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Benjamin's Political Philosophy of History

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The reflection on history seems a constant theme in Benjamin's thought. Since his early works to his last texts, this concern constitutes the conducting thread, which grants to his diverse work an underlying unity. For Benjamin, the fundamental question seems to be how to interweave "the theory of historiography with the theory of the real course of history," how "history itself is referred to its 'making'—political praxis," [Tiedemann 1983-4, 91] that is, how to generate a certain interrelationship between history and politics. This question refers us not to the nature of the historical process but to the way we acquired historical knowledge, not to historiography but to philosophy of history. Here the implicit issue is the construction of a new concept of history.

Benjamin draws his concept of history through three differentiated answers: In the first phase, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* (1916) and *The Task of the Translator* (1923), he propounds a theological paradigm of history. Later, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), he develops, concerning history, an aesthetics paradigm. And finally, starting from 1925-1926, which marks his Marxist turn, Benjamin steadily develops a political paradigm of history, which its clearer claim is *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940) and the theses *On the Concept of History* (1940). This work only deals with Benjamin's political paradigm, which is the synthesis of his historico-philosophical thought.

In thesis XVII, Benjamin distinguishes between a history, which "its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time," and another by virtue of which "thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad." [CH, thesis XVII, 396] Thus, in thesis I, Benjamin illustrates the relation between these the two models of history with the chess game between an automaton perfectly programmed to win, and a Turkish puppet moved by a little hunchback, cleverly camouflaged, which is an expert chess player. The puppet can win the chess game provided that it can use of

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something underestimated by enlightened reason, namely, a political-theological reason, that is why the latter is represented by a little hunchback clown hidden to avoid hurt the sensitivity of his contemporary fellowmen. To put it another way, Benjamin's analysis of history draws a distinction between two philosophies of history: on the one hand, a philosophy of history that refers to historicism (Enlightenment's idea of progress), and on the other hand, an "interruptive" philosophy of history (political messianism).

For Benjamin, the notion of the past turns into the keystone of all conception of history. We could think that the future might dissolve the priority of the present. But the future is really such, as a new radical possibility, when it becomes something else than just the continuity of the present. It seems that the future assumes the breakdown of the present, but the breakdown of the present is only a matter between the present and the past: "In order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant, there must be no continuity between them." [AP, 470, N7,7] Benjamin's concern is to dissipate the illusion of continuity in history, and that it is possible only if the past and the present are polarized, that is, if the past puts in critical condition the present. This is Benjamin's view of history as interruption of time, or in his own words, as "dialectics at a standstill." [Ibid., 463, N3,1]

Benjamin breaks, then, with the classical model of the philosophy of history, the theory of progress. Philosophy of history's idea of progress is a unilinear, homogeneous and continuous process capable of self-fulfillment. The telos of history is precisely this self-fulfillment. This immanent progress we could call it humanity, absolute spirit or communist realm of freedom. But all these abstractions reveals that for all modern philosophies of history what really counts are not the details of everyday life, but the history of events, not the individual destiny, but the history of the species. In other words, what constitutes the heart of these philosophies is not the historical subject, the man of flesh and blood, but the subject of history—the ultima ratio of history. The everyday life and the transient, the grief and the misery, are just temporaries—all that has no historical interest.

Thus Benjamin does not stop with an ideal model of progress that would identify the historical process with the endless process of history to self-realization. What Benjamin does not accept is the belief in progress as a kind of indefinite self-realization that determines almost automatically the evolution of mankind. Moreover, Benjamin splits up himself from this kind of history:

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The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself. [CH, thesis XIII, 394-5]

## 2.

In contrast to those philosophies of history, that usurp and devour the concept of utopia reducing it to a mere continuity of the present, Benjamin suggests the image of his Angelus Novus. The nature of that image force us to assess all the details, for all of them are loaded with meaning. The story goes like this:

There is a picture by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at 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 and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm. [Ibid., thesis IX, 392]

