



Walter Benjamin: Melancholy and Revolution

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ABSTRACT

From a very young age, Walter Benjamin's influences were anarchism, revolutionary pre-romanticism and messianism. His paradigmatic text "The Life of Students" (1915) is from this phase, as well as other texts that reveal his thinking at the same time. Later, in 1924, Benjamin was confronted with dialectical materialism, based on Luckács' work, *History and Class Consciousness*, under the influence of Asja Lascis. These three streaks referred to here (messianism, dialectical materialism and anarchism) constitute, throughout his work, the fabric that would give rise to his most finished thought, namely that which is expressed in his last text, "On the Concept of History". As we intend to emphasize in this text, the idea of revolution is the most evident line in his last work, taking it as the expression of class struggle and, at the same time, of messianism. Here, we analyse these trends that ran through the philosopher's thought and texts, during the thirties and until his death, in 1940, in the adverse context of fascism.

KEYWORDS: *Messianism, Revolution, History, Marxism*

"(...)The historical task is to give absolute form, in all purity, to the immanent state of perfection, to make it visible and to make it triumph in the present (...)".

Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 1, p. 75.

From a very early age Walter Benjamin established a close relationship between messianism and revolutionary utopias. It is precisely in the 1915 text, "The Life of Students" that he opposes the formless ideology of progress with the critical power of utopia, just like the "revolutionary idea in the sense of 89." (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften II* [Collected Writings], 1974, p. 75). This revolutionary idea that the author alludes to here is that of the French Revolution. The relationship or association between messianism and the revolution will become one of the fundamental nuclei of his thought, which will be fully developed in the text "On the Concept of History." In "The Life of Students" we can also see how the Tolstoyan spirit is associated with a utopian outlook, with its call to put oneself at the service of the poor. This spirit "was born of the deepest anarchist conceptions and of Christian monastic communities" (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 1974, p. 79). As Löwy states, "in a typically romantic revolutionary shortcut, the religious past leads to the utopian becoming, under the common inspiration of the Russian socialist, Christian and libertarian writer" (Löwy, *La révolution est le frein d'urgence*, 2019, p. 62).

Both Scholem and Benjamin were attracted by anarchist ideas from a very young age, especially those of Gustav

Landauer, namely his essay *The Revolution*.¹ If Scholem admits his sympathy for anarchism, it is above all for its morality (Löwy, *La révolution est le frein d'urgence*, 2019, p. 63). In his text "The Critique of Violence" Benjamin also draws an analogy between the "legitimate counter-violence of the general strike" (*Ibid.*) and divine violence. Indeed, the question that Benjamin poses is that of knowing "whether violence in general is moral, as a principle, if it were a means to just ends." (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 1974, p. 180). It is above all in this essay that one finds reflections that are unmistakably inspired by Georges Sorel and by anarcho-syndicalism. "He unreservedly approves of the "radical and perfectly justified" anti-parliamentary critique of the Bolsheviks and anarcho-syndicalists" (Löwy, *La révolution est le frein d'urgence*, 2019, p. 72). Benjamin considers that Sorel's perspective, which he calls anarchist, seems to him worthy of praise because the general strike is that event whose "sole task is to destroy the violence of the state" (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 1974, p. 193). With

¹ Gustav Landauer was a romantic socialist and a Jew. Among the anarchist authors in which Benjamin is interested, Gustav Landauer occupies an important place. Benjamin was closer, in 1921, to the romantic and libertarian socialism of Landauer and Sorel than to Karl Marx or Engels.



the general strike, Benjamin adds, “the revolution appears as a pure and simple revolt” (*Ibid*, p. 194). In this sense, the general strike appears to him as authentically revolutionary, that is, as a bearer of justice-restoring violence.

