

# BEYOND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL POSITIVISM AND THE INGENUOUS FAITH IN PROGRESS

## Walter Benjamin and his theses on the concept of history

**Eduardo Jozami**

The author of complex, often fragmented texts, ranging from literary criticism to observations on the city and from reflections on political violence to the study of language, Walter Benjamin has always been hard to classify. Not only because of the diversity of interests that guided his work but also because this reveals a philosophical and political orientation that can initially seem contradictory. The influence of Romanticism, with its cult of the tradition, is apparent in some of his early work but does not disappear when he discusses Baudelaire and nineteenth-century Paris as a supreme expression of modernity. His studies of great writers such as Goethe, Proust or Kafka, with which he sought to establish his position as the most important German literary critic of his time (within the hierarchical conception of criticism as an autonomous work of art championed by Friedrich Schlegel), did not preclude his taking an interest in authors or forms of expression considered minor, such as journalism, radio or serial fiction.

Benjamin's analysis of the impact of the new technologies that allowed the technical reproduction of the work of art seems, at times, to take a conservative view, to be a lament for the disappearance of the classical forms of artistic consumption such as we find in the later writings of other members of the Frankfurt School. Benjamin, however, emphasizes the revolutionary possibilities of the new technologies and highlights the fundamental role that film can play in the fight against fascism. Not to dwell further on this list of the tensions that run through his work, let us note finally that the influence of Jewish theology during his youth, manifested in his friendship with Gershom Scholem, appears to be questioned by his successive approaches to Marxism from the mid 1920s on. However, in his last text, 'On the Concept of History',<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, which reveals a radical leftist turn in his thinking, it is clear that the Messianic idea in Judaism was still an important component of his vision of the world and of history.

Benjamin's posthumous text was and is of great interest for many reasons. The author's death gave it the status of the last words of a victim of Nazism, while its anguished, agonized tone, gave it a very significant evidential value. It documents the most dramatic situation that Europe had endured in many centuries. With the recent German occupation of Paris and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact, there was no place left for hope.<sup>2</sup> Aware of his descent into hell, Benjamin nevertheless argued that hope is born precisely from this state of despair, and the text possesses this

---

<sup>1</sup> Also published under the title of 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. There are numerous editions.

<sup>2</sup> Although there is no shortage of testimony to his concerns about the Soviet situation, and in particular about the Moscow Trials, Benjamin still believed it was necessary to rely on the Soviet Union as the only chance of victory over Nazism. It is therefore not hard to imagine the desolation produced in him by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact agreeing the joint occupation of Poland, and this probably has a lot to do with the tone of 'On the Concept of History'.

ambivalence: conclusive evidence of defeat, in places it assumes the epic dimension of a battle hymn.<sup>3</sup>

‘On the Concept of History’ was published by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the United States, a couple of years after Benjamin’s death. Without an introduction or critical commentary — his friends preferred to omit from a tribute edition the severe critique they might have made what they considered an improper use of Marxist categories — Benjamin’s complex text was unlikely to make much of an impression. Moreover, the international political situation had changed with the declaration of war on the German Reich by the Soviet Union and the USA. The anguished pessimism of ‘On the Concept of History’ reflected a moment of confusion in which the overthrow of Nazism was unthinkable. As with so many warnings about the failure of social democracy and the dangers of Stalinism, the growing optimism that manifested itself in the new situation prevented any proper appreciation of the prescience of Benjamin’s reflection on the horrors that Nazism was still to show the and the post-war world.

‘On the Concept of History’ made no more of an impression when it subsequently appeared in *Les Temps modernes*. This is perhaps harder to explain, because in 1947, the year of publication, the magazine edited by Jean-Paul Sartre was the most appropriate place for a text to get attention or generate controversy. That this did not happen can be attributed in large part to the growing influence of the Communist Party and the dogmatic vision of Marxism it expressed, but even those who thought independently of the CP at the time, like Sartre himself,<sup>4</sup> and thinkers highly critical of the Soviet Union such as Lefort and Castoriadis, were not attracted by a thought with so strong a theological stamp as Benjamin’s.

