Franz Borkenau on the Mechanical Weltbild

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at thoroughly analyzing Borkenau’s 1934 book Der Übergang vom feudalen zum bürgerlichen Weltbild (The Transition from the Feudal to the Bourgeois World Image), which not only is a hidden classic, but it is also particularly relevant in the contemporary effort to re-think technology. Specifically, the paper focuses on Borkenau’s use of the term Weltbild with regard to its relation with modern science, mechanism, and technology, showing that Borkenau’s idea of Weltbild represents a crucial ring in the chain between Dilthey and Weber on the one hand, and Heidegger and Foucault on the other.

Introduction

The term Weltbild (world image or world picture) is contained in the title of Borkenau’s 1934 book Der Übergang vom feudalen zum bürgerlichen Weltbild (The Transition from the Feudal to the Bourgeois World Image). However, this title also contains the adjectives “feudal” and “bourgeois”, setting up a contrast between two world images. These terms belong to completely different theoretical universes. What led Borkenau to opt for such a strange way of proceeding, due to which one of the most innovative works of historically oriented social theory is still all but ignored?

Borkenau’s life is just as fascinating as his ideas. Born into a well-to-do Viennese family, with an uncle being head of the political police in Austria both before and after WWI, Borkenau became a militant Communist after the War,

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1 I’ll use the 1976 German and 1984 Italian editions; the latter contains an excellent Introduction by Giacomo Marramao.

2 For details, see Szakolczai, 2000a, pp. 26–32.
leading the youth wing of the German Communist Party. However, his disillusion was just as quick as his engagement, and by the late 1920s his political and intellectual disengagement with Communism, even Marxism, was completed. Through his old Austrian Marxist contacts he got then a position in the newly founded Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, becoming one of its first assistants. However, the director nominated, Carl Grünberg, died very shortly, and Borkenau found no favour with Max Horkheimer, who quickly discovered that Borkenau’s Marxist credentials became shaky.

Time and place also played their role. In January 1933 Hitler rose to power and most members of the Institute went in exile, first to Paris, where the book was published in 1934, in German. Borkenau’s options were extremely limited: he had to publish the book through the Institute, which employed him to write it, while he knew that his ideas and person were not appreciated. He was forced to play a hide and seek. We must peel off any aspect of the text placed there either by external force, or by Borkenau’s attempt to comply with the expectations of his fellow exiles. Such an effort, however, is worth the trouble, as the book is not only a hidden classic, but has a particular importance in the contemporary effort to re-think technology.

1. Weltbild in Dilthey and Max Weber

In his use of the term Weltbild, Borkenau represents a crucial ring in the chain between Dilthey and Weber on the one hand, and Heidegger and Foucault on the other, in particular concerning its association with modern science, mechanism, and technology.³

³ Indicating only one issue, originally Borkenau did not intend to write about manufacture. It was Horkheimer who first insisted that he must refer to the «manufacture period» in the subtitle and first chapter of the book; and then made it sure that it would be reviewed by Henryk Grossman, a bona fide Marxist economic historian specialised in the period, who then focused his most negative critique on this – completely alien and irrelevant – aspect of the book.

⁴ Heidegger started to use the term Weltbild in his 1938 paper The Age of the World Picture, a main step towards The Question of Technology and its analysis of Ge-Stell (enframing) (both are in Heidegger, 1977). It was originally entitled The Establishing by Metaphysics of the Modern World Picture, and presented on 9 June 1938 at a conference in Freiburg in Breisgau on the theme of the establishing of the modern world picture (Naugle, 2002, p. 139).
1.1. Dilthey

_Weltbild_ as a philosophical concept is closely associated with the work of Dilthey. It is part of his typology of worldviews [Weltanschauungen], a central aspect of Dilthey’s thought, which exerted a considerable impact on the sociology and philosophy of the past century. It is also closely linked to another major part of his work, the attempt to go beyond Kant’s constructivist approach to experience [Erfahrung], by offering an analysis of the very structure of the lived experience [Erlebnis].

