



European Natural Knowledge and “Faustian” Identity: Continental Conservative Views

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Abstract. The article offers an analysis of the conservative views on nature proposed by the thinkers of continental Europe in the 20th - early 21st centuries, and the connection between the understanding of nature and the complex worldviews of modernity, as well as Christian and pre-Christian European traditions. Particular attention is paid to the thoughts of O. Spengler, M. Eliade, E. Jünger and A. de Benoist. The author also relies on a number of studies on the conservative thought of the 20th century, primarily on the works of A. Mohler, S.V. Artamoshin and A.M. Rutkevich. The novelty of this study is justified by the fact that most of the works devoted to conservative thinkers analyzed in the article are focused mainly on the political aspect of their theories, while their views on the natural world and its understanding in the context of the identity problem are not given due attention. The author proceeds from the specific ecological subject-object consciousness of modern man and its analysis from a conservative point of view to an alternative attitude to nature shared by a number of conservative thinkers, which can be characterized by the idea of the organic inclusion of the human and social order in the natural order. He also points out its divergence from the traditional Christian approach. After that, the article focuses on the ideas by O. Spengler and his like-minded about the immanent connection between Western natural knowledge and the “Faustian” European identity. Our research follows the methods of discursive analysis, history of philosophy, philosophy of history, comparative, socio-philosophical and culture studies.

Keywords: Anthropology · European identity · Conservatism · Nature · Tradition · Ecology

1 Introduction

Reflecting on the problem of identity, we understand, of course, that identity necessarily presupposes identification and, of course, self-identification. The deeper our “Us” [1] allows us to dive into it, the more fundamental grounds we can potentially find for “Me”.

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Ultimately, the fundamental component of our identity turns out to be anthropological. However, although we assume the unity of nature in all representatives of the human species, it would be misleading to talk about identity as if anthropology were also unique.

Any anthropology is a structure of specifically asked questions and answers given in its own way about the key dispositions of human existence (that are “man-others”, “man-history”, “man-spirit”, “man-body”, “man-death”, etc.) [2]. One of the most important among these dispositions is the disposition “man-world” or “man-nature”, which, in turn, involves introducing the question “Who am I?” into the semantic field of the question “What is nature for me?”.

Whatever our own ideological orientations are, we must admit that the greatest focus on the deep natural (or even metaphysical) foundations of our identity characterizes the conservative intellectual trends. As a rule, they see the breaking with our foundations not as the beginning of a proper human triumph and long-awaited freedom, but, on the contrary, as a loss of ourselves. Therefore, the consideration of how conservative thinkers see the nature and our connection with it could help us look at the problem of identity also from this, at first glance, perhaps not a very typical angle. However, this “atypicality” does not imply the absence of an essential connection, and, as G.-K. Kaltenbrunner writes, “conservative theory is blind without political ecology, without the concept of a holistic system of “environment”, without a long-term ecological ethics that goes beyond relationships between people”. He calls it “the cosmic perspective” of conservatism. He also believes this cosmic perspective to fundamentally differ from liberalism and socialism, “which, regardless of the emphasis on individualism or collectivism, have an anthropocentric orientation” [3].

Assuming the impossibility of covering everything that has been said on this issue in a single study, we will limit ourselves chronologically - turning our gaze only to “modernity”, conditionally understood as the 20th and early 21st centuries, as well as culturally - focusing on a number of iconic thinkers of continental Europe, primarily Germany and France (this theoretical circle has already been outlined by us elsewhere [4]).

2 Going Through Ecology to Anthropology

By the last third of the XX century the planetary international community recognized ecological situation as problematic. We will not list here the threats and risks that, at the current level of technological development, the reckless treatment of the environment brings - they are well known to everyone. Our understanding of the environmental problem contains two temporal vectors (let’s call them “con-temporal” and “pre-temporal”), which are revealed in a greedy focus on the present along with indifference or unreasonable, naive optimism about the future. In this historical short-sightedness, conservative thought distinguishes another perspective: “post-temporal”. It’s the discrediting of the past or its oblivion, or, as J. Ortega y Gasset states, “[the] grave dissociation of past and present” when “any remains of the traditional spirit have evaporated” and “models, norms, standards are no use to us” [5].

