

## *Modernity and Revolution*

The subject of our session this evening has been a focus of intellectual debate and political passion for at least six or seven decades now.\* It already has a long history, in other words. It so happens, however, that within the last year there has appeared a book which reopens that debate, with such renewed passion, and such undeniable power, that no contemporary reflection on these two ideas, 'modernity' and 'revolution', could avoid trying to come to terms with it. The book to which I refer is Marshall Berman's *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. My remarks tonight will try—very briefly—to look at the structure of Berman's argument, and consider how far it provides us with a persuasive theory capable of conjoining the notions of modernity and revolution. I will start by reconstructing, in compressed form, the main lines of his book; and then proceed to some comments on their validity. Any such reconstruction as this must sacrifice the imaginative sweep, the breadth of cultural sympathy, the force of textual intelligence, that give its splendour to *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. These qualities will surely over time make it a classic in its

field. A proper appreciation of them exceeds our business today. But it needs to be said at the outset that a stripped-down analysis of the general case of the book is in no way equivalent to an adequate evaluation of the importance, and attraction, of the work as a whole.

### Modernism, Modernity, Modernization

Berman's essential argument, then, starts as follows: 'There is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience "modernity". To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "All that is solid melts into air"'.<sup>1</sup>

What generates this maelstrom? For Berman, it is a host of social processes—he lists scientific discoveries, industrial upheavals, demographic transformations, urban expansions, national states, mass movements—all propelled, in the last instance, by the 'ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating' capitalist *world market*. These processes he calls, for convenient short-hand, socio-economic *modernization*. Out of the experience born of modernization, in turn has emerged what he describes as the 'amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own'—'visions and values that have come to be loosely grouped together under the name of "modernism"'. The ambition of his own book, then, is to reveal the 'dialectics of *modernization* and *modernism*'.<sup>2</sup>

Between these two lies, as we have seen, the key middle term of *modernity* itself—neither economic process nor cultural vision but the *historical experience* mediating the one to the other. What constitutes the nature of the linkage between them? Essentially, for Berman, it is *development*. This is really the central concept of his book, and the source of most of its paradoxes—some of them lucidly and convincingly explored in its pages, others less seen by them. In *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, development means two things simultaneously.

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\* A contribution to the Conference on Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in July, 1983 in the session whose theme was 'Modernity and Revolution'.

<sup>1</sup> *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

On the one hand, it refers to the gigantic objective transformations of society unleashed by the advent of the capitalist world market: that is, essentially but not exclusively, *economic* development. On the other hand, it refers to the momentous subjective transformations of individual life and personality which occur under their impact: everything that is contained within the notion of *self*-development, as a heightening of human powers and widening of human experience. For Berman the combination of these two, under the compulsive beat of the world market, necessarily spells a dramatic tension within the individuals who undergo development in both senses. On the one hand, capitalism—in Marx's unforgettable phrase of the *Manifesto*, which forms the leitmotif of Berman's book—tears down every ancestral confinement and feudal restriction, social immobility and claustrophobic tradition, in an immense clearing operation of cultural and customary debris across the globe. To that process corresponds a tremendous emancipation of the possibility and sensibility of the individual self, now increasingly released from the fixed social status and rigid role-hierarchy of the pre-capitalist past, with its narrow morality and cramped imaginative range. On the other hand, as Marx emphasized, the very same onrush of capitalist economic development also generates a brutally alienated and atomized society, riven by callous economic exploitation and cold social indifference, destructive of every cultural or political value whose potential it has itself brought into being. Likewise, on the psychological plane, self-development in these conditions could only mean a profound disorientation and insecurity, frustration and despair, *concomitant with*—indeed inseparable from—the sense of enlargement and exhilaration, the new capacities and feelings, liberated at the same time. 'This atmosphere,' Berman writes, 'of agitation and turbulence, psychic dizziness and drunkenness, expansion of experiential possibilities and destruction of moral boundaries and personal bonds, self-enlargement and self-derangement, phantoms in the street and in the soul—is the atmosphere in which modern sensibility is born.'<sup>3</sup>

That sensibility dates, in its initial manifestations, from the advent of the world market itself—1500 or thereabouts. But in its first phase, which for Berman runs to about 1790, it still lacks any common vocabulary. A second phase then extends across the 19th century, and it is here that the experience of modernity is translated into the various classical visions of *modernism*, which he defines essentially by their firm ability to grasp both sides of the contradictions of capitalist development—at once celebrating and denouncing its unprecedented transformations of the material and spiritual world, without ever converting these attitudes into static or immutable antitheses. Goethe is prototypical of the new vision in his *Faust*, which Berman in a magnificent chapter analyses as a tragedy of the developer in this dual sense—unbinding the self in binding back the sea. Marx in the *Manifesto* and Baudelaire in his prose poems on Paris are shown as cousins in the same discovery of modernity—one prolonged, in the peculiar conditions of forced modernization from above in a backward society,