These terms are part of Dilthey’s effort to overcome the agenda-setting dualism between “object” and “subject”. He attempted to develop a philosophy that is at the same time *concrete* — dealing with life as lived by real human beings in the world (Dilthey, 1985, p. 25); but that nevertheless is concerned with *wholeness* — not fragmentary, disconnected individual experiences, but living the world as part of a harmonious whole. His great intuition, which he never managed to fully substantiate, was that this implies starting in the middle, instead of dividing and separating everything from the start into irreconcilable dualisms and dichotomies. *Erlebnis, Weltanschauung* and _Weltbild_, in particular, are aspects of those conceptual tools by which human beings try to make sense of their experiences, interpreting the events around them, giving and discovering meaning in their lives.

A central novelty in Dilthey, and the point where he goes beyond Kant, is the idea that the human mind (whether transcendental or not) does not simply “construct” a view by which to see the world, but rather takes for granted a concrete and yet all-encompassing “image” of the world that on the one hand is historically given, and on the other is a cognitive imposition as condition of possibility of any interpretation of our experiences. Our evaluations of the world and life [Lebenswürdigung] are already based on such cognitive structures (Makkreel, 1975, pp. 349–351).

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5 This part of Dilthey’s work was picked up by the anthropologist Victor Turner, who in some of his last writings argued that the term “liminality”, developed in social and cultural anthropology on the basis of a study of rites of passage, actually confirms Dilthey’s intuition; for details, see Szakolczai, 2009.

6 Note that this word implies directionality, as rooted in the word _werden_ (becoming).
The question concerns the nature of these cognitive orienting maps, in particular their sources. Dilthey was searching for this foundational level in two directions: psychology and aesthetics. However, both Dilthey and his interpreters became hopelessly entangled in the conceptual web spun around these terms since centuries. At times Dilthey gives the impression that such cognitive “world images” are themselves rooted in certain “life moods” [Lebensstimmungen], indicating a subjective or psychological perspective; while at other times he offers an aesthetic perspective (Makkreel, 1975, pp. 351–352).

The solution to this particular problem can only be given by realising that the two are one. The basic “life moods” for Dilthey are not individual, subjective emotional states, but fundamental predispositions or stands of which there are very few. The term Stimmung is particularly helpful here, as on the one hand it refers to the musical quality of being attuned to something, closely rhyming with Nietzsche’s philosophising with a forking tune; but on the other hand it implies a perfect fit, oneness, or harmony with the world. It implies the absence of any gap, schism, split, division at that fundamental level.

This point has two corollaries. First, this means that in a very real sense only two “alternatives” exist: either being attuned to the world (whether approached through Heidegger’s Gestimmtheit “attunement”, or Weber’s Objektivität), or being “split” from it, experiencing living in the world as having to accommodate oneself to an external, alien reality. These two basic predispositions are sometimes defined as “optimism” and “pessimism”, but such terms have a too subjective colouring. This generates confusion, as the two basic predispositions are not symmetrical. A split represents a certain kind of violent dismantling of a previous, harmonious unity; and a move back from a “split” existence to an intact mode of being is by no means as simple.

Second, this Stimmung is by necessity an aesthetic category, not in terms of subjective feelings one might experience when encountering a work of art, rather in the sense of the profoundly aesthetic character of the two basic modes of experiencing life. The first implies beauty, grace, and radiance, an ode to life; while the second despair, nausea, glorification of suffering, deformity and ugliness. “Psychology” and “aesthetics” are thus different aspects of the same

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7 On the etymology and semantics of Stimmung; see also Agamben, 2005.
8 See Nietzsche, The Twilight of Idols.
9 For a perfect representation of Weber’s meaning, see the megalithic tombs of the Neolithic.
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phenomena. The perspective from which their belongingness can be recognised is the philosophy of Plato, especially as exposed in the *Timaeus*.

