

Neil G. Robertson

The Fall of the Modern Age?

Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World

by Chantal Delsol

ISI Books, 2003.

After more than three decades of a constant stream of French post-modernist theory, for many of us the identification of contemporary French thought with post-modernity has become nearly complete. It is therefore with a certain sense of wonderment, or at least curiosity, that one must greet the publication of this translation of Chantal Delsol's explicitly un-post-modern contemplation of "contemporary man" and the cultural situation in which he finds himself. For Delsol, contemporary man is not flying high in the ether of deconstruction, *différence*, and the endless play of meaning. Rather, he is an Icarus fallen, a creature whose wings have melted from flying too close to the sun and who now walks confused and disillusioned in the labyrinth of the very human condition from which he sought escape. From this perspective post-modernity is but a final form of modernity—broken wings flapping wildly. For Delsol, such efforts to fly from reality have come to an end. The truth of the contemporary situation is that we stand disappointed and disoriented in a world we hardly recognize as our own, clinging to principles and postures we know at the same time to be empty and vain.

Delsol is clearly a formidable person.

She is the mother of a small tribe of children, the wife of a controversial conservative French politician, and is involved in religious concerns, specifically contemporary Catholicism. Professionally, she is a university professor, a respected novelist, and a noted contributor to French political thought. In the latter field she has been particularly involved in questions of European federalism and in efforts to apply the originally Catholic concept of subsidiarity to the contemporary political world. Thus, she has been a critic of the centralizing tendencies both within France and in the European Union. In short, while she is a critic of "contemporary man," she is also—and knows herself to be—fully a "contemporary." As she puts it, "I obviously do not feel that I am essentially any different from the contemporary man of which I write."

She describes *Icarus Fallen* as "very much a *sociology of the mind*." Her intent in this work is to elucidate the spiritual or mental standpoint in which humanity today finds itself, a standpoint which finds the world empty, or meaningless, or uncertain. Her general claim is that modernity has ex-

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posed itself, especially with the collapse of Soviet Marxism, as a failed flight from the real. As a result, the hyperbolic ideals and hopes that modernity propounded have led to a radical deflation. We now live in a strange realm of humanistic complacency, where there is a powerful morality of inclusion and equality, but without foundation or purpose. For Delsol, this late modern/post-modern morality is ultimately a morality of withdrawal and despair. The contemporary mind is wounded, unable to look beyond its own self-satisfaction to realities that are constituting and elevating. From this point of view, the contemporary mind is a paradox: both self-satisfied and despairing, complacent and restless. However, throughout the book Delsol suggests that the contemporary is not simply this standpoint of resignation and complacency, but that there are present in it as well intimations of larger structures of reality: intimations that point to questions of good and evil, truth and falsity, the passing character of the world and the eternity of the divine.

In the face of these deeper intimations Delsol ends the book with a call to a new vigilance and a new sense of responsibility. Contemporary man needs to live more directly and openly within the fragility and contradictions of existence. Refreshingly, she does not call for a simple repudiation of the modern and a simple return to pre-modern forms of meaning and significance. As she states, "The great difficulty will be to defend the gains of modernity while at the same time struggling against its excesses. For taking a simplistic approach is always the first reflex, and the great temptation of this disappointed era could easily be an overall rejection, a return to the besieged

cocoon of *a priori* certitudes, or purity-seeking fundamentalism, which is just another form of utopian delusion."

This is a beautifully written and finely translated book that falls within the French *essai* genre. As such, it is written in a direct and meditative fashion, without the normal scholarly apparatus. While this approach is very appealing, especially for the common reader, it does have its frustrations. I would have valued learning about Delsol's view of how she is situated in the



The return of the human condition?

