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## BLASTING THE PAST: A REREADING OF WALTER BENJAMIN'S *THESES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY*

### ABSTRACT

The text offers a reappraisal of Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*; 'On the Concept of History') from the perspective of global politics today and its similarities with the socio-economic and political situation in Europe and the Americas during the 1920s and 30s; more specifically, the impact of crises on the erosion of trust in liberal representative democracy and the concomitant rise of mostly rightwing populist movements and their strongmen leaders, aided to a significant degree by the media, 'old' and 'new' alike. The purpose of the text is to draw lessons from Benjamin's vision of materialist historiography for our current political predicament.

### KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin, history, historical materialism, historicism, progress, Karl Marx, allegory, narrativity, continuum of history, Fascism

In April this year (2019), the Faculty of Media and Communication (*Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, FMK*) in Belgrade hosted a one-day scholarly academic conference, titled *The (Post)Digital Age: Media, Business, Technology, Trust*. The conference featured a selection of keynote speakers from the United Kingdom and the United States, including Andrew McStay of Bangor University (UK), Mara Einstein of the City University of New York, Christopher Hackley of Royal Holloway London, and Des Freedman of Goldsmiths, London, as well as Lazar Džamić from the Faculty of Media and Communication. The keynotes were accompanied by a panel discussion between the audience and several prominent figures from Serbia's academic and business community in the field of media, including Aleksandar Fatić from the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (*Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju*); Goran Tomka from the Faculty of Sport and Tourism (*Fakultet za sport i turizam*) at the University of Novi Sad; Branimir Brkljač, story-maker and founder of Mokrin House; and Uroš Krčadinac from the Faculty of Media and Communication. The panel was moderated by Danica Čigoja Piper (FMK). The main topics addressed in the keynotes and panel discussion included the digital as the first meta-medium and indispensable infrastructural paradigm of our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including not only media, but also education, politics, business,

retail, and marketing, and much more concerning our everyday lives; the notion of revolution in the digital revolution; the work of paratexts in digital communication; the ethics of Internet marketing; issues in empathic technology, and much more.<sup>1</sup>

Following the conference, I was asked to do a brief interview with Des Freedman, one of the keynote speakers. Provoked by some of the issues he raised in his talk as well as a number of recent and not so recent developments in European and international politics, I asked him whether and, if yes, to what extent he would draw parallels between the situation in global economics and politics during the 1920s and 30s, especially in Europe and North America, and our present socio-economic and political predicament. Specifically, some of the parallels that came to my mind included the economic and other crises of the 1930s and our own time;<sup>2</sup> the erosion of trust in and decline of liberal representative democracy throughout 1930s Europe (with a few noble exceptions) and even more widely today;<sup>3</sup> the concomitant rise of typically rightwing populist movements<sup>4</sup> personalised by their more or less charismatic leaders, such as Mussolini in 1920s Italy and, to a lesser extent, Hitler in Germany, as well as, today, Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and many others,<sup>5</sup> offering seemingly easy

1 More information about the conference may be found at FMK, internet.

2 ‘As we find ourselves entering the adolescent years of the twenty-first century, it appears that we are well and truly living in the age of crisis – the Global Financial Crisis, the Eurozone crisis, environmental crisis, various humanitarian crises – the list goes on. More broadly, it is alleged that we are undergoing a crisis of faith in democracy’, wrote Benjamin Moffitt in 2016 (Moffitt 2016: 118). For more on crisis, real or perceived, as a major if not the main catalyst of populism, see also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 100, 106 and Anselmi 2018: 37. Moffitt still ventures the farthest in concentrating on crisis as the main factor in the rise of populism, when he writes, for instance, that ‘if we do not have the performance of crisis, we do not have populism’ and that ‘the performance of crisis should be seen as internal to populism – not just as an external cause or catalyst for populism, but also as a central feature of the phenomenon itself’ (Moffitt 2018: 123).

3 For more on the current erosion of trust in liberal democracy, see, for instance, Birgit Sauer’s diagnosis of ‘a wider and deeper liberal-democratic crisis’ in the western world (Sauer et al. 2018: 159). For a detailed discussion of liberal democracy as the main target of populism, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017. For discussions of populism’s threat to liberal democracy, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 79–91; Anselmi 2018: 41, 89; and Moffitt 2016: 148–152.

