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Book Reviews

**David J. Rosner. *Catastrophe and Philosophy*.
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books Publishers, 2019**

Reviewed by John Berteaux

In Chinese, the word “catastrophe” is composed of two characters: 危机. The first character represents danger and the second is the symbol for opportunity, suggesting as my son so aptly put it, “We should never let a ‘good’ disaster go to waste.” In much the same light, philosopher David Rosner’s sensible and probing anthology, *Catastrophe and Philosophy*, directs us to observe that, “catastrophes are catastrophes not only because they bring widespread death and destruction in their wake, but also because they fundamentally challenge the basic ‘sense making’ feature of the human mind and our need for a meaningful world.” (Rosner, p. xi) By occurring at the intersection of lived experience and philosophy, catastrophes urge us to rethink the world we inhabit. Rosner’s analysis is well-timed given the social, political, and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic that currently grips the world. To be sure, conventional wisdom has it that Covid-19 is permanently changing the way we live our lives. But what exactly do crises like Covid-19, global warming, or the recent fire storms in California, Oregon, and Washington require?

Ultimately, *Catastrophe and Philosophy* does not offer a definitive answer to reality’s complexity. Rather, Rosner suggests the goal of the text is to point out the importance of perspective. It is perspective, he insists, that can reveal commonalities between radically different times and places – commonalities that can afford us a foothold against, “the untenable idea of life and human suffering being ultimately random and amoral.” (Rosner, p. xiii) He observes that by exploring the history of ideas, it may be possible to locate a trail through the tangle of crisis that braves our craving to make sense of experience. (Rosner, p. xi, 323)

To take a case in point, Rosner’s asks us to weigh how the crisis of World War I affected the European consciousness and was reflected in much of the art of the period between World War I and World War II. (Rosner, p. xvi) Consider the three paintings pictured below done by Cubist, Pablo Picasso (1891-1973).¹ These paintings were done over a seven-year period, the last just prior to the First World War which began in 1914. First, there is his traditional painting of Gertrude Stein completed in 1907. This depiction of Gertrude Stein offers few hints of what was to come. The second canvas, “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon,” came after Stein’s portrait.

¹Cubism is a movement in art that was initiated by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Picasso and Braque were intent on representing the world in a new way. They rejected the single, objective, or naturalistic viewpoint and used geometric planes and shapes to represent the subject from many different perspectives at once.

It was also completed in 1907, and it is considered a transitional painting, appearing at the dawn of Cubism. “*Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*” hints at a new intellectual structure, or way of knowing and seeing the world. Again, both canvases were done just seven years before the First World War. Then between 1911 and 1912, only two years before the start of World War I, Picasso completed “*Ma Jolie*.” While all three paintings portray women, “*Ma Jolie*” is indecipherable as a depiction of Picasso’s lover Marcelle Humbert (Eva). Although Rosner directs us to explore art produced during the interwar years (1918-1939), the canvases I turn to were completed a little earlier. I contend, however, that these works presage the disruption, breakdown, and destruction of an existing order that occurred as the world marched toward two catastrophic world wars in the span of twenty-five years. Indeed, “*Ma Jolie*” is a portrait that seems liberated from having to depict recognizable images, a work of art that exhibits “increased tendencies toward fragmentation, distortion, and the dissolution of classical norms.” (Rosner, p. xvi)



Gertrude Stein 1907

*Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*
1907*Ma Jolie* 1912

Moreover, Picasso’s celebrated piece “*Guernica*” (see next page) was created to express his outrage about the Nazi’s barbaric aerial bombing of Guernica, a Basque city in Spain. The piece was completed in 1937, twenty-five years after “*Ma Jolie*” and just two years prior to the start of the Second World War.

Whether or not one sees Picasso as offering a complete worldview, the question is, is it possible as Rosner suggests, to appreciate commonalities joining Picasso’s indecipherable images of “*Ma Jolie*” and *Guernica* to that of a radically different time and place?



Picasso's 1937 painting *Guernica* expresses his outrage against war

Take for example the rise of Rome (146 BCE) which marked the end of the Greek city state and saw the growth of disaffection in a new political culture. The new culture was one in which the average Greek citizen was no longer intimately involved in the working of the state or tied into a cosmopolitan Hellenistic world. Rather, average Greek citizens saw themselves as isolated members of large impersonal kingdoms run by professional bureaucrats. As a result, their focus turned inward, leading them to delve into philosophes of despair such as Stoicism, Epicureanism, Cynicism, Skepticism, and Christianity—philosophies offering advice for individuals living in a crumbling world. As attempts to sustain balance by proposing new ways of fulfilling our need for a meaningful world, both Picasso's Cubism and the early Greeks' philosophies of despair shared a common origin. One implication of Rosner's treatment is that the trauma associated with the fragmentation, distortion, and dissolution of the assumptive world transcended time and place.

