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All That Is Solid Melts into Air

The Experience of Modernity

MARSHALL BERMAN

New Edition

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Melts Into Air



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VERSO

London • New York

This edition first published by Verso 2010
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Parts of *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* were first published in slightly different form in *Dissent*, Winter 1978; *American Review* 19, 1974; and *Berkshire Review*, October 1981.

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Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG

US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201

www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-84467-644-6

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed in Great Britain by Bell & Bain Ltd., Glasgow

**In Memory of
Marc Joseph Berman
1975–1980**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is far from a confessional book. Still, as I carried it for years inside me, I felt that in some sense it was the story of my life. It is impossible here to acknowledge all those who lived through the book with me and who helped make it what it is: the subjects would be too many, the predicates too complex, the emotions too intense; the work of making the list would never begin, or else would never end. What follows is no more than a start. For energy, ideas, support and love, my deepest thanks to Betty and Diane Berman, Morris and Lore Dickstein, Sam Girgus, Denise Green, Irving Howe, Leonard Kriegel, Meredith and Corey Tax, Gaye Tuchman, Michael Walzer; to Georges Borchardt and Michel Radomislí; to Erwin Glikes, Barbara Grossman and Susan Dwyer at Simon and Schuster; to Allen Ballard, George Fischer and Richard Wortman, who gave me special help with St. Petersburg; to my students and colleagues at the City College and the City University of New York, and at Stanford and the University of New Mexico; to the members of the Columbia University seminar in Political and Social Thought, and of the NYU seminar in the Culture of Cities; to the National Endowment for the Humanities; to the Purple Circle Day Care Center; to Lionel Trilling and Henry Pachter, who encouraged me to begin this book, and to keep at it, but who did not live to see it in print; and to many others, not named here, but not forgotten, who helped.

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**All That Is
Solid Melts
Into Air**

Preface

For most of my life, since I learned that I was living in “a modern building” and growing up as part of “a modern family,” in the Bronx of thirty years ago, I have been fascinated by the meanings of modernity. In this book I have tried to open up some of these dimensions of meaning, to explore and chart the adventures and horrors, the ambiguities and ironies of modern life. The book moves and develops through a number of ways of reading: of texts—Goethe’s *Faust*, the *Communist Manifesto*, *Notes from Underground*, and many more; but also I try to read spatial and social environments—small towns, big construction sites, dams and power plants, Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace, Haussmann’s Parisian boulevards, Petersburg prospects, Robert Moses’ highways through New York; and finally, reading fictional and actual people’s lives, from Goethe’s time through Marx’s and Baudelaire’s and into our own. I have tried to show how all these people share, and all these books and environments express, certain distinctively modern concerns. They are moved at once by a will to change—to transform both themselves and their world—and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart. They all know the thrill and the dread of a world in which “all that is solid melts into air.”

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own. It is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibil-

ities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold on to something real even as everything melts. We might even say that to be fully modern is to be anti-modern: from Marx's and Dostoevsky's time to our own, it has been impossible to grasp and embrace the modern world's potentialities without loathing and fighting against some of its most palpable realities. No wonder then that, as the great modernist and anti-modernist Kierkegaard said, the deepest modern seriousness must express itself through irony. Modern irony animates so many great works of art and thought over the past century; at the same time, it infuses millions of ordinary people's everyday lives. This book aims to bring these works and these lives together, to restore the spiritual wealth of modernist culture to the modern man and woman in the street, to show how, for all of us, modernism is realism. This will not resolve the contradictions that pervade modern life; but it should help us to understand them, so that we can be clear and honest in facing and sorting out and working through the forces that make us what we are.

Shortly after I finished this book, my dear son Marc, five years old, was taken from me. I dedicate *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* to him. His life and death bring so many of its ideas and themes close to home: the idea that those who are most happily at home in the modern world, as he was, may be most vulnerable to the demons that haunt it; the idea that the daily routine of playgrounds and bicycles, of shopping and eating and cleaning up, of ordinary hugs and kisses, may be not only infinitely joyous and beautiful but also infinitely precarious and fragile; that it may take desperate and heroic struggles to sustain this life, and sometimes we lose. Ivan Karamazov says that, more than anything else, the death of children makes him want to give back his ticket to the universe. But he does not give it back. He keeps on fighting and loving; he keeps on keeping on.

New York City
January 1981

Introduction

Modernity—Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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."

People who find themselves in the midst of this maelstrom are apt to feel that they are the first ones, and maybe the only ones, to be going through it; this feeling has engendered numerous nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost. In fact, however, great and ever-increasing numbers of people have been going through

it for close to five hundred years. Although most of these people have probably experienced modernity as a radical threat to all their history and traditions, it has, in the course of five centuries, developed a rich history and a plenitude of traditions of its own. I want to explore and chart these traditions, to understand the ways in which they can nourish and enrich our own modernity, and the ways in which they may obscure or impoverish our sense of what modernity is and what it can be.

The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them half-way across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market. In the twentieth century, the social processes that bring this maelstrom into being, and keep it in a state of perpetual becoming, have come to be called "modernization." These world-historical processes have nourished an 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. Over the past century, these visions and values have come to be loosely grouped together under the name of "modernism." This book is a study in the dialectics of modernization and modernism.

In the hope of getting a grip on something as vast as the history of modernity, I have divided it into three phases. In the first phase, which goes roughly from the start of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, people are just beginning to experience