Is There Life beyond Paradigm?[1]

Morris Berman

Most people like stories, so I thought that today I would tell you one. This story has the added advantage of being true. Many years ago, a British sociologist by the name of Max Marwick moved to Northern Rhodesia, or what we now call Zambia, whose tribal people, the Cewa, practised a form of witchcraft. In keeping with Western academic criteria, Marwick didn't believe that these magical beliefs had any basis in objective physical reality. These criteria dictated that the anthropologist's job was to study these beliefs from the *outside*, as it were; to learn what the major beliefs or practices were and try to figure out why these tribespeople believed them. And so he rented or purchased – I can't recall exactly how it was arranged – a grass hut in the village, and settled in for a year of research, i.e. observation.

There was, however, just one particular problem with this arrangement: Marwick wasn't able to sleep. When he subsequently wrote this story up, he called it 'The Case of the Dancing Owls'. Every night a flock of owls would gather on the ceiling of his hut and hoot and jump around. In England, one would simply call an exterminator to remove the owls. But this was not England, and the Cewa certainly didn't have any exterminators. In addition, Marwick wanted to try a native solution, not a Western one, so he paid a visit to the local sorcerer. The suggested remedy was hardly one he expected. The sorcerer asked him if, prior to leaving England, there had been any disturbance in his family relations. It turned out that there was: Marwick had had a rather acrimonious argument with one of his uncles, which left him feeling depressed and guilty. The sorcerer recommended some medicines, to rub into his skin, and added that he should write to his uncle and mend that relationship. 'Then', he said, 'the owls will leave you in peace.' As you might imagine, Marwick did neither.

And here we come to the issue of conflicting epistemologies. Marwick regarded this advice as absurd. What possible relationship could there be, he thought, between his conflict with his uncle and the owls 'dancing' on the ceiling? Rather than try the sorcerer's remedies, he chose to spend his entire time in the village living with noisy owls that wouldn't let him sleep. But if we switch out of a Western scientific epistemology, to that of African sorcery, a very different picture emerges.

African systems of causality place great emphasis on social relations, and the Cewa attribute negative events to disturbances in those relations. As with cats in 17th-century New England, owls are regarded as witches' 'familiars' – animals with supernatural powers that do the work of sorcerers or malevolent agents. The shaman whom Marwick consulted believed that his uncle sent the owls to disturb his sleep, in retaliation for the bitter argument they had. Hence the logical remedy to the situation was to heal that relationship, after which the owls would depart. What was obvious to the Cewa was essentially crazy to the Western-trained sociologist.

So that's the end of the story, although it does raise some interesting questions:

1. Leaving the issue of the sorcerer's medicines aside, did Marwick not write to his uncle because this suggested causal connection was ridiculous, in his view, or because it might actually work?
2. What would have happened if Marwick *had* written to his uncle, repaired the relationship, and the owls subsequently disappeared?
3. Marwick saw himself as a social scientist, and the heart of science is empirical testing. But his reaction – a priori rejection of the theory – was hardly a demonstration of scientific experimentation. After all, he could have tested

the theory, but instead he refused to do it. Not the best example of scientific procedure, or curiosity, it seems to me.
4. Note that Marwick was willing to cast an anthropological eye on the Cewa, but apparently had no interest in casting such an eye on his *own* culture. We Westerners have the truth, is the idea, so we observe and record the 'strange' behavior of 'primitive' cultures. It never occurs to us that, say, Australian aborigines probably regard white Anglo culture as weird, if not actually insane. In fact, the deliberate ignoring of social relations might properly be regarded as toxic. (One might add that Margaret Thatcher was promoting toxicity in English society – which she denied even existed – and did a lot of damage to the culture as a result.)

Let me suggest that Western science, although it obviously contains much that is objectively true, also has holes in it. No paradigm is a perfect description of reality; that's just not possible. And once you insist that your own paradigm is perfect, you have entered the world of religion, i.e. of unquestioning belief. Science can be made into a religion like any other paradigm, and it was Marwick's. I suspect that if he had written his uncle and the owls then went away, he would have had a nervous breakdown. His world would no longer have made sense to him, and as a result he would have no way to orient himself in the world – and no way of knowing who he was any more. Mystery and 'miracles' were just not part of his worldview.

Personally, I don't find the uncle–owl connection all that mysterious, if we are willing to credit what we call 'pre-science' – magic, witchcraft, alchemy, astrology, numerology, and so on – with some degree of validity. The medieval and Renaissance magical tradition was based on what was known as the Theory of Correspondences, which said that the world was interconnected: that everything was related to everything else. In fact, this theory has been resurrected in the field of holistic medicine and certain branches of environmental science, and it is also the ethical basis of Buddhism. Birds, for example, start to twitch, to behave differently just before an earthquake hits. This is well known, especially in rural communities. Similarly, they can probably detect disturbances in human beings. Marwick was emotionally miserable; he was walking around with a load of guilt because of his break with his uncle, and the owls picked up on this 'vibration', this disturbed energy. I suspect that if he had written to his uncle and eased his soul, the owls would have flown away.

