



Son of Spinoza
Georg Brandes and
Modern Jewish
Cosmopolitanism

Søren Blak
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Introduction

Brandes as a Vital Cosmopolitan Archive

In the first years of our current global age, shortly after the collapse of the Eastern European and Soviet communist regimes, Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis seemed for many to be an accurate diagnosis and prognostication of forthcoming world historical events. In the introduction to *The End of History or The Last Man Standing* (1991), which was based on the Hegelian interpretation of the human "desire for recognition" as the key principle for historical development, Fukuyama designated Western liberal democracy as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution."¹ In explaining why Western liberal democracy applies itself to the human struggle of recognition better than any other state form, Fukuyama writes that:

The inherently unequal recognition of masters and slaves is replaced by universal and reciprocal recognition, where every citizen recognizes the dignity and humanity of every other citizen, and where that dignity is recognized in turn by the state through the granting of rights.²

Fukuyama does not reflect much, however, on terms such as "national cultural tradition," "nation state," or "nationalism," except from downgrading the continuing relevance of these terms. Influenced by Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis and similar diagnoses of a global and non-binary world order after the fall of communism, the long-gone field of cosmopolitanism was revitalized in the 1990s. Important cultural thinkers, philosophers, and sociologists such as Julia Kristeva, Homi K. Bhabha, Martha Nussbaum, Jacques Derrida, and Ulrich Beck designated themselves as cosmopolitans in the tradition of Kantian liberal

cosmopolitanism. All of these influential scholars wrote essays and books thematizing that the universally shared “cosmopolitan existence” which Immanuel Kant had envisioned in “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht” (1784) would in the succeeding decades replace the dominance of nation states and national cultural traditions.³ According to Ulrich Beck in *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (2004), in what could be seen as the culminating work in this wave of liberal cosmopolitan optimism of the 1990s, the so-called national outlook and the twentieth-century tendency to observe all historical and political matter through the lenses of national state paradigms had become backwards and outdated.⁴ Instead, according to Beck, we should all develop what he calls the cosmopolitan outlook.⁵ The increasingly globalized world would thus increasingly develop through borderless, transgressing, and transnational processes. Beck observes how the development from national to cosmopolitan outlook could already be observed in the early 2000s in the way we—as Westerners—semantically represented our global age existence:

A transvaluation of values and words is taking place, symbolized by a veritable flood of words such as “diaspora” and “hybridity” [...]. The experiences of alienation or living in between, the loss of ontological security [...] and existential exclusion, talk of ambivalence [...] even the reproach of “rootlessness”, have lost much of their apocalyptic meaning.⁶

Beck refers to a time in history when the concept of “rootlessness” and the “experiences of alienation or living in between”, as well as cultural diaspora, had an “apocalyptic meaning” for many, and he seems to be certain that such views now belonged to the past.

Ulrich Beck has been criticized since the publication of *The Cosmopolitan Vision* for not paying enough attention to the unintended consequences of the globalization processes in his cosmopolitan vision of how this bond of cosmopolitan-oriented human beings will gradually—and almost naturally—replace the national outlook.

However, in recent years, it has become clear that many people,

Westerners as well as non-Westerners, do not feel part of a “progressive global age” in which terms such as *cosmopolitanism*, *strangeness*, *diaspora*, *rootlessness*, and *cultural hybridity* have lost their apocalyptic meaning. Right-wing populism is on the rise and many, it seems, do not want to live according to a cosmopolitan outlook. In this context, the constant flow of new “revolutionizing” technologies, the individual flexibility required by an ever more globalized work market, and accelerating information loads are often experienced as difficult challenges, and not only by those usually counted as “Modernisierungsverlierer.”⁷ Also, recent research documents that some segments benefit more from the positive effects of the globalization processes than others, and have easier access to the advantages of our global age.⁸ In fact, more and more people fear the future of our global age, and why would it be any different? A majority of TV series, films, political campaigns, and journalistic breaking news feed us narratives on a daily basis that represent the world we inhabit as overloaded with crises prognosing the future of our present-day global age through various dystopian and catastrophic scenarios (for example in the context of the climate crisis, the Western democracy crisis, pandemic crises, financial crises, migration crises, etc.).

According to the German historiographer Reinhart Koselleck, it is only logical that we can observe this intensification of cultural products, political ideologies, and journalistic breaking news forecasting our future through such dystopian crises and catastrophic scenarios. Hence, according to Koselleck, modern human consciousness is characterized by a temporal distinction between the past and the future, instead of perceiving time mainly as pre-modern and cyclical.⁹ In this way, modern consciousness also generates a gap between past experiences and future expectations. This gap amplifies the human utopian and dystopian imagination, which grows still further if the gap between our *Erfahrungsraum* and *Erwartungshorizont* increases. The accelerated social and technological changes of our present-day global age thus leave us with less and less useful *Erfahrungsraum* on which we can build constructive expectations of the future.¹⁰

Indeed, today, we live in an age of accelerated overheating and unintended crisis consequences of which we cannot rationally predict the outcome. As such, it seems that the type of optimistic cosmopolitanism that Ulrich Beck designated as an ideal for all to follow back in the 2000s has lost its relevance. Following Koselleck's concepts of *Erfahrungsraum* and *Erwartungshorizont*, one could instead ask: Do we have any concrete experiences of cosmopolitanism and global-age processes from which we can learn and build our present-day anticipations of how our global age will develop, so that we do not act in an atmosphere of reckless optimism or, on the other hand, on feelings of anxiety, panic, and crisis?