Two details call our attention: the eyes and the wings. The angel has his gaze turned back, toward the past. It is a gaze of horror, shaken, frightened by what he sees. What does he see? It is pertinent to stress that the angel does not see in history what we see. While he sees a catastrophe, a pile of debris that grows incessantly, what we see is a chain of events, with its logic and its explanation. The angel is set to fly for he has his wings opened. But here it is the significant, that he would like to stop but can't. In front of such misery, he would like to help; moreover, he would like to resuscitate the dead and to rebuild the many ruins. But he can't. The power of a stormy wind (progress), which comes from Paradise, does not let him close his wings but propels him forward, toward the future, a future that the angel turns his back on.

If we follow Benjamin's hermeneutic pathway, we discover a double view of history, the angel's and ours: What seems for us to be the logic of events, for the angel is pure catastrophe. Benjamin illustrates, then, the existence of two

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conflicting philosophies of history: the one, symbolized by the angel, and the other, symbolized by the storm. On the one hand, the storm, which is wind and spirit, refers to a conception of history as power and dominion. Thus enlightened man—the one fallen and expelled from Paradise—has hoped to gain with his own forces the happiness that he had once in Paradise by means of progress. On the other hand, the angel of history, as a good angel that he is, unveils his significance in a biblical mode. According to the Bible, there is only the past that paradoxically is what is before us, and the future is what we are turned away from, what is hidden behind our back. Nevertheless, Benjamin does not want to take comfort from this theological interpretation of history; and that is why his angel cannot find consolation by raising the dead or repairing the ruins. He also does not find consolation in the philosophy of history we take for granted, because he understands that so many sacrifices, past and present, cannot be understood as the price of the future. For the angel of history, the future is other, namely, the hopes brought from Paradise and maintained by tradition. But Benjamin does not think that an apparent tradition (the ideology of progress), which establishes continuity (historicism), can fulfill those unsatisfied hopes:

It may be that the continuity of tradition is mere semblance. But then precisely the persistence of this semblance provides it with continuity. [AP, 486, N19,1]

Benjamin claims for an authentic tradition, for he believes that all those hopes of happiness must pass on to philosophy—a disruptive philosophy. In this respect he writes: “It is the inherent tendency of dialectical experience to dissipate the semblance of eternal sameness, and even of repetition in history.”[Ibid., 473, N9,5] If philosophy takes charge, it is not to mechanically reproduce the same old answers, but to actualize and illuminate new questions.

Benjamin's specific point of view is to seek the future in the past. But, what is meant when he puts the hope in the past? Maybe the key is in Benjamin's claim about his angel of history “who preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them.”[Benjamin 1931, 456] Opposite to the philosophies of history whose abstract issues promise the happiness of men, Benjamin stresses the power of liberation of those who can have reasons for hope. The reasons of the oppressed who claimed their rights not settled, and those who have received the hope that the given—the past and present suffering and injustice—is not the last word. In this Benjaminian circle, the possibility of history is at stake.

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Benjamin opposes to the teleological principle that rationally determines the course of history the memory of men that relates liberation with the grasping of those voices of the past that claim justice. For Benjamin, liberation lies on receiving a gift—anamnesis—from those of the past—and the present—that have nothing. According to Benjamin “only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope.”[Benjamin 1919-22, 356]

However, if happiness is the liberation of chains, can we be happy remembering the chains of our ancestors? Can we be happy remembering the frustrated hopes of our ancestors? Is not this a condemnation to unhappiness? No. Hope does not arise from satisfied men but from unsatisfied ones. Only if the present generation makes the hopes of the past generations its own hopes, can it break the present, and hope something different from what already it is. In Benjamin's words:

There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. [CH, thesis II, 390]

Benjamin's language seems to us unintelligible and unacceptable, if we take a theological reading of it. Let us consider, to understand this thesis, Tiedemann's gloss on it: “Succeeding generations cannot simply ratify the fact that what has been lost (the loser's own praxis) has been lost for all time, and that the dead have no more access to any praxis, for another praxis is within reach,” [Tiedemann 1983-4, 79] that is, our own praxis “on which the past has a claim.” However, according to Mate, there is a philosophical translation, in ethical code, of Benjamin's theological reflections:

While the cause of the oppressed does not prevail, the victors of yesteryear would continue to produce victims, new victims. That entails the acknowledgment of solidarity between generations; the noble causes of the past generations make it possible to overcome the injustices that are committed against us. And they will not die again in vain if their cause would triumph in posterity. [Mate 1991, 215]

Benjamin, like his Angelus Novus, does not forget the face of the past. It is true that the angel's face seems terrified by what he sees, but at the same time he is trying to say that today those who lightheartedly speak of happiness do so because they do not dare to see the past. The modern victors see the past as the

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price of history we have to pay and leave it behind; the angel of history sees with horror the past, but wants to take charge of it. That is the difference.

### 3.

In Benjamin's view, the past that really matters is the one that is not present, the one that possesses "the spark of hope"—the liberating past. [CH, thesis VI, 391] He refers to that relegated, unknown past that "has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful," [Benjamin 1928, 166] although its precarious existence is bestowed by remembrance. Thus Benjamin's aim is to recover the potentiality of the unknown past: "the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been." [AP, 458, N1,9] Remembrance then is going to be the touchstone of the critique of historicism, and its alternative as anamnesis: "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was'. It means appropriating a memory." [CH, thesis VI, 391] Furthermore, that is why Benjamin faces the theories of progress and historicism, whose line of vision of the past is one that only continues the present. For the theories of progress, the past assumes the cost of the future; for historicism, the past is the substance of ideology that legitimates the present, and facilitates the reproduction of the past, that is, the relations of domination and power. But only a concept of history as remembrance can save the past from the fate of oblivion.

Benjamin grants the past a new meaning. He seeks for that past capable of shaking the actual structures, capable of stopping the trade of present happiness for past suffering, capable of stopping the reproduction of past misery and injustice. It is a special past, which must reveal a new dimension of history:

What science has "determined," remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. [AP, 471, N8,1]

While history can settle a past event, remembrance understands it as a pending matter. For instance, while history would shelve the case of victims who unjustly died for defending a good cause, only remembrance can open the file and recognize that there are pending rights because it understands that those rights can and must be settled. But, how? Benjamin recognizes that the question for the rights of the victims is a theological question: "in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological." [Ibid.] But nowadays a philosophical answer is necessary, not a theological one.

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However, Benjamin's philosophical answer is based on a structure of remembrance capable, first, to guarantee "the increasing concentration (integration) of reality," without leaving out of its angle of vision the deprived past, and second, with the potential to ignite "the materials that are latent in what has been." [Ibid., 392, K2,3] Here the issue consists "in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past," [Benjamin 1929, 210] whose nature Benjamin describes it as follows:

The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again. [...] For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image. [CH, thesis V, 390-1]

The past that Benjamin is interested in is, as hitherto, the unknown side of reality that could rise in the light of the present. We can discover this hidden past in the debris of history. Benjamin is not looking for what is most valuable: his gaze is fixed on the debris, on the insignificant. The pay off is an unknown light to discover the present. Here we must assume an emergent link between the historical subject who seeks to know the past, and the object of his attention, which tries to make itself present: "knowledge comes only in lightning flashes." [AP, 456, N1,1] There is a convergence between the instance of the object of knowledge (the past) and the momentum of the subject of knowledge (the present). In order to avoid mere tautology or reconstruction, as conventional historiography does, and to have the possibility to reach the unknown, the subject must be an unsatisfied man, a subject unsatisfied about what he knows of the present, because it throws him into a loss of his dignity and freedom, and consequently, to an alienated condition.

