

## Book Reviews

Stephen Eric Bronner, *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 161 pp.

Stephen Eric Bronner fears the disenchantment of the world and the disengagement of that disenchanted world from politics. In response he has written an unusual, and an unusually compelling and provocative, book that draws on his extensive knowledge of the artistic and political movements of the twentieth century. It seeks to take what is best from both to reinvigorate the contemporary moment.

On Bronner's account, modernism as an artistic and political movement "can be understood as an anti-authoritarian reaction to modernity or, more precisely, the reification process usually identified with modernity" (pp. 6–7). In the face of massive industrialization, urbanization, the decline of religion, the rise of science, and the alienation that these developments engendered, modernists, argues Bronner, sought "to reenchant and invigorate the world that modernity had disenchanted and deadened" (p. 7). The hero of this movement was the artist. Writing about the expressionists, Bronner observes: "The task of the artist is to strip away unessential encumbrances and create the conditions for an upsurge of emotional intensity" (p. 42), though this observation holds good for the author's understanding of the goals of modernism in all its forms (see, for example, pp. 16, 18, 33, 71, 93, and 109).

"All of this" writes Bronner of the modernists' goals, "was concerned with articulating a new sensibility; institutional power was an afterthought. The subpolitical became a substitute for politics" (p. 6). For Bronner, modernists saw their enemy as largely personal—albeit in the form of a representative man—rather than political. They defined themselves in opposition to the philistine, rather than any specific political movement. "The modernist" he observes, "understood himself as the enemy of the habitual, staid, and conservative domains of everyday life in which the cultural philistine thrived . . . [He] saw the philistine as hypocritical, puritanical, nationalistic and militarist enough, not emotionally daring enough" (p. 140, see also pp. 10, 43, 46). Tellingly, given his observation that the modernist assault on alienation and reification, "appealed to the radicals of my generation" (p. xv), amid his highbrow references to the artistic works and movements of the period, Bronner also quotes the rock band The Kinks' "well respected man about town doing the best thing so conservatively" (p. 7) to establish the connection between the decline of modernism and the politics for which this book seeks a return.

Nevertheless, the politics of modernism is, as Bronner is well aware, something of a prickly business. He notes that the modernists' focus on intensity of feeling permitted solidarity across boundaries both political (p. 140) and artistic (p. 55). Nevertheless, as Bronner is more than willing to admit, the politics of modernism was often far from admirable. Indeed, if a movement is focused

largely upon generating an intensity of feeling, it should perhaps be no surprise that its politics gravitated toward the extreme. Occasionally, this took the form of a simple contempt for the masses with whom they were seeking to identify (pp. 11, 43), but as Bronner details in chapters on F.T. Marinetti and the Italian futurists, and Emil Nolde, intensity of feeling was sometimes synonymous, or at least compatible, with fascism. The elitism inherent in modernism was illustrated by Marinetti's advocacy of war as the "world's only hygiene" (p. 71); and, as Bronner observes, a bond was formed—at least momentarily—between the fascists and the futurists that drew recruits for the former (p. 77). Likewise, with eloquent understatement that is typical of his engaging style, Bronner observes of Nolde: "The great power of his painting . . . has often been used to whitewash his activity as a charter member of the North Schleswig branch of the Nazi Party and as a supporter of the movement through its seizure of power" (p. 79). That neither Nolde nor Marinetti ultimately ended up prospering under fascism does little to quell the unease that certain aspects of Bronner's call for a reinvigoration of the modernist moment in the contemporary age might generate in the reader.