Any sober appeal of the logos to the oikos in contemporary circumstances can see ecological situation as problematic not only from a technical or economic, but, above

all, from an ideological point of view. Nature has been turned into a source of capital, and although the very possibility of such a metamorphosis is due to a specific level of development of scientific, technical and production potential, nature as a source of capital is a way of thinking. For today's dominant economic thinking, as A. de Benoist notes, "natural resources and nature itself do not have any intrinsic value. Their value is determined only by how they can be used" [6]. Whether we endow nature with an intrinsic value or deny it is a question of our axiomatics and at the same time a question *to* our axiomatics: to what extent could and should it claim to be universal? Ecology, therefore, "implies a certain ethical and [even] metaphysical choice," as A. Kaye puts it [7].

When concerned about environmental risks, our consciousness is looking for solutions that could reconcile two differently directed tasks: the preservation of the natural habitat and the prevention of resource exhaustibility, on the one hand, and further economic development, on the other. One of the proposed strategies is, as we know, the strategy of "sustainable development". However, its "strong" version, which assumes "self-sustaining development" while preserving the ecosystem, seems to many authors difficult to implement and almost utopian, and its "weak" version, which puts the task of growth "in line" with the dynamics of the reduction of natural resources, is inefficient, since it is not about avoiding the exhaustion of resources that are vital for our civilization, but about only postponing the moment when they are exhausted or when their extraction will, for example, require such energy costs that exceeds the amount of energy received as a result. Prohibitions related to "dirty" production are ineffective (at least on a global scale, when countries for which the main problem is, say, hunger or jobs are paying for the clean ecology of the most developed countries), and various forms of sanctions (fines, taxes) only contribute to the actual conversion of "pollution" into "costs" instead of reducing it [8], but "natural heritage and financial capital cannot completely replace each other" [9].

However, we should note that for our research the ecological situation is not the main subject. It is a symptom, a sign, evidence of a certain attitude towards nature, and, consequently, its understanding. With such discretion, the idea of the exhaustibility of resources with the "inexhaustibility" of the human intellect [10] which should in some future provide us with the technical capabilities to solve environmental problems, due to its pre-temporal optimism turns out to be an idea valid only within a specific anthropological model. "The notion of permanent economic growth, which seems quite natural today, is in fact a modern idea," de Benoist writes. "For most of history, it was unknown to human societies that were concerned only with their own survival, for which they were reproducing their social structures, while slightly improving their living conditions. Today it has become a universal dogma" [11]. The decision *not* in favor of nature and *not* in favor of the future comes from the self-confident hubris of man, who is convinced of his central position in the universe, or in the passive nihilism of "the last man", for whom nothing makes sense and "after whom, the flood." This hubris is already embedded in the very principle of the capitalist economy, "since it is based on the rejection of any limit" (unlimited growth for the sake of satisfying unlimited needs) [12].

3 Organic Inclusion or “Saving from the Monotony of Nature”

In the context of various models of historical thinking, the idea of infinite growth is a linear one. And conservative thought opposed this linearity, which the “progressists” relied on, long before the general recognition of the environmental problem. Limiting ourselves to the 20th century, let us turn to the representatives of the so-called “conservative revolution” in Germany of the interwar period. A. Mohler, to whom we are largely indebted for the introduction of the very concept of “conservative revolution” in relation to thinkers and politicians of this time, sees the foundations of the worldview conflict of interbellum in the confrontation between “line” and “sphere” (Kugel) [13]. And, although, for example, in the context of Spengler’s ideas, the “line” of the progressives turns out to be the embodiment of infinite space as a prime-symbol of the Faustian soul, when we look from a greater distance, we see it as inscribed in the “circle” of the cultural and civilizational process. Thus, even when discussing the Faustian culture, to which he reckoned himself and which hardly correlates with the symbol of the “sphere”, Spengler himself, as a representative of the conservative German thought of that time, remains loyal to cyclic, or, according to Mohler, “spherical” logic.

It should be mentioned that the difference between these two forms of historical thought is closely related to the different understanding of nature, as well as the nature of society and the connections that exist between them. In the worldview of the representatives of the conservative revolution the natural is not an external object. For them nature, as a rule, seems to be a natural basis for the social, just as, for example, Cicero derived natural law from natural justice.