The relation established by Benjamin between the past and the present is really original. Whereas historicism goes from the present to the past, Benjamin comes to the present from the past. The change of direction is dialectical:

For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. [Ibid., 462, N2a,3]

Past makes its present appearance as an assault, interrupting the nowadays. Time is stopped, as the French revolutionaries wanted "to make the day stand still," [CH, thesis XV, 395] the same first day of the Revolution, shooting on



clocktower faces which strike the time that was not their time. The revolution irrupts in the relationship within which subject and object, present and past, meet in a historical perception:

Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in 'what has been,' and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal—the flash of awakened consciousness. [AP, 388, K1,2]

According to Benjamin, the historical consciousness must start with an awakening. This image of awakening is an inversion:

The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth [...]. Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance. [Ibid., 389, K1,3]

The image of awakening refers, then, to a dialectical inversion, a qualitative metamorphosis of consciousness: In the extreme limits of sleep, what seemed to belong to the realm of dreams is transformed into the real, while what we have taken as reality retrospectively turns out to be merely dream-like imagery. This is an essential moment of consciousness: What has been lived as reality loses its veil, and reveals itself as an illusion—awakening is a metaphor for demystification. For Benjamin, then, the historical consciousness of what-has-been, "its advancement has the structure of awakening" [Ibid., 389, K1,2]—political awakening. In this threshold of consciousness, precisely, "politics attains primacy over history." [Ibid., 388-9, K1,2]

#### 4.

Benjamin understands historical intelligibility not as the establishment of a causal connection between two events, but as the clash of a moment of the past and a moment of the present "in which time takes a stand and has become to a standstill." [CH, thesis XVI, 396] From this sudden clash does not rise any new scientific paradigm committed to discover the laws of history, but one based on a hermeneutic model which offers an interpretation of events; one that enlightens its meaning. From the clash between these events—not in a continuous sequence—arises, then, a new figure of thought, where the present enriches the past, and awakes the forgotten or repressed meaning within it, as the past recovers, in the very core of the present, a new actuality (remembrance). This



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clash of the present and the past functions according to the metaphor model, where the coincidence of two signifiers belonging to different semantic frameworks raises an absolutely new third signifier. Here present and past are not absorbed in a common concept; on the contrary, from their conjunction rises a new reality. This new reality takes the form of a “dialectical image.”

In Benjamin's thought the concept of “dialectical image” is loaded with historico-philosophical implications. But what is the logic of the “dialectical image” in Benjamin's political paradigm of history? This logic does not form a discursive system, but an instantaneous flash where the past is illuminated precisely at the moment of its disappearance into the present:

Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. [AP, 462-3, N3,1]

On the one hand, the dialectical image illuminates truth as historically fleeting: “The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability.” [Ibid., 473, N9,7] This fleeting image “is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it.” [Benjamin 1928, 31] For “truth [...] is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike.” [AP, 463, N3,2] Hence, truth is not a philosophical construction, but an immediate grasp of a dialectical image. The cognitive experience provided by it is a historical perception. This perception within a charged force field of past and present produces political electricity in “lightning flashes,” that is, generates a tension-filled constellation within this “nucleus of time” that becomes politically charged, dialectically polarized:

Every dialectically presented historical circumstance polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. [Ibid., 470, N7a,1]

On the other hand, the political nature of the articulation of these two moments of the past and the present is clearly showed in thesis VI: “Articulating the past historically [...] means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” This danger, writes Benjamin, “threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it.”[CH, thesis VI, 391] Benjamin understands by “those who inherit it,” the oppressed of history, those that are suddenly aware—through a historical consciousness-raising shock—of their “tradition,” the meaning of their hope, which is in danger of being forgotten. Here the awareness of danger has an ambiguous meaning: either “the spark of hope” is about to become extinguished or “the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode.” [Ibid., thesis XV, 395] However, the consciousness-raising shock is linked to political praxis; by virtue of which the subject of tradition recognizes the sign of “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”[Ibid., thesis XVII, 396] This means that there is a chance to introduce a revolutionary change into the present.

