

Return to Order

John Horvat II. 2013. York, Pennsylvania: The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property. ISBN 978-0-9882148-0-4. \$21.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Kristen Cooper, Gordon College

John Horvat's ambitious book, *Return to Order*, argues that the time is ripe for Americans to move from "frenetic intemperance" to an "organic Christian society." The first third of the book, roughly, outlines what the author perceives to be the critical failings of modern American society. The second third introduces the author's visions for alternative social structures, which are loosely modeled on the feudal society of Medieval Europe. The last third proposes some characteristics of the economic and social institutions in this vision. In this review, I attempt to summarize Mr. Horvat's central ideas and suggest how these ideas may enrich the thinking of Christian economists. I also point to what I view as some critical shortcomings.

The author defines "frenetic intemperance" as a "restless, explosive, and relentless drive inside man that manifests itself in modern economy by 1) seeking to throw off legitimate restraints; and 2) gratifying disordered passions" (p. 17). This drive is caused (or at least, increased) by a concept called The Revolution. This concept was introduced by Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, a Brazilian Catholic activist, in a 1959 book, which was translated to English in 1974 as "Revolution and Counter-Revolution"; Corrêa de Oliveira also expanded upon it in 1977 (Corrêa de Oliveira, 2002). According to Mr. Horvat, the impulse of The Revolution is seen in the Renaissance and Protestant Revolution, the French Revolution, the Communist Revolution, and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's in the U.S. (p. 18).

The first third of the book theorizes about the economic and social consequences of frenetic intemperance and the factors that facilitate it. I will highlight five of the hypothesized consequences. "Gigantism" (p. 29) refers to the tendency for businesses to grow too large; according to the author it leads to inefficiency and an overly globalized culture, and it paves the way for socialism. "Mass standardization" (p. 37) refers to a depersonalized pattern of production and consumption that is associated with a disconnect between producers and the true needs of consumers. This leads to a loss of creativity, lack of locally customized

products, and lower quality of products. Another economic malady arising from frenetic intemperance is the “rule of money,” which is synonymous for “misuse of money” (p. 101). Instead of serving as a means of exchange and store of value, money becomes a measure of value for all things and an end sought unto itself. This misuse manifests itself in speculative investing and a system of easy credit where people chase things they can’t afford. Frenetic intemperance also facilitates an abuse of technology, where cultural values of speed and novelty are over-emphasized and the result is a dehumanizing “massification”: “the reduction of modern men into insignificant equals performing mechanical tasks,” (p. 60). Finally, according to Mr. Horvat, a chief cultural problem associated with frenetic intemperance is “atomized” individualism (p. 75). Since the 1960’s, members of society have thrown off all restraint in the name of “liberation,” but, perhaps paradoxically, this has led to a rejection of the logic and internal order that connected people to each other. Throughout the text, other economic and social phenomena also interact with the concept of frenetic intemperance: the activity of merchandising gives rise to frenetic intemperance and mass standardization; progressivism glorifies the “new and improved” above all else as it breaks down all barriers and social institutions; intervention by the State is also caused by, and contributes to, many of the problems discussed above.

Mr. Horvat’s proposed solution is to reject frenetic intemperance and turn to a correct model for society – an “organic Christian society” – which can be based on the feudal society of Medieval Europe. He is concerned that America’s “co-op model,” which relies on people contributing to the civic society from which they jointly benefit, is breaking down (p. 13). Instead, the “feudal bond” can serve as a social glue; this connection between people is like a “family spirit”: personal, multi-layered, and characterized by mutual responsibility (p. 191). Two concepts are central for enacting this vision. First, society needs “representative characters” to be exemplars and provide leadership; citing MacIntyre (2007), the lives of representative characters are symbolic of society’s morals. Mr. Horvat emphasizes that these would not be “today’s unrepresentative figures: celebrities, media stars, and unprincipled politicians” (p. 205). Second, the structure of society must facilitate “upright spontaneity” (p. 150) – an order that results not from external control but from decentralized, creative behavior in a shared system of values.