4 ‘These are good times for populism’, Moffitt writes in his book, titled *The Global Rise of Populism* (Moffitt 2016: 162). Similarly, Manuel Anselmi notes ‘a global populist rise’ (Anselmi 2018: 108), while Toril Aalberg describes populism as ‘an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in European politics’ (Aalberg et al. 2017: 3). For more on the global rise of populism, see also Mazzoleni 2014: 44, Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 21–40, and Lochocki 2018.

5 ‘Most populist movements are initiated by charismatic figures that tend to become absolutist leaders and authority figures’, writes Gianpietro Mazzoleni (Mazzoleni 2014: 45). In the view of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘populism implies the emergence of a strong and charismatic figure, who concentrates power and maintains a direct

and ‘common sense’ solutions (e.g. ‘Build that wall!’) to the crises and various social grievances of their day, whether real or imagined;<sup>6</sup> their ‘solutions’, usually predicated on pitting an ostensibly inclusive but really exclusionary notion of ‘the people’, honest and hardworking, against corrupt elites<sup>7</sup> and various Others in Manichean, ‘us vs. them’ dualist incendiary rhetoric, whether targeting ‘international Jewry’, Free Masons, Bolsheviks, and others, as in the 1930s, or refugees, immigrants, and other minorities today, and aimed at minority rights, checks and balances, and other mainstays of liberal democracy;<sup>8</sup> and, last but not least, the complicity, often knowing, of both ‘old’ (traditional, legacy) elite, mainstream and commercialised tabloid media, seeking to improve their bottom lines, and ‘new’ media – wireless telegraphy, radio, and sound film in the 1920s and 30s and the Internet, that is, various media (web portals, social networks, applications, and the like) supported by the Internet, whose massive reach and, in our time, interactivity, virality, and lack of regulation and ‘gate-keeping’ (i.e. censorship) have massively benefited the spread of extremist rightwing populist political messaging.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, many of these parallels have already been drawn by a number of scholars in political science, media and communication studies, and other fields. For instance, populist elements in Nazism and especially Italian fascism have been discussed by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 33) as well as Gianpietro Mazzoleni, who identifies some of Europe’s 1920s and 30s populist movements with fascism when

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connection with the masses’ (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 4). According to Moffitt, the populist leader is ‘the key performer of contemporary populism’ (Moffitt 2016: 16). For more detailed discussions on the centrality of leaders to most populist movements, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017 and Moffitt 2016: 16.

6 See more detailed discussions in Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 68 and Moffitt 2016: 52, 131–132.

7 For more on the populist construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’, as well as its Manichean anti-elitist discourse, see Aalberg et al. 2017: 14–15 (‘the communicative construction of “the people” [...] constitutes the undisputed core of populist communication’); Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 5–12, 104–105; Anselmi 2018: 8 (‘A discursive, argumentative communication style that is always Manichean’); and Moffitt 2016: 107 (‘“the people” is not a pre-existing social group [...] Rather, “the people” only come to be “rendered-present” through mediated representation, which in populism is usually linked with the image of the leader’).

8 On nativism and the exclusion of all Others in the construction of ‘the people’ in contemporary populism as well as *das Volk* in its 1930s version, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Lochocki 2018: 8–25; Moffitt 2016: 52, 149; and Herf 2013, 91.

9 Moffitt’s assertion that ‘the media are never just neutral “loudspeakers” for populist performances but are actually active participants, often presenting themselves as proxies for “the people” and answering claims on their behalf’ is a compelling and succinct summary of this complicity (Moffitt 2016: 102). For more detailed discussions, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 103–114, Anselmi 2018: 81–86, Moffitt 2016, Reinemann et al. 2019: 6, Mazzoleni 2018: xv–xvi, and Wodak 2018, xvii–xx. For more on the Nazis’ use of what were then new media, see Etlin 2002: xviii; Tworek 2019: 99, 118; Hilmes 2013: 201–202.