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

in the long literary tradition of St Petersburg, from Pushkin and Gogol to Dostoevsky and Mandelstam. A condition of the sensibility so created—Berman argues—was a more or less unified public still possessing a memory of what it was like to live in a pre-modern world. In the 20th century, however, that public simultaneously expanded and fragmented into incommensurable segments. Therewith the dialectical tension of the classical experience of modernity underwent a critical transformation. While modernist *art* registered more triumphs than ever before—the 20th century, Berman says in an unguarded phrase, ‘may well be the most brilliantly creative in the history of the world’<sup>4</sup>—this art has ceased to connect with or inform any common life: as he puts it, ‘we don’t know how to use our modernism’.<sup>5</sup> The result has been a drastic polarization in modern *thought* about the experience of modernity itself, flattening out its essentially ambiguous or dialectical character. On the one hand, from Weber through to Ortega, Eliot to Tate, Leavis to Marcuse, 20th-century modernity has been relentlessly condemned as an iron cage of conformity and mediocrity, a spiritual wilderness of populations bleached of any organic community or vital autonomy. On the other hand, against these visions of cultural despair, in another tradition stretching from Marinetti to Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller to Marshall McLuhan, not to speak of outright apologists of capitalist ‘modernization theory’ itself, modernity has been fulsomely touted as the last word in sensory excitement and universal satisfaction, in which a machine-built civilization itself guarantees aesthetic thrills and social felicities. What each side has in common here is a simple identification of modernity with technology itself—radically excluding the people who produce and are produced by it. As Berman writes: ‘Our nineteenth-century thinkers were simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life, wrestling inexhaustibly with its ambiguities and contradictions; their self-ironies and inner tensions were a primary source of their creative power. Their twentieth-century successors have lurched far more towards rigid polarities and flat totalizations. Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt; in either case it is conceived as a closed monolith, incapable of being shaped or changed by modern men. Open visions of life have been supplanted by closed ones, Both/And by Either/Or.’<sup>6</sup> The purpose of Berman’s book is to help restore our sense of modernity, by reappropriating the classical visions of it. ‘It may turn out, then, that going back can be a way to go forward: that remembering the modernisms of the nineteenth century can give us the vision and courage to create the modernisms of the twenty-first. This act of remembering can help us bring modernism back to its roots, so that it can nourish and renew itself, to confront the adventures and dangers that lie ahead.’<sup>7</sup>

Such is the general thrust of *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. The book contains, however, a very important sub-text, which needs to be noted.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Berman's title, and organizing theme, come from *The Communist Manifesto*, and his chapter on Marx is one of the most interesting in the book. It ends, however, by suggesting that Marx's own analysis of the dynamic of modernity ultimately undermines the very prospect of the communist future he thought it would lead to. For if the essence of liberation from bourgeois society would be for the first time a truly unlimited development of the individual—the limits of capital, with all its deformities, now being struck away—what could guarantee either the harmony of the individuals so emancipated, or the stability of any society composed of them? 'Even if,' Berman asks, 'the workers do build a successful communist movement, and even if that movement generates a successful revolution, how amid the flood tides of modern life, will they ever manage to build a solid communist society? What is to prevent the social forces that melt capitalism from melting communism as well? If all new relationships become obsolete before they can ossify, how can solidarity, fraternity and mutual aid be kept alive? A communist government might try to dam the flood by imposing radical restrictions, not merely on economic activity and enterprise (every socialist government has done this, along with every capitalist welfare state), but on personal, cultural and political expression. But insofar as such a policy succeeded, wouldn't it betray the Marxist aim of free development for each and all?'<sup>8</sup> Yet—I quote again—'if a triumphant communism should someday flow through the floodgates that free trade opens up, who knows what dreadful impulses might flow along with it, or in its wake, or impacted inside? It is easy to imagine how a society committed to the free development of each and all might develop its own distinctive varieties of nihilism. Indeed, a communist nihilism might turn out to be far more explosive and disintegrative than its bourgeois precursor—though also more daring and original—because while capitalism cuts the infinite possibilities of modern life with the limits of the bottom line, Marx's communism might launch the liberated self into immense unknown human spaces with no limits at all.' Berman thus concludes: 'Ironically, then, we can see Marx's dialectic of modernity re-enacting the fate of the society it describes, generating energies and ideas that melt it down into its own air.'<sup>9</sup>

### The Need for Periodization

Berman's argument, as I have said, is an original and arresting one. It is presented with great literary skill and verve. It unites a generous political stance with a warm intellectual enthusiasm for its subject: the notions of both the modern and the revolutionary, it might be said, emerge morally redeemed in his pages. Indeed *modernism* is profoundly revolutionary, by definition, for Berman. As the jacket of the book proclaims: 'Contrary to conventional belief, the modernist revolution is *not* over.' Written from the left, it deserves the widest discussion and scrutiny on the Left. Such discussion must start by looking at Berman's key terms 'modernization' and 'modernism', and then at the linkage between them through the two-headed notion of

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

'development'. If we do this, the first thing that must strike one is that while Berman has grasped with unequalled force of imagination one critical dimension of Marx's vision of history in *The Communist Manifesto*, he omits or overlooks another dimension that is no less critical for Marx, and complementary to it. Capital accumulation, for Marx, and the ceaseless expansion of the commodity form through the market, is indeed a universal dissolvent of the old social world, and can legitimately be presented as a process of 'constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance, everlasting uncertainty and agitation', in Marx's words. Note the three adjectives: constant, uninterrupted, everlasting. They denote a *homogeneous* historical time, in which each moment is perpetually different from every other by virtue of being *next*, but—by the same token—is eternally *the same* as an interchangeable unit in a process of infinite recurrence. Extrapolated from the totality of Marx's theory of capitalist development, this emphasis very quickly and easily yields the paradigm of modernization proper—an anti-Marxist theory, of course, politically. For our purposes, however, the relevant point is that the idea of modernization involves a conception of fundamentally *planar* development—a continuous-flow process in which there is no real differentiation of one conjuncture or epoch from another save in terms of the mere chronological succession of old and new, earlier and later, categories themselves subject to unceasing permutation of positions in one direction, as time goes by and the later becomes earlier, the newer older. Such is, of course, an accurate account of the temporality of the market and of the commodities that circulate across it.

