

On Walter Benjamin's Historical Materialism

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Resumen: El objetivo de este trabajo es rastrear y articular el concepto de materialismo histórico, así como su relación con otros conceptos tales como política, teología y progreso, en los principales textos histórico-filosóficos de Benjamin. El marco teórico del trabajo es analítico-descriptivo.

Palabras clave: Materialismo histórico, política, teología, progreso.

Abstract: The aim of this work is to trace and formulate the concept of historical materialism, and its relationship with politics, theology and progress, in Benjamin's historical-philosophical texts. The work's theoretical framework is analytic-descriptive.

Key-words: Historical materialism, politics, theology, progress.

Walter Benjamin's theses *On the Concept of History* (1) promise a discussion on a new *concept* of history, and concomitantly on a new concept of the present. A characteristic of the text is that at the center of it there is no discursive explanation, but an *image* instead. Benjamin's concept of history seems to do away with philosophy's conceptual games, and transforms concepts into images, which spoil the promise of *truth* offered by philosophy of history. For Benjamin, the traditional concepts of history evaporated as he wrote the historical-philosophical theses. He could no longer be convinced that every historical event derives from a linear cause and effect relationship, and that all events together constitute a progressive, continuous motion. In thesis IX this appears as "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage," the "pile of debris" was so vast that it even "grows toward the sky." According to Benjamin, everything about history has been untimely, sorrowful and unsuccessful. History has collapsed into a "single catastrophe" in which the history of mankind has shown to be a failure. The basis for Benjamin's image of the pile of debris reaching to the sky, and the catastrophic concept of history in these theses, goes beyond concepts and phrases. For Benjamin, the stigma of philosophical language is that it does not extend to *mimesis* - remembrance. Only images attempt to gain direct access to *mimesis*.

The image of thesis IX presents history as Benjamin himself understood it, but we still have to grasp what he hides behind that image: "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." The image is an allegory of history as natural history. And the

angel stands for the “true” historian, the “historical materialist” who has stripped himself of all illusion about human history. In order to use the “*weak* messianic power” bestowed on us “like every generation that preceded us,” we must perceive history from a materialistic point of view, that is, history as the catastrophic pile of debris that continually “grows toward the sky.” The historical materialist understands the “claim” implicit in accepting this power: “a power on which the past has a claim” (thesis II). “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.” Here Benjamin seems to pave the way for the construction of a new “conception of the present as now-time” (thesis XVIII, A).

It is plausible to contend that Benjamin was aware of the explosiveness of historical materialism, which lay in the concept of the incompleteness of the past. In the theses, Benjamin refers to the “past” or “what has been” in general, and in some passages, to “past generations,” the “tradition of the oppressed”, and finally, to the dead and the smashed. Benjamin is not writing history, but developing a new “concept” of history.

No one more emphatically integrated the incompleteness of history into its completeness than Marx did. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (2) he wrote: “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” For past revolutions, there might have been some sense in “awaken the dead”, but for the revolution—that Marx thought was imminent— “in order to arrive at its own content” --its own identity-- it “must let the dead bury their dead.” In the same line of thinking, Horkheimer asserted: “The determination of incompleteness is idealistic if completeness is not comprised within it. Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain....” (See, Horkheimer’s letter of March 16, 1937). But Benjamin inveighs against this, and thus he holds his position in a celebrated passage from the *Arcades Project* (3):

History is not simply a science but also and not least a form a 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 [N8,1].

Succeeding generations cannot simply ratify the fact that what has been lost has been lost for all time, and that the dead have no more access to any *praxis*, for other *praxis* is within reach. Thus the history written by the historical materialist takes up a certain “idea of the past” as its cause.

If “the idea of redemption” is inherent to the “idea of happiness,” the same should hold true for the idea of the past. “The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption.” But Benjamin does not assign the task of redemption to a redeemer who is to intervene in history from the outside; he also maintains like Marx wrote, “men make their own history.” Benjamin thereby renders the past of history its completeness. “There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth.” Although all this may sound theological, it has a materialistic intent and content. It is the historical materialist who is “aware” that “the past has a claim” on us, and we will not

“settle” this claim “cheaply.” Benjamin does not depend on messianic promises: “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power.” That “messianic power” is an impulse, a promise that does not turn it into a fetish of what it promises.