Nor did the edition that Adorno brought out in 1950 generate any greater response, and it was not until he published Benjamin’s text again in the mid 1960s that the process of reappraisal, which continues today, began.<sup>5</sup> The student movement of 1968 took a greater interest in Benjamin, while at the same time challenging the Frankfurt School editors of his work for having concealed the importance of Brecht and Marxism on Benjamin’s later thinking. Horkheimer and Adorno’s differences with Benjamin were major in the last period, but concealed at times by Benjamin’s reluctance to set out all of his thought to those on whom he depended for financial support and the opportunity to leave Europe. The extent of these differences will be clear if we recall, as Andreas Huyssen does, that the much quoted chapter on the culture industries in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was conceived by its authors as a reply to Benjamin’s 1936 essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This may have prompted Rolf Tiedeman, editor of the German edition of Benjamin’s Complete Works, to describe ‘On the Concept of History’ as a manual of urban warfare — a statement which clearly cannot stand.

<sup>4</sup> ‘[Sartre’s] Existentialism was very far removed from [Benjamin’s] Jewish Messianism,’ writes Michael Löwy, after noting that they both had a conception of ‘open history’. See Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm* (trans. Chris Turner), London, Verso, 2005, p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> Reyes Mate, *Medianoche en la historia*, Madrid, Trotta, 2009, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 233.

The very relative interest in Benjamin's thought within the debates of the European left in the 1970s is apparent in a text by Perry Anderson which reviews the plurality of trends then being expressed in European Marxism. Anderson, an author very much inspired by the works of Marx and Lenin but also very open to all of the latest theoretical developments in the field of history and culture, quotes Benjamin on several occasions and notes that the expression of his thought employs tones and images which are absolutely original with respect to the tradition of historical materialism, but does not consider a deeper study of his work necessary.

Benjamin's work — already recognized in the field of cultural studies — had to wait for a fuller recognition of the failure of the model of real socialism to find a better reception in the realms of leftist thought and political philosophy. Benjamin's contribution was at last valued in that hour of defeat: 'If there is a Marxism today, it must be utopian and melancholic,' said Enzo Traverso,<sup>7</sup> an author whose work is permeated by Walter Benjamin's thought. The heterodoxy that had been unacceptable before was now to be Benjamin's great asset. The Messianic invocation or the category of *redemption*, so alien to the Marxist tradition (and perhaps for that very reason), today allow some recovery of the revolutionary idea, stimulating the reflections of those who do not want to bury along with Marxism in crisis all thought of transformation.

In recent years, the growing number of studies on memory and, in general, the profusion of monuments, memorials and remembrance initiatives all over the world has also led to Benjamin's work being more widely read. This interest has not translated into the field of academic history, which generally refers to memory only in order to point out that history has little to do with it. *Realms of Memory*, the compilation directed by Pierre Nora, a history of France that leaves nothing out of his study of the sites of memory, from great personages to festivities and symbols or ideas such as 'Republic', 'People' and 'Nation', was to have significant repercussions, and since then what Nora has called 'the end of memory-history' has been sanctioned.

Following the path opened up by Claude Lévi-Strauss with his critique of Sartre in the final chapter of *The Savage Mind*, and the work of François Furet calling for a re-evaluation of the dominant thinking in Gallic historiography about the French Revolution, in order to clarify his claims about the exhaustion of memory Nora, too, invokes a new relationship with that foundational event: 'That we study the historiography of the French Revolution, that we reconstitute its myths and interpretations, implies that we no longer unquestioningly identify with its heritage.' Nora's text defines a notion of history that has done well in academia and is all too similar to the conception of positivist historicism Benjamin decried. A past event becomes the subject of history when it has lost its significance for us, when it is constituted, in Nora's words, as 'a past that has gone for good'. We no longer live that past as memory: that, according to Nora, would explain the proliferation of sites of memory and remembrance initiatives. The French historian can claim that 'we talk so much about memory because it no longer exists'.