But Marx's own conception of the historical time of the capitalist mode of production as a whole was quite distinct from this: it was of a complex and *differential* temporality, in which episodes or eras were discontinuous from each other, and heterogeneous within themselves. The most obvious way in which this differential temporality enters into the very construction of Marx's model of capitalism is, of course, at the level of the *class order* generated by it. By and large, it can be said that classes as such scarcely figure in Berman's account at all. The one significant exception is a fine discussion of the extent to which the bourgeoisie has always failed to conform to the free-trade absolutism postulated by Marx in the *Manifesto*: but this has few repercussions in the architecture of his book as a whole, in which there is very little between *economy* on the hand and *psychology* on the other, save for the *culture* of modernism that links the two. Society as such is effectively missing. But if we look at Marx's account of that society, what we find is something very different from any process of planar development. Rather, the trajectory of the bourgeois order is curvilinear. It traces, not a straight line ploughing endlessly forward, or a circle expanding infinitely outwards, but a marked parabola. Bourgeois society knows an ascent, a stabilization and a descent. In the very passages of the *Grundrisse* which contain the most lyrical and unconditional affirmations of the unity of economic development and individual development that provides the pivot of Berman's argument, when Marx writes of 'the point of flowering' of the basis of the capitalist mode of production, as 'the point at which it can be united with the highest development of productive forces, and thus also of the richest

development of the individual'—he also stipulates expressly: 'It is nevertheless still this basis, this plant in flower, and therefore it fades after flowering and as a consequence of flowering.' 'As soon as this point has been reached,' he goes on, 'any further development takes the form of a decline.'<sup>10</sup> In other words, the history of capitalism must be *periodized*, and its determinate *trajectory* reconstructed, if we are to have any sober understanding of what capitalist 'development' actually means. The concept of modernization occludes the very possibility of that.

### The Multiplicity of Modernisms

Let us now revert to Berman's complementary term 'modernism'. Although this post-dates modernization, in the sense that it signals the arrival of a coherent vocabulary for an experience of modernity that preceded it, once in place modernism too knows no internal principle of variation. It simply keeps on reproducing itself. It is very significant that Berman has to claim that the *art* of modernism has flourished, is flourishing, as never before in the 20th century—even while protesting at the trends of *thought* which prevent us adequately incorporating this art into our lives. There are a number of obvious difficulties with such a position. The first is that modernism, as a specific set of aesthetic forms, is generally dated precisely *from* the 20th century, is indeed typically construed by way of contrast with realist and other classical forms of the 19th, 18th or earlier centuries. Virtually all of the actual literary texts analysed so well by Berman—whether by Goethe or Baudelaire, Pushkin or Dostoevsky—precede modernism proper, in this usual sense of the word: the only exceptions are fictions by Bely and Mandelstam, which precisely are 20th-century artefacts. In other words, by more conventional criteria, modernism too needs to be framed within some more differential conception of historical time. A second, and related, point is that once it is treated in this way, it is striking how uneven its distribution actually is, geographically. Even within the European or Western world generally, there are major areas that scarcely generated any modernist momentum at all. My own country England, the pioneer of capitalist industrialization and master of the world market for a century, is a major case in point: beachhead for Eliot or Pound, offshore to Joyce, it produced no virtually significant native movement of a modernist type in the first decades of this century—unlike Germany or Italy, France or Russia, Holland or America. It is no accident that it should be the great absentee from Berman's conspectus in *All that is Solid Melts into Air* itself. The space of modernism too is thus differential.

A third objection to Berman's reading of modernism as a whole is that it establishes no distinctions either between very contrasted aesthetic tendencies, or within the range of aesthetic practices that comprise the arts themselves. But in fact it is the protean variety of relations to capitalist modernity that is most striking in the broad grouping of movements typically assembled under the common rubric of moder-

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<sup>10</sup> *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Frankfurt 1967, p. 439.

nism. Symbolism, expressionism, cubism, futurism or constructivism, surrealism—there were perhaps five or six *decisive* currents of ‘modernism’ in the early decades of the century, from which nearly everything thereafter was a derivation or mutant. The antithetical nature of the doctrines and practices peculiar to these would suffice in itself, one would have thought, to preclude the possibility that there could have been any one characteristic *Stimmung* defining the classical modernist bearing towards modernity. Much of the art produced from within this range of positions already contained the makings of those very polarities decried by Berman in contemporary or subsequent theorizations of modern culture as a whole. German expressionism and Italian futurism, in their respectively contrasted, tonalities, form a stark instance. A final difficulty with Berman’s account is that it is unable, from within its own terms of reference, to provide any explanation of the divarication it deplores, between the art and thought, practice and theory, of modernity in the 20th century. Here indeed time divides in his argument, in a significant way: something like a *decline* has occurred, intellectually, which his book seeks to *reverse* with a return to the classical spirit of modernism as a whole, informing art and thought alike. But that decline remains unintelligible within his schema, once modernization is itself conceived as a linear process of prolongation and expansion, which necessarily carries with it a constant renewal of the sources of modernist art.

