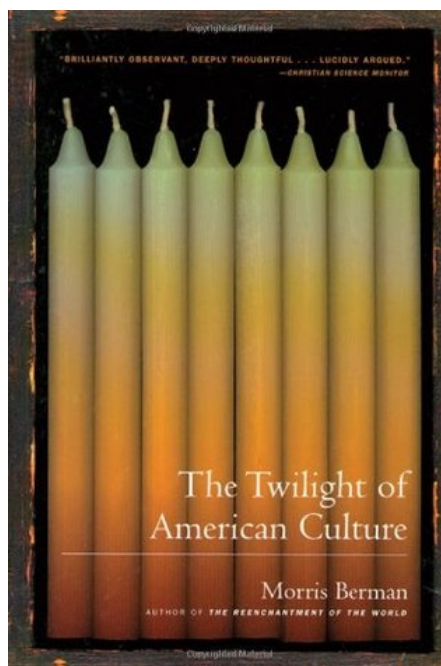




The Twilight of American Culture

Morris Berman

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A prophetic examination of Western decline, *The Twilight of American Culture* provides one of the most caustic and surprising portraits of American society to date. Whether examining the corruption at the heart of modern politics, the "Rambification" of popular entertainment, or the collapse of our school systems, Morris Berman suspects that there is little we can do as a society to arrest the onset of corporate Mass Mind culture. Citing writers as diverse as de Toqueville and DeLillo, he cogently argues that cultural preservation is a matter of individual conscience, and discusses how classical learning might triumph over political correctness with the rise of a "a new monastic individual"—a person who, much like the medieval monk, is willing to retreat from conventional society in order to preserve its literary and historical treasures. "Brilliantly observant, deeply thoughtfullucidly argued."—*Christian Science Monitor*

The Twilight of American Culture Details

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From Reader Review The Twilight of American Culture for online ebook

Christoph says

It would be pretty trivial to pass off Professor Berman as a crank taking his argument at face value. In *Twilight of American Culture*, Berman claims that America is in clear decline which will lead to inevitable collapse sometime in the 21st century. The decline observed is primarily cultural and social but that these symptoms have serious impact on economic and political stability of the nation. Berman claims that the decline is irreversible and that the only option for those that see this decline and resent it, is to preserve the portions of the culture you appreciate (language, music, literature, etc., etc.) and roll with the impending punches. The primary point of his argument is that the behavior and actions of the American Empire today are analogous to Rome in its period of decline prior to the emergence of the European monarchies and the so-call Dark Age as brought about through institutionalization of religion by the state. This period was extremely protracted and only ended due to the Enlightenment which was a flowering of human intelligence and knowledge but has been giving diminishing returns since essentially its inception.

To a very large extent, a similar argument is presented very superficially in right-wing circles as evidence that we are getting off track in America and used as a call to return to traditional American values and the like. The primary difference between the two arguments though is that a central tenet of Berman's is that the United States is irrevocably and unequivocally in decline while right-wing folks still cling to American Exceptionalism despite perceiving this decline in some form. The problem is then that most on the right are perceiving this situation from a very myopic view of a few decades at best and moreso on scales associated with the last time their party was in power. Berman instead takes a very grand view of human history and sees the epochs and ages that defined major moments in history and is relating them back to our own time. Another difference between the right-wing formulation of this argument and Berman's clearly leftist rebuke of society is that there is no turning back from this decline while most commentators claim if only we did this one or handful of things (get more religion in your life, remove sex and violence from movies, ban video games, etc. etc.) then we can redeem ourselves once again.

Many of Berman's arguments are compelling, but I cannot accept a fatalistic notion that American culture is hopeless to return to a state like the Enlightenment. Culture has proven time and again to be a resilient and unexpected creature. Further, the social fabric we weave every day clearly trends towards diversity (which, certainly can be ugly on both sides of the spectrum) and complexity all while being more uniform. I suspect that if Berman were confronted with the notion that his ideas are purely pessimistic and only discourage those who he attacks from seeking to attain higher cultural experience, he would merely claim to be a realist.

Ancient Weaver says

Eh, not as great a book as I was hoping it might be. To sum it up, the author tells us what a lot of us already know - America is getting dumber, inequality between rich and poor continues to grow, we all exist only to serve as consumers of what the corporations sell us, etc. The problem is I don't think that most people who are going to read *Twilight* would dispute any of these ideas before having read the book. Is America in relative cultural, intellectual, and societal decline? Absolutely. That being the case, what more does the author have to say beyond this fact? Nothing much.