Although Scholem was the first of the two to take an interest in communism, writing in 1918 a text entitled “Bolshevism,” in which he evokes its “revolutionary magic” and addresses the Russian revolution as a “messianic reaction” against the First World War, Walter Benjamin shared his point of view, certainly in Scholem’s own words (Scholem, *Histoire d’une amitié*, 1981, p. 188). However, Scholem moved away from communism, with his departure for Israel (1923), and Benjamin moved even closer to communism, from 1924 onwards, with his relationship with Asja Lasci and the reading of György Lukács, in particular of his work *History and Class Consciousness*(1923). Therefore it was belatedly, following the revolutionary events in Russia and Europe from 1917-1923, that he discovered Marxism.

His first impressions of Marxism can be found in a letter he wrote to Scholem, on 16 September 1924 (Benjamin, *Briefe I*, 1993, p. 354-355). Benjamin announces to him that he plans to join the Communist Party of Germany – something he will never do – and that this does not mean renouncing his anarchism. From here on, Benjamin’s entire work will shift in another direction, moving away from its first phase. Alongside the influence of dialectical materialism, he is also marked by messianism, which will never abandon him, although it is more absent in his texts from the 1930s. In a letter to Scholem, dated February 14, 1929, Benjamin compares himself to a two-faced Janus, whose two faces are simultaneously turned towards Moscow and Jerusalem (Benjamin, *Briefe II*, 1993, p. 489). Benjamin’s commitment to communism will be addressed in further conversations with Scholem, but Scholem avoids arguments with his friend, saying that he sees no contradiction between his new ideas and his previous convictions. Scholem did not realize how innovative Benjamin’s thought had become, on the one hand linked to theology and, on the other, linked to dialectical materialism.

What came to put an end to Benjamin’s last hesitations regarding his political position was the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, signed in 1939. It was based on this fact that Walter Benjamin wrote his text “On the Concept of History”, in 1940, a few months before his tragic suicide in Port Bou. This text differs from the previous ones by the central place taken by messianic themes, deeply intertwined with historical materialism, giving rise to a new, profoundly original conception.

Marxism becomes visible in *One Way Street*, written between 1923-25 and published in 1928. Despite his interest in communism, it is noteworthy that the revolutionary political current present in this text is anarcho-syndicalism. In a fragment entitled “Ministry of the Interior”, he will examine two types of political behaviour: first, the

conservative politician and, second, the anarcho-socialist (Benjamin, *Imagens de Pensamento*[Thought-Images], 2004, p. 17].

Benjamin’s most important Marxist text, according to several of his commentators, is his essay on surrealism in 1929. Benjamin recognized in surrealism the revolutionary charge it carried. For him, it was hatred of the bourgeoisie “that pushed the surrealists to the left” (Benjamin, *Essays on Literature*, 2016, p. 302). And he adds, in the same text, that Since Bakunin, no radical concept of freedom has existed in Europe. The surrealists do have it. They are the first to deliver the coup de grace to the ideal of liberal freedom, hooked by humanist morality (Benjamin, *Ensaio sobre Literatura*[Essays on Literature],2016, p. 306).

For Benjamin, it was about:

Putting the forces of inebriation at the service of the revolution (...) this is its most authentic task. And it is not enough for him to know that every revolutionary act has a component of inebriation. This task is identified with that of anarchism (*Ibid.*).

Löwy adds that:

Surrealism is the most impressive and fascinating example of a romantic current in the 20th century. (...) It is also the one that most radically embodied the revolutionary dimension of romanticism (Löwy, *Charge explosive*, 2004, p. 192).

The opposition of the surrealist movement to modern capitalist civilization was radical. And Benjamin understood this revolutionary charge of surrealism very well, choosing as one of its fundamental authors the surrealist Pierre Naville, who preached the organization of pessimism as one of the concepts of revolution (Naville, 1975), opposing it to the optimistic spirit of social democracy:

And what is the treasure of images of these poets of social democratic society, their *gradus ad parnassum*? Optimism. The air that is breathed in Naville’s writing, which places the “organization of pessimism” on the order of the day, is quite different. (Benjamin, *Essays on Literature*, 2016, p. 308).