### The Socio-Political Conjuncture

An alternative way to understand the origins and adventures of modernism is to look more closely at the differential historical temporality in which it was inscribed. There is one famous way of doing this, within the Marxist tradition. That is the route taken by Lukács, who read off a direct equation between the change of political posture of European capital after the revolutions of 1848, and the fate of the cultural forms produced by or within the ambit of the bourgeoisie as a social class. After the mid-19th century, for Lukács, the bourgeoisie becomes purely reactionary—abandoning its conflict against the nobility, on a continental scale, for all-out struggle against the proletariat. Therewith it enters into a phase of ideological decadence, whose initial aesthetic expression is predominantly naturalist, but then eventually issues into early 20th-century modernism. This schema is widely decried on the left today. In fact, in Lukács’s work, it often yielded rather acute local analyses in the field of philosophy proper: *The Destruction of Reason* is a far from negligible book, however marred by its postscript. On the other hand, in the field of literature—Lukács’s other main area of application of it—the schema proved relatively sterile. It is striking that there is no Lukácsian exploration of any modernist work of art comparable in detail or depth to his treatment of the structure of ideas in Schelling or Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche; by contrast Joyce or Kafka—to take two of his literary *betes noires*—are scarcely more than invoked: never studied in their own right. The basic error of Lukács’s optic here is its *evolutionism*: time, that is, differs from one epoch to another, but *within* each epoch all sectors of social reality move in synchrony with each other, such that decline at one level must be reflected in descent at every other.



The result is a plainly over-generalized notion of 'decadence'—one of course enormously affected, it can be said in extenuation, by the spectacle of the collapse of German society and most of its established culture, in which he had himself been formed, into Nazism.

But if neither Berman's perennialism nor Lukács's evolutionism provide satisfactory accounts of modernism, what is the alternative? The hypothesis I will briefly suggest here is that we should look rather for a *conjunctural* explanation of the set of aesthetic practices and doctrines subsequently grouped together as 'modernist'. Such an explanation would involve the intersection of different historical temporalities, to compose a typically overdetermined configuration. What were these temporalities? In my view, 'modernism' can best be understood as a cultural field of force *triangulated* by three decisive coordinates. The first of these is something Berman perhaps hints at in one passage, but situates too far back in time, failing to capture it with sufficient precision. This was the codification of a highly formalized *academicism* in the visual and other arts, which itself was institutionalized within official regimes of states and society still massively pervaded, often dominated, by aristocratic or landowning classes: classes in one sense economically 'superseded', no doubt, but in others still setting the political and cultural tone in country after country of pre-First World War Europe. The connexions between these two phenomena are graphically sketched out in Arno Mayer's recent and fundamental work *The Persistence of the Old Regime*,<sup>11</sup> whose central theme is the extent to which European society down to 1914 was still dominated by agrarian or aristocratic (the two were not necessarily identical, as the case of France makes clear) ruling classes, in economies in which modern heavy industry still constituted a surprisingly small sector of the labour force or pattern of output. The second coordinate is then a logical complement of the first: that is, the still incipient, hence essentially *novel*, emergence within these societies of the key technologies or inventions of the second industrial revolution: telephone, radio, automobile, aircraft and so on. Mass consumption industries based on the new technologies had not yet been implanted anywhere in Europe, where clothing, food and furniture remained overwhelmingly the largest final-goods sectors in employment and turnover down to 1914.

The third coordinate of the modernist conjuncture, I would argue, was the imaginative proximity of social revolution. The extent of hope or apprehension that the prospect of such revolution aroused varied widely: but over most of Europe, it was 'in the air' during the Belle Epoque itself. The reason, again, is straightforward enough: forms of dynastic *ancien régime*, as Mayer calls them, did persist—imperial monarchies in Russia, Germany and Austria, a precarious royal order in Italy; even in Britain, the United Kingdom was threatened with regional disintegration and civil war in the years before the First World War. In no European state was bourgeois democracy completed as a form, or the labour movement integrated or coopted as a force. The possible revolutionary outcomes of a downfall of the old order were

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<sup>11</sup> Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, New York 1981, pp. 189–273.

thus still profoundly ambiguous. Would a new order be more unalloyedly and radically capitalist, or would it be socialist? The Russian Revolution of 1905–1907—which focused the attention of all Europe—was emblematic of this ambiguity, an upheaval at once and inseparably bourgeois and proletarian.

What was the contribution of each of these coordinates to the emergence of the field of force defining modernism? Briefly, I think, the following: the persistence of the 'anciens régimes', and the academicism concomitant with them, provided a critical range of cultural values *against which* insurgent forms of art could measure themselves, but also *in terms of which* they could partly articulate themselves. Without the common adversary of official academicism, the wide span of new aesthetic practices have little or no unity: their tension with the established or consecrated canons in front of them is constitutive of their definition as such. At the same time, however, the old order, precisely in its still partially aristocratic colouration, afforded a set of available codes and resources from which the ravages of the market as an organizing principle of culture and society—uniformly detested by every species of modernism—could also be resisted. The classical stocks of high culture still preserved—even if deformed and deadened—in late 19th-century academicism, could be redeemed and released against it, as also against the commercial spirit of the age as many of these movements saw it. The relationship of imagists like Pound to Edwardian conventions or Roman lyric poetry alike, of the later Eliot to Dante or the metaphysicals, is typical of one side of this situation: the ironic proximity of Proust or Musil to the French or Austrian aristocracies of the other.