Before its mechanistic autumn, any culture, according to Spengler, is organic, sensitive to the landscape, and its soul is receptive to the “cosmic beat” (“physiognomic tact”) [14] in accordance with its prime-symbol. But the mechanical old age of culture is also not free from its natural foundations, because it is they, that give any civilization its own unique shape and image, made of everything that previously lived, acted, and created. Many other iconic categories of the conservative revolution also carry a direct connotation with the natural (or cosmic) order of things. This is true for “blood”, understood both in the ethno-social and in the spiritual-metaphysical sense. The idea of “soil”, which was no less discredited by subsequent historical events and, above all, by its catastrophic inclusion in the ideological framework of the Third Reich, is also most obviously nature-centric, though in a very specific way. Defining the people as a new historical - and revolutionary - subject, and distinguishing it from the nation, which turns out to be only its first, outer layer, represented primarily by the “propertied and educated bourgeoisie”, and is an idea and a value that “felt very comfortable in the world of industrial society” [15], H. Freyer writes that “under the nation there is another layer [...] the people in the highest sense of the word” [16]. In this layer one can find “the original forces of history; establishing of the Absolute; spirits very close to nature, as incomprehensibly creative as nature itself; great immediate existence that affects history but does not flow into it” [17]. The state that H. von Hofmannsthal, W. Rathenau, H. Freyer and their associates dream of is also organic and it should become “the embodiment of the will of the Gemeinschaft” (community-state) [18]. Irrational and at the same time natural are the “compulsory blood arguments” of the early E. Jünger. Their connection with a person’s character which is above morality is organic and is a “condition

of education, not its result". And at the same time, this is not a simple biologicality - behind "blood arguments" is the "divine injustice of fate" [19]. Nature "breathes real life" even "into the work of machines" [20]. Jünger is convinced that "only by restoring a kin connection with the Earth, can we feel the involvement in everything that it carries on" [21]. Shared nature, according to A. Moeller van den Bruck, unites both the "right" and the "left" into one people [22]. The idea of "harmonious fusion of man and nature" was also inherited from German romanticism by Völkische [23].

At the same time, of course, we should not bypass significant exceptions. C. Schmitt criticizes the understanding of the unity of the people as organic, for it misses the decisionist nature of power, and its political metaphysics is built in the manner of a machine that works by its own, thus, the concept of God (in the traditional Catholic sense) becomes incomprehensible for such metaphysics [24].

Representatives of the conservative revolution sometimes make an alliance with the bearers of traditional Christian identity. However, this alliance is soldered, as a rule, not so much by the commonality of their anthropology as by their common enemy, the "adherents of progress". A. Mohler notes that this rapprochement is temporary, since Christianity in this conflict belongs to the camp of the "line"; moreover, it is from Christianity that progressists inherited their "linearity". Progressists (dem Fortschrittsverfechter) became opponents of Christianity, from which they eventually descend, notes Mohler [25]. It could be objected that in Christianity the liturgical time, which is genuine or, using the category of M. Eliade, archetypal time, is cyclical [26] as well as any time of a person belonging to the "homo religious" type. But this cyclicity is included in the linear time between Creation and the Last Judgment, and "The Christian liturgy unfolds in *a historical time sanctified by the incarnation of the Son of God*" [27]. According to R. Guardini, Christ, coming "from above", saves from "the monotony of nature" (my emphasis), and from myths in which the individual has no place [28]. On the other hand, an individual seeking to find his place can imagine this place both theologically (as, for example, the place near the throne of the Lord), and in a purely secular way. At the same time Guardini, being a Catholic theologian, admits that modern domination over the world through knowledge and technology was made possible thanks to the atoning sacrifice of Christ, who delivered man from the curse of nature [29].

