A Friendly Nod to B-52s

ADAM SHATZ

By Paul Berman.

Rowing up radical and lonely in the Reagan years, teenagers like myself were never in much doubt as to the legacy of sixties protest. We only had to take a casual count of the Movement veterans at Central America solidarity meetings to know what it was—and to blush that we were so pathetically outnumbered. Yet, much as we revered (and envied) them, we could also tell that a lot of our 40-something comrades despaired about their impact on American politics. The women and gay veterans tended to have a better sense of what they had fought for, since their battles for equality and recognition were still vibrant. But the expectation of sweeping social transformation was already receding. Liberalism itself dropped off the political map, which was being grotesquely redrawn by freewheeling corporations, religious rightists, callous white suburbanites and an invigorated American imperialism. A somber mood overtook the '68ers—hence the impassioned yet humbly inconclusive tone that permeates much of the autobiographical literature on the period. Looking back, the children of the Movement often seem, incongruously enough, as confused as the square in Dylan’s famous taunt: “There’s something happening here, but you don’t know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?”

Of course, the sixties upsurge eludes anyone’s understanding in many respects, not least in its profligate enlargement of the idea of revolution. Once we know that every aspect of the body politic is an ergonomic zone, a certain delirium is almost certain to break out. In his new book, Paul Berman captures this process in disarming parataxis: “The sparks of radical action flew from one country to the next so swiftly that no one could remember how or where or why the whole thing had gotten started, and the crowds were marching through the streets with red and black flags and it was 1968.” You could dispute the idea that “no one could remember...why the whole thing had gotten started.” In this country, there was an awful war to demonstrate against, and urban revolts were confirming, almost daily, the accuracy of James Baldwin’s premonitions. Nevertheless, you’re content to let Berman dance to the beat set by his syntax, because it does convey something of the breathlessness he surely felt in his days as a student rebel at Columbia University.

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Evoking a mood has always been Berman’s strength. That’s what makes his literary essays a genuine, if acquired, pleasure. A man of enthusiasms, he can, however, get carried away by an insight. Consider, for instance, his gloss on how scores of relatively affluent kids turned into radicals by leaping from one Cartesian formula to the next, from “I am privileged, therefore I am nothing,” to “I struggle on behalf of others, therefore I am.” It’s a glibly abridged kind of history, yet Berman has refined a pair of sentiments so that they achieve the poetry of a pop anthem.

There are plenty of passages like this in A Tale of Two Utopias—but hardly enough. For the most part, we are faced with a tendentious reading of a number of books on the postwar left, unencumbered by original research or reporting, while Berman recounts the “political journey of the generation of 1968.” The rightful heirs of 1968, we are given to understand, are not housing organizers and labor economists and opponents of U.S. imperialism, but chastened liberals like Paul Berman. The triumph of liberal reformism was made clear to him in 1989 with the overthrow of Communism,

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the resurgence of liberal democratic ideals and the exhaustion of revolutionary movements. Throwing in a Hegelian intimation of historical necessity, Berman writes that the insurrections of 1968 were merely “a young people’s rehearsal, preparatory to adult events that only came later. Suddenly it was obvious that the authentic political revolution of our era was now, not then; liberal and democratic, not radical leftist in the ’68 style; real, not imaginary.” Berman entertains the idea—which he calls the “American possibility”—that history may end in a liberal American millennium. He enlists an array of thinkers as diverse as Marcuse and Fukuyama, Alexandre Kojève and Jean Baudrillard—but most of all Walt Whitman, his philosophical godfather. It’s a nice piece of associative thinking, though you wouldn’t know from Berman’s airbrushed account that Whitman’s belief in America’s global mission was nurtured by his early involvement with the jingoistic Young America movement, and led him to champion Manifest Destiny. Given Berman’s recent views on America’s right to intervene in other countries’ affairs, he might just agree. He has been heading for a long time, in The New Republic and Dissent, towards a cautious and basically conformist liberalism.

Tale of Two Utopias is curiously devoid of anecdotes from the author’s own “political journey.” A memoir would have required Berman to admit the subjective and therefore limited nature of his interpretation. Instead, he has elided the distinction between his journey and that of his ex-comrades. It was as the editor of the 1972 collection of Quotations from the Anarchists that he first entered the clausrophobic debating society of leftist sectarianism. The book found him hurling anarchist injunctions (“Smash the State” and “Abolish God”) against the truisms of Mao’s little red book. There Berman also revealed a flair for wishful theorizing: “It is interesting to observe that the village structure of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front is based on a high degree of syndicalist-like direct democracy and self-management.”

