

THE POWER OF DEATH; THE REMNANTS OF LOVE

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It is one thing to go to Rosenstock-Huessy again and again to take personal orientation in the epigrammatic wisdom one finds in his work; but it is something else, entirely more sober, to make those works speak in a systematic way to the formation of a new Europe and a new global economy-- which I take to be the themes the conference organizers had in mind when they issued their call. As far as I know, Rosenstock-Huessy did not leave us with any blueprints for the economy of the future, and that makes this difficult set of issues impossible to address directly. By indirection, I shall give here a very brief essay treatment of the question of what Rosenstock-Huessy might say about an economic "third way" neither capitalist nor centrally planned.

ECONOMICS AND DEATH

I believe it is fair to say that Rosenstock-Huessy was, at best, ambivalent when it came to thinking about economics. At least in one small part, this ambivalence was autobiographical. Rosenstock-Huessy's father operated a small, private bank in Berlin; and though he wanted to pursue other careers, Rosenstock-Huessy offered to join the family firm.¹ His father declined, saying such an enterprise had no future. Yet, Rosenstock-Huessy told his students at Dartmouth, "The bankers are the greatest asses of the world, in my conviction. They have no way of ever looking beyond their own planning."² Commerce, he warned a meeting of Peace Corps volunteers in 1966, tears down the architecture of generations, ruptures the fine vessels of history.³ We Americans have contributed to international culture a famous cautionary tale to this effect called *Jaws*: when the merchants insist on keeping open the beach, the shark eats their children.

Rosenstock-Huessy's harsh words to the young Americans he addressed in the 1950s and 1960s were, in part, no doubt, a reaction to the often oppressive discontinuity we experience in the U.S. when vast resources and remarkable ingenuity are employed in an unmitigatedly instrumental manner to obtain the crassest of commercial ends. Of course, Rosenstock-Huessy could not stop at mere moral complaint; he tried to place this problem in a larger framework of understanding. Significantly, the term he often used to describe predatory commerce and the practices it dictates was "dead."

"Behind every one thinkable problem of our social sciences we can trace this major preoccupation of distinguishing between the living and the dead elements of the social pattern," Rosenstock-Huessy wrote.⁴ In his 1954 Dartmouth course "Comparative Religion" he theorized five kinds of life-- mechanical, organic, conscious [economic], passionate, and political, expressed as power, rhythm, purpose-intelligence, love, and sacrifice.⁵ To focus on one or two of these forms or "cycles" of life-- and particularly to accept the reductive theses of those who are specialists in the mechanical, organic, and economic-- was, in Rosenstock-Huessy's way of thinking, a form of living death.

Is it really first thing that you weigh 150 pounds? That would be if physics

rules the world. Or is it really important that economics rules the world? Gentlemen, you know very well that they don't rule you. You would despise you if they would. But why can't you see that in any one moment these two great powers of life and death are lying in ambush against you? The powers of death are the modern natural sciences. They are very good for dead things, but as soon as you say that you can learn for your life anything from them, they are poisonous...⁶

Do you meet with the event of your being created, or do you meet with the event of your being...--undone, by physics? One is, do you describe your fall, your gravity, your resistance, your tiredness, your laziness-- as the main item in life? That you are full of weight, and dross, you see, and feces, and that you have to die. Is this the first thing? That you're already dead, so to speak? Or is the first thing that, despite everything, you are called forth to create life?⁷

And, so, in this spirit, Rosenstock-Huessy tried to rouse his students to life by chiding them about their "dead things," their television sets and their price tags,⁸ their dead numbers,⁹ even their brains-- the organs of death.¹⁰ He warned his hearers about the American national religion of inducing people to buy things they do not want,¹¹ of that capitol of commercial stupidity Chicago where they even ruin the encyclopedias they sell,¹² about the *Who's Who* substitution of a "standard of living" for life,¹³ about people who change their minds to get and keep a job,¹⁴ and those who would glorify "toughs, cheaters, and sellers."¹⁵ "Everyone knows," he said, "that the wage-earner in the factory has no life."¹⁶

