

## In Remembrance: Marshall Berman (1940-2013)

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Writer and Historian

- 1 Marshall Berman, who died on September 11, shortly before his seventy-third birthday, was my on-and-off friend of fifty years. In recent years, we regained an old intimacy, spoke weekly, and saw each other as often as possible. But there were long periods when we didn't talk, mostly because I found him irritating, egotistical and difficult to deal with. His anxieties often overwhelmed me, as did his strong personality. It also took me too long a time to realize that, beyond his lack of cooth and elegance and beyond his need for control, he was an extremely loving and caring person who had a fierce attachment to his friends and family. If he loved you, he did so without reservation and he was a great friend.
- 2 I first met Marshall when we were both in college at Columbia. He pledged my fraternity and was vetoed by most of my fraternity brothers, mainly on account of his terrible if youthful social awkwardness: he ended every sentence with "I don't know" and had some sort of tic which made him constantly cross his arms while talking. In spite of my *confreres* I struck up a friendship with Marshall, mostly because he was smart and interesting and for someone so young, already knew so much about literature, philosophy, history. Later, we took the famous Barzun-Trilling seminar together and our role as the star students in the class cemented our relationship. He went to Oxford with a Columbia Kellett fellowship and I went to France on a Fulbright and my fondest memories of him relate to our frequent trips in Europe, either to see each other in England or France, or traveling through Italy to Florence, Rome, Venice and other places, engaged in endless argument while visiting museums, going to concerts, walking, ogling beautiful women, and drinking gallons of cappuccino.
- 3 Our arguments were always about the same thing: his identification with the working class and mine with educated elites. I remember our visiting the grand estate of Lord Chief Justice Hardwicke outside of London and being wowed by the interior decoration of the Adam brothers, which evoked from me the provocative comment – "what have the English done since the eighteenth century?" Of course, I soon regretted my provocation, because what followed was a long lecture from Marshall on the glories of English socialism, on George Bernard Shaw and the Fabians, and on the merits of the English Labour Party as compared to the aristocratic Tories. By the time we were done I was exhausted, defeated and felt something like mortal guilt at the mere suggestion that the English aristocracy in the eighteenth century might have contributed anything of worth to English society or culture. A flip remark from me brought out Marshall's complete artillery and I was mowed down and reduced to dust.
- 4 Our arguments were also often about scholarly interpretation and detail. While Marshall was writing the dissertation that eventually became a book, *The Politics of Authenticity*, I took issue with his interpretations of Rousseau and Montesquieu, which I considered partial and distorted. I could see how Rousseau had lambasted French society in the eighteenth century for its inauthenticity (especially in *The Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*) and how he attacked civilization for transforming the ignorant savage into a creature who was vain, proud, and narcissistic. But I couldn't see how Rousseau's politics were about authenticity, even though I could grant that surrender of one's self for the common good might be a fulfillment of individuality. And though I agreed with Marshall that Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* demonstrated the superiority of Western urban freedom over Persian despotism, I pointed to *The Spirit of the Laws* to make the case that Montesquieu

was a proponent of aristocratic liberty and privilege and not the admirer of individual freedom that Marshall made him out to be. Later, as Marshall took on the role of urbanist, I thought his obsession with New York both sentimental and in some ways perverse. Having never lived anywhere but New York, he made the mistake that so many New Yorkers make, which is to think that Gotham is the center of the universe. A recent [piece of mine](#) in this journal referenced his CUNY Mumford lecture of last May, which I criticized for failing to say why New York had “emerged from the ruins” and also for not saying that its emergence in the Bloomberg era, if for the better, signified “the better being the enemy of the good.”

- 5 Marshall’s principal subject was modern culture and the experience of modern life. He characterized modernity as a maelstrom in which human beings ran the risk of being made into objects, even as the modern condition provided them with the freedom to become subjects. He saw modernity correctly as a perpetual dialectical contradiction. At the same time, he identified with the maelstrom, preaching that if we were to have the opportunities and possibilities that modernity offered, we had to accept, however grudgingly, the dread and destruction that it wrought.
- 6 Here was the locus of our major disagreement. My animus was different: I wanted to resolve the contradictions of modernity through democratic politics and I believed that state activism was or could be consistent with democracy and with a modern culture and society that was humane, civilized, and which did not succumb to the competition that made capitalism brutal. Marshall, of course, believed in democracy, but he was seduced by the Faustian *Geist* of modernity. He had a tendency to impose his own *zerissen* self on the world in which he lived and to revel in the drama of a turbulent modernity. He expected life to be full of tumult and aggravation and many of his favorite writers, particularly Phillip Roth, used their novels to express in its fullness the tumult and aggravation that was the daily lot of modern men and women. Marshall was so great a critic of modernity because he embodied its contradictions. One part of him was Settembrini, the brilliant humanist of Mann’s *Magic Mountain*; the other part was the terrifying and diabolic Naphtha, who ardently embraced despair.
- 7 The source of Marshall’s originality was his acceptance of himself and his ability to infuse his work with the full force of his complex personality. Everything he wrote was personal and it was not possible to separate the ideas from the man; they were one and the same. His great feat as a scholar was to rescue Marx from the cold world of dogma and to revivify Marxism with both great subtlety and enthusiasm. In Marshall’s view Marx became an admirer of capitalist energy and creativity even while remaining a cogent critic of capitalist exploitation. Capitalism was corrosive and destructive – “[all that is solid melts into air](#)” – but by creating a fully socialized world of work it allowed for the possibility of human solidarity. Long before the discussions about globalization, Marx understood that capitalism was responsible for creating a global civilization in which human interdependence might ultimately lead to a world “without Jews,” meaning the opposite of what the phrase seems to imply, but instead a world in which the nasty divisiveness of nationalism and racism would disappear. Capitalism alienated man from the fruits of his own labor. But it also provided the energy and tools to renew the world. It was, in short, a mixed bag.
- 8 Marshall was a mixed bag as well. But he was my dear friend and I will sorely miss him.

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