

Dynamics of modernity: berman and canclini



Compare and contrast Marshall Berman's and Nestor Garcia Canclini's account of the dynamics of Modernity

“ 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.”

(Berman: 1983: 13-14)

Modernity has long been hailed as one of the most powerful forces to have emerged in the world, with the capacity, according to Marx, to move mountains, and to ensure that ‘ all that is solid melts into air.’ Within the statement by Berman that begins this essay, we can see one of the dynamics that has created this impression. Modernity, despite its deeper roots, begins to be talked about by a series of thinkers who combine a high degree of abstraction with a imperative to act. Thus Marx argues for huge motors of historical *telos* that exist outside of our will, and at the same time argues for an immanent need to change historical conditions. This relationship between abstraction and concreteness is perhaps the most fundamental dynamic of modernity. It gives rise to the planned economies of communism, and the controlled biopower of modern states that Foucault (1998) talks about, which attempt to rule over the function of life itself. At the same time it gives rise to what Badiou (2005: 12) calls the ‘ passion for the real’; the search for an authentic existence in the absence of the certainties with which previous epochs lived.

What is crucial about these two movements is the way in which they inflect each other. The idea of authentic will becomes possible only with the collapse of grand narratives and the rise of administered life, and the administered life then uses the same notion of self-fulfilment within consumerism to further be able to administer biopower. It is this covalence that is fundamental to modernity, and which this essay will argue is entirely misunderstood by Berman. One of the reasons for this is that, as Braudel (1995: 14) notes, "each civilisation tends to overestimate its own objectivity." Likewise, each age tends to see itself as more unique than the last. However, this is particularly a problem with the period called modernity because during this period it was thought reason could break with the past, and a utopia of the state was possible. We can see this legacy in both the Communist economies and in the artistic movements such as Marinetti's futurism, which had as its motto: "make it new." It is precisely this trap that Berman falls into: confusing the ideas of modernity with the effects of modernisation. In fact, Berman's fetishised notions of will and authenticity, played out in the ahistorical *telos* of his modernist planar development, resemble nothing as much as a 19c treatise on the movement of history.

Perhaps part of the reason for this is the combination of Berman's European sources with his background in the strong individualist tradition of American pragmatism, as we can see in his first book (1970). Canclini stands just south of Berman, but from the perspective of Mexico, modernity is not a finished project to be talked about nostalgically in the way Berman does. Because this project is unfinished, Canclini is much better placed to understand the complex and intertwined relationship between what is constructed as '

tradition' and what is constructed as 'modernity'. His notion of hybridity, placed in the context of a heavy reliance on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, allows one to understand that supreme category of modernity: tradition. For instance, Canclini notes (1995a: 53) that there is no clear line between popular and hegemonic culture, because (ibid: 75) peasant culture is necessary for capitalism as a 'symbol of national identity' and because (ibid: 83) it offers the 'construction of a hegemony through the management of cultural fragmentation.' Thus modernity can be seen here as a hybrid form whereby old identities are mobilised rather than changed and uprooted. Canclini understands that modernity, if it means anything, means a change in underlying structure rather than the type of cultural universalism which lies as the undertone of the work of Berman. This essay will consider how Berman sets up the dynamics of modernity within this ahistorical schema, and argue, as previously alluded to, that he misses the important aspects of the relation. It will also be argued that Canclini, within his much more modest project, understands the underlying dynamics of the abstract and the concrete to a far greater degree.

Perhaps Berman's problems begin with his tripartite division of modernity into modernity, modernisation and the modern, without every looking at how these categories are mutually constitutive of each other. Modernity, Berman explains is (1983: 15): "a mode of vital experience - experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils." Berman's book is more of an evocation than a scholarly argument, but nonetheless it seems pertinent to insist on some evidence for such a claim: did other ages not experience space and time? The problem here is not simply that

Berman's generalisations do not tell us anything about modernity, but that they conceal the real dynamics of the process. For instance, Berman often insists on the sense of newness, of authentic experience, within modernity. Yet understood as what Berman construes it to be, the sense of the new is not an experience particular to modernity at all. What is important here about the dynamics of modernity is the way in which the experience of the new, what Berman calls modernity, is an essential part of the process of modernisation. This has been argued well by one of Berman's claimed inspirations, Walter Benjamin, whose *Arcades Project* (2002) traces the way in which a sense of wonder was used to create the consumer sensibility. This is also laid out in the work of Canclini, who chronicles the powerful political effect created by constructing modernity as something to come - around which one can mobilise people towards new identities and on new political projects. However, this is a discursive effect, rather than a fundamentally new ontological possibility for the modern subject, and Berman asserts the latter as a property of the former without giving a single argument.