Not to say the book is a complete waste. There is admittedly a certain kind of morbid pleasure in reading about how absolutely ignorant some Americans are, not excluding those who are post-secondarily

edumacated. (The author helps confirm my own view that the value of an advanced degree has become so overinflated in the last 50 years so as to make it virtually meaningless. That is to say there is no reason to assume someone with an advanced degree is necessarily better educated or learned than someone without one.)

But again, the question is, so what? What disappoints me is that some of Berman's ideas seem to be kind of simplistic and out-of-date. (And I don't mean the way he complains about the popularity of New Age thinking.) Berman seems to have this faith in Enlightenment rationalism as *the* answer and ultimate good. "If only people were better educated, more scientific, more knowledgeable, things would be better." But this philosophical idea has been in question since Kant's critiques at the tail end of the so-called Age of Enlightenment (and long before that, even).

The value of Enlightenment rationalism has been shown to be wanting by thinkers over the last couple of centuries. One cannot just assume that a better-educated people will be a better people. (The machine gun, world wars, poison gas, atomic bombs, colonialism, etc. are all products of the modern, scientific, post-Enlightenment world.) One can no longer just take it for granted that knowledge and reason have value in and of themselves or that their acquisition will provide satisfying answers to life's questions. These larger philosophical issues seem to have eluded Berman.

Tom says

Morris Berman wrote this book in 2000...or at least, that's when it was copyrighted. Since then, we've experienced 9/11 and the resulting fear-based war on terrorism. After 9/11, I think many more Americans would side with Berman that the American culture is and has been on a downhill slide to something similar to the Dark Ages. The book is a good read but that's if you can stand the alarming nature of Berman's thesis that we should be gathering our 'culture' and storing it in secret places so that future generations will see that there was at one time something that qualified as an enlightened culture in the USA. It's also a good read because Berman has the ability to present his dialectical arguments in a way that engages the reader--at least this reader--and compels critical thinking, questioning, and reaction. I didn't always agree with Dr. Berman but never seemed bored by his thinking.

Some of Berman's 'data' is suspect since the data don't appear to have been gathered empirically. Rather, what Berman often presents as 'data' seems personal, emotional and based on undocumented bits of evidence that become generalized into his grand and sentimental argument. Most of the issues he addresses are not new but have been around for millennia, e.g, the widening gap between the have's and have nots, the diminishing literacy in our young people, the ruthlessness of the corporatocracy, a culture of kitsch.

Nevertheless, the book is worth reading if for no other reasons than to challenge your thinking and firm up your own dialectical skills.

Bro_Pair ???? says

Remarkably prescient about the decay of America and actually inspiring - Berman's call for a monastic way of life is deeply moving.

Clive says

I write from a British perspective & as someone who had a traditional british liberal education. I agree it is on the wane & often feel like "an expatriate in my own country" - this is a phrase I coined before picking up the book and it appears on p.26 so the book struck a chord with me. Since about 1979 popular culture became dumbed down in the UK. British TV has become a kind of 'sewage of the mind' compared with what people used to watch in the 70s. Similarly BBC output has gone from being trusted to being Orwellian in its obedience to the government line. The BBC doesnt tell you what to think but it does let you know what you **should** be thinking ie. political correctness. It no longer trusts or encourages you to make up your own mind. If you have a dissenting voice - dont even bother trying to talk to the BBC.

But do societies alternate between eras of enlightenment/reason and darker periods of unreason/barbarism?? This is a good question and one that is not often asked - perhaps because to ask it you have to understand the difference between the two. The book compares the current dumbing down of The West with the end of the Western Roman empire. The comparison is discussed at length & is really interesting.

A reflective and challenging view of history and the way many people live today. Mr Berman has written a later book called Why America Failed; I look forward to reading that soon.

There are other contemporary books which explain the end of american power & they are equally subversive; Tom Coburn, The Debt Bomb. Michael Levin, The Next Great Clash. Louis Hyman, Borrow. Jaron Lanier, Who Owns the Future. Melanie Philips, World Turned Upside Down etc etc.

I think enough people are questionning the twilight of American Culture for it to be around for sometime. But when people stop writing books like this - maybe that is the time to start worrying.

