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Review of "The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973"

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Ahab's Madness

Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

If you share my cast of mind, nothing excites you more than an author braving the most magisterial of topics. The more expansive the subject, the more I feel I am likely to read something that touches on my deepest questions about life, society, and the world we live in. When basic subjects are broached and questioned, one's mind is stretched and potentially reconfigured. It is exhilarating to read about topics and ideas like God, the cosmos, the world, the law, the mind, etc. Indeed, I am usually hooked when the title starts "The Idea of..."

Mark Greif's *The Age of the Crisis of Man* is one of those works. Few histories have explicitly explored its topic: the idea of man. Greif cites Edward Purcell's *The Crisis of Democratic Theory* (1973) as one important exception. Greif attributes this lacuna to the centripetal force of World War II as an interruption in historiographical attention. Because of this, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* covers a kind of "chronological [man] hole," or a "historiography of neglect," in the intellectual history of the United States (p. 15). That hole extends from the early 1930s up to the early 1970s. Greif would like his book to be considered alongside important historical works such as James Kloppenberg's *Uncertain Victory*, Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, Howard Brick's *Age of Contradiction*, and Daniel Rodgers' *Age of Fracture* (p. 320). While Greif does not capture the full intellectual character of all of his actors, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* deserves to be on the shelves next to those books. Altogether they attempt to fully explicate the intellectual climate of the twentieth century United States.

Greif's argument is that this midcentury discourse on "the 'crisis of man' is historically indispensable (p. x). That dialogue consisted of a "particular set of collisions and concentrations" which constitute "a single episode in the restructuring of midcentury thought." As an episode, however, this period brought together a number of scholarly topics "treat[ed] superbly but separately: totalitarianism, Enlightenment, universalism, existentialism, human rights, relativism, Cold War unity, technology, and critique" (p. xi). To support his argument and its intellectual streams, Greif uses works of philosophy and social science, but also fiction. On the last he integrates, and gives extended treatment to, the midcentury novelists Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Flanner O'Connor, and Thomas Pynchon.

Despite the grandness of the topic, one learns that Greif tackled it somewhat reluctantly. He wrote that to do it he had to "accept Ahab's madness"—i.e. "to be enraged with a dumb thing" (p. 330). Just as his historical actors heightened the discourse of man in the face of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and Nazism, Greif felt a need to counteract a fearful discussion about humankind that had arisen in reaction to Middle Eastern radicalism of the early 2000s. When a there exists a "shared sense of catastrophe," people question who they are where they are going (p. 328). Greif hoped to "lay bare the limitations of the earlier discourse" to undermine "false foundations and certainties" in the present and future (p. 327). It all feels like madness to Greif because "a frustrating sense of repetition without insight persists." The "wrong analytic questions" are posed in each moment, such as the "answers will be preprogrammed in



ways you can't even begin to imagine or see" (p. 328). Greif forwards that this discourse was "empty in its own time" ("unreadable...tedious...unhelpful), it peaked in 1951 (especially in the work of Hannah Arendt), and then declined thereafter (pp. 11, 14, 96).

What were the foci of the historical discourse Greif covered? How was it empty and preprogrammed? Greif identified four major "constellations" of topics that were of great importance: human nature, history, faith, and technology. The discourse reshaped these into questions: (1) Is there a human nature—something essential, fundamental, and permanent? (2) Is there a shape or direction to human history? (3) What beliefs (i.e. faith or ideology) mattered? (4) What are the roles of human tools, whether in terms of technology, techniques, or planning? (p. 10-11). Many intellectuals and philosophers are rolled together in to discuss these topics in Parts I, II, and IV of the book. But in Part III, Greif uses Bellow and Ellison to address human nature and history, O'Connor for faith, and Pynchon for technology.

Because the crisis-of-man discourse can be broad and abstract, Greif's deployment of those four authors is quite effective. Close readings of their works, in the context of the search for the "great American novel," demonstrates how art can reflect larger intellectual themes and crises of the times (p. 107). Bellow, Ellison, O'Connor, and Pynchon revived the form after the so-called "death of the novel" in the 1940s—a death buttressed by "philosophical assumptions drawn from the crisis of man" discourse. That revivification involved an "adoption by creative writers of the problems of the crisis of man" (pp. 132-133). Those novelists, following the work of Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky, would "fulfill the critics' continued expectations for the writer as a solitary genius...who would stand for America and independent human values" (p. 134-141).

Of the four areas of discourse laid out by Greif, the most fundamental, as might be expected, is the one centering on human nature. He lays out this area in the form of a dichotomy between "the partisans of permanent human nature" and the "theorists of social malleability" (p. 31). Each node brings out differing terminology among midcentury thinkers. On the 'unchanging' side, to Greif, there appear recurring discussions of normativity, essences, individual agents, rights, universalism, and the universal subject. On the side of 'change' one sees philosophical topics such as historicism, difference, diversity, structures, oppression, antihumanism, particularism, and granularity.

This dichotomy may feel false, at times, to historians familiar with the range of thinking and writings of particular historical actors. That is not because Greif's construction of the discourse is simplistic, but rather because human thinkers are so complex. In my own case, I know the work of Mortimer J. Adler—generalized by Greif as one of the minor partisans of permanence—to have covered difference, oppression, and cultural diversity. And Adler spent considerable time on the question of "man" in the 1950s with a team of thinkers at the Institute for Philosophical Research. It is to Greif's credit that he forces you to know your area and reconsider how to articulate the complexity of certain historical figures.

Even if the changing/unchanging dichotomy feels overdetermined in the crisis of man discourse, Greif's historical actors and intellectual exchanges explain why the conversation turned, in the 1950s and 1960s, to the race problem. In his words, "the essential flaw in the American discourse of man had always been race" (p. 261). Intellectual dialogue had not been sufficiently "capacious enough to contain the division of



racial identity and racial inequality” (ibid.). The Civil Rights Movement used the rhetoric of universalism while also taking it apart.

What can the reader take away from Greif’s study on the question of humankind? How does it present us with a usable past? I am with Greif when he argues, in his conclusion, that the solutions to problems about discourse of man is not to go abstract but rather focus on “practical matters, concrete questions of value...and find the immediate actions necessary to achieve an aim.” What matters is “your moment” and today’s context (p. 328). This is not to say that examining historical discourse is useless. On the contrary, it provides one with a basis of some paradoxes, problems, and areas of contentiousness. But that past will be reformed. It must necessarily bend to present necessities and pressing issues.

Greif’s study helps educators understand the necessity of binding together history and social studies. Deep historical analysis of the most potent and magisterial of questions matter. But they will, in the end, just inform the present situation. The answers given in history will never transfer directly to current crises. The meaning of human endeavors, in light of Greif’s work, is ultimately wrapped up in hard studies of the problems that exist today. The answers we create for our existential crises will be informed by the past, but must fit our own age.

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