His accounts of the surrealists and the Russian avant-garde both suggest, however, that at least as far as Bronner is concerned, there is much to be gained from reengaging with certain aspects of modernism. He notes that although surrealism had an uneasy relationship with political organizations, it "generated a sense of fun and wonder in the audience. Its artists still evoke a sense of discomfort with reality and the feeling that things can be different. Surrealism may thus foster a psychological desire for change." Lest it appear that Bronner is guilty of reducing artistic movements to their political impacts, it should also be noted that this passage later continues. "Neither a dialectical foundation nor a revolutionary politics is necessary in order to exercise the imagination. Surrealist art offers its own reward" (p. 103). Indeed, Bronner is such a gifted reader of works of art that at times one wishes he would flesh out some of his claims about the particularities of certain movements with more detail. Certainly, his discussions of Vladimir Tatlin's work, such as the *Monument to the Third International* (1920) or *Corner Relief* (1915), simply whet the appetite for more discussion of particular works of art. Bronner wears his erudition so lightly that one cannot, perhaps, help but feel at times like one of the philistines the modernists so abhorred.

Given that the relationship between modernism and politics is so ticklish, it is perhaps something of a surprise that Bronner seems so intent upon refurbishing it for modern usage, asking of the movement "what might be reconfigured for progressive purposes in the present" (p. xiv). Indeed, he asserts, "The philistines are still with us, and the need still exists for a more critical and concrete approach toward cultural politics" (p. xvi). The question remains, however, as to why Bronner harks back to modernism as a means of moving forward. The answer to this puzzle is found in his palpable disdain for anything—artistic or political—that might be labeled "postmodern."

"There is," writes Bronner, "a pressing need to establish the connection between cultural criticism and constructive political thinking, one that calls for rethinking the most basic traditions of modern political aesthetics" (p. 21). Bronner finds postmodernism simply inadequate for this purpose. "At the end of the day" he writes of postmodernism, "there is only the incessant need to deconstruct consensual meanings and highlight the multiplicity of possible

significations that any object or text can display." Furthermore, he suggests, "If all categories are arbitrary, all theories merely relative in their truth claims, and any commitment to deliberation merely an expression of power, then all responses to the given order become equally valid (or invalid)" (p. 29). While there is obviously insufficient space in a review to address these rather sweeping statements in any meaningful way, it might be noted that the care and attention that Bronner gives to identifying the different strands of modernism is sadly absent in his discussion of the set of ideas that people call postmodernism. Dismissing works with which he disagrees in this way would, perhaps, be akin to dismissing modernism simply because of its associations with fascism. Moreover, there is quite a difference between saying that categories are contingent, which is what most postmodernists would claim, and saying, as Bronner does, that they are arbitrary; failing to recognize this distinction is, perhaps, what leads him to the view that postmodernists believe that any and all responses to a given order are equally valid. If Bronner is willing to celebrate modernism because it was, as he puts it, "intent of transforming everyday life by multiplying the ways in which we can look and experience it" (p. 151), and that expressionist painting, "made room for freedom" (p. 49), then it seems churlish of him to be so dismissive of postmodernist art and theory because they have done much the same for members of so many different groups: one need only think, perhaps, of the emancipatory power that Judith Butler's work on gender and sexuality has provided for many gays and lesbians across the globe.

It would be wrong, however, to end a review of such a smart, engaging, and compelling book on an—albeit significant—squabble of the meaning and impact of postmodernism. Bronner's book is so rich that it is possible to bracket this discussion, and instead to focus on one of its great strengths: the chapter on the 1978 exhibition *Paris and Berlin, 1900–1933* at the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris. Offering a reading of the exhibit that moves beyond its own self-image, Bronner nevertheless captures what was so remarkable about it and what it displayed. "*Paris and Berlin*," he writes, "created a bridge between then and now, offering a lasting glimpse into how modernism educated the sentiments of people, changed their expectations, and contributed to the unfinished struggle for liberation" (p. 144). Much the same can be said for Bronner's wonderful book.

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Steve Coll, *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2010, 685 pp.

Steve Coll, Pulitzer-prize winning author, renowned journalist, and President and CEO of the New America Foundation, masterfully weaves together stories from the history of ExxonMobil into a tale that reads like a suspense novel, complete with villains, wars, dangerous liaisons, and money. Lots and lots of money. *Private Empire* goes to great lengths to reveal the practices of the most profitable company in the world. In this well researched monograph, Coll delivers a critical, yet

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