P.S. - if you read C.S. Lewis's Screwtape Letters - he writes a postscript about the end of traditional education in favour of protecting children's self esteem with teaching them modern garbage. And this was written in the 1930s. So the Berman book is part of the modern dumbing-down literature which first appeared 80 years ago!

Poiema says

Book Review: The Twilight of American Culture by Morris Berman

"History repeats itself" is a well-known aphorism, one which Morris Berman would agree with only in part. When history comes full circle, the rebound would more closely resemble a helix, a bit more complex than a simple replay of the past. Each time a culture rises to power, a decline is inevitable but seeds of rebirth lie within that cultural decay. Like the mythical phoenix bird, new life may emerge from the ashes.

The book The Twilight of American Culture details author Morris Berman's thoughts on the decline of America, how this decline mirrors that of great civilizations of the past, and his projections (not predictions) of what type of society might spring from the ashes of America the Beautiful.

"As the twenty-first century dawns, American culture is, quite simply, in a mess. Millions of Americans feel this, if only on a subliminal level, while a few hundred write books and articles about it, documenting the trends and analyzing causes. (snip) It doesn't take an Emerson or an Einstein to recognize that the system has lost its moorings, and, like ancient Rome, is drifting into an increasingly dysfunctional situation."

People who would choose to read a book by this title probably don't need to be convinced that our society is in a state of decay. Regardless, Berman catalogues the signs of impending culture death evidenced in the mindless media, consumptive corporate world, sick entertainment, and declining literacy. Faced with this litany of depressing facts, I felt a little overwhelmed at our downward spiral. There was a little comic relief when I read that a university graduate thinks the Gettysburg Address is "an address to Getty." But maybe I should be crying because this kind of widespread illiteracy portends a cultural collapse of huge proportions.

As might be expected, Berman reaches back into history in order to compare America's decline with that of Rome and other ruined civilizations. In reaching back, he "pulls out a plum"-- a little gem of an idea on which he chooses to base the theme of this book:

the monastic option.

"....civilizations rise and fall, and a class of 'monks' is always necessary to preserve the treasures of the dying civilization and use them, like seeds, to impregnate a new one. In the process, they create an authentic life for themselves' the personal benefits of such activity are as important as the possible historical outcome."

The lens through which I view life is Biblical, so these thoughts readily stirred to my remembrance the many times the nation of Israel was reduced to a "remnant," a small nucleus of people who were faithful to preserve scripture, tradition, and culture on behalf of future generations.

Berman does not write from a spiritual perspective, and his worldview is different from mine. Still, I find his thought intriguing. He says,

"One of my intentions in writing *The Twilight of American Culture* was to create a kind of guidebook for disaffected Americans who feel increasingly unable to fit into this society, and who also feel that the culture has to change if it is to survive. (snip) I have argued that we are in the grip of structural forces that are the culmination of a certain historical process, so a major change is not likely to be quick or dramatic; but individual shifts in life ways and values may just possibly act as a wedge that would serve as a counterweight to the world of schlock, ignorance, social inequality, and mass consumerism that now defines the American landscape. At the very least, these 'new monks,' or native expatriates, as one might call them, could provide a kind of record of authentic ways of living that could be preserved and handed down, to resurface later on, during healthier times."

The "new monks" that are spoken of in the above quote are, of course, not religious in any sense of the word. They are only monk-like in that they preserve and transmit culture as did the Irish monks after the fall of Rome. Berman sees them creating "zones of intelligence" in private, local ways. Notice the word private; they are not in this for recognition or to be in the limelight.

What types of activities might these new monastic individuals (NMIs) engage in ?

- * craftsmanship- bucking the trend of buying imported, cheap junk and opting instead to create and invest in quality.
- * preserving scholarly works* more on this later
- * exercising stewardship over the environment~ could include gardening or agrarian pursuits
- * rejecting consumerism- perhaps opting for a simple Christmas celebration?

Berman admits that there are no guarantees that these NMIs will succeed in their endeavors, however, that individual will reap great personal rewards in putting forth the effort to contribute to the future. He states,

"You and I can lead the 'monastic' life, and we can start to do it right now. And don't worry about being marginalized; this is good."

