Introduction

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Since early modernity and the Enlightenment, dominant narratives of civilization have assumed technological progress to be a key marker of human development. Under these conditions, human relationships with nature have been defined as the mastering of the former over the latter, according to the prototypical conception of development. The main problem with this idea is that it rests on a linear understanding of human history, in which development is based on exploitation – both of nature and of other human beings. If we consider events such as the invention of the printing press (1450–70), Europe's discovery and colonization of the Americas (1492), the invention of the telescope (1600) and, later, Darwin's theory of evolution (mid 1800s), these all contributed to a gradual relativizing of the centrality of 'the human' – i.e. they made humans more conscious of their fragile and contingent existence. However, such insights did not sufficiently dislodge humanity's self-conception of its pre-eminence in the natural order.

This problem persists in the contemporary context. The epoch in which we live has been called the Anthropocene, in reference to the significant impact of 'the anthropos' – the human – over everything that is other, be it technology or nature.[1] In other words, while rightly highlighting humanity's exploitative activities upon nature and through technology, it potentially reinstates the centrality of the human, while perpetuating an oppositional view of human-technology relations. It is against such linear and dualistic visions of the world that Walter Benjamin's theorizing on barbarism proves useful for rethinking our relationship with technology, under the present conditions and throughout history.[2]

Before discussing the work of Benjamin, it is first of all necessary to contextualize the concepts of civilization and barbarism. The former has often been associated, somewhat uncritically, with the West, so that civilization is, in fact, understood as synonymous with Western civilization. As Walter Mignolo observes, the modern concept of barbarism was developed by 'civilized' Western Christians to create and justify a spatial colonial difference in the sixteenth century. They took up the idea of the barbarian from the Greeks, but reworked and modified it to refer to the constitutive other, located in an inferior space.[3] As is well known, the Greeks called non-Greeks barbarians, i.e. those outside their frontiers who spoke an unintelligible language (bar bar) and could not, therefore, share their culture. Maria Boletsi points out that this process of barbarization of the 'other' by the Greeks was also a method of disempowerment and a reassertion of their cultural and social hierarchy.[4] In a similar move, the concept of barbarism was conceived by Europeans as a negative standard against which their own culture, behaviour and manners were deemed more sophisticated, more virtuous and therefore more valuable.

Benjamin's essay 'Experience and Poverty' (1933), the text from which all the articles in this themed issue depart, responds with a provocation to the binary opposition of civilization and barbarism. In it, he calls for 'a new, positive concept of barbarism'.[5] This call is not a championing of barbarism against civilization – in 1933, after the rise of the Nazis to power, this would have seemed an irresponsible proposition. Instead, Benjamin's intention is precisely to unsettle the binary opposition of civilization and barbarism by introducing a third term. The term he uses is Barbarentum, which is different to the conventional German word for barbarism, Barbarei, and means 'barbarianhood', conveying a sense of community or

collectivity.[6] Barbarentum therefore complicates the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism to render the latter theoretically and politically useful.

Strictly speaking, technology is not the focus of Benjamin's polemic in 'Experience and Poverty', and yet it becomes central for his argument, as the source of both the decline of civilization and the rebirth of a new form of humanity which has incorporated a barbaric – i.e. not imperialist – technology into its existence. Benjamin resumes this theme in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (1935–1939), where he discusses the effects of technology upon art, through its process of technologization. At the beginning of the essay, he points out that his analysis is not limited to art, since 'its significance extends far beyond the realm of art'.[7] Benjamin's argument is that the process of technologization works to detach a work of art, an object or, more radically, a thought from its own tradition. This leads to a loss of vital collective experience (Erfahrung) which is substituted by immediate, fragmentary experiences (Erlebnisse). And yet, as often happens in Benjamin's analyses, he also considers the positive potential of such a loss. Benjamin saw in the impoverishment created by this process an opportunity to supersede civilization and start again.

Indeed, like many contemporaneous writers, Benjamin understood that the development of technology was leading to the destruction of civilization. Technology did not impose on civilization from without, but was obviously a distinctive expression of civilization. In other words, civilization was – or had reached a point at which it had become – self-destructive. In 'Experience and Poverty', Benjamin thus urged a rethinking of technology from the impoverished perspective of barbarism, in contrast to the wealth of civilization. An impoverished terrain could provide the starting point to create humanity anew, reconceiving technology as a non-instrumental medium in which a relationship of interplay (Zusammenspiel) between humans and nature could be established.

For Benjamin, figures such as Paul Scheerbart, Adolf Loos, Paul Klee and Bertolt Brecht offered glimpses of a positive barbarism and an alternative to capitalist-imperialist uses of technology. Rooted in a critique-appreciation both of inherited cultural tradition and of technological modernity, in some ways Benjamin anticipates current posthumanist debates about the immanence of technology to the human. At the same time, he provides an important critique of the celebration of technology for technology's sake. His call for the adaptation and innervation of an unmediated technology into the (collective) human body is fragmentary, mobile, ever-changing, conceived as a challenge to the body understood as an ego, or an identity – be it the individual or the social body. For that reason, Benjamin's theories prove especially fruitful to counteract not only the armoured body championed by fascism, but also the ego-centred strains of posthumanism and transhumanism.