At the same time, for a different kind of 'modernist' sensibility, the energies and attractions of a new machine age were a powerful imaginative stimulus: one reflected, patently enough, in Parisian cubism, Italian futurism or Russian constructivism. The condition of this interest, however, was the abstraction of techniques and artefacts from the social relations of production that were generating them. In no case was capitalism as such ever exalted by any brand of 'modernism'. But such extrapolation was precisely rendered possible by the sheer incipience of the still unforeseeable socio-economic pattern that was later to consolidate so inexorably around them. It was not obvious where the new devices and inventions were going to lead. Hence the—so to speak—ambidextrous celebration of them from Right and Left alike—Marinetti or Mayakovsky. Finally, the haze of social revolution drifting across the horizon of this epoch gave it much of its apocalyptic light for those currents of modernism most unremittingly and violently radical in their rejection of the social order as a whole, of which the most significant was certainly German expressionism. European modernism in the first years of this century thus flowered in the space between a still usable classical past, a still indeterminate technical present, and a still unpredictable political future. Or, put another way, it arose at the intersection between a semi-aristocratic ruling order, a semi-industrialized capitalist economy, and a semi-emergent, or -insurgent, labour movement.

The First World War, when it came, altered all of these coordinates. But it did not eliminate any of them. For another twenty years, they lived on in a kind of hectic after-life. Politically, of course, the dynastic states of Eastern and Central Europe disappeared. But the junker class retained great power in post-war Germany; the agrarian-based Radical Party continued to dominate the Third Republic in France, without much break in tone; in Britain the more aristocratic of the two traditional parties, the Conservatives, virtually wiped out their more bourgeois rivals, the Liberals, and went on to dominate the whole inter-war epoch. Socially, a distinctive upper-class mode of life persisted right down to the end of the 30's, whose hallmark—setting it off completely from the existence of the rich after the Second World War—was the normalcy of servants. This was the last true leisure-class in metropolitan history. England, where such continuity was strongest, was to produce the greatest fictional representation of that world in Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*, a non-modernist remembrance from the subsequent epoch. Economically, mass production industries based on the new technological inventions of the early 20th century achieved some foothold in two countries only—Germany in the Weimar period, and England in the late 30's. But in neither case was there any general or wholesale implantation of what Gramsci was to call 'Fordism', on the lines of what had by then existed for two decades in the USA. Europe was still over a generation behind America in the structure of its civilian industry and pattern of consumption, on the eve of the Second World War. Finally, the prospect of revolution was now more proximate and tangible than it had ever been—a prospect that had triumphantly materialized in Russia, touched Hungary, Italy and Germany with its wing just after the First World War, and was to take on a new and dramatic immediacy in Spain at the end of this period. It is within this space, prolonging in its own way an earlier ground, that generically 'modernist' forms of art continued to show great vitality. Quite apart from the literary masterpieces published in these years but essentially nurtured in earlier ones, Brechtian theatre was one memorable product purely of the inter-war conjuncture, in Germany. Another was the first real emergence of architectural modernism as a movement, with the Bauhaus. A third was the appearance of what was in fact to prove the last of the great doctrines of the European avant-garde—surrealism, in France.

### The West's Season Ends

It was the Second World War—not the First—which destroyed all three of the historical coordinates I have discussed, and therewith cut off the vitality of modernism. After 1945, the old semi-aristocratic or agrarian order and its appurtenances was finished, in every country. Bourgeois democracy was finally universalized. With that, certain critical links with a pre-capitalist past were snapped. At the same time, Fordism arrived in force. Mass production and consumption transformed the West European economies along North American lines. There could no longer be the smallest doubt as to what kind of society this technology would consolidate: an oppressively stable, monolithically industrial, capitalist civilization was now in place. In a wonderful passage of his book *Marxism and Form*, Fredric Jameson

has admirably captured what this meant for the avant-garde traditions that had once treasured the novelties of the 20's or 30's for their oneiric, destabilizing potential: 'The Surrealist image,' he remarks, was 'a convulsive effort to split open the commodity forms of the objective universe by striking them against each other with immense force.'<sup>12</sup> But the condition of its success was that 'these objects—the places of objective chance or of preternatural revelation—are immediately identifiable as the products of a not yet fully industrialized and systematized economy. This is to say, that the human origins of the products of this period—their relationship to the work from which they issued—have not yet been fully concealed; in their production they still show traces of an artisanal organization of labour while their distribution is still assured by a network of small shopkeepers . . . What prepares these products to receive the investment of psychic energy characteristic of their use by Surrealism is precisely the half-sketched, uneffaced mark of human labour; they are still frozen gesture, not yet completely separated from subjectivity, and remain therefore potentially as mysterious and as expressive as the human body itself.'<sup>13</sup> Jameson then goes on: 'We need only exchange, for that environment of small workshops and store counters, for the *marché aux puces* and the stalls in the streets, the gasoline stations along American superhighways, the glossy photographs in the magazines, or the cellophane paradise of an American drugstore, in order to realize that the objects of Surrealism are gone without a trace. Henceforth, in what we may call post-industrial capitalism, the products with which we are furnished are utterly without depth: their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy. All libidinal investment in such objects is precluded from the outset, and we may well ask ourselves, if it is true that our object universe is henceforth unable to yield any "symbol apt at stirring human sensibility", whether we are not here in the presence of a cultural transformation of signal proportions, a historical break of an unexpectedly radical kind.'<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the image or hope of revolution faded away in the West. The onset of the Cold War, and the Sovietization of Eastern Europe, cancelled any realistic prospect of a socialist overthrow of advanced capitalism, for a whole historical period. The ambiguity of aristocracy, the absurdity of academicism, the gaiety of the first cars or movies, the palpability of a socialist alternative, were all now gone. In their place, there now reigned a routinized, bureaucratized economy of universal commodity production, in which mass consumption and mass culture had become virtually interchangeable terms. The post-war avant-gardes were to be essentially defined against this quite new backdrop. It is not necessary to judge them from a Lukácsian tribunal to note the obvious: little of the literature, painting, music or architecture of this period can stand comparison with that of the antecedent epoch. Reflecting on what he calls 'the extraordinary concentration of literary masterpieces around the First World War', Franco Moretti in

