

BENJAMIN, SOUNDING THE FIRE ALARM

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1. Time and Place

To speak of Benjamin in Portbou is a weighty matter. Here the time of his being was interrupted and, according to his philosophy, this would be an apt place and an apt moment in which to read his work. Here his life was snuffed out and his work fanned into flame, a work jealously guarded by the author all his lifetime (he published very little before his death), which was slow to become known and now lights up the twentieth century. Illustrative of this is the fate of his ‘Theses’, one of the most important texts of the twentieth century: he felt it was not ready for publication. When they appeared after his death they encountered only indifference, and today everyone who knows them regards them as indispensable.

2. The Personality

Benjamin, who is now considered a cult author, tiptoed through academic life. He did not shine like the great names of the Frankfurt School, such as Horkheimer, Adorno or Tillich. He submitted himself to its dictates in order to be published in the Institute’s journal, he endured with good grace the slaps on the wrist he received from ‘Wiesenthal’, he implored the aid of scholarships that failed to arrive, his doctoral thesis was rejected as ‘confused’... in other words, he so internalized his condition as loser so as to make it a mark of identity, as the curriculum vitae that he submitted to the authorities makes clear: ‘In Denmark I found temporary shelter in the home of my friends, the Brecht family. However, I could accept their generous offer only for a short time. Otherwise, I am absolutely without means. I possess nothing but a small working library, which has found shelter in the Brecht house. I have taken the liberty of presenting this state of affairs to the aid committee in the hope that you may be able to relieve my current situation in some way. I remain at your disposal for any further information. Sincerely, W. Benjamin’ (CV presented to the Danish aid committee for, 4 July 1934).

The existential image he conveys is one of great fragility; he was physically fragile, hence the frustration of his companions on the clandestine crossing to Portbou; he was also intellectually fragile: very little published work, no well-defined genre, embroiled in foundational questions in areas in which he did not always have the requisite scholarship, more a thinker than a knowledgeable expert... Everything pointed to an amateur or an ‘essayist’, a genre that has a certain prestige among us but not in the Germany of the great specialists, the field of the human sciences included.

But this image or impression is false, because what lies behind all this is the vocation of a radical intellectual. By ‘intellectual’ I mean the opposite of the scholar, the super-specialist, the armchair philosopher who gazes at the wall when he writes rather than looking at the street. He wanted to speak freely to his contemporaries, with first-hand knowledge of the facts, about the issues of his time, in order to free them from often

invisible bonds. If others were interested in knowledge, he was interested in truth, a fundamental distinction in his work.

We must understand ‘radical’ in the sense in which Marx used it: someone who goes to the roots, and the root is man. This is what makes Benjamin’s thinking so transgressive: it dismantles canonical histories, breaks taboos, questions unassailable knowledge... in his own words, it ‘[brushes] history against the grain’. The truth does not flow with the current but braves it, pushing upstream.

We might attempt a quick portrait of this radical intellectual. He said, first of all, that ‘truth shines forth in a moment of danger’. And he exposed himself to danger in order to understand his time. When he was in exile in France and the Nazi threat was growing, friends urged him to come to the United States with them. He declined the offer: ‘there are still many battles to be fought in Europe’. He wanted to look the Gorgon in the face, to wrest it of its secret. He endured it so long that he could not break away from it. And he succumbed.

Secondly, he was very much aware of the failure of his generation, ‘the most unfortunate in history’, because it did not address in time the danger of fascism and communism. Those of his generation were impotent witnesses to the pact between Hitler and Stalin, which amounted to the effective triumph of fascism.

Benjamin, then, instead of plunging into melancholy at the midnight of history sought reasons for hope, knowing as he did that if there were any they would not be for them but for us: ‘hope is granted only to the hopeless.’

Thirdly, he was a pioneer who broke moulds. He understood that World War I signified the failure of the Enlightenment project and that it had to be thought anew, taking its failure into account. There was no sense in repeating what had been said. This is relevant today. Last Sunday Juan Luis Cebrián and Bernard-Henri Lévy talked about the new obscurantism in the West and advocated the old medicine: re-read Voltaire. That is to repeat and not to think anew. Benjamin’s gesture is very different. In his programmatic First Thesis he suggests rethinking the Enlightenment project by questioning its very starting point: the Voltairean relationship between reason and religion. Benjamin, a follower of Marxism, proposed a pact between Messianism and historical materialism ‘for the benefit of politics’.

His old friends screamed blue murder: the Jew Scholem said that he had given himself up to Marxism, and the communist Brecht that he had lost himself in mysticism. But all he wanted was to give enlightened reason another chance.

In fourth place we must consider his way of conceiving of the left: he was a very singular Leftist. A radical critic of progress, supreme symbol of modernity, he warned against confusing technological progress with moral progress; he was a radical critic of communism for its betrayals and of social democracy for its abandonment. A Marxist who placed the centre of gravity on the *Lumpen* rather than Proletariat, he championed the figure of the ‘ragpicker’ as embodying privileged insight into consumer capitalism and also its therapy.

If Marx sought to formulate a response to the capitalism of the nineteenth century, Benjamin engaged the fundamentally consumerist capitalism of the twentieth. Hence the figure of the ragpicker.

To sum up, he made '[brushing] history against the grain' the ideology of his work. It was not just a matter of going against the tide or transgressing political correctness. Benjamin was not the Unamuno who walked into meetings with the challenge 'I am against'. Benjamin's phrase invites us to reflect on what it means to think. Descartes said *penser c'est deprendre*: to move on from what has already been said, not to repeat, to go further. Quite the opposite of what is happening with leader writers and commentators today. It is enough to know where they are or where they are writing to know what they think. They cannot surprise us because they cannot surprise themselves. They are predictable.