How this power with which mankind is endowed is to be put to work? Benjamin does not treat this question in the theses. But he has no doubts about who is to put it to work - the historical materialist. In thesis II, Benjamin outlines the task of the historical materialist, and in thesis XVII, he describes the procedure. Benjamin first provides a summary of “materialistic historiography,” under which he subsumes his works: it “is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well.” The “movement of thoughts” seems to stand beside “their arrest.” This shows Benjamin’s characteristic form of philosophizing, which uses “dialectical images” to decode profane existence as the enigmatic form of something beyond existence. Benjamin also combined these ideas in the paradoxical formulation “dialectics at a standstill.” His insistence on the arrest of the flow of thoughts opposes Hegel’s dialectics. Benjamin does not seek to assimilate itself into the temporal course of history through understanding or intuition. The knowledge —exposed by the arrest of the movement— “flashes up at the moment of its recognizability” (thesis V):

Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a configuration saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallizes as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad (thesis XVII).

This representation is a construction that distills the rational shape out of the tensions of history. Benjamin’s method seems to be an optical change: the lenses in the historical camera have been replaced. In order to grasp the movement of history, the flow must come to a stop. It must crystallize into a shape and be constructed as something immediately present. Regarding the historical subject, Benjamin writes: “In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening.” By virtue of his “constructive principle,” by means of this “shock” which he gives to history, the historical materialist causes it to crystallize into a monad, bringing about the “arrest of happening.” Like Marx, Benjamin also recognizes the sign of “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past,” by virtue of this “messianic” arrest.

In other words, thesis XVII deals with the chance of historical materialism to gain possession of history as a unity subject-object, which crystallizes itself by means of an “arrest” into a monad. In thesis VI, this cessation is more precisely described as “a moment of danger”: historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past, which appears to man, single out by history at a moment of danger. This danger is the political one “of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.” Benjamin accepts the cause of the oppressed as his own: “Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it.” The “tradition”

becomes then a “tool of the ruling classes” if it is abandoned to “conformism,” and all that because under capitalism the social relations are determined in the same way as commodities. The task of the historical materialist is to wrest tradition away from the ruling classes. As an explanation of this task, thesis VI continues with this sentence: “The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the victor over of Antichrist.” The introduction of these theological concepts cannot disguise the fact that there is no thought in the religious sense. While the Messiah is an image for the historical materialist, the Antichrist is an image for the “ruling classes.”

Benjamin’s language in the historical-philosophical theses invokes anew the theological origin of Marxian concepts; the secularized content of these ideas is always maintained. The Messiah, redemption, the angel and the Antichrist appear in the theses as images, analogies and parables --not literally. Here the question is why Benjamin proceeds in this manner. Maybe, the metaphorical emphasis of Benjamin’s thought leads us to assume that he is playing a game. What then are the rules of this game?

On thesis I, Benjamin offers us an image and its interpretation as well:

There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game. A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf -- master at chess-- sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings.

But Benjamin adds to the interpretation of the image his own interpretation of the figures:

One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called “historical materialism,” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight.

How then do the dwarf and the puppet, theology and historical materialism, relate to one another? It seems that historical materialism and theology, which is the impulse that sets the apparatus of historical materialism, are by no means identical. There is no identity between the separate figures. But it is the dwarf (theology) who guides the puppet’s hand (historical materialism).

In Benjamin’s interpretation, these relationships seem to be shifted. Historical materialism is in control: it “enlists the services of theology.” Theology is the slave who must do the work. Of course, the tasks undertaken by theology are not prescribed to it; on the contrary, it is the

expert. But it can only do anything when it is in the interest of its master. The master-slave relationship is reversed: the living dwarf does not “enlist the service” of the lifeless puppet. This reduces the living being to a mere object of domination and reveals “the puppet” to be, in reality, alive and active.

Although the two figures are clearly separated, they become unified, however, when they make up the image of the automatic chess player. Only when theology and historical materialism have joined forces can the game begin. Only as allies would the two be a match for any opponent on the field of history –the class struggle. It seems that Benjamin seeks a form of cooperation between historical materialism and theology in which they can do more than take up the struggle - they can win. There can be no doubt about the desired outcome of the class struggle for one who has taken up the position of the oppressed classes. But is not it a solely intentional standpoint. Benjamin might respond to the question: if historical materialism “enlists the services of theology”, the victory of the oppressed classes must be objectively produced. Historical materialism “is to win all the time.”

