

## Walter Benjamin's Pessimistic Politics: Between Historicism and Postmodernism

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In his 1940 piece, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin fiercely criticizes the optimistic views that see human history as a story of progress by exposing them as a violent ideology whose persuasiveness lies in its reliance on a commonsense notion of linear, uniform time. To contest this view, Benjamin establishes an alternative understanding of time grounded in his own understanding of historical materialism, which treats historical events not as distant, dead facts but, instead, as constituting a unity with the present where we may find ourselves engaged in the same struggles as the victims of history did. The goal of this paper is to situate Benjamin's understanding of history in the context of historical materialism, historicism, and postmodernism to show the uniqueness of his position and to emphasize his consequent political relationship with history.

Benjamin's primary concern with progress narratives is political: He is worried about the way that these views produce negative results in various Leftist movements. In particular, he criticizes both party-Communism for its unwavering faith that the party is in tune with the science and direction of history and Social Democrats who have a similar faith that the workers are "moving with the current" of history which will slowly and steadily increase the status of the workers through a democratic process of reform.<sup>1</sup> While decolonial critiques in particular have generated greater skepticism about progress narratives since Benjamin's time,<sup>2</sup> many thinkers nonetheless retain their faith in Enlightenment optimism<sup>3</sup> and Social Democratic theory seems to be the guiding political principle for many on the Left today.<sup>4</sup> For Benjamin, the tenacity of this view is attributable to its reliance on a "commonsense" notion of time which has gone unquestioned.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 258. He argues that "Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims." He then goes on to describe three premises of this conception of progress: First, progress is pictured as "the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge)." Second, progress is "something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind." Third, progress is "regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course." Benjamin, "Theses," 260.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account and criticism of how the contemporary Frankfurt school problematically engaged in a defense of the idea of progress, see Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (London: Penguin Publishing, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Much of contemporary politics seems to be guided by Francis Fukuyama's claim that we are at the end of history. In other words, the course of history from here on out will not be marked by radical ruptures generated by revolution, but by a slow process of reforming and perfecting liberal democracy. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> "The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself." Benjamin, "Theses," 261.

In progressive views, time is thought of as a container, within which each temporal moment contains its own isolated set of events and each preceding the next. This time is uniform, measurable, and linear – each temporal moment is distinct. This conception of time lends itself to the idea of history as a semi-objective science of describing what events occupied each of those temporal moments in sequence. Thus, history is about accurately representing the events that really happened, laying out the specimens in chronological order. This means taking an unbiased approach to history and chronicling the data disinterestedly and objectively. When viewed as a continuum, one can construct a general narrative of progress. Despite various periods of decline or violence, when one views the entire narrative of human history, one can see history as a slow march from barbarism to modern civilization in all its glory.

Interestingly, while criticizing these progress narratives, Benjamin simultaneously criticizes another view of history that often rejects notions of progress: historicism. This view, while not committed to progress, is committed to the view of time described above, especially the notion that history should be interpreted as a particular sort of objective science.<sup>6</sup> As H.D. Kittsteiner notes, historicism came onto the scene at nearly the same time as Karl Marx introduced historical materialism in the mid-nineteenth century in response to G.W.F. Hegel's idealist evolutionary theory of history,<sup>7</sup> yet historicists like Leopold von Ranke took a different approach from those in the Marxist tradition. Ranke argued for a depoliticized, objective evaluation of history where the historian disinterestedly chronicles the events of the past, removing as much of themselves as possible.<sup>8</sup> Opposing narratives of progress that treat each stage of history as mere stepping stones to the greater present, Ranke sought to show the value of each moment of history by understanding it on its own terms, not according to our own "superior" standards.<sup>9</sup> While Ranke rejects progress narratives, Benjamin's insight is that he

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<sup>6</sup> Yi Wu describes what the various historicist figures that Benjamin discusses have in common: "The historicist repose in the confidence that 'the truth will not run away from us' (Gottfried Keller), its desire to recognize the past 'the way it really was' (Leopold von Ranke), or its fantasy to relive an era by blotting out everything the historian knows about the later course of history (Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges) - in all three, Benjamin spots the underlying identical view of the past: in the guise of a claim to temporal autonomy and a denial of any relation with the present, the historicist past actually conspires with the victorious or ideological present." Yi Wu, "The Historical and Its Discontents: Nietzsche and Benjamin Against 'Historicism,'" *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2020): 59.