And what does it mean to “organize pessimism”? It means “overthrowing the intellectual hegemony of the bourgeoisie and establishing contact with the proletarian masses” (*Ibid*, p. 309), that is, opening the space for revolution and transforming it into an active demand.

If Benjamin recognizes the revolutionary force and explosive charge of surrealism, from 1929 onwards, in his later writings his anarchism will disappear. However, according to Löwy, quoting editor Rolf Tiedemann, his texts can be read as a palimpsest where anarchism is present (Löwy, *La révolution est le frein d’urgence*, 2019, p. 79).

Benjamin’s theory of history, in its revolutionary nature, owes simultaneously to surrealism and anarchism, and the revolution does not correspond to the culmination of

historical evolution – the so-called “progress” – but, instead, to a radical interruption “of the historical continuity of domination”² (*Ibid*, 82), as we shall see. As Walter Benjamin states in Thesis XV, “The consciousness of exploding the continuum of history is peculiar to the revolutionary classes in the moment of their action.” (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 2005, p. 18).

Reading *On the Concept of History* and his philosophy of history³ allow us to list the aspects of his idea of revolution, based on three fundamental axes: German romanticism, Jewish messianism and dialectical materialism. As mentioned above, this is not a synthesis of these three perspectives, which are incompatible in their appearance, but rather a “reinvention”, based on these three axes, of a new, profoundly original conception. The different currents of thought, the various authors mentioned by him, and the writings of his friends are materials with which Benjamin weaves a very peculiar texture, elements with which he operates a fusion. If we cannot speak of a theory of history, in a systematic sense, we can, however, refer to its fragmentary aspect. Benjamin’s inflection towards the romantic tradition in the attack against the ideology of progress is not done in the name of conservatism, but in the name of revolution, as we mentioned at the beginning. A testimony of this is his text “The Life of Students”, which anticipates (in 1914) the ideas that he will pursue throughout his life. The real questions facing society are not technical problems, but metaphysical questions in which historical temporality (qualitative rather than quantitative) is essential. The conception of messianic time is opposed to the physical-mathematical conception, infinite time, which is precisely the foundation/framework of the idea of history as infinite progress.

The distinction between the historical vision, from the point of view of progress and the judeo-messianic point of view, certainly results from the very conception of temporality that is intrinsic to them.⁴ The simultaneous presence, in Benjamin’s thought, of a “deconstruction” of history from

2 Walter Benjamin recurrently speaks of revolution as the interruption of continuous history, in the *Book at Passages* and also in “About History”, citing it as the interruption of catastrophe, which is precisely the vision of history as continuous progress. It is about breaking with this vision and restoring justice to history’s losers.

3 I also emphasize the texts of the *Book at Passages*, namely the Letter N.

4 *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 1, “Trauerspiel und Tragödie”, p. 133-137. In this text, Benjamin clearly distinguishes the two types of conception and temporality that underlie them, stating that the time that supports his conception of history is not reducible to the time of mechanics, rejecting the mathematical and homogeneous view of temporality as a support for history. The idea of complete time, according to Benjamin, “is the historical idea that dominates in the Bible and has a name: messianic time.”

the point of view of progress, parallel to the construction of a new perspective where time appears as “full time” is something that is also clearly drawn in *The Metaphysics of Youth [Metaphysic der Jugend]*.⁵ This text, written between the end of 1913 and the beginning of 1914, contains as essential elements a messianic conception of time and the outline of a vision of language that will be developed later in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”. This messianic, utopian and revolutionary ferment will be articulated with the reading of Luckács’ essay,⁶ “the most accomplished of the works of Marxist literature” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften III*, 1972, p. 171). This text, where Benjamin also speaks of the maturity of the revolution and the completion of theoretical knowledge of Marxism, shows the aspect of Marxism that interests him most: class struggle. However, historical materialism does not replace his anti-progressive intuitions of romantic and messianic inspiration, it will articulate with them. For this reason, we can say that this critical view differs from the official and dominant Marxism of his time. That is why Benjamin’s conception “is a singular and unique view in Marxist thought and in the European left between the two wars” (Münster, 1996, p. 64).

