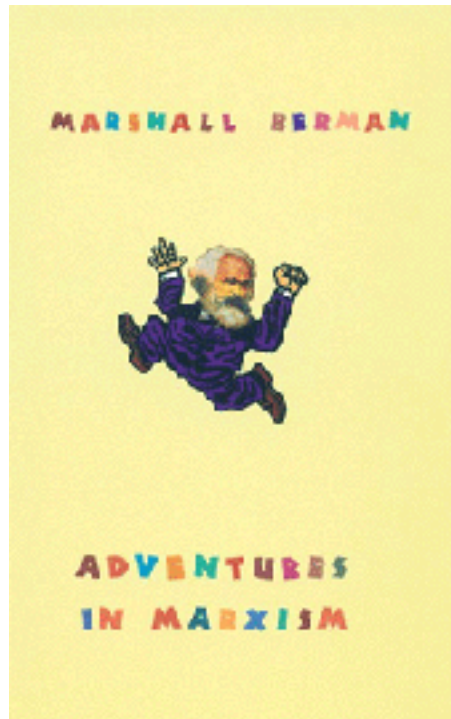


Big Apple Redux: An Interview with Marshall Berman

Tony Monchinski



"*Strange days have found us,*" Jim Morrison sang nearly four decades ago. The unfolding of a new millennium brings with it hope but at the same time a certain sense of despair as the forces of irrationality gain strength. Consider: terrorists go to their death piloting planes into American targets; Americans, who now find it convenient to weep over past treatment of the native-Americans, fail to see the parallels between that situation and the Israeli occupation of Palestine; Slobodan Milosovic is raked over the coals of an international war crimes tribunal while Henry Kissinger continues to insult, *err*, consult and write books; in the name of defending liberty America's leaders demand we relinquish many of our freedoms; the National Missile Defense Fairy Tale gains ground; O.J. Simpson is still a free man and Christopher Hitchens, well, ahem, more on him later.

Faced with this maelstrom, I met Marshall Berman at the Metro Diner on Broadway and 100th Street in Manhattan at the end of December. Over Danish and coffee, Berman and I discussed -- among other topics -- fundamentalism, modernity versus post modernity, the Bush/Bugs Bunny connection, and the decline of the 42nd Street sex industry.

Tony Monchinsky: Kierkkgard spoke of a "*leap of faith*," a connection of yourself with something, someone, some movement. Today I would like to talk about leaps of faith: leaps to the working class, to modernity, to fundamentalist religious doctrine. For the 19 terrorists who crashed jet planes into the Twin Towers, Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania, their leap of faith appears to have been to a radical strain of Islam. In the *New York Times*, Herbert Muschamp describes the destruction of the World Trade Center as "*a cultural statement as well as an act of murderous aggression*." In light of this world's Mohammed Attas and Osama bin Ladens, is modernity still happening?

Marshall Berman: It is. I think that there is a paradox in fundamentalism. Every religion in the twentieth century is polarized: on the one hand it's more humanistic and inclusive, on the other hand it's more tribal, rigid and exclusive. Part of the exclusion is that not only does it exclude people from other religions but it also excludes most of the people from the religion itself. For example, to a Christian fundamentalist, most Christians turn out not to be *true* Christians; for a Muslim fundamentalist, most Muslims turn out not to be *true* Muslims.

All fundamentalisms have a depressingly similar structure. It's easier for them [varying religious fundamentalists] to talk to one another and they have more in common with one another than they do with other Jews, other Hindus, other Christians, etc. But Fundamentalism is a very modern idea. It takes traditions that are thousands of years old and rejects almost all of them, conceptualizing a few of them and putting them into a system. It then judges all life according to that system.

Fundamentalism uses very modern forms of cognitive operations: it's not *the only* modern way to see things, but it is certainly *one of the ways* to see things. Fundamentalism is also open to modern technology. It's extremely avant-garde, so that in many religions the most sophisticated computer technologists are fundamentalists. In a sense Fundamentalists are more willing to buy into certain forms of modern technology more uncritically than secular humanists like myself. Willing to buy into *anything* if it will put forth their idea of the faith.

T.M.: Is Fundamentalism a threat to modernity?

M.B.: Yeah, although at the same time it is a form of modernity. The Cold War was a threat to modernity. Sure, it wasn't orchestrated by religious fundamentalists, though it created a fundamentalism all its own. Modernity is full of threats to modernity. For example, we generate a lot of toxic waste. There are certain ideas of modernity that make it seem like a sort of seamless web, but it isn't. Because it is full of threats to itself, modernity is adventurous and interesting, but it is also scary.

T.M.: As a native New Yorker, family man, Marxist-humanist and urbanist, how did you feel on and after September 11th?

M.B.: I feel very hurt, like someone hit me with a baseball bat and my head still hurts. I'm still shaking. It's not that it surprised me exactly. In fact, in one of my classes a week before the 11th, we tried to figure out all the outbreaks of mass murder in the second half of the twentieth century. We listed them on the board. There were plenty. I said, *look, look how big and rich we are*. I knew how vulnerable we were. But that doesn't make it hurt any less. It's like going into some dangerous terrain where you know somebody might attack you and then they do. If you're lucky you survive, but the hurt and pain are still there.

T.M.: How do you feel the Left handled September 11th?

M.B.: Not very well. Listen, I'm not really *up* on things. But if I judge it by the operations my students got into and the e-mails I received, what shocked and depressed me was the inability of many on the left to sympathize with the people who were killed and their families.

A very widespread response was, "*Yes, but look at all the bad things America has done*" followed by a shopping list of America's sins, which, indeed, have been plentiful. While I think its legitimate to criticize those sins, I also think that somebody who has empathy for the poor people of Somalia and Brazil, for the victims around the world, I believe that if their empathy is legitimate they must feel for the poor people of Brooklyn, of New Jersey and the poor kids who's daddies aren't coming home anymore. *We're* on the list of victims here.

People who want to help victims everywhere need to get hip to what's happened. I think some people understand this, others don't. It still upsets me when people I usually agree with politically say "*Yes, it's terrible, but blah-blah-blah-blah*" and the "*yes, it's terrible*" takes about three seconds whereas the "*but*" takes hours. There's some way in which they don't get it.

T.M.: Besides the enormous human toll, here in New York City we no longer have our Twin Towers. In the November 2001 final edition of *Lingua Franca* you have an article entitled, "*When Bad Buildings Happen to Good People.*" Like yourself, I'm a native New Yorker, albeit one with fewer years under his belt. For me, the Twin Towers always were: they were natural and normal, a part of the city as if they had always been. In *Lingua Franca* you describe the Towers as "*expressions of an urbanism that disdained the city and its people.*" Please explain.

M.B.: If you contrast the World Trade Center with the skyscrapers in New York that were most prominent before them, the Chrysler and the Empire State Buildings, these building were on the streets, part of a total system, in the middle of life. The World Trade Center isolated itself from the city in very elaborate ways. It was hard to get to, it was hard to use. They had enormous expansives of space, but it was a *lousy public* space. In some ways they didn't want the rest of us there. Even before September 11th, it had its own forms of security clearance and it gave off hostility.

That's interesting, because just to the south of the World Trade Center, the Battery Park City Complex, which was built in roughly the same way through the Public Authority, was infinitely more user-friendly. Every weekend for most of the year, the parks, the Strand, the museums and restaurants that grew out of Battery Park City were jammed. People would use one or more of those, but to get to the subway to go home one would have to pass through the World Trade Center. And there it was like a ghost-town: you passed from this overflowing, full site to one that was empty.

From everything I heard, the Port Authority wanted it that way. Their idea of safety involved repelling the people. The slab shape of the Towers and their isolation grew out of an aesthetic voiced best by Le Corbusier, who said that in order to have modern planning we have to "*kill the streets*." For him the street epitomized disorder and chaos. The idea was to create some other system that repelled the city street. I think that this was one of the greatest mistakes made all over the world.

There is some fear of the city that plays an important role in 20th century culture. It created an endless series of completely sterile and empty gigantic spaces all over the world. There are certain types of stereotyped buildings that people eventually came to see as dreadful. But maybe they had to experience them and live with them before they could see what was wrong. That said, after the World Trade Center got bombed it made me and many other people feel more sympathy for it. Like us, it was vulnerable.

T.M.: In the 19th century, Nietzsche pined for a "*more manly*," more "*warlike*" age. The Futurists of the early 20th century included Marinetti, who wanted to "*glorify war -- the only true hygiene of the world -- militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of anarchist, the beautiful ideas which kill, and the scorn of woman.*" What links, if any, are there between the September 11th bombers with Nietzsche and the Futurists?

M.B.: Well, for one thing the idea that there is something liberating about killing people. Now I understand: all humans are equipped with the capacity to kill. If somebody was trying to kill me I would try to kill him first as defense. But the stuff you were just reading from Nietzsche and the Futurists (and you could have read from a lot of other people too), the idea that killing other people makes you better and somehow raises your level of being, I think that this idea gained currency in the 19th century because you had one-hundred years without a major war. There were local and regional wars, but no world wars.

Most people lived their lives without the experience of being either a soldier or victims of war. Some of them came to feel that that was very boring. Many people who yearned for a war were horrified when 1914 finally came. On both sides of that war, the politicians and generals had said, "We'll blow them away and we'll be home for Christmas." Fairly early in that war the politicians and generals realized that it was going to be impossible to win quickly. They then adopted a tactic that in English is called a war of attrition, which means we kill lots of them, they kill lots of us; we kill more of them, they kill more of us;

we throw in our sons, and they throw in their sons. Both sides believed that they would be the last side standing.

There's a great book by Paul Fussell called *The Great War and Modern Memory*. It describes how World War I was the perfect model of a system in which almost everybody was horrified and thought it was beyond belief and evil, yet everyone felt powerless to stop it. There were a few people who got off on it and enjoyed it, usually the people removed from the front lines and combat. One frequent theme of that period is how much more bloody minded the civilians are than the soldiers.

T.M.: That's interesting in light of September 11th. Reading the local papers and the national news something we saw is that most of the people who were calling for war were not the victims and their families down at Ground Zero. It was people from other parts of America. Many people who saw what happened down there were disgusted and didn't want to visit that destruction on anyone else.

M.B.: Right. I think that, not always but often, people who are in the trenches and see the bloodshed empathize with the enemy and don't want to inflict war. In this case, television gave everybody pretty clear visions of awful stuff.

The first speech from the White House was that we were going to end states that aid terrorism. I thought, did this include Florida and New Jersey? The particular words chosen, *end states*, kind of horrified me. It was as if, "*Hooray, hooray, now we can do what we've always wanted to do.*" It was very Strange-Lovian actually when you consider that high on the list of states aiding terrorists are us.

A famous picture from 1979 showed my old professor Brzezinski handing a rocket launcher to a Mujahedin in Afghanistan. In the picture, Brzezinski looks like Superman, holding the thing like a barbell, and everyone showing these cartoon-like smiles. There hasn't been the kind of self-scrutiny that an event like September 11th requires. I think the White House has done a lot to orchestrate a sort of war madness, but I am happy to see it hasn't really happened.

I felt that some military action was necessary, but I am afraid of what might happen next. My son was imitating Bugs Bunny, and it made me think of the archetypical cartoon where Elmer Fudd gets bigger and bigger and bigger guns but can't get Bugs Bunny. In the process he does immense amounts of damage to the landscape and to himself too to get that *silly wabbit*. I fear that Bush has painted himself into an Elmer Fudd type of corner. At the same time I feel that Secretary of State Colin Powell, possibly the only sane man in that Administration, has delivered us from some of the more awful places we may have gone. But I fear an escalation of the war where we are going to destroy more stuff and never get that rabbit. In that case Bugs Bunny would be controlling us, and that's a pretty awful situation to get into.

T.M.: Your *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* is a ringing defense of modernity. For many segments of the left, Post Modernism is a specious concept. What, if anything, should we (the left) take from Post Modernism?

M.B.: I guess the most attractive quality in it is skepticism towards everything. That's something we should always carry around with us. We should always be self-scrutinizing and self-critical.

But I don't think many of the Post-Modernists themselves have actually done that. Part of the thing that is so infuriating to me about the Post Mods is the total lack of self-criticism, so that they can see how all previous thought was complicit in this and that -- which is often certainly true -- *except for them*. The idea that is impossible to tell the truth about anything except *this*. The naiveté with which they did this was attractive to many people, except me. I think Nietzsche is a very good teacher in that way, in that he shows we must say to ourselves, *what if the opposite is true*, instead of what I think?

T.M.: One hat you wear is that of Urbanist. You coined the term *urbicide*. What does it mean and how, if at all, did September 11th contribute to it?

