REVIEW: MARSHALL BERMAN, *ADVENTURES IN MARXISM*. LONDON: VERSO, 1999.

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Marshall Berman is best known for his well-received 1982 work *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. The attempt to duplicate the success of that volume apparently resulted in a sort of writer's block: nothing he produced subsequently "seemed grand enough or profound enough to deserve the title 'book.'" Nearly two decades later, however, we have in our hands *Adventures in Marxism*. In its preface, Berman reveals how he dealt with the Gordian knot of his writer's block in fine Alexandrian fashion: giving up his "notion that a book should be an organic whole," he decided to release a collection of previously published essays.

Berman doesn't need to apologize for this solution, because the pieces—mostly book reviews and short biographical sketches of figures like Lukács and Benjamin, as well as the volume's centerpiece, a reworked version of the essay that became the basis for *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*—that make up *Adventures in Marxism* hang together remarkably well. As the title suggests, in the first place they all have something to do with Marxism. But it is really the notion of "adventure," which Berman thinks is central to modern life, that connects the various pieces. For Berman, "an adventure is not an idyll: much of its excitement springs from its risks, from the chance that it could end horribly." *Adventures in Marxism* constantly returns to this contradiction, beginning with the deeply personal introduction in which Berman reveals how the

vagaries of the world market bankrupted his father, ruining his health and, Berman suggests, sending him to an early grave. Yet the same world responsible for his father's ill-fated "Marxist adventure" allowed Berman, a working class kid from the Bronx, to attend some of the world's most elite universities.

Better than anyone else, Berman argues, Marx grasped how the modern world was at once full of these sorts of "possibilities and perils." He is especially taken with Marx's "impassioned, enthusiastic, often lyrical celebration of bourgeois works, ideas and achievements" found in the *Communist Manifesto*, and the longest essay in *Adventures*, originally published in 1978, is given over to an exploration of how Marx thought capitalism created new possibilities, but also new problems, for human freedom and development. The impetus for this exploration was Berman's perception that, as the New Left disintegrated, people he "thought he knew...drifted toward a primitivist romance that idealized any form of life that looked different from our own." Feeling "a desperate need for a radical criticism that didn't explode into primitive self-hate, and that wasn't nihilistic toward the whole modern world," Berman turned to the *Manifesto*, in an attempt to rescue what he felt was Marx's more sophisticated, genuinely dialectical vision of what the modern world has to offer. What he concluded is that Marx's greatest achievement was to recognize that for all its problems, capitalism creates the conditions that make possible the transition to a better world, and thus "that the way beyond the contradictions would have to lead through modernity, not out of it."

After the *Manifesto*, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* are probably most central to Berman's

thought. His own "Marxist adventure" involved discovering the recently published *Manuscripts* as an undergraduate in 1959, an experience that, as he puts it, "focused my identity for the next forty years." What Berman found in the *Manuscripts* was something he labels "Marxist humanism." Characterized by their "feeling for the individual," and the importance of human self-development, the *Manuscripts* showed Berman that what Marx had in mind was something very different from the really existing Communisms of the twentieth century. But Marxist humanism was always more than simply "an alternative to Stalinism," the relevance of which died with the Soviet Union. In Berman's mind, the real importance of Marx's critique of alienated labor was that it showed that "so long as work is organized in hierarchies and mechanical routines and oriented to the demands of the world market, most people, even in the freest societies, will still be enslaved."

Berman's Marxist humanism causes him to place a great deal of emphasis on *people*. The review essays in *Adventures in Marxism* tend to focus on books like Studs Terkel's *Working* and Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station*. The essays on Marx, Lukács, and Benjamin reveal that Berman thinks their lives are as important as their ideas. And when Berman writes about *Capital*—which probably takes third place in his ordering of the Marxist canon—he writes about "The People in *Capital*," and shows that even where Marx explicitly set out to deal with "individuals...only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories" (*Capital*, Penguin, 92), real human beings kept cropping up, and what these people did mattered. Berman's approach is conscious: he thinks "it's an occupational hazard for intellectuals, regardless of their politics, to lose touch with

the stuff and flow of everyday life," but that "this is a special problem for intellectuals on the Left, because we, among all political movements, take special pride in noticing people, respecting them, listening to their voices, caring about their needs, bringing them together, fighting for their freedom an happiness."

Adventures in Marxism undoubtedly has some problems: Berman's tendency to conflate "capitalism" and "modernity" obscures capitalism's chronology, as Ellen Meiksins Wood has pointed out; and at times his account of the contradictory character of capitalism sounds a bit too celebratory, especially since he fails to consider problems like environmental destruction (which may not have a dialectical resolution). But Berman's rare appreciation for the way people make their own history under conditions they didn't choose more than compensates for these shortcomings, and his engaging style makes *Adventures in Marxism* a joy to read.