This articulation is shown for the first time in his book *One Way Street*, which contains, under the title “Fire Alarm”, this historical premonition of the threats of progress:

And if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed by 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. (Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other writings*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, p. 80.)

Contrary to the vulgar evolutionary Marxism (of certain texts by Marx and Engels), Benjamin does not conceive of revolution as the inevitable result of economic and technical progress, but as the interruption of a historical evolution that leads to catastrophe. And as we have seen it is precisely because he perceives this catastrophic danger that he claims to be a pessimist. However, this pessimism is not conservative and accepting, as is the case of the German pessimistic culture (such as Carl Schmitt or Spengler), but one that serves the oppressed classes. Benjamin’s concern is not the “decline” of the elites or the nation, but rather the threats that progress (promoted by capitalism) poses to humanity from a technical and economic point of view.

The text on surrealism also reveals Benjamin’s attraction to what he considers to be a modern manifestation of revolutionary romanticism. The romantic protest against capitalist modernity is always carried out in the name of an idealized past, whether real or mythical. What then is the past that Marxist Walter Benjamin uses as a reference

5 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, p. 91-104.

6 *History and Class Consciousness*.

in his critique of progress? If in the earliest and theological writings of his youth it is always the question of a lost paradise, in the 1930s, however, it is primitive communism that plays this role. Benjamin's 1935 text on Bachofen is, according to Michael Löwy, "one of the most important keys to understanding his method of building a new philosophy of history from Marxism and Romanticism" (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d'incendie*, 2018, p. 31). Bachofen's work, going to romantic sources, fascinated both Marxists and anarchists for its "suggestion of a communist society at the dawn of history" (Benjamin, *O Anjo da História*[The Angel of History], 2010, p. 80). In this text, Benjamin refutes the conservative (Klages) and fascist (Bäumler) interpretations to say that Bachofen's work nurtured Elisée Reclus' "libertarian ideal" (*Ibidem*, p. 90).

Also in Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire, he interprets the "previous life" evoked by the poet as a reference to a primitive and Edenic age, a time and space in which authentic experience [*Erfahrung*] still existed (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire, un Poète Lyrique à l'Apogée du Capitalisme*, 1982, p. 189, 191). Here, Benjamin refers to Baudelaire's poem "Correspondences": "The 'correspondences' are the data of recollection. Not data from history, but from prehistory. What makes the feast days great and important is that they allow the encounter with a 'previous life'" (*Ibid.*). The time of the "previous life" is a time that is opposed to that of modernity, emptied of its meaning. Therefore, Benjamin calls this, that of modernity, the time of the lived experience of shock.

It is mainly between 1936-40 that Benjamin will develop his view of history, in the sense that he takes it as "history against the grain" (Benjamin, *O Anjo da História*, 2010, p. 13), criticizing more and more radically "the illusions of progress" within the thinking of the German and European left. In the text about Eduard Fuchs (Benjamin, *O Anjo da História*, 2010, p. 107-144), written in 1937, some passages already prefigure the 1940 Theses.

Describing Fuchs as the example of a dialectical materialist collector and historian (Benjamin, *O Anjo da História*, 2010, p. 107), Benjamin in this text radically criticizes social-democratic Marxism, mixed with positivism, Darwinian evolutionism and the cult of progress. The forces of progress were highly destructive because they mainly fed the technique of war and its propagandistic preparation (Benjamin, *Ibid.*, p. 117). Benjamin's aim is precisely to deepen and radicalize the opposition between Marxism and the bourgeois philosophies of history, to intensify their revolutionary charge. This spirit is also what fuels the ambition of the *Book at Passages* project:

The possibility of a historical materialism that has itself annihilated the idea of progress can also be considered as an objective methodologically pursued in this work. It is precisely in opposition to the habits of bourgeois thought that historical materialism finds its sources (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, 1982, p. 574).