1.2. Weber

Max Weber was the other main source of inspiration for Borkenau’s book. Weber’s significance concerning “world image” lies in radically shifting the relative weight of the terms *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung*. One aspect is purely negative: while Dilthey used *Weltbild* as part of a general typology of *Weltanschauungen*, Weber identifies the latter with ideology, and only uses analytically the former. The reason is in a passage of the *Science as a Vocation* lecture, where Weber argues that teachers should not use their position to «sell» their students «a Weltanschauung or a code of conduct» (Weber, 1948, p. 150). By that time the term gained a meaning different from Dilthey’s, propagated by Marxist movements.  

On the positive side, central for Weber’s use is a crucial passage in the *Einleitung*, one of his most cited passages. It indicates how Weber went beyond the dichotomy of idealism and materialism (and also how faithfully he followed Dilthey’s hint about trying to stay in the middle). It states that, even though the direct sources of the conduct of life (*Lebensführung*, also taken from Dilthey’s *Weltanschauunglehre*) are interests, not ideas, «images of the world» can function like «switchmen» that define the tracks alongside which actions can take place (Weber, 1948, p. 280).

Three points require further attention in this passage and its context. The first concerns the exact meaning Weber attributed to the term *Weltbild*. The term is used several times, always closely linked to its *rationalisation* and *systematisation* by intellectuals. While such an “image” is rooted in religious experiences, Weber shifts the focus to systematic elaboration. Second, the perspective from which Weber is interested in the concept is religious *revival*. Such a revival (which assumes a prior “split”, or a corrupted state) cannot be simply rooted in religious experiences, but requires the work of rational *systematisation*, thus the work of intellectuals. This is quite a striking and surpris-

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10 This position would be fully formulated by Georg Lukács in his famous *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1923. It should be added that even scholars closest to Weber did not follow him in this regard; one could refer to Jaspers’s important and very Weberian 1919 book *Psychology of the World Views*; or Mannheim’s 1923 essay *On the Interpretation of Weltanschauung*. 
ing point, as here Weber’s use fits uneasily with Dilthey’s terminology, showing affinities with the constructionism characteristic of neo-Kantian uses of Weltanschauung.

The third and central point is that the formation of such a Weltbild for Weber is connected to “taking a stand” [Stellungnahme] with respect to the world. This idea has serious problems. Such stand implies a negative attitude, taking for granted a “split” image of the world as a starting point, and Weber evidently does not even consider that another type of “stand” is possible.

2. World Image in Borkenau

Weltbild plays a central role in Borkenau’s work. Following the word and spirit of Dilthey, it refers to basic assumptions about the transitority and historicity of forms of thought (Borkenau, 1984, p. 4). The heart of Borkenau’s interest are changes at this level, as specified in an «intermediate reflection», just before the central chapter on Descartes, where he states that his book is concerned with «transformations of the forms of thought» (1984, p. 262).

Following a hint from Weber, Borkenau applied the term to an area that lay outside Dilthey’s scope: the (natural) sciences themselves. Borkenau is quite conscious about the novelty of his approach, stating that the history of science is a neglected field.

This represented a radical departure from Dilthey’s project, rectifying a major shortcoming, the neo-Kantian separation of the two sciences. Borkenau’s work, far from accepting the necessary primacy of the scientific method as developed in the “natural” sciences, rather argued that the mechanistic aspect of the modern scientific world image is itself outcome of a social process. Such an idea seems to have affinities with the Marxist position, where “bourgeois” science is explained by the rise of capitalism. While Borkenau pays a lip service to this perspective, his ideas are quite different.

Partly through the mediation of Weber, Borkenau combined Dilthey’s ideas about the formative role of history with elements from Nietzsche’s gene-

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11 This terminology is extremely close to Foucault’s; see his terms episteme, «historical a priori», and «positive unconscious».
12 Weber there tries to define in a conclusive manner the project underlining his Protestant Ethic, and argues that another, parallel project could be devoted to the «mechanisation of technology», «the creation and diffusion of the rationalist and antitraditionalist’ spirit», and the project of a «history of modern science» (Weber, 1978, pp. 1128–1129).
alogy. This resulted in an ingenuous combination of Dilthey and Nietzsche that underpin Borkenau’s work: the new Weltbild, or the cognitive axioms about the nature of the world, was based on a certain existential stand; and this was due to the character of the historical conditions out of this Weltbild emerged.