Benjamin had many mutually incompatible friends. He couldn't arrange to meet Brecht and Scholem at the same time. He took a special interest in conservative thinkers (Schmitt, Jünger, Sorel): he gauged the value of his propositions by their reactions to them. He valued a leftist idea not for the enthusiasm it aroused among progressives but for the concern it caused conservatives.

3. The Fire Warning

It seems to me essential to establish these data from Benjamin's intellectual biography strike before tackling the theme of this lecture: the man who sounded fire alarm.

Benjamin died in 1940 and seems to have been aware of the course of the war. But between 1939 and 1945 is 1942. Here it seems that he foresaw what lay ahead. Kafka said that the artist is like a clock that tells the time in advance. We see just that in Walter Benjamin.

What fire did he warn of? In the first place, progress as catastrophe. He was a great admirer of progress. Nobody celebrated as he did the advance of technology, but he soon discovered its ambiguity: its relationship to humanity. Then he related fascism to progress, seeing that they have in common the composure with which they justify the victims resulting from the pursuit of their goals, whether it be a better world for the generations to come or safeguarding the purity of the race.

Secondly, the revolution as interruption. His was a generation ready for revolution, whether of the left or the right, and one that did not escape totalitarianism. Everyone understood the revolution as an acceleration of time. Remember Lenin's formula: the revolution is Soviet power plus electrification. The same formula holds in today's China. The time of that revolution is time as unit of production and wealth. We can do it faster. And since time is infinite and redeeming, we will end up beating capitalism.

Benjamin suggests another form of revolution: the interruption of the progressive logic with which history is constructed: '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.' It is a formula that no one has wanted to test out. There is in it an apocalyptic vision of time

(that time is limited) and a sense of the loss of experience. The goal is to break with a historical logic that comes from behind and aims to conquer the future over the bodies of its victims. This is the logic on which the angel of history gazes with terrified eyes in the Ninth Thesis.

Let us note this paradox: the Walter Benjamin who preached the revolution as interruption was invoked by the students of May 68, who said they were inspired by Marxism and implacably critical of Communism, while sharing the Marxist philosophy of history that Benjamin questioned. They confused Benjamin with Che, without understanding the critique of political violence put forward by Benjamin.

4. The Left and Benjamin

Walter Benjamin's legacy is at the disposal of the left that found itself without a discourse throughout the twentieth century. After the failure of the revolutionary strategies, the Western left opted for reformism, which was accepted by capitalism until the fall of the Berlin Wall. Now, with no Red menace in sight, it seems that the welfare state is expensive and not competitive. The real result is a rampant depoliticizing of politics, a homespun pragmatism that has not been shaken by the current crisis, despite its severity.

If Benjamin's innovative premise (the revolution as interruption) is to reach the more traditionally minded (who linked revolution with justice), the relationship between interruption and justice must be clarified. Let's see. Interruption refers to the logic of progress based on the inevitability of the victims' suffering. the interruption of this logic means politics without victims. Rethinking the relationship between politics and violence invites us to think politics as a mourning for the suffering caused and a debt to previous generations. The concept of historical responsibility appears here.

This strategy posits an in-depth review of the concept of politics, as we have seen, and of justice. Justice is not only a matter of the distribution of wealth. Justice has to be a response to injustice. And Benjamin figures here as the detective who goes about identifying all kinds of injustices: linguistic, in our inability to name things; historical, making us responsible for what we didn't do but have inherited, and those we have wiped off the map because they have lapsed or because they are irreparable.

No one has outlined a project of justice as ambitious as Benjamin. If justice is to be universal, as all of us today recognize that it must be, then it has to be global in space — that is to say, it has to assert its competence to deal with injustices outside of our territory — and global in time. Past victims on whom we have built our well-being also require justice. Past injustices are present thanks to memory. We are committed to talk about historical memory.

Ethics is also affected by this critique of the logic of progress. Modern ethics are the ethics of autonomy, based on good conscience or on the recognition of the equal right to dignity. But this does not hold up. It collapsed in Auschwitz. Since then, the moral subject is constituted when we are assailed by the other. This needs to be an ethics of compassion. And herein lies the warning: Kantian ethics is impotent before the barbarism of Auschwitz.

5. The Limits of the Warning

Benjamin saw a great deal but he did not get it right: he spoke of political crimes and what occurred was a crime against humanity; he anticipated concentration camps as political prisons, but what ensued was the extermination camp... So it is not enough to go back to Benjamin literally: something happened after him that obliges us to read him differently. What happened? The unthinkable took place and that is what makes us think. We need to relativize our cognitive capacity — restore Benjamin's distinction between knowledge and truth — and install memory as the principle of knowledge.

The emergence of memory as a central category of politics or morality has nothing to do with a revival of Romanticism. It has to do with the limits of knowledge. Auschwitz was not thought and it took place, and that is why it is what makes us think. This is the place of memory.

Benjamin did not foresee the barbarism that the Holocaust embodied. But his theory of history as memory, set out in his 'Theses', offers us the best tools with which rationally to develop the duty of memory.

6. The Currency of Benjamin

I would like to conclude by stressing two Benjaminian theses of indisputable current relevance: a) that the memory of injustice or, as Adorno said, the need to let suffering speak, is the condition of all truth. The truth is of the order of listening rather than of seeing. And b) 'The judges are all of you.' This is Primo Levi, who probably had not read Benjamin when he wrote it but had certainly thought about the suffering in Auschwitz. What he knew is that there is no justice without memory, and no memory without witnesses who remember. When there are no direct witnesses, others will have to remember in order to do justice and in order that the crime is not repeated.