---

<sup>7</sup> Interview in *Políticas de la Memoria*, Buenos Aires, CEDINCI, Summer 2006/2007, p. 97.

Nora's explanations of the reasons why we can speak of the exhaustion of spontaneous memory, that which was transmitted from generation to generation in predominantly peasant societies, have points of contact with some of Benjamin's ideas. For the author of *Realms of Memory* the acceleration of history and the processes of globalization, massification, democratization and mediatization are some of the phenomena which would explain the end of the memory societies that once ensured the conservation and transmission of values. Benjamin, too, emphasized the impoverishment of experience in societies that had undergone major transformations, a process that had been accentuated by the First World War: the soldiers who returned from the trenches, silent witnesses to the great catastrophe, had lost the capacity to convey the experiences they had been through.

But if Nora's reasoning has affinities with Benjamin's, his conclusions could hardly be more different. The author of 'On the Concept of History', far from believing that we can speak of a past that has gone for good, centres his reflections on the way that past is recovered, on the way it enters the constellation of the present, and indeed he so firmly believes that the past is not closed that reminds us that it still awaits redemption. All of Benjamin's work, not just 'On the Concept of History', is a reflection on memory, from his study of wakefulness and involuntary memory in Proust to the analysis of the phantasmagoria of objects that allows us, as in *The Arcades Project*, to know the culture, the hopes and the dreams of an era. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that Benjamin does not history but memory, as some have claimed in attempting to reconcile the growing interest in his work with the hegemony of a thinking about history that absolutely demarcates it from memory.

Benjamin refers to himself as an historian trained in historical materialism, and in 'On the Concept of History' he argues with historicism and with some of the founders of positivist historiography, so that it would be hard to ignore that his reflections are also those of a historian, especially bearing in mind the work of tracking down archival material he carried out over thirteen years for *The Arcades Project*. Lucien Febvre wrote that history is done with documents, but not with documents alone: 'With words, with signs, with landscapes and with tiles. With the shapes of fields and with weeds. With eclipses of the moon and with halts.' This integral conception of the material of history, this 'constant effort to make dumb things speak',<sup>8</sup> were also Benjamin's, a bold seeker of texts but also a collector of objects, an observer attentive to the transformations of urban construction, a tracker-down of dreams. Therefore, although the author of 'On the Concept of History' seems not to have been much interested in delimiting the diverse disciplinary facets of his cultural interventions — the frustration of his attempt at a university career reflects a manifest incompatibility with the world of academia — it is beyond doubt that he would not have accepted his exclusion from the field of history. What is more, from the way he conceived his work it is evident that for him there was no sharp distinction between history and memory. The principal distinction in Benjamin's schema, which to some extent overlaps with the former distinction, is between the historicist historian who merely collects data and the materialist who is attentive to what never came into being, who also analyses what could have been and as a result carries out a work of memory.

---

<sup>8</sup> Lucien Febvre, *Combates por la historia*, Buenos Aires, Planeta DeAgostini, 1993, p. 232.