If Berman had stopped here, I might have closed the book encouraged, but his final chapter is entitled "Alternate Visions," in which he explores the could-be's of the future. This presented a fork in the road for me, because his plausible scenarios leave out one very important truth: there is a God who is Sovereign over the affairs of man. Knowledge of Him, and intimate knowledge of His Word enables me to face the future with hope.

I acknowledge that there may dark days ahead, but choose to believe that history is linear and will culminate in the wonderful events outlined in scripture. Monastic individuals such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and John the apostle get some of the credit for preserving those wonderful words of life.

As I grow older, I become more and more cognizant of the fact that my life has a very small sphere of influence. But it is a sphere and I do wield influence, and that should not be negated.

*My husband and I started collecting old books early in our marriage. At first it was just a hobby, but as time goes by we have both begun to feel that this little treasure cache is not just for us. There will be, perhaps, someone who will value them long after we are gone.

I get goosebumps when I open a well-preserved, old volume and read the inscription written on the flyleaf in loopy, intricate handwriting:

"To my Colorado Sweetheart. Christmas 1920"

Whose hands lovingly held this same volume? What did it mean to them? Will someone yet unborn hold it at some future date and count it as precious as we have?

Some of the antique books that we have collected have brought to light a practice that I find distasteful. Modern publishers will sometimes reprint a vintage gem, but will leave out whole chapters. I presume this is because they want to eliminate controversial subject matter in favor of securing more sales. My "monastic" instinct tells me this is wrong. I want to see the author as he really is, not how someone else dresses him up (or down) to be.

Berman makes note of the fact that individuality is under fire in a declining culture. The chapters that are expurgated from books are usually the very ones that define the individual and set him apart from the pack. Society loses its vitality when individuality is quenched.

I think we all have an inborn need to feel that our life pursuits connect us to something much bigger than ourselves. We all need to feel there is a place in history for "little me." I'm thankful that my Christian faith allows for that individuality, while at the same time connecting me to a great cloud of witnesses who have shared the passion for truth that will set apart a certain percentage of people of EVERY generation.

"LORD, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were born,
Or Thou didst give birth to the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting,
Thou art God." Psalm 90:1-2

Carlos says

Bueno el análisis comparativo de la decadencia estadounidense con la del Imperio Romano. Buena la teoría de las oscilaciones entre culturas idealistas y culturas pragmáticas

Estimulante la propuesta de aspirar a un rol monástico para los tiempos de decadencia.

Cuestionables sus ejemplos de personajes monásticos (sobre todo, por supuesto, el ejemplo de Michael Moore)

Siempre que uno lee libros o mira películas que pretenden dar un diagnóstico sobre la cultura estadounidense, se tiene la sensación de que nos están contando cosas que ya sabíamos desde hacía (por lo menos) unos veinte años. Se entiende que los gringos no lo saben bien y por eso hay que decírselos. Pero entonces uno se queda con la pregunta: ¿para qué contarme a mi también algo que ya sabía desde hacía tanto tiempo?

Pero sí, es recomendable... de refilón, uno se queda pensando en su sitio dentro de la cultura McWorld y siente peor cargo de conciencia al quedarse más de un minuto viendo Ventaneando o cosas así.

J says

Shorter Berman: "The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers." Sorry that was Socrates 469–399 B.C. Morris basically says we live in a shallow society that frowns upon intellectual pursuits and our kids are getting progressively dumber. Reading it alternated between duh and thinking of an old man yelling at kids about "if that damn ball comes into my yard one more time..."

Stewart says

Morris Berman's alarming book of 183 pages was written in 2001, and I read it a year or two later. I was curious to reread the book and see its relevance 10 years later. Closing the book, I think that its analysis of the decline of American culture is as true now as a decade ago. In fact, the situation is much worse.

Berman looked at the cult of money and consumerism that permeates U.S. life, the dominance of hype and propaganda, the squeezing of the middle class, and the redistribution of wealth upward (sound familiar?). He described the widespread solipsism and resentment of so much of the residents of this country. He saw colleges and universities becoming no more than providers of job training. He also examined the corporate oligarchy that devalues our democracy and the anti-intellectualism (and indeed anti-science attitude of one of our major political parties) that coarsens public discussion.

He wrote that the U.S. has reached the stage depicted by Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451." However, unlike the situation in that 1953 book, now the government doesn't have to ban books; people these days are ceasing to read books, magazines, and newspapers – and are abandoning critical thinking and the pursuit of knowledge – quite on their own. "It may even be the case that the number of genuinely literate adults in the United States amounts to fewer than 5 million people – that is, less than 3 percent of the total population."