Berman never formally renounced his anarchism; sometimes, in an offhand way, he shows it off, rather as if it were an endearing birthmark. But he has shifted his attention in recent years to the manifold threats presented by the left. Among these are Jesse Jackson (Berman likened him to George Wallace, in an eerie echo of Irving Howe’s similar denunciation of Tom Hayden), the Sandinistas (then under U.S.-backed contras siege), and, of course, the P.L.O. On the eve of the Gulf War, Berman traded in his last pair of sandals for combat boots, declaring himself ready to “contemplate a friendly nod at a B-52.”

Having failed to smash the state, the anarchist decided to join it. As Karl Kraus observed, “It is the style of idealism to console itself for the loss of something old with the ability to gape at something new.” That jewel is the liberal West. It is Berman’s conviction that, however flawed, Western social democracy must be defended against all forms of radicalism. This principle was 1989’s epochal contribution to the history of radical ideas. It was also the downfall of 1968.

As appropriations of the sixties go, this is a fairly capricious one: a farewell letter implausibly disguised as an homage. What, then, is his point in imaginatively linking the two utopic moments? It’s not political proximity: Berman hails 1989 as a triumph over, not of, the revolutionary ideals of 1968; if he appreciates such New Left offshoots as moderate feminism and rudimentary gay rights it is only insofar as they don’t require much fiddling with liberal capitalism. The reason lies, more likely, in the author’s own nostalgia. If generational allegiance may be likened to a religion, Berman is a pious, albeit heretical believer. Much as he may frown upon ’68ers who continue to advocate “the leftist fundamentals,” he takes pride in the fact that children of the sixties defeated Communism in Eastern Europe. The sight of Frank Zappa fans grooving their way to power in Czechoslovakia supplies the generation of ’68 with something like a raison d’être.

Berman is also cheered by wizened ex-radicals who have participated in the “invisible aftermath” by converting to liberalism. A delicious irony results from this choice of heroes—the rebels of ’68 are commended only insofar as they let go of their dreams and grow up. Berman is be dazzled by the evolution of André Glucksman, a former Maoist who rose to prominence in France in the late seventies as one of the “New Philosophers” loudly proclaiming that Marxism leads straight to the gulag. Glucksman is Berman’s Kurtz. “He is the model of the besotted revolutionary who sores up with a look of horror on his face. He is the looniness of 1968 repellant.” Berman does a good job of presenting Glucksman’s unoriginal critique of totalitarianism. But of what relevance is Glucksman’s attempt to make in an era of rule by multinationals? Berman doesn’t say. Nor does he suppose that Glucksman’s antitotalitarianism might be no less intolerant than his Maoism. Just last year, Glucksman gave an ugly demonstration of his ideas about the measures needed to defend
the open society against “fundamentalism,” railing against the wearing of veils in school as tantamount to terrorism. Muslim girls should realize, said the philosopher, that their scarves are coated with blood.

It’s doubtful Berman would share Glucksman’s sentiments. When it comes to expressions of cultural identity, he is at his most libertarian. Yet Berman is similarly hostile to the Third World, directing much of his invective at the Palestinians and the Black Panthers, whose resistance strategies are depicted as though they emerged from some hateful void. Moreover, it never occurs to him that his own ideology could spawn illiberalism. Berman’s blindness is a product of the obsessive anti-Communism he learned from social democrats like Sidney Hook, who tried, as Philip Rahv bitingly remarked in 1948, “to turn anti-Stalinism into something which it can never be: a total outlook on life, no less, or even a philosophy of history.” At the heart of A Tale of Two Utopias is the claim that the New Left lost its soul because, in its innocence, it failed to master the ABCs of anti-Communism. The Communism of the Third International had virtually no influence over the American New Left. Even the ultra-leftism that sprouted in the late sixties probably doesn’t merit being described as Communist. Yet Berman insists that the cold war was the central moral test the New Left failed to pass, and that this failure destroyed it.

Berman’s analysis centers on a legendary altercation that in 1965 led Students for a Democratic Society to break away from its parent organization, the League for Industrial Democracy. Tensions had been steadily mounting since the 1962 Port Huron Statement, which much of the LID leadership considered soft on Communism. While denouncing Communist rule in Eastern Europe, the Statement was bravely judicious in apportioning blame for the cold war while praising anti-colonial liberation, and that was enough to elicit LID fears. Then there was the controversial participation of “red diaper babies”; in the view of many LIDers, the children of Communists were poisoned by their upbringing. Around the time of Port Huron, S.D.S. outraged LID by permitting a 17-year-old Communist to attend a conference. Three years later, when S.D.S. dropped the “anti-totalitarian exclusion clause,” LID’s answer to the loyalty oath, the link was irreparably severed.

Berman acknowledges S.D.S.’s wish to free itself from the crippling provincialism of the culture surrounding LID. Yet he is convinced that LID’s paranoia was amply

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vindicated by S.D.S.‘s subsequent history. He’s even willing to treat the red-diaper alert as a legitimate concern. While admitting that “it’s a delicate point to raise,” he muses that “maybe the elders did have a point in fretting over the family backgrounds of some of the SDSers,” since, despite their “hugely positive role,” red-diaper babies were importing “the ancient Leninist gods...into the social democratic church.”

