

Readers wanting a more conventional history of Times Square in its first century might want to turn to James Traub's excellent *The Devil's Playground: A Century of Pleasure and Profit in Times Square* (Random House, 2007) or a remarkable series of scholarly essays, edited by William R. Taylor, *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). But readers who seek a deeply personal and passionate work that is open about its nostalgia for Times Square and uses a series of icons and moments in the square's history to make a rousing defence of the right to the city and its public spaces, will want to read the inimitable Marshall Berman's book.

It begins (in a section called 'My Family Romance') with a red dress – the red dress his mother used to wear when she went out with Berman's father for a night on the town, which meant to Broadway and Times Square, to 'take a bath of light' (p. xxvi). (I had hoped to use this red dress in an exhibition I curated on the history of Times Square in 2004). His mother, seeking a romantic night out, also recognized something more profound: that in Times Square could be found most everything that would define the United States in the twentieth century – popular culture, new roles and possibilities for men and women alongside intense exploitation, urban planning experiments, new forms of consumerism and marketing. Times Square is, in Berman's estimation, 'the most dynamic and intense urban space of the twentieth century . . . America's gift to the modern world' (p. 23).

The story of Times Square's first one hundred years is told through a series of idiosyncratic episodes and cultural artifacts. The Benetton 'Colors' advertisement (featuring a diverse and nude cast of young people) by Tibor Kalman is the latest stage of signage in the square, a reason for optimism for Berman, despite its obvious exploitative nature; Alfred Eisenstaedt's infamous V-J Day photograph serves as introduction to a close examination of the musical *On the Town* and the ideals of manhood played out in the square and on stage and in film; Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* serves as a way into a discussion of the changing agency of women in the square and the permeability of reality and fantasy on Broadway. And yet *On the Town* is ultimately about something far more than nostalgia for Times Square's past, or even just Times Square: it is a call of defence for the city and for the public spaces of the city. Berman marvels that in the heart of the capital of the capital of capitalism, where people and ideas and products are sold on the street, in the sky, in lights and neon and LED, there is also a rare sense of freedom – freedom of walking, looking, desiring, protesting. The square, writes Berman, 'has noticed and inspired all sorts of men and women to step out of line, to engage actively with the city, merge their subjectivity into it, and change the place as they change themselves' (p. 225).

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Edward R. Schmitt, *President of the Other America: Robert Kennedy and the Politics of Poverty*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010. ix + 324pp. 12 photographs. \$39.95.
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Edward Schmitt offers a portrait of Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) as America's would-be poverty warrior-in-chief, focusing on the experiences that brought RFK to

the forefront of the nation's struggles for social and economic justice in the years leading up to his assassination during the presidential campaign of 1968. His book is also a portrait of a time in the not-so-distant past when the fight against poverty was elevated to the highest echelons of national politics as a statement of liberalism's electoral and moral aspirations. Schmitt argues that the politics of poverty were far more central to the decade than the existing historiography suggests, figuring prominently in Democratic Party efforts to expand its constituency base and in major domestic policy initiatives from civil rights to urban renewal, as well as in Lyndon B. Johnson's official declaration of War on Poverty in 1964. RFK may have had a singular 'obsession' with the issue of poverty, as one contemporary journalist put it (p. 1), but in Schmitt's view his gambit to make it the basis of an electoral coalition makes his candidacy a sign of where politics was heading –and where it might have gone had he lived.

Just how, and why, RFK came to this position has been the subject of disagreement among biographers, with some emphasizing his sincerity and others his opportunism. Schmitt takes the middle ground on the question of RFK's motivation, but his larger aim is to offer an alternative account, of steady engagement rather than sudden transformation, and of a gradually deepening commitment to dealing with poverty and racial inequality after years of first-hand exposure to the needs and political struggles of the disenfranchised. The result is a narrative of moral and political education, closely tracking RFK's encounters with poverty from his brother's storied 1960 presidential primary campaign in impoverished West Virginia through his decision to enter the 1968 presidential race as the poor people's candidate. Schmitt is balanced and admirably unsentimental in his treatment, carefully weighing the combination of political calculation and genuine concern behind RFK's alternately cautious and far-sighted positions on civil rights, hunger, the rights of migrant farm workers and the looming 'urban crisis'. He also acknowledges the limitations of what he argues was a distinctively 'communitarian' approach, most fully embodied in RFK's efforts to launch the Bedford Stuyvesant Community Development Corporation as a model for neighbourhood transformation.

Schmitt is less persuasive in his attempt to locate RFK ideologically, using the terms 'communitarian' and 'community' loosely and interchangeably without adequately establishing how Kennedy himself defined community, whether his vision stemmed from a considered critique of contemporary expressions of liberalism, or indeed whether it was especially distinctive at the time. Nor is it entirely clear from this discussion whether RFK's growing compassion for the 'other' Americans ever translated into a more systematic analysis of poverty as a problem rooted in social and economic injustice, let alone a coherent programme for reform. Whether RFK might have led the Democrats – and the country – in a different, more compassionate and just, political direction remains for many a matter of speculation, as it does in Schmitt's book. Although some of its themes remain underdeveloped, it offers a well-documented, historically grounded account of a career that gave millions of people reason to harbour those expectations – of Robert F. Kennedy, and of American politics.

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