What Benjamin proposed was a return to Marx himself, being convinced that his reading of Marx "had its roots in the romantic critique of industrial civilization" (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d'incendie*, 2018, p. 34), but he himself was convinced that Marx's sources were the same.⁷ Benjamin's Marxism was also far from Stalin's and closer to that of Trotsky, whom he admired,⁸ as can be seen in his correspondence, in a letter to Gretel Adorno in 1932 (Benjamin, *Briefe II*, 1993, p. 553). During the 1930s, namely after Hitler's rise to power, Benjamin always hoped that the USSR would remain an ally of the anti-fascists. However, the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact will completely disappoint him, because he realizes that the war against fascism is definitely lost.⁹ And it is precisely this great disappointment that will motivate the writing of "On the Concept of History", a fundamental text for understanding not only his philosophy of history, but also his idea of revolution. The first thesis introduces us immediately into the universe of his thought:

It is well-known that an automaton once existed, which was so constructed that it could counter any move of a chess-player with a counter-move, and thereby assure itself of victory in the match. A puppet in Turkish attire, water-pipe in mouth, sat before the chessboard, which rested on a broad table. Through a system of mirrors, the illusion was created that this table was transparent from all sides. In truth, a hunchbacked dwarf who was a master chess-player sat inside, controlling the hands of the puppet with strings. One can envision a corresponding object to this apparatus in philosophy. The puppet called "historical materialism" is always supposed to win. It can do this with no further ado against any opponent, so long as it employs the services of theology, which as everyone knows is small and ugly and must be kept out of sight. (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 2005).

Thesis I immediately announce the combination of theological materialism and messianism (theology), the context in which Benjamin's entire philosophy of history emerges. Without the help of that ugly little old theology, dialectical materialism could not win the chess match. And winning the match has a double meaning: on the one hand, it is to interpret history correctly and fight against the vision of the oppressors, on the other hand, it is to defeat the historical enemy itself, which is fascism (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d'incendie*, 2018, p. 52). These two purposes are inextricably linked, in an indissoluble unity between the theory and practice of history (*Ibid.*). Theology here is

7 Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, I, p. 820.

8 Cf. Enzo Traverso's text, in which the author discusses the relationship between the two: <https://www.contretemps.eu/walter-benjamin-trotsky-marxisme-traverso/>

9 Benjamin was one of the first German intellectuals to denounce fascism. In 1930 he published an article against the mystical cult of war in Ernst Jünger, entitled "Theories of German Fascism".

messianism, without which dialectical materialism could not win, nor revolution could triumph. And theology has to hide itself, in a rationalistic and incredulous age, in order to act within dialectical materialism. Theology thus appears at the heart of “profane” thought. But what does theology mean to Benjamin? It refers back to two fundamental concepts: the concept of remembrance [*Eingedenken*] and the concept of messianic redemption [*Erlösung*]. And these two concepts are the essential components that constitute the new concept of history that the Theses will build.