<sup>7</sup> Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, Jonathan Monroe, and Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin's Historicism," *New German Critique*, no. 39 (1986): 182.

<sup>8</sup> "History has often been assigned the task of judging the past so as to teach one's contemporaries for the benefit of future years. The present work makes no such exalted claims; it wants only to show how things actually were." Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, quoted in Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, Jonathan Monroe, and Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin's Historicism," *New German Critique* 39 (1986): 180.

<sup>9</sup> "Should one want to suppose, in opposition to the view offered here, that progress resides in the higher potentiality of each age in the life of man, that each generation completely surpasses the preceding one, and that the latter is inevitably the most privileged, the previous ones being only the bearers of those that succeed them, this would be an injustice on God's part. Such, as it were, mediated generations would have no meaning in and of themselves; they would only have meaning as a stage preparing the way for the following generations and would not stand in an immediate relation to the divine. I maintain, however, that each era is immediate before God, and its worth does not at all depend on what follows from it, but on its own existence, its own self." Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen*

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relies on the same understanding of time in order to construct his theory of history. György Lukács describes it as a “quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable things.”<sup>10</sup> If there is progress for historicists, it is in the progress of knowledge slowly gained by filling up the empty homogenous container of time with data of what really happened at each moment.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin's critique of homogenous time is best introduced through his well-known discussion of the angel of history which depicts history as one great disaster rather than a story of progress.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin inverts the optimistic picture of progress, instead pessimistically describing history as a unified violent structure. The progressive view which isolates events from each other as discrete moments on the timeline is replaced with the view that the pile of corpses generated throughout history constitutes one single catastrophe. To recall Patrick Wolfe's remarks on settler-colonialism: Catastrophe is a structure, not an event.<sup>13</sup> Or, as Benjamin puts it, catastrophe “is not an ever-present possibility but what is in each case given.”<sup>14</sup> Narratives of human progress only make sense in light of the empty-container view of time in which temporal moments are discrete, such that we can compare one to another and say that our present moment is better. This view treats history as merely a series of dead facts that are at best related to the present only as part of an extended causal chain of events. Thus, while thinkers like Ranke may reject progress narratives, they nonetheless endorse the picture of time that makes progressive views possible. Benjamin's goal is to provide an alternative understanding of time which is incompatible with narratives of progress.

In contrast to the progressive, quasi-scientific view of history, Benjamin claims that “[h]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.”<sup>15</sup> The past's relationship with the present is far more intimate than distant events on a timeline. Benjamin's ideal historian, whom he calls the historical materialist,

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*der neueren Geschichte* (Darmstadt, 1965), 7, quoted in Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, Jonathan Monroe, and Irving Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin's Historicism,” *New German Critique* 39 (1986): 180-1.

<sup>10</sup> György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 89.

<sup>11</sup> As J. B. Bury puts it: “[T]he idea of the future development of man...furnishes...the justification of much of the laborious historical work that has been done and is being done today...This work, the hewing of wood and the drawing of water, has to be done in faith – in the faith that a complete assemblage of the smallest facts of human history will tell in the end. The labour is performed for posterity – for remote posterity.” J. B. Bury, “The Science of History,” in *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 219.

