generally, the whole geopolitical “conceptual map” of the global relations changed in the political actions and in the intellectuals’ perception (on geopolitics see Losano 2011; Chiantera-Stutte 2014).

Some of the main thinkers, who registered a break with the past, were “intellectuals” - in Sartre’s meaning, namely, academics who cultivated the ideals of the Western scientific community. At the same time they performed a public function as promoters of “universal” values and were leaders of think-tanks or members of organizations working for their national governments. They tried to cope with different and sometimes contradictory demands: to keep their intellectual objectivity, to show their academic expertise as well as to promote their State’s interests and spread political ideas in the public opinion. Amongst these academics were three main intellectuals, who belonged to different disciplinary fields and were members of key political organizations in their countries: Halford Mackinder, Isaiah Bowman and Arnold J. Toynbee. The first two were geographers and geopoliticians; the third was an historian. All of them were considered not only brilliant academics in their disciplinary fields, but also main strategists, political advisors and key thinkers of the discipline of the “International Relations”, that at that time was just beginning to be introduced into the American Universities.

In this article their ideas will be investigated from the perspective of the history of political thought: they will be considered as “political thinkers”, whose comments on contingent political facts were supported by their academic and intellectual expertise and whose ideas, at their turn, had a certain impact on the political ideas and praxis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In so doing, I will trace back to the genesis of the idealistic paradigm of IR during the crisis of the main institutions of the political national and international order, as well as its fragmentation into two main strains: the geopolitical and the “civilizational” paradigms of interpretation. I will demonstrate, on the one hand, the impact of the political transformations of that time on their “geopolitical conceptual map” from the First to the Second World War – namely their ideas of Europe, America and the “Other” -; on the other hand, I will trace back to the origin of the split between two main paradigms, used in order to explain the crisis of the order in international order and its possible “restoration”. Despite the profound difference concerning their approach, these authors are classified here as belonging to the idealistic tradition in the IR, i.e. the tradition that originated with President Wilson and with his idea of democracy and of internationalism. All authors dealt with a deep transformation of the political field, i.e. the globalization of the political, economic and cultural relations, but all of them tried to stick to the main values of democracy, peace preservation and human rights. All of them experienced the crisis of national States and voiced the necessity of bringing to the fore different political agencies able to control the global order.

## **1. The geopolitical paradigm and the crisis of European supremacy**

Mackinder was a famous author – and has become even more popular today – for his geopolitical theory of the “Geographical Pivot of History” elaborated in 1904 (Mackinder 1904). In his historical reconstruction of the global relations from the beginning of the European history till the contemporary political events, he juxtaposed

Land powers against Sea powers. His aim was to trace back the contemporary confrontation of Sea and Land powers – England vs. Russia – to the resilient political and military processes. The main sources of his geographical approach were on the one hand Lamarckism, on the other the German and American geopolitics – in particular Ratzel's and Mahan's works (Mahan 1890).

According to him, the main threat for the European -and worldly – balance of power was the growing power of the Land powers, corresponding to the "heartland", a vast area in the Asiatic continent which was rich for its resources and not accessible to the navy. The world would have been in danger if Russia could penetrate in Europe and conquer a coastal area, or ally with Germany: the nightmare of a universal empire dominated by the Asiatics was the worst scenario for mankind. The political opposition between Land powers and Sea powers was also a civilizational opposition between the European – Anglo-Saxon and German - culture against the Asiatic "barbarity". The developments in the Twentieth century could dangerously break the balance between Land- and Sea powers and lead to the domination of the former: the modern development, in particular the improvement of railways, and the increasing population in Russia would reduce the gap with the Sea powers, which till that moment were technologically superior and dominated the world seas (Kearns 2009; Parker 1982; Knutsen 2014).

Mackinder's ideas had a tremendous impact in the European and American public opinion, due to his prestige in and outside the academia. Not only was Mackinder the President of the Geographic Royal Society and a relevant political advisor, but his ideas were also supported by military and political currents in the British government, who were aware of the gradual loss of economic and political power of the British Empire and promoted a strong intervention against the Asiatic emerging Empire (Blouet 1987; Biultin 2005). Mackinder's articles and works had a threefold destination: for the academics, for the wider public opinion, that Mackinder aimed to "educate in order to assume a role as imperial subjects" (Mackinder 1887; see also O'Tuathail 1996) and for the political and military elite. It was exactly Mackinder's role in politics and in the public opinion that promoted his "conversion" to a voluntaristic idea of political international relations after the First WW. The war and moreover the Paris treaties changed his political vision: in spite of his previous geographical determinism, he felt that history could be "done" and that human agency was relevant for the political developments.

