Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 4 (53) No.2. - 2011 • Series IV
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

ASPECTS OF THE CONSERVATIVE INTELLECTUAL MODERNITY IN THE CULTURE OF CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract: *The article traces some of the important and influential ideas inside the intellectual history of modern Central Europe, especially in its German cultural design. Authors like Robert Musil, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hermann Broch, Eric Voegelin, Hans Sedlmayr et al. share a philosophical scepticism towards the revolutionary radicalism of modern thought and art. Their innovative mind, conceptual and theoretical creativity ought not be conceived along the conventional lines of modernism's antagonism to tradition, but rather as criticism of both revolutionary modernism and traditionalism as (modern) ideology. Another defining aspect would be their disposition of thinking through the consequences of secularization and the dilemmas of modernity as a secular age.*

Key words: *modernity, Central Europe, cultural conservatism, disenchantment, tradition.*

Probably the most popular of the general theories of modernity is based on the polar opposition between religion and science. But this opposition is only apparently a clear-cut one. A phrase like the "belief in reason" proves the survival of the religious ethos in modern times. Alternative theories of modernity make a strong point out of this: beginning with the description made by Tocqueville of the French Revolution as religious revolution and going along with the interpretation of modernity as Gnosticism in the work of Eric Voegelin, or with the highlighting of the religious nature of modern utopianism in Ernst Bloch, or with the theory of the return of myth in the midst of modern rationalism in Adorno & Horkheimer. As the sociology of religion has for long argued (if we are to mention only Max Weber and Peter Berger), not only that rationality and religion are not antagonistic but large processes of rationalization of the world-view had their origins in the history of Judaism and Christianity. As Edward Shils argued, the sacred seems to be a constant value (though shape-shifting) in every society that has some continuity. Religion is an answer to a constant need of social life. An entire theory of the novel coagulates in the modern high culture of Central Europe starting from the definition of the modern world as a disenchanted world. The concept of *Entzauberung* (disenchantment) will be a key word for the Central European (German-speaking) intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century. For Max Weber the notion describes the modern belief that the world has nothing magical, nothing mysterious

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and that mankind can dominate and control it through calculation and instrumental reasoning. But the aesthetic aura of the word made it appealing for German cultural pessimism (*Kultur-pessimismus*), probably the most influential form of intellectual conservatism and anti-modernism in this period. But neither Weber nor authors like Musil, Broch or Wittgenstein rally with the *Kulturpessimismus*. Modernization is irreversible and the attitude of the intellectual must be one of rational stoicism. Weber disapproves of the modern intellectual that seeks for the ultimate truth and salvation and so falls back on attitudes resembling to the forms of the religions of salvation that require the sacrifice of the intellect. However, if Weber can be called, as Eric Voegelin has called him, a "positivist with regrets", Robert Musil, although sharing the same view on modernity as disenchantment and differentiation of realms of life (*Wertsphären*), has a different attitude. It is a different understanding of the de-centering and disappearance of traditional hierarchies. For Musil (as for Kafka and sometimes Broch) disenchantment can be a way to access - through empirical investigation by means of literary instruments - the mechanisms of the individual soul. These mechanisms are now, once the religious, moral and philosophical traditions were removed, exposed to a curious gaze. Musil (with his "secular mysticism"), Broch (with his novels' apocalyptic horizon) and even Wittgenstein (with his eccentric civil asceticism) do not abandon the definition of man as religious being. One of the most interesting critiques of modernity was expressed by Eric Voegelin, a philosopher with a Viennese background and formation. Voegelin sees modernity as the final phase of the Christian civilization. The symbols of modernity are derived from the degraded or deranged symbols of Christianity. He understands modernity as a generalization of Gnosticism. The essence of the Gnostic thought is found in the attempt of overcoming the finitude of the human being and attaining perfection through *gnosis*, or esoteric knowledge. For a Gnostic, the world is evil in its essence, and salvation from the evil of the world is possible through human effort. This effort ought to be oriented towards the radical change of the world, towards its reversal or destruction. A good and just world would historically evolve out of a crooked and evil one. For Voegelin modern civilization is the result of successive Gnostic action of agents like the humanist intellectual, the puritan saint, the liberal, the progressivist and the revolutionary. Their success is due to the fact that these forms of Gnosticism laid the prize of salvation on the fervent worldly activity. This is for Voegelin the most important difference between modern and ancient Gnosticism: the modern imanentization of the eschatology. The most important modern social and political movements represent for him "political religions". What originates these *Ersatz* religions is a dire need for certainty that grows with the historical decline of faith. Gnostic knowledge satisfies this spiritual need for the modern thinkers. Modernity is granted the definition of an escape from the uncertainty of faith and a refuge inside a form of Gnostic certainty. Revolution (in Tocqueville's description) and Romanticism (in Hans Sedlmayr's view) represent the imanentization of the religious feeling. For the Austrian (Habsburg) modern culture both Revolution and Romanticism were sources of anarchy and destruction. We find here not only a critique of modernity as disenchantment but also one of modernity as re-enchantment of the world, return of the demons. And it is both a critique of political religions of modernity and of its artistic religions, such as aestheticism or avant-garde. The novel, as a modern genre,

