Remembering Marshall Berman

written by Jason Schulman | September 23, 2013

The death of Marshall Berman—City University of New York political theory professor, author of books including the seminal *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, *Dissent* editorial board member, and one-time professor of mine—caught me quite by surprise, as I'm sure it did many. I'd last seen him in person at a *Dissent* holiday party and last talked to him on the phone some months ago. Although, in all honesty, Marshall never looked to me like he was ever in the best of physical health, it never occurred to me that he was "due" for a heart attack. That he's now gone is something that my mind has yet to fully accept.

Marshall's death has led to eloquent tributes, none of which I can hope to "compete with." Aside from various online articles, including one on the Marxist art critic Meyer Schapiro which appeared in the first issue of *New Politics* that I ever read, the only book by Marshall that I ever read was *All That Is Solid*—which, of course, is brilliant, and about which I have nothing uniquely insightful to add. Further, I only ever took one course with him, in the Fall of 2001 (and, yes, the class was made more interesting—for want of a better word—after the 9/11 massacre, which makes Marshall's passing on 9/11/2013 all the stranger for me). The class was on Modernism and Post-Modernism, and my final paper for it, slightly altered, ultimately found its way into the pages of *Jacobin*, ten years or so later. So I suppose I should belatedly again thank Marshall for that.

I attended Marshall's funeral on September 14. Had I given the matter a moment's thought I would have expected it to be as overcrowded as it was. Various people whom I had expected to see there did show up, but I was pleasantly surprised to see and hear Robert Christgau, self-proclaimed "Dean of American Rock Critics" and whose no-longer-published Consumer Guide for the *Village Voice* I started reading in high school, offer a moving remembrance. I had forgotten that they were good friends and shared cultural tastes.

And this was what I loved most about Marshall—his aesthetics. Yes, we had Marxism in common, but it's not as if many Marxists of Marshall's vintage could speak about my favorite hip-hop acts (Public Enemy, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest) in an informed way, or even do so at all. We both loved comics writer Harvey Pekar, also gone too soon. And we both loved New York, although of course he loved it in a much more personal and knowledgeable way than I—he born of the South Bronx and living in the Upper West Side, me a transplant from the NYC suburb otherwise known as Stamford, Connecticut.

In retrospect, I wish that Marshall and I had talked more—about music, about New York, about the state of the Left at home and abroad, about Judaism (I go to services under duress—Marshall went with enthusiasm), about any number of other matters. Like so many others who were touched by him and his work, I miss him.

R.I.P., comrade.