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<sup>12</sup> *Marxism and Form*, Princeton 1971, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

his recent book *Signs Taken for Wonders* writes: 'Extraordinary because of its quantity, as even the roughest list shows (Joyce and Valéry, Rilke and Kafka, Svevo and Proust, Hofmannsthal and Musil, Apollinaire, Mayakovsky), but even more than extraordinary because that abundance of works (as is by now clear, after more than half a century) constituted the last *literary season* of Western culture. Within a few years European literature gave its utmost and seemed on the verge of opening new and boundless horizons: instead it died. A few isolated icebergs, and many imitators; but nothing comparable to the past.'<sup>15</sup> There would be some exaggeration in generalizing this judgment to the other arts, but not—alas—all that much. Individual writers or painters, architects or musicians, of course produced significant work after the Second World War. But not only were the heights of the first two or three decades of the century rarely or never reached again. No new aesthetic movements of collective importance, operative across more than one art form, emerged either, after surrealism. In painting or sculpture alone, specialized schools and slogans succeeded each other ever more rapidly: but after the moment of abstract expressionism—the last genuine avant-garde of the West—these were now largely a function of a gallery-system necessitating regular output of new styles as materials for seasonal commercial display, along the lines of *haute-couture*: an economic pattern corresponding to the *non-reproducible* character of 'original' works in these particular fields.

It was now, however, when all that had created the classical art of the early 20th century was dead, that the ideology and cult of modernism was born. The conception itself is scarcely older than the 1950s, as a widespread currency. What it betokened was the pervasive collapse of the tension between the institutions and mechanisms of advanced capitalism, and the practices and programmes of advanced art, as the one annexed the other as its occasional decoration or diversion, or philanthropic *point d'honneur*. The few exceptions of the period suggest the power of the rule. The cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, in the 60s, is perhaps the most salient case in point. As the Fourth Republic belatedly passed into the Fifth, and rural and provincial France was suddenly transformed by a Gaullist industrialization appropriating the newest international technologies, something like a brief after-glow of the earlier conjuncture that had produced the classical innovatory art of the century flared into life again. Godard's cinema was marked in its own way by all three of the coordinates described earlier. Suffused with quotation and allusion to a high cultural past, Eliot-style; equivocal celebrant of the automobile and the airport, the camera and the carbine, Léger-style; expectant of revolutionary tempests from the East, Nizan-style. The upheaval of May-June 1968 in France was the validating historical terminus of this art-form. Régis Debray was to describe the experience of that year sarcastically, after the event, as a voyage to China which—like that of Columbus—discovered only America: more especially, landing in California.<sup>16</sup> That is, a social and cultural turbulence which mistook itself for a French version of the

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<sup>15</sup> *Signs Taken for Wonders*, London 1983, p. 209.

<sup>16</sup> Régis Debray, 'A Modest Contribution to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Tenth Anniversary', *New Left Review* 115, May-June 1979, pp. 45-65.

Cultural Revolution, when in fact it signified no more than the arrival of a long-overdue permissive consumerism in France. But it was precisely this ambiguity—an *openness* of horizon, where the shapes of the future could alternatively assume the shifting forms of either a new type of capitalism, or of the eruption of socialism—which was constitutive of so much of the original sensibility of what had come to be called modernism. Not surprisingly, it did not survive the Pompidou consolidation that succeeded, in Godard's cinema or anywhere else. What marks the typical situation of the contemporary artist in the West, it might be said, is, on the contrary, the closure of horizons: without an appropriable past, or imaginable future, in an interminably recurrent present.

This is not true, manifestly, of the Third World. It is significant that so many of Berman's examples of what he reckons to be the great modernist achievements of our time should be taken from Latin American literature. For in the Third World generally, a kind of shadow configuration of what once prevailed in the First World does exist today. Pre-capitalist oligarchies of various kinds, mostly of a landowning character, abound; capitalist development is typically far more rapid and dynamic, where it does occur, in these regions than in the metropolitan zones, but on the other hand is infinitely less stabilized or consolidated; socialist revolution haunts these societies as a permanent possibility, one indeed already realized in countries close to home—Cuba or Nicaragua, Angola or Vietnam. These are the conditions that have produced the genuine masterpieces of recent years that conform to Berman's categories: novels like Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, from Colombia or India, or films like Yilmiz Güney's *Yol* from Turkey. Works such as these, however, are not timeless expressions of an ever-expanding process of modernization, but emerge in quite delimited constellations, in societies still at definite historical cross-roads. The Third World furnishes no fountain of eternal youth to modernism.