<sup>12</sup> “This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” Benjamin, “Theses,” 257-8.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 38.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 473. In this sense, Benjamin also differs from a *regressive* view of human history which sees humanity as perpetually falling away from the perfection of noble, primitive societies. The catastrophe is a structure, not a constant falling away. The regressive view, adopted predominantly by conservatives and traditionalists, still relies on the same notion of time as the progressive view.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 261.

sees history as a monad: a sort of unity between past and present in which “he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” in one great catastrophe.<sup>16</sup> This involves seeing current struggles against oppression as involved in the same struggle as generations prior. He points to the early twentieth-century Spartacist group in Germany as a group that realized this relationship with history.<sup>17</sup> The name invokes solidarity: their struggles against Germany’s pro-war policy in World War I are seen in unity with the slave rebellions in Rome. The injustices of the past are not simply related to current forms of violence in a sort of distant, causal relationship; they are the *same* struggle against a history of domination of one group by another. Benjamin claims that “[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory that flashes up at a moment of danger.”<sup>18</sup> The past is not something to be viewed as a distant object, but as something that seizes us in moments of struggle and danger, just as the memory of Spartacus seized the anti-war Germans or the memory of Emiliano Zapata inspired fighters for the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico in 1994.<sup>19</sup> These victims and revolutionaries represent unfulfilled hopes and unfinished revolutionary demands. Benjamin warns of a threat that the past will “disappear irretrievably” when these memories are relegated to a distant, frozen past that does not make political demands on us today.<sup>20</sup>

The consequences of this view can be seen in the pessimistic view that the historical materialist has towards cultural treasures.<sup>21</sup> For Benjamin, by viewing the past according to its own standards without judgment, historicism unknowingly expresses empathy with the victors and the ruling class.<sup>22</sup> Where the optimist sees grand buildings, statues, and technological marvels the pessimist sees stolen land, exploited labor, and primitive accumulation. These achievements, often attributed to great leaders named in history textbooks, are in fact the result of the anonymous toil of countless exploited laborers unrecognized by universal history. The

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 263.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of the example of the EZLN in relation to Benjamin’s thought, see Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History,’* trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso), 57, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 255.

<sup>21</sup> “For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.” Benjamin, “Theses,” 256-7.

<sup>22</sup> “The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.” Benjamin, “Theses,” 256. Shoshana Felman helpfully explains Benjamin’s argument: “Because official history is based on the perspective of the victor, the voice with which it speaks authoritatively is *deafening*; it makes us unaware of the fact that there remains in history a claim, a discourse that we *do not hear*. And in relation to this act of deafening, the rulers of the moment are the heirs of the rulers of the past. History transmits, ironically enough, a legacy of deafness in which historicists unwittingly share.” Shoshana Felman, “Benjamin’s Silence,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 210.

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progressive is willing to dissociate the treasure from violence: while the genocidal stealing of land was evil (though for Ranke who rejects imposing the present on the past, perhaps only so according to our modern standards, not the standards at the time), that was a long time ago and has no bearing on that land today. The historical materialist cannot make this dissociation but should, instead, view the past and the present as a monad materially embodied in cultural treasures. Stolen land does not become dissociated from violence and barbarism simply by virtue of temporal distance from the event of stealing.<sup>23</sup>

While historicism still has some grip on history as a discipline,<sup>24</sup> many of Benjamin's worries about progress narratives, universal history, and historical objectivity have become common assumptions in a world after the "linguistic turn," permeated by ideas of post-structuralism and postmodernism.<sup>25</sup> The previous few decades have seen the rejection of modernist ideas of objective knowledge and master narratives in history, instead embracing the idea that any historical work is equally a work of literature and involves the writer's own situation, problematizing Ranke's unbiased approach.<sup>26</sup> Many consequent practices seem aligned with what Benjamin calls the "tradition of the oppressed" which seeks to "brush history against the grain":<sup>27</sup> the multiplying of universal History into various histories, the emphasis on counter-histories from oppressed groups, and the increasing amount of literature focusing on memory since the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> This work is aligned with Benjamin's insight that history must operate on a "constructive principle" rather than a merely "additive" understanding of historical knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The progressive view of time insidiously suggests that stolen land does dissociate from violence in the past. Operating on a metaphor for spatial distance, the linear view of time suggests that distance from violence happens as one moves progressively farther away from the origin. The optimistic view of time also suggests that as one moves forward in time, one moves naturally closer to perfection. Time heals all wounds, as if time itself had natural regenerative properties in one direction.

