Walter Benjamin and Marxism

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Walter Benjamin, born in a bourgeois Berlin Jewish family in 1892, was not only a brilliant literary critic and sociologist of culture, but also one of the most creative modem Marxist thinkers. A friend of Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adomo, and Gershom Scholem (the well known historian of Jewish mysticism), he wrote his first books on the concept of art criticism in German romanticism and on German baroque drama. A sympathizer of the communist movement, he visited the Soviet Union in 1 92 7 and 1 928 but never joined the German Communist Party. Forced into exile by the Nazis in 1933, he lived precariously in France with a stipend from the Frankfurt School, which published in its Journal for Social Research some of his most important essays (on Baudelaire and on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction). Trying to escape the Nazi occupation of France by crossing the Pyrenees in September 1940, he was arrested by the Spanish (Franco) police. Threatened with being turned over to the Gestapo, he preferred to commit suicide. His last writing, the Theses On the Concept of History, is one of the most important documents Of revolutionary theory in our times. Known only to a small circle of people during his life, he became, after the 1960s, an increasingly influential thinker for a new generation of radical students and intellectuals in Europe and America.

Benjamin was first introduced to the English speaking public with a collection of essays, Illuminations (1968), selected and edited by the cold war publicist Hannah Arendt. In a lengthy introduction, Arendt minimized Benjamin's commitment to Marxism. Arendt claimed that "without realizing it" Benjamin had more in common with the Nazi Martin Heidegger than "with the dialectical subtleties of his Marxist friends." Since then, Benjamin's work (and Heidegger's hidden past) have become widely known and Arendt's project of falsification can now truly be said to have failed. Like that of his contemporaries Gramsci and Lukacs, Benjamin's Marxist thought permits in its subtlety a variety of interpretations and applications to today's world. The following essay focuses on an aspect of Benjamin's scorching critique of positivist, inevitablist vulgar Marxism. —The Editors

Walter Benjamin occupies a unique place in the history of modern Marxist thought. He is the first partisan of historical materialism to break radically with the ideology of progress. His Marxism, therefore, has a distinct critical quality, which sets it apart from the dominant and "official" forms and gives him a formidable methodological superiority.

This peculiarity has to do with Benjamin's ability to incorporate into the body of Marxist revolutionary theory insights from the Romantic critique of civilization and from the Jewish Messianic tradition. Both elements are present in his early writings, particularly *The Life of the Students* (1915), where he had already rejected "a conception of history which, confident in the infinity of time, distinguishes only the speed at which humanity and epochs roll, quicker or slower, along the tracks of progress"—a conception characterized by "an inability to see the connections between things, a lack of recognition for the precise and forceful demands that the past makes on the present" as opposed to the utopian images such as The Messianic Kingdom or The French

Revolution.(1)

Benjamin's first reference to communism appears in 1921 in his *Critique of Violence*, where he celebrates the "devastating and on the whole justified" critique of parliaments by the Bolsheviks and the Anarcho-Syndicalists.(2) This link between communism and anarchism will be an important aspect of his political evolution: his Marxism will to a large extent take on a libertarian coloring.

But it is only after 1924, when he reads Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and discovers practical communism through the eyes of Asja Lacis, a Soviet artist and political activist he met in Capri, that Marxism becomes a key component of his world view. In 1929 Benjamin still refers to Lukacs's opus as one of the few books which remain lively and topical. He refers to it as the most achieved philosophical work in the literature of Marxism. Its uniqueness lies in the assurance with which it grasps in the critical situation of philosophy the critical situation of class-struggle, and in the coming concrete revolution the absolute implementation and the last word of theoretical knowledge. The polemic against it by the hierarchy of the Communist Party under the leadership of Deborin confirms in its way the scope of the book.(3)

This commentary illustrates Benjamin's independence of mind toward the "official" doctrine of Soviet Marxism in spite of his sympathies for the USSR.

In a letter to Gershom Scholem (September 1924) he refers to the tension between his "nihilism" and Lukacs's Hegelian dialectics but emphasizes that he is attracted by the political praxis of communism as a "binding attitude." What interests him foremost in Lukacs's book is the unity between theory and practice that constitutes the philosophical hard core of the work and gives it an immense advantage: ". . . any other method is only demagogic and bourgeois phraseology."(4)

The first work of Benjamin in which the influence of Marxism can be felt is "One-way Street," written between 1923 and 1926, and published in 1928. The change in his way of thinking can be illustrated by a comparison of the first version of the manuscript, written in 1923, and the last one from 1926. In the early version, he writes about the victim of misery:

He should keep his senses awake for all humiliations inflicted upon him, and should discipline himself until his suffering sets him no longer on the downward course of hatred but on the upward path of prayer.