But this question necessarily raises the problem concerning the necessary conditions for winning the historical match. At this point, Benjamin implicitly departs from the discussion of the concept of history to the possible historical *praxis*. Benjamin’s historical materialism would postulate the unity of theory and practice as has been advocated since Marx. He attempts to develop the theory of a different practice, which might have a chance of winning the match. Indeed this seems to be the intention of the historical-philosophical theses.

Historical materialism once sought to realize philosophy by transforming it. But in the meantime, for Benjamin, it has lost its relationship to reality. So in order to be able to catch up with real history again, historical materialism must return beyond philosophy to theology. But the question remains: Was Benjamin’s attempt successful? Is the alliance of historical and theology actually able to produce a new unity of theory and practice?

Benjamin’s theses closely connect the theory of historiography – narrative-- with the theory of history –the nature and transformation of human society-- in the same way in which history itself is referred to its political *praxis*. For Benjamin, it is necessary to have a certain conception of the present that allows us to generate an interrelationship between history and politics. The concept of history intended by Benjamin is meant to improve our position in the class struggle and historical materialism in the process. He immediately begins to develop the conception of an alternate political *praxis*, which would pursue the cause of historical materialism.

Benjamin’s critical revision of the theory and practice of historical materialism has its starting point as a “criticism of the concept of progress itself” (thesis XIII). Its theory and practice have been formed by a conception of progress, which “bore little relation to reality but made dogmatic claims” (*loc. cit.*). Here Benjamin criticizes a vulgar historical materialism that “recognizes only the progress in mastering nature, not the

retrogression of society” (thesis XI). The vulgar-historical materialist bypasses the question that the concept of “progress” and the notion of “barbarism” are two sides of one and the same thing. Therefore, the task of historical materialism is “to brush history against the grain” (thesis VII).

It would be a mistake to understand that Benjamin is against progress; he is against that man internalizes the logic of progress, and in this way he would indefinitely reproduce it. When the progress turns into the objective of mankind and not mankind the objective of progress, we reproduce a conformist and reified conception of history. In other words, the task of historical materialism then is to blast out the continuum of historical succession, that is, to overcome the concept of “progress.” Benjamin adopts a conception of history as discontinuity, as interruption.

“Historical materialism aspires to neither a homogeneous nor a continuous exposition of history” [N7a,2], rather it “leads the past to bring the present into a critical state” [N7a,5]. The critical momentum of historical materialism “is registered in that blasting of historical continuity” [N10a,1]. Benjamin writes:

The concept of progress had to run counter to the critical theory of history [historical materialism] from the moment it ceased to be applied as criterion to the specific historical developments and instead was required to measure the span between a legendary inception and a legendary end of history...as soon it becomes the signature of historical process *as a whole*, the concept of progress bespeaks an uncritical hypostatization rather than a critical interrogation [N13,1].

For Benjamin, historical materialism “carries along with it an immanent critique of the concept of progress” [N11,4]. So it must liquidate the continuum of history: it “blasts out ‘the reified’ continuity of history” [N9a,6], and constructs it as a discontinuum. That is, historical materialism does not reconstruct history by repeating the past, but constructing its “interferences” in the present. Its “founding concept is not progress but actualization” [N2,2].

Benjamin attempts to establish “the discontinuity of historical time” as the foundations of the materialistic view of history. This attempt terminates in the concept of history as a “catastrophe”. The catastrophe is the continuum of history. For Benjamin, catastrophe is progress; progress is catastrophe. Thereby, “the concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe” [N9a,1]. That things continue on going is the catastrophe.

However, Benjamin postulates a true concept of progress *versus* its reified version: “Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences” [N9a,7]. That is, in its discontinuities. These discontinuities are no less than the outcome of the *aporias*, the historical contradictions, of the present. In short, the task of historical materialism is to construct an alternative history once it “has annihilated within itself the [reified] idea of progress” [N2,2].

NOTES

1. Quotations originate from Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
2. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
3. Quotations in brackets are from Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).