

# THE REVOLUTION IS THE EMERGENCY BRAKE

## Walter Benjamin's political-ecological currency

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Walter Benjamin was one of the few Marxists in the years before 1945 to propose a radical critique of the concept of 'exploitation of nature' and of civilization's 'murderous' relationship with nature.

As early as 1928, in his book *One-way Street*, Benjamin denounced the idea of the domination of nature as 'imperialist' and proposed a new conception of art as 'the mastery of relations between nature and humanity'. In this text there appeared for the first time the concept of revolution as *interruption* of a catastrophic process, closely associated with the technological progress driven by capital: if the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat 'is not achieved by the time an almost predictable moment of economic and technological development has been reached (inflation and gas warfare point to it), then all is lost. Before the spark hits the dynamite the burning fuse must be cut through.'<sup>1</sup> Benjamin was wrong about inflation, but not about the war, although he could not foresee that the lethal gas would be used not on the battlefields, as in the First World War, but in the industrial extermination of Jews and Gypsies.

Critical of the ideology of inevitable progress, in his essay on Surrealism (1929) Benjamin argues that revolutionaries need to *organize pessimism*.

We can only trust, he writes ironically, in the IG Farben — the great German capitalist chemicals conglomerate — and the peaceful perfection of the Reich's air force, the Luftwaffe. Benjamin's critical vision allowed him to perceive — intuitively, but with surprising acuity — the catastrophes in store for Europe as a result of the crisis of industrial/capitalist civilization. But not even Benjamin, the most pessimistic of his time, could have foreseen the destruction that the Luftwaffe was to rain down on the civilian populations of Europe's towns and cities, still less imagine that IG Farben, just twelve years later, would set up plants in the concentration camps to exploit the prisoners as forced labour.

If Benjamin rejected the doctrines of progress, this did not prevent him from positing a radical alternative to the impending disaster: the revolutionary utopia. Utopias, dreams born of a different future, writing in Paris, capital of the nineteenth century (1935), closely associated with elements coming from prehistory (*Urgeschichte*), that is, a primitive and classless society. Stored in the collective unconscious, these experiences of the past 'interact with the new to give birth to [...] utopias.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. Benjamin, *One-way Street and Other Writings* (trans. J. A. Underwood), London, Penguin, 2008, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> W. Benjamin, 'Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts' (1935), *Gesammelte Schriften (GS)*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977, V, 1, p. 47.

In his 1935 essay on Bachofen, Benjamin develops the reference to prehistory in more specific terms. Friedrich Engels was greatly interested in Bachofen's work on matriarchy, while for the anarchist thinker Élisée Reclus the interest lay in the 'evocation of a communist society at the dawn of history', a classless, democratic and egalitarian society which implied a genuine 'subversion of the principle of authority'.<sup>3</sup>

Archaic societies also lived in greater harmony with nature. In 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' (1938) Benjamin calls into question the 'mastery' (*Beherrschung*) of nature and its 'exploitation' (*Ausbeutung*) by humans. As Bachofen had already shown, Benjamin insists, 'the murderous (*mörderisch*) idea of the exploitation of nature' — a dominant capitalist/modern concept from the 19th century on — did not exist in matriarchal societies because nature was perceived as a generous mother (*schenkenden Mutter*).<sup>4</sup>

For Benjamin — as for Engels and the libertarian socialist Élisée Reclus — it was a question not of a return to the prehistoric past but of putting forward the prospect of a *new harmony* between society and the natural environment. The name that sums up for Benjamin the promise of such future reconciliation with nature is Fourier. Only in a socialist society in which production will no longer be based on the exploitation of human labour, 'work [...] would no longer be characterized as the exploitation of nature by man. It would be conducted on the model of children's play, which in Fourier forms the basis of the "impassioned work" of the Harmonians [...] Such work invested with the spirit of play is oriented not towards the production of values but towards the improvement of nature.'<sup>5</sup>

In the Theses 'On the Concept of History' (1940), his philosophical testament, Benjamin once again hails Fourier as the utopian visionary of 'a labour that, far from exploiting nature, is capable of extracting from it the virtual creations that lie dormant in her womb' (Thesis XI). This is not to say that Benjamin wanted to replace Marxism with utopian socialism: he regarded Fourier as a supplement Marx, and in the same passage in which he speaks so highly of the French Socialist invokes Marx's observations on the Gotha Programme's conformist stance on the nature of work. For social-democratic positivism — typified by Joseph Dietzgen — 'the new conception of labour amounts to the exploitation of nature, which with naive complacency is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat'. This is 'a conception of nature which differs ominously from the one in the Socialist utopias before the 1848 revolution' and one which 'already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism'.<sup>6</sup>

We find in the Theses of 1940 a *correspondence* — in the sense Baudelaire gives to the term in his poem 'Les Correspondences' — between theology and politics: between the lost paradise from which we have been driven by the storm called 'progress' and the classless society at the dawn of history, an also between the

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<sup>3</sup> W. Benjamin, 'Johann Jakob Bachofen', (1935), *GS II*, 1, pp. 220-230.