### The Limits of Self-development

So far, we have looked at two of Berman's organizing concepts—modernization and modernism. Let us now consider the mediating term that links them, modernity itself. That, it will be remembered, is defined as the *experience* undergone within modernization that gives rise to modernism. What is this experience? For Berman, it is essentially a subjective process of unlimited self-development, as traditional barriers of custom or role disintegrate—an experience necessarily lived at once as emancipation and ordeal, elation and despair, frightening and exhilarating. It is the momentum of this ceaselessly ongoing rush towards the uncharted frontiers of the psyche that assures the world-historical continuity of modernism: but it is also this momentum which appears to undermine in advance any prospect of moral or institutional stabilization under communism, indeed perhaps to disallow the cultural cohesion necessary for communism to exist at all, rendering it something like a contradiction in terms. What should we make of this argument?

To understand it, we need to ask ourselves: where does Berman's vision of a completely unbounded dynamic of self-development come from? His first book, *The Politics of Authenticity*, which contains two studies—one of Montesquieu and the other of Rousseau—provides the answer. Essentially, this idea derives from what the sub-title of the book rightly designates the 'radical individualism' of Rousseau's concept of humanity. Berman's analysis of the logical trajectory of Rousseau's thought, as it sought to contend with the contradictory consequences of this conception across successive works, is a *tour de force*. But for our purposes the crucial point is the following. Berman demonstrates the presence of the same paradox he ascribes to Marx within Rousseau: if unlimited self-development is the goal of all, how will community ever be possible? For Rousseau the answer is, in words that Berman quotes, that: 'The love of man derives from love of oneself—'Extend self-love to others and it is transformed into virtue'.<sup>17</sup> Berman comments: 'It was the road of self-expansion, not of self-repression, that led to the palace of virtue . . . As each man learned to express and enlarge himself, his capacity for identification with other men would expand, his sympathy and empathy with them would deepen.'<sup>18</sup> The schema here is clear enough: *first* the individual develops the self, *then* the self can enter into relations of mutual satisfaction with others—relations based on identification *with* the self. The difficulties this presumption encounters once Rousseau tries to move—in his language—from the 'man' to the 'citizen', in the construction of a free community, are then brilliantly explored by Berman. What is striking, however, is that Berman nowhere himself disowns the starting-point of the dilemmas he demonstrates. On the contrary, he concludes by arguing: 'The programmes of nineteenth-century socialism and anarchism, of the twentieth-century welfare state and the contemporary New Left, can all be seen as further developments of the structure of thought whose foundations Montesquieu and Rousseau laid down. What these very different movements share is a way of defining the crucial political task at hand: to make modern liberal society keep the promises it has made, to reform it—or revolutionize it—in order to realize the ideals of modern liberalism itself. The agenda for radical liberalism which Montesquieu and Rousseau brought up two centuries ago is still pending today.'<sup>19</sup> Likewise in *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, he can refer to 'the depth of the individualism that underlies Marx's communism'<sup>20</sup>—a depth which, he then quite consistently goes on to note, must formally include the possibility of a radical nihilism.

If we look back, however, at Marx's actual texts themselves, we find a very different conception of human reality at work in them. For Marx, the self is not *prior to*, but is *constituted by* its relations with others, from the outset: women and men are *social* individuals, whose sociality is not subsequent to but contemporaneous with their individuality. Marx wrote, after all, that 'only in community with others has

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<sup>17</sup> *The Politics of Authenticity*, New York 1970, p. 181.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>20</sup> *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, p. 128.

each individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions: only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible'.<sup>21</sup> Berman cites the sentence, but without apparently seeing its consequences. If the development of the self is inherently imbricated in relations with others, its development could never be an *unlimited* dynamic in the monadological sense conjured up by Berman: for the coexistence of others would always *be such a limit*, without which *development itself could not occur*. Berman's postulate is thus, for Marx, a contradiction in terms.

Another way of saying this is that Berman has failed—with many others, of course—to see that Marx possesses a conception of *human nature* which rules out the kind of infinite ontological plasticity he assumes himself. That may seem a scandalous statement, given the reactionary caste of so many standard ideas of what human nature is. But it is the sober philological truth, as even a cursory inspection of Marx's work makes clear, and Norman Geras's recent book *Marx and Human Nature—Refutation of a Legend* makes irrefutable.<sup>22</sup> That nature, for Marx, includes a set of primary needs, powers and dispositions—what he calls in the *Grundrisse*, in the famous passages on human possibility under feudalism, capitalism and communism, *Bedürfnisse, Fähigkeiten, Kräfte, Anlagen*—all of them capable of enlargement and development, but not of erasure or replacement. The vision of an unhinged, nihilistic drive of the self towards a completely unbounded development is thus a chimera. Rather, the genuine 'free development of each' *can only* be realized if it proceeds in respect for the 'free development of all', given the common nature of what it is to be a human being. In the very pages of the *Grundrisse* on which Berman leans, Marx speaks without the slightest equivocation of 'the full development of human control over the forces of nature—including those of his own nature', of 'the absolute elaboration (*Herausarbeiten*) of his creative dispositions', in which 'the universality of the individual . . . is the universality of his real and ideal relationships'.<sup>23</sup> The cohesion and stability which Berman wonders whether communism could ever display lies, for Marx, in the very human nature that it would finally emancipate, one far from any mere cataract of formless desires. For all its exuberance, 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.