2.1. The Birth of the Mechanical World Image

At a first level the shift can be characterized as a contrast between the “optimism” of Aquinas and the “pessimism” of the 16–17th centuries. The change, however, was not a matter of individual psychology, rather due the collapse of the medieval world order. It was a social collapse, in the sense that a series of socio-political events, culminating in a state of permanent religious and civil wars, rendered the vision of the world still characterizing the Renaissance untenable. Yet, in contrast to Marxists or even Hegelians, Borkenau did not establish any positive social causality, and explicitly rejected the Enlightenment idea of progress (Borkenau, 1984, pp. 9–10). Socio-political developments were “causes” only in a negative sense: the medieval worldview, as formulated by Aquinas in his theory of natural law, became impossible. The articulation of the new world image required a work of thought. This could not be reduced to social factors, like the rise of the bourgeoisie. Following Dilthey, the solution for Borkenau emerged out of the middle, through efforts to reflect on contemporary, quite apocalyptic experiences. Even Borkenau’s only use of a social explanation has a Diltheyan ring: the emphasis on the gentry, defined as an «in-between» class, given that it consists of people whose social status was mostly due to their capital, and yet also had feudal privileges (Szakolczai, 2000a, pp. 146–147).

Following Nietzsche, Borkenau also tried to specify, as closely as possible, the conditions out of which this new Weltbild emerged. Living through the collapse of one’s own taken for granted world, when the previous order of things degenerates into a series of unending and increasingly violent warfare, marked by truly apocalyptic scenes, like the sack of Rome in 1527, or St Bar-

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13 Borkenau developed this aspect of his work together with his friend Norbert Elias; for details, see Szakolczai, 2000b.
14 About this, see also Koselleck, 1988.
15 See also the similar concept metaxy in Voegelin, 1978.
tholomew’s Night in 1572, culminating in the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), is certainly an anguishing experience. Contemporaries lived their life as an existential terror, resumed by Jean Delumeau as the «century of fear» (Delumeau, 1978). Under such conditions, a harmonious fit [Stimmung] with the world was out of question.

At the level of “problematisation”, the new way of experiencing the world was formulated through two basic assumptions. The first was anthropological, and posited a radical corruptness of human nature, crystallized in the position of Calvin, but shared by the Jesuits and the Jansenists. The second was about the very nature of the world, asserting that the world itself was corrupt, bad, or even outright evil (Borkenau, 1984, pp. 165, 182, 205, 251). Corruption is so omnipresent in the world (pp. 219–223), that it is outright an alien place (pp. 293–294). If the former position took up and deepened certain negative presumptions about fallenness contained in the works of Paul and Augustine, to be traced back to the Book of Genesis, the latter can be called outright Gnostic, in the sense of Eric Voegelin (1952).

Contemporaries were searching for an exit out of this intolerable situation, trying in this «earthly inferno» to give «meaning to a terrifying life» (Borkenau, 1984, p. 10). Borkenau starts by reviewing the positions suggested by his main sources, Dilthey and Max Weber. Dilthey’s work about the 16th and 17th centuries focused on the importance of neo-Stoicism. According to Dilthey, stoic morality, with its emphasis on reinforcing the self from the inside, rendering it stable and constant even in the face of overwhelming external adversity, played a major role in developing a new ethic of life. For Borkenau, however, this solution was restricted to the upper classes. 16

Concerning Calvin and the radical Reformation, Borkenau agrees with Max Weber that this made a major contribution to the development of a mass morality that enabled a larger number of people to live a meaningful life in a disturbing universe, and even connected it closely and positively to the rise of the ab-

16 The more recent work of Gerhard Oestreich (1978) on neostoicism emphasized the broader, socio-political effects of this way of living, partly through the development of “police”, “policing” and “policy”, both as concrete institutions and also as ways of thinking; and even more importantly through the impact the neostoics had on the organization of the modern army. Given the emphasis attributed by Michel Foucault (1979) to the military in the development of the rational “technologies of power”, and by Eugen Weber (1979) in his classic work of about the contribution of obligatory military service to the rise of modern democracy in France, the impact of neostoicism on aspects of the modern world might well be worth taking up again.
solutist state. Yet, this still remained too close to a negative experience of world collapse.