For Benjamin theology is not an end in itself, but it is instrumentalized in the service of the struggle of the oppressed, that is, in the service of the revolution. In thesis II (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 2005), the concept of redemption appears, associated with the idea of reparation, and it is collective reparation, Benjamin conceives of redemption as the historical remembrance of victims of the past. However, in remembrance the contemplation in conscience of past injustices is not enough, in Benjamin’s point of view. For redemption to take place it is necessary to repair [*tikkun*] the suffering of the defeated generations and fulfil the goals for which they struggled and failed. What is at stake is the fulfilment of social utopia. And Messianic (and revolutionary) redemption has been assigned to us as a task by past generations. There is no Messiah here sent from heaven.¹⁰We are the Messiah ourselves and each generation has a share of the messianic power, which it can and must exercise. The only possible Messiah is collective; it is humanity itself, oppressed humanity. It is not a question of waiting for the Messiah, but of acting collectively. “Redemption is a self-redemption, in which the profane equivalent can be found in Marx: men make their own history, the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d’incendie*, 2018, p. 67). Thus, messianic power is not merely contemplative, in which the gaze turns to the past (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 2005), but is also active: redemption is a revolutionary task that takes place in the present. “We have been expected upon this earth” (*Ibid.*) – not only to rescue the vanquished from oblivion, but also to finish their struggle, that is, the emancipation of the vanquished. It is an eminently political and ethical task at its highest level. In this sense, the violence of the prophetic tradition is combined with the radicalism of Marxist criticism (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d’incendie*, 2018, p. 69), in a demand for active transformation of the present.

Dialectical materialism is also present in the following theses. “In Benjamin, there is a dialectic of the material and the spiritual in the class struggle that goes beyond the mechanistic model of infrastructure and superstructure: the wager of struggle is material, but the motivation of social

10 Here, Benjamin approaches the Hasidic thought of Martin Buber, who says that God does not want redemption without the participation of humans. Cf. M. Buber, *Die Chassidische Bücher*, Schocken Verlag, Berlin, 1927, p XXIII, XXVI, XXVII.

actors is spiritual” (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d’incendie*, 2018, p. 77). If the struggle were not animated by certain moral qualities, the oppressed class would not know how to fight for their liberation. Benjamin refers to the qualities of confidence, cunning, humour, steadfastness and courage (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Thesis IV, 2005). The fundamental concept for him is not so much dialectical materialism in the abstract, but rather the class struggle which, with the aforementioned qualities, will “call every victory which has ever been won by the rulers into question” (*Ibid.*). It is the class struggle that allows the historian to understand the present, but also the past and the future, as well as their secret links, through the dialectical image.

If all Marxists allude to class struggle, few pay attention to it as Walter Benjamin does. What interests him is not the development of the productive forces, the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production, the various forms of state ownership, the evolution of these modes of production, which are fundamental themes in Marx’s work, but above all the struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed, the exploiters and the exploited, the dominators and the dominated. History appears to Benjamin as a succession of victories by the ruling classes over the ruled classes. This is the story of progress he seeks to abolish – a cumulative, evolutionary perspective, always on the side of the ruling classes. It is, therefore, against this history that Benjamin takes a stand, on the side of the defeated, insisting on the struggle of the revolutionary classes. Benjamin also takes a stand against a certain evolutionary conception of Marxism. The relationship between the present and the past is not one-sided, but rather a dialectical process in which the past is updated in the present by the dialectical image. And “Just as flowers turn their heads towards the sun, so too does that which has been turned, by virtue of a secret kind of heliotropism, towards the sun which is dawning in the sky of history.” (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Thesis IV, 2005).

In Thesis VI, Benjamin says: “To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’” (*Ibid.*). Rather, it means recognizing the dialectical images in which the Then meets the Now and history is written, thus, in a dialectical or figurative way:

An image, on the contrary, is that in which the Then meets the Now in a flash to form a constellation. In other words, the image is suspended dialectic. Because while the relationship between the present and the past is purely temporal, continuous, the relationship between Then and Now is dialectical.” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, 1982, p. 576, 577).