In 1919, when he wrote "Democratic ideals and reality", he avowed himself a promoter of the League of nations and of internationalism and a supporter of Wilson's democratic ideal (Mackinder 1919). The material geographical facts were no longer the only reason to explain the war: resources distribution, the geographic position and density of a State were no longer the "real" reasons for the fight and the victory of a people. Ideals, namely the human perspective on reality, the interpretation and "use" of material facts impacted dramatically on the political international scenario: humans could free themselves from the limits given by nature and strive for a peaceful

cooperation instead of engaging into a timeless “struggle for life”. Politics was no longer understood as the background of that struggle: it resulted from the human ability to force all natural conditions and to state moral and political values, like liberty, democracy and self-determination. Accordingly, Mackinder supported the “ideal” of the League of Nations and the internationalization of politics, as coherent projects able to organise human actors and nations in order to achieve rational values. But, at the same time, he acknowledged that the task of the League was difficult and its power precarious: guaranteeing peace between different nations, which had different resources and political perspectives, and struggled for power, was a tremendous work.

He acknowledged also that the First World War was caused by the material disparity between nations. The League could dangerously fail to dominate the international anarchy of conflicting States, if it were not supported and strengthened by the “old” politics of diplomacy and balance of power. This meant that some particular States had to “guarantee” the global balance of power and avoid the possible hegemony over Europe. Naturally, these “guarantors” could only be the Sea powers: Great Britain, the “old” and USA, the emerging Sea power, able to strengthen and replace England. Their role in the international politics would be both to reinforce the action of the League and to promote the transition from the old international politics, based on the central role of States, to a new international one. The balance of the new Europe was based on the division into buffer States, old nation States and great powers: buffer States, in the Eastern area, had to prevent the possible expansion of the Land powers.

In sum, in spite of Mackinder’s changed positive attitude towards the force of democratic ideals in the history, his geopolitical assumptions about the historical and political role of Sea powers remained unchanged: Sea powers were still the pivotal forces to preserve peace in the world and guarantee the development of the Western civilization against the “barbarians” and communist Asians, and against their eventual control of the World Island.

A similar model of the geopolitical interstate relations was set out by Isaiah Bowman, the American geographer who founded during the First WW the first American think tank (Inquiry Commission) in order to analyse data about the European crisis. He was a brilliant academic, a scientific advisor for the American President, and a member of the American Delegation at the Paris Treaties. In his “Democratic ideals and reality” published in 1921, Bowman also stated the new crucial role of Sea powers as a safeguard for the international order and peace. The main reasons for the First World War were found in the existence of grey zones between the States, the lack of clarity of European diplomacy and, first of all, the disparity in the national resources for the international competition. Bowman was one of the first analysts who stressed the importance of economic competition to explain peace and war between nations. What mattered, according to him, was to keep and maintain free markets, rather than acquire a stronger military power. Accordingly, wars were not fought for political or geopolitical reasons, namely in order to increase the territorial power, but only in order to achieve economic resources. In stating this, Bowman disentangled the

political competition from the territorial claims as Bowman's biographer, Neil Smith, demonstrates (Smith 2003). The real hegemony became the economic one and the "real peace" between democracies was made dependent on the expansion of the free market. The space for the market had to be open, global, free in order to integrate all nations into the capitalist system; only in this space democracy and international peace were possible. These were also the main tenets of Wilson's idea of democracy, that Bowman learned and promoted at the end of the war in Paris, when he participated in the American delegation.

Also Bowman, like Mackinder, insisted on the opposition between Land and Sea powers, but he pointed out their different means of expansion: the violent territorial imperialism of the Land powers, which had led to the World War, was juxtaposed to the positive and soft economic hegemony of the Sea powers, that would lead to a peaceful integration of all States and to the internationalization (Bowman 1926: 12). Military (Land)power should give way to the economic (Sea)hegemony. According to Bowman, as well as to Mackinder, the Sea powers would safeguard peace and stability in Europe; the main difference was that Bowman's idea of international stability was based on the expansion of free market and capitalism against communism. Bowman, like Mackinder, promoted the League of Nations and the internationalism, as well as the American interventionism. The First World War was according to him the moment in which it was possible to re-draw the new world – and, for this purpose, it was necessary to embrace idealism. Nevertheless, as Mackinder had noticed, internationalism and idealism were not sufficient to safeguard peace: the Seapowers had to assume their responsibility in order to safeguard the balance of power against the threat of Asia and communism (Ivi: 11).

