March 12-13, 2026

On the Resilience of Reason

Phenomenology, Pragmatism, and Neo-Kantianism in Times of Social Crisis

Conference organized by Albert Dikovich (University of Constance) & Sebastian Luft (University of Paderborn) in cooperation with the Dr. K. H. Eberle Research Center "European Cultures in a Multipolar World"

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Short Summary

The planned interdisciplinary conference will address skepticism regarding Enlightenment notions such as historical progress and rational social organization as well as concepts that emerged in response to the rise of fascism and the breakdown of the international order following World War I during the 1930s and 1940s. It will focus on phenomenologists, pragmatists, and Neo-Kantians, who are viewed as inheritors of the transatlantic Enlightenment project. These thinkers sought to make reason and trust in society's potential for progress resilient in the face of historical developments that contradicted previous expectations and threatened to undermine their ideals and values. The conference will explore historiographical perspectives on philosophers as agents within specific political contexts, as well as systematic reconstructions of normative arguments articulated during the intellectual struggles of the time. Ultimately, the conference aims to draw lessons for the historical challenges we face today.

Thematic Introduction

Today, the Western world is in a profound, multifaceted political and intellectual crisis. This crisis, as has been frequently noted, is not without precedent. In the 1930s, following a short

period of democratic expansion after World War I, the rise of authoritarianism appeared unstoppable. One newly founded European democracy after another succumbed to fascist and reactionary movements, including Germany, Austria, Spain, and Czechoslovakia. The international rule of law, established with the founding of the League of Nations in 1920, gave way to a world where might makes right, as Nazi Germany annexed neighboring Central European countries and ultimately initiated World War II by invading Poland. Even the emerging hegemon of the West, the United States, hesitating to intervene in the desctruction of the European order that was built under its leadership, faced challenges from numerous fascist and anti-democratic movements, such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Economic crisis was not the sole driving factor behind this development. Fascism thrived on a crisis of the Enlightenment concept of reason, characterized by a disengagement from its foundational ideals and institutions—most notably, liberal democracy. Globally, after devastation and the mass killings of World War I, European rationality was perceived as compromised, leading to questions about authority and its claim to universality. The notion that European civilization might be *mortal*, as Paul Valéry articulated in 1919, and that the future of world history would belong to others—such as the Russians, the Japanese, or Chinese—was widespread during the interwar period. Furthermore, the idea that the decline of European civilization, evidenced by the war's catastrophic outcomes, could be viewed positively took root in this era. This early wave of global detachment from European philosophy culminated in a conference entitled "Overcoming Modernity," held in Tokyo in the summer of 1942, marking not only the birth of the idea of intellectual decolonization but also the first modern attempt to create a world order independent of European ideas and power.

However, the inner-European abandonment of Enlightenment ideals, its standards of rationality, and its universalist aspirations was often more radical. As a regime of intellectual and epistemic discipline disintegrated, what had been excluded and suppressed in a culture shaped by Enlightenment, secularism, and bourgeois social thought forced its way into public life in the form of fascist mysticism, esotericism, cults of close community and ethnic rootedness, rampant conspiratorialism, and xenophobia. German intellectuals celebrated National Socialism as a rejection of a hegemonic, imposed foreign philosophy, often labeled "Western liberalism," "materialism," "cosmopolitanism," or "Cartesianism." Today, concepts developed by thinkers such as Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger are part of the inventory of anti-liberal thought worldwide.

For the Enlightenment, the purpose of a rational social order is to enable the autonomous development of the individual. This fundamental notion was the guideline for social and political thought. Political order, the state, and its laws are thus judged by their capacity to secure and expand the autonomy of their members, rather than defining the proper space and functions for each individual and reserving the right to use individuals for their own purposes. The common understanding of social affairs should be developed in shared spaces of institutionalized communication. However, after World War I, during which warring states claimed the right to sacrifice millions of citizens on the battlefields of Europe, there was no complete return to this rationale of politics. Political ideologies took on the task of providing orientation and meaning to individuals' lives, drawing from religion and, to a lesser extent, philosophy. Fascist regimes, in particular, celebrated the primacy of the collective and the state over the individual. The common epistemic ground shattered along the lines of ideological and political conflicts. Consequently, the old institutions meant to guarantee the exchange of perspectives and the communicative expansion of common knowledge were increasingly regarded as obsolete and

worthless, if not destroyed with malicious pleasure. The practice of public reasoning lost its social foothold.

Doubts and a sense of uncanniness regarding history were widespread among those who remained intellectually rooted in the Enlightenment. Could one's own image of humanity and progress have been fundamentally misguided? Among the attempts to respond to these doubts, Edmund Husserl's analysis of the current state of "European humankind" in his Vienna lecture of 1934 and the subsequent publication of his late major work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, stand out. According to Husserl, modern European sciences had deviated from their original *telos* of orienting towards a responsible, autonomous life, instead limiting themselves to the task of expanding human domination over nature. Consequently, they—and philosophy—lost their ability to provide answers to the human quest for a meaningful life, leading individuals to turn toward creeds and ideas that science and philosophy had previously deemed irrational.