The "Marxist" version of 1926 repeats almost the same phrase but ends otherwise: ". . . until his suffering sets him no longer on the downward course of sadness but on the upward path of revolt."(5) In this single phrase is concentrated the entire striking transformation of his political ideas during those two years.

Benjamin's former neo-romantic criticism of progress is now charged with a revolutionary Marxist tension, as in the section of the book called *Fire Alarm*:

. . . if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed before an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (a moment signalled by inflation and (poison-gas warfare), all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut.

Will the proletariat be able to fulfill this historical task? The survival or destruction of "three thousand years of cultural development" depends on the answer.(6) In opposition to the vulgar evolutionist brand of Marxism, Benjamin does not conceive the proletarian revolution as the "natural" or "inevitable" result of economic and technical progress, but as the critical interruption of an evolution leading to catastrophe.

This critical standpoint explains why Benjamin's Marxism has a peculiarly pessimistic spirit—a revolutionary pessimism which has nothing to do with resigned fatalism. In his 1929 article on surrealism, where he again tries to reconcile anarchism and Marxism, he defines communism as the organization of pessimism, adding ironically, "unlimited confidence can be placed only in IG Farben and the peaceful perfectioning of the Luftwaffe."(7) Both institutions were soon (but after his death) to show, beyond his most pessimistic forecasts, the sinister use which could be made of modern technology.

However, 1933 marks the beginning of a short period during which Benjamin seems tempted to adopt some elements of Soviet Marxism, and in particular its "progressive" conception of productive forces. Articles written from 1933 to 1935 containing a very favorable evaluation of technical progress—in particular "Experience and Poverty" (1933), "The Author as Producer" (I 934), and to a lesser extent "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935)—are also those which contain uncritical support of the Soviet model of socialism, whose ideology was at this time (the Five Year Plan) a most industrialist and productivist kind of Marxism. It is necessary to add, however, that these documents are somewhat ambiguous. In "Experience and Poverty" he celebrates the end of traditional culture in modern society as creating a salutary tabula rasa, but the concept used to define the new civilization—sober and cold like glass and iron—is frightening, "a new Barbarism." And in relation to the article on the work of art, Gershom Scholem pointed to the deep tension between the first part, which seems to mourn the loss of aura, and the second part which praises cinema as an intrinsically revolutionary medium.

These articles are usually considered to be the most "Marxist" pieces written by Benjamin. In my opinion, however, they are only those that are nearest to the established view of what Marxism is about, accepted by most "orthodox" theoreticians of the communist and social-democratic movements. Benjamin's essays from 1925 to 1933, and later from 1936 to 1940, are also Marxist, but they belong to an original and "heterodox" kind of historical materialism, in conflict with the dominant canons because of its non-evolutionist and non-progressivist view of history.

The end of this period of experimental support for some aspects of Soviet Marxism seems to coincide with the Moscow trials of 1936, which Benjamin viewed with perplexity. During the years 1937 to 1940 he became increasingly critical of Soviet policy, finally settling accounts with Comintern Marxism in the "Theses" of 1940.

The 1937 article on "Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian" contains a severe criticism of social-democratic ideology, which combined Marxism with positivism, Darwinist evolutionism, and the cult of "progress." Its most serious weakness is that it saw in the development of technology only the progress of natural sciences, never the social regression. It never perceived the danger that the energies produced by technology could serve above all for the technical perfection of war. Against the shallow optimism of the pseudo-Marxists, Benjamin opposes his pessimistic-revolutionary perspective, referring to Engels' and Marx's own prognosis of a possible barbaric development of capitalism.(8)

Benjamin's breakwith the "materialist/progressivist" perspective from 1933 to 1935 is not at all a break with Marxism. The essays of 1936 to 1940 are also Marxist, but constitute a new and original reinterpretation of historical materialism (nourished by Romantic culture and Jewish theology), radically different from the orthodoxy of the Second and Third Internationals. They should be considered as an attempt to deepen and radicalize the opposition between Marxism and bourgeois ideology, to heighten its revolutionary potential and sharpen its critical content. This was also the aim of Benjamin's uncompleted book on the Parisian Arcades (Passagenwerk):

One can perceive as one of the methodological aims of this work to demonstrate the possibility of a

historical materialism that has annihilated in itself the idea of progress. Here is precisely where historical materialism has to disassociate itself from bourgeois habits of thought.(9)

Such a program did not aim at some sort of "revision" but rather, as in the case of Karl Korsch's work (Karl Marx, 1936, one of Benjamin's major sources), at a return to Marx himself

One of the critical insights directly inspired by Marx and Engels is Benjamin's analysis of the workers' loss of experience and their transformation into automatons (in the Passagenwerk and the Baudelaire essay). He quotes a passage from Das Kapital in which the workers are described as having to coordinate their movements "with the uniform continuous movement of an automaton." Benjamin concludes that the proletarian lives in a kind of hell, because his life is eternal repetition of the same. Quoting Engels, Benjamin compares the assembly line worker to Sisyphus.(10)

Benjamin was aware that his interpretation of Marxism had its roots in the Romantic critique of industrial civilization, but he was convinced that the same roots are present in Marx himself, and he found support for this view in Korsch's book. As Benjamin quotes Korsch:

In the theory of the modern labor movement there has been included . . . also an clement of that "sobering" which . . . was proclaimed after the great French Revolution first by the French theoreticians of counter-revolution and then by the German romantics, and which had, particularly through Hegel, a strong influence on Marx.(11)

According to Habermas, there is a contradiction between Benjamin's philosophy of history and historical materialism, Benjamin's supposed mistake having been to try to impose on historical materialism a theory that "takes into account progress not only in the sphere of the productive forces but also in that of domination . . . an anti-evolutionist conception of history."(12)

However, a dialectical and non-evolutionist interpretation of history, taking into account both progress and regression, can find support in several writings by Marx (for instance, his late pieces on Russia). It is true that this interpretation conflicts with the dominant views of historical materialism developed throughout the twentieth century. What Habermas considers to be a mistake is precisely the source of the unique value of Benjamin's Marxism, and of its superiority over "progressivist evolutionism" in understanding a century characterized by the overlapping between modernity and barbarism (as in Auschwitz or Hiroshima).

The most radical formulation of this anti-evolutionist interpretation of historical materialism is of course Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History* (1940), where the ideology of progress—also inside the communist movement—is criticized in its philosophical foundations: linear and empty time.

This criticism is inspired by a Messianic conception of time. The question of the relationship between Marxism and Messianism in Benjamin's late writings is of course a most controversial one. Some interpreters explain it in terms of "secularization," others speak of "theologization." During the sharp polemics of the 1960s in Germany, some insisted on the religious dimension, others on Marxist materialism. Benjamin himself referred ironically (in a letter to Scholem) to his "Janus face," with the critics looking only at one face while ignoring the other. In order to transcend this kind of polemic, it is useful to recall that the Roman god had two faces but only one head; Benjamin's faces are manifestations of one and the same thought which had simultaneously a Messianic and a Marxist expression.

Let us take as an example Thesis 1, the famous allegory of the mechanical chess player:

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of

chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called "historical materialism" is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.(13)

Two topics are interwoven in this allegory: a critique of the sort of Marxism that understands history as a mechanical process leading automatically to the triumph of socialism, and the reestablishment of the explosive "theological" (i.e., Messianic) and revolutionary spirit of historical materialism, which had been reduced to a miserable automaton by its epigones.

The articulation between theology and materialism takes a curiously paradoxical form in the allegory. At the beginning, the theological dwarf is presented as the master of the automaton, which he uses as a sort of instrument. However, at the end of Thesis I, it appears clearly that the hunchback is a servant of the automaton. What does this reversal mean? It seems that Benjamin wanted to suggest their dialectical complementarity. Theology and Marxism are each one the master and the servant of the other; they need each other.

One must take seriously the idea according to which theology is "at the service of" historical materialism—a formulation that reverts to the traditional scholastic definition of philosophy as ancilla theologiae. Theology, as memory of the victims and hope of redemption, is not for Benjamin an end in itself, a mystical contemplation of the divine. It is at the service of the struggle of the oppressed.

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A few decades after Benjamin's death, the idea of a theology at the service of the poor in the struggle for their self-liberation, a theology intimately linked with Marxism, comes to life again, but this time in a very different cultural and historical context, the liberationist Christianity of Latin America. But there is a secret affinity between Walter Benjamin and liberation theology.

NOTES

(1.) Walter Benjamin, "Das Leben der Studenten," 1915, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (*GS*), II, 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), p. 75. All translations unless otherwise indicated are mine.

(2.) Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," *GS*, II, 1 (1921), p. 191.

(3.) Benjamin, "Bucher die Liebending geblieben sind," *GS*, III, p. 171.

(4.) Benjamin, *Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), p.355.

(5.) Benjamin, "Einbahnstrasse" (1928) *GS IV*, 1, p. 97 and IV, 2, p. 931.

(6.) Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in Peter Demetz , ed., *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), p. 84.

(7.) Benjamin, GS, II, 1, p. 308. The chemical trust IG Farben employed forced labor from concentration camps during the Second World War. It also produced the Ziklotron gas used to exterminate the inmates.

(8.) Benjamin, GS, II, 2, pp. 474-75.

(9.) Benjamin, “Passagenwerk,” GS, V, 1, p. 574.

(10.) GS, V, 1, pp. 61, 71, 75, 77.

(11.) GK, V, 2, p. 820.

(12.) Jurgen Habermas, “Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik,” in Walter Benjamin, *Zur Aktualitat* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), p. 207.

(13.) Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 253.

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