he writes that some of them ‘ultimately developed into the Fascist parties that came to power in Italy, Spain, Germany and Portugal’ (Mazzoleni 2014: 44). Ernesto Laclau, one of the most prominent theorists who analysed populism, drew another parallel when he wrote that ‘[w]ithout the slump of the 1930s, Hitler would have remained a vociferous fringe ringleader’ (Laclau 2005: 177), just like today’s populists arguably owe their success to the crisis of 2008 and ensuing upheavals. Moffitt likewise notes that ‘there are historical precedents [to today’s populism] in totalitarianism, in which the leader functions as the embodiment of a unified society’ (Moffitt 2016: 63–64); ‘In both [totalitarianism and populism], the leader is the figure that represents “the people”, bringing together and uniting them against enemies’ (Moffitt 2016: 72).<sup>10</sup> Regarding the advent of wireless telegraphy and radio in the 1920s and today’s new media, Heidi Tworek provides some interesting parallels: ‘Wireless was the first technology to reach vehicles on the move, the first to become instantaneous point-to-many technology, the first where physical connections were not necessary to reach each receiver’ (Tworek 2019: 13). Further interesting parallels could still be made between the opportunistic love-hate relationships that 1930s populists and their modern successors have cultivated with mainstream media, which they decried then as *Lügenpresse* and *Systempresse* (‘lying media’, ‘system media’) much as they decry it now as ‘fake news’ and ‘enemies of the people’, unhesitant to use it to further their own agendas (Tworek 2019: 170; Moffitt 2016: 87) as well as the calculated mixing of entertainment and propaganda on German radio under Goebbels and in today’s ‘infotainment’, etc. (Anselmi 2018: 81).

Responding to my question, then – to what extent would you draw parallels between the political and socio-economic situation in Europe and beyond during the 1920s and 30s and today – Des Freedman gave the following response:

Any question that encourages us to think historically, making links, tracing continuities and discontinuities between different historical periods is likely to generate a more profound, a more complex account of the world in which we live. So, without wanting to say that these two periods [...] are the same, I think it’s important to reflect on some of the similarities. And also, I think, by doing that, it helps us to think there is something that is both new, about our current era, but also something that we have faced before.

So, in terms of that, quite clearly the rise of a form of right-wing populism, forms of propaganda and disinformation that were not invented in the digital era, but certainly were intensified in the 1930s in very powerful and disastrous ways, we should be learning from those periods and not just locating everything as if it started in 2001 or even this decade. In terms of the rise of racism,

<sup>10</sup> For more on populist leaders’ self-positing as both ‘ordinary men’ and extraordinary figures in terms of ‘embodying the people’ and directly channelling their general will, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 43–64; Anselmi 2018: 8, 20; and Moffitt 2016: 60–74.

anti-Semitism, a distrust of strangers, of foreigners and so on, there are important continuities between the two periods and we should be learning, I think, some lessons particularly about the media, of how we should not let claims about the dangers of immigration go unchallenged. [...] you can see some of that coverage in the 1930s in the newspapers in a way in which we see much of that in 2019 in new digital forms.

So it seems to be very useful to learn the lessons of the 1930s and to act decisively against those political forces [...].<sup>11</sup>

Motivated by Freedman's response, I decided to use this paper not only as an opportunity to draw our attention to the disturbing parallels between the 1930s and our own time, which I attempted to do above, as succinctly as possible, but also, in what follows, to offer a discussion of a short but famous philosophical fragment from that era, bequeathed to us by one of its most tragic philosophical figures: Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, 'On the Concept of History'), because in my mind, some 80 years later, Benjamin's political re-conceptualisation of history still offers us a chance to learn from his tragic time, to learn useful lessons from the 1930s, as Freedman put it, and equip us with potent conceptual and philosophical weapons 'to act decisively against those political forces', 'something that we have faced before'. In his *Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*, Rolf Goebel asks: 'Is our time – late capitalist postmodernity in the age of globalizing politics and digital media – particularly destined to actualize Walter Benjamin?' (Goebel 2009: 1). While I am not sure if our time is particularly destined for anything, Benjamin's continued relevance today does strike me as evident. Writing in the same volume, Marc de Wilde described Benjamin's thought in the *Theses* as 'still valuable and relevant for us today', as 'a critique of totalitarian ideologies that, to this date, has remained unsurpassed in philosophical depth and rigor' (De Wilde 2009: 177). In what follows, I hope to show why, with regard to some of our most pressing political concerns today.

For reasons that I will presently make apparent, I begin with a quick biographic reminder. Walter Benjamin wrote his *Theses* during the final months of his Parisian exile, probably in the Spring of 1940 and only weeks before the collapse of France, followed by Benjamin's own death by suicide in late September of the same year, in a failed attempt to reach the relative safety of Spain and from there emigrate to the United States. Published posthumously in 1942 by Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, even though Benjamin himself had never intended them for publication, the *Theses* are typically cited as Benjamin's last finished work. As Uwe Steiner notes, they 'are emphatically thought to be Benjamin's legacy not only on the basis of their place in the context of his writings, but more even in view of the historical circumstances under which they were written' (Steiner 2004: 173).

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11 An integral version of Freedman's response is available at Freedman, internet.