<sup>4</sup> W. Benjamin, 'Das Passagen-Werk', *GS VI*, 1, p. 456.

<sup>5</sup> 'Das Passagen-Werk', I, p. 47

<sup>6</sup> As I quote from 'On the Concept of History' in my book *Fire Alarm* (trans. Chris Turner), London, Verso, 2005.

Messianic age of the future and the new classless society of socialism. But how are we to interrupt the ongoing catastrophe, the accumulation of debris which ‘grows skyward’, the result of so-called ‘progress’ (Thesis IX)? As always in the Theses of 1940, Benjamin’s answer is both religious and secular. In the theological sphere, it is the task of the Messiah, while the secular equivalent or ‘correspondence’ to Messianic intervention is none other than the *Revolution*. The Messianic/revolutionary interruption of progress is, then, Benjamin’s response to the threats posed by the human species by the continuation of evil and impending storm of new catastrophes. We are in 1940, only months away from the start of the Final Solution.

In the Theses ‘On the Concept of History’ Benjamin makes frequent reference to Marx, but at one important point adopts a critical distance from the author of *Capital*: ‘Marx said that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps things are very different. It may be that revolutions are the act by which the human race travelling in the train applies the emergency brake.’<sup>7</sup> Implicitly, the image suggests that if humanity allows the train follow its course, already laid down by the steel structure of the rails, and nothing stops its vertiginous career, we shall be hurled into catastrophe, the crash or the abyss.

But even so, Benjamin, the most pessimistic of Marxists, could not foresee how far the process of capitalist exploitation and domination of nature — and its bureaucratic double in the countries of the East before the fall of the Wall — would have catastrophic consequences for all humanity.

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### **Some comments on the political-ecological currency of Benjamin’s thinking**

We are witnessing now in the early twenty-first century the ever faster ‘progress’ of the train of industrial/capitalist civilization into the abyss, an abyss called ecological disaster, the most dramatic expression of which is global warming. It is important to bear in mind the increasing acceleration of the train, the dizzying speed at which it is racing towards disaster.

A few years ago, when one referred to the dangers of ecological catastrophe, it was in the distant future, perhaps at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hans Jonas, in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, called on us to protect the lives of generations yet unborn. Now, though, the process of climate change has accelerated to the point that we are discussing what will happen in the next few decades; in fact, the catastrophe has already begun and we are in a race against time to try to impede, slow down and contain this disastrous process, which will result not only in the raising of the planet’s temperature but the desertification of vast areas, the rising of sea levels and the

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<sup>7</sup> W. Benjamin, *GS I*, 3, p. 1232. This is one of the preparatory notes to ‘On the Concept of History’, which does not appear in the final versions of the document. The passage from Marx to which Benjamin refers appears in *The Civil War in France*: ‘Die Revolutionen sind die Lokomotiven der Geschichte’ (the word ‘world’ does not appear in Marx’s text).

disappearance under the waves of coastal cities: Venice, Amsterdam, Hong Kong and Rio de Janeiro.

It is not a matter of the ‘bad will’ of this or that multinational or government, but of the *intrinsically perverse* logic of the capitalist system based on unlimited expansion — what Hegel called ‘bad infinity’ — and the unlimited accumulation of goods, capital, profits: a logic that is inevitably destructive of the environment and responsible for climate change.

The United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen (December 2009) illustrates the inability or lack of interest of the capitalist powers to address the dramatic challenge of global warming.

Partial reforms are completely inadequate. What is at issue is the need for a revolutionary interruption: to stop the train of modern industrial/capitalist civilization before it reaches the abyss. In other words, it is necessary to replace the microrationality of profits with a social and ecological macrorationality, which requires a shift in the paradigm of civilization.

