

Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, \$29.95 / £19.95. Pp. 434; ISBN 978-0-691-14639-3.

The power of Mark Greif's *The Age of the Crisis of Man* lies in its ability to synthesize a broad range of discursive currents from midcentury within a coherent intellectual frame. Seen from the perspective of this book, the political theory of Hannah Arendt, the fiction of Ralph Ellison and the anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss, to choose just three examples, have something important in common. Each provides a response to the set of fundamental questions that, Greif argues, animated midcentury thought in the United States, about the nature of man, the shape of his history, the nature of his beliefs and his relationship to technology. The broad sweep of his critical narrative looks something like this: during the late 1930s and 1940s intellectual discourse in the United States turned self-consciously towards a crisis in the abstract conception of humanity, driven in part by the advent of Nazism and Stalinism in Europe, and reified by the discovery of the death camps and the first use of nuclear weapons. During the succeeding period in the late 1940s and 1950s, the burden of exploring and elucidating the crisis of man fell to the novel, which was able to bring something to the debate that had been absent in more abstract intellectual discourse, an ability to mediate between the universal and the particular through narrating experience *in concreto*. The characteristic features of intellectual life in the 1960s and 70s can then be understood as a reaction against the humanism of the preceding decades, an attempt to fragment the figure of universal man, to displace and ultimately to evacuate him altogether from accounts of society and culture. The orthodox readings of the canonical figures that Greif addresses in the study are not radically revised, but the accumulative effect of their participation in a common discourse is to reorientate our view on the period and its logic. While recent intellectual histories of the postwar period such as Daniel T. Rodgers's *Age of Fracture* have been obliged to thematize fragmentation itself as a paradoxical common ground for thinkers, Greif's work confidently places the crisis of man at the centre of intellectual culture in the United States, a problem around which the most accomplished thinkers of midcentury orbited, whether using the tools of fiction, philosophy or theory.

The book is unapologetically concerned with centres, and its centripetal tendencies follow those of the culture it addresses. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr made clear in his 1949 book *The Vital Centre*, the spatial imagination of the cultural establishment in the postwar United States was driven by an explicit desire to claim the centre ground. Greif to some extent reproduces this world where the United States, New York and *Partisan Review* are the dominant institutions for conceiving culture, and by reference to which he navigates the period. It is significant, then, that the pairing of Ralph Ellison and Saul Bellow are placed at the heart of book, receiving two chapters dedicated exclusively to them, while discussion on either side moves swiftly through prodigious and weighty figures such as Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Derrida in the space of a few pages. Greif is particularly good in his treatment of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, launching close readings of the novel that justify not only its existing place at the centre of the US canon, but also, through critical practice, the bold claims made for the intellectual work done by fiction at this time. The Ellison that emerges from these chapters is a supple thinker who was able to see in the form of the novel a way of intervening effectively in the discourse of the day, and of revealing race as the blind spot for universalist thinking about man. The same, however, does not hold for the treatment of Bellow, whose intellectual heritage in the Chicago Great Books tradition serves to accentuate further Ellison's sophistication by comparison, and although the contrast with Ellison is neatly laid out, it's not entirely clear why *The Adventures of Augie March* should be privileged as a route into understanding the crisis of man. As centre, Bellow doesn't hold, but Ellison's dialectical habits are the force that holds Greif's book together.

As such, it is surprising that Hegel and Marx do not play more important roles in a book that takes the relationship between the singular and the universal, and debate over the teleology of history as its two biggest topics of inquiry. Greif shows dexterously how influential Ellison's reading of Hegel had been on *Invisible Man*, but goes little further. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is arguably the fullest deployment of Marxist-Hegelian thinking in addressing the crisis of man, is given relatively short shrift. The Trinidadian émigré intellectual C. L.

R. James, who was deeply committed to a revitalized Marxist humanism for midcentury America, is nowhere mentioned. The breadth and erudition of Greif's book are evident and impressive, but its understanding of the cultural establishment as the centre of gravity for the crisis of man means that such brilliant thinkers, whose relevance to New York intellectuals was peripheral at best, remain untapped as resources. The larger questions begged by this reservation are whether the crisis of man is to be understood as a U.S. phenomenon or a global one, and whether U.S. intellectuals are indeed best placed to grasp it. How would the book look different if Frantz Fanon's Marxist-humanist critique of American imperialism, rather than Saul Bellow's novel, stood with Ellison at its centre? Greif's consistent attention to émigré and transatlantic figures offers opportunities for the kind of transnational critical purchase I am thinking of, but it seems that for the purpose of the book their importance to the crisis of man is dependent on their importance to the U.S. intellectual culture. Consequently, the imperial logic that made (and continues to make) universal man a particular kind of historical problem for the United States after World War Two is never fully elucidated, even if it is glimpsed in the commentaries on the work of Hannah Arendt and Thomas Pynchon.

At the end of the book, the author himself adopts the rhetoric of a frustrated midcentury intellectual, describing himself "enmeshed in the stupidity and mediocrity of our own time" (330). There are echoes here of Adorno's lament in *Minima Moralia*, that "every visit to the cinema leaves me feeling stupider and worse," but while Adorno advocated hostile estrangement and austerity as the only response to midcentury American barbarism, Greif's recommendation is that we face our "confused and ignorant moment" in the twenty-first century (330).<sup>1</sup> This leaves us with a choice, of whether to "live in the moment and let it be" or "accept Ahab's madness to see what is at the back of it" (330). Even this turn to *Moby Dick* has its own midcentury flavor, but it rehearses not so much Matthiessen's celebrated criticism, but C. L. R. James's 1953 book on Melville, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, which reads the novel as a parable of the alienated midcentury intellectual in crisis. In the context both of the novel and of James's reading of it, the choice between intellectual withdrawal and some form of apocalyptic violence (Ahab: "If man will strike, strike through the

mask!") strikes me as a false one. It articulates the limits of an argument that does not excavate the deep roots of the crisis of man in imperialism and global capital, but it should not detract from the significant achievements of this book in providing a rich new map of midcentury U.S. thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Fragments from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 28.