And those circumstances were truly terrible. While Benjamin was at no point in his life blessed with a tranquil existence – his ‘life was, by choice and circumstance, predicated on the perennial experience of dislocation, exile, and ruination’ (Goebel 2009: 7) – his circumstances, financial and otherwise, were steadily deteriorating throughout the 1930s, until the catastrophe of September 1940. As a German-Jewish intellectual seeking refuge in Paris from the Nazis’ persecution of Jews in Central Europe, Benjamin lived there in a sort of double exile, often in abject poverty as well. Always a fierce critic of fascism, which for him meant both German National Socialism and its Italian counterpart, Benjamin watched fascism’s peace and wartime gains with horror and alarm, which are all too audible in the *Theses*. However, the year 1940 also saw the signing of the infamous German-Soviet Nonaggression Treaty, which in Benjamin’s eyes irredeemably compromised not only the version of state communism practised in Stalin’s Soviet Union, already damaged by the purges and show trials of the 1930s, but also the European communist movement as a whole. ‘It was his disappointment with Communism that led Benjamin to write the theses. His main motive was to understand why Communism had betrayed its cause by siding with Fascism instead of opposing it’, De Wilde writes (De Wilde 2009: 179), although one would probably want to qualify his ‘Communism’ as ‘Soviet state communism’ or ‘European party communism of the 1930s’, since Benjamin, as I attempt to show below, remained a communist, albeit perhaps in a utopian sense, to the end of the *Theses* and his life.

In my mind, familiarity with this historical context is vital to understanding the notoriously cryptic prose of the *Theses*. On an objective level, the prose is cryptic because the *Theses* were only a sketch, not intended for publication, but, as Esther Leslie nicely put it, ‘intended to say so much with few words’; their ‘cryptic, poetic references derive a language for thinking when language has failed’ (Leslie 2000: 175). And in 1940s Europe, language may have failed indeed. However, as I seek to show below, the *Theses* grow perhaps a bit less cryptic when read through the lens of Benjamin’s concrete and urgent concern with Europe’s predicament at the time, that is, the seemingly unstoppable march of fascism (including Nazism) and the abject and complicit defeatism and acquiescence of its conservative and social-democratic, even communist enablers. As I try to show below, this shaped Benjamin’s perception of what he refers to in the *Theses* as ‘historical materialism’, which substantially diverges from its orthodox or ‘vulgar’ Marxist conception, embodying Benjamin’s implicitly ambivalent stance on the Marxist conception of history.

Thesis I is a good place to start, not only because it happens to be Benjamin’s opening thesis, but also because it incorporates the ambivalence noted above; it is also a famous instance of Benjamin’s ‘cryptic, poetic references’. Benjamin here tells the story of the famed chess automaton: a chess-playing puppet dressed in ‘Turkish’ garb, for which (almost) nobody is a match. In fact, there is a dwarf inside the cupboard underneath the puppet, proficient in chess and hidden behind an intricate system of mirrors. ‘One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device’, Benjamin writes, positing the story as an

allegory of (his version of) ‘historical materialism’: ‘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 wizened and has to keep out of sight’ (Benjamin 1968: 255). Over the past 80 years, much ink has been spilled trying to decipher this allegory, from Gershom Scholem’s early readings, in which he interpreted the allegory as Benjamin’s break with historical materialism and, by extension Marxism, and return to theology and metaphysics, arguably in line with Scholem’s own interests and ideological positions, to the present paper and some of the works cited in it; indeed, 80 years on, Benjamin’s allegory continues to fascinate. Is it, to the contrary, an acknowledgement of the conceptual supremacy of (Benjamin’s) ‘historical materialism’ over other conceptions of history? Or is it, perhaps, a thinly veiled irony, or suspicion, perhaps? For there is something not unequivocally positive in locating historical materialism in the *puppet*, an inanimate automaton operated by a hidden impostor, a ‘wizened dwarf’.<sup>12</sup> And crucially, what did Benjamin mean by ‘theology’ in this and the remaining Theses, which ‘has to keep out of sight’? Out of whose sight? Presumably out of its opponent’s sight, sitting across the chessboard; but who might be this opponent?