Interestingly, if the First World War represented for these two authors a turning point for their political and intellectual theory, the Second World War did not lead to a break in their conception: both Mackinder and Bowman kept on using similar geopolitical models in order to explain the Second World War and to indicate the fear of Asia as the main reason for the promotion of internationalism, of the role of Seapowers and of free markets in the global society (Mackinder 1943).

## **2. Toynbee: civilizations and crisis**

Another British intellectual at the same time discussed and dealt with the themes of the European crisis and of the international anarchy in his "Surveys of International Affairs": Arnold J. Toynbee. He had a completely different background from Mackinder and Bowman, he was a historian of classical civilisations, but shared with them the same engagement in his country's political institutions and in the political life of his time. Already in his youth, he participated in the British government agency of Wellington House, whose aim was to define the lines of the British political propaganda for the foreign public opinion. Other members of the group were the historian Lewis Namier and Hedlam-Morley. Later on, after his participation in the British delegation

at the Paris conference, he was member of the Royal Institute of International Affairs -so-called Chatham House- that was directed by him from 1939 to 1943. The political purpose of Chatham House was to inform the public opinion and to gather information, useful for the government in order to prevent war and conflict in Europe. Toynbee's surveys were originated from this political activity: they aimed not only at educating British citizens about the international political events, but also at advising the political and military elites (McNeill 1989; Navari 2000; Castellin, 2015; Bosco, Navari 1994).

Toynbee was also a distinguished academic, whose background was the so-called "evolutionary idealism", that tried to combine Darwinian naturalism with the idealistic philosophy elaborated by T.H. Green. All intellectuals, belonging to this current – amongst them Leonard T. Hobhouse, John A. Hobson, and the Fabians – tried to find the theoretical background, in which the laws of natural evolution would be reconciled with the moral ideal of progress (see Lang 2011). Their faith in the natural coincidence of human progress and evolution was mirrored in their optimistic vision of the future of the world society and their eurocentric approach to the issues of peace and war. According to this group of intellectuals, the attainment of peaceful international political society was based on the diffusion of the universal European civilization, whose cosmopolitan and liberal values would make possible the coexistence of different peoples and culture. Their political ideal was therefore dependent on overcoming the political institution of national states. In their rather ethnocentric perspective, the stronger and higher civilization was the European one, whose cultural and material progress had paved the way for the peaceful integration of all countries. National states were a historical necessary step for the national and international order, but were bound to be replaced in the future by strong supranational institutional forms. This political position was shared by Toynbee in the years before the First World War, who strongly promoted the League of Nations as well as the necessity of referring to national unities as the main political agents, for the moment.

The outbreak of the First World War instilled doubts in Toynbee's optimistic belief in the future of Western civilisation, contrary to his main Oxford colleagues. If, on the one side, he acknowledged that nations were the primary groups in the political life, as "groups of men bound together by the immanence of the impulse [of cooperation]" (Toynbee 1916: 19 ff.), on the other side, he began to acknowledge the shortcomings of the traditional model of the national State. Therefore he searched for new geographical and political categories, and referred to wider groups of people in order to explain the global power constellations. This new line of investigation urged him to reflect on the deep differences among civilisations and on the impact of the West on other societies. He wondered about the consequences of the Western expansion: if the Western "modernization" of the world - which had introduced industries and free commerce in colonies - meant not only the exportation of the ideas of the technological and economic development, but also the adoption of western political institution, like the national State. If Western "progress" could be seen – according to Toynbee after the War – as a universal value; did also the Western national model represent likewise a global political phenomenon? According to Toynbee, the "exportation" of

the State model into other civilizations led to the constitution of autarkic state entities in countries which, at their turn, could not cope with the rapid process of economic and technical globalization. In a clear and long-sighted interpretation of the relations between the West and its colonies, he observed that the economic development had spread in the world more quickly and effectively than the political one. The emergence of “economic globalization” clashed against the limitations of the States, which could not master economy in their own boundaries. This diachrony had produced not only the political European crisis at the beginning of the century and in the First World War, but also the tension between the West and “the Other”(idem).