The Theory of Correspondences has another name: action-at-a-distance, and it is actually not that far removed from modern science. Isaac Newton's deepest intellectual attachment was to alchemy, and he wrote thousands of unpublished pages on the subject. The British economist John Maynard Keynes, who discovered these pages, declared that Sir Isaac was 'the last of the magicians'; and it was alchemy that gave Newton the notion of action-at-a-distance, which became the basis of his Law of Universal Gravitation. Without alchemy, we could never have put a man on the moon. The Theory of Correspondences, like the Law of Universal Gravitation, is based on the notion of invisible influence, and this is why the Cewa shaman told Marwick to write to his uncle. But Marwick couldn't do it, because a positive result would have blown his mental categories. Had he regarded modern science as *one possible view* of reality, this would not have happened. But for him, science was IT – was religion – and thus he was trapped. Better noisy owls and insomnia than a reasonable belief in invisible forces. To quote the British poet W.H. Auden, 'We would rather be ruined than changed'. A depressing thought.

Two points I'd like to make in conclusion:

1. I don't know if it's true, but someone once told me that the most often-quoted phrase on the Internet is from my book *Coming to Our Senses* (Berman, 1989): 'An idea is something you have; an ideology is something that has *you*.' Is it not possible to cultivate some distance – say, two millimeters – between who we are and what we believe? This could be the beginning of

world peace, when you think about it. Or at the very least, an entrée into a more flexible understanding of reality.

2. The reason that we turn ideas into ideologies, which is to say into mythologies and religions, is that we are afraid of the outside world. And there is, of course, much to be afraid of. So we latch on to various belief systems, whether sacred or secular, to give ourselves the illusion of security. But as all paradigms – including modern science – are necessarily incomplete, this ultimately will not work. There is, however, a way out: to accept insecurity and incompleteness as inescapable; as central to the human condition.

Easier said than done.

Editor's Addendum

Richard House writes: Heart-felt thanks for this wonderful story from Morris, whom many readers will know wrote the iconic book *The Reenchantment of the World* some 40 years ago this year (Berman, 1981), with its core humanistic concerns and its concerted challenge to our prevailing mode of 'Enlightenment' scientific consciousness. Later this year *Self & Society* will be publishing a 'retro review' essay of *The Reenchantment of the World*; and it's a great honour to be featuring in these pages the first recipient of the annual Rollo May Center Grant for Humanistic Studies in 1992.

I asked Morris a few questions arising from his talk and his earlier writings, to help flesh out the implications of his provocative contributions to this vital cultural conversation about the modern world, to which he responded with characteristic generosity.

Discussion

Richard House (RH): (1) As we write, Morris, this is the 40th anniversary of your hugely influential book *The Reenchantment of the World* (Berman, 1981). It seems fitting to take this opportunity to ask you a few questions relating to your 1981 magnum opus. In *Reenchantment*, you write that our aim should be to formulate a 'neo-holistic science' based on a 'post-Cartesian paradigm' (pp. 96, 156). I wonder how you perceive the situation today, four decades on from when you wrote those words – and if you think we're any closer to that aspiration today than we were 40 years ago.

Morris Berman (MB): To be honest, things are much worse today than when I was writing the *Reenchantment* book in the seventies. At least on the surface, things seemed to be opening up in a holistic, sustainable direction. President Jimmy Carter established an Office of Appropriate Technology, and put solar panels on the roof of the White House. His 1979 Annapolis speech, on the 'spiritual malaise' of America, was a call for Americans to turn their backs on unchecked consumerism, in favor of deeper values. He invited E.F. Schumacher to the White House, and we were awash in a slew of books on the need to curb the 'growth' society, of which the *Whole Earth Catalog* was the most visible product.

With the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1981, just as *Reenchantment* was rolling off the press, all of that was reversed. Why? Because Reagan understood the American people in a way that Carter did not. All of that alternative lifeways stuff blew away overnight, like dandelion spores; it had amounted to nothing more than radical chic at San Francisco cocktail parties. What Americans really wanted, and still

want, is More – of everything: houses, cars (Janis Joplin's Mercedes Benz), money, expensive wines, private planes, and so on. ('Possessions are a disease with them' – Sitting Bull.) Their interest in holism and sustainability was just talk; in the crunch, it was not what they really wanted at all.

The year after *Reenchantment* appeared, I was teaching at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, and a colleague of mine in the political science department, who was much more clued into reality than I (or President Carter) was, told me that the problem with my book was that it never addressed the issue of power. Like Thoreau, I had painted a beautiful picture; the problem was, where were we going to hang it? And I realized: not in this world. My colleague was right.

