I first read *All that is Solid Melts into Air* in the 1980s, a few years after it was published. It had an enormous impact upon me, as it did on many others. Here was a book that recognized, indeed insisted, that modernity was not just ‘social processes’ but also new subjectivities, not just new world(s) but new ways of inhabiting them, and thus that comprehending modernity required engaging not only with Marx, but also with Goethe. It was a book written in the idiom of the Left, but without an obsession with its shibboleths, or its sometimes deadening prose. A book of extraordinary scope and range of reference, written with a passion and verve that would enthral even a skeptical reader.

I was not a skeptical reader. As with all readers, I approached the text with my own preconceptions and desires. I was then in my mid-20s, and was working on my PhD dissertation. I was an active member of the (very small) radical Left in Australia. In my reading and appropriation of Marxism, Marxism (like liberalism) was not only a product of the modern age, but also a champion of it. It was unmistakably a progeny of the Enlightenment, and saw in the modern that which is both inevitable, and desirable; and I too envisioned the future in terms of the socialist modern. But I was also beginning to ask questions to which I could not find satisfactory answers. Given the cruelties involved in the transition to the modern, could one be an unabashed champion of it? And, even if modernity was a good, because it laid the grounds for appropriating its fruits without its horrors, where did this leave ‘premoderns’? Were the indigenous peoples of Australia, for instance, premodern, and if so, were they to be pitied or despised for it? Would it be necessary— in their own interests— to engage in social engineering that would drag them into the twentieth century? Such questions— no doubt naïve, immature and badly phrased ones— had begun to unsettle my youthful convictions, and I was in search of something which would answer, allay, or silence, them.

I read Jurgen Habermas, champion of the unfinished project of modernity, in the hope of finding answers, but came away disappointed. In particular, I was deeply disturbed by the manner in which Habermas’s appropriated Piaget and Kohlberg to suggest that
there existed a ladder of moral development, with different societies occupying different rungs of it.\(^1\) If the modern was nearer the apex of this ladder, where did this leave India? If defending modernity required viewing some others, including many of my own countrymen and women, as morally backward, this was not for me. I was (and am) acutely conscious of the many inequities and cruelties that characterize societies deemed to be insufficiently modern, such as India, but I was also conscious of the affective pleasures afforded by certain forms of social life, and practices of being a self, that seemed to be intimately tied to such premodernity; and I was not willing (or able) to condemn these as morally backward, or consign them to the proverbial dustbin of history. Reading Habermas stoked, rather than allayed, my questions and doubts about the ‘unfinished project of modernity’.

And then along came Berman’s *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, offering a spirited defence of modernity which, however, recognized in equal measure the restless and relentless destructiveness of modernity (Berman’s word for holding these together, in tension, was ‘dialectical’). It did so not, as in the standard Marxist narrative, by reiterating that many humans and their ways of life would suffer before the full benefits of modernity could be experienced in the form of the socialist modern, but by raising the deeper question of whether modernity might entail a never ending flux that may be incapable of ‘coming to fruition’, and might be inhospitable to any settled form of life. Indeed, in Berman’s account the perpetual openness and restlessness that characterized the process and flux we call modernity, left Marx’s own assumptions or prophecies about communism as the fulfillment of modernity curiously ungrounded. Berman asked whether, given that under modernity all that is solid melts into air, communism too might be a fleeting moment rather than a culmination and a resting place (105). Yet the emphasis was emphatically on the possibilities that modernity, for all its destructiveness, opened up, and thus on the need for critics of it to simultaneously embrace it and its possibilities: “the fullest and deepest critique of modernity may come from those who most ardently embrace its adventure and romance” (86); “those who are most critical of modern life need modernism most” (128); the voices of 19th C modernism had been animated by the hope “that the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of today” (23), and it these voices which Berman seeks to retrieve and reinvigorate for our times.\(^2\) Here was what I was looking for: an
argument that echoed some of my own reservations about modernity as an unadulterated good, and yet which passionately and persuasively affirmed the multiple possibilities of modernity, possibilities that produced suffering and vertiginous disorientation, and yet which had to be experienced, lived through and seized, if one’s critiques of modernity were to be meaningful, and have any real consequences.

