THEMES FOR CHINA: MODERN ARTS, MODERN CONFLICT

Marshall Berman

Some...hope to get rid of modern arts, in order to get rid of modern conflicts.

—Karl Marx, 1856

My presentation will be a trip through the Communist Manifesto, with special emphasis on part one. I believe this book is the greatest-ever vision of modernity. I want to emphasize the expansiveness of its horizon, its grasp of the paradoxes and inner contradictions of modern life, and the depth of its penetration into the inner life of the modern subject. Subjectivity is a central theme for Marx. He shares Hegel’s idea that “the principle of the modern world is freedom of subjectivity.” He builds on this idea and deepens it. Freedom of subjectivity is central to his communism. In the 1840s, he portrays it as the culmination of bourgeois humanism. His communist society will be one where “the freedom of each is the basis for the freedom of all.”

Marx presupposes the English, the American, and the French Revolutions; he sees communism as a way to fulfill their broken promises of democratic citizenship and human rights. The USSR and the PRC emerged in environments where no such promises were ever made, where the story of liberty never had a chance to begin. Their models were peasant communes and religious monasteries, overpowering collectivities that crush the self. In Russia and China, a Marx-type communism couldn’t even be imagined until Stalinism and Maoism were overthrown. Only then could modern subjects emerge and act.

Their actions are loaded with irony and contradiction. Modern capitalism promises subjective freedom, but it alienates people from themselves. The pressures of market society twist the individual into a cash machine (some of whom produce a lot more cash than others). Marx thinks the workers can overcome their alienation, because capitalism is the one social system that oppresses people in a way that actually makes them smarter and stronger. All workers get a compulsory free education in what old American slang calls “the school of
hard knocks.” To organize and to create radical labor unions, is not just a triumph, but a triumph of subjectivity. The song “We Shall Overcome” promises us a new world, if only we can remain united and remember our long-term goals. But who knows if the workers of this world can stay together long enough to overcome the global market?

I talked about this in my book, All That is Solid Melts into Air.\(^1\) It was published in paperback shortly before the great events of 1989, at the Berlin Wall and in Tian’anmen Square. Since then China has become the most dynamic economy in the world. I have been reading a book, One China, Many Paths (Verso, 2003), in which many Chinese intellectuals discuss the meaning of the boom. The government’s position seems to be summed up in the 1980s slogan coined by Deng Xiaoping: “development is the irrefutable argument.” If this is so, then China’s spectacular growth rates not only win the argument they end the argument. That seems to be the point of the 1990s slogan, “farewell to utopia.” There also seems to be a wave of cultural bullying directed at intellectuals. They are told something along the lines of: “China’s boom will go on forever; it is its own justification. It is dangerous to think about what it means, or about how its benefits should be shared, or about how men and women should live. Brains have an important function, to design technical improvements and arrange policy implementation, not to worry about the meaning of life. You had dialogues about all the great ideas in the 1980s, and you know where they led. We do not want any more of that.” This language reminds me a lot of the “McCarthy years” in which I grew up, an age of cultural repression in the midst of an economic boom, when intellectuals were told they had better “Shut up and keep off the grass.”

What does this have to do with Karl Marx? Communist Manifesto has a couple of trenchant sentences that can help us see the connection. “The bourgeoisie,” he says, has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the doctor, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-laborers.

In this vision intellectuals are still there, but they are demoted, deskilled, disabled, and pushed down into the proletariat, where they live by selling their brains for purely technical uses. However for Marx,

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