Little of this is new, but Berman was one of the earlier people to sound the alarm.

Berman thinks we are in a Dark Age and it is getting darker all the time. As was the case in medieval Europe where monasteries preserved the wisdom of ancient Greece and Rome until the flowering of the

Renaissance, Berman proposes the “monastic option” in the 21st century. “We can include in it traditions of craftsmanship, care, and integrity; preservation of canons of scholarship, critical thinking, and the Enlightenment tradition; combatting the forces of environmental degradation and social inequality; valuing individual achievement and independent thought; and so on. But central to all these examples is the rejection of a life based on kitsch, consumerism, and profit, or on power, fame, and self-promotion.”

Anyone who reads this review and wants to study my manuscripts and discuss literature, music, philosophy, movies, politics, language, or the meaning of life is always welcomed to my monastery -- in person or my e-mail. I will even share my red wine.

Glen says

This book gives an accurate account of current social, educational, economic, and political structures in America. In addition, Berman suggests a variety of future possibilities for America, along with ways of preserving our culture in the future. Overall, the book was very thought-provoking and influenced me to add about a dozen books to my 'to-read' shelf. I'll have to give Berman 5 stars if his predictions come true in 50 years or so. I'm betting that his predictions pertaining to higher education will be close to dead on.

Zach says

A book about the decline of civilization. The author says we are headed into a dark ages and need modern-day monks to be preserving for the future what knowledge we have.

At the very least, this book makes you think about stuff.

But the evidence he sites is hardly empirical in nature and suffers from anchoring bias.

Al says

A real doom-and-gloomer. Berman's thesis is that American culture has entered a period of irrevocable decline, akin to that of the Roman Empire which presaged the Middle Ages. "Irrevocable" is the key word here; Berman repeatedly stresses his belief that this decline cannot be reversed. The obvious question then, is what does one do in the face of this coming decline? Berman terms his answer the "monastic option," patterned as it is on the activities of cloistered medieval monks who, via transcription and the creation of illuminated manuscripts, preserved much of high Western culture that may otherwise have been lost. Given the differences of our current period to that of the end of Rome, Berman isn't necessarily suggesting that we become hoarding archivists, but more that we emulate the spirit of these medieval monks - the idea is to keep alive the Enlightenment spirit, and this can be accomplished through any number of methods, though they principally involve a conscious rejection of the profit imperative. Interestingly, the current boom of artisanal crafts fits into this conception, as Berman notes (through a citation) that slow, methodical submersion in any task is a tacit rejection of post-industrial corporate culture.

A significant difference that Berman points out regarding the declines of Rome and America is that our decline will have some characteristics that typically would not be associated with decline, but with growth. Primarily this involves the fast-paced "information society" in which we now live. There are seemingly new

advances every day, especially in the realm of consumer electronics/entertainment. However, while these are certainly technological advancements of some stripe, they do little more than advance corporate profit, argues Berman. (For a corollary to this argument, see David Graeber's article from the most recent Baffler. Available right here: http://thebaffler.com/past/of_flying_..., and highly recommended.)

Berman's commitment to Enlightenment ideals means he lands in a very odd place in our current political spectrum. He is stridently anti-corporate (he regards the law responsible for the creation of the modern American corporation as a key component in the acceleration of our current decline), and if not necessarily anti-capitalist, he at least thinks it has outlived its usefulness. He sees the widening gap between the richest and poorest as key signpost of cultural decline. However, when it comes to cultural matters, his perspective is much more in line with what we would expect from a conservative. He stridently objects to post-modern thought and identity politics in nearly all of their forms. While he recognizes the value of civil rights and equality in a token sense, he seems to chafe at activism. He clearly states that he is opposed to everything that becomes an -ism, as they inevitably become totalitarian. While there is certainly some truth to this belief, a conscious rejection of all -isms creates a situation in which instituting social change would be a very slow process, if one that happens at all. And this brings about the central problem of Berman's conception of the monastic option: all we can do, he argues, is individually adopt this monastic mentality and *hope that it eventually catches on*. Berman himself doesn't even think this is a terribly likely scenario (he is stridently anti-Utopian, and too strong a belief in this scenario could easily turn Utopian). Thus, social change, in general, seems only something that can (or should) come about via some weird collective/atomic force of will (monastic types do not work in consort, rather, they pursue their ends individually, though they do so in similar spirit) and commitment to enlightenment principles. The hope is that if/when a new, enlightened culture eventually arises, it will just work. It will be just because everyone just knows that justice is good. Or something. Again, one can't really call this "too hopeful," because Berman himself notes that it's practically impossible. So, in the end, what this book is is too bleak. Not only are we in irrevocable decline, but there's essentially nothing we can do about it. Collective action inevitably becomes totalitarian. All we can do is hunker down to our studies or crafts and try to ignore the world around us as it burns.