Rereading it after some 25 years, I am still filled with admiration. All that Is Solid is a significant achievement, and a genuinely important book. But it does not resonate for me as it once did. Some of its core presumptions—by which I mean, not particular arguments, but rather more fundamental notions that provide the foundations or scaffolding that enable particular arguments—I no longer share. I will devote the remainder of this essay to briefly outlining three core presumptions of the book, before registering the nature of my disagreements with these.

Bildung, Totality and Historicism

A notion of self-development is at the heart of All that Is Solid, and of a great deal of what is appealing about it. Tearing people out of lives defined by fixed roles and static essences, modernity has initiated (Berman is here parsing Marx) “a process of continual, restless, open-ended, unbounded [individual] growth.”(98) To be sure, for many this has been experienced as great material hardship and as the loss of familiar worlds and existential belonging; but the changes are for the most part inescapable, the possibilities opened up are real, and moreover, we must never forget “the cruelty and brutality of so many of the forms of life that modernization has wiped out” (60). The historical and existential task is to live through the pains and possibilities of modernity, and bend it such that one can be at home in it: “To be modern…is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one’s own…” (345-46)

To make oneself at home—this is the language of the Bildungsroman, and one way of reading All That Is Solid, I suggest, is to read it as a latter 20th C Bildungsroman, the narrative of self-development of which Goethe’s William Meisters Lehrjahre is the
archetype, and which provides, in Lukac’s words, “an ideal of free humanity which comprehends and affirms the structures of social life as necessary forms of human community; yet, at the same time…takes possession of these structures, not in their rigid political and legal being-for-themselves, but as the necessary instruments of aims which go far beyond them.” In an original and beguiling argument, Berman posits modernism as the form that Bildung must take for us moderns. It is only by simultaneously accepting, but also shaping to our purposes, the modernity that we inhabit— and modernism is the means to this end— that we can ever hope to be at home in this world.

A second important feature of All that is Solid is its totalizing drive. Berman treats the phenomena he analyses as modernity rather than, say, capitalism; there could be no modernity without capitalism, but the phenomena of modernity is not exhausted by capitalism, and nor is it merely a secondary derivation or effect of it. Modernity includes the aesthetics of an epoch defined by perpetual change and transformation, the modes of subjectivity that it produces and that mark different ways of trying to come to terms with it, and much else besides. One of the defining features of the 19th C modernism that he valorizes is that it recognized this interconnectedness in a way that 20th C modernisms often have not. Berman approvingly notes that his two central intellectual referents, Goethe and Marx, “share a belief that ‘modern life’ comprises a coherent whole.” (88)

Finally, Berman’s argument is deeply ‘historicist’, by which I mean not merely that it historicises, but that it operates with an understanding of time and social process in which some societies are ‘now’ at a point in their development where other societies were ‘then’. Modernity is a global process, Berman reminds us, but one that proceeds at an uneven pace. The modernism of Europeans and north Americans is 200 years old, but insight into it will allow us to “connect our lives with the lives of millions of people who are living through the trauma of modernization thousands of miles away, in societies radically different from our own.” (35) These Third World societies are currently experiencing what Russia, another backward country catapulted into modernity, experienced in the 19th and early 20th C— “In that hundred years or so, Russia wrestled with all the issues that African, Asian and Latin American peoples and nations would confront at a later date. Thus we can see nineteenth century Russia as an archetype of the emerging twentieth-century Third World.” (175)
Having identified three important presumptions of *All That Is Solid*, I will outline my disagreements in reverse order, beginning with what I have termed Berman’s historicism.