From this point on, history is constructed in a politically explosive “constellation of past and present,” as a “lightning flash” of truth. Thus hope is now historically “actual” in the sense that it is realizable—“time filled full by now-time (Jetztzeit).” Past and present overlap in a political possibility; they remain disconnected until political action explodes the continuum of history and blasts humanity out of it like “the tiger’s leap into the past [...] The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.”[Ibid., thesis XIV, 395] Political action is, then, the link between the past and the present. This link is possible because the history of the individual recapitulates that of mankind, as the “now-time, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation.” [Ibid., thesis XVIII, 396] The truth of history is verified by the historical subject’s experience. It is the unfulfilled potential for happiness of our own recollected past that give us insight into the possibility of the present. In other words, our experience of the past is the condition of our insight into the present historical time, as one that does not exhaust the potential of reality:

The idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. [Ibid., thesis II, 389-90]

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The subject of knowledge establishes the substance of the relation between the past and the present when he “grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time.”[Ibid., thesis XVIII A, 397] The Messianic time must be understood as a break in the course of history—the “time of the now” or interrupting time—and not its culmination, as a potential present that charges dialectical images in the consciousness of man with explosive power—in the political sense. At this point, Benjamin’s political paradigm of history turns into his political philosophy of history.

## 5.

What does Benjamin’s political philosophy of history involve? It is well-known Benjamin’s game of hide-and-seek in his philosophical texts. Yet what is hidden behind the veil of Benjamin’s theologico-philosophical language? A straightforward answer would be its political content. However, the answer to the question might be two-fold: One side of the answer concerns an epistemological key, that the true knowledge of history becomes self-knowledge of the historical subject, and the other side, concomitantly, concerns an ethical key.

First, the core of Benjamin’s political philosophy of history is a new concept of the present, and its end is “the subject of historical knowledge” For Benjamin, the subject of history is the “struggling, oppressed class.” The oppressed class becomes itself a subject of history, not by taking up arms, but by putting the stress on historical knowledge and itself. The subject of history is not given, on the contrary, it has to constitute itself as the depository and catalyst of historical knowledge. This process of constitution is nourished not from utopias—“the ideal of liberated grandchildren”—but from remembrances and experiences—“the image of enslaved ancestors.”[CH, thesis XII, 394]

The “struggling class” does not become a subject of history because of its place in the productive process, like Marx’s subject of revolution—the working class—but rather passing “through what has been, in order to experience the present,” [AP, 838, F°,6] that is, through the actualization (remembrance) of the past. Historical knowledge is an encounter between a subject that does not resign himself to the given as real—“timeless truth” [Ibid., 463, N33,2]—and an

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specific past as not present—“a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been”—between an unsatisfied subject and an unknown object.

The concept of necessity refers to an instance of dissociation between the subject and his historical situation. The answer, then, to that necessity is the actualization of the past that has not been realized; or to put it differently, by the apprehension of that forgotten past, the subject grasps his historical consciousness, a new consciousness of himself, for hitherto the subject has experienced necessity as a mere privation, not as a necessity to strive “for the oppressed past.” This is because historical “truth is not [...] a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike.” [Ibid., 463, N3,2]

Once the “struggling class” has grasped this knowledge and recognizes a sign of “a revolutionary chance,” then, it could change its present situation. However, its action would never be the same as Marx’s revolutionary class which constitutes its real power from its position in the productive system, rather it would be its weakness, its necessity. This necessity is double: on the one hand, the necessity of happiness—“the idea of redemption”—that it lacks, and on the other hand, the consciousness that the power to fulfill it comes from the past—“we have been endowed with a weak messianic power.”

According to Benjamin, there is only a subject of history if the candidate to accomplish the role is invested by a knowledge that is received from the past. This mediation of knowledge in the constitution of the subject of history seems to paralyze the subject’s action, but it does not because the motives for action—necessities and values—are never given before the constitution of the subject, who then—not before—assumes them as the goal of his political action.

