

1940-2020: Eightieth Anniversary of Walter Benjamin's Death. Ten Theses on His Contribution to Critical Theory

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A permanent exile, a dissident Marxist, a lucid anti-fascist, Walter Benjamin died in Port-Bou 80 years ago, in September 1940, after an attempt to flee Vichy's France to Spain. Like thousands of other German Jewish and/or anti-fascist refugees, he was interned in a camp in the summer of 1939, at the beginning of World War II, as a "national of an enemy country."

It was one of the most infamous chapters in the sad history of the Third Republic. Freed from the camp thanks to the intervention of French writers and intellectuals, he tried to "disappear" in Marseille. But after the armistice, and the establishment of the "French state" of Vichy, he felt caught in a mousetrap: the roundups of "undesirable foreigners" followed, and the Gestapo, under the sweet title of "Armistice Commission" lurked everywhere. It was at this moment that he knocked on the door of Lisa Fittko, an anti-fascist German (Jewish) refugee, who was organizing an exit route to Spain for the most threatened, through the "Lister Road," a narrow path to cross the Pyrenees. With Fittko's help, Benjamin will reach the border and the Spanish village of Port-Bou with great difficulty because of his health.

Arrested in Port-Bou by the police (Francoist), who, under the pretext of the absence of a French exit visa, decides to hand him over to the Vichy police – that is to say to the Gestapo – he chose suicide. It was "midnight in the century," the Hitler Third Reich had occupied half of Europe, with the complicity of the Stalinist Soviet Union. As much as an act of desperation, it was a last act of protest and anti-fascist resistance.

In homage to his memory, a few brief notes on Walter Benjamin's contribution to Marxist Critical Theory.

1. Walter Benjamin belongs to the Critical Theory in the broadest sense, that is, this Marx-inspired current of thought which, from or around the Frankfurt School, calls into question not only the power of the bourgeoisie, but also the foundations of Western rationality and civilization. A close friend of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, he undoubtedly influenced their writings, and especially the vital work that is the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, where we find many of his ideas and even sometimes "quotes" without reference to the source. He, in turn, has also been sensitive to the main themes of the Frankfurt School, but he is distinguished by certain traits which are singular to him, and which constitute his specific contribution to Critical Theory.

Benjamin was never able to find a university position; the refusal of his authorization – the thesis on the German Baroque drama – condemned him to a precarious existence of essayist, "man of letters" and maverick journalist, which, of course, deteriorated considerably during the years of the Parisian

exile (1933-40). An ideal-typical example of the freischwebende Intelligenz (the layer of the freely floating intellectuals) of which Karl Mannheim spoke, he was, at its highest point, an Aussenseiter, an outsider. This existential situation may have contributed to the subversive acuity of his gaze.

2. Benjamin is, in this group of thinkers, the first to question the ideology of progress, this philosophy “incoherent, imprecise, without rigor,” which perceives in the historical process only “the more or less rapid pace by which men and epochs advance on the path of progress” (“The Life of Students,” 1915). He went further than the others in trying to rid Marxism, once and for all, of the influence of bourgeois doctrines of “progress”; thus, in *The Book of Passages*, he gave himself the following objective: “The possibility of an historical materialism, which in itself has annihilated the idea of progress, can also be considered as the methodologically pursued goal in this work. It is precisely by opposing the habits of bourgeois thought that historical materialism finds its sources.” Benjamin was convinced that “progressive” illusions, including the belief of “swimming in the flow of history,” and an illusory view of the existing technique and productive system contributed to the defeat of the German labor movement in the face of fascism. Among these harmful illusions was the astonishment that fascism could exist in our time, in such a modern Europe, the product of two centuries of “civilization process” (in the sense of Norbert Elias in this term): as if the Third Reich were not, precisely, a pathological manifestation of that same civilized modernity.

3. While most thinkers of Critical Theory shared Adorno’s goal of putting conservative romantic criticism of bourgeois civilization at the service of enlightenment emancipatory goals, Benjamin is perhaps the one who has shown the greatest interest in critical appropriation of the themes and ideas of anti-capitalist romanticism. In *The Book of Passages* he refers to Korsch to highlight Marx’s debt, via Hegel, to even the most conservative German and French romantics. He did not hesitate to use arguments by Johannes von Baader, Bachofen or Nietzsche to demolish the myths of capitalist civilization. In him, as with all revolutionary romantics, there is an astonishing dialectic between the most distant past and the emancipated future; hence his interest in Bachofen’s thesis, which Engels and the anarchist geographer Elisha Reclus will draw on, about the existence of a communist society, without classes, authoritarian powers and patriarchy in the dawn of history.

This sensitivity also allowed Benjamin to understand, much better than his friends at the Frankfurt School, the significance and scope of a romantic/libertarian movement such as surrealism, to which he assigned, in his 1929 article, the task of capturing the forces of drunkenness (Rausch) for the cause of the revolution. Marcuse, too, realized the importance of surrealism as an attempt to combine art and revolution, but it was forty years later.

4. Like his friends at the Frankfurt School, Benjamin was a proponent of a kind of “critical pessimism” that took in his writings a revolutionary form. In his 1929 article on surrealism, he even asserted that to be a revolutionary was to “organize pessimism.” He expresses his distrust of the fate of freedom in Europe and adds, in an ironic conclusion: “Unlimited confidence only in IG Farben and the peaceful development of the Luftwaffe.” Of course, even he, the pessimist par excellence, could not foresee the atrocities that the Luftwaffe would inflict on European cities and civilian populations; or that IG Farben would, barely a dozen years later, become the manufacturer of Zyklon B gas, used to “rationalize” the genocide of Jews and Gypsies. However, he was the only Marxist thinker of those years to have the intuition of the monstrous disasters that could result from the bourgeois civilization in crisis.

