

In Memoriam

On Marshall Berman

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Marshall Berman was born in the South Bronx in 1940. Over the next three decades, he watched his lower-middle-class neighborhood turn to ruin. Between 1948 and 1972, Robert Moses—who years later became the Faustian villain of Marshall’s brilliant, pained, nearly sui generis work of urban history and personal lament, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*—built the Cross Bronx Expressway. It ravaged the South Bronx, cutting it up into bits and pieces and bombing out other areas in total sum, including much of Marshall’s own neighborhood, Tremont. In the 1970s, the less systematic destruction began. New York City was broke, its outer boroughs in a state of neglect and disrepair. “The Bronx finally made it into the media,” as Marshall recalled in an essay about the ’70s. The headline: “The Bronx Is Burning!”

The self-destructive tendencies of New York City—and, more generally, of modern urban life—were to become the central preoccupation in Marshall’s work. His first book, *The Politics of Authenticity* (1970), took 18th-century Paris—and its two most brilliant thinkers, Montesquieu and Rousseau—as a case study for what eventually precipitated in the revolutionary violence at the end of the century. *All That Is Solid*, which came twelve years later, was something less and something more. It marked the end of a promising, though contained, academic career in the vein of his college and early graduate school mentors—Peter Gay, Lionel Trilling, Isaiah Berlin—and the blossoming of a startling and radical new voice in social criticism. Tracing an arc of violence and destruction from Goethe’s Faust to New York City’s Moses, Marshall argued that modernism, when coupled with the toxic tendencies of industrial capitalism, wreaked havoc on man’s psychic and spiritual life as well as his social and economic conditions.

Both works—and the many essays that came before and after—still maintained, however, an ambivalent stance toward modernism and urban life. They were, to be sure, the fount of all that was destructive in the 19th and 20th centuries. But they were also sites for rebirth. A figure like Moses, eschewing the humanist impulses of both city life and modernist aesthetics, sought to rid New York of the creative chaos that enabled people to feel, to love and express. Marshall’s modernist heroes—and they were heroes (he was the only person in the Dissent orbit I knew to comfortably use such a noun)—were legion. But they were also all particularly sensitive to the irreparable fractures of life. In fact, they sought in the face of these fractures to turn fragments into meaning, chaos into forms of solace. From the young Marx to the young Lukács, and from Baudelaire to Run-DMC, the intellectual and creative brilliance of modern urban life, fractured and chaotic as it is, helped build us anew. From alienation came freedom, and from the ruins came new life. “All that is solid melts into air” was Marx and Engels’ lament about what happened to life under capital; for Marshall it was also what happened to life in a state of exuberant rebellion against it.

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The opening chapter of *Politics of Authenticity* is called “The Personal is Political.” I’ve always wondered about this title: it being, even then, such a flat-tire turn of phrase. But I think what Marshall meant was something more nuanced than just a catchphrase. In fact, I think what he was getting at was that the political should be personal. As Corey Robin and several others have already

pointed out, Marshall's historical and philosophical narratives have almost always been suffused with personal trauma. This, perhaps, reached its fullest expression in *All That Is Solid*, where he moves from 18th-century Paris to his own midcentury New York, and in his later essays collected in *Adventures in Marxism*. But his turn to the personal went well beyond the fact that he was now writing from his home turf; it was an attempt to make our politics more personal, more felt.

For Marshall the failure of modern capitalism—in both its industrial and postindustrial phases—was as much the emotional suffering it caused as its troubling maldistribution of goods and services. This was why Marshall found the young Marx, who writes of alienation, and the young Lukács, who writes of a particular form of alienation (reification), so appealing in the early 1960s. Their ideas were ways of explaining what Marshall already suspected was wrong with the world he inhabited: it was not so much that his father was a failed garment-district middleman but that his father had suffered the psychic and spiritual costs of this failure. This personalization of Marx and more generally of social criticism was what gave Marshall's thinking its poignant erudition. It is what drew him to the more humanist side of Marx and the more humanist side of the left. "Even when capitalism was highly successful," Marshall wrote, the young Marx helped him realize it still "could be humanly disastrous, inflicting upon people insult and injury by treating them as nothing more than a commodity." The great injustice of modern life was not the inequities alone but the high tax they placed on us: the ways in which they limited our range of expression as well as our formal freedoms, our libido as well as work week, the ways they helped turned whole neighborhoods into expressways.

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One does not always practice what one preaches. But it was precisely this sensitivity to human feeling that not only gave his social criticism its humanist edge but also what made him so lovely as a person. He cared. His generosity came casually to him. He lent me Peter Gay's *Weimar Culture* (a reason why I went to graduate school). He read a fellow editor's four-year-old undergraduate thesis in an afternoon and then offered detailed notes and corrections. He even tried, rather unsuccessfully, to get Michael Walzer to listen to Bob Dylan. A common refrain at a *Dissent* meeting is, "So what do we think about this?" Marshall often phrased it, "So how do we feel about this?" When I was at something of a romantic impasse several years ago, he steered our lunch conversation away from edits I had made on a review to narrate a comically failed early romance: it was the 60s, he was in Venice, free love was everywhere but in his pensione.