I will address that final question first, as an avenue to tackling the other two. If, according to Benjamin’s allegory, ‘historical materialism’ is to be situated in the puppet, its opponent, in the *Theses* and the allegory itself, must be ‘historicism’. ‘Historicism is the enemy’, Esther Leslie notes (Leslie 2000: 195). Benjamin explicitly names and subjects it to a severe critique throughout the text, most notably in Theses VI, VII, XIV, XVI, and XVII. As Thesis VI makes it clear, what Benjamin means by historicism is the ruling German, that is, Prussian 19<sup>th</sup>-century conception of history, epitomised by Leopold von Ranke’s famous dictum that history ought to be told ‘the way it really was’ (Benjamin 1968: 257), by objectively *uncovering* causal historical narratives in the past, mostly by studying written historical sources. Benjamin resolutely rejects this ‘antiquarian interest in history’ (Steiner 2004: 170) and ‘the archival complacency of nineteenth-century historicism’ (Goebel 2009: 12), on two counts. First, because, as De Wilde correctly notes, following Ranke’s prescription means ‘in fact serving the ruling classes’, because ‘the image of the past, as it is constructed and read in the present, is always implicated in a certain configuration of power’ (De Wilde 2009: 186). Second, and perhaps more importantly for our purposes here, Benjamin also rejects historicism on account of its particular conception of historical time. In this long intellectual tradition, time is conceptualised as ‘empty’ and ‘homogeneous’, an empty linear continuum, through which the history of humankind, rationalised as irreversible progress toward the mystical endpoint of history as its *telos*, irresistibly unfolds. While Uwe Steiner is right that Ranke, for whom all epochs were ‘equally close to God’ (Steiner 2004: 172), did not subscribe to this idea of progress through history, it was taken for granted by subsequent generations of mostly nationalist,

12 In more recent translations, the dwarf is described as ‘small and ugly’.

conservative Prussian and German historians of the historicist school, led by Johann Gustav Droysen. Its philosophical underpinning can be found already in Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, for instance, where history is conceptualised as the unstoppable progress of human consciousness toward (a strictly circumscribed) freedom, which the subject, led by God's hand, leans to accept as his 'second nature' (Hegel 1900: 18–19). A more materialistic version of the same metaphysical position may be seen in Adam Smith's concept of the 'invisible hand', which allegedly guides humans in fulfilling their own selfish needs, whereby they also contribute to the general progress of humanity without necessarily realising it (Smith 1920: 220–222).

While it might be objected that this metaphysical conception of history entails a blind leap of faith, Benjamin was more concerned about its disturbing political implications. He addresses those implications already in Thesis VI, but nowhere as clearly and compellingly as in Theses VII, IX, and X. They concern historicism's aestheticisation of history as a progress narrative, which inevitably imposes the present on us – however terrible that present might be – as a natural, inevitable, and therefore unobjectionable stage in its unfolding, if not its final outcome. The historicist idealises this traumatic past and present by always and only empathising with the victors, Benjamin writes in Thesis VII, thus perpetuating the suffering of the oppressed, who are left out, erased from this narrative in which not even the dead are spared. In Leslie's apt summary, historicism presents 'a mass of facts to fill up empty and homogeneous time where history passes by without human input, a tale of great men, like us but not quite like us little people'. Its central strand is 'the conception of a continual progressive course of history as a pile-up of event after event. [...] Historicism deals in empathy with the version of the historical past present by the ruling class. This past is closed to re-evaluation from the perspective of the oppressed' (Leslie 2000: 195). In Thesis IX, his famous and extremely powerful reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin posits history precisely not as a progress narrative, but as a 'single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage into a pile of debris' that 'rises skywards', from which the angel of history seeks to avert his eyes but to no avail (Benjamin 1968: 259–260).

When one remembers only the horrors of humanity's alleged progress that Benjamin witnessed in his relatively brief lifetime – industrialised mass killing of millions of people in two world wars, aggravated by ruthless persecution of entire ethnic groups simply on account of their ethnicity – it is hardly surprising that Benjamin rejected a progressivist conception of history that implicitly stabilised such horrors as logical, natural, and inevitable. He saw fascism 'grounded in a dogmatic form of "historicism", which represented the existing power relations as the only possible outcome of history, as its "fate" and "destiny"' (De Wilde 2009: 179). In Steiner's eloquent summary: 'The catastrophe of Fascism which faith in progress had considered impossible, comes as no surprise to those for whom the course of history until now had meant not progress but continuous suppression' (Steiner 2004: 171). Likewise today, 80 years on, when history 'keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' in the shape of



more wars and genocide, albeit more localised, and human suffering in general, which is already being exacerbated by the climate crisis, itself another product of humanity's historical and technological 'progress' that arguably threatens its very survival, with our populist leaders doing nothing to alleviate it, Benjamin's rejection of this spurious notion of progress still rings true. Benjamin 'wants to suggest that the rulers who have ruled need not always rule', to borrow Esther Leslie's conclusion; 'It need not go on like this. It must not go on like this, for this is hell. Progress, the continuation of business as usual, is catastrophic' (Leslie 2000: 168).