The striving for profit, which today has become a "universal law", is based, according to de Benoist, on the "axiomatization of self-interest" and the ideology of progress [30]. The triumph of such thinking becomes possible after the radical disenchantment of the world in the era of modern times which signifies a break with the tradition that correlates man with the sacred; but even earlier, during the Christian period, nature and the world were deprived of their own, inner sacredness, inherent in them before the establishment of Christianity. The concept of "Nature", which we are accustomed to, according to Eliade, arises as "the product of a progressive secularization of the cosmos as the work of God" [31]. If we look into an even more distant past, it is there where, instead of the modern hubris of limitless growth for the sake of growth, we could learn the prudence of phronesis, based on the principle of harmony between man and nature [32].

The pre-Christian component of medieval culture, of course, resists the deprivation of nature of its own sacredness by turning it into an object created by the transcendent Absolute, but this component, of course, primarily relates to the everyday worldview

(moreover, mainly of a rural inhabitant), and to the culture of carnival rather than to church dogma, the core of the Christian faith.

4 “The Force Which Moves the Mass” or the Faustian Picture of Nature

According to the logic of Spengler, the pre-Christian element is different in the East and in the West. In Western culture it is actually the Faustian, Germanic principle, that leads to the transformation of Christianity, which was originally (and remained so in the East) a product of a magical, and not a Faustian soul.

The ideal of infinite economic growth is “ethnocentric” [33], as de Benois notes, and this idea is in good agreement with Spengler’s idea that in Western culture behind the “laws of nature” that science “discovers”, there is primarily Faustian “will to command over Nature” [34]. These laws of nature “are forms of the known in which an aggregate of individual cases are brought together as a unit of higher degree” [16], but what brings these cases together and according to what? It is will, according to its own principle. In fact, Spengler reproduces here the Nietzschean idea about the “will to truth”, the truth, which since the time of Socrates has been the highest and self-sufficient value for any “real” philosopher or scientist, but behind which, as Zarathustra spoke, there is actually the will to power [35].

Will as the main principle of the existence of Faustian man, awakened to life and growth by the challenge of infinite space, produces a special methodology of natural knowledge, which is specific, according to Spengler, precisely for Western science. “The Greek,” writes Spengler, “asked, what is the essence of visible being? We ask, what possibility is there of mastering the invisible motive-forces of becoming? For them, contented absorption in the visible; for us, masterful questioning of Nature and methodical experiment” [36]. Instead of “content” - “interrogation”, but, as it becomes clear later, the Faustian man, whose practical imperative is action, doesn’t stop with interrogation: “by our analysis and synthesis, Nature is not merely asked or persuaded but forced” [37].

Since nature for a particular culture through the efforts of scientists (no matter how proud they are of the “objectivity” of their achievements) is not as much revealed in the light of a certain universal truth, as seen and read through the prism of a certain cultural optics and symbolic means of a certain language (“Nature is a function of the particular Culture” [38]), its knowledge, according to Spengler, becomes for us at the same time a form of self-knowledge [39]. By studying our knowledge of nature, we better understand ourselves. There is no gap between natural science and other spheres of life. Ethics and politics born together with a specific feeling of nature from a common source (which is the prime-symbol) are in close connection with this feeling. That allows Spengler to speak, for example, about the “Socialism of the atom” inherent in the Faustian world-picture, in contrast to the “Stoicism of the atom” in ancient science [40]. The main categories of physics are organically woven into the language that describes, for instance, “political fields of force, with cabinets and great diplomats as effective centres of purposeful direction and comprehensive vision” [41].

In contrast to the bodily, plastic Apollonian picture of nature, the Faustian natural science gives preference to the invisible, striving for ever greater abstraction. Its central principle is revealed through the category of “force”. “Force is the mechanical Nature-picture of western man; what Will is to his soul-picture and infinite Godhead in his world-picture” [42], emphasizes Spengler. Historically the understanding of God is changing, its personal component (that enables the connection with the concrete human being) is becoming thinner, and the abstractness of its power, the omnipotence of the Absolute increases. That change influences both personal life-feeling and natural knowledge. “This God-feeling it was that formed the scientific world-image of the West, its “Nature,” its “experience” and therefore its theories and its methods, in direct contradiction to those of the Classical. The force which moves the mass – [...] that is what Galileo and Newton captured in formulae and concepts” [43].

“The force which moves the mass” – what an apt physical allegory for the political reality of the 20th century!