A convincing solution, which restored a degree of confidence in the world, was only found by Descartes.

2.2. Descartes

The chapter on Descartes constitutes the core of the book; a centrality visible by its sheer size. It contains a number of striking insights, anticipating ideas by Heidegger and Foucault, while still preserving its freshness and originality, and also the challenge it represents for a deeply-rooted self-understanding of modernity.

Borkenau’s central claim is that only Descartes managed to offer a proper solution to the anxieties of the age at the level of the “mood” [Stimmung] that underlies a world image. Here we again must take the word Stimmung seriously. This must express some kind of fit or oneness with the world at large. Otherwise, a moral or religious ideology that merely expresses the crisis cannot have a healing effect, and only reinforces, even fixates a schismatic perception. Philosophical schools and religious sects that merely express the tensions of a historical crisis cannot provide a world image that enable human beings to live with a degree of security and confidence. Modern science, up to our “knowledge society”, pretends to offer such a comfortable and secure vision; and, according to Borkenau, to a significant effect its foundations were laid down by Cartesian philosophy. This is why Descartes, even more than Kant, is the unremovable cornerstone of modern thought, whose fundamental contribution cannot be questioned without facing marginalization, even ridicule. Borkenau attempts to explain why this is the case.

The fundamental conviction underlying Descartes’s oeuvre is extremely simple, though the full implications of the position are not so easy to realize. It is that the solution to the profound existential and socio-political crisis can be given at the level of “mere” thought and knowledge. The radical novelty of the position can be illuminated first by contrasting it with Weber’s idea in Science as a Vocation that scholars should not impose on their students an overall vision of the world. This is exactly what Descartes did — in a way.¹⁷ Weber of

¹⁷ One way to put this is that for Descartes Weltbild and Weltanschauung exactly coincided. This implies the reduction of the “vision” of the world to a purely cognitive map.
course meant taking up a political position. Descartes’s vision is not ideologi-
cal, but purely scientific, though with theological implications. The singularity,
and also the problem, with Descartes’s position lies elsewhere: it concerns the
idea that solutions to the problems of the broader social and political world can
be provided by pure knowledge. In other words, knowledge saves.

Up to Descartes, men of knowledge had various possibilities in putting
their ideas into practice. Most of these were religious: to found a sect or mo-
nastic order of like-minded people. Philosophical schools in Antiquity were
small, closed, and strictly restricted to the aristocracy. Any thinker searching
for real effects needed patrons. The new idea of Descartes, and the reason for
its attractiveness, was that all this is not necessary: a single thinker can change
the order of the world by simply sitting down, placing a sheet of paper in front
of him, and discover the true nature of the eternal world.

The radical novelty of such a perspective is the combination between set-
ting aside and defining “pure” thinking as something completely separate from
life as experienced, on the one hand; and to make a claim for the external,
socio-political potency of such pure thinking/ knowledge on the other. Of
course, human beings “thought” even before Descartes. But this thinking was
not separated from participation in reality. The person who performed the
work of thought was either identical with the person who made the decision –
the artisan, the statesman, or the commander; was a councilor or affiliate to
these; or was somebody merely ruminating on general matters, without any
effective power. The moment in which a “thinker” pretended to “solve” prob-
lems, outside the entire fabric of interwoven institutional arrangements, he
became a sectarian heretic with minimal hopes for success, as even declaring
direct divine inspiration implied a delicate uphill battle (after all, even Jesus
was crucified). Descartes went beyond all this – and evidently succeeded: his
life was not taken away, and we still live in the mental universe “discovered” or
“created” by him. How did this happen?