That review—one of his late classics—told the story of Ka, Blue, and Ipek, who form the sad, mostly unconsummated love triangle that anchors Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*. For Marshall, the center of the novel was not the clash between the secular and religious, the modern and the traditional. It was not even about politics. The novel, for him, was about love: love won but also, more commonly, lost. This was our most modern of disasters: the suggestion of freedom, the age of liberation, and yet nothing. We can fuck, we can touch and embrace, but something about modern life seems to stop us from love. Ka and Ipek, plotting to escape the religious violence of Anatolia, never catch their train. They dream of a place where they might be able to overcome the dampening of emotional life, but the currents of history, or at least the currents of Pamuk's novel, stop them.

Marshall wrote:

"In the history of modern culture, the archetypal couple presiding over Ka's and Ipek's fantasies and hopes come from the moment of the French Revolution: they are Papageno and Papagena, from Mozart's Magic Flute. Ka and Ipek, two centuries later, would be a modernist variation on Mozart's theme. Their embraces will be accompanied by all the latest mass media, by movies and television, by computer hooks and hyperlinks, and by dreams of America—of undubbed America (Pamuk

highlights this), an America in as raw and direct a form as they can imagine. Americans can feel proud to be part of their dream life and their pursuit of happiness.

Why shouldn't they have all this? In fact, it is only drastic last-minute plot intervention by the author that keeps the heroine off the train to freedom. Maybe Pamuk thought it would be a better story this way, and if he did, who knows, maybe he was right. Maybe stories of love crushed are more poignant than stories of love fulfilled. Or maybe the best story is love crushed after it's fulfilled."

For Marshall, though, this was not enough. As he ended the review, again turning back onto his own life, "But there's a difference between the logic of a story and the logic of history. At the start of the twenty-first century, our history may be more open than our literature. A great many people have got out of nightmarish situations all over the globe, and America has given them space to breathe. On any Saturday or Sunday afternoon, at Herald Square, on Telegraph Avenue, in shopping malls in all sorts of American places I and Pamuk have never heard of, you can find couples that look a lot like Ipek and Ka (they are often of different colors), schlepping their babies around in ultra-modern snugglies, overflowing with new life."

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When I read these last passages of his review I was kind of surprised. It was early 2009, not exactly a time, despite Obama's election, to be proud of the United States. A great many people had certainly escaped nightmarish situations all over the globe, and sometimes because of our beneficence. But the United States also was one of the many sources for these nightmarish situations and certainly not a place of relief. What troubled me most about these last paragraphs, however, was not that Marshall still could mine a deep reserve of hope and possibility in the midst of so much disappointment. It was that he had found, in a novel about political violence, an unfulfilled love story: a narrative, as old as Mozart's Papageno and Papagena, that revealed the deeper sorrow of modern experience—our inability to connect with one another. This was, at least to me, a radically different type of social criticism, a criticism that did not only formulate social complaint but also psychic and spiritual ones. It was a criticism—a politics, really—of feelings.

When *All That Is Solid* was published it was met with a wave of exuberant reviews. The *Times* called it "generous . . . and dazzling." The *Voice* insisted that it was "a visionary work which by all rights ought to have the impact of such sixties bibles as *Growing Up Absurd* and *Life Against Death*." It did, in many ways. And Marshall always was grateful for the recognition it brought him, even if in later years I think he felt burdened and hemmed in by its success.

The left, being the left, however, had a variety of responses, not all kind and perhaps none as stinging as Perry Anderson's. Writing in the *New Left Review*, Anderson argued that the book confused modernist visions of release with those radical ones of liberation. "For all its exuberance," he wrote, "Berman's version of Marx, in its virtually exclusive emphasis on the release of the self, comes uncomfortably close—radical and decent though its accents are—to the assumptions of the culture of narcissism."

For Marshall this must have particularly stung because the underlying argument of *All That Is Solid* was about the ways in which modernism can help people come closer together: creative expression, in the street as well as in the museum, was an effort to find communion. Modernist art, urban culture—these were, in fact, ways to repair our present state of alienation. They were means to overcome the persistent loneliness of modern life.

