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Book Reviews

David J. Rosner, *Conservatism and Crisis, The Anti-Modernist Perspective in Twentieth-Century German Philosophy*. Lexington Books, 2012.

Reviewed by Laina Farhat-Holzman

It is fascinating that a book so specifically devoted to looking back to how the anti-modernist fever in the first half of the 20th century led to something as nightmarish as World War II, the Holocaust, and the deaths of millions of people around the world. But what made this book even more interesting to me was its relevance to our own time, and our own fever of anti-modernism that is causing war, deaths, and enormous human misery.

While we are all aware of the negative consequences of such anti-modernism, Rosner notes that these movements are a response to a natural and understandable human emotion: the longing for certainty in the face of what many see as loss of everything familiar and sacred. Such longing takes form in nostalgia, romanticizing the past, and some kind of wish to reconnect with the natural world.

David Rosner is a philosopher, a specialist in German philosophy, a discipline that has given much serious scholarship to the world. But it has also given something else: philosophy that gave heft to the formless fear of modernity that gave rise to Nazism.

In his preface, Rosner asks:

When longstanding ways of life are extinguished and new paradigms have not yet been offered to replace them, how is the world now experienced and constituted by the individual subject? What happens when the only explanatory framework a culture has ever known is slowly eroded? Interwar Germany's cultural collapse involved a number of serious concrete problems specific to Germany at this time, such as a devastating financial crisis and a sense of national humiliation in the aftermath of World War I associated with the treaty of Versailles. Yet often accompanying such external factors in a cultural collapse are the signs of the loss of an entire value system. Thus, the crisis of Weimar signified the deeper loss of a spiritual center, a sense of wide-spread pessimism and confusion, felt not only in Germany but throughout the West after the *fin de siècle*.

Rosner talks about the *aporia* of modernity, a term that he defines as alienation, a sense of loss, of homelessness. For many, modernity brought with it great gains: the discoveries of the scientific revolution, industrialization, the lessening of the hold of

traditional religion as a force for explaining the world, the emancipation of women, and the opening of political participation to those who were never included before. But these optimistic values were dashed by World War I, when civilized Europeans descended into mindless horror. Empires collapsed, a whole generation of young men died or were horrifically maimed, and everything familiar had changed.

From 1500 to 1950, the traditional world changed with ever-increasing speed, at a rate too fast for ordinary people to understand and accept. There have been many times in human history that such changes took place (the collapse of Rome, barbarian invasions, the sudden rise of Islam, the discovery of the New World, the religious wars); however, the changes in the 19th and early 20th century were the most rapid of all, and the outcome of World War I threw millions of people into a world with no rational explanation for why things happen.

Although Rosner focuses on Germany, this book can be read as an explanation for the current *aporia* of so many people: conservative and sometimes neo-fascist movements in Europe and the US, as well as the most obvious of all, the crisis within Islam, the struggle between the modernizers and those who violently reject modernity.

The German philosopher Heidegger, who struggled with the loss of all that was familiar in traditional rural Germany, is the key philosopher whose trajectory from despair to his shameful romance with the Nazis makes him the central figure in this book. Rosner not only reviews the work of Spengler, Schmitt, Jünger, and others who were influenced by earlier Romantic movements, but in his scholarship he also cites numerous important modern philosophers and analysts of the interwar period.

Rosner looks at secularism and its discontents: the sense of “disenchantment” that Max Weber noted. For the disenchanted, the loss of the magic implicit in religion is a great loss. With the loss of this transcending value come high levels of social decadence, Rosner notes, such as “the sexual revolution and widespread drug abuse, both of which left many shattered lives in their wake.”

In his final chapter, “Fear and Hope in Post Modernity,” Rosner explores the angst of those who feel that their world has lost all values, all things worth having. But he also looks at the solutions sought by some groups, and provides pros and cons for these solutions. He explores Fundamentalism, the attempt to return to the roots of one’s religion for answers to all problems. This process provides an absolute and unchanging moral code that gives certainty to some; it provides a strong sense of community (something lacking in reason and secularism); it affords a feeling of moral superiority, a feeling of being among the “elect” and it provides a firm grounding in tradition and longstanding religious practices that have stood the test of time.

But on the negative side, he says that the absolutistic reactions can be even more nihilistic than the original problem itself. He cites the violent excesses of Muslim terrorists, some Israeli Jewish settlers, and Christian murders of abortion doctors. He also notes that religious fundamentalism is a closed system, in which one must accept a number of simplistic assumptions.

He then examines Stoicism as a possible solution: just living and taking in stride that there is no meaning to be found, but that one should live as though there were. On the con side, Stoicism has been seen as “tired.” It is never going to have great appeal.

His best solution seems to be seeing the sacred within the secular. He notes that “...the Eco-philosophy movement has taken on an urgency rarely felt in the usually rarefied circles of academic philosophy.” But even here, this movement has within it “archaism,” an attempted return to an almost mythic ethos that is impossible to reclaim at this late state in history.

Rosner concludes, as have many philosophers (going back to Socrates), with the only possible solution: looking within. The sacred is within us, they have said. Finding the authentic core of oneself is the best protection against despair and of either railing against or getting caught up in mindless modernity.

Where I would argue with Rosner is that a case can be made that our modern world is not just soulless, materialistic, and selfish. There is pure magic in the unfolding work of scientists exploring the mysteries of the world and the universe. One can still feel the magic of a full moon that is not spoiled by knowledge of the moon’s geography. One can still marvel at the beautiful complexity and interconnection of our global systems of oceanic streams, winds, and volcanism that global satellites are unfolding for us. And one can have a magical experience looking at a newborn, in all of its perfection. Knowledge just opens up more areas of wonder and the magic is by no means gone.

I would have liked more in the book about the phenomenon of hatred for cities and their cosmopolitanism. The back-to-the-countryside philosophers, such as Heidegger and earlier in German Romanticists, found cities alienating, in direct contrast with those of us, from civilization’s beginnings, who find cities lively, exciting, providing us with a fascinating mix of peoples. Great cities have always attracted great art, great ideas, and tolerance of the new.

There is a connection between city hatred and focus on prominent Jews, who were examples of cosmopolitanism and high culture. The Nazis honed in on this hatred and they detested Berlin, their own cosmopolitan capital, for this very reason. Urban-Rural antipathies are still a major source of violence in today’s Third World alienation. Despite this, Rosner does go a long way toward explaining the fear and hatred and sense of loss fueling the crisis of alienation.