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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>

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To cite this article: Ville Suuronen (2023): Husserl's Universalist Cosmopolitanism, The European Legacy, DOI: [10.1080/10848770.2023.2226509](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2023.2226509)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2023.2226509>



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Published online: 22 Jun 2023.



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## Husserl's Universalist Cosmopolitanism

**Husserl and the Idea of Europe**, by Timo Miettinen, *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2020, 256 pp., \$99.95 (cloth), \$34.95 (paper), \$34.95 (ebook)

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Timo Miettinen's recent book aims to re-articulate Edmund Husserl's whole phenomenological project by reading him as a "universalist cosmopolitan" thinker (123). Drawing on Husserl's late works, especially his diagnosis concerning the crisis of Europe,<sup>1</sup> Miettinen offers new perspectives on Husserl's ideas on historicity, generativity, teleology, his concept of intersubjectivity, his peculiar reading of Greek philosophy, as well as his notion of the community of love. Beyond discussing Husserl, the book also offers a very rich and intellectually stimulating historical contextualization of his ideas on the crisis of Europe by comparing Husserl with Plato, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Spengler, Heidegger, Arendt, and Schmitt, among others.

As Miettinen emphasizes, at the heart of Husserl's theoretical venture to understand Europe is the attempt to "treat the history of European universalism as a lesson to be learned" and to understand Europe as a "question to be asked" (4–5). For Husserl this referred to the attempt to "rearticulate the ideals of rational humanity" (13) during the crisis that had come to define the European intellectual landscape after World War I. Miettinen also shows how Husserl's phenomenological reflections on Europe and their intellectual heritage aimed to confront this crisis by providing a "counter-discourse to the violent and unilateral history of European modernization" (15).

This reading of Husserl is timely not only because it emphasizes the need to be critical toward the history of what Husserl called the spectacle of Europeanization in the forms of imperialism and colonialism, but because at the same time it also aims to salvage an idealistic vision for another Europe. In this review I will focus on the way in which Miettinen's reading of Husserl offers a counternarrative to the fascist understandings of Europe and of politics more generally that developed in the 1920s and 1930s. In doing so, I take my cue from the Miettinen's comparisons of Husserl and Carl Schmitt, after which I will expand on these comparisons by looking at some of the central motifs of the book.

As Miettinen argues, there is a radical contrast between Schmitt's theory of the political that is based on an existential conflict between friends and enemies, and between Husserl's cosmopolitanism that aimed to overcome or at least relativize the divisions

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between different cultures, or in Husserl's terms, homeworlds and alienworlds (13, 123). As Miettinen notes, underlying Schmitt's definition of the political was the anthropological presupposition that human beings are dynamic and evil creatures, and the notion that enmity itself had a specific geographical and spatial grounding in the different *nomoi* of different peoples and cultures (138, 162).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the aim of Husserl's phenomenological account of Europe and of universal reason was to deconstruct all such essentialist presuppositions and cultural prejudices through the generative retelling and reframing of traditions. It is of course obvious that for Schmitt there was no such thing as universality in politics, and for him, the very notions of teleology and generativity would have been utterly anti-political: "Whoever says humanity, wants to cheat," as Schmitt famously stated.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, despite these differences, Miettinen also argues that in emphasizing the necessity of rearticulating the rational ideas of humanity in an era of unforeseen crisis, Husserl's work is also underpinned by a curious philosophical *decisionism*—a term that Schmitt popularized in the 1920s to describe his own Weimar-era legal theory. Indeed, both Husserl and Schmitt were confronted with the same paradox that Miettinen diagnoses, namely, the fact that although Europe was living through such a deep crisis, it nevertheless remained a dominant factor in terms of culture, power, politics, and the spirit. Husserl's answer to this seeming paradox was that it was not Europe itself as a geographical reality that was in crisis, but rather the *idea* of Europe, or more precisely, "the principle of universal reason that had defined Europe since antiquity" (179), as Miettinen puts it. Husserl always understood "Europe" as a spiritual and philosophical unity and his Europe also included the United States, the British dominions, and even Japan, while also excluding several non-European peoples (86–87). This forms a radical contrast with the way fascists, such as Carl Schmitt, would understand the meaning of Europe. For Schmitt, there was no such thing as a "spiritual Europe" in the universalistic sense meant by Husserl. For Schmitt, Europe was a distinct geo-spatial unity that had its own space and its own unique culture, its own *nomos*. Already in the 1920s he had tentatively started to envision a political world no longer dominated by nation-states but rather by a few large empires<sup>4</sup>—a vision that he would later reformulate into a more coherent theory of geographically and culturally distinct "large spaces" or *Grossräume*.<sup>5</sup> These large spaces or spheres of influence would gradually replace nation-states as the basic political units in global politics. By the late 1930s, with the German expansion on the continent, he concluded that German domination over other nations in Europe was inevitable. If there was a spiritual unity in Europe, it certainly did not reach the United States or other cultures that were on the other side of the Schmittian division between friends and enemies.