### The Present Impasse

To conclude: where, then, does this leave revolution? Berman is quite consistent here. For him, as for so many other socialists today, the notion of revolution is distended in duration. In effect, capitalism already brings us constant upheaval in our conditions of life, and in that sense is—as he puts it—a 'permanent revolution': one that obliges 'modern men and women' to 'learn to yearn for change: not merely

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<sup>21</sup> *The German Ideology*, London 1970, p. 83; cited by Berman in *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature—Refutation of a Legend*, London 1983.

<sup>23</sup> *Grundrisse*, pp. 387, 440.



to be open to changes in their personal and social lives, but positively to demand them, actively to seek them out and carry them through. They must learn not to long nostalgically for the “fixed, fast-frozen relationships” of the real or fantasized past, but to delight in mobility, to thrive on renewal, to look forward to future developments in their conditions of life and relations with their fellow men.’<sup>24</sup> The advent of socialism would not halt or check this process, but on the contrary immensely accelerate and generalize it. The echoes of 60’s radicalism are unmistakable here. Attraction to such notions has proved very widespread. But they are not, in fact, compatible either with the theory of historical materialism, strictly understood, or with the record of history itself, however theorized.

Revolution is a term with a precise meaning: the political overthrow from below of one state order, and its replacement by another. Nothing is to be gained by diluting it across time, or extending it over every department of social space. In the first case, it becomes indistinguishable from mere reforms—simple change, no matter how gradual or piece-meal, as such: as in the ideology of latterday Eurocommunism, or cognate versions of Social-Democracy; in the second case, it dwindles to a mere metaphor—one that can be reduced to no more than supposed psychological or moral conversions, as in the ideology of Maoism, with its proclamation of a ‘Cultural Revolution’. Against these slack devaluations of the term, with all their political consequences, it is necessary to insist that revolution is a *punctual* and not a permanent process. That is: a revolution is an episode of convulsive political transformation, compressed in time and concentrated in target, that has a determinate beginning—when the old state apparatus is still intact—and a finite end, when that apparatus is decisively broken and a new one erected in its stead. What would be distinctive about a socialist revolution that created a genuine post-capitalist democracy is that the new state would be truly transitional towards the practicable limits of its own self-dissolution into the associated life of society as a whole.

In the advanced capitalist world today, it is the seeming absence of any such prospect as a proximate or even distant horizon—the lack, apparently, of any conjecturable alternative to the imperial status quo of a consumer capitalism—that blocks the likelihood of any profound cultural renovation comparable to the great Age of Aesthetic Discoveries in the first third of this century. Gramsci’s words still hold good: ‘The crisis consists,’ he wrote, ‘precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears.’<sup>25</sup> It is legitimate to ask, however: could anything be said in advance as to what the new might be? One thing, I think, might be predicted. *Modernism* as a notion is the emptiest of all cultural categories. Unlike the terms Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Mannerist, Romantic or Neo-Classical, it designates no describable object in its own right at all: it is completely lacking in

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<sup>24</sup> *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, pp. 95–96.

<sup>25</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London 1972, p. 276.

positive content. In fact, as we have seen, what is concealed beneath the label is a wide variety of very diverse—indeed incompatible—aesthetic practices: symbolism, constructivism, expressionism, surrealism. These, which do spell out specific programmes, were unified *post hoc* in a portmanteau concept whose only referent is the blank passage of time itself. There is no other aesthetic marker so vacant or vitiated. For what once was modern is soon obsolete. The futility of the term, and its attendant ideology, can be seen all too clearly from current attempts to cling to its wreckage and yet swim with the tide still further beyond it, in the coinage 'post-modernism': one void chasing another, in a serial regression of self-congratulatory chronology. If we ask ourselves, what would revolution (understood as a punctual and irreparable break with the order of capital) have to do with modernism (understood as this flux of temporal vanities), the answer is: it would surely end it. For a genuine socialist culture would be one which did not insatiably seek the new, defined simply as what comes *later*, itself to be rapidly consigned to the detritus of the old, but rather one which multiplied the different, in a far greater *variety* of concurrent styles and practices than had ever existed before: a diversity founded on the far greater plurality and complexity of possible ways of living that any free community of equals, no longer divided by class, race or gender, would create. The axes of aesthetic life would, in other words, in this respect run horizontally, not vertically. The calendar would cease to tyrannize, or organize, consciousness of art. The vocation of a socialist revolution, in that sense, would be neither to prolong nor to fulfil modernity, but to abolish it.

Revolution simultaneously legitimises and denies the coordinate centre of the political order of Modernity. It is difficult to describe the historical evolution from the early industrial, class-national forms of political organisation to late or global Modernity other than in terms of a low-intensity revolution in the rate of social change.Â The Political Project of Modernity as a Permanent Revolution? The subject of our session this evening has been a focus of intellectual debate and political passion for at least six or seven decades now.<sup>14</sup> It already has a long history, in other words. It so happens, however, that within the last year there has appeared a book which reopens that debate, with such renewed passion, and such undeniable power, that no contemporary reflection on these two ideas, "modernity" and "revolution", could avoid trying to come to terms with it.