Borkenau addresses this question at three levels: Descartes’s personality,
his life experiences, and the character of his thought. Concerning the first,
Descartes possessed an exceptional intellect, but he soon developed a similarly
exceptional pretence on this basis: anything that happens in his personal de-

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18 The ambivalence is inevitable here, as Descartes is halfway between Bacon, for whom knowledge
was power, and Kant, whose focus was on the power of thinking. Here again, Descartes’s position can
be characterized as an exact coincidence between knowledge and thinking.
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Development must have exemplary value (Borkenau, 1984, pp. 268–269). Such self-confidence gave him a great force, but also a terrible doubt, as he became intensely preoccupied with anything happening to his education: whether his studies promoted his movement forward, or only wasted his time. It was this conviction that gave him the force to break away from the entire corpus of scholastic knowledge; but – given that doubt became the driving force of his thinking – it turned his entire life into a permanent crisis, being continuously assailed by anxiety.

The word to characterize such an attitude toward one’s own intellectual capacities is hubris. This is a central term for Greek legal thinking as well as mythology, hubris being distinguishing feature of Prometheus, the titan, selected by the Sophists as their hero. The idea that knowledge saves, the intellect having a unique significance in human life, is also a basic conviction of various Gnostic movements and sects. Thus, even at the level of basic personality structure, Descartes had a fundamental affinity with the Sophists and the Gnostics.

Given his learning and intelligence, and also due to his deep religiosity, Descartes was aware that such hubris and excessive importance attributed to the intellect and in particular the pursuit of the method of doubting could compromise his salvation. It is here that the most important personal experience of his life provided reassurance, where – beyond the stove-heated room, where he coined cogito ergo sum – a crucial role was played by a series of dreams, which Descartes interpreted as giving divine approval to his “method” (Borkenau, 1984, pp. 282–5).

Descartes was thus ready to offer a solution, through knowledge, to the problems of his age; even to human life itself. This solution has so much become the taken for granted foundation of our life that its specificity is difficult to see; indeed, most people would consider that Descartes simply “discovered” something. Yet, the idea is highly specific, and extremely problematic. Its central core is the following. The “mind” and the “body”, or the human intellect and the external world are completely separate – a perspective that is simply a hypostasis of the most simple and unreflected part of human existence: here I am, writing this article, and outside me there are this computer, the furniture in the room and the park across the street, just being there, independently of my being and action. The second step is the idea that this external world, everything that is outside human life, not simply exists, but is governed by laws, which are similarly external to human or even organic life, and are furthermore
mechanical, thus follow identical, predictable regularities (Borkenau, 1984, pp. 355-64). Given that these laws are not affected by human action, they are also outside the scope of the existential and socio-political anxieties of the period in which he was living. The world is not chaos, rather a perfectly functioning mechanical whole. Only the human world is chaotic, whose order however can be assured and restored by imposing on it a conformity with the mechanisms governing nature. Human and social life can also return to normality and order if such natural order, with its mechanical regularities, is taken as the model of human existence. The implication of Cartesian pure science and pure rationality is an effective and in a way optimistic mass morality: one simply must take as model for life the mechanical laws of nature, which are equal for all. In this way Cartesian meditations replace the *Imitatio Christi* with the imitation of nature, prescribing a similar way for the social and human sciences, which they are indeed increasingly following. The proportionality of a harmonious and beautiful order of the cosmos, which we can only apprehend – as we do it all the time, for e.g. when we listen to the singing of a bird\(^{19}\) – by participating in it, is replaced by the mechanical and quantitative, equalitarian perspective of an external world that, due to the predictive regularity of its laws, is no longer alien. Science and knowledge, which discover the external regularities of the “natural world” indeed solved the problems and thus have a saving power. Q.e.d.

2.3. Assessing the Cartesian Solution

The Cartesian solution offered a way out of a schismatic world, restoring meaning to life, but at a tremendous price; no surprise that such an idea did not occur to anybody before the terrifying anxieties of the 16-17\(^{th}\) centuries. It simply severed the link between human beings and the surrounding world, ending our participation in the cosmos, thus rendering the experience of alienation, or living in an external, alien world, not simply a matter of individual or social pathology, but the natural condition of human existence. It also opened the way for an infinite growth of the will to knowledge. It must therefore be explained how such an idea could have been accepted at that moment; and why does it survive up to our own days.