In other words, Rosenstock-Huessy put his curse on all of the dead works of competitive acquisition, bonehead corporatism, the marketing hustle, and the violence of industry, no matter how they are disguised, rationalized, legitimized, and rewarded. But Rosenstock-Huessy did not repudiate death and the dead; for dead things have their usefulness, dying is the most important sign system, and death is the most powerful motive force in human existence. Life and death are not separate paradigms to be entered and exited at will, or to be accepted or avoided as one pleases: they are more nearly a single dialectical whole. Therefore, all education, Rosenstock-Huessy told his students in 1953, grows out of the desire to control and postpone death;¹⁷ death, one might aver, is the universal curriculum. "The danger of death is the first cause of any knowledge about society."¹⁸ So, while Rosenstock-Huessy might encourage us to form the terms of our lives outside of the "normal" discourse on prosperity and political economy, he would advise a constant surveillance of these matters in a vocabulary consistent with our actual predicament. I suggest what Rosenstock-Huessy offered as the vocabulary suitable for our ongoing encounter with death is the orienting language of love. "Death...under the mask of love is natural man's share. Love, under the mask of death is historical man's share."¹⁹ As creatures self-conscious of our existence in time, how is it love can be a direct address to, rather than a sentimental evasion of, our strange world of confusion about life and death?

ECONOMICS AND LOVE

A new European economy, neither capitalist nor centrally planned; a new integrated global economy that will suture into its fabric peace and justice! Is this discussion not already utopian enough without embarrassing all of those gathered by speaking of love?

Perhaps we can ease the way, slightly, by saying we already possess a great

tradition which conflates political economy and love. Of course, in part, this tradition is Biblical, but I would call attention to one of our American adherents to this tradition, Walt Whitman. Whitman wrote his essay "Democratic Vistas" and many of his poems in a furious agony about life in our democracy tainted by civic malfeasance, fouled with cultural mediocrity, and twisted by commercial mendacity. He decried the American "hollowness at heart."²⁰ (Europeans, and all of us, might turn to "Democratic Vistas" today to capture the frustrations and fear which accompanies the end of the Soviet system.) Yet Whitman could not evade the most fundamental principle, "that a kelson of the creation is love."²¹ Even in the midst of the American Civil War he could hear that "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice":

Be not disheartened, affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet...

. . . .

It shall be customary in the houses and streets to see manly affection,
The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly,
The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,
The continuance of Equality shall be comrades.

These shall tie you and band you stronger than hoops of iron,
I, ecstatic, O partners! O lands! with the love of lovers tie you.

And then the prophetic voice added this postscript:

(Were you looking to be held together by lawyers?
Or by an agreement on a paper? or by arms?
Nay, nor the world, nor any living thing, will so cohere.)

If Whitman's dream of love solving the problems of freedom seems comical in our world of suspicion, then consider the ways Rosenstock-Huessy followed this thought.

"The history of the human race is written on a single theme: How does love become stronger than death?" wrote Rosenstock-Huessy.²² The manifestations of this reality in economics is the plurality of the forms of production and consumption:

Ingredients of capitalistic, socialistic, feudal, communistic, monastic, paternal, mercantilistic procedures enter into a sound economy as well as features of a family economy, a type very much by itself. A navy, a family, a convent, a hospital, an artist, a factory represent this variety of economies conspicuously enough....

That anybody should try to reduce these contradictory economies of our various stages and phases and occupations into the straightjacket of pure capitalism or pure communism or anything pure, has mystified me all my life.²³

In the pure impurity of economic relationships, love erupts in ownership, self-discipline, education, charity, invention, sacrifice, stewardship, defensiveness, display, and law. Reticence and secrecy, display and indoctrination, each has its place in an economy that is nothing less than many contradictory languages that must be spoken in succession and simultaneity. Global love then, to the extent we can even imagine and express it, is not an economic dogma²⁴ but many truths, each one valid under certain circumstances, each with its own discourse.