A recent revival of the concept of barbarism can be found in Maria Boletsi's 2013 book Barbarism and Its Discontents. Boletsi seeks to recast the term as a critical tool in cultural theory, to unsettle binary oppositions and long-established ideas. Her analysis attempts 'to dislodge barbarism from its conventional contexts and rekindle the critical and transgressive potential of this concept, not despite but through its controversiality'.[8] Our intention in this themed issue is to work with and through barbarism, to elaborate on Boletsi's rediscovery of the term's critical and transgressive potential, alongside Benjamin's work. In line with this approach, here we explore barbarism not as an identity, but as a different set of practices that contest the affirmative and hierarchical notion of civilization. For that reason, we have opted to call the issue Barbarisms in the plural, to allow for multiple barbaric ways of thinking

against and beyond the straitjacket of civilization. The plural also challenges an essentialist conception of civilization. If there is not one, but many barbarisms, this also unsettles civilization understood as the only possible, positive standard. Moreover, as Raymond Williams notes, from the nineteenth century onwards, civilization has been widely used in the plural, usually as a synonym for cultures, meaning a set of values and traditions common to a specific geographical area.[9] That being the case, 'barbarisms' present an important challenge to the positive and affirmative conception of civilizations or cultures.

The field into which we make our intervention is that of technology. Our aim is to propose a different perspective on how technology is considered, thought and used. The concept of barbarism implies a negation of tradition and of heritage. Applying it to technology is a way of uprooting technology from other traditions of thought. Therefore, dis-locating and de-centring technology from dominant conceptions of development will allow for a re-evaluation of its different potentialities. What does it mean, then, to (re)think technology in barbaric terms? How can we reconfigure and politicize the link between humans and technology productively? At stake, of course, is how far barbarism can supply a useful framework – or, at least, the tabula rasa on which to build one – for breaking with (bourgeois) tradition and understanding the shift in experience brought about by technology.

In different ways, the articles in this issue attempt to answer these questions while also, inevitably, raising others. In 'Barbaric Salvage: Benjamin and the Dialectics of Destruction', Sami Khatib gives a detailed analysis of two figures who are crucial to Benjamin's theorization of barbarism: the positive barbarian and the destructive character. The radicalization of impoverished experience enacted by these figures provides insights into the effective nihilism which Khatib suggests is at the heart of Benjamin's materialism. He ends by reflecting on questions of survival under capitalism, proposing that such impoverished figures meet the challenges of 'poor reality', and point towards a historical materialism adequate to negotiating the capitalist impoverishment of social relations.

Daniel Mourenza's article 'Barbarism? Yes, Indeed': A Barbaric Theorizing of Technology', addresses the issue theme by synthesizing a barbaric theorization of technology, as it develops in Benjamin's writings. After highlighting parallels between positive barbarism and contemporary decolonial thinking, Mourenza proceeds to flesh out Benjamin's conception of a technology freed from imperialist imperatives. He focuses particularly on Benjamin's writings on Scheerbart, and the latter's imagining of creatures that transform and emancipate themselves through technology.

In 'And Yet It Moves: Marx, Benjamin, Brecht and the Subject of Modernity', Anne van Leeuwen uses Karl Marx's critique of political economy as the starting point for her examination of Benjamin and Brecht, showing that Marx's critique provides the background for their identification of the emancipatory potential of technology in the construction of collective experience. She goes on to explore technology's role in the construction of this experience through discussion of Benjamin's aphorism 'To the Planetarium' and Brecht's Leben des Galilei.

Hannah Lammin's original contribution 'Seeing in-photo: Non-photography as Positive Barbarism' puts Benjamin into dialogue with the non-philosophy of François Laruelle. Lammin argues that the 'impoverishment' of philosophy upon which Laruelle's method is based finds resonances in the figure of Benjamin's positive barbarian, with respect to the question of a productive poverty of experience. She then develops an analysis through tracing

the radicalization of experience in both Benjamin and Laruelle, before finally considering how Laruelle's approach can be applied to the contemporary media environment to study the effects of digital technologies on experience.

The last article, Stefano Calzati's 'A Proposal for Survival: Barbaric Strategies in the Realm of Digital Technologies', returns to notions of survival, specifically in the contemporary media context. Calzati situates his discussion by giving an account of empirical research conducted by himself and a colleague, to investigate the influence of social media on self-representation. The results of this research – which point towards loss of memory, reflection and self-awareness – inform his proposals for new media literacies as barbaric tools for survival. The article ends by appealing to a more radical set of barbaric strategies in the figure of the hacker, who Calzati suggests holds the potential to use the language of technology to disrupt technology's exploitative logics.

As these contributions demonstrate, Benjamin's theorization of a positive barbarism may provide openings for unsettling the binaries that have shaped the so-called development of capitalist modernity. If we recognize that barbarism is not in opposition to civilization but inherent to it, we cannot, by the same token, oppose past and present, or technology and humanity. Therefore, this themed issue may be read as an attempt to think a kind of barbarism – immanent to our condition – that works within the technology-led dissolution of tradition and experience.

Notes

[1] Clark, Ecocriticism on the Edge, 1.
[2] Another example can be found in Bernard Stiegler's call for a 'neganthropic' move, enabling a passage towards a new human-technology phase. This suggests a means of negotiating the problem of 'the Anthropocene as a destiny that leads nowhere' through, rather than against, human-technology relations; specifically, by inverting the digital infrastructure that supports the data economy. See Stiegler, "Automatic Society," 136–37.
[3] Mignolo, "Delinking," 470–71.
[4] Boletsi, Barbarism and Its Discontents, 4.
[5] Benjamin, "Poverty and Experience," SW2, 732.
[6] Boletsi, Barbarism and Its Discontents, 123.
[7] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 104.
[8] Boletsi, Barbarism and Its Discontents, xii.
[9] Williams, Keywords, 59.

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