Recently, in *Once Within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth and Belonging since 1500* (2016), Charles S. Maier defines the period from the 1970s onwards as the second modern era of intensified globalization in the history of modern Europe.¹¹ Maier convincingly argues that the fin-de-siècle period, from the 1870s to 1914, should be considered as forming the first wave of accelerated globalization in modern European history.¹² The fin-de-siècle period was thus—like our present-day global age—characterized by continuous upheaval and renewal, which transformed the existing European societies and individual life worlds. In this process, Jews and Jewishness became a focal point in discussions of the dramatic transition from the old world to the liberal democratic and capitalist modern societies of the twentieth century. As such, it was indeed in the fin-de-siècle period that cosmopolitanism and various globalization processes acquired this “apocalyptic meaning” Ulrich Beck speaks of in the passage quoted above. Hence, it was not in Hitler's Nazi Germany of the 1930s that the identity characteristics of cosmopolitanism, alienation/strangeness, rootlessness, in-between-ness, and cultural hybridity became interconnected with Jewishness, and established a dominant cultural code by which the accelerated processes of the first intensified globalization period were discussed and anticipated.¹³ Historical research that focuses on the period from when Hitler gained power in Germany as the time when modern antisemitism became a dangerous new form of populism is merely addressing the culmination

of a much longer historical course of interconnected events and narratives. According to the already classic studies on modern antisemitism by Reinhard Rürup and Shulamit Volkov, and newer work by Michael Stanislawski and Maurice Samuels, we must go further back, at least to the 1870s. This was the time when modern antisemitism developed into a dominant cultural code that primarily focused on Jews and Jewishness in the context of the unintended consequences of this first period of intensified globalization.

The Goals of the Book

The construction of an almost synonymous relation between Jewishness and cosmopolitanism became the focal point in the modern antisemitic and the later Nazi ideology. As such, Georg Brandes (1842–1927) stands as a key historical actor due to the great influence he exerted as one of the leading European intellectuals in the fin-de-siècle period, not only in the context of the creation of modern antisemitic populism, but also because of his own interconnections of Jewishness and cosmopolitanism. From his earliest writings, Brandes characterized himself as a cosmopolitan, and he defined the cosmopolitan tradition of which he considered himself a part as Jewish-related. Most of Brandes' interconnections of Jewishness and cosmopolitanism were contextually bound to the different ongoing discussions of the so-called Jewish Question in the fin-de-siècle period; his passionate engagement with different topics related to the so-called Jewish Question is evident from the first of his publications in the 1860s to the last four books he published before he died in 1927. Brandes drew from various intellectual sources when he elaborated on the relation between Jewishness and cosmopolitanism in both his early and later writings.¹⁴ He was particularly influenced by other modern European Jewish intellectuals and writers such as Berthold Auerbach, Heinrich Heine, Moritz Lazarus, Benjamin Disraeli, and Ferdinand Lassalle. Doubtlessly, Brandes' greatest inspiration for identifying with the cosmopolitan tradition, which in his early writings he calls "modern Jewishness", was the Dutch Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza.¹⁵ In previous (mainly Danish-based) research on Brandes, little

attention has been paid to his representations of Jewishness, and none has so far thematized which cosmopolitan tradition Brandes considered himself part of, though the primary identity marker with which most previous research characterizes Brandes is that he first and foremost was a cosmopolitan, in his writings as well as in his practice.¹⁶ As such, this book seeks to contribute to two fields. First, it adds to the existing research on Georg Brandes and the key theme in this literature: Brandes' role in shaping modern Denmark. In this context it also intends to establish more substantial links between Brandes research and the field of Danish Jewish history, as well as to the much larger scholarly field of Jewish Studies. The book's second historiographical goal is to create an awareness of the importance of Georg Brandes' life and work as a cosmopolitan archive in the modern intellectual historical field. Regarding the first goal, in my opinion, the dominant post-WW2 collective memory of the "miracle of '43" vis-à-vis the rescuing of Danish Jews from Nazi concentration camps during WW2 plays an important role when it comes to the lack of existing research on Danish Jewish history, and specifically on the Jewish themes in Brandes' oeuvre. The way this collective memory is usually narrated today reflects a belief that Denmark and Danish history is mainly to be considered an exception in the broader history of antisemitism in modern Europe. However, there are many other important historical events in Danish Jewish history that we can learn from today; the case of Georg Brandes represents rather different perspectives, no less important than the rescuing of the Danish Jews in 1943.

There is no doubt that what happened in 1943 offers a unique historical perspective in the context of the Holocaust. We must never forget that most of the Danish Jews were rescued and sailed to Sweden, and it is natural that the story has become one of the most significant Danish post-WW2 collective memories and as such an important modern Danish nation-building element. This was evident in 2018 when the 75th anniversary celebration of this event at the synagogue in *Krystalgade* in Copenhagen was broadcast live on the national Danish television station, DR. The Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen