

All That Is Solid Melts Into Air — Afterword 2010

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Abstract: When I first imagined *All That Is Solid*, my vision had an enormous scope: a cosmopolitan horizon that could embrace not only my neighborhood but also the whole world, and help empower men and women everywhere. When the book came out, in 1982, its American publisher was uninterested, and took it out of circulation. However, it was picked up by Verso, and then translated into many languages. It evoked great excitement in Brazil and Latin America, as part of the democratic culture that was just emerging after a generation of “dirty wars.” American Penguin noted this, and brought it out in an edition still in print. The book also had adventures in China, and most recently in Iran. The global reach of my earliest fantasies has come true.

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- 1 This book has been an adventure, maybe the great adventure of my life. Over three decades, it has had more intense reverberations than anything I’ve ever done, reverbs around the corner, reverbs thousands of miles away. At times I’ve taken it for granted, nourished by it without noticing it. Other times I’ve had to stand up and fight for it. Still other times it’s threatened to crush me. But all the time, it’s been powerfully *there*.
- 2 When I first conceived *All That Is Solid*, I imagined it in a very large way: a vision of modern life that could embrace not only my hometown but the whole world, and that could empower men and women all over the world. At first, though, in the early 1980s, despite a couple of enthusiastic reviews, it didn’t seem to have much impact on anyone. “Face it,” my editor said, “we’re in the age of Reagan. This book is going nowhere.” The book’s first publisher, Simon and Schuster, placed it in an ominous category of being: “indefinitely out of stock.” This was a limbo that no one could penetrate. (I couldn’t even get the book to use in my classes.) It was only after a couple of years of nasty exchanges, and threats of lawsuits, that my agent Georges Borchardt pried the book loose. Now it was “out of print,” but at least I had “the rights”; now there was a chance the book might have a future.
- 3 Then, even as I mourned and felt alone, my book was discovered and celebrated across various oceans. It appeared in a wide range of places: the UK (thank you, Verso), Italy, Sweden, Spain/Mexico, Brazil. The buzz in Latin America was especially striking. For years, Latin intellectuals had rejected the whole “modern” paradigm as an ideological weapon of the USA or of “the West.” But in *All That Is Solid*, a great many Latin Americans seemed to find a vision of the modern that they felt was *about them*.
- 4 This led to my visit to Brazil for three weeks in the summer of 1987. It was an uncanny interlude for me: in Andy Warhol’s phrase, I was famous for fifteen minutes. Reporters met me at the plane, people stopped me on the streets, motorists honked their horns, strangers phoned me late at night. It seemed that everybody wanted to *talk*. There was so much that people wanted me to talk about, and expected that I *could* talk about: writers and painters and photographers and jazz and rock, urbanism (what did I think of the capital, Brasilia? not much), and feminism, and materialism and idealism, and relativity and indeterminacy, and what went wrong in the Russian

Revolution, and whether love could last under modern conditions (yes), and what my dreams were like in Brazil, and how they compared to my dreams in the USA. I wasn't quick enough to say, *My whole time in Brazil has been a dream*. Everything I said seemed to evoke thunderous applause. I was acclaimed by people all over Brazil's social order, from mayors and state governors, to shop stewards from the Metal Workers Union (Lula's union), to uniformed cooks and kitchen workers in my Sao Paulo hotel, to a jazz singer who stopped her set to point me out, to a potter who rushed out of his shop and gave me a beautiful bowl "to say Thank You." I wasn't raised to be a celebrity, not even for fifteen minutes, and at first it took my breath away. But then it went to my head, as acclaim often does, and it made me smarter and more fluent than I've ever been in my life. On a panel on a radio show, I asked why Brazilians seemed to like me so much. A man in the audience gave a marvelous answer: "*You give a great commercial for freedom of speech.*"

- 5 This phrase puzzled me at first, but before long, it fell into place, and I understood why I was there. For people in Brazil and in Latin America, this was a time of hope. They were just coming out of the shadows after the "dirty wars." Free speech was gradually coming back. Some Brazilians had read my book and got the idea that I could help it come back; that by being as enthusiastic in person as I was in print, I could make freedom of speech seductive, delicious, ecstatic, a turn-on, a thrill; that I could personally connect with Brazilians, and could entice them to speak freely for the sheer joy of it. Could I really, by talking, help repressed people talk, and so help them live? I knew that, even at best, I would be in the background of a great historic project; still, I would be there. (For the foreground, think of, say, Caetano Veloso.) If I could be of help, what an honor it would be. Day after day, I *schlepped* up and down the country, with a politician's speaking schedule. Everywhere I got standing-room-only crowds, and then afterward I went outside to speak to people who couldn't get in. On different days I would read different parts of my book, spreading out a wide range of 19th- and 20th-century moments and movements, jump-cutting from erudition to intimacy: *I know what you went through; if you speak freely, you can live again*. I can't imagine talking this way today. But I could do it yesterday because I had gone through plenty myself, the loss of a child, not so many years before – Brazilians remembered my book's dedication – and learned to come out of my own shadows and live again. Indeed, their responses were helping me live, even as my call (I hoped) was helping them. Looking backward now, after so many years, *was* I any help, to Brazilians, to Brazilian cultural life? I hope so, but I can't say. What I can say is, although Brazil is known as a relaxed place, I've never in my life been under pressure of so many great expectations, and I've never talked so well.
- 6 Brazil was a thrill, but it also had an afterlife, a kind of blowback. The *tummel* around *All That Is Solid* over there helped to convince publishers right here that my book could have a future in the USA. American Penguin brought out a paperback in 1988, including a new Preface. Like the Verso edition in the UK, the American Penguin has had limited but steady sales, year after year, over three decades. The combination has given my book a continuous solid presence. In the 1990s and 2000s, through the modern magic of translation, its presence extended into Portugal (whose Portuguese, I am told, is very different from Brazil's), and into Turkey, Iran, Poland, and China, and back into Brazil, where there was a new translation just a couple of years ago. My book has persisted for close to thirty years. In advertising jargon, the product *has legs*. And I could stand tall on them, and become part of the history of places whose history I had never known. I got to enlarge myself, to meet people who felt like soul mates even if our lives were lived thousands of miles apart, and to imagine what it might mean to be "a citizen of the world."
- 7 Back in the USA, after the blowback, *All That Is Solid* took on new meanings. Here people were glad to talk. There were two groups of people who were very interested in the book, and who wanted to talk with me: urbanists, including architects and city planners, and writers and literary critics. It was a thrill when the man who had designed New York's marvelous Subway Map came up to me on Broadway, and said that all the time he was putting his map together, he had tried to keep my book in mind.
- 8 With urbanists, I unfolded what I called "the Jane Jacobs tradition," that is, those 19th- and early 20th-century texts that portray the city street and crowd as primary life forces, and the experience of being part of this crowd as a primary source of happiness. I focused on Baudelaire and Dostoevsky, who are in my book, and I was glad to add Charles Dickens and Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain and a great array of 20th-century writers to the crowd. Ric Burns invited me to be part of the seven-hour *History of New York* that he was creating for PBS. It was a terrific series. Alas, its release date turned out to be about two minutes after 9/11. But over the years it has run in repertory, it plays a big role in PBS fund drives, and I still get stopped in the streets or honked at from trucks by people who know me only as a character on TV.
- 9 The closest thing to a villain in *All That Is Solid* is the megalomaniac master builder Robert Moses. As he recedes from historical memory, people can't seem to get enough

of him as a myth, an icon of evil, something like the giant puppet in Theodora Skopitares' 1981 puppet play, *The Radiant City*. I think it has brought me a queer sort of status to have been a victim of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. But I always argued that Moses could never have perpetrated horrors like the CBE on his own; he worked out of a total elite consensus that there was nothing worth saving in the poor, dense, mostly Jewish immigrant neighborhoods of the Bronx. Moses was in complete harmony with the first generations of city planners: he hated the city; they all hated the city. He always aimed for "deconcentration" of New York; he always followed blindly Le Corbusier's obsessive drive to "kill the street." A bureaucrat of genius, he found and opened streams of federal money that could realize his vision concretely, even as thousands of other officials who shared it were stuck at their desks wondering which way to go.

- 10 Moses' urbidical later career came at the end of a long wave, when Americans took their cities for granted and used them as springboards for expansion and development. He built the CBE, probably the worst horror of his career, in the 1950s; he could never have got away with it in the 1960s. The times a-changed, people learned, visions of the city got deeper; they saw their cities were vulnerable and needed nourishment and vigilant care. They came to feel crowded streets, human concentration, people pressing together, intimacy between strangers, as primary sources of joy; "public space," sectors of cities that made this joy possible, needed to be nurtured and cared for, not destroyed. Now, too, within cities, despite their many polarizations, the horizon of empathy expanded: people came to see the human benefits of keeping other people's neighborhoods alive, even if they would never go to those neighborhoods or share in that life. Once there was a critical mass of people who not only loved their cities but *knew why* they loved them, and recognized they had to take care of them, the *Lebensraum* for imperial bureaucrats shrank fast. When Moses died in 1981, he had come to feel as badly displaced as any of his many victims.
- 11 (Ironically, though, the collective learning that thwarted Moses, and made the world "love New York" more than ever, generated a real estate boom that has driven out, and keeps out, a great many of the people who "love New York" most. And the boom has nourished a generation of predators who have supplanted Moses' twisted, despotic idea of public service with no idea of public service at all.)
- 12 The other story that urbanists have always wanted to hear is the South Bronx and its ruins. In the 1970s, an array of poor neighborhoods, quite close to where I grew up, crashed and burned, and became an apocalyptic landscape, reminiscent of the great bombed cities after World War Two. The mass media loved this landscape: they would announce with great fanfare, and ill-concealed relish, "THE BRONX IS BURNING!" Urban ruins make great visuals. I walked through them obsessively, as if trying to penetrate to some mystical core. My quest for a core of meaning inside the ruins is one of the forces that drives *All That Is Solid* and gives it life.
- 13 After long wandering, the ruins got to be too much for me, I had to stop. That meant I couldn't go a favorite place, the Bronx Zoo, because the only way to get there on public transit led directly through the ruins; so for years, I just didn't go. (Later I realized there were alternate routes. *Idiot!*) Finally, it was 2005, my younger son's fifth-grade class was going to the Zoo, they needed parents, it was a lovely spring day, my son was lovingly pulling me, how could I say no? I went, prepared for the worst. The kids, sitting down, wouldn't be able to see it, thank God; but I, standing up, couldn't avoid it. I stood up where I knew it began, braced myself, craned my neck, and — THE RUINS WERE GONE! In their place, as the train rode north, I saw ordinary apartment houses, trucks unloading, kids on bikes, old people on folding chairs—the whole *shmeer* of everyday modern city life. "Look!" I said to the teachers on the train with me, "it looks like an ordinary city." They said, "Well, isn't the Bronx an ordinary city?" I noticed then how young they were. When "The Bronx [was] Burning!" these girls weren't even *born*. Now, it looked like nothing special — and yet, miraculous.
- 14 The South Bronx today, after the rain, is a fine instance of the resilience of modern cities, and of modern men and women, who have the capacity both to commit uricide and to overcome it; to reduce their whole environment to ruins and to rebuild the ruins; to turn apocalyptic surreality into ordinary nice urban reality where any of us could feel at home.
- 15 The other group that has paid *All That Is Solid* special attention are the writers and critics from English and Comp Lit departments on both sides of the Atlantic. They have especially enjoyed my perspective on Baudelaire. My way of embedding him in Haussmann-era Paris turned out to overlap with what they called "The New Historicism," a movement for rescuing literature from Structuralism and its spinoffs, and giving it back to human beings. I have had many happy moments doing readings of Baudelaire. More than anyone else I wrote about, he helped me bring out what I think is the essential modernist idea. When I read, I often focused on one of my favorite Baudelairean themes, a subject he calls the *flaneur*, the walker in the city. This is a man who is open to everybody and everything. He is "married to the crowd." In it, "he can be both himself and somebody else." Through his imagination, the

flaneur can merge with any of the people around him, and relive any experience that anybody in the crowd has ever had. The modern metropolis, with its endless parade of strangers, opens the way for a tremendous opening up and enlargement of the self. But this can't happen without a general liberation of fantasy. Every modern man and woman has the capacity to be a *flaneur*. But first we have to learn to affirm our inner lives and to feel at home with our desires, even weird ones. (Not that we have to act them out; but we have to let them fill our minds.) This vision of a city of crowds, vibrating with mutual fantasy and desire, adds something fundamental to the Declaration of Rights. It points backward to William Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," written in the midst of the French Revolution, and it points forward to Sigmund Freud. Baudelaire imagines a new form of urban development that is also a new form of a democratic citizenship and a new way of being fully alive.

- 16 It was in English and Comp Lit departments that some of the nastiest attacks on *All That Is Solid* unfolded. Many people have been troubled by the universality of my book's horizon. They have said that I impose "modern values" on cultures that "have different values." What I say is that modern experience imposes clashes of values on everybody, wherever they come from, whether they like it or not; that everybody is forced to sort out the conflicting values in their lives, and to create a mix that is distinctively their own. Thus, everybody in the world has the chance to create meaning for his or her lives; but also, everybody has got to do it. Rousseau was one of the first thinkers to grasp the pressures of this situation, where people are "forced to be free." One of the chronic modern conflicts is the desire to succeed and the real delights of distinction *versus* the desire to be decent and sweet to other people. Another conflict is the belief that young people, kids like my students, should marry the people their parents pick out for them and stay close to home, *versus* the idea that love is a primary way of growing up, and lovers should be free to marry and to make their lives with whoever they love, even if their love carries them far from home. (*Romeo and Juliet* might be the first modern play. Its tragedy seemed so remote to me when I read it in the Bronx more than half a century ago; but after nearly half a century as a college teacher in the public sector, I can see how fresh it is, and how it is getting played out on those same streets and in those same buildings. Why didn't I see it then? Because I was a kid, I had a lot to learn.) There are other structural conflicts. People can deal with them in a variety of ways, but they are built into everybody's modern landscape, and we have to live with them. One of Baudelaire's late prose poems, which ran as an op-ed piece in a Parisian newspaper, is called "Anywhere out of this world." He wanted us to know there was no way out. But an immense amount of cultural energy in modern culture has gone into the quest for a way. One of the main routes has been through what historians call "the invention of tradition." Dislike of my work, sometimes even hate, often seems to go with a reification of "tradition," as if all the many cultural, religious and political traditions in world history are uniformly benign, or as if people simply *are* whatever tradition they grew up with, and they become critical, or detached, or fall in love with the wrong people, or get the wrong ideas, only because outside agitators have messed their minds up. Sometimes my critics sound like PR men for every despot on earth who tramples on his subjects' human rights, tortures and kills them, and tells the world they like it like that because "it's their tradition."
- 17 There has been another striking motif in criticism of my book. Some people say I portray modern life as easy and without troubles, as if the whole book isn't about its troubles. They equate my vision of modernity with American capitalism, as if one of my heroes of modernism isn't Karl Marx. (Sometimes it sounds like they have mixed my book up with Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*.) In fact, I have been a leftist all my life. For most of that time, I have worked as a writer and an editor of *Dissent*, a democratic socialist magazine in New York. Through the years I have identified most closely with those European leftists from the years after Stalin's death who called themselves "Socialist Humanists"; with the counter-cultural American New Left of the 1960s; and with diverse spirits of the 1980s, spread out from Gorbachev's Kremlin to Nelson Mandela's prison on Robben Island, who came to see that there can be no socialism worthy of the name unless (as they said in Prague in 1968, before they were crushed by Soviet tanks) it is "socialism with a human face," built on a bedrock of human rights.
- 18 Earlier on, I adapted a piece of advertising and mass media jargon, and said I was delighted to see that my book "has legs." I used this expression in its usual way, to denote products that have a shelf life longer than other products. But it has another, richer meaning: the capacity to carry a product into regions the producer never dreamed of. This happened to my book a generation ago in Brazil, and now, in the 2000s, it has happened in Iran. Typically for our century, most of it has happened on the Internet. A few years ago, I started getting e-mail letters from Iranians. They introduced themselves; some told me they hoped the day would come when they could speak their real names, but not yet; others, apparently the younger ones, seemed more direct; two or three were young women. They were remarkably open; to find total strangers who could feel like my soul mates was a writer's dream. They said *All That Is Solid* was circulating in Farsi in bootleg form, and they all had found it a source of inspiration. It came out as a book, an elegant forbidden book, in 2000.

There have been several printings; I got a copy in the mail last year. Its cover was a city street scene (*a la Paris*), crowned with a big, out-of-scale Times-Square-ish neon sign, with a cryptic motto: PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT.

- 19 Some of my Iranian correspondents came from newspapers and magazines (which sometimes, even as they wrote, were closed by the police, then allowed to reopen, then seized again); others were from Iran's remarkable *samizdat* film industry. Some had been imprisoned and tortured. They shared a hatred for the theocratic police state, but some of the older writers also felt guilty and responsible for bringing it into being. In 1979, they disastrously had it wrong." Now, they hoped to have "a chance to get it right." Thirty years in a police state had given them — I admired the nuances of this phrase — "some idea what freedom means." Communication from Iran grew denser in 2008-09. A liberal politician called me, and asked me, would I please "explain the separation of church and state"? A woman editor asked, could I explain to her readers "the meaning of the Bill of Rights." (Her paper was seized a couple of weeks later.) I was thrilled to be doing political theory in such an urgent situation, and proud that imperial America still had something to teach the world about being free. Somebody said, "We would love to work with you," and they (who?) would be sending me some DVDs; I said I would love to work with them, but I didn't want them to get in trouble for collusion with me ("American agent"). I shouldn't worry, he said; he assured me that he and his friends were all in plenty of trouble already.
- 20 Late in 2008, I got a message from Iran that the stream of messages I was getting from Iran would probably stop soon. (Indeed, it did.) One reason, apparently, was that the state was getting more adept at censoring the Internet. (Was it learning this dark art from China?) Another reason, he said, was this: "It won't be because we have forgotten you. It will mean that we are in prison. BUT WE WILL COME OUT."
- 21 And then, in the summer of 2009, there they were, with a million people like them, out in the streets of Tehran, forming The Green Wave. And this time, unlike thirty years ago, there were women in the crowd. I asked myself, Can some of those legs be my book's legs, encouraging people to run from the police and to stand up for human rights? I hope they can run, and I hope they can stand, and I hope their legs hold out, and I hope I can be worthy of those people whom, in a mysterious way that is the whole meaning of *global culture*, the culture we share, I have helped to be there now.

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Note

Afterword to Marshall Berman. 2010. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New Edition of a Modern Classic. London and New York: Verso. 392 pp.