The intellectual origins of the notion that there are those who inhabit the present and yet at the same time belong to the past, have been traced variously to the historical novels of Walter Scott, the Scottish Enlightenment, the philosophy of Friedrich von Schiller, and more generally, the emergence of a new sense of time and history that characterizes and distinguishes the modern age. This is itself a characteristically modern outlook and gesture, not only in the sense that it is historically recent, but also in the sense that it is one of the ways in which we moderns mark and to that degree ‘make’ ourselves modern. Thus the notion is pervasive, and is to be found in formalized intellectual schools such as modernization theory and development studies, in liberalism and Marxism, in the practices of international financial and aid agencies, but also in quotidian outlooks and practices, like describing or denouncing other places or peoples as ‘medieval’ (a practice that has become ubiquitous since 9/11). This is one of the ways in which we perform our modernity. It is also, however, grievously mistaken.

To think of us as having already gone through a process of modernization that others are currently undergoing only makes sense inasmuch as we think of modernity as something that begins in one place (Europe and north America) and then spreads or radiates outwards. If one were to momentarily substitute ‘capitalism’ for ‘modernity’, one could say that Berman’s theoretical stance is similar to that underlying the ‘transition to capitalism’ debates within Marxism in the 1950s, where the framing question was ‘what led to capitalism emerging only in Europe’, from which the derivative question became ‘why and how did it spread beyond Europe’. Immanuel Wallerstein and now many others, however, have sought to show that the development of capitalism is not a tale of endogenous development in Europe, but of structural interconnections between different parts of the world that provided the conditions for the emergence of capitalism. The implication of this argument is that capitalism might be best considered as a complex system in which certain parts of the world are already of it and shaped by it, without having become capitalist or ‘modern’, if by this is meant that certain criteria (generalized commodity production,
the uprooting of a peasantry, etc) have to be met before a society can be considered modern or capitalist.

Arguments such as this have two advantages. First, they allow us to accord a proper historical and conceptual place in our explanations for the brute fact of colonialism. Colonialism was not a secondary feature of modernity, nor the vehicle by which a capitalism and modernity that had already come into being were coercively transplanted elsewhere; colonialism was constitutive of modernity, a defining part of it rather than a footnote or episode in some other, ‘larger’ narrative. Colonialism reshaped the colonizer just as it did the colonized, and this reshaping, this transformation, was integral to the production of a global modernity. It was so not only ‘economically’- we are all familiar with the arguments about the central role that the conquest of the new world, the slave trade, and the colonization of Asia and Africa played in the industrial revolution- but in every regard. Can one understand the culture and experience of modernity in the United States without jazz and blues, and therefore, without the slave trade and slavery? Are the modernisms of Latin America, of which Berman writes so appreciatively, modernisms akin to 19th C European modernisms, or are they (also) modes of expressing and making sense of an experience that hundreds of years ago transplanted Europeans and Africans to the New World and wrought calamity on indigenous peoples, inaugurating that modernity of which we are all of us, differentially, now heirs? I am sure that Berman would recognise these as legitimate questions, and thus this criticism is not meant to suggest that he is insensitive to them. It is, however, to suggest that such questions are occluded by an analysis which presumes that modernity radiates outwards from its original source, and with a temporal lag.

A second advantage of seeing modernity as a complex system that includes wealthy countries as well as poor ones, the ‘advanced’ and the ‘backward’, is that it allows us to rephrase a question that gripped scholarship about (and much of that produced in) the Third World for far too long. This scholarship has been obsessed by stories of transition, and has posed itself questions of lack: why has modernity not arrived? why are we still in transition? In the years since the publication of All That Is Solid, a growing body of thought has rejected the narrative of transition and the question of ‘lack’. Instead it has started to map the nature and character of a modernity that is, simply, different from that of the West- one in which the information superhighway
sits alongside dirt tracks, and where the labour-power of highly skilled software engineers co-exists with bonded labour and child labour.