The First World War, as well as the Bolshevik Revolution and the disintegration of the British Empire, could be explained only if the differences and incommensurability between civilizations, as well as the negative impact and side-effects of the Western imperialism were to be taken seriously. In particular, the British civilization had to be considered in her double function in the history of mankind. On the one side, she was just one amongst other ones: this fact as well as the contacts and conflict among civilizations had to be researched through a historical perspective – what Toynbee began in these years to achieve with his life long work “The study of history”, written from 1934 till 1961. On the other side, she had been dominating the whole world, imposing not only her material power through the process of colonization. She had exerted her hegemonic power on societies and changed the economic, political and cultural life of other civilizations. Only in the light of the domination of the Western political and cultural models, was it possible to explain the extreme violence of the conflicts of the old colonies, emerging from their aggressive national claims – in particular between Greece and Turkey (Toynbee 1922). The extreme aggression showed in the war between these two “new-born” nations was historically rooted into the imposition of the western political model of the national State upon them, and represented one clear example of the negative impact of the exportation of Western values on non-western civilizations. Once that the national state had been defined by the Western dominant culture as the main political structure for the safeguard of the internal order and peace in the colonial powers, the colonized peoples fought with extreme violence in order to “imitate” the western countries and built their own nations. The discourse on nations had become, according to Toynbee, a boomerang for the western imperial powers: it was used against them with a terrifying conviction (ivi). Remarkably here, Toynbee, contrary to many of his contemporary historians, not only questioned the centrality and uniqueness of the Western civilisation, but he also accused it of having unleashed forces that would be self-destructive. Differently from Mackinder and Bowman, his analysis of the relations among cultures considered the genesis and the history of the relations between cultural and political entities and the repercussions of the Western cultural domination (Hall 2012; Hall 2014; Thompson 1985).

The “Eastern question”, therefore, could not be disentangled from the “Western question” (ivi): the real reasons for the political unrest in the East were not to be found in the diversity between cultures *per se*, but in the economic globalization and imposition of the Western political models onto other civilizations. The awakening

of nationalism, as well as the emergence of a stronger appeal to religion in Islam, originated from Western imperialism and the real threat to the Western civilization was the “westernization” of Islam. Also the diffusion of Pan-Islamism, that was the worst possible scenario in this perspective, was a reaction against the West and, at the same time, the imitation of a Western political project. It meant the unification of all Islamic societies for a war and therefore the coming back of a war of religion, against the West, which was represented as a religious homogeneous enemy (Toynbee 1915).

Between the two World Wars, Toynbee’s strategy in order to cope with the crisis of the international political order was twofold: on the one hand, he suggested to recognize the claims of other civilizations, in particular their demands to be acknowledged as national States; on the other hand, he envisaged the European future as a process of increasing political integration in which

Europe [would be] economically knit into a whole ... but differentiated politically into a number of independent, self-sufficing, self-developing groups, capable of living in harmony side by side (Toynbee 1916: 61-62)

In other words, nationality was a legitimate political aim outside Europe, because it consolidated the modern economic and technological development in the old colonies. At the same time, national states had to be overcome in Europe: nationality was a “phase of social evolution which every people on the earth sometime attain and which all, we hope, will eventually transcend” (ivi: 67). The “idol of nationality” had therefore to be abandoned in the future, in favour of the promotion of the League of Nations and of other forms of integration (Toynbee 1931). States would become “organizations providing education” and “cooperative societies of consumers” (ivi: 771). The political international order would be safeguarded, in that scenario, by a supranational organization that would be founded on the best and most representative values of the West and would, in the end, unite the world. Toynbee wrote in 1931

I suggest this new internationalism is Western in its structure and in its complexion. Just as the world-wide economic system which has already virtually established itself is Western in its technique, so the world-wide political order and the cosmopolitan culture ... are both being fashioned out of materials of Western spirit (ivi: 768).