Instead, Berman (1983: 15) gives us evocation and adjective, one strung after the other. The underlying dynamic of modernity for him is: "modernity... is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish." Underlying all this purple prose is Marx's statement, that inspires the book's title, that 'all that is solid melts into air.' Yet what Marx is talking about is the ability of capital to undermine use-value and create a world of people alienated from their labour and extracted of surplus value. Now one can take issue with Marx's account, (as Baudrillard (1983)

most usefully does by pointing out that use-value is also a fetishisation, this time of authenticity, and that the original alienation occurs with the construction of *value*) but what he draws attention to is the way people see the imaginaries of capitalism as *real*: capital is perceived by people in Marx as something actually existing, rather than a 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration.' Here, Berman fails to give proper account of why he diverges from Marx.

What can we salvage from Berman's account of the dynamics of modernity?

It is true to say that the political subject in modernity was thought of as massively flexible and capable of continual reinvention. Though it must be added that this notion has much broader historical roots than Berman gives credit for: one can already see it in Machiavelli's (2004) notion that people are capable of masking their intentions and this constitutes the basis for politics. However, this continual possibility for reinvention led to some of the most firm sets of continuities the world has seen for some time: the idea of class war, the tradition of the French *bourgeoisie*, and the modern state. Berman writes off in a few lines most of the great thinkers who have analysed this mutually constitutive relationships, Adorno here meriting a line. Canclini, in contrast, is alert to the way the supposed newness of modernity function to preserve power, and in his account of modernity in Mexico draws attention to the way 'newness' is made a continuity of ritual and hegemonic power.

Berman then separates out modernization as the social process that brings this maelstrom into being. In doing so he outlines some clear divisions between the phases of modernity. These phases resemble nothing so much

as the clear evolutionary steps of early modern thinkers like Morgan. In doing so he makes a mockery of the patient work of people like Arrighi (1994), who have worked to uncover all the continuities that exist between different periods. Furthermore, his account is not even internally consistent. There is insufficient clarity in his work as to the difference between the 19C and 20C: Pushkin and Biely are made manifestations of the same movement, despite the widely different impulses that inform their work. What Canclini's work manages to do very well is to understand the way in which modernity, more than any other epoch (for it is the epoch of men who make history themselves without reliance on religious narratives) is complicit in its own construction of history. He traces the way in which history is used as a political tool, and that the function of the type of planar divisions Berman uses is to extract a continuity from a succession. Which is to say that such divisions function as a political tool to extract a notion of destiny and objective inevitability from a history which is contingent and uncertain.

Berman's one-sided and simplistic reading of modernity reaches its apex in his account of the American city. His account is a one sided view of power, as if Le Corbusier had artfully created American cities and all the modern man needed to do was stand up against this bloody tyrant. Canclini (1995b: 743-755) charts the way in which the modern man is complicit in the spaces that he builds, and that the solution to problems of alienation that occur in such spaces is not some type of revolt by a careful reworking of the practices and delimitations of space that occur in the city. It is working through the very dynamics of modernity that one resolves its problems, and to do so requires an understanding of their complex inter-relation. Such an

understanding is accurately posed by Jameson (1992: 335) in his understanding of how it was the very construction of space in Los Angeles that led to the possibility of that constructions overthrowing. Furthermore, Berman misunderstands how contested Le Corbusier is in architectural theory. He fails to see the varying currents that inform modernity and that produced a diverse and heterogeneous formation of space, even within Le Corbusier's own school (Rabinow: 1991). Theoretically, he also fails to see what De Certeau (2002: 19) has persuasively argued for, which is that it was the very relationship of time and space in modernity that leads states to forget the possibility of space. He argues that the spatial organisation laid out by the modern state was predicated on a notion of time as mode of organisation (e. g. wage labour) and a possibility of reinvention which necessarily allowed the particularities of space (as somewhere one has a proper place and a tradition that cannot be reinvented) to left to the people. Thus the conditions for contesting the state in modernity emerges from the intertwining of the micro and macro processes.

These complex processes are ignored by Berman, because he is looking for a will-to-power to set against what he sees as the large bureaucratic structures of modernity. This is why he is so against Foucault, who attempts to set out the co-relation between these things. In attempting to find human creativity outside of any sort of system (though without offering any kind of rigorous account of how that might be achieved) he gives to much credit to bureaucratic systems. Canclini, in understanding how the four divisions of modernity he sets out (the rationalising, renovating, emancipatory and

democratising projects) are frequently in conflict and lead to a conflicting and contested legacy, is in a much better position to understand.

Ultimately, Berman's work seems as if it was written with a long nostalgia to badly understood 19C authors. He uses a notion of freedom as fetishised will (where he deploys what one could reasonably call a notion at all) without understanding that the development of modernity has destroyed this very category. As Zizek (1999: 389) artfully pointed out it is the search for the real, for fetishised will, that, when not placed in a grand narrative, ends up in indulging in its simulacrum; the real emptied of risk. Likewise, it is the bureaucratic form of government that has led to the globalisation and decentralisation of its own form. These processes are ignored by Berman, who sees modernity as a universalism, even if a contradictory one, issuing like a new beacon of hope from a centre in Europe. Canclini understands modernity as a hybrid formation that cannot be tied to Europe, and has begun to chart the complex ways that modernity brings to bear on itself, and construct its own legacy.

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