Benjamin's work is an example of intellectual rigour and a painstaking obsession with minor details. There is in Benjamin an ethics of research that makes him reject easy answers and leads him to pose his questions time and time again. Nevertheless — or rather, for that very reason — he strongly challenged the propaedeutic offered by the positivist historiography of Niebuhr, Ranke or Fustel de Coulanges, who believed it possible to analyse the historical fact with the precision of natural science. Like the founders of the Annales school, Benjamin also found the attitude of historians who worship the facts without seeing to what extent it is they themselves who construct them ludicrous.<sup>9</sup> But as Reyes Mate has pointed out, it is not merely methodology which separates Benjamin from positivist history; in 'On the Concept of History' it is the outline of a different theory of knowledge, one that sees no need to stick to the facts or take science as its model and is not disgusted by metaphysical questions.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the positivist claim to construct history in such a way as to show things as they really were, according to the classic definition by Leopold von Ranke cited by Benjamin in 'On the Concept of History', in fact veiled the political sense of the work of historiography. If history, in the modern form of the discipline, be regarded as having been constituted in the early nineteenth century, it is interesting to analyse the themes pursued by the great historians of that century. Augustin Thierry and Jules Michelet in France and Niebuhr and Ranke in Germany coincide in claiming that their work tends merely to the reconstruction of the past, but the need to explain the French Revolution and the debate about the forms to be taken by a unified Germany weighed so heavily on their respective shoulders as not to be hidden from even the most unsuspecting readers. If Michelet's whole endeavour was, as François Châtelet suggested, the history of the constitution of the French people, it is obvious that his text — apart from the immense historiographic value it still has today, which sometimes seems veiled by the author's romantic rhetoric — is a political text, and the same can be said for the German masters, behind whose painstaking investigations it is not hard to discern Bismarck's policy.<sup>11</sup>

Such history is always political. It is plain to see in the case of Michelet, full of enthusiasm for the Revolution, but perhaps less evident in those such as Fustel de Coulanges — also cited by Benjamin — who believe in the possibility of engaging the historical object, ignoring everything that has happened since. It is these latter, however, who most clearly refuse to take possession of the true image of history, which 'flashes up at an instant', and who are not concerned to understand the relationship of past and present. They are the ones who believe — as the aforementioned Pierre Nora does today, perhaps with different tools, but with a similar perspective — that the past is dead and buried.

For Benjamin, the questioning of historicist history also has a deeper political meaning. Susan Buck-Morss has noted that with his *Copernican revolution*, Benjamin stripped history of its legitimizing role, because the questioning of historicism allows Benjamin to point out that the historians who stick to the facts, who consider the past

---

<sup>9</sup> Febvre, *op. cit.* p. 236.

<sup>10</sup> Reyes Mate, *op. cit.* p. 21

<sup>11</sup> François Châtelet, 'L'Histoire', in François Châtelet (ed.), *Histoire de la Philosophie*, Tome VII, Paris, Hachette, 1973, p. 215 & ff.

to be gone for good and refuse to 'brush history against the grain', have empathy with the victors and that this consolidates the retrospective legitimation of a history which is that of those who have always been the victors.<sup>12</sup>

Benjamin's idea of history is based on drawing a parallel between the task of the researcher and the struggle of the oppressed class, regarded as the true subject of historical knowledge. It is not always easy to distinguish which of the two he is writing about, because with regard to what he wanted to say in 'On the Concept of History' there is an essential agreement between them. 'A historical materialist,' we read in Thesis 17, 'approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad.' There, in that constellation of past and present that crystallizes with the stopping of time, Benjamin sees a Messianic instance, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. However, he goes on to say that this revolutionary chance affords an opportunity to blast a specific era out of the course of history, to blast a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the life. The text seems to refer both to a political act on the part of the oppressed which brings into the present a past era and to the work of the scholar who recovers a work or recreates a life.

In some texts prior to 'On the Concept of History', as 'The Author as Producer' from 1934 and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' from 1936, we see a strong influence of the Soviet experience and also — it has been noted — a less prescient attitude towards Stalinism. In this work, Benjamin suture appears very concerned with bridging the gulf between the producers and consumers of art and cultural products and highlights instances such as the sending of letters to the newspapers by Soviet workers, which he sees as an attempt to end the confining of the practice of writing to a minority. This same spirit informs 'On the Concept of History', with its relative lack of differentiation between the practice of the intellectual and the struggle of the oppressed. It is obvious, however, that Benjamin, who always defended his autonomy as a writer and his solitary work, could hardly ignore the different status of the two activities, for all that he vindicated the political element that was common to both.