In Thesis VI Benjamin speaks of a danger. This danger, he says, “is one and the same: handing itself over as the tool of the ruling classes.” (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Thesis VI, 2005). For Benjamin it is a question of wrenching

tradition from conformism and maintaining (or saving) its subversive dimension in relation to the established order. The enemy that “never ceased to be victorious”, to which he refers at the end of this thesis, is precisely progress, which now has a new face: fascism. It represents, for the oppressed class, a “supreme danger” (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d’incendie*, 2018, p. 89), which is “the second death of the victims of the past and the massacre of all opponents of the regime” (*Ibid.*). Benjamin was unable to predict Auschwitz, but he was already aware of the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

In Thesis VII, we have the much-quoted expression of the mission of “brushing history against the grain” (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 2005). As we cannot analyse all the theses in *On the Concept of History* let us concentrate on the key moments of the theses and this is one of them. Brushing history against the grain is a formula that has not only a historiographical, but also a political charge. It expresses, by itself, the historian’s refusal to join the triumphal procession of the victors. As always in Benjamin, the expression “brushing history against the grain” has a double meaning; on the one hand, it is historical, as it contradicts the official version of history, opposing it to the tradition of the oppressed; on the other, it is political, as it tells us that redemption only belongs to the counter-current, for which it is necessary to fight. It is also in this thesis that the famous dialectic between barbarism and culture is presented: “There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism” (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 2005). This means to say that the great works of art and civilization, such as the pyramids or the wall of China, could not be made except at the expense of suffering and slavery. The historical materialist is the one who recognizes this and tries to restore justice to history’s losers, hence “brushing history against the grain”.

As already said, we cannot go into all of Benjamin’s theses, choosing those that allow us to better address the relationship between history and revolution, in the light of Benjamin’s concepts. Thesis IX is perhaps, among all, the one that is most read and commented upon, which is why it seems unavoidable to us.

This text has undoubtedly a prophetic dimension. His tragic warning – that of the helpless angel incapable of saving the dead and the rubble that accumulates before him – seems to anticipate Auschwitz and Hiroshima (Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 2005). “The rubble-heap before him grows sky-high”. “That which we call progress, is this storm”, Benjamin ends. This thesis summarizes this entire document. And it is presented as a commentary on a painting by Paul Klee, which Benjamin had had since his youth. Löwy sees in the construction of this thesis a deep relationship with Baudelaire (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d’incendie*, 2018, p. 117). What is the equivalent of this lost paradise that Benjamin tells us about? “Many signs suggest that Benjamin

is referring to a primitive classless society” (*Ibid*, p. 117). This light sheds on the reading of Thesis IX a dialectical materialist connotation that is not obvious. In the antipodes of paradise there is the damnation of hell. In “Zentralpark. Fragments on Baudelaire”, a text that has evident affinities with Thesis IX, Benjamin says: “It is necessary to base the concept of progress on the idea of catastrophe. May things continue to go like this, here is the catastrophe” (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire, un Poète Lyrique à l’Apogée du Capitalisme*, 1982, p. 242). Therefore, the heaping of ruins to the sky represents the vision of unstoppable catastrophe or progress. It is up to the materialist historian to stop this infernal process, establishing a saving rupture. The ruins spoken of here are not an object of aesthetic contemplation, in the romantic way, but rather an impressive image of the catastrophes, massacres and similar of history. According to Löwy, Benjamin’s process consists in trying to invert Hegel’s view of history (Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: avertissement d’incendie*, 2018, p. 121), demystifying the history of progress. “Why designate Progress as a storm?” (*Ibid*, p. 21). The origin of the term in Benjamin goes back to the Bible, evoking the deluge, or the firestorm that befell Sodom and Gomorrah.

How to stop this storm or stop Progress in its fatal course? Benjamin’s answer is twofold: on the one hand it is religious, on the other hand it is profane. In the sphere of theology, this task belongs to the Messiah. Its profane counterpart is the Revolution. It is thus a messianic and revolutionary interruption of Progress. Benjamin says:

Marx had said that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But it could be that things are different. It may be that revolutions are the act, for humanity traveling on the train, of pulling on the emergency brake” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 3, 1972, p. 1232).

This suggests that if humanity allows the train to go on its way, and if no one comes to halt its dizzying course, it will fall into catastrophe and into the abyss. Stopping Progress in its dizzying course is to save history from catastrophe. Now, this is the revolutionary/messianic gesture par excellence, which belongs to the materialist historian.

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