I am not, of course, suggesting that we simply redefine modernity such that it now includes India, China and elsewhere, but rather suggesting that a fundamental rethinking of our understanding of modernity is required, one which is especially attentive to how ‘culture’ and ‘knowledge’ figure in our understanding of what it means to be modern. In a thoughtful contribution to this end, Charles Taylor characterizes the account which privileges the European experience, and treats it as that which all societies must undergo if they are to be classed as modern, as one in which “modernity is conceived as a set of transformations which any and every culture can go through…Modernity in this kind of theory is understood as issuing from a rational or social operation which is culture-neutral...a general operation that can take any specific culture as its input.” In fact, however, modernity is not just a set of economic and institutional arrangements, but also the practices, beliefs and background assumptions that enable these economic and institutional arrangements to function. Why then does this account assume that the background assumptions and practices of the modern will not even be inflected in any major way by the traditions they encounter- and replace? Because what is implicit and often explicit in this account is the view that the presumptions connected with modernity, or what Taylor calls the ‘culture of modernity’, is not on a par with other cultures. It is not simply one more way of construing and constructing human identity and its place in the world: “At the heart of this explanation is the view that modernity involves our ‘coming to see’ certain kernel truths about the human condition”, such as instrumental rationality, and the assumption that the individual is somehow more basic and more real than any collective. Taylor rightly rejects this account of modernity, and the accompanying narrative that tells us that the culture of modernity is the privileged bearer of certain universal and trans-historical truths. He offers instead a way of conceiving modernity in which the cultures of regions that become modern leave a lasting imprint on that modernity: “If the transition to modernity is like the rise of a new culture…[then] the starting point will leave its impress on the end product…transitions to what we might recognize as modernity, taking place in different civilizations, will produce different results that reflect their divergent starting points…new differences will emerge from the old. Thus, instead of speaking of
modernity in the singular, we should better speak of ‘alternative modernities’.”

In this account of modernity, the ‘difference’ between, say, India and the countries of the West is not the space of a time lag, but of the ways in which different starting points—

including the fact of a world which had been globalised under conditions of profound inequality—led to different outcomes.

*All That Is Solid* is not about modernity conceived as a neutral and ‘material’ process, in the terms described by Taylor above, but rather is very much about how it is experienced, made sense of and lived, such that the living and making sense of it are part of what modernity is, rather than merely the ‘reaction’ to a modernity that can be identified prior to and independently of the ways in which it has been lived. But when it comes to modernity in the non-Western world, Berman’s theoretical frame compels him to see it as repetition, for which 19th and early 20th C Russia can serve as ‘archetype’. The experience of modernity elsewhere can only produce variations on a theme; the script was written long ago, and the play has been performed on Broadway and the West End before moving to the provinces.

The second substantive criticism I wish to make concerns the totalizing drive which characterizes *All That Is Solid*, and that gives it a great deal of its power. This is manifested not only in treating economic modernization, cultural change and changed sensibilities as intricately interconnected, such that a single story can be told, but also in an insistence on the oneness of modernity, on its all-encompassing nature which leaves nothing untouched, such that there is no ‘outside’. Indeed the notion of an outside, whether put forward by Third world elites, by 60s and 70s radicals who saw the ‘wretched of the earth’ as a revolutionary vanguard because they were uncorrupted by modernity, or by narodniki of all varieties, is either an act of bad faith or ruinously mistaken (29). It is necessary, Berman declares with some feeling, to render oneself “immune to nostalgic yearnings for the world we have lost.” (60)

I am entirely sympathetic to the idea that there is a story to be told about the phenomena we call modernity, and that art, literature, commodity production and so on can all be intelligibly linked as part of that story. I also agree that modernity is a global phenomena, and that there are few people, if any, who now lie ‘outside’ of it. I agree that in both of these senses, modernity is total. But when Berman approvingly writes that Marx and Goethe “share a belief that ‘modern life’ comprises a coherent whole” (88), I disagree; it frequently does not do so, and it is often our categories of
analysis and our narratives which produce this effect of wholeness, in the process ignoring and covering over the fissures and temporal gaps which in fact characterize the modern.