M.B.: I thought I coined that term writing in the 1980s about the ruins of the Bronx. But when I read Eric Darton's book about the World Trade Center, *Divided We Stand*, I saw that some of the critics of the WTC had used the word themselves back in the 1960s. That made me feel, on the one hand, embarrassed, but on the other hand it affirmed for me that we were all thinking about the relationship between the gargantuan structures like the WTC and the ruins that were created in much of the outlying parts of the city.

There was a book in the 1950s by Morton & Lucia White called *Intellectual Versus the City: from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright*. It seemed to show that virtually all of American thought was virulently anti-city from the very beginning. The problem with that is how could these cities have grown up, how could people have lived in them? Surely people had had some appreciation of them. But you couldn't find such sentiment in the Whites.

There was so much hatred of the city and it became the focus of so many different projections. Projections I am using here in the Freudian sense of people who are embarrassed about some of their feelings, don't know how to deal with them, and project these feelings on some other and blame the other.

I think cities have always been some repository of blame in that way. You can see this in ancient Greece and in the Bible. You can see the projection mechanisms too. In Aristophanes, people blaming Athens for their own impulses is a source of comedy. It can also, of course, be a source of tragedy.

It's interesting though, that in the aftermath of September 11th, there have been all these expressions of solidarity towards New York and *ich-bein-ein-New-Yorker*-type affirmations. I am glad to hear them but I am also skeptical as to how long they will last.

I grew up in a very different time when abuse of cities was the norm. I think an important part of what Goldwater first called the Southern strategy that worked so well for Nixon and Reagan was that all of the problems in life come from the city and that you can draw a ring around the city and isolate all the problems there.

T.M.: I remember a comment by North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms that he would like to cordon off Chapel Hill (home of the University of North Carolina). He thought that would be good for society.

M.B.: That conception of purity and pollution goes back thousands of years in the history of culture. One class I recurrently teach is *Theories of the City*. We study how you can see people doing this kind of projection against the city way, way back.

The Book of Revelation is a very interesting example of that. The Great Whore of Babylon, who embodies everything that is alluring and attractive but at the same time all the vices. How when she is destroyed the new world emerges but there is nothing in it. In the Book it has all the carpenters, tailors and musicians tearing their hair out because all of their occupations are gone. There are no longer any markets, centers, public spaces in which the things they did had any meaning. It's a new world, the New Jerusalem, but it's completely empty.

Much more typical than the sentiment following September 11th was the attitude at the time of the fiscal crisis. Some Southern Politician was having a rally. The question on the agenda was this: should Congress approve the loans to bail out New York City? This politician asked the people, *should New York City live or die?* You then saw hundreds of people getting up, shaking their fists and saying *Die! Die!* In a way I am still shaking from that.

So it's strange, because we haven't changed that much: how come everybody loves us all of a sudden? On the other hand, I don't want to resist love, because there isn't so much of it in the world.

One thing I think that has happened is that Americans have become more accepting and mature about their impulses. I think this was reflected in Bill Clinton's ability to get through his impeachment. The idea that here's Clinton -- sex, drugs, rock and roll -- with problems, but the majority of Americans thinking it was possible to get through those problems and still emerge okay as a leader.

The people basically were pretty blasé about it. Some of this stems from the Christian attitude of let he who is without sin cast the first stone. Another part of it is that throughout the '80s the problems of the big city spread to the suburbs and into middle America. For example, drug use was no longer only a city problem. People came to terms with these issues and that allowed Clinton to survive politically. I think that is a positive sign in that it shows Americans are growing up, maturing.

T.M.: Let's talk about the New Jerusalem that is Times Square. I know you are working on a project now that deals with the area. [Note: see Berman's *Women and the Metamorphoses of Times Square* in the Fall, 2001 issue of *Dissent*.] Times Square has changed a lot in my thirty years.

M.B.: How has it changed in those thirty years?

T.M.: When I was younger it was seamier. Now it's cleaner, more corporate. We used to go and roam around, hang out, visit the sex shops. A lot of those places aren't there anymore: it's a warmer, fuzzier Times Square.

M.B.: I don't mind the warmer, fuzzier type of stuff. I think it's a more multi-cultural Times Square now than it's ever been. Compare photos of Times Square from 20 or 30 years ago to standing on a corner down there looking at people now. It's much more a microcosm of the world today. I think that's something to feel good about.