I will briefly sketch some features of the institutions in Mr. Horvat's proposed vision for an organic Christian society. People's interactions with the *State* are characterized by subsidiarity, voluntary service of individuals to the State, leadership by representative figures, and bridges of cooperation to the Church. The *Church* speaks to spiritual matters and produces social capital. *Man* is correctly viewed as "homo sapiens," (meaning wise), not "homo economicus" (p. 223). As a result, social structures are grounded on people's virtues, not vices. All structures acknowledge people's autonomy and properly direct their "vital flux" – a term for the complementary ordering principle seen in all living things (p. 173). The traditional *family* is defended and preserved, and people come to see the State and other organizing bodies, and especially their guilds, as an extended family. *Economic activity* is based on the virtues of justice, prudence, and charity. Drawing from the Middle Ages model, economic ideals include self-sufficiency, guilds and other local organization of industry, and local economies. In contrast to merchandising systems, producers and consumers directly interact in local economies, and production satisfies needs instead of shaping them. In contrast to gigantism, economic and social relationships exhibit proportional scales. *Consumer values* turn from quantity, utility, and mass appeal to quality, beauty, and individualization.

As the summary above suggests, Mr. Horvat sets out to address a huge range of topics (including monetary theory, legal theory, and urban development, in addition to those mentioned above) and introduces new terminology at many points along the way. As a result, two potentially significant limitations of the book are its breadth and organization. Many of his ideas are intriguing, and could profitably be developed in their own right, but do not receive sufficient attention here. The book totals 51 chapters at an average of only 5–6 pages each. Perhaps due in part to the quantity of new terminology introduced, the author's arguments are also difficult to follow at times. It is not clear until Chapter 19 that the society of the Middle Ages is the foundation for the recommended model.

From a Christian perspective, an important question is whether the societal outcomes that Mr. Horvat attributes to "frenetic intemperance," could simply be attributed to humankind's sinful nature. It seems that many of his concerns reflect situations where something that could be good has been distorted. Of course, if this assessment is correct then

a central challenge for actually implementing Mr. Horvat's reforms is to find the right balances. At times it seems that Mr. Horvat just wants the good without the bad. He decries "gigantism" but admits the desirability of taking advantages of economies of scale (p. 29). His problem with the Industrial Revolution and other technological advances is not the technology itself but the way it has increased frenetic intemperance (p. 27). Technology itself is not a problem but its de-personalizing effects (p. 50) and its role in people's progressive utopias (p. 59) are. When Mr. Horvat offers specific ideas for societal change, they often involve some moral sense of balance. For example, he contrasts "gaudy luxuries" with luxury that is a "tasteful expression and not the measure of honor" (p. 267). Although international trade is desirable for some goods, it should also be limited by "healthy customs and local elites" (p. 283). On some level I think I might know what he means. But in future work, I would encourage Mr. Horvat to wrestle with the details. What criteria might people and communities actually use to strike the right balances, and how might they discern the benefits of new technology without its distortions?

For use in a classroom setting, Mr. Horvat's citation style and gender-specific writing may also present limitations. The author refers to all personal pronouns in the male form; this is a somewhat confusing choice (if there is a distinctive role for women in an organic Christian society, it is never discussed), which does not seem likely to connect with students. To construct and defend his arguments, the author builds on an impressive collection of over 180 sources. Papal authors are heavily cited throughout. However, many claims are made without proof where it appears that empirical research ought to have something to add – e.g., optimal size of the firm in the context of efficiency and gigantism (p. 32), the impact of technology on human psychology (p. 68), and the level of innovation in the Middle Ages compared to the Renaissance (p. 238). Readers who are familiar with the existing literature that attempts to integrate insights from Christian faith with the discipline of economics may also wish that Mr. Horvat had acknowledged other proposed visions for "Christian economies" in some form. For example, he refers to "spheres" as a model for the Church and the State (p. 213) without reference to the theory of sphere sovereignty in the Kuyperian tradition of Reformed thought (e.g., Hoksbergen, 1992). Given their common foundation in Catholic teaching, I was surprised that Mr. Horvat did not

reference the apparent similarities between some of his ideas and those of Distributism (e.g., Lanz, 2008).

Despite these limitations, I encourage Christian economists who seek to understand a diversity of perspectives in Christian economic thought to consider the perspective offered by John Horvat in *Return to Order*. Although Mr. Horvat is not (to the best of my knowledge) trained as an economist, his social commentary reflects real concerns and raises interesting economic questions. For example, in what models is it possible that technological change could lead to sub-optimal quality of goods or inadequate local customization? Does society undervalue social capital and overvalue convenience, in some sense? Readers may also be uplifted by his exhortations: he calls readers to unity, a joint search for meaning, and a re-orientation towards the sublime rather than the materialistic. Although this call to unity seems to be addressed to a narrow target of Catholic men, its basic premise – that reorienting society must ultimately come from a call to values, not a call to policies (p. 311) is one that many Christian economists may embrace.

References

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