This is where Benjamin's 'historicism' and 'historical materialism' part ways – in the latter's rejection of the former's view of historical past as unbroken progress through the empty continuum of time. In one of his central Theses, Thesis VII, Benjamin writes: 'There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken' (Benjamin 1968: 258). That method, Benjamin continues, is the progressivist historiography of historicism, which has never ceased to empathise with the victors and marginalise the vanquished, upon whose oppression and suffering the dominance of the victorious has been predicated. Consequently, a large part of Benjamin's own work in historiography, most notably in the *Arcades Project*, is concerned with the material lives and lived experiences of the downtrodden, the bohemians of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris. But as Steiner correctly notes, Benjamin's historical materialism cannot 'be identified with its actual historical emanations', that is, with orthodox or 'vulgar' Marxist historical materialism (Steiner 2004: 169). This is because one of the axioms of so-called vulgar historical materialism is that history comprises a steady, unbroken, and irreversible expansion, or progress, of the forces of production, to which the relations of production necessarily, *structurally*, conform. This conforming is accomplished through revolutions, periodical upheavals that overthrow old relations of production and impose new ones. As soon as the productive forces have outgrown the existing relations of production, the latter *must* yield to their configuration and a revolution *must* occur. Perhaps the most explicit outline of this determinist and progressivist view of history is found in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1970: 21–22).

To that, one might object that revolutions do perforate the Marxian continuum of time; but Marx, in fact, posits them rather as mere stages in the *progress* of the forces of production. The only real stopping point will be the final revolution, the destruction of capitalism at the hands of the proletariat. But that will also be the final revolution and, strictly speaking, the only genuine revolution, which will finally liberate the real potentials of humanity, currently enfettered by the alienation of waged labour, itself predicated on the imposition of private property. In Marx's view, capitalism is a special case, because it not only expands the productive forces beyond a level it can structurally accommodate, but also because it begets its own archenemy, the revolutionary class consciousness of the proletariat. In this view, then, capitalism itself necessarily harbours the seeds of its own destruction; its *structural* aporiae will

eventually spell its doom. This is what qualifies ‘vulgar’ historical materialism as a steady progress narrative, just like Benjamin’s understanding of historicism, albeit with a clear *telos* in sight.

Given the historical juncture that Benjamin occupied, it is hardly surprising if for him that *telos* was no more believable than it is for us today. The dangerous implication of ‘vulgar’ historical materialism, which it shared with Benjamin’s notion of ‘historicism’, was its implicit naturalisation of fascism, if not as the *telos* of history, then as a historically necessary and inevitable stage in the progress of productive forces, regardless of its sheer inhumane horror. In Benjamin’s words, the danger lurked in the historicist imposition of fascism as a ‘historical norm’. While, admittedly, the *Theses* do not feature an explicit critique of the progressivist determinism of the orthodox Marxist conception of history, instead juxtaposing Benjamin’s notion of historicism with that of historical materialism – which is perhaps one of the most confusing aspects of Benjamin’s last work – the discrepancies between Benjamin’s ‘historical materialism’ and that of Marx’s classical writings are too glaring to overlook.<sup>13</sup> That is why Benjamin asserts in Thesis VIII: ‘One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm’ (Benjamin 1968: 259) – not merely due to Stalin’s betrayal of the antifascist struggle with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, but more profoundly, on account of ‘vulgar’ Marxism and historical materialism’s normalisation of fascism as a necessary stage in its own progressivist view of history. That is why the *Theses* are, in Esther Leslie’s summary, ‘a late attempt to write a dialectical philosophy of history that denounces the content of inherited ideologies of progress’ – historicism and ‘vulgar’ Marxism or historical materialism alike (Leslie 2000: 205). They voice ‘a bitter critique of political doctrines – vulgar Marxism and reformist social democracy included – whose theories of history and political praxis are united by forms of inevitabilism or secular forms of fatalism. The implication is that from their theories of history the victory of fascism was unforeseeable, and their political practice was inadequate’ (Leslie 2000: 169).