On the other hand, the big corporate office buildings don't thrill me much. Honestly, I didn't like the sex shops very much. In the 1950s Times Square had many second-hand book and magazine shops. I remember going there when I was in high school to get *Popular Mechanics*, August 1936. I don't remember what weird device was featured in that particular magazine, but kids in high school with those obsessions could go there.

Those same shops sold pornographic magazines, but in the 1960s the pornographic materials became much more prosperous than any of the others. The result was that Times Square's sex industry expanded enormously. Print was replaced by video. A thing you could do that felt like fun, browse through the various magazines, ended. You'd have to plunk down twenty or forty bucks and buy the video. There were booths on the ground floor where you could watch videos, but you'd need to know what you wanted to see. In a way it was niche marketing.

Another thing that doomed the sex industry in Times Square was the internet: suddenly at your desk at home you could have access to more pornographic material than any jaunt in Times Square would expose you to. I think that very few of the people who are nostalgic for that period are nostalgic for the sex industry. You were in high school then, so I can imagine high school kids going in and enjoying that stuff. But very few people who were 30 or 40 then actually went in and used those shops.

But I used to when things were print and I stopped when they went to video. I said this on MSNBC in the summer of 1999, and one of the commissioners of the Times Square Development Agency said, "*So you're one of the types of people who use those shops? Why is this man allowed to be on television?!*" There was some way, technology-wise, that that industry was doomed.

I'm leaving one segment out and those are the live sex shows. I never went to them. I've heard a few people express nostalgia for that world, there's a book, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

T.M.: Yeah, by Samuel Delaney.

M.B.: Yeah, the science fiction writer. But if you take that as a roughly accurate description, you're going to see that you're not going to fit into that world. A very small group of people did and got happiness from it, but whether that small group of people should have had exclusive control of some very desirable public space is a serious question.

Another thing that has been important in the development of Times Square is the building of enormous hotels. A lot of the sex industry in Times Square goes through the hotels, in video and in person. The biggest owner of pornography is General Motors, who own the Loews hotels chain.

Sex became much more of a participant activity, also accounting for the demise of the industry there. More and more teenagers after the 60s were having sex and didn't need the Times Square sex industry. In the *Taxi Driver* period, one of the terrible things that happened on 42nd Street was that women disappeared. They were afraid to be down there. I taught on 42nd Street for 30 years. If there were women students in my class who had to use the subway or bus terminal I had to walk them down there because there were a lot of aggressive men there and there were no [police] uniforms. Now why there were no uniforms is an interesting question. Maybe they wanted the street to rot. At what level this decision was made would be an interesting question. Now on 42nd Street there is a surplus of uniforms.

I saw an aggravated assault down there in 1980 where a guy was laying on the street bleeding from the head. Finally a porno shop owner let us use the phone to call 911.

CUNY [City University of New York] did a survey of 42nd Street in the late '70s and they found that 90% of the people on it were male. It was like de-modernization. The Taliban would have been happy with that distribution. For anybody who understands that, it's difficult to see what the basis of nostalgia for that world would be.

T.M.: In the waning days of the [New York City Mayor] Giuliani Administration, new baseball stadiums for the Yankees and Mets: a good idea or a bad idea?

M.B.: A bad idea. I don't think its going to happen. There's other stuff after September 11th that the city needs. The proposal to build new stadiums was a way for Giuliani to give money away to those who already had it. The Yankees and Mets are doing fine and getting plenty of subsidies as it is.

Ironically, the new stadiums around the country are retro: they're all neo-Ebbets Fields and neo-Kaminsky-parks, trying to recall the good old days. But the proposals for new stadiums for the Yanks and Mets are trapped in the really sterile futurism of the World Trade Center age.

T.M.: Here's former New York City's much lauded mayor Rudy Giuliani defining "freedom": "*Freedom is about authority. Freedom is about the willingness of every single human being to cede to lawful authority a great deal of discretion about what you do and how you do it.*" (quoted in *NY Post*, 3 March 1994) That could have come right out of an Orwellian Newspeak dictionary. You and the Generalissimo are both denizens of the Big Apple.

M.B.: And we're both Yankee fans. He ran the city for eight years like it was a ball game. Some people won and some people lost. A leader of a city or any kind of political entity has to root for everybody and try to create a feeling that everybody can win.