

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

# ‘A RARE MOMENT OF CRISIS’ Modernist intellectual currents in Europe

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We are living in a very singular moment of history. It is a moment of crisis, in the literal sense of that word. In every branch of our spiritual and material civilization we seem to have arrived at a critical turning-point. This spirit shows itself not only in the actual state of public affairs but also in the general attitude towards fundamental values in personal and social life.

(Planck 1932: 64)

German physicist Max Planck's sense of crisis, as expressed in his 1932 book *Where is Science Going?*, echoes William Butler Yeats's famous lines from 'The Second Coming,' written in 1919 (Haughey 2002: 161) and published in 1920: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' (466). German feminist and radical socialist Rosa Luxemburg articulated this experience of crisis as the preexisting condition for political revolution, demanding action and progress and rejecting the status quo. In a 1904 letter to a friend she insists: 'for a revolutionary movement not to go forward means – to fall back. The only means of fighting opportunism in a radical way is to keep going forward' (Luxemburg 2011: 183). 'Red Rosa', as Luxemburg was known, was a fierce proponent of revolutionary activity in Europe; her brazen state-sanctioned murder in 1919 by a group of paramilitary men shook Weimar Germany's fragile democracy. These three instances show how varied and widespread the intellectual and cultural responses to the modernist groundswell were, spread across the fields of science, politics, economics, and the arts, giving rise to the formation of diverse modern identities.

With the Second Boer War and two World Wars punctuating the period of European modernism examined in this article, the era encapsulates an unparalleled sense of bouleversement and sweeping change rendered even more turbulent by the Russian Revolution (1917) and the Spanish Civil War (1936–9). The Second Boer War (1899–1902) indicated the first faltering steps of an era of rapid industrialization, preceded by the Berlin Conference (1884–5), which focused on the colonial distribution of Africa and spoke to Europe's atavistic exploitation of the world. But it was the First World War (1914–18), also known as the Great War or 'the war to

end all wars', which marked the fundamental untenability of the old sociopolitical models. Triggered by the assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo, Bosnia, the War's unprecedented scale involved virtually every European nation in the hostilities. For the first time in recorded history, military belligerence and aggression involved mass-manufactured killing machines and chemical warfare.

Against this cataclysmic backdrop, European modernism offers a remarkable level of philosophical, intellectual, ideological, scientific, technological, political, and aesthetic development. Distinct from the values, mores, and relative peace of the Victorian era, the pace and intensification of radical thought and action during the modernist years provided the breeding ground for the proliferation of new dissentingisms, schools, movements, and coteries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Amongst numerous other debates, the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of Europe was shaped by a wide spectrum of ideas ranging from socialism to Keynesian macroeconomics; suffragism, subjectivity and fashion; psychoanalysis and formalism; urbanism and primitivism; quantum theory and science; Nietzschean vitalism and the avant-garde; communism, fascism, and National Socialism.

## ECONOMIC CRISES AND MODERN ECONOMIC THOUGHT

Austrian filmmaker Fritz Lang's 1927 silent film *Metropolis* offers a striking cinematic depiction of the treacherous monotony of the modern labourer in the throes of alienation, estranged from nature, self, and society by means of modern industry, technology, and politics. As traditional ideologies like religion ebbed, new political and economic allegiances (liberal, reactionary; capitalist, Marxist) gained traction. The first few decades of the twentieth century saw the marked increase in the number and frequency of economic transactions made between individuals, resulting from more wage-earners being employed. Labour agitation won important improvements for workers, such as fair wages and legal regulations on the number of hours one could work. In turn, these developments increased the availability and circulation of capital. The surge in expenditure and consumption was proudly displayed through colossal public spectacles celebrating the triumph of commodity culture in the World Expositions of London (1851), Paris (1889, 1900), and Chicago (1893, 1933). The expositions, which Walter Benjamin called 'places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish' (Benjamin 2002: 7), featured dizzying achievements in architecture and industry, allowing visitors to enjoy escapist fantasies by trying out the latest consumer goods or visiting mock ethnographic villages, trenchant examples of colonial exoticism.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels expounded on the nature of the commodity and commodity fetishism in revolutionary terms that would be adapted by the theorists and activists of the modernist era. 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism', Marx and Engels wrote presciently in *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848 (Marx and Engels 1986: 33); by 1917, the Russian Revolution not only dealt the death blow to Russia's monarchy (quite literally by executing the Romanov family) but ushered in the Communist system with the October Revolution. Led by Vladimir Lenin, the 'red' Bolsheviks defeated the 'white' Mensheviks (of monarchist and liberal forces). Adapting orthodox Marxism, Marxism-Leninism

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