



## Reread

Is new paradigm thinking the only option when considering the evolution of consciousness? This reread looks at **Morris Berman's** twenty year, three-volume cultural history, which takes the long, long view, and offers a different wayside map to our possible cultural evolution.

# Living in Paradox

Books by Morris Berman discussed in this piece are *The Reenchantment of the World*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981, republished as a Bantam paperback; *Coming to our Senses*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989; and *Wandering God*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000.

I have the most archaic values, of the upper paleolithic', wrote Gary Snyder many years ago in *The Real Work*. Gary Snyder talked not so much of the big, rather of the long, long picture, evolutionary timescales where the last 10,000 years were only a blink of an eye. For him the great revolution for humankind, turning out to be a defining evolutionary watershed, was between the Neolithic and the Paleolithic. Snyder brought poetic voice to the debate about the evolution of consciousness, which has rumbled on over the last decades. In turn, thinkers associated with holistic and New Age approaches have contributed significantly to the conversation. Spiritual paths, from Buddhism through to esoteric religion similarly speak a language of the evolution of spiritual consciousness. At the same time ideas about the evolution of mind have been transformed within the mainstream academy, with the latest thinking reported in popular explications such as Christopher Wills' *The Runaway Brain*. These brain science books are a different category; worked from the orthodoxies of science apart from nature, rather than as part of nature.

This under-reported cultural phenomenon announced that a cultural shift of seismic proportions was underway. Across the seventies and throughout the eighties a series of accessibly styled book-length essays appeared from the pens of recently young (white) Americans from across the Atlantic, seeking to make sense of the two decades or so of cultural change in terms of consciousness, moving from a mechanistic paradigm to one of holism. The changes were seen

within these books as positive, an evolution away from the older ways of modernity, mechanistic science and industrialism – embracing an ecological, New Age way of being, knowing and doing in the world; Marilyn Ferguson's proto-new age text, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*. Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point* drew similar conclusions from the move towards alternative medicines, the new spirituality and the greening of politics and technology. Hazel Henderson's *The Coming of the Solar Age* outlined the new solar economics which was on the cusp of replacing the clapped-out oil economics. Quite soon Ken Wilber was to become well known in North America at least, for his massive systematising tomes on consciousness changes, whilst William Irwin Thompson's equally prolific, if less visible, series of consciousness books, beginning with the most influential, *The time falling bodies take to light* showed that this was a trend with broad flanks.

All these books shared the conviction that massive change was on the way, and on the way soon. That they were, to a man and woman, American, wasn't something which escaped some cultural commentators, and in Europe were often warily connected up with the excited goings on in California and other centres of incipient over-the-top New Agedom. European academicians, never too keen on such naked, uncritical optimism dismissed it all as over-excited speculation and waited for it to go away.

Twenty years on, it may well be that this cultural shift has run its course. Certainly currently, the mainstream's marginalisation of the integrity of this cultural phenomenon, seems conclusive. After an initial period of curiosity, the mainstream lost interest. At the same time, by contemplating a longer timespan, for example the two hundred and fifty year emergence of the scientific revolution – encompassing Copernicus' publication of *De Revolutionibus* in 1543 to Newton's *Principia* in 1687 – a different story might be suggested. Two hundred and fifty years provides something of a clearer