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Review of Claudia Agostini, Monuments of Progress: Modernization and Public Health in Mexico City

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Scientific Revolution. Ernst Müller interprets the German Enlightenment in light of an “amphiboly” of religion and art—that is, the simultaneous emergence and mutual imbrication of “aesthetics” and “religion” as urgently contested categories (indeed, subdisciplines)—in philosophy. The argument commences (Ch. 1) with a convincing case that neither “aesthetics” (especially as a systematic theory of the arts) nor “religion” (as a generic concept—i.e., not simply “Christianity” or “theology”) achieved philosophical salience until the eighteenth century. This occurred specifically in Protestant Germany, where both categories were mobilized to restrict the impetuous rationalism spawned by the Scientific Revolution so as to secure traditional (specifically, Pietist) cultures and identities. Müller draws on the most up-to-date historiography to demonstrate that the interest in “aesthetics”—that is, the “knowledge” attainable in sensual experience apart from logical concepts—that is, the argument for religious recourse through sensibility to the sacred domains foreclosed by pure rational inquiry.

Accordingly, Johann Georg Hamann’s hitherto seemingly eccentric preoccupations assume a systematic centrality in Müller’s narrative (Ch. 3), even as Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment remains its teleological climax. Where Hamann intended to maximize the opportunities of a mutuality of the sensual and the supersensible, Kant did all he could to “depotentiate the supersensible” (Ch. 4) significance of the aesthetic. Müller does a splendid job of contextualizing Hamann’s idea of Glauben (belief or faith) not simply in David Hume but in this German religious and exegetical context (the Bible as a poetic text, aesthetically available for spiritual communion). He links Hamann to Friedrich Jacobi, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Søren Kierkegaard in a manner that seems far more historically compelling than, for example, Isaiah Berlin’s similar linkage under the dubious rubric of “Counter-Enlightenment.” The discourse was too central to the Aufklärung to be its “counter.” And this was precisely what concerned Kant, who exercised his considerable philosophical prowess to defuse what he saw as its powerful threat to rationalism. Müller’s interpretation of Kant’s Third Critique seeks above all to demonstrate how Kant tried to keep aesthetics and religion as far apart as possible, even or perhaps especially in his treatment of the crucial category of the “sublime.”

The positions of Hamann and Kant formed the force field between “faith” and “knowledge” that shaped subsequent German Idealism and Romanticism. Müller traces this out from Fichte and Schiller through Schleiermacher, Hegel, and the Hegelian school, culminating with Kierkegaard (Chs. 5–7). The discussion of Schleiermacher (Ch. 6) subtly distinguishes the latter’s effort to use aesthetics for the vindication of religion from any attempt to reduce religion to aesthetic delectation. Similarly, Müller’s discussion of Hegel (Ch. 7) works intricately through his argument about the “end of art” in relation to Hegel’s historicist vindication of religious—specifically Christian—truth. Kierkegaard forms the appropriate end point, after a brief but cogent visitation of both the right and the left Hegelians in Germany.

Ästhetische Religiosität und Kunstreligion in den Philosophien von der Aufklärung bis zum Ausgang des deutschen Idealismus is a carefully researched, meticulously argued, and dauntingly comprehensive tour de force in the intellectual history of Germany and of the key categories of religion, art, and the “religion of art” in modern times. Moreover, Müller contextualizes his investigation in terms of the postmodern fascination with the “sublime” (e.g., Lyotard) as a category of the “altogether other” that seeks to replay the aesthetic gambit first undertaken in the eighteenth century in a new effort to retrieve access to sacred ground. That gives the work a potently presentist twist.