Instead of the historicist and ‘vulgar’ Marxist view of history as progress through an empty continuum of time, Benjamin offers his vision or ‘redemption of historical materialism’ (Leslie 2000: 200) based on the concept of *Jetztzeit*, the now-time. He introduces this neologism partly to draw a clear distinction between it and the present, *Gegenwart*, which are therefore strictly not synonymous. While there is an inkling of now-time already in Theses V and VI, to which I will presently return, Benjamin withholds a fuller explanation of the term until the final five Theses. Here, now-time approximates a singular cultural-historical object, for instance, the mourning play of the German Baroque, which is regarded not merely as a transitory episode in the progress narrative of history, as it would be in historicism or vulgar Marxism, but as a *monad*, an autonomous cultural-historical object addressed in its own right. ‘History is the

13 For instance, see Marx 1992: xxvii–xxviii, Marx 1971: 120–122, and Marx & Engels 1966: 68–73.

subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now', Benjamin writes in Thesis XIV (Benjamin 1968: 263). He then elaborates on the contrasting conceptions of time in historicism and his vision of 'historical materialism' in Thesis XVI: 'Historicism gives the "eternal" image to the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past' (Benjamin 1968: 264). This is partly how Theses V and VI may be understood, where Benjamin posits the historical past not as a narrative, as a story, but as a picture that 'flits by', as a fleeting image that 'flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again' (Benjamin 1968: 257). Narrativity is so deeply ingrained in our conception of history, that a non-narrative history may be difficult to imagine. Indeed, in most European languages, Romance, Germanic, and Slavic, narrativity is etymologically inscribed in the word 'history', where it typically equals or approximates the word 'story'. History must make sense as a story, as a narrative, even if that means cutting out, suppressing whatever does not fit – the vanquished and the oppressed – and thus perpetuating their suffering even in death. It is precisely this compulsion of narrativity that the (Benjaminian) materialist historian must resist, as Benjamin explains in Thesis VII. Instead, 'the materialist historian must blast specific moments of the past, moments that are in danger of being forgotten or marginalized by the course of history, out of the continuum of the [...] "homogeneous, empty time" [...] of universal history' (Goebel 2009: 12).

For Michael P. Steinberg, this privileging of the moment, the *Monad*, image, flash, over the flux of narrative, is an index of Benjamin's 'moral homage to the past in its actuality' (Steinberg 1996: 3). But more importantly, it reflects his interest in the past not just for its own sake (as in historicism), but as a weapon of political intervention in the present; 'redeeming knowledge of the past, in order to act in the present' (Leslie 2000: 168). In my mind, herein lies the gist of the final Theses, especially Thesis XVII, where he anchors 'materialist historiography' in 'a constructive principle'. This constructive principle involves setting up provisional 'constellations', in Benjamin's words, of specific now-times and using them as politically motivated allegories of the present. Allegories, not symbols, because an allegory does not arrest the flow of meaning between the *monads* that constitute it, does not freeze or rob them of their semantic of historical specificity. 'Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else', Benjamin wrote in his *Trauerspiel* project (Benjamin 1977: 175). Accordingly, Steinberg thus discusses Benjamin's engagement with the German Baroque mourning play, as a staged mourning (and therefore final repudiation) of total sovereignty and political totality that were shattered in the Thirty Years' War and an allegory of similar developments in German politics in the Weimar Republic (Steinberg 1996: 15–18). Perhaps we might then similarly remember the 1930s in Europe and use that period for a provisional constellation comprising that time and our own, as a politically motivated allegory of our present. It would perhaps remind us that some of what we are seeing in national, European, and global politics today – the seemingly irresistible rise of exclusionary rightwing populist politics on the wings of new media – is not

new, but must be recognised and fought and resisted, rather than normalised for the sake of a misguided belief in history as progress.

The task of the Benjaminian materialist historian is therefore to wrest the cultural-historical object from the (false) continuum of (historicist or ‘vulgar’ Marxist) history and use it as a politically pointed allegory of the present. If the historian is successful in this regard, s/he will have exploded, in Benjamin’s words, the continuum of history, which for him would be nothing short of revolution. This is because, as Goebel put it, ‘the presence of the past deconstructs the totalizing master-narrative of linear, teleological progress’ (Goebel 2009: 9). But this notion of revolution has little in common with the final revolution that Marx envisaged, described above, which will break the *materially real* continuum of history only once and for all, after which history will have reached its endpoint, unable to resume. Rather, the revolutionary interruption (‘explosion’) that Benjamin sought is of a conceptual kind: not the interruption of the continuum of time but of the historicist construction of the continuum of time, a political intervention that must be continually applied and reapplied with no guarantee of success. That is arguably why the ‘past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the moment when it can be recognized and is never seen again’ – unless a *Monad* is recognised as an allegory of the present, a now-time, it recedes back into the dark recesses of the past.