long tradition of the critique of modernity. For it is here that I have my most basic question for this book. Let me state bluntly what I take to be the general tenor of the critique of modernity: Modernity seeks to establish an impossible standpoint which leads to its own undoing, evidenced by a situation of nihilism, meaning-

lessness, and despair; this in turn points us to an abiding standpoint beyond the modern, return to which provides us with renewed structures of significance. Such an account may be found in a multitude of figures throughout the twentieth century: T.S. Eliot, Martin Heidegger, Josef Pieper, Karl Löwith, Leo Strauss, and Alasdair MacIntyre are but a few names one could mention. So one might well ask, beyond some new images and rhetorical figures, what does Delsol have to say about the character of contemporary man that cannot be found by reading Eliot's *The Waste Land*? At the most fundamental level, I would judge that there is nothing to distinguish them—putting aside the evident difference in genre. But is this to say that Delsol is simply repeating the thoughts of the great critics of modernity from the early twentieth century? No. Delsol is writing in the context of early twenty-first-century Eu-

rope, and this crucially informs the whole character and significance of her work.

But it is on this count that I would criticize this American edition of *Icarus Fallen*. Delsol herself tells us, "In spite of my fragmented and insufficient knowledge of North America, I am convinced that there is a similarity between your societies and our own, at least as far as this 'sociology of the mind' is concerned." But I am not so convinced. Even if what she claims is true, her argument still cannot make sense to North American readers without a more extensive explanation of European political developments, and particularly French intellectual history. This is where a much more informative introduction to the book would have been a great addition.

For Delsol, the whole meaning of the fall of *Icarus* is the fall of Soviet Marxism. To North Americans, this defeat is a great and important event, but is so primarily in terms of a shift in geopolitics. It has not led in North America to the conviction that modernity is in crisis. Indeed, insofar as it has affected North American self-understanding, this has appeared in Francis Fukuyama's popular "end of history" thesis: namely, the claim of the final triumph of (modern) liberal democracy. The defeat of Soviet Marxism has clarified for North Americans that their forms of government are not just one pole of the Capitalist-Communist dialectic, but rather are self-standing wholes capable of bringing civil order and contentment to modern life.

Thus, I would argue that *Icarus* has not fallen in North America; if anything, the fall of Soviet Marxism has brought forth a bolder, more confident modernity here. By contrast, for Delsol, coming out of the tradition of twentieth-century French political thought, modernity is essentially identified with Marxism. Consequently, *Icarus* really did fall in 1989. While North Americans have never seriously been attracted to

the extreme politics that have been so powerful in Europe throughout the twentieth century, much of French intellectual life has been, for at least fifty years, essentially post-liberal, and so fundamentally critical of the relation of society and government characteristic of liberal democracies. For the North American reader to really follow Delsol's argument and its specific import, this larger intellectual and political context needs to be brought out. Of course, behind my criticism is the claim that Delsol's argument is not directly translatable to the North American context; she and the editors of *Icarus Fallen* may well have judged otherwise.

Such a judgment is certainly not without some warrant. After all, so much of North American social, intellectual, and moral life seems to be found in the pages of this evocative text. Certainly conservatives will find much here that resonates with their intuitions and daily experience. Delsol does bring out with real delicacy the ambiguous, tentative stance many in the contemporary world find themselves adopting. We know the failure of the radical politics that so enlivened the twentieth century, the failure of radical secular humanism: and yet we seem unable to return to the older forms of thought and belief that can give place and order to our lives. We seek structures of significance: and yet, as soon as they become determinate, we flee them as oppressive and limiting. Delsol herself can only point to this dilemma without actually resolving it, for she guards against any direct turn to metaphysics or theology. She points to the need, as she puts it, "to defend the gains of modernity": modernity in its failure exposes an abiding principle, but now one that we, as moderns, must come to know for ourselves, through a tentative, exploratory "new anthropology."

But is this tentativeness itself not yet another form of the contemporary malaise

Delsol works to expose? My own judgment is that while North Americans have tendencies towards the “contemporary man” that Delsol describes and seeks to overcome, fundamentally we North Americans are *already beyond* this European condition; we live with a straightforward confidence in our institutions and religions that seems altogether impossible to contemporary

Europeans. But is this claim true? It is precisely in forcing us to confront our ambivalent intuitions that we can see the virtue and importance of *Icarus Fallen*. This book brings to the North American reader a searching and powerful account of the contemporary European soul, and then asks that reader whether he too finds himself reflected there.



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