Second, Benjamin’s political pathway seeks for something that is not given at the beginning of the process, but discovers the impulse that leads to the end—“remembrance.” Benjamin understands politics as the route from the beginning to the end due to ethics, or to put it differently, an ethical impulse drives the process. The task of politics is to take to its end, as much as possible, “what is good for men in general.” [Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b] Thus Benjamin conceives political action as “the adequate form of morally and philosophically decisive action.” [Radnoti 1991, 115]

Can we consider the universality of history without the past that is not present? Can we think about the universality of the present without “the

oppressed past"? With the notion of "remembrance" Benjamin reconciles ethics and politics in an original relationship:

History is [...] a form of remembrance. What science has "determined," remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. [AP, 471, N8,1]

In Benjamin's view, the ethical principle of universality is the un-subject (the oppressed man) that in the dialectical point of rupture (awakening) discovers himself as a needed and unsatisfied man: "the moment of awakening would be identical with the 'now of recognizability,' in which things put on their true [...] face." [Ibid., 463-4, N3a,3]. That is the impulse that drives the un-subject to abandon (dialectical negation) his inhumane condition. Impulse that charges itself with reason (ethical rationality) when he discovers the non-identity (dissociation) with the present, that is, the present privation of the subject's dignity and freedom.

Precisely, Benjamin's ethics turns into politics beginning with the critical moment of the oppressed man, when the un-subject is in tension to be a subject. This tension necessarily leads to a confrontation with the situation of injustice, oppression and suffering. In Benjamin, the un-subject, because of his in-humanity, becomes the subject. Un-subjectivity is the notion that defines the human condition. And it is by assuming that condition that man obtains his human condition. But in Benjamin, how is that access to the subject's condition produced? The answer is found starting from the recognition of the human condition, in the recognition of the other as our own condition. Since Benjamin claims the universality of the subject in its whole radicalness, it is possible to speak of political ethics.

## 6.

Benjamin's texts contain many passages concerning politics and ethics, but one searches in vain for a complete and elaborated political ethics. But any attempt to read Benjamin in such a way that the rudiments of these passages open one's understanding to an implicit political ethics must rely upon other approaches. Our starting point is Horkheimer's claim that "man's striving for happiness is to be recognized as a natural fact requiring no justification." [Horkheimer 1992, 44] In the same way, Benjamin also based the radical universality of human action on a verifiable fact. This factum is the experience of

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feelings such as rebelliousness, compassion or solidarity; feelings that express the ethico-political dimension of experience. In Horkheimer's words:

The life of most people is so wretched, the deprivations and humiliations are so many, and their efforts and success are for the most part so disproportionate, that we can easily understand the hope that the earthly order of things may not be the only real one. [Ibid., 1992, 23]

Benjamin understands this experience as solidarity, which emerges from the notion of remembrance, as the attitude that looks toward the other not because the power he holds—that feature admirable and admired by bourgeoisie society—but for his potentiality to develop happiness. Experience as solidarity is guided to the other's necessities and constraints. Thus the subject of experience sets his sights on the neediness and poverty of the present whose overcoming opens the way to hope, which is addressed to happiness—"the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption." We cannot understand this experience without the orientation toward the realization of mankind; orientation that rises from the privation of the present, from the misery and suffering that predominates in history. The experience of suffering is translated into a gesture of compassion to the other that is not resigned to his luck. This experience as solidarity is given as a vital necessity; no one questions its foundations or legitimacy: "All living beings have a claim to happiness for which it would not in the least ask any justification or grounds." [Horkheimer 1995, 34-5] Solidarity with the man forced to suffering and death is called compassion, a feeling that is inherent to man.

But experience as solidarity is rationally mediated: the other is worthy of compassion. We view the other not as a mere suffering object of a blind historical situation, but as a subject with his dignity offended and frustrated. He is recognized as an end in itself, and not as a mere means. That dignity through which the other reveals himself is the dignity that he justly demands. Therefore, compassion is the mediation between the particularity of that experience and the universality of human dignity.