5. More than other thinkers of Critical Theory, Benjamin was able to productively mobilize the themes of Jewish messianism for the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed. Messianic motifs are not absent from some of Adorno’s texts, notably “Minima Moralia,” or in Horkheimer, but it is in Benjamin’s theses on the concept of history that messianism becomes a central vector for a refoundation of historical materialism, to avoid the fate of an automaton doll, as it had become in the

hands of vulgar Marxism. There is a kind of correspondence in Benjamin (in the Baudelairian sense of the word) between messianic irruption and revolution as an interruption of historical continuity – the continuity of domination.

For messianism as he understands it – or rather, invents it – it is not a question of waiting for the salvation of an exceptional individual, of a prophet sent by the gods: the “Messiah” is collective, since each generation has been given “a weak messianic force,” which is to exercise, in the best possible way.

6. Of all the authors of Critical Theory, Benjamin was most attached to class struggle as a principle of understanding history and world transformation. As he wrote in the 1940 *Theses*, class struggle “is continually to be present to the historian formed by Marx’s thought”; indeed, it is constantly present in his writings, as an essential link between the past, the present and the future, and as a place of dialectical unity between theory and practice. For Benjamin, history does not appear as a process of developing productive forces, but rather as a fight to the death between oppressors and oppressed; rejecting the evolutionary view of vulgar Marxism, which perceives the movement of history as an accumulation of “acquired,” he insists instead on the catastrophic victories of the ruling classes.

Unlike most other members of the Frankfurt School, Benjamin waged, until his last breath, on the oppressed classes as the emancipatory force of humanity. Deeply pessimistic, but never resigned, he never ceases to see in “the last enslaved class” – the proletariat – the one that, “in the name of the vanquished generations, brings to an end the work of liberation” (Thesis XII). While he does not share the myopic optimism of the workers’ parties on their “mass base,” he sees no less in the dominated classes the only force capable of overthrowing the system of domination.

7. Benjamin was also the most stubbornly faithful to the Marxian idea of revolution. Certainly, against Marx, he defines it not as the “locomotive of history” but as an interruption of its catastrophic course, as the saving action of humanity that pulls the emergency brakes of the train. But the social revolution remains the horizon of his reflection, the messianic escape point of his philosophy of history, the keystone of his reinterpretation of historical materialism.

Despite the defeats of the past – from the slave revolt led by Spartacus in ancient Rome to the uprising of the Spartakusbund of Rosa Luxemburg in January 1919 – “the revolution as conceived by Marx,” this “dialectical leap,” is still possible (Thesis XIV). Its dialectic consists of operating, through “a tiger jump in the past,” an irruption into the present, in the “time of today” (Jetztzeit).

8. Unlike his friends at the Frankfurt School, jealous of their independence, Benjamin tried to get closer to the communist movement. His love for the Latvian Bolshevik artist Asja Lacis probably played a role in this attempt... At one point, around 1926, he even considered, as he wrote to his friend Gershom Scholem, to join the German Communist Party- which he would not do... In 1928-29 he visited the Soviet Union: in his Diary of this stay, there were critical observations, which suggested some sympathy for the left-wing opposition. If, during the years 1933-1935, he seems, in some of his writings, to be closer to Soviet Marxism, from 1936 he began to distance himself; for example, in a letter of March 1938, he denounced “the compromise in Spain of the revolutionary idea with the Machiavellianism of the Russian leadership.” However, he still believes, as evidenced by his correspondence, that the USSR, despite its despotic nature, is the only ally of the anti-fascists. This belief collapsed in 1939, with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: in his *Theses on the Concept of History* (or *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1940), he denounced the “betrayal to their own cause” of the Stalinist communists.

9. Walter Benjamin was not a Trotskyist, but he repeatedly expressed a great interest in the ideas of

the founder of the Red Army. In a letter to Gretel Adorno in the spring of 1932, a time when Trotsky was denounced as a “traitor” by Stalinists – he wrote: “I read Trotsky’s history of the February Revolution and am about to finish his Autobiography. For years I have not assimilated anything with such tension, breathtaking. You must without hesitation read both books.” And in another letter to a friend, from May 1, 1933, he rejoiced at the reading of Trotsky’s second volume of his *History of the Russian Revolution*. These two letters were sent from the island of Ibiza (Balearic Islands) where Benjamin stayed at that time. The writer and art critic Jean Selz, who frequented him in Ibiza in 1932-33, described him in later testimony as a supporter of “an overtly anti-Stalinian Marxism: he showed great admiration for Trotsky.” This judgment may seem somewhat exaggerated, but it is consistent with what these two letters suggest.

10. Benjamin’s thought is deeply rooted in the German Romantic tradition and in the Jewish culture of Central Europe; it responds to a specific historical context, which is that of the time of wars and revolutions, between 1914 and 1940. And yet, the main themes of his reflection, and in particular his theses on the concept of history, are surprisingly universal: they give us tools to understand cultural realities, historical phenomena, social movements in other contexts, other periods, other continents.

Michael Löwy

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