Let me explain what I mean, drawing upon Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Reading Marx somewhat against the grain, Chakrabarty suggests that for Marx, once capital has fully developed, there are certain historical transformations (e.g., the separation of labour from the land) which appear, retrospectively, as the logical presuppositions of capital. That is, once the logic and structure of capital has become apparent (which can only occur after the event, when capitalism is triumphant and its structure retrospectively clear), it becomes apparent that certain historical events are a necessary part of capital’s emergence, are logically necessary conditions for the emergence of capitalism that can be seen to have also historically occurred. But there are other elements of the past which capitalism also encounters as antecedents to it, but- Chakrabarty quotes Marx- “not as antecedents established by itself, not as forms of its own life-process.”12 These are pasts which are not ‘outside’ capital, but nor are they logical preconditions of it, necessary elements in the history of capital. In other words, one can read Marx to be acknowledging “that the total universe of pasts that capital encounters is larger than the sum of those in which are worked out the presuppositions of capital.”13 These other pasts may be part of the ‘premodern’ past of a society, but they also may not, consisting (for example) of comportments, bodily rhythms, and structures of affect which coexist with capitalist global modernity, but are not part of the world that it posits. That is, multiple ways of being human- which are not part of the logical structures and historical processes of globalizing capitalism, and the global modernity that it helps to produce- continue to inhere, even where global modernity has done its work most thoroughly. Modern life may be shaped and animated by a logic that makes it a whole, but it is not a coherent or singular whole, for that logic has not reshaped and remade everything. Differences- that which is not subsumed by this logic- continue to exist, though “difference, in this account, is not something external to capital. Nor is it something subsumed into capital. It lives in intimate and plural relations to capital, ranging from opposition to neutrality.”14

If this is true, those who attend to this difference, and even value it, may not necessarily be guilty of an ill-conceived hankering for what are mere ‘survivals’ of
the pre-modern into the modern. Attending to such differences may be intellectually important (because they are not mere relics destined for extinction, but rather reveal the fissures and heterotemporality that is part of the modern condition), and ethically sustainable (to pay attention to these is more than ‘nostalgia’- Berman’s word for foreclosing the possibility that such practices are living parts of modernity, ways in which some moderns navigate the modern in order to make it livable, and which may therefore afford examples and possibilities for other moderns).

As observed, one way of reading *All that is Solid* is to see it as a novel twist on the Bildungsroman. Berman posits a subject who, buffeted by the restless nature of an epoch in which all that is solid is continually melting away and re-forming, nonetheless has the capacity to intervene in this flux and shape it to her own purposes, and thus make herself at home in this world. There is in any case no choice, no going back, and the failing of many 20\textsuperscript{th} C modernisms, unlike 19\textsuperscript{th} C ones\textsuperscript{15}, is that for them, “modern man as a subject- as a living being capable of response, judgment and action in and on the world- has disappeared” (27). In Berman’s account, the subject appears as a given, as a free individual capable of the exercise of freedom, granted the social and existential circumstances which would allow it. If for Jacob Burckhardt it was the Renaissance that finally made it possible for man to recognize himself as a “spiritual individual,”\textsuperscript{16} for Berman modernity is when man is finally in a position to recognize, and to act upon, his freedom, untrammeled by fixed social roles and custom.\textsuperscript{17} I mention Burckhardt because it seems to me that Berman follows Burckhardt, Hegel and most closely, Marx, in seeing the modern as unveiling the real character of what it means to be human- namely, to be free and self-creating. There may not be an endpoint or final destination to the historical process in Berman’s account of modernity as endless transformation, but there is a telos in another sense, namely that this process marks the unveiling and the realisation of capacities that are immanent in being human, and that can finally be recognized and realized only in modernity. This is why modernity is to be welcomed, and why we must strive to adapt it to our needs, rather than turn our back on it; it is why modernity is not only inescapable, but is moreover something we should embrace rather than seek to escape. In all this Berman is truly heir in spirit, if not always in letter, to Marx.