Toynbee’s belief was going to vacillate after some years. As Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and as the II World War broke out, he became much less confident about the function of the League of Nations and the future of European politics. The League of Nations, whose model was, according to Toynbee the “pax britannica” - “a substitute for the medieval *respublica christiana*” - had failed (Toynbee 1939). Germany, on the one side, had a strong geopolitical position and could possibly dominate Europe and transform the European cosmopolitan civilization, made out of different traditions,

into a universal totalitarian State (ivi). The Asiatic Bolshevism, on the other side, had been able to transform a political illiberal regime into a religion, whose dogma were not doubted by the population. In this situation the “positive” side of the Western civilisation – its liberal nature, its cosmopolitanism, its openness – was in danger. The reasons to promote the intervention of Great Britain and USA in the war were universal and moral: Toynbee became a strong interventionist, as Mackinder and Bowman did at the same time. During these years Toynbee developed the idea of building a federation between England and France against Nationalsocialism (Bosco 2016, 225 ff.).

### **3. New and old Fears: Globalization, Islam and the world society**

Contrary to Mackinder and Bowman, Toynbee discussed in even more critical and pessimistic terms the position and the role of the West after World War II. The main diversity of their viewpoints was not rooted so much in their political beliefs, but even more in their methodological approaches. Toynbee did not see the system of international political relations as a static “chess game”, where all actors – nations or continents – were theoretically on the same level, defending or attacking other political enemies – as in the geopolitical interpretation offered by Mackinder and Bowman. Toynbee’s strategy of explaining the global tensions was to consider the main separation between West and its colonies and therefore overcome the model of the national State. His basic approach was to define civilizations as the main political actors in order to explain the history of the relations between the Western world and its colonies and integrate the historical processes into the interpretation of the contemporary events. Therefore the conflicts and upheavals in the non-Western area had to be seen within their relation to the Western colonial and cultural domination.

In this perspective, two main points became the focus of his analysis after the Second World War: the bipolar division between capitalism and communism and the relation of the West to Islam. A bipolar world was an unstable scenario that nourished Toynbee’s fears about the end of the Western civilisation. The ideological division between communism and capitalism would lead either to a nuclear war, or to the cooperation among the great powers – the second possibility was considered remote, because of the strong confrontation between two opposite models of politics and society represented by the USA and Russia (Toynbee 1947a).

Even more worrying than the nuclear tension was the relation of the West with Islam: Islam had been exploited materially and morally by the West. The economic globalization, the advancement of technology, that had been embraced by the Islamic world, did not affect the Islamic culture and religion (Di Fiore 2010). On the contrary, the West had produced a “spiritual void” and “Islam had taken advantage of the opportunity thrown open by the Western pioneers of material civilization” (Toynbee 1949: 207). Moreover, the relation among civilizations and, in every civilization, between the classes, was characterised by an increasing disparity and injustice. Islam

was recruited in the “ubiquitous proletariat which is one of the most portentous by-products of the Westernization of the world” (ivi: 201). The internal increasing gap between the masses and the elites, the polarization of the world, as well as the worldly disparity between rich and poor countries could lead to a crisis and probably the end of the Western world. Remarkably, who was really responsible for the catastrophe was not Islam, but rather the West, whose disinterest in the creation of a spiritual and a cultural community and whose promotion of economic and material development had increased social injustice inside the nations and between civilizations (Toynbee 1947b). The only possible task for Toynbee was to recover the old moral and political values of the Western society and promote the encounter between civilizations.

Toynbee’s explanation of the political global crisis and of the possible remedies remained therefore quite different from the geopolitical models elaborated by the other two Anglo-Saxon analysts of the International Relations Mackinder and Bowman, even if they shared a common political belief in the superiority of Western values and democracy. The dichotomy between a strategical, geopolitical and “static” view of the relations between States and continents, centered on the nexus between Anglo-Saxon and European continental – or Asiatic relations-, elaborated by the “geopoliticians”, began already just after the Second World War to be juxtaposed to a more global and historical explanation of the human political history, in which civilizations, religions and cultures played a pivotal role. Is it possible that this dichotomy was kept alive in the following theories of International Politics? If we consider the extensive literature on the containment in cold war, on the one side, and on the civilisation theory, on the other side - beginning with the geopolitician Spykman and ending with the theory of civilizations by Samuel H. Huntington- it is possible to find in Mackinder, Bowman and Toynbee the first signals of a fundamental split into the way of interpreting the relations between the West and the “Other”, seen as the major threat for the Western culture and power.

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