Berman fails to note that the LID’s claim to being a “church” rested not only on the purity of its anti-Communism, but on the inquisitional zeal with which it assailed and excluded anyone who thought the United States bore some responsibility for the cold war. But the student left could hardly have abided by LID’s sclerotic and insensible anti-Communism after 1965, with the United States conducting an increasingly brutal war against Vietnamese Communists. One does well to remember that LIDers overwhelmingly lent their support to the Vietnam War, and to George Meany’s reactionary leadership of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.

Berman omits this, so intent is he on demonstrating that after the ban on Communist participation in S.D.S. was lifted, “every last Kafkaesque nightmare that was dreamed by the senile Socialists slowly came to pass.” Slowly is right. The nightmare to which Berman is referring, the take-over of S.D.S. by the Maoists of the Progressive Labor Party, took place in 1969—four years after S.D.S. made that supposedly fateful decision. Why wasn’t the P.L.P. successful overnight? What happened between the Gulf of Tonkin fraud and the Tet Offensive to make ultraradicalism appear viable to tens of thousands of young people? A huge chasm had opened between America’s self-professed ideals and its actual practices that widened with every massacre in Vietnam and every repression of a protest or happening at home. Meanwhile activists were more frustrated than ever. They had finally “named” the system, as S.D.S. leader Paul Potter had once urged them to do, but they didn’t have a chance of overthrowing it. The larger population, for its part, was little inclined to join—if it wasn’t hostile to—their revolt. Feeling betrayed by the government, and stranded by middle-America, student radicals cast about for vanguards, identifying them wherever the dispossessed were giving the United States government, or local police, a run for their money: in Cuba, in Vietnam, in the ghetto. S.D.S. was naturally going to reflect this mood, and however unfortunate and ruinous the dogmatic turn was, it emerged from a cluster of historical reasons, and the lack of a loyalty clause isn’t one of them. The collapse of S.D.S. was a tragedy, not a conspiracy. The Progressive Labor Party had its pyrrhic victory because a good many desperate people who weren’t members came around to its point of view. In place of historical explanation, Berman gives us a sordid little sect story.

Berman is more humane, more compelling, more likeable when he’s describing what draws him to a movement. Take, for instance, his tribute to the moral grandeur of gay emancipation as “the most romantic political campaign that ever existed.” And the most audacious: “By proclaiming homosexuality as their right, they...had overthrown Mom and Dad.” Predictably, the gay movement disappoints him—the reason being, again, the ascendancy of antidemocratic ideas. In Berman’s imagination, there is a twisted road from the Jacobin Terror to the erotic floats in the Gay Pride parade: “A reign of terror was guaranteed to come of this, even without the pressures of an epidemic. In any movement based on building up a cultural identity, sooner or later someone will step forward to declare his own identity to be truer and more authentic than everyone else’s, and will announce a grave impending threat to collective identity, and on that basis will take into his own hands the right to make decisions for all, and to unmask traitors, and to carry out the executions.”

Berman is trying to convey what it’s like to be inside a movement and in a minority faction when doctrinal rectitude seizes the day: You feel as though you’re in a little authoritarian country, and your first instinct may be to emigrate. Sadly, he overlooks a deeper truth, which is that you’re not really in that country, whereas your enemies are quite real. Berman’s lack of balance is telling. It points to a pusillanimous unease with the radical styles of will that social movements, from civil rights to the Christian Coalition, inexorably unleash. Perhaps he would prefer a politics of campaigns, as Richard Rorty recently proposed in Dissent. If only he’d say so.

### Carrying a Torch for Money

**CHRISTOPHER CAPOZZOLA**

**OLYMPIC POLITICS.** Christopher R. Hill. St. Martin’s. 283 pp. $35.

One hundred years ago, 300 European athletes gathered in Athens to revive the ancient ritual of the Olympiad, in which the heroes of the Greek city-states competed for the glory of sport, Athens and Sparta. The London Times, unsure what to make of the newly revived festival, ran its coverage of the 1896 Olympic Games in its foreign affairs section rather than on the sports pages.

The Times was on to something. Christopher R. Hill’s new edition of his 1992 Olympic Politics examines both the international politics of the Olympics and the role the Games have played in international relations. Criticism of the Olympics often derides the political interference, institutional backbiting and increasing commercialization that have sullied the “purity” of the Games. But Hill demonstrates that these problems have been with the Olympic movement from the outset. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the eccentric French academic who is credited, perhaps unjustifiably, with reviving the Olympic Games, grappled with geopolitics, money politics and petty politics in 1896, just as his successors have done.

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