John says

Berman is a doomsayer w/ yet a little hope. His enemy is gigantic Corporate America, which spreads its consumer values across the globe without regard for any of the people that it stomps & steamrollers. Berman is a classy writer; his prose is a model of clarity & persuasiveness. As a solution, he advocates people living lives of a sort of new monasticism, making their lives models of good living: honorable, respectful, et cetera. The hope is that this way of life will spread into the general public. By monasticism, he refers to the monks of the early Dark Ages, who acted as scribes, recording the best wisdom of the past, for a future that someday may be able to use & understand it.

Mystie Winckler says

MCL. Would like to own. It's the monastic option for us! Liberal, but good analysis and solution-theory.

Jen Padgett Bohle says

Essentially, America is one big hustla and corporatocracy has us in its death grip. Democracy, according to

Berman, has come to mean the right to choose between Burger King and McDonald's or Target and Wal-Mart or other equally banal places where one can part from one's money. Furthermore, the sun is setting on the formerly flourishing American empire because our literacy levels and basic cultural and historical knowledge are declining; our youth all want to be celebrities and can barely write coherent sentences or read over a middle school grade level. His evidence for this isn't always what I imagine discerning readers would like, but we've all seen the idiocracy for ourselves in all probability. I want to say this is all alarmist bunk from a crotchety malcontent (after all, who hasn't been crying the end of some culture or another at pretty much every point in history?), and I suppose it is indeed bunk to some --- but only if you're fine with slogans replacing nuanced thinking, buying and branding replacing true choice and self-awareness, and knowledge and education as pure commodities, to be bought and sold like anything else.

The problem is that no period in history has had a population full of intellectuals or even literate people. And haven't folks always wanted material goods and to be either aspirational consumers or conspicuous ones? Berman is right, though, to emphasize that the extent corporations have provided bread and circus for the population is now hindering real thought and action, that this "democratizing of desire" has virtually swept the population adrift. All of this allows the wealthy to become even wealthier and virtually purloin the American economy, according to Berman.

He convincingly argues that the decadence of the U.S. parallels that of Rome in its decline, but that premise is staid and nothing new, honestly. More interesting is his solution to the demise of an intellectual America: a scattered class of New Monastic Individuals (NMIs) who reject corporate consumerism and business and commercial success to embrace the liberal arts and a life lived away from celebrity culture, malls, and 24 hour news cycles.

I like the NMI idea, but I also like activism, and Berman is unwilling to consider that civil disobedience, protest, and alternative news sources, among other things, can begin to awaken people from a corporation and commodities- induced zombie state. (We should not go gentle into that goodnight!)

Admittedly, I was fairly appalled by Berman's wholesale dismissal of postmodernism and multiculturalism/political correctness (his rebuttal might be that I can't see past the cultural constructions that I've been subjected to. You see how these rebuttals could go on and on and on...ad infinitum) As with anything, there are ridiculous extremes to these movements, but there are valuable elements to these -"isms" and, in fact, -"isms" can be productive. For example, in Berman's diatribe against them and group identification, he rails against women describing themselves as "feminist", saying that an NMI would call herself an "independent woman", not a feminist. It seems to me that cohesive communities of like-minded people are useful to the political life of a nation as well as the soul of a person, and where I come from (rural KY) I find a fearless identification with what is viewed as subversive and abnormal important (i.e. feminism to those in the bible belt). One can be a critical and independent thinker and still find group identities important and more than simply labels, as long as a dialectic is possible and the groups don't become ideological straightjackets.

This book, though, has changed my reading list for the next few years and further inspired me in my thus far pitiable and inadequate attempts to renounce (at least partially) Feudalism 2.0. I am inspired to take bits and pieces of Berman's New Monastic Individual idea and combine that with other philosophies and values I find important.