The reference to the struggle of the oppressed class clearly suggests a marked difference from the Leninist conception of revolutionary ideology. On the one hand, 'oppressed class' is not synonymous with 'working class'. Although the meaning of the expression is not clear, it seems to refer to a broader subject which includes not only the workers but all of the impoverished and humiliated. On the other hand, Benjamin attributes the condition of subject of knowledge to those who struggle, and the subjective element then becomes all-important. It is the practice of the oppressed that places them at that vantage point and not simply the place they occupy in the production process. This assessment of the practical struggle of the oppressed is reinforced by the references in 'On the Concept of History' to Louis Auguste Blanqui and to Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacist League. The author of 'On the Concept of History' was probably not thinking specifically about their respective strategies but

---

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that Benjamin was referring to historicism in a broad sense that includes all of those historians who believe it possible to reconstruct what really happened and who act with that empathy with the victors denounced in 'On the Concept of History'. Clearly, Benjamin's idea goes far beyond the so-called German Historical School, which emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as a reaction against the Enlightenment.

about what they both symbolized. Blanqui, who spent most of his life in prison and was known as *'le fermé'*, was questioned by the Marxists, who rejected his policy of insurrection which they considered merely putschist, but it could not be denied that he was the great protagonist of the three French popular revolutions of the 19th century. For her part, Rosa Luxemburg, who promoted the strategy of the mass strike, gave the class struggle a hierarchy that was less evident in Lenin's thesis in *What Is to Be Done?*, with its emphasis on the ideology of the intellectuals and the construction of the party.

The invoking of Rosa Luxemburg suggests another affinity which may exist between Benjamin's thinking about progress as a march towards catastrophe and Luxemburg's forecast of the necessary collapse of capitalism. On the basis of the thesis of the author of *The Accumulation of Capital* and other works, Marxism, especially in the first two decades of the 20th century, strenuously debated whether Marx had formulated a theory of the necessary downfall of capitalism. The discussion ran through the whole field of Marxist thought without it being easy to situate the contenders: both Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg, representing the extreme right and left wings of German social democracy, believed in the theory of collapse, while Lenin refuted the idea and argued that it only served to endorse the quietism of the labour movement. This charge seems better suited to Bernstein's position than to the activism of Luxemburg, who was murdered in 1919 while preparing the insurrection.

The debate was complex because Marx had formulated the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, but had also pointed to countertendencies that could compensate this effect. Rosa Luxemburg argued that capitalism required the existence of non-capitalist markets in order to stave off crisis, so that, in her opinion, the global expansion of the system must necessarily lead to its final crisis. Although the idea of collapse continued to underpin many discourses, the consolidation of power in the Soviet Union moved discussion of the possible end of capitalism onto a more political level.<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin felt the imminence of the catastrophe, but his premises are different from the arguments about the collapse, focusing instead on analysis of the functioning of the capitalist economy. The author of *'On the Concept of History'* was not thinking only about the end of one mode of production and its replacement by another; the disaster he envisioned had to do with a broader crisis of civilization, as can be seen in the alarm he expresses at the way in which nature has been dominated and his resuscitation of the utopian postulates of Fourier. What is more, the Marxist thinkers who argued for the inevitability of the collapse believed that the end of capitalism would be followed by the establishment of socialism. Benjamin's thinking seems more complex. He was in no doubt that the bourgeoisie would perish as a result of its contradictions but he wondered if it would die by its own hand or at the hand of the proletariat. The survival of a cultural heritage of more than three thousand years would depend on this. Could the proletariat fulfill that task? If it did not, 'all [would be] lost'. 'Before the spark hits the dynamite,' Benjamin concludes, 'the burning fuse

---

<sup>13</sup> On the controversy of the collapse, see Lucio Colletti, *Il Marxismo e il crollo del capitalismo* (1975); *El marxismo y el "derrumbe" del capitalismo*, Mexico, Siglo XXI, 1983.

must be cut through.’<sup>14</sup> If the collapse occurred, it was not only capitalism that might disappear.