Unsurprisingly, Husserl and Schmitt also had radically opposed ideas of what the so-called European rationality or principle of reason consisted of. As Miettinen shows, for Husserl, the particularity of Europe consisted in the discovery of the principle of universal reason that first emerged in classical Greece. This "principle of cultural development that emerged through the birth of philosophy" (18) was apparent especially in the philosophy of Plato, whom Husserl describes as "the father of a genuine and rigorous science" (88). The Greeks developed a new attitude they called theoretical, from which emerged an entirely new realm of ideal truths, devoid of empirical content. This quest for ideal truths also brought with it a new form of intersubjective cooperation and communality that

made philosophy itself a practical task (84). By looking for an ideal form of community, the classical philosophers developed an entirely new critique of culture and of existing traditions, with the aim of sketching a universal culture and a universal reason. It is in this sense that Miettinen contrasts Husserl's "static" phenomenology with his later "genetic" approach that seeks to understand the origins and historical meaning-formation of ideas.

In the early twentieth century, Husserl's historical narrative, based on the principle of universal reason, was faced by an unforeseen crisis, most notably in the forms of fascism and Nazi irrationalism. It was this crisis that Husserl sought to confront through the process of *Rückfragen*, of questioning back and looking at the origins of this distinctively "European" attitude. For Husserl, this originally European rationality was something that could open itself up to the rest of the world with its universalistic potentialities. However, the development of this rationality, its teleology, was not to be understood in terms of the Kantian or Hegelian process-history premised on the ultimate triumph of reason, but rather through an open-ended process that would realize its own limits and infinity. As Miettinen emphasizes, history, for Husserl, was not a Kantian-Hegelian *Roman*, but rather a *Dichtung*, a poetic creation that new generations would have to redevelop over and over again (15).

Again, Husserl's historical understanding of Europe stands in radical contrast with the fascist understanding of European rationality. From Schmitt's perspective, the particularity of European political rationalism was something completely different. For Schmitt, this rationality consisted in the ability to limit warfare among European nations in a way that civilians would not be harmed.<sup>6</sup> According to Schmitt, this specifically European political rationality existed solely on European soil roughly from the Westphalian treaties of 1648 to the beginning of World War I in 1914.<sup>7</sup> This limited warfare was made possible by two things: (1) European colonialism that made it possible to push unlimited warfare into the colonized territories; and (2) the freedom of the seas where the laws of warfare did not apply.<sup>8</sup> The contrast between Schmitt's position and Husserl's narrative could indeed not be more radical. The fundamental question here is of course: What thing or entity deserves to be named "European rationality" or "Europe"? While for Husserl these terms signified the opening of a universalistic principle of rationality that would develop gradually through a process of generative and teleological development, for Schmitt European political rationality signified something entirely different, namely, a specific territorial order that made the differentiation between equal friends and enemies a concrete reality in Europe.

It has become a commonplace to criticize Husserl as a Eurocentric thinker, as Jacques Derrida, for example, does in several of his texts. Derrida accuses Husserl of so-called metaphysical racism because he separates the "homeworld" of Europe from those "alien-worlds" located outside of Europe. While also recognizing and emphasizing the problematic aspects of Husserl's Eurocentrism, Miettinen notes that Derrida's understanding of Husserl is perhaps nevertheless too hasty. Husserl's historical and phenomenological interpretations carry a specifically "non-Eurocentric undertone" that is derived from his peculiar utopian universalism (21). This cosmopolitan attitude or undertone indeed becomes clearer when Husserl is compared with fascists like Schmitt, for whom racism and concrete exclusion—both spatial-geographic as well as spiritual-cultural—were not a problem to be solved through generativity and teleology, but rather the very necessary

presuppositions that made European political rationalism a tangible, nomotic reality—a space of exclusion. As Schmitt emphasized, the European colonial violence was the necessary presupposition for the limited warfare on European soil: freedom in Europe was bought with the blood of the colonized. This is the concrete spatial grounding on which Schmitt’s theory of the political relies on, and this logic, this spatial grounding of “the political” in his theory of the nomos is fascist to the core. While Husserl’s crisis of Europe consisted of the crisis of the universalistic principle of reason, Schmitt’s crisis of Europe, on the other hand, consisted in the destruction of an essentially colonial and Eurocentric world order that brought unlimited warfare into the European continent itself with the beginning of World War I.