\(^{19}\) On the philosophical significance of the position of Descartes concerning birds and their singing, in contrast to the views of Augustine, see Matthews, 1999.
Concerning the first question, the answer indeed is in the conditions; but we must be precise here. The explanation lies in the peculiar manner in which Descartes restored an “optimistic” Lebensstimmung. The medieval and Renaissance world picture was not optimistic in a “subjective” sense, rather simply exuded a confidence in the nature of the world, thus finally overcoming the “dark ages” that came after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Once this world image collapsed, human beings in Europe, each and every one of them – though especially those living in centres like cities or courts – needed some kind of personal reassurance about the meaning of life; some reason for continuing to go on living, and not just surviving. Descartes managed to provide exactly this. The terrible price of the Cartesian solution was accepted partly due to the world-rejecting component strongly entrenched in the Scriptures, and partly to the tempting egalitarian aspect of Cartesian rationality, which made it possible that, as first pointed out by Rousseau, some kind of “participation” was restored in this way, though not in the cosmos, but in politics. However this was nothing but a mere palliative, given that politics was reduced to the performance of mechanical duties, governed by the purely formal, mechanical regularities of the economy.

The problem with the codification of such an exterior position is not simply a negative break with participation, a resignation to giving up the idea of a cosmos, with its proportions and harmony, but – and here I move beyond Borkenau – of not just tolerating but positively affirming a non-participatory mode of existence, the position of the outsider. Here we need to bring in a concept from contemporary anthropology, the figure of the Trickster (Horvath, 2008), and admit that in so far as the Cartesian Weltbild of the universe is concerned, the “world” is indeed created by the Trickster (Hyde, 1998). Such raising of the outsider into a not simply tolerated but normative position also implies that the machinations of actual tricksters become impossible to recognize, directly preparing the conditions for the 20th and even 21st century, where trickster figures in politics become celebrated as charismatic leaders of their people.

This shift from the classical understanding of “natural law” as a beautiful cosmos to a universe of mechanical exterior regularities also implied unlimited trust in something that was quite unreliable: the sheer regularities of a dehumanized and despiritualised universe. And while for Descartes, just as for Newton, the discovery of purely mechanical regularities, to be formulated through mathematical expressions, were part and proof of a theological position, even-
tually leading Leibniz to return through them to a universe of proportion and harmony, even divine providence, its untenability was rendered evident by the Lisbon earthquake, and exploited by Voltaire to maximal purpose. The shaky foundations of subjective optimism were thus shifted, with Kant, whose philosophical position was drastically altered as a consequence of the Lisbon earthquake, into a “constructivist” position, further elevating the status of the abstract thinker. The ever progressing “democratisation” of such a position through Husserlian phenomenology, mass media and social constructivism ensured that in today’s internet world everybody can think that he or she is living in a world “constructed” by oneself.

Descartes’s position was perfectly compatible with the political philosophy of Hobbes, just as Kantianism has strong affinities with the political philosophy of Rousseau, who was indeed one of Kant’s preferred thinkers, and corresponded to the shift in European politics from absolutism to democracy. The deep problems underlying this position were recognized by Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), as Borkenau argued in the concluding chapter of his book.

2.4. Pascal

The fundamental difference can be recognized at the level of personal character. If Descartes’ project was driven by unlimited hubris, Pascal’s response to the crisis of his age (he was born into and brought up during the Thirty Years War) was humility. Hubris or humility are not just a matters of subjective preference, but have a fundamental affinity with the respective visions of the world. The central aspect of Cartesian hubris was already identified and dismissed by Shakespeare, in Hamlet, in fact, it is the heart of the dilemma of that play. Even if «time is out of joint» (Shakespeare, Hamlet, I.v.189), a single human being cannot and should not try to “set it right”; this is outside human possibility. The very idea destroyed Hamlet. Taking up a “stand” of trying to “resolve” the problems of the “world” is absurd, implies nihilism, as recognized by Nietzsche.20 This is because no matter how much the problems of an age seem overwhelming, the “world” as such does not change due to it; and if philosophers and mystics for centuries and millennia all around the globe asserted that