Mass comes to the forefront of history, according to J. Ortega y Gasset [44]. The origins of this process can be sought in the “horizontal” logic of bourgeois revolutions, or even earlier, in Christian egalitarianism. At the same time, no matter where we see its prerequisites, the fact remains a fact, and the mass remains the mass. And it must be reckoned with. You can flirt with the mass, pleasing and fawning contradicts the picture of the soul of a Faustian man. Although indulgence to the passions of the masses can bring significant practical results in the acquisition of real power, doubt and thoughtfulness may not be alien to force. Care, which is the cornerstone of Spengler’s understanding of socialism, can hardly be realized without thoughtfulness. Criticizing Hitler’s National Socialism in 1927, E. Jünger notes that despite the fact that “old soldiers will not sit in their corners when the hour strikes [...] the language of violence makes sense only at the moment of decision [...] during a respite it is important to think about the victory of what values the decision should lead us to” [45]. For National Socialism, the masses are extremely important, while for those who truly live for the interests of the nation, “numbers do not matter, and a phenomenon of Spengler’s level [...] weighs more than a hundred seats in parliament” [46].

Awareness and experience of the meaning of one’s tradition, its fate, a special time of fate, etc. are impossible in the objective way that we call “scientific” because all of these things are not measurable, but only allow evaluation [47]. Hence the high significance was recognized by many representatives of the conservative revolution for “poetic forms” [48]. But it is also nature that is revealed not to calculus, but to poetry. Spengler quotes Goethe, a poet, he says, not a calculator: “Nature has no system. It has Life, it is Life and succession from an unknown centre to an unknowable bourne” [49]. And then he adds that “for one who does not live it but knows it, Nature has a system. But it is only a system and nothing more” [16].

5 Conclusion

Poetry is alien to the prudence of purely economic thinking, but accounting, based on computability, and systemicity are not alien to it. But this systemicity may have the most dramatic consequences for nature and our existence in it, since system-centric

thinking is often unable to resist the temptation to think of a system in a closed way and, in spite of all its internal dynamics, statically, that is, mechanistically. “Since Newton, the assumption of constant mass the counterpart of constant force has had uncontested validity”, Spengler notes [50]. According to Georgescu-Roegen, to whom de Benoist refers, “the whole of classical liberal economics is inspired by the model of Newtonian mechanics, which is ignorant of thermodynamics and the law of entropy” [51]. What does this mean for environmental practice? The illusory basis for growth by the supposedly unlimited consumption of resources and energy, as well as the unconscious conviction that the damage to nature is reversible. According to de Benoist, the only promising pre-temporal vector should not be built around further development, or even a simple preservation of the current status quo, but around contraction, because in the planetary perspective the economic process in its present form is inherently entropic, that is, it implies such use of energy that ultimately leads not to its reproduction, but to its dissipation.

But should we look for the causes of our tragic ecological frivolity only in our myopia that does not want to know about entropy? Does not, on the other hand, the very idea of the entropy serve our preoccupation with the treasures of today at the expense of future existence?

Our speculative models, according to Spengler, tend to theoretically affirm the reversibility of all physical processes, but “in actuality processes of Nature in their entirety are irreversible” [52]. The idea of entropy as the end of nature is similar to the final end in the historical worldview of Western man, and “side by side with the inorganic necessity of Causality” it appears “the organic necessity of Destiny” [53].

According to Spengler, entropy rediscovers to us the experience of fate, purpose, and, we add, therefore, the finality of history (no matter how boundless the horizon of the Faustian picture of the world is) and so returns us to “the old great symbol of Faustian man’s historical passion”, the first of which he calls “Care”, “the outlook into the farthest far of past and *future*” (emphasis mine) and “the foreseeing state” [54]. However, is it not in this sense of irreversibility and inevitability of fate, from which almost all the gilding of greatness was torn off in the second half of the 20th century, is it not in the unconscious experience of the inevitability of Ragnarök and the tragedy of a cosmic scale born of it, bordering on a sense of tragic doom, that at the same time lurks another basis of our ecological carelessness, overcoming all the arguments of reason, clouding the possible clarity of phronesis? Isn’t it the optimism of the last hour, born of repressed fear of a pessimistic lot? *Carpe diem*, for “winter is coming”?

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