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Aaron French. *Max Weber, Rudolf Steiner, and Modern Western Esotericism: A Transcultural Approach.* Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2025. *vii* + 200 pp. ISBN: 9781032566382. $204.40/£150,91.

In a comparative study of Rudolf Steiner and Max Weber — likely considered radical by proponents of old, well-established paradigms and historiographical categories — this volume challenges entrenched dichotomies, positioning esotericism and its advocates as counterparts to modernity. The volume convincingly demonstrates that the demarcation of Weber as rational and modern, in contrast to Steiner as irrational and antimodern, is not only flawed but also a significant obstacle to understanding the many facets of modernity. By situating Steiner and Weber in a comparative framework of the *zeitgeist* of German and European modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Aaron French shows that they both responded to the same historical impulses of modernity.

The goal of this approach is to rethink ideas of European and modern identities, to show that Steiner and Weber were not polarities, and to encourage scholars to take the influence of esotericism more seriously. By challenging such assumptions, the author aims to foster an understanding of what he calls a global modernity. The suggestion is that Steiner and Weber were developing an early form of global philosophy, which French particularly addresses through the context of transculturality and a focus on East-West exchanges (1–2, 7, 18–19). In a way, neither Steiner nor Weber takes centre stage in this volume; instead, the focus is on the *zeitgeist* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the fears, hopes, and dreams of the people who lived through them. Instead of upholding Steiner as an irrational mystic and Weber as a rational scholar, French asks the fundamental question: how did two seemingly different people share so many concerns?

The comparison of Steiner and Weber rests on a solid foundation that not only includes the *zeitgeist* but also a personal dimension. In the first chapter,

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"Some Surprising Historical Connections," these are shown to be perspectives concerning matriarchy and patriarchy, a life characterised by breakdowns and depression, and also a return from these "abyss experiences," renewed (36–37, 52). In the second chapter, "Light from the East," Steiner and Weber are placed in the broader context of European intellectuals who concluded that, since Western thought had produced a chaotic situation in Europe, the inclusion of Eastern thought seemed logical. Thus, while maintaining European uniqueness, Weber endorsed Confucian ideas, while Steiner integrated ideas of reincarnation (70). This part of the analysis is particularly fruitful for French's argument on a global philosophy, as he shows that Chinese thinkers like Gu Hongming (1857–1928) and Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) were part of the same discussions as Weber and Steiner. Such thinkers appealed to each other on a transnational level, the author argues, because their ideas were rooted in the same discussion of rationality, disenchantment, polytheism, and science.

However, as evidenced in Chapter Three, Steiner and Weber can also be compared based on their fear of "The Threat of Technology." Both sought the borders of technology and spirituality, and for both, instrumental rationality and materialism were a central part of what their contemporary, Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), described as contributors to the *Decline of the West*.[1] The final analytical chapter, "Max Weber in Ascona," adds another layer to the comparison, showing that through their environment and social circles, Steiner and Weber can also be compared. Crucially, it links Weber to spiritual milieus like the Eranos Kreis (1904–1908) in the first decade of the twentieth century and the social circles in Ascona, Monte Verità, which Weber visited in 1913–1914.

One of the few points of criticism of this volume concerns the implementation of the global concept. Given the work's explicit aim to explore a "global philosophy" or "a global way of thinking," there is surprisingly little clarification and reflection

1. See, for instance, David Engels, "Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West," in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 499–507.

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on the nature and utilisation of this concept. In some cases, the "global" seems located in the very ideas of Weber and Steiner — for example, that both sought solutions in the "East" to solve the problems in the "West." The global, in this case, is thus empirical in nature. At other times, the global dimension seemingly emerges through the methodological framework of comparison, as reflected in the transcultural approach stated in the subtitle of the volume.

While not made explicit, French can be said to follow a global historical framework in two ways. Firstly, the work conforms with a research trajectory grounded in global history, concerned with departing from Eurocentric scholarship focused on Western frameworks and actors.[2] In this spirit, French argues that "Weber and Steiner can be reinterpreted in light of the recent scholarship that seeks alternative (non-Western) rational approaches to modern problems" (3). Questions of Eurocentrism and Orientalism are, therefore, with good reason, brought up in the introduction. These matters are insightfully and thoroughly discussed in Chapter Two, but with a few exceptions, receive very little mention in the remaining chapters. While Steiner and Weber evidently sought "the Light of the East," they did so to solve the crisis they saw in European society, which aligns with the general thesis of the work: that a global philosophy was a part of European modernity.

Secondly, French follows a method of comparison discussed by several global historians, which concentrates on cultural and historical points of similarity *despite* obvious differences.[3] In many ways, French's analysis incorporates elements of Siep Stuurman's reflections on the concept of "common humanity," a specific way of thinking that transcends borders, concentrating on commonalities by

2. Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History? (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3–6.
3. Samuel Moyn, and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 17; Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), xv–ix; David Washbrook, "Problems in Global History," in *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century*, ed. Maxine Berg (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22.

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transcending cultural differences.[4] This is true both in the general comparison of Weber and Steiner, which French argues have been wrongly placed in two different cultural categories, and in the comparative framework in which he shows similarities between Chinese and European ideas.

One of the great merits of the work is that French does seem to locate a form of "global" philosophy and successfully treats this from the theoretical standpoint of global history. However, a clear and explicit demarcation of the empirical and theoretical dimensions of the "global" could have contributed to a theoretical discussion with great potential for the fields of global or transnational history. The work's underlying premise – that Steiner and Weber are (empirical) examples of a global philosophy embedded in European modernity – could have benefited from a discussion of the empirical and methodological approach in isolation, as well as how these two elements relate to each other.

The global dimensions remain one of the few points of criticism of the work, yet they are far outweighed by its merits. French's central contribution is showing how non-European knowledge, and crucially esotericism, had a significant impact on both Steiner and Weber, and generally what it meant to be modern. His work underlines that esotericism is a significant part of European history and modernity. A no less central contribution is the well-researched foundation of the work, including carefully researched archival material, which brings many new sources into the discussion. Arguably, one of the most significant observations of this work is that the concerns of Steiner and Weber remain as relevant today as they were in the early twentieth century. "Western civilisation," its crisis, and its possible collapse are still being debated, just as anxieties about technology are

4. Siep Stuurman, "Common Humanity and Cultural Difference on the Sedentary-Nomadic Frontier," in *Global Intellectual History,* ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 35–38.

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still central.[5] Moreover, the project of thinking of the East and West together, as Weber and Steiner did, or thinking of Steiner and Weber together, as French does, has roots in the field of global history as it has developed since the 1990s.[6]

The greatest merit of French's book is that he shows how two historical figures, rarely discussed within the same framework, shared many sentiments situated in the same historical context. The work contributes an explicit comparison of Steiner and Weber, of which just one previous study exists.[7] This not only shows that esoteric figures like Steiner can and should be compared with more mainstream figures like Weber, but also shows what happens when such an analysis is carried out: the established understanding of figures as inherently rational (Weber) or irrational (Steiner) is blurred, showcasing how these individuals were entangled. This not only concerns the *zeitgeist* of the period, in which machines and technology were seen as threats, but also concerns the personal experiences and places of men like Steiner and Weber as they looked to solve the problems they saw in Western society. While some undoubtedly would consider the comparison radical, fundamentally, comparison should make sense and yield new insight — and it does when it comes to Weber and Steiner. Hopefully, French's work will inspire much more "radical" comparison of this nature.

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5. See, for instance, Miguel Angel Centeno, ed., *Historical Systemic Collapse: Managing the End of the World as We Know It* (London: Routledge, 2023); Michel Saloff-Coste,*Innovation Ecosystems: The Future of Civilizations and the Civilization of the Future* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2022); Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (London: Pelican, 2025).

6. Georg G. Iggers, Supriya Mukherjee, and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2017), 49–50; Huntt Lyn, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014); Dominic Sachsenmaier, and Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam, "Global History," in *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* (11.02.2010): 4; Bruce Mazlish, "Comparing Global History to World History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 3 (1998): 395.

7. Perry Myers, *The Double-Edged Sword: The Cult of "Bildung," Its Downfall and Reconstitution in Fin-de-Siècle Germany (Rudolf Steiner and Max Weber)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004)..

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