<sup>24</sup> As Nancy Partner writes, "For all the sophistication of the theory-saturated part of the profession, scholars in all the relevant disciplines that contribute to or depend on historical information carry on in all essential ways as though nothing had changed since Ranke, or Gibbon for that matter; as though invisible guardian angels of epistemology would always spread protecting wings over facts, past reality, true accounts, and authentic versions; as though the highly defensible, if not quite the definitive, version would always be available when we really needed it." Nancy Partner, "Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions," in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 22.

<sup>25</sup> "The turn to narrative in historiographical discussions in the United States coincided with the question of history by Roald Barthes, and the assault on 'grand' or 'master' narratives by post-structuralist thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, who would ultimately define postmodernism as the repudiation of master in favor of local narratives and stories, and draw attention to the gaps and fissures in narratives as a better way of getting at the truth of the past than what the documentary evidence provided." Arif Dirlik, "Whither history? Encounters with historicism, postmodernism, postcolonialism," *Futures* 34 (2002): 81.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Vann argues that by the mid-seventies "something like a paradigmatic shift had occurred; for the next twenty years historians' language, not explanation or causality, would be *the* topic around which most reflections on history would centre." Richard Vann, "Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and History and Theory, 1960-1975," in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 65.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, "Theses," 257.

<sup>28</sup> For an account of the proliferation of memory literature, see Dirlik, "Whither history," 83-4.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin, "Theses," 262. As Arlif Dirlik puts it, "Constructivism in history is here to stay." Dirlik, "Whither history," 88. Vanessa Schwartz reads Benjamin as a precursor to many modern views of history: "We are thus incapable of showing 'how things really were' but instead create a dialogue between the past and present that

Yet, while Benjamin was equally critical of historicism as many postmodernists, his connection to postmodern historiography is merely superficial. Like Benjamin, postmodernism argues for the impossibility of seeing history “as it really was,” instead claiming that we always impose our own modern outlook onto the past; the interpretation of the past is always colored by the present. While this is absolutely true for Benjamin,<sup>30</sup> as Slavoj Žižek notes, Benjamin’s insight is more radical: “[W]hat the proper historical stance... ‘relativizes’ is not the past (always distorted by our present point of view) but, paradoxically, the present itself.”<sup>31</sup> The crux of Benjamin’s argument is less about how the present acts on and reinterprets the past, and more about how the victims of the past (more undead than dead) can flash up in moments of crisis to present new possibilities for political action in the present. Benjamin’s main focus is not the epistemic debate on whether our versions of the past are objective or relative, but to reject the approach to history as a series of dead facts, instead making history into an ethical-political practice.<sup>32</sup> The core of Benjamin’s pessimistic politics lies in the fact that if there is hope for better days to come, that hope will not be ignited by optimistically imagining the future,<sup>33</sup> but by confronting the past in all its violence and horror and hearing the demands placed on us today.

When Benjamin writes that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins,”<sup>34</sup> it is easy to misunderstand him as Max Horkheimer does: “Past injustice has occurred and is

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establishes a usable version of history. Even Benjamin's notion that ‘to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event’ can be integrated into a seemingly ordinary sense of the historian's method by which the grain of sand becomes the means to understanding the desert—the sort of signature of such genres as microhistory. While these statements about history suggest that Benjamin may have been ahead of his time, historical discourse has at least caught up with him by now.” Vanessa R. Schwartz, “Walter Benjamin for Historians,” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (2001): 1738-39. In the following pages, she directly connects Benjamin to notions of “postmodern historiography,” which are found in Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin approvingly quotes Grillparzer in *The Arcades Project*: “‘To read into the future is difficult, but to see *purely* into the past is more difficult still, I say *purely*, that is, without involving in this retrospective glance anything that has taken place in the meantime.’ The ‘purity’ of the gaze is not just difficult but impossible to attain.” Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 470.

<sup>31</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for* (New York: Verso, 2000), 90.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin quotes Friedrich Nietzsche: “We need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it.” Benjamin, “Theses,” 260.