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received here, in the high culture of Central Europe, the highest mission and esteem, the same mission the modern philosophy abandoned: the knowledge of experience in its particular reality. It was considered by the novelists (like Robert Musil, Hermann Broch or their self-declared heir Milan Kundera) or theorists (like Georg Lukács, again Broch, and Theodor Adorno) of this culture to be the most suitable instrument in the exploration of modernity. Born as a reaction to modernity - and not always against it - conservatism as an intellectual and philosophical standpoint found itself in a constant ambiguity. It is the product of modernity fighting with modernity with modern strategies and often from the standpoint of the early and idealized modernity of the free individual. This constitutes the paradox of modern conservatism: as modernity is regarded as a flight from individual spiritual freedom, a flight from the finite reality of the self towards Gnostic forms of transpersonal salvation, the true moderns remain the empiricist conservatives, gardening the possibilities of individual accomplishment inside the contingency of tradition. This is the tone in which we can describe the novels and essays of a contemporary writer, Milan Kundera. The connection these authors have with their Central European tradition is not an explicit one, based on affiliation and attachment. Their conservative vocation reveals itself after they experience the failure of modernity (their exposure to the work of Nietzsche plays a certain part in the recognition of this failure). They are not plain conservatives, having no taste for the idea of collective communion, but they share the view on man as a limited being. Tradition is thus for them more of a frame that organizes and limits the freedom of individuals allowing this freedom to exist as a positive freedom, both logically and morally. The historical, political, religious context of this alternative modernity is of great importance. This context shaped and originated the peculiar forms that enlightenment, liberalism and conservatism took in the center of Europe since the 18th century. One can focus on the case of a less known novel, *Die Stadt im Osten*, by the Transylvanian German author Adolf Meschendörfer. Although written in the 30s and displaying interesting marks of modern, expressionist esthetics, Meschendörfer's novel is contained by a genre (that of the *Bildungsroman*) and by a culture (that of the independent, protestant Transylvanian city of Kronstadt, as configured starting from the second half of the 16th century) that are both traditional. However, this tradition is not set in antinomy with modernity. Its analysis deconstructs this classical equation for we are dealing here with a protestant tradition of autonomy of the individual and of the republican democratic rule of the community. Also, as the structure of the novel's universe reveals, the *school* as charismatic institution and education and self-accomplishment as key values are central in this worldview, generating the whole system of relations between the characters. The attachment of the narrator to this tradition does not make him an adversary of modernity as a moral paradigm, but rather reticent to modernity as historical and political reality. The feeling of this special tradition moderately satisfies both moral individualism and the individual's need for the sacred.

Our study was guided by an understanding of the conservative modern mind in its ambivalent confrontation with modernity that was once admirably described by Peter Berger: "To be a conservative means above all to be aware of the historical dimension of the human condition. The knowledge of history is heavy with anguish. The moral utility of history, for this reason, is compassion.

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Unlike the enthusiasts of revolution and radical change, the conservative ought to be prudent about upsetting the fragile structures that protect men's lives from the terrors of chaos. His ought to be a prudence born of knowledgeable skepticism regarding all utopian promises, and born especially of a care to avoid the senseless suffering that most attempts to realize such promises have produced historically. The great radicalisms of the modern era have all claimed to love mankind; the conservative ought to cultivate affection for individual men in their concrete and irreplaceable particularity". (*Facing up to Modernity. Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion*, Basic Books, New York, 1977, p. 116)

Acknowledgement

The present article was written with the support from ANCS, UEFISCSU and CNCSIS through the contract nr. 863/19.01.2009 of the PNII IDEI_760 research grant, *Cultural discourses and forms of legitimation in the European literature of the 20th century*, coord. Rodica Ilie.

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