

'Of No Interest Except in Economic Terms': Benjamin on Business

Radio Benjamin by Walter Benjamin. London, Verso, 2014, ISBN 9781781685754. Pages: 394. £20 (hbk)

To claim that *Radio Benjamin* is not an obvious choice for 'business book of the year' is perhaps an understatement. It mainly contains historically overlooked children's stories from the early 1930s, written by a failed academic who declared them of 'no interest', and broadcast through the now antiquated medium of radio. And yet, when that failed academic is Walter Benjamin¹ perhaps we should refrain from such an instant judgement. In her excellent introduction editor Lecia Rosenthal points to the wide-ranging "generative, cross-disciplinary effects" (p. xv) Benjamin's work has registered, effects which if anything continue to be amplified through the years (viz. De Cock et al., 2013). For a writer who became so obsessed with the notion of 'redemption', there is at least some poetic justice in that his own tragic life somehow seems to be redeemed by the reception of his works today. But all this seemed not very likely when Benjamin, convinced he faced total annihilation, committed suicide in 1940, having left behind 12,000 manuscript pages in his Paris flat as he desperately tried to flee from the Gestapo. Some of these pages were the radio pieces contained in this volume. Their complex archival and publication history need not concern us here (again, Rosenthal's introduction provides wonderful insights), but we cannot but linger briefly on Benjamin's own negative attitude toward the "work he did for the money" which has contributed to their perception as "unimportant". In a letter dated February 28, 1933 to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin speaks of, "the series of countless talks, which [have] now come to an end, unfortunately, and are of no interest except in economic terms, but that is now a thing of the past" (reproduced on p. 220). Indeed, he usually mentions the radio broadcasts (August 1929 – January 1933) in the context of pressing financial concerns, "the work I do simply to earn a living" (p.xix). But we should read these dismissive comments in the context of an extreme historical situation: the day after Benjamin's last broadcast Hitler was appointed German Chancellor and the infamous Nazi torchlight parade monopolised the airwaves. By March 1933 Goebbels had become Head of German Radio, turning it into an instrument of state propaganda, thus dashing all Benjamin's emancipatory hopes for the new medium. This context makes the light touch and optimism we find in these radio pieces, turning the harshest workings of the world into an uplifting narrative, even more poignant. One can almost imagine Benjamin's famous *Angel of History* glancing towards paradise for the briefest of moments. Never again would there be such an optimistic tone to Benjamin's writing.

Twenty nine radio stories and two radio plays for children make up the bulk of the *Radio Benjamin* (pp.1-248). They are complemented with further radio talks, 'listening models', writings on radio and some miscellanea. These radio stories can roughly be divided into three overarching themes: Berlin (12), outsiders (witches, robbers, gypsies, swindlers, forgers, impostors, and bootleggers – 7) and

¹ Benjamin was thwarted in his efforts successfully to submit *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as his Habilitation thesis in July 1925 which meant he could not get an academic position in Germany.

catastrophes (6). Rosenthal captures the spirit of these stories well when she points out that, “Benjamin’s gaze often falls upon traces of disappearance and the vestiges of obsolete forms... In order to present such typologies of vanished life, Benjamin must catalogue and read their traces in the present” (p.xxii-xxiii). Such a focus on the “representation of social forms precisely in their moment of evanescence” (p. xxiii) is vintage Benjamin of course. But what surprised this particular reader is how many of these pieces are infused with insights from the commercial world: factories, department stores, markets, job descriptions, pay negotiations... Benjamin wants to tell the story of the world we have constructed for ourselves to live in, and that story simply cannot be told without talking about business and the world of work. In his story on the