This is an immensely appealing outlook and vision, and to the very degree that it resonates with so many people (myself included), it is part of what modernity means;
less a ‘fact’ that defines us as modern, than one of the ways in which we ‘make’ and define ourselves modern. It is a expression of the Promethean spirit, in which the recognition that Man is the maker of his world, and has been so all along, enables him to re-make his world and be at home in it, not least because it allows him to engage is self-making, so that Man becomes his own project. It animates, or partly animates, various and diverse projects for freedom and emancipation, many of which command the allegiance of scores of people—again, myself included.

What this forgets or denies, however, is that first man as subject had to (historically) appear. Contra Berman, Burckhardt, Hegel, Marx, and that whole tradition which treats modernity as the ‘unveiling’ of universal truths, man as subject is not a fact about what it means to be human, awaiting the right circumstances in which it can be revealed and recognized. It is instead a historically produced, contingent artefact. We know that there are those for whom to be human is not even to be unitary, for the human is composed of 5 skanda, which produce the illusory effect of an ‘I’; just as there are those for whom animals and plants and ghosts and the spirits of their dead ancestors are also willing, desiring subjects; and also those who do not regard themselves, but rather their gods, as the source of their actions. We can either, following the tradition with which Berman aligns himself—that which treats modernity as the privileged site from which certain universal truths finally become apparent—treat these figures as subjects who have not yet recognized their agency, and who suffer from self-estrangement and alienation. Or we can conclude that to be a subject, in Berman’s sense, is not the only way of being human, and the only way of being a self.

I opt for the latter, and this postcolonial— for let us call it that—rather than Promethean outlook, is the principal source of why my evaluation and understanding of modernity differs from that of Berman. The Promethean account and endorsement of modernity is valuable, but in important respects mistaken. In treating modernity as a process that occurs in the West and then, belatedly, in the rest, it is intellectually as well as politically and ethically mistaken, for such an understanding underpins precisely those projects of social engineering and forced modernization that Berman otherwise condemns. To treat it as a coherent whole is to accord it a homogeneity and consistency which it does not possess, and is to overlook the fissures and cracks where ideas and practices not in accord with the dominant logic of modernity
continue to exist and sometimes thrive. To treat the autonomous subject as the truth about what it means to be human is to privilege one of the many available ways of being a self, and is again to accord modernity greater consistency than it in fact possesses. We are, I suggest, (almost) all moderns, but even as moderns, we do not- to draw the preceding arguments together- inhabit a single time, are not possessed of a single and undivided subject-self, and our modernity contains within it forms and ways of life that are not subservient to, or overwritten by, its logic. And if all this is so, then being at home in the world might not be something that can only be achieved, or even best achieved, by embracing the adventure of modernity.

Quoting Paul Goodman towards the end of his book, Berman concludes that our contemporary malaise arises not from the spirit of modern society, but because “that this spirit has not sufficiently realized itself.” (347)


This is what Johannes Fabian has described and decried as the ‘denial of coevalness’- Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Fabian’s argument is specific to the discipline of anthropology, and its “tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than that of the producer of anthropological discourse”, but the phenomenon he refers to is, as I am suggesting, much wider than the discipline of anthropology.

I refer to at least two bodies of literature, that on ‘alternative’ or ‘multiple’ modernities, and that undertaken under the sign of postcolonial theory.


Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity”, 170.


Berman even states that “it would be stupid to deny that modernization can proceed along a number of different roads…There is no reason that every modern city must look and think like New York or Los Angeles or Tokyo” (124-25). But the context of this remark is a polemical aside against Third World elites who presume to protect their people from the depredations of modernity, and any possibility of pursuing the insight that modernities might be different is ferociously foreclosed: the posited governments and elites merely seek to keep a “political and spiritual lid on their people”, but the lid will inevitably blow, and the “modernist spirit” will come out as “the return of the repressed” (125).


Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 64.


Not to mention Foucault, Barthes and others, all of whom, in Berman’s view, revel in the powerlessness they posit.


Finally free, in Berman’s words, of “the cruelty and brutality of so many of the forms of life that modernization has wiped out” (60).