Although one could arguably find a decisionist motif in Husserl’s attempt at rearticulating the ideal political community after World War I, his proposed solution could have not been more different from the multipolar world divided into different spheres of influence, as envisioned by Schmitt and other German geopolitical theorists. Quite interestingly, like Schmitt, also Husserl would pose the critical question concerning the “gradual dismantling of the state organizations of power” in his Kaizo essays (162–63). As Miettinen points out, there is a tension between Husserl’s universalistic vision between a “universally encompassing community,” the *Allgemeinschaft*, and his earlier reflections on the state as the basic form of human sociability. For Miettinen, Husserl’s political utopianism comes to the light of day precisely here, in his vision of what he called the community of love.

Unlike Hegel, who saw the state as an absolute, Husserl could not accept such an idea. For him, philosophers were to operate as “functionaries” and “spiritual organs” of humanity, whose task was to remain highly critical of existing political institutions and organizations, while keeping in mind an ideal form of community (164–65). For Husserl, this ideal form was precisely the community of love. By uncovering a communal world, the *Allwelt*, as the basis of their reflections, philosophers could and should undertake a radically novel and cosmopolitan form of cultural critique, critical of all existing traditions (169).

As Miettinen argues, for Husserl “love is the name for the identity-in-difference that constitutes the compassionate unity of the ideal community” (176). This ideal community knows no absolute telos, such as the state. In his summarizing sketch of Husserl’s “radically renewed understanding of universalism” (172), Miettinen names three criteria or ideals that define this utopian ideal: (1) *formality*: the utopian attempt to define the basic characteristics of a universal culture; (2) *plurality*: the recognition of the manifoldness of different cultures and traditions; and (3) *the openness to self-critique*: the recognition of the infinite critical task of philosophy. Through these three ideals, Husserl’s thought finally appears in its full utopian (and philosophical) character as the task that can never be realized in an absolute sense but only in a relative sense.

For fascists like Schmitt, nothing could be more horrendous than such a vision of rational internationalism and cosmopolitanism. Without accepting Schmitt’s blunt critique that outrightly rejects all appeals to common humanity, and without simply adopting Husserl’s problematic reliance on the notion of love, one can perhaps seek to reformulate Husserl’s position with the help of Hannah Arendt. After publishing her famous report on Adolf Eichmann, in a public exchange of letters, Gershom Scholem attacked Arendt and claimed that her thinking was lacking in love for the Jewish people.<sup>9</sup> In her response, Arendt noted that love and politics do not have, and should not have,

anything to do with each other. Why? Because love implies the kind of immanence that cannot be realized among large groups of people, and because love lacks the necessary distance that political coexistence and objective political judgment necessitate.<sup>10</sup> In Husserl's vision, this problematic idea concerning the community of love is also mirrored in an idealized conception of philosophy itself, in the idea that philosophers should and could operate as the "functionaries" of humanity—the very position of philosophy that the Arendtian approach to European intellectual history always sought to criticize. In Arendt's political thought, which is also utopian in a different way, she relied on the concept of *solidarity*. Unlike love that creates a wordless space of immanence, solidarity operates on the condition of non-intrusion and with the logic of allying—in other words, it corresponds to Arendt's political metaphor of the "table" as the space that both separates and brings human beings together to act in concert.<sup>11</sup>

While some features of Husserl's political vision must thus be questioned (as Miettinen also emphasizes), the general defense of universalism retains its core in an era that is once again witnessing the rising tide of various forms of far-right politics and thought. The particular form of political universalism that Miettinen discovers in his timely reading of Husserl's works provides topical material for critical thought that not only challenges the presupposition concerning the apolitical nature of classical phenomenology but also provides a new and nuanced articulation of cosmopolitanism and universalism in an era in which both seem to have gone out of fashion.

## Notes

1. Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*.
2. Cf., Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 46–51; Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde*.
3. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 55.
4. Schmitt, *Die Kernfrage*, 54–55.
5. Schmitt, *Völkerrechtliche Grossraumordnung*.
6. Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde*, 89–96, 112–15, 156–58.
7. *Ibid.*, 162; cf., 156–57.
8. *Ibid.*, 162, 188–212.
9. Arendt and Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 429.
10. *Ibid.*, 439–40.
11. Cf., Arendt, *On Revolution*, 79; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

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