JOHN H. ZAMMITO

Modern (Nineteenth Century to 1950)


Claudia Agostoni’s book on the history of urban renewal in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mexico City is a significant contribution to a growing body of literature exploring the conjunction of science, medicine, public health, engineering, and public policy in Latin America.
The glory and mess of Mexico City is a subject of great fascination, ripe for exploration, discussion, and analysis. Agostoni takes up this task from the perspective of the history of science—in particular, that of engineering and public health. Her attempt, aimed at a specialized audience, is successful but limited, perhaps because of the vast and complex nature of the city and its population. But even a limited discussion of this topic adds to our understanding of the interplay of ideas and technologies and the social beliefs and assumptions of the period in question.

Agostoni’s study of urban engineering follows a chronological structure, beginning with an investigation of ideas about the city, disease, public health, and sanitation in the late colonial period. The Spanish identified Mexico City as pathological early on and sought to cure it with new public health policies. Agostoni next discusses the rise of “scientific” urban reform in the late nineteen century, including attempts to improve on colonial efforts to save the city from the ill effects of being built on a marshy lake. The story is made more interesting because the years in question coincide with the political period known as the Porfiriato (1876–1910). Named for the dictator Porfirio Díaz, the Porfiriato was a time of great attempts at “progressive” reform of Mexican society, with the ultimate goal of increasing the flow of foreign capital into the Mexican economy. Díaz gathered around him a group of influential men, known as the cientificos, who were charged with applying the latest scientific principles to create a strong government, economy, and population. Thus, the remaining three chapters of Agostoni’s book deal with Porfiran attempts to modernize Mexico City, including discussions of the mapping of a growing and changing city; the raising of political monuments and the modernization of the city; and attempts to manage the city’s drainage problem. There is significant overlap in parts of all three chapters that goes beyond the necessary repetition of themes. Indeed, only the last chapter, on water management, introduces new material and analysis.

Agostoni waits until the final pages of the book to present her thesis. She concludes that despite the great poverty of the populace, the turn-of-the-century Porfiran government chose to ignore root causes of urban problems and to emphasize “devising and applying technological, educational, and scientific solutions to questions of public health” (p. 155). These policies masked an “exclusionary modernization project” that aimed to discipline a number of social groups, including migrants and the poor. Readers familiar with the literature on the history of science and medicine in Latin America (see the work of Nancy Leys Stepan, Marcos Cueto, and Katharine Bliss, among others) will find a familiar story here: that of politicians selectively using science, medicine, and public health ideas and practices to create order in a seemingly out-of-control society. The promise of Mexico as a subject for this type of analysis lies in the country’s strong tradition of populism and revolution, which reached a zenith immediately after the Porfiriato, but Agostoni largely misses the opportunity to make clear what is distinct in the Mexican story.

While Monuments of Progress is based on solid and thorough research, it only hints at enlightening us on larger themes, such as the social effects of scientists’ and physicians’ contribution to the Porfiriato or the role of science in shaping Mexico’s dynamic political culture in the years leading up to the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). Its relatively narrow analysis will make it of interest to a limited audience of specialists. Nonetheless, the book is a welcome contribution to the growing historiography on the history of science, technology, and medicine in Latin America.

Julia Rodriguez

Peter Ayres. Harry Marshall Ward and the Fungal Thread of Death. vii + 168 pp., illus., apps., bibl., index. Saint Paul, Minn.: APS Press, 2005. $79 (cloth).

As the title suggests, this book is a biography of Harry Marshall Ward (1854–1906), whose life it affectionately describes. Ward’s life coincided with a formative period in the development of plant pathology, occupying the interval between the publication of Darwin’s Origin of Species in 1859 and the rediscovery of Mendel’s laws in 1900: in fact, he was one of the founders of the discipline. There has been less research in the history of science in this period than in those pertaining to Darwin and Mendel. This period is rightfully regarded as crucial for the development of evolutionary theory, embryology, and bacteriology, especially as these anticipate modern genetics.

One striking point made by this biography is that Ward led a checkered life. He grew up in a close family, but his father’s financial ruin obliged him to conclude his education when he was fourteen. He worked and took night classes, and in London he was befriended by a wealthy...