Therefore, the possibility of failure is fundamentally inscribed in Benjamin’s project of materialist historiography. In the opening Theses, Benjamin even goes so far as to posit history as a series of failures, missed opportunities that must be ‘redeemed’. That is the task of the Benjaminian materialist historian, endowed, like the rest of us, with *weak* Messianic power, the power to reclaim the missed opportunities of the past for the sake of building a less horrific present and future. I would link this *weak* Messianic power back to the wizened dwarf of Thesis I, the hidden theology whose services historical materialism must enlist in order to win every time. Perhaps this is the theology that must keep out of sight, hide from the pseudo-objective rigour of historicism and the blind belief in progress of ‘vulgar’ historical materialism. The puzzling invocation of theology in the *Theses* has caused some interpreters, starting with Gershom Scholem, to take it more or less literally; thus, for instance, De Wilde interprets it as ‘a theologically understood responsibility toward the past’, ‘a *theological* responsibility to save the past from the forces of forgetting’, the ‘theological origins’ of historical materialism (De Wilde 2009: 179, 181, 189).

However, I would side with those readers who resist such literal interpretations of Benjamin’s theology. In my mind, Steiner is right when he asserts that Benjamin’s theology is not ‘to be taken *à la lettre*’, that the ‘theological concept of redemption’ is given ‘a profane interpretation’ in the *Theses*, as ‘the immanently historical, topically political redemption of the unsettled claims of the past, of the victims and of the defeats suffered by past generations’, turning it therefore into an ‘anthropological-materialist’ and ‘political’ concept (Steiner 2004: 169–179). I would likewise agree with Esther Leslie when she asserts that Benjamin was ‘not concerned with developing or interpreting religious

doctrine in any sense' (Leslie 2000: 173). For, Benjamin's theology strikes me as strictly a politically motivated notion, seeking to redeem suppressed moments from the past in order to motivate and enable concrete political action in the present and future. After all, the Messianic power of the Benjaminian materialist historian is *weak*: it must be constantly negotiated and marshalled anew against the constructed but not for that reason any less totalitarian continuum of history, even though its success is by no means guaranteed. Benjamin's theological historical materialism or materialist historiography is thus a strictly constructivist political project, aware of and candid about its contingency on an anti-fascist political agenda.

In concluding, I would briefly return to another point made by Marc de Wilde. While I do not entirely agree with his literalist understanding of Benjamin's theology, I do find compelling his reading of Benjamin's *Theses* as 'a politics of remembrance' (although not necessarily 'originating from an theologically understood responsibility toward the past'). His notion that Benjamin conceived of his politics 'as an antidote to National Socialism and Communism, in which he recognized the forces of a mythical forgetting' (De Wilde 2009: 179) does strike me as worth remembering, especially if we seek to learn the lessons of our past, as I think we must, avoid committing the same errors, and stand up to the forces of a mythical forgetting of our own time, 'act decisively against' them, as Freedman put it in his response quoted above. Benjamin acted in his own time, and, tragically, failed, but the sheer relevance of his thought today suggests that his failure was not in vain.

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Žarko Cvejić

## Miniranje prošlosti: ponovno čitanje teza *O shvatanju istorije* Valtera Benjamina

### Apstrakt

Predmet teksta jeste preispitivanje teza *O shvatanju istorije* (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*) Valtera Benjamina iz ugla globalne politike danas i sličnosti sa društveno-ekonomskim i političkim stanjem u Evropi i Americi 20-ih i 30-ih godina 20. veka; preciznije, u članku se raspravlja o uplivu kriza i gubitka poverenja u liberalnu predstavničku demokratiju, kao i pratećeg uspona uglavnom desničarskih populističkih političkih pokreta i njihovih autoritarnih vođa, uz znatnu pomoć medija, i „starih“ i „novih“. Cilj teksta je da ponudi određene pouke iz Benjaminove vizije materijalističke historiografije radi uspešnijeg nošenja s našim trenutnim političkim (ne)prilikama.

Ključne reči: Valter Benjamin, istorija, istorijski materijalizam, istorizam, napredak, Karl Marks, alegorija, narativnost, istorijski kontinuum, fašizam