Compassion is, then, the "moral sentiment" of an inter-subjective relationship, not a symmetrical one, but one rather in accordance with a real asymmetry. If we view this relationship as ideally symmetrical, the question is just to determine the object of compassion, the recipient of our compassion. Here it

is assumed that the ethical subject is already constituted. But the dignity that the other has, as the object of compassion, he really does not have it. What he has is a demand, a necessity, and a negation, as the subject of compassion. Here the emphasis is not put on the object, but on the subject. Thus the constitution of the ethical subject cannot be understood as a mere emanation of the self, but as an answer—an action—to the necessity of the other—a negation of the negation. The answer is directed toward the subject. In this manner, the action is not dissociated from the constitution, or recognition, of the ethical subject. Therefore, any universality that deals with the other as if he had dignity would just leave the other plunged in his disgrace, and the self that gets acquainted with the other could only abandon itself to the solace of the allegedly ethical possession.

How then is the ethical subject and his action constituted? In Benjamin, the starting point of the constitution of man as an ethical subject is the needed man, one making his cause our own as an ethical impulse, and the answer to the necessity of the other as a political action. The cry of the needed one—expression of suffering and injustice—is the universality of the answer to the actual misery. There is no ethical subject except as an impulse and answer to that demand. In the history of mankind, in which unhappiness constitutes a fundamental feature, a certain human reaction has become apparent: the experience of its negativity.

For Benjamin, ethics is politics. The ethical impulse is the content of the political ideals and values—freedom, equality and solidarity. Benjamin's concern is to bring compassion and politics into a dialectical relationship, one that manifests itself in transformations of one into the other and viceversa—a theological relationship in Benjamin's language.

Benjamin's political ethics starts not from a matter of reason but from the "history of suffering" and its negativity. This fact is that the man of flesh and blood suffers, is hungry, suffers from injustice; man is not seen as a subject deprived of his dignity, which belongs to him, but as an object of a blind historical situation. Because the other one does not yet have dignity, there can only be a relationship of solidarity, whose sense is not other but to actualize the demand of dignity. This sense of solidarity that necessarily goes with experience makes Benjamin's philosophy an ethical politics. This experience as solidarity is not merely satisfied with the Kantian imperative—which says just not to obstruct the other as an end in itself—but rather constrains us to remove the obstacles that limit the other so



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as to recover his dignity. That active attitude is what Benjamin understands as political action, that is, historical praxis.

The experience as solidarity is an intersubjective relationship: a) the other is not seen as a mere object worthy of compassion, but as a subject deprived of dignity, which belongs to him; and b) the self discovers itself also deprived of dignity and dependent on the other, that is, the self seeks the recognition from the other. Here appears the principle of recognition, a very important aspect of political ethics.

Here we clearly understand the recognition of the other by me, but what does it mean that the other recognizes me? Benjamin understands the relation between ethical subjects as an expression of a situation of injustice and misery that the other suffers, situation to which we are indissolubly bound up—"our coming was expected on earth." There is, then, an ethical relationship, where an ethical impulse occurs only when man professes his commitment to feelings of indignation, compassion, love, and solidarity. This means that we belong to a tradition, and we burden the history that the present displays, or in Mate's words:

But somebody is "expecting us:" he has been previous to us, but he had not stayed behind but has moved forwards. Who is that? The victims, the army of losers, all those that cannot have peaceful rest because they have been deprived of their dignity. If they wait for us is because they expect something in return, they have some pending rights that we must settle. [Mate 1991, 154]

In sum, Benjamin's conception of experience as solidarity is what gives ethical substance to politics, or to put it differently, it is a "political temporalization of experience" [Osborne 2000, 59] where the character of the present—its political "action-generating"—is determined by its relation to a specific past—its ethical impulse. Thus a specific idea of the past is the cause of the experience as solidarity—an "idea of the past, which is the concern of history." This is the dialectics that redefines political experience as solidarity, solidarity as politics, or political praxis as ethical actualization, ethical actualization as praxis.

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