

Volker Weiß. *Moderne Antimoderne: Arthur Moeller van den Bruck und der Wandel des Konservatismus*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2012. 548 S. ISBN 978-3-506-77146-9.

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V. Weiß: Moderne Antimoderne

Arthur Moeller van den Bruck has been firmly established as a central conservative cultural critic in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany by such scholars as Fritz Stern (1961), Hans Joachim Schwierskott (1962), and more recently André Schlüter. André Schlüter's "Moeller van den Bruck: Leben und Werk" André Schlüter, Moeller van den Bruck: Leben und Werk, Köln 2010. is primarily concerned with the analysis of Moeller's writing and his circle, and considers him as a national pedagogue of sorts. Volker Weiß' exhaustive "Moderne Antimoderne: Arthur Moeller van den Bruck und der Wandel des Konservatismus", based on his doctoral dissertation completed in Hamburg, makes an ambitious move beyond the literary sphere, to analyze Moeller's polemics on art and architecture and consider his post mortem reception and appropriation. Weiß impressively manages to discuss the unusually wide range of topics on which Moeller worked, by presenting thematic sections that follow the general scope of a biographic chronology. A great strength of the monograph is that these sections are successful as stand-alone pieces, and generally avoid superficial or hasty analysis.

Weiß identifies transition as the theme of the *fin de siècle* and as representative of the Wilhelmine relationship to modernity. In his book Moeller van den Bruck emerges as the epitome of this transition, flitting between disciplines and writing freely on cultural subject matter. In his reexamination of Moeller's cultural criticism, such as in his compelling comparison with Julius Langbehn's cultural pessimism, Weiß comes to the conclusion that the ultimate difference between the two is that Moeller's

criticism was not of modernity itself but of its 'verfehlte Form' (p. 36–7). Though this differentiation is insightful and convincing, the choice of Langbehn and of Lagarde – whom Weiß names as the origin of the mode of criticism based on the premise that conservatism lacked radicalism (p. 85) – the two constantly cited exemplars of German 19th century cultural pessimism, is predictable and thus slightly disappointing. As Gerhard Kratzsch pointed out in 1969, Langbehn produced a single work and Lagarde's essays were republished in a second edition with great difficulty, so their inclusion as exemplars can not be understood as based on their representative value as authors and may, in the worst case, propagate a history of exceptions. Gerhard Kratzsch, Kunstwart und Dürerbund. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Gebildeten im Zeitalter des Imperialismus, Göttingen 1969, p. 33.

Weiß considers Moeller's cultural criticism and polemics not as prophetic, but as reflective (p. 86), since both are based on an understanding of modernity as an upheaval, which in its aesthetic prefigured developments in the political sphere, thus casting the arts as a social seismograph (p. 328). By identifying the metaphysical triumvirate of 'Rasse', 'Raum' and 'Volk', which cumulate in the nation (p. 122), as the wellspring of the arts for Moeller, Weiß situates Moeller's aesthetic criticism within his political ideology. The latter's belief in architecture's primacy in the arts explains his prominent consideration of architecture and its integration into his 'Weltanschauung'. His hope was that the simplification of forms practiced by the architectural avantgarde might crystallize into a Germanic 'Ur-Stil' (p. 136), though, as

Weiß acknowledges, even in “Der Preussische Stil” he produced no actual architectural analysis (p. 141). Although Moeller shares this body of thought and ambition with such politically disparate members of the Wilhelmine reform milieu as Wilhelm Kreis, Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Fritz Schumacher and Hermann Muthesius, Weiß neither considers this context at length, nor looks beyond Fredric Schwartz (p. 120, 210) to the work of such cultural and art historians as Barbara Miller Lane, Mark Jarzombek, Winfried Nerdinger and Sigrid Hofer.

The reexamination of the scholarly reception of Moeller’s benchmark publication of the complete works of Dostojewskji (1906–1919) is particularly successful. Arguing that its reception is determined by the deep misunderstanding that Moeller’s writing incorporated a slavophile character opposed to the German dream of eastward expansion (p. 163), Weiß makes a convincing argument that this work instead demonstrates the inconsistency of Moeller’s view of Russia, indebted to political cycles. His analysis illustrates that the work was not about Russo-German communication, but about the self-determination and reflection necessary in order for the German Reich to accede to the peak of nations (p. 186).

A further welcome aspect of Weiß’ work is his examination of the etymology and source of Moeller’s infamous title “Third Reich”. He dissects the term’s multi-layered complexity as a poetic-literary figure in a succinct excursus that spans the Christian-eschatological myth of the ‘Reich’, Ibsen’s “Kaiser und Galiläer”, the Friedrichshagener Dichterkreis, and the Rudolf Steiner Kreis, in order to draw attention to the use of the figure in literary circles before its popularization by Moeller’s book in 1923 (p. 177). Weiß makes clear that the crucial transfer of the term to the political sphere and the normalization of its use in political language occurred in Moeller’s work, which invested the term with the ‘pseudo-myth’ so palatable to the National Socialists. Weiß provides not only a differentiated examination of Moeller and the shifting notions of conservatism, but rectifies erroneous historiographical understandings such as

widely held belief that Moeller was dismissive of the NS-DAP and, in particular, of Hitler, and the conception that his vision of a third Reich differed entirely from its later reality (p. 264). By the example of a Moeller text published in mid-November 1923, considered canonical in its apparent condemnation of Hitler’s ‘proletarian Primitivism’ Weiß poignantly illustrates the appropriation and shifting of Moeller’s writing to fit first a National Socialist narrative and later his postwar reception (p. 268).

Though Weiß engages with the issue of modernity and technological progress, a more precise delineation of his position from propositions such as Jeffrey Herf’s ‘reactionary modernism’, beyond agreeing with Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani’s observation of the unhelpful dichotomy of good avantgarde and “bad” traditionalist architecture (p. 332-33), would have been very helpful. His placement of Moeller van den Bruck within Herf’s paradigm (p. 334) would have benefitted from even a brief discussion of ongoing scholarly arguments by such historians as James Retallack, Thomas Rohkrämer, and Mark Roseman, about the forced dichotomy of conservatism and modernity, and conservatism and technology.

Sure to appeal to both subject specialists and scholars investigating specific aspects of Moeller’s oeuvre, Weiß’ “Moderne Antimoderne” is a timely and empirically necessary contribution to our understanding of Moeller’s position as influential writer and critic in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, and more widely of the ongoing and interrupted narratives of German cultural criticism in the first half of the 20th century. It contributes a highly differentiated account to the expanding prosopography of the cultural conservative network of Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, and its proponents’ long-term ideological and semiotic influence. The picture of Moeller, his work and its reception emerge as much more complex than traditionally understood, and though Weiß is not able to explore the intricacies of all his chosen themes, his comprehensive study provides a very sound base for further investigation and discussion.

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