Marshall, ever generous, responded to Anderson's review this way:

*"I am grateful to Perry Anderson for remembering *The Politics of Authenticity*, and for pointing out the continuities between that work and what I'm doing now. Then as now, I've been trying to develop a theoretical vision of the unifying forces in modern life. I still believe that it's possible for modern men and women who share the desire to 'be themselves' to come together, first to fight against the forms of class, sexual and racial oppression that force everyone's identity into rigid moulds and keep anyone's self from unfolding; and next, to create Marx's 'association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.' Nevertheless, *All that is Solid*, and what I've written here, have a much thicker density and a richer atmosphere than my earlier work. This is because I've tried increasingly to situate my exploration of the modern self within the social contexts in which all modern selves come to be. I'm writing more about the environments and public spaces that are available to modern people, and the ones that they create, and the ways they act and interact in these spaces in the attempt to make themselves at home. I'm emphasizing those modes of modernism that seek to take over or to remake public space, to appropriate and transform it in the name of the people who are its public. This is why so much of *All that is Solid* is taken up with public struggles and encounters, dialogues and confrontations in the streets; and why I've come to see the street and the demonstration as primary symbols of modern life.*

Another reason that I've written so much about ordinary people and everyday life in the street, in the context of this controversy, is that Anderson's vision is so remote from them. He only has eyes for world-historical Revolutions in politics and world-class Masterpieces in culture; he stakes out his claim on heights of metaphysical perfection, and won't deign to notice anything less. This would be all right, I guess, except that he's so clearly miserable over the lack of company up there. It might be more fruitful if, instead of demanding whether modernity can still produce masterpieces and revolutions, we were to ask whether it can generate sources and spaces of meaning, of freedom, dignity, beauty, joy, solidarity. Then we would have to confront the messy actuality in which modern men and women and children live. The air might be less pure, but the atmosphere would be a lot more nourishing; we would find, in Gertrude Stein's phrase, a lot more there there. Who knows—it's impossible to know in advance—we might even find some masterpieces or revolutions in the making."

Marxism and modernism, for Marshall, happened on the ground, in the world. In this way, he followed Michael Walzer's vision of a connected social critic. But for Marshall it was not merely enough to try to address the specific material needs of a community; the critic had to also address its spiritual and emotional ones: those more subterranean desires that when unfulfilled also limit the range and variety of our freedom. "The complaint against democratic capitalism," as he argued, "was not that it was too individualistic, but rather that it wasn't individualistic enough: it forced every individual into competitive and aggressive impasses ('zero-sum games') which prevented any individual feelings, needs, ideas, energies from being expressed." There was a need for a new moral basis for the left's critique of what capitalism and modern life did to people. There needed to be, as he put it in *Politics of Authenticity*, "a Marxism with soul."

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"Marxism with soul" has a double meaning, I think. It meant a Marxism that moved beyond the structuralist analyses of orthodox Marxists but also one that broke from the more philosophical criticisms of the Frankfurt School. For Marshall, Marxism not only needed to address the soul—it, itself, needed soul. It had to be modern, carrying with it the messy energy and rhythms of our particular moment. This meant engaging with everyday culture, in all of its messiness, wherever it emerged. Marshall never shied away from this, in appearance or commitment: his hair and beard sprang out in curly-cues of gray and black, his shirts were almost always wrinkled tie-dyes. He had Freud and Marilyn Monroe bobble-heads on his desk at home. His body was ailing; this was clear to

many of us. Several times during meetings, he would spread out before us, fast asleep, almost a ruin, marked by years of urban life, by frustrations—personal and political—and by happiness as well. But even from this came life, spontaneity. At one meeting, after having fallen asleep, he woke up to one of our standard discussions about the “state of things.” Sitting up in his chair he proposed we adopt a new motto: “Keep on truckin!”

Marshall’s sense of humanist exuberance, his vision of a Feeling Left, will certainly sustain itself. Social criticism as psychic complaint has a long history, going back as far as Emerson, and finding its 20th-century expression in figures like William James, Randolph Bourne, Paul Goodman, Ralph Ellison, Susan Sontag, and Ellen Willis. Marshall was our—Dissent’s—practitioner, a social democratic master of the form. It was not only the self to which he was committed. He was committed to masterpieces and revolutions, to solidarity and liberation, to utopias that exceed present imagination. But he was also a master at finding meaning in the face of ruin and emptiness. He insisted that politics must not only be a politics of feeling but that it must also address the world as it is. It must seek out that Leibnizian imperative: the best of all possible worlds.

After a *Dissent* meeting held in Soho two years ago, Marshall and I walked up to the 1 train together. As we walked along Wooster’s cobblestones, Marshall kept pointing at various buildings and remarking on the artists who once lived there. Everything, he said, changed in the 1980s. Art became expensive—to make, to buy, to view. The art community was replaced by a financial one. On cue, a group of young people passed: a clatter of heels, a scent of cologne. Embarrassed for my generation, I said, It’s a shame it’s all gone. No, Marshall said, it’s back. Look at all the young people.

David Marcus

P.S.

* n+1 magazine: <http://nplusonemag.com/on-marshall-berman>