<sup>33</sup> “For what is the program of the bourgeois parties? A bad poem on springtime, filled to bursting with metaphors. The socialist sees that ‘finer future of our children and grandchildren’ in a condition in which all act ‘as if they were angels,’ and everyone has as much ‘as if he were rich,’ and everyone lives ‘as if he were free.’ Of angels, wealth, freedom, not a trace. These are mere images. And the stock imagery of these poets of the social-democratic associations? Their *gradus ad parnassum*? Optimism.” Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 190. In this 1929 paper, Benjamin is primarily concerned with the question of how to politically organize pessimism in a way that avoids both future-oriented optimism and apolitical hopelessness. In “Theses,” he gives a story about how hope comes about for the pessimist through the tragedy and failure of the past. It is a hope which begins not in an image of a better future, but simply in the recognition that the oppressed of the past make demands on the present. He sees the visions, demands, and hopes of the past as making a claim on us today and thereby endowing us “with a *weak* Messianic power.” Benjamin, “Theses,” 254.

<sup>34</sup> “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that

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completed. The slain are really slain...the injustice, the horror, the sufferings of the past are irreparable.”<sup>35</sup> Of course, for Benjamin, it is trivially true that the slain are slain – his position is not, as some Frankfurt school critics have read him,<sup>36</sup> arguing that the violence of the past can be undone. Nonetheless, Benjamin claims that history understood as remembrance can make incomplete what history understood as science has rendered complete.<sup>37</sup> His point is not that we can undo the past, but we can render it incomplete. The proper approach to the past, for Benjamin, is *not* to treat its horrors as mere objects of endless mourning and commemoration. Doing so commodifies history, merely treating the past as an aesthetic object, like a sad movie, rather than something that makes demands on us now. We can see the possibility of justice, of breathing life into what was thought to be buried, in those fleeting moments when the past “flashes up at a moment of danger,” where the unfulfilled demands of the past unite with our present struggles. In this moment, we see the past injustices and our current struggle as unified fights in one single catastrophe rather than as isolated, temporally distant events. For Benjamin, history as remembrance means something much more than simply reading untold stories about the anonymous victims of history, commemorating the victims in memorials, or generating counter-histories.<sup>38</sup>

Despite his similar criticisms of historicism, in contrast to postmodernism's relativism and opposition to totalizing history, Benjamin emphasizes that there is a *true* history that flashes up in a moment of danger,<sup>39</sup> that “the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge,”<sup>40</sup> and through his idea of understanding history as a monadic structure, he

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historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.” Benjamin, “Theses,” 255.

<sup>35</sup> The unpublished letter is referenced by Benjamin in *Arcades Project*, 471.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin's understanding of redemption is neither a magical reparative process which undoes the violence done to the victims of history, nor is it a return to a paradise before the violent storm of progress. This idea is often misunderstood by thinkers in the Frankfurt school. For instance, Axel Honneth criticizes Benjamin for providing an unsuccessful model of reparations based on a moral debt to the past when he argues that those who are dead can never be resurrected as “interacting participants in a moral community.” Axel, Honneth, “A Communicative Disclosure of the Past: On the Relation between Anthropology and Philosophy of History in Walter Benjamin,” *New Formations* 20, (1993): 92. Sami Khatib notes a more charitable but equally incorrect reading popularized by Adorno: “The powerful image of the *Angelus Novus*, however suggestive, should not be confused with a melancholic sentiment, a gaze at a lost past – an interpretation that rather stems from Benjamin's close friend Theodor W. Adorno's reading rather than from Benjamin himself.” Sami Khatib, “Walter Benjamin, Karl Marx, and the Specter of the Messianic: Is There a Materialist Politics in Remembrance?” *Recordando a Walter Benjamin: Justicia, Historia y Verdad. Escrituras de la Memoria* (2010): 3.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 471.

<sup>38</sup> Although he does emphasize the importance of these practices, Benjamin should not be reduced to an endorsement of these practices as his primary contribution to the philosophy of history. “Consequently, to address the problem of history, it will neither be sufficient to simply acknowledge the injustices nor to remember and give voice to those who have been silenced in the past; for such efforts can also transform into another form of ‘enshrined heritage,’ even if it calls itself the revolutionary tradition of the oppressed. Rather, the study of history be, for every generation, a constat attempt at wresting tradition from the conformism that perpetually threatens it.” Preciosa Regina Ang de Joya, “A Vision of Hell: Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* and the Catastrophe of Progress,” *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2014): 45.

