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# READERS

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*To the editors:*

The latest fad in the marketplace of ideas is the “culturally conservative radical,” as Jackson Lears styles himself in his review of Marshall Berman’s book on modernism, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*. Lears claims that “ordinary folk have been the most tenaciously traditional element” in society and that this is a great blessing to radicals because “looking backward” enables “ordinary folk” to “look forward to a more just society.” Lears argues that resistance to capitalist modernization and consumer culture *only* occurs because of attachment to the traditional aspects of household, family, community, craft, and religious or ethnic ties. Thus, he justifies cultural conservatism as a “reservoir” from which “political egalitarianism” can draw strength. Lears admonishes us: “Instead of fretting about apple pie authoritarianism would-be democrats might address the concerns of those who . . . stand in the way of modernization.” One can only be a true democrat if one is a cultural conservative, allied with the traditions to which ordinary people “tenaciously” adhere. In contrast, Berman’s commitment to “modernism” makes him undemocratic because it disregards the wishes of ordinary folk, and makes him the unwitting accomplice of the corporate state because modernism undermines the traditions that enable people to fight back.

Lears presents a comicbook rendition of the relation between culture and politics in the Reagan era. At stake in this passion play of allegorical creatures, however, is the shape and direction of radical politics after both the New Left and New Right. These stakes can be demonstrated by examining briefly Lears’s complaints about Berman and modernism.

First, Lears condemns Berman, “progressives,” and “modernism” for having “no interest in the past except as a foil for the exciting present and future.” He means they avoid the destruction caused by “progress” and miss the political opportunities presented by tradition. But Lears himself engages in avoidance and misses opportunities. For example, he refers to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to prove that the tradition of religion and community made the civil rights movement possible, but then says nothing about the fact that the SCLC failed because those traditions did not exist in the Northern ghettos and that another kind of politics had to be created. What do cultural conservatives do when nothing is left to conserve or draw on? Earlier political movements among blacks, women, and workers were not only promoted by, but were—at best—limited and flawed by the traditions of church, domesticity, and craft. At worst, unchallenged “traditions” have become the source of political reaction or assimilation: racism turns populism into an elite tool, craft traditions justify the

disenfranchisement of other workers, ethnic loyalties enabled urban machines to turn immigrants away from political protest.

Finally, Lears ignores the fact that the traditions that he celebrates in such vaporous terms were themselves inherently problematic. Must we be reminded in this time of revivalism that modernism arose as an attempt to get past the unconscious nihilism and resentment of religion and other traditional values and institutions? Must we be reminded that traditions were, are, and will be undermined from below by those they victimize and trap? Women, minorities, unskilled workers, and youth were oppressed by and therefore opposed to the traditions of household patriarchy and gender division, community cohesion along ethnic lines, craft solidarity, and puritanical ethics. Traditions benefit some at the expense of others: egalitarianism has only arisen because men and women did not conserve, but struggled against the traditions that buttressed established power.

This is to say, secondly, that Lears is not speaking for vast numbers of "ordinary people." By extension, he radically misconstrues their experience of modernization by insisting that they are simply innocent and traditionalist victims of a coercive process. Berman and others have shown the ways and senses in which immigrants and their children have participated in, are complicit in, their own modernization and in the destruction and transformation it entails. The American experience is perceived by others and described by our finest authors as a quintessentially "modernist" project of opposing traditions in order to create a new community based on personal autonomy, social equality, and open-ended experimentalism. People without power do suffer and resist capitalism, not in the name of tradition, however, but because "we want to make something better of ourselves and for our children," that is, in the name of willful change. Berman locates the ambivalence of restlessness and loss that is at the heart of America. He does face the destructiveness of capitalism and modernism, but does not therefore insist that we are a nation of traditions warranting a Burkean conservatism. Rather, he would have us look into our loss to find self-recognition and examine our desolation to disclose the opportunities it conceals.

Here we reach the third issue of contention, modernism. Lears treats modernism as a lifestyle of "growth," self-development, and therapy, which hypertrophies the self to the exclusion of all else so that it easily fits into consumer culture and is incapable of political action. For Lears, modernists commit the sin of pride when they attack tradition in the name of what he calls the "illusory and destructive" fantasy of autonomy. This sin of the spirit becomes the merely selfish revolt of the flesh which makes political life impossible by overwhelming the traditional restraints on autonomy and desire. If one wants politics one must choose tradition because only tradition provides the renunciations that, in Lears's mind, make possible the "larger loyalties" of politics. He would have us believe that if one rejects tradition, then one rejects politics and can only affirm merely

hedonistic desire. Lears would force us to choose between modernism, autonomy, and the gratification of desire, and tradition, politics (social justice), and renunciation.

Lears's need to justify his own asceticism leads him to miss Berman's argument that modernism at its best is about rejecting such choices. Autonomy is not equivalent to hedonism, politics need not be based on renunciation, and tradition is not the only basis of political action. Berman shows that the modernist rejection of traditional institutions, values, and art forms is both the necessity of the victim and the choice of would-be creators; that "modernist" autonomy is both a choice to (learn to) speak in one's own voice (personally, politically, and artistically), and a choice to join with other rebels and outcasts. Modernism is about the transformation of the given self and its understanding of gratification and loyalty.

In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx describes what he calls "farce," which occurs when men anxiously conjure up spirits from the past in order to avoid facing the present. Reagan and the New Right hoped to capture "ordinary people" by resurrecting dying traditions and moribund myths. Lears, ostensibly the sober and disenchanted adult who is rectifying progressives' adolescent illusions, claims that by capturing the ghosts of tradition he can defeat the right and instead promote "radical" politics (whatever he means by that). But this fantastical claim is "illusory and destructive." Lears is captured by these ghosts: his alleged disenchantment about the present is really a condition of being possessed by the past. Thus possessed, he urges the left to betray its deepest values, commitments, and constituencies.

**George Schulman**

Berkeley, California