For the late Husserl, reason is something that possesses a life of its own, one that is historical, and must confront a world hostile to what one holds as true and good. In the situation he encountered, reason must be reconnected to the essential needs of human beings and defended accordingly. Husserl's assertion of philosophical reason and the idea of a rationally guided life, however, remains largely theoretical. There were attempts to develop a practical self-assertiveness of reason that transcended the self-affirmative stance of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. Across Europe and the Atlantic, the question of how to secure reason its rightful place in social life became a major concern for philosophy that could no longer afford a merely contemplative attitude. In Spain, for example, Ortega y Gasset, a student of German N-Kantianism during his formative years and an important philosophical and sociological analyst of modern mass society, led an intellectual circle of parliamentarians called *Agrupación al Servicio de la República,* dedicated to defending the endangered Second Spanish Republic. The Austrian legal scholar and Neo-Kantian philosopher Hans Kelsen, after the rise of National Socialism, sought to convince the powerless liberal intelligentsia not to despair and to trust that history that would, eventually, correct the course of political development. In Prague, the last stronghold of liberal democracy in Central Europe, the organizers of the Eighth International Congress of Philosophy attempted to elevate the political confrontation between proponents democracy and of rising fascism to a philosophical level by staging a debate between representants of both camps—though the results were, to say the least, of questionable success. Later, as the democratic expansion of 1918/19 was firmly reversed and World War II was already raging, John Dewey advocated for maintaining *faith in democracy* and, as he had during World War I, the United States' entry into the conflict, adding robust military action as a means to preserve the chances of a reasonable ordering of the social and political world.

The planned conference is interested in attempts to make reason resilient in the context of the political upheaval and social crisis of the 1930s and early 1940s. It will focus on three different philosophical schools whose representatives adhered to the Enlightenment project despite strong philosophical countercurrents: (Husserlian) Phenomenology, Pragmatism, and Neo-Kantianism. Rather than recounting heroic stories of individual intellectuals who took upon themselves the task of preventing the "destruction of reason" (Georg Lukács), only to fail in most cases, the conference aims for a critical engagement with the shortcomings and illusions characteristic of many such efforts—whether it be a saviorism that gravely overestimated the influence of intellectuals in society, an elitist stance that distanced itself from democracy, or a misjudgment of the dangers ahead. Ultimately, the conference seeks to draw lessons and

conclusions for the challenges we face today: the populist overturning of liberal democracy and the rise of authoritarianism, the breakdown of a common epistemic framework as the basis for democratic public deliberation, the disillusionment with teleological notions of historical development, the descent into a chaotic and dangerous international order dominated by power politics and unhinged imperial ambitions, the disengagement from ideas and values rooted in the Enlightenment, and the discrediting of European or *Western* science and philosophy in light of the looming ecological and civilizational catastrophe of climate change. The scope will not only be transatlantic, reflecting the intensified exchange of philosophical ideas between Europe and America during the interwar years and the transatlantic nature of the Enlightenment itself, but will also include regions often neglected in the historiography of European philosophy, such as the Iberian Peninsula and Eastern Central Europe—central battlegrounds for the struggle over democracy and the rule-based European order during the interwar period. Of special interest are also non-Occidental perspectives on the crisis of Enlightenment reason, articulated by members of the Kyoto School, Russian conservative thinkers such as Ivan Ilyin, and Indian philosophers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi.

The conference will be divided into three thematic sections:

1) *How Could it Come to This?*

The conference seeks to answer the question: *How could it come to this?* Does philosophy share responsibility for the turn away from Enlightenment ideals, and does the crisis reveal flaws in the Enlightenment project itself? Is the crisis contingent, or is it a necessary result of profound, perhaps even essential shortcomings? If so, philosophy can only find a way out of the crisis by radically transforming itself. Is Europe, or the Occident more generally, capable of extricating itself from its crisis independently, or will contributions from the non-European outside be essential? Furthermore, can the analysis of the crisis of reason in the 1930s and 1940s be applied to our own times, particularly regarding phenomena such as climate change, transhumanism, and the resurgence of imperialism?

2) *Defending Reason*

This section will explore attempts to defend standards of public reason within existing or newly created academic and political institutional spaces against the rising tide of extremist ideologies. It will address the social function of philosophy in times of crisis, efforts to influence public opinion, engagement within political organizations, practices of dissent, and the problem of non-discursive, ultimately violent means to halt the destruction of institutionalized reason, including concepts of militant democracy (Karl Loewenstein) and justifications for the war effort against fascism.

3) Rational Hope

To regard such engagements as meaningful, a well-founded trust in a future alteration of the course of history—or at least a belief in the possibility of such change—was required. What narratives of reasonable hope underpinned such activism, and from which philosophical resources were they derived? Which narratives proved capable of guiding individuals through times of doubt, disorientation, and the closing off of future horizons, and which narratives were erroneous or even exacerbated the crisis? The struggle for rational hope can be seen as the struggle to maintain an essential aspect of the Enlightenment—not only as a doctrine but as a moral and existential posture toward the world: the trust that history will ultimately vindicate what may seem futile in the present.

Abstracts with a maximum length of 500 words may be sent to albert.dikovich@uni-konstanz.de until July 15, 2025.