Rosner's *Catastrophe and Philosophy* is broken into five sections: The Ancient World, The Middle Ages/Renaissance, Modernity I: Early Period, Modernity II: High Modernity, and Post Modernity. Each section is preceded by a short preface and contains three or four brief essays. For instance, in The Ancient World, research professor Jeidong Ryu at the Theological Institute, Sungkonghoe University, South Korea, explores the Buddha's search for enlightenment in a world marked by upheaval and suffering. In contrast, PhD student in the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, Sarah Katerina Corrigan, examines the *Book of Lamentations* as a response to a crisis in Jewish history. While, in the section Modernity, David Wilkinson, professor of Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles, delves into the political ideas of Thomas Hobbes as a reaction to war, famine and dislocation.

In Post-Modernity, David A. Chalfin, who received his A.B. and M.A. in philosophy from Brown University, and a J.D. from Stanford Law School, explores the American rejoinder to the challenge of 9/11 by investigating a select part of the legal response to that catastrophe. Chalfin probes the difference between internalism versus externalism in the law. The upshot of all of this is that *Catastrophe and Philosophy* not only surveys the work of philosophers like Plato, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, but is also interdisciplinary in that it explores religious texts, literary works, musical compositions and legal decisions.

In that the book recounts philosophical reactions to crises, Rosner advises that philosophy is not just about grasping ideas or abstract theory. Instead, he implies that philosophy is best understood within the context of personal biographies, larger crises, social struggle, or institutional change. (Rosner, p. xi-xii) To be sure, the current Covid-19 pandemic, by destroying the existing order of things, has forced us all to confront a salient fact, as Rosner (p. xiv) himself writes: “Catastrophes reveal cracks in the moral scaffolding of society.”

Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University, John Ross (Rosner p. 193) observes, in a radically different time and place, “Two of the twentieth century’s greatest horrors — World War I and Nazi Germany — both emanated from Vienna.” Mid-nineteenth century Vienna, the capital of the Austrian Empire (later Austria-Hungary), seemed to many an idyllic city. Under the Austrian Habsburgs it became one of Europe’s cultural centers. Its artistic and intellectual legacy was second to none. Moreover, there was nothing unique or unusual about the issues facing the Habsburg Empire that resulted in the horrors of two world wars. For instance, “political oppression, corruption, abuses by the aristocracy, the plight of the working class, poverty, lack of housing and medical care for the poor, religious intolerance, the political and social marginalization of women...” were endemic throughout modern Europe. (Rosner, p.193) And yet, Ross notes, the Habsburg Empire was remarkable in that language and race (anti-Semitism) became focal points of contention. (Rosner, p. 194)

Consider America’s inability to accommodate divisions among its citizens in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Not unlike Vienna, the U.S. has had long existing social and economic inequalities. Today racial discord has increasingly fueled civil disobedience along with acrimony, disruptiveness and violence. Presently however, with hundreds of thousands of US citizens dead as a result of Covid-19, there is little consensus about whether individuals should be required to wear masks, social distance, or simply stay at home. What happens when the political system is itself in crisis, unable to accommodate differences of opinion? British judge and historian Jonathan Sumption (2019, p.88) observes that “the chief function of a political system is to accommodate differences of interest and opinion among citizens.” Sumption insists that when politics fail nations turn to the courts for definitive answers to tough moral questions.

But law, he argues, “exists to protect us from harm not to recruit us to moral conformity.” (Sumption p. 8) Actually, Covid-19 has exposed profound cracks in the moral scaffolding of our society.

In the long run, Rosner’s analysis counsels that we can either seek inspiration for dealing with catastrophe or be crushed by circumstances. In the final chapter of the text, psychologist Marek Celinski contends that the ability to readily recover from the catastrophic surprises that life offers necessitates resilience. Celinski insists: “Resilience develops when we patiently continue our efforts at understanding while being constantly surprised by our inadequacies.” (Rosner, p. 334) Rosner’s *Catastrophe and Philosophy* argues that, rather than seek definitive answers in a crisis, we should strive for perspective or a meaningful interrelationship of ideas. Is it possible then, that appraising a crisis requires conceding, up front, the commonalities between radically different times and places, or that we should never let a “good” disaster go to waste?

References

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