20 See for e.g. Gay Science, No. 346.
the world indeed was a cosmos, they must have had a reason for doing so. Pascali.

calan humbleness represents a return to this basic position.\(^{21}\)

In fact, the idea of a *return* is exactly the reason why Borkenau finished his book by a chapter on Pascal and the need for humility. As, while the book has no concluding chapter, it indeed does have a conclusion, explicitly evoking a crucial passage from Rainer Maria Rilke, the concluding phrase of his *Archaic Torso of Apollo*: «You must change your life»;\(^{22}\) or a call for conversion. Beyond a religious concern, as conversion is usually interpreted, and which is clearly not intended here, Borkenau alludes to a move between two fundamental attitudes, or basic stands with respect to the world: a mechanical vision of the world, based on experiences of anxiety and terror; and the recognition of the world as a beautiful *cosmos*. Conversion implies a tearing away of oneself from a dehumanized and spiritless universe, back to recognizing the beauty of the cosmos.

3. Conclusion

Modern science, since the discovery of the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, does not live inside the mechanical image of the world. Yet, this does not mean that Borkenau’s work has no direct relevance for the present. Apart from the lasting in-depth effects of this world image, it is still a dominant force in its most mechanized form in an area that since decades, together with genetic engineering, is at the forefront of scientific and especially technological progress: communication technology. This can be seen through a short glimpse into the recent, milestone book published by Roberto Calasso (2010).\(^{23}\)

Calasso’s work is an in-depth study of the oldest layers of the Vedanta, the *Brahmana of the hundred ways*. Yet, right at the start of its concluding chapter Calasso makes it clear that his purpose is contemporary, and from a particular diagnostic angle: the *Satapatha Brahmana* is a «powerful antidote to the actual mode of existence» (Calasso, 2010, p. 417). This is because it offers a «world

\(^{21}\) Not surprisingly, humbleness or humility is not a theme in Bourdieu’s *Pascalian Meditations*.

\(^{22}\) «Du mußt dein Leben ändern»; the exact words used by Borkenau are «das Leben zu verändern» (1976, p. 559).

\(^{23}\) For a recent attempt to trace technological thinking even further, into the Paleolithic, see Horvath, 2010.
image» [immagine del mondo] that represents the exact opposite of the modern image of the world, rendering this image visible. In the Brahmana, the religious pervades the smallest gestures, while the modern world image is secular, thus the «incompatibility between the two visions is total» (p. 419). The contrast is also visible in their attitude towards two basic modes of thinking, defined as «connective» and «substitutive». Traditionally, the «connective» always preceded the «substitutive». Thus, in the Brahmana, it is because things in the world are connected in so manifold ways, and because such connections are to be cultivated and preserved, that certain sacrifices must be performed. This can be called an «analogous» way of thinking. In the modern world, however, where formal acts of sacrifice became unthinkable, emphasis shifted to the «substitutive» mode of thinking, with connections being established on the principle of mutual substitutibility. This way of thinking – and here we jump right into the heart of the present – is termed digital.

The shift from “analog” to “digital” is most evident in our days in communication technology; but for Calasso this is only part of a long-term historical trend, connected to experimentation and quantification, based on the principles of repetition and substitution. This is usually interpreted as scientific or technological progress, the two perceived as almost identical. Yet, for Calasso there is some irony in the fact that while modern intellectual life considers the ritual killing of an animal barbarian, literally millions of animals are killed daily in slaughterhouses in the most mechanical and soulless manner. We might be more “developed” technologically, but we are by no means more “noble” – using another central Nietzschean word.

Understanding the connection that existed in the past between nobility and sacrifice24 would help us retrieving our links with our past which – and here, in the very last sentence of the book, the striking parallels with Borkenau’s project become suddenly radiant – could help us «to restart again» [partire di nuovo]» (Calasso, 2010, p. 451).

24 Calasso here suggests a move beyond Girard’s understanding of sacrifice (2010, pp. 434–435). The point should not be taken lightly, as Calasso published practically Girard’s entire oeuvre in Italian.
REFERENCES