We need a much more radical and profound vision of what a revolution is. It is a matter of changing not only relations of production, property relations, but the very structure of the forces of production, the structure of the productive apparatus. The same logic must be applied to this apparatus that Marx used in relation to the state apparatus on the basis of the experience of the Paris Commune. According to Marx, workers cannot appropriate the apparatus of the bourgeois state and make it serve the proletariat; they need to destroy it and create a different kind of power. The same logic can be applied to the existing — capitalist — system of production: it has to be, if not destroyed, at least radically transformed. In its current structure and functioning — based on fossil fuels — it is ecologically unsustainable. The socio-ecological revolution implies a profound reorientation of technology that will replace existing energy sources with other, non-polluting, renewable sources such as wind or solar power; indeed, some ecosocialists speak of ‘solar communism’, seeing an elective affinity between the (free) energy of the sun and socialism.

The first question to be addressed, then, is that of control of the means of production, and especially decisions about investment and technological change; such means and decisions should be taken away from the banks and venture capitalists to become the communal property of society. Clearly, radical change involves not only production but also consumption. However, the problem of bourgeois/industrial civilization is not, as environmentalists often claim, the ‘excessive consumption’ of the population, and the solution is not a general ‘limiting’ of consumption, first and foremost in the advanced capitalist countries. It is the nature of present-day consumption, based on ostentation and waste, mercantile alienation and obsessive accumulation, which needs to be questioned.

What is needed is the full-scale reorganization of the mode of production and consumption on the basis of criteria other than those of the capitalist market: the real needs of the population (not necessarily the profitable ones) and the safeguarding of the environment. In other words, an economy of transition towards socialism, ‘adjusted’ (as Karl Polanyi would say) to the social and natural environment because

it is founded on the democratic selection of priorities and investments decided by the people, not by market forces or an omnipotent Politburo. In other words, democratic planning — local, national and eventually international — with a view to defining: 1) what products should be subsidized or distributed free of charge; 2) what energy options should be allowed, even if they are not at first sight ‘profitable’; 3) how to reorganize the transport system according to social and ecological criteria, and 4) what steps can be taken to repair, as quickly as possible, the massive environmental damage left by the ‘legacy’ of capitalism.

This transition will lead not only to a new mode of production and an egalitarian and democratic society but to an alternative way of living, a new civilization, ecosocialist, beyond the realms of money, of patterns of consumption artificially induced by advertising and the infinite production of goods that harm the environment.

Utopia? In the etymological sense (‘no-place’), yes: without a doubt. But if we no longer believe, like Hegel, that ‘all that is real is rational, and all that is rational is real’, how are we to think a substantial rationality without referring to utopias? Utopia is indispensable in social change, provided it is based on the contradictions of reality and real social movements.

Among these movements, one of the most important today is that of indigenous communities, particularly in Latin America. It is no accident that this year saw the meeting in Cochabamba, Bolivia, convened by President Evo Morales, of the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the defence of Pachamama, Mother Earth. The resolutions adopted at Cochabamba take up, almost literally, Walter Benjamin’s argument about of industrial-capitalist civilization’s ‘murderous’ relationship with nature, which prehistoric communities regarded as a ‘generous Mother’.

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A revolution is necessary, Benjamin wrote, to halt the race towards catastrophe. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, who is far from being a revolutionary, recently (*Le Monde*, 05.09.2009) offered the following diagnosis: ‘We,’ he said, referring no doubt to the governments of the world, ‘have our foot stuck on the accelerator and we are heading towards an abyss.’

Walter Benjamin defined the destructive progress that accumulates catastrophes as a ‘storm’. The same word ‘storm’ appears in the title (which seems to be inspired by Benjamin) of the latest book by James Hansen, a NASA climatologist and one of the world’s foremost specialists in climate change. Published in 2009, the title of the book is *Storms of my Grandchildren. The Truth about the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (New York, Bloomsbury). Hansen is no revolutionary, either, but his analysis of the coming ‘storm’ — which is for him, as for Benjamin, an allegory for something much more menacing — is impressive in its lucidity.

Will humanity apply the revolutionary brakes? Every generation, Benjamin writes in 'On the Concept of History', has been endowed with a 'weak Messianic power', and so has ours. If we do not exercise it 'by the time an almost predictable moment of economic and technological development has been reached [...] then all is lost', as Benjamin told us in 1928.

Walter Benjamin was a prophet; not like someone who tries to see the future, like a Greek oracle, but in the Old Testament sense: that is, one who calls the people's attention to future dangers. His predictions were conditional: see what will happen, unless... if we do not... The future is still open. Every second is the narrow gate through which salvation can come.