What does it take to produce substantive social and political change, as opposed to cosmetic (non-)change? Why have things gotten worse over the last 40 years? Socialism won't work, because its core values are the same as pro-growth industrial society – namely, economic and technological expansion. What it would take is a whole different way of life – what President Carter was lobbying for – which means different values, different people, and even (in the case of the US) a different country. And this might happen via secessionist movements, in the long run, which I actually see as very likely (no empire lasts for ever). Imagine, say, Vermont in 2040, as an independent region of the former US, in which what is valued and practiced is craft, community, de-growth, care for the environment, and the honoring of human dignity rather than the possession of objects. As my favorite Brit, John Ruskin, famously put it, 'There is no wealth but life'.

Hey, a man can dream.

RH: (2) In *Reenchantment*, you also write: 'For more than 99 percent of human history, the world was enchanted and man saw himself as an integral part of it. The complete reversal of this perception in a mere four hundred years or so has destroyed the continuity of the human experience and the integrity of the human psyche. It has very nearly wrecked the planet as well. The only hope, or so it seems to me, lies in a reenchantment of the world.' (p. 23) I wonder how you see the state of the human psyche and of the planet today, Morris, and whether you see anything happening culturally, spiritually and/or politically that gives you hope for our collective future?

MB: Since the US is the epicenter of neoliberal capitalism and the destruction of the environment, and since it will hang on to the expansionist paradigm until its dying breath, the only hope I personally, as an American, see, is the disintegration of the country into independent regions, some of which might (hopefully) reject the industrial-era way of life. In Alcoholics Anonymous, they talk of change not likely to occur until the individual 'hits bottom'. But what if s/he hits bottom on the other side of death? That, I believe, is what we are going through today. The economist Joseph Schumpeter called this 'creative destruction'. We can only hope that as this process continues, we shall see more creativity than destruction. But there are no guarantees. In particular, we shall need to be wary of 'greenwashing', enterprises or projects that 'talk green' but in reality are out for profits. And I can tell you, there's plenty of that around. (Thomas Friedman and Al Gore are outstanding examples of this.) In a word, 'green capitalism' is a con; it's about capitalism, not about green. I'm sure that tender shoots exist, and that more will arise over time; but we will need to organize 'Green SWAT Teams' to call out the phonies.

RH: (3) I wonder finally, Morris, whether you have a vision of what 'medical science' (if such would still exist in a re-enchanted world) might

look like in the kind of world that you'd like to see come into being? For example and specifically, how might it differ from the current worldview underpinning mainstream medical science – both philosophically, and in terms of medical practices and conceptions of illness and health, and in a way that has sufficient credibility in the face of what will no doubt be a fierce defence of the status quo by mainstream 'normal' science? I ask this in the context of both your and Rupert Sheldrake's compelling work (e.g. Sheldrake, 2012) having been around for a long time – yet little if anything seems to have changed. Or putting it somewhat differently – is it possible to keep 'the baby' from whatever is worth salvaging from 'enlightenment' science, whilst getting rid of its toxic Cartesian bathwater? (I don't underestimate what a massive question this is!)

MB: I doubt I'm the person to address this question, since I have no medical background or expertise. But one thing I do know: somehow, we will have to remove corporations (e.g. HMOs) from the equation. Again, it comes down to issues of power, or entrenched interests, against whom a real fight is necessary. On the mental level, however, we will need to redefine our notion of 'progress' in this area. Here's a personal example. When I was a little kid, and got sick, my parents would call the doctor, who – imagine that – made house calls. He would do what he had to do, to improve my situation, and then my father paid him out of his wallet. The fee was reasonable; there were no large business enterprises standing between my father and the doctor; and house calls were hardly unusual, in those days. Americans especially, wrote Octavio Paz, think that whatever is new is better; but this is not merely wrong, it's foolish. Lots of change, of 'progress', is deleterious. It would hardly be a mistake to look to the past, and recapture some of the positive things we have lost. *That*, in my opinion, would be progress.

Note

1 This talk was originally written in early 2020 as a paper for a seminar to be presented to the Anthropology Department at UNAM in Mexico City. In any event, the seminar did not take place due to the covid crisis. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.

References

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About the contributor

Morris Berman is a poet, novelist, essayist, social critic, and cultural historian. He has written 16 books and nearly 200 articles, and has taught at a number of universities in Europe, North and South America, and Mexico. He won the Governor's Writers Award for Washington State in 1990, and was the first recipient of the annual Rollo May Center Grant for Humanistic Studies in 1992. In 2000, *The Twilight of American Culture* was named a 'Notable Book' by *The New York Times Book Review*, and in 2013 Morris received the Neil Postman Award for Career Achievement in Public Intellectual Activity from the Media Ecology Association. His most recent book, a collection of short stories entitled *The Heart of the Matter*, was published in 2020.