<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Benjamin's notion of true historical knowledge, see Sami Katib, “Walter Benjamin, Karl Marx, and the Specter of the Messianic,” 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 260.

emphasizes the structuralist insight that individual events must be understood in terms of their broader historical, social structure. In his story of the angel of history, he emphasizes the need to see history as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage,”<sup>41</sup> which goes against postmodern tendencies to reject master narratives and treat individual events in their singularity.<sup>42</sup> Arif Dirlik argues that, while the postmodern revolution in historiography had liberatory aims of democratizing history, it has led to some disastrous results in the commodification of history, for instance, when Disney planned to build an American history theme park in Virginia and argued that it had just as much of right to construct history as the historians.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, Dirlik claims that the problem with postmodernism is the “loss of a vision of the future,”<sup>44</sup> whereas Benjamin argues it is a distorted commodified vision of the past. Benjamin’s pessimistic politics primarily orients political action around the violence of the past and the demands it generates rather than optimistic visions of the future. When a group becomes detached from real, concrete history, its revolutionary potential is neutered.<sup>45</sup> Real injustices which we can point to, along with names of really existing victims, are capable of generating revolutionary affect in the present – unfulfilled utopian hopes of the past shape the way that present struggles understand themselves. The orientation towards the future replaces this with an abstract utopia grounded in principles and talk of “humanity” without any talk of real persons. Thus, Benjamin differentiates his vision of revolution from Marx: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train — namely, the human race — to activate the emergency brake.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 257. This is closely related to his reading of Marx in which the proletariat is not just one oppressed class among others, but the class which may finally overturn the entire course of history which up until now has been a story of domination of one group by another in various forms. As he puts it, “Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden.” Benjamin, “Theses,” 260.

<sup>42</sup> For a detailed account of the anti-totalizing postmodern approach to history in literary criticism, especially in the work of Stephen Greenblatt and the New Historicists, see Sarah Maza, “Stephen Greenblatt, New Historicism, and Cultural History, or, What We Talk About When We Talk About Interdisciplinarity,” *Modern Intellectual History* 1, no. 2 (2004): 249-265.

<sup>43</sup> Dirlik, “Whither history,” 86.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> “Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.” Benjamin, “Theses,” 260.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” in *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 402. Benjamin’s materialist revolutionary messianism can be contrasted with that of Jacques Derrida, who argues for an “undetermined messianic hope” or “a waiting without horizon of expectation.” Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 81, 211. This seems to be exactly the sort of view that Benjamin is criticizing when he claims that Social Democrats have turned politics into an “infinite task.” Benjamin, “Paralipomena,” 401.



## Walter Benjamin's Pessimistic Politics

To return to where we started, Benjamin's interest in time and history is first and foremost political. It is not a matter of writing different histories, but of changing our relationship to history. Benjamin's claim that history is a practice of remembrance can be misunderstood as a demand that we must build more monuments for victims or tell stories of more forgotten figures. But Benjamin's primary worry is that this still simply treats the past as an "enshrined heritage,"<sup>47</sup> a series of dead facts that have a "narcotic"<sup>48</sup> effect on action. The point is not that we need more histories, more facts which have been left out of universal History which can then become a different "enshrined heritage." The point is that we need a new relationship to history which, by viewing our present moment as part of a monadic constellation with the past, sees a series of demands and potentials that generate an active, revolutionary, and pessimistic (though never without hope) notion of history and politics.

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<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 473.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 863. "And here is where the real problem lies: that 'facts' do not make our blood boil; the past is an event of the past, it is 'over and done with.' We can therefore conclude that historicism's greatest disaster is that it used writing to effectively cut 'the sinews' of our greatest strength – a strength that feeds on the anger and suffering that can only be evoked not by disinterestedly contemplating the succession of past events but by remembering the image of our enslaved ancestors." Joya, "A Vision of Hell," 48.