In part, I suspect Rosenstock-Huessy accepted in the mid-1940s, when he wrote "Mad Economics and Polyglot Peace" and the concluding chapter of *The Christian Future*,

the broad outlines of a Keynesian economics of full employment and the Myrdalian "welfare state" as an expression of the nearer realization of Christian compassion. He told his students in "Universal History" in 1956 that the Russian Revolution had made the business cycle obsolete. He told these same students that the big corporations, upon which life as we know it has come to depend, were less private enterprises than public utilities.²⁵ There is that arresting phrase in *The Christian Future*: what we are in need of is not the soul trust of the church or the brain trust of science but the stomach trust of economics.²⁶ *The Christian Future* could hardly be more explicit in its concern for the meaningful employment of the veterans of the Second World War. Historical conscientization in the Twentieth Century would make any other view indecent. But if economics is a never ending mix and match of techniques and purposes (guild socialism! computerized cottage industry!), then these instruments and ends must always be animated by love, lest they become fetishism and morbidity.

I shall make one last stab at this and give it all a little bit of a twist before I let this subject go for the day. I take as my texts several marvelous poems by a man named William Martin who studied with Rosenstock-Huessy at Dartmouth. In his "Guideposts Along the Way" Martin says:

Only Economics could imagine
That the Central act of free citizenship
Is the choosing of Brand A over Brand B.

In "El Pueblo: An Introductory Lecture" he observes:

A place is called a community
when you can live your life
without stepping outside it.
The social whole, says the dictionary,
on sociology's authority,
which owns the entire subject matter
despite the pompous objections
of Economics and Government--
a combination of elements
described by Thomas Carlyle
(Emerson's friend and mentor)
as "anarchy plus the constable."
No such places exist
as an "economy" and a "polity"
lying outside the community
and gravely aspiring to rime with it.

We can begin by taking a chortle of delight in Martin's confident twitting of economics and political science; but there is a great deal more here which, unpacked in a telegraphic fashion might read: "central act, free, citizenship, choice, not anarchy or constabulary, material existence, gravity, aspiration, community." Martin issues us a severe test of our willingness to set aside our sentimental ideals, our antswarm political panics, our bad faith philosophical anthropology, and our smug nonchalance about what is and what is not in our interest and under our control, and take up the one true question bigger than economics and as big as love, the question of the formation of community.

About the formation of community Rosenstock-Huessy was a genius. No essay and no conference could exhaust what he has contributed to this subject. The participants in this conference must certainly take to heart what Rosenstock-Huessy has to offer community makers concerning generations, calendars, citizen diplomacy, industrial

organization, and much more. But I will suggest something else, perhaps less pleasant and inspiring for many readers, about the quest to make love triumph over death, and economy subordinate to community. Today, I believe, this quest requires us to become deeply involved in politics.

Rosenstock-Huessy told his students in "Universal History" in 1956 that, "All laws...are the remnants of love, if they are rightly built..."²⁷ Our genius, inspiration, and love must be put into words, shared, debated, legislated, institutionalized, obeyed, and amended by new inspiration. And today especially the healthy varieties of economics and future economics must be protected by law from the predators with their extra-legal quarter-by-quarter efficiency maximizing paradigm. This is the imperative of life in its battle with the forces of death today. In this important 1956 lecture Rosenstock-Huessy neglected to develop the corollary to his position on law and love: all laws wrongly built are the remnants of fear! Our communities are littered, our lives are hampered, our spirits are assaulted by the remnants of fear. At the moment of political enactment it is hard to know fear from love, death from life. But we know it in time, and we know that our times demand we clear away the one to make way for the other in order to assure there will be that crucial "interplay of various economics." If we make this open and public struggle against the monists of fear and death and in favor of the plural discourses of life; then, as Rosenstock-Huessy told those student in 1956, in the end, our grandchildren will bless us.