We know that ‘On the Concept of History’ was written against the dramatic background of Nazi victory and Soviet desertion in early 1940, but the text quoted above was published more than ten years earlier. This shows not only that the despairing vision dominated much of the interwar period, but also that Benjamin’s fears for the future of humanity had deep roots and were not solely instilled by the growing menace of Nazism. Another text from the late 1920s, of key importance for determining Benjamin’s interest in the literary and artistic avant-gardes, reveals a similarly sombre outlook. This was no time for the facile optimism of the social democrats; the communist response must be ‘the organization of pessimism’. However, it was possible to continue thinking about the revolution, and the intoxication of Surrealism was to be channelled in that direction.<sup>15</sup>

Benjamin’s critique of the idea of Progress, perhaps his most original contribution to the Marxist tradition, is also shaped by the tremendous human and social costs of that process. The Hegelian philosophy of history held that any harm suffered — innocent flowers trampled in the path of so mighty a figure — was necessary. With the development of history guided by reason, so that individual interests contribute to the attainment of a higher goal, nothing that happened could be considered gratuitous or unnecessary. But Benjamin is less concerned with the great figures that with ordinary people and, unlike Hegel, nor does he believe it necessary to distinguish between small events and great events, because a redeemed humanity will regard nothing that happened in the past as irrelevant lost forever.

For Benjamin, the exorbitant cost of progress — so clearly outlined by Bertold Brecht in the poem ‘Questions from a Worker Who Reads’, which recalls the thousands of victims claimed by the construction of what we consider great monuments of civilization — reveals the impossibility of separating, in history, the deeds and documents of culture and of barbarism. The author of ‘On the Concept of History’ was not willing to believe that such milestones of barbarism must be accepted as part of a higher purpose: he was profoundly doubtful of the meaning of that march of progress and chose to look at the other side of history from the victors’.

Marx described in all their gravity the crimes that marked the process of primitive accumulation that enabled the rise of capitalism and the ruthless policies applied by settlers in colonized lands. However, he could not get rid himself of a teleology of progress, the heaviest burden in the Hegelian heritage, which led him to see these ills as steps towards the full establishment of the capitalist world market, a necessary condition for the subsequent victory of the proletariat. German social democracy was purging the vision of the nuances that abounded in the author of *Capital*, making the idea of progress the key to the economic evolutionism Benjamin denounced.

---

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Fire Alarm’, in *One-way Street and Other Writings* (trans. J. A. Underwood), London, Penguin, 2008, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism. The Latest Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, in *One-way Street and Other Writings*, *op. cit.* pp. 143-160.

That different attitude toward progress also fed into another way of understanding the revolution. For the German social democrats, comfortably situated in the path of history, the very idea of revolution was not only unnecessary but dangerous. The Communists do not deserve this reproach. The concept of insurrection applied in October 1917 by Lenin and Trotsky has nothing to do with the patient, trusting attitude of those who expect that the mere passage of time must bring them to paradise. Insurrection is a formidable act of political will, a break in the continuum of history, but the course taken by the Bolsheviks, the primary emphasis on the development of the forces of production, also has to do with the idea of a road leading irreversibly to the new society, in the sense of advancing in the construction of the economic bases. Although their attitude was not passive like that of the expectant social democrats, the communists believed none the less that they were walking in the direction of history.

Rethinking Benjamin seventy years after his death, in a global reality that is so different, but gives no cause for complacency, helps us to appreciate the present relevance of his work. Benjamin's thinking offers an alternative to those currently promoting works of memory as mere compensation to the closure of a past that no longer has anything to say to us. The denunciation of the role of history as the legitimation of the victors, the rejection of historical time as a continuum that cannot comprise suspensions or ruptures, the affirmation of the intimate relationship between culture and barbarism, the idea that the past keeps calling us to redemption, all point to fruitful orientations. Not only to attempt a historiography that will undertake what Nietzsche called for in the second of the *Untimely Meditations* — 'we need history for life and action' — but to benefit from a legacy that in all spheres of thought shows itself to be increasingly vital.