A League of Minds with a Heart: Intellectual Cooperation and Emotions in the Interwar Period and Beyond

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In the introduction to an "Open Letter" entitled "A League of Minds," published by the Institute of Intellectual Cooperation in 1933, philosopher Paul Valéry and art historian Henri Focillon explained that if perpetual peace were to ever to become a reality, then a "fundamental agreement" among people of learning in different countries needed to be reached (Valéry and Focillon 1933, 13). As true "intellectual combatants," they were to march toward the "moral conquest of public opinion," lift up the "spirit of the masses," and ultimately win the fight for peace (Kolasa 1962, 42–3). Against this backdrop, emotions emerged as a central feature of intellectual cooperation in the interwar period and beyond. Members of various committees and sub-committees involved in the League's intellectual cooperation—and/or in bodies associated with it—evoked emotions both in official documents and in the other textual and visual materials they produced. They crafted notions such as "international agreement" or "friendship" as the stated goal of their activities, and they outlined concrete steps to achieve it.

As a result, interwar intellectual cooperation turned into the crafting of a distinct "emotional style" that used feelings both to denounce inequities and to argue for a peaceful way forward. Having pledged to remain "apolitical," the intellectuals involved in cooperation would not interfere with nation-states but would instead strengthen the connections that they had with one another. This aspect is particularly important if one takes into account that the "League of Minds" was not confined to Europe but was meant to include the entire world. The breadth of the League's scope was proudly displayed on the cover of the aforementioned 1934 "Open Letter" edited by Valéry and Focillon. Front and centre was a list of contributors comprised of men from different nationalities: next to the two Frenchmen were not only other Europeans like Spanish writer Salvador de Madariaga and British classical scholar Gilbert Murray but also representatives from other parts of the world such as the Brazilian physician Miguel Ozorio de Almeyda, the Mexican writer, philosopher, and diplomat Alfonso Reyes, and the Chinese educator and founder of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (a.k.a. *Academia Sinica*) Cai Yuanpei. In an open letter to Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, who was also involved in this work, Gilbert Murray explained that great promise lay in "a certain germ of mutual sympathy" that might sprout among "people of goodwill or good intelligence" from different countries around the world, and advocated for using art and literature as a means to bring them about (Murray and Tagore 1935, 20). In his reply to Murray's letter, Tagore did not try to hide his scepticism: "I must confess at once that I do not see any solution of the intricate evils of disharmonious relationship between nations, nor can I point out any path which may lead us immediately to the levels of sanity" (Murray and Tagore 1935, 32). He too adopted an emotional rhetoric and the description of physical, embodied experiences to make his point: "We have seen Europe cruelly unscrupulous in its politics and commerce, widely spreading slavery over the face of the earth in various names and forms" to the point that "our spirit sickens at it" (Murray and Tagore 1935, 40–1; 44). The effects of such nefarious policies had been devastating to the point that now "Asia is preparing to imitate the ruthless aspect which slays, which eats raw flesh, which tries to make the swallowing process easier by putting the blame on the victim" (Murray and Tagore 1935, 46–7). Yet, despite the strength of these words, Tagore was far from being altogether dismissive of Gilbert Murray's arguments. Instead, he sent his British friend a message of hope and of faith "in the ultimate truths of humanity" that they both shared. He also expressed his commitment to "meeting in mutual understanding and trust in the common field of cooperation; never for nourishing a spirit of rejection, but for the glad acceptance which constantly carries in itself the giving out of the best we have" (Murray and Tagore 1935, 67). Emotions such hope, faith, and trust made its way into his rhetoric and shaped his framing of the questions on hand.

The passionate involvement of prominent non-European intellectuals such as Tagore was not enough to make the "League of Minds" a body that would embrace the entire world but might explain the resilience of intellectual cooperation in the twentieth century and beyond. To be sure, as many authors have emphasized, "Intellectual Cooperation" never lost its Eurocentric character. The members' tally remained deficient in non-Europeans names (Renoliet 1999, 184–5); and "others" often seemed to make only useful "contributions," while the intellectual world that counted the most remained the one conceived, written, and dominated by countries and peoples from the small western end of the Eurasian landmass (Kolasa 1962, 64). Yet thinking about the work of emotions might help to illuminate why the past unfolded the way it did, and how intellectual cooperation survived two world wars and worldwide conflicts in different forms. More specifically, emotions can help us to understand when and how international encounters such as congresses took place, the workings of bureaucracy, machines, and technologies, as well as the development of the infrastructure of intellectual cooperation and the shape of the spaces and technologies through which we live and interact in the twenty-first century.

References

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