NOTES

¹Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lectures to "Comparative Religion," Dartmouth College, 1954, lecture 1, page 10.

²Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lectures to "Universal History," Dartmouth College, 1954, lecture 16, page 20.

³Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lectures to "Peace Corps," Vershire, Vermont, 1966, lecture 3, page 12. Catastrophe does not disrupt families, he said, money does. Transcript of lectures to "Cross of Reality," Dartmouth College, 1953, lecture 24, page 9.

⁴Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "In Defense of the Grammatical Method," in *Speech and Reality* (Norwich: Argo Books, 1970), page 21. "Superstition is an attempt not to say what is dead and what is alive, you see, but to hang onto something that is already dead too long." "Cross of Reality," lecture 22, page 9.

⁵"Comparative Religion," lectures 10 and 11.

⁶"Comparative Religion," lecture 11, page 25. Of related interest read Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution* (Norwich: Argo Books, 1969), pages 741-753.

⁷"Comparative Religion," lecture 11, pages 27-28.

⁸Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lectures to "St. Augustine By the Sea," Santa Monica, California, 1962, lecture 1, page 13.

⁹"St. Augustine By the Sea," lecture 1, page 8; lecture 2, page 1.

¹⁰"Cross of Reality," lecture 24, page 17. Also see Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lectures to "Circulation of Thought," Dartmouth College, 1954, lecture 7, page 1.

¹¹Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lectures to "Hinge of Generations," Dartmouth College, 1953, lecture 8, page 9.

¹²Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lectures to "Greek Philosophy," Dartmouth College, 1956, lecture 11, page 5.

¹³"Cross of Reality," lecture 15, page 6.

¹⁴"Cross of Reality," lecture 7, page 2. Also see "Greek Philosophy," lecture 10, page 15.

¹⁵"Cross of Reality," lecture 15, page 11. "America in the last 40 years has tried to face [problems] by suspended animation. By diminishing the danger of death, they have thought they could extend life. Even to 150 years. Terrible. Real life, you see, overcomes much death by much life. You have to take your choice." Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lecture to "Circulation of Thought," Dartmouth College, 1956, page 18.

¹⁶"Comparative Religion," lecture 11, page 2.

¹⁷"Cross of Reality," lecture 24, page 6.

¹⁸"In Defense of the Grammatical Method," page 21.

¹⁹"Cross of Reality," lecture 24, page 9.

²⁰Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," in *Walt Whitman Prose Works 1892*, Vol. 2, Ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: NYU Press, 1964), pages 369-370.

²¹Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City: Doubleday, 1926), page 28.

²²Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Soziologie*, Bd. II (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958), page 759.

²³Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Mad Economics or Polyglot Peace," unpublished paper, 1944, page 17.

²⁴"Man is free to choose any old or new way in economics. Matter is undogmatic. You may have to have a dogma about God because otherwise Hitler may be enthroned as Christ as this literally was done in Germany by the German Christians, people with a soft brain. But under no circumstances can you have a dogma about money or wheat or the optimum size of a factory; if you try to have such a dogma, the people may have neither work nor bread.

The reader need hardly be told that the situation thirty years ago was topsy-turvy. Dogmas about God were pooh-poohed, but dogmas about economics were taken to be infallible. When people put a wrong emphasis on the static and the dynamic elements of their judgment, they lose their judgment. The misplaced dogmatism led to the world wars. If we wish to conclude peace, the dogmas must be placed outside this material world of ours. An economic dogma is impossible because in economics, we consume every product of time. Everything may be right at one moment and wrong at another. If we try to handle economics dogmatically, the world falls on evil days." "Mad Economics or Polyglot Peace," page 18.

²⁵Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, transcript of lectures to "Universal History," Dartmouth College, 1956, lecture 7, pages 15-17.

²⁶Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966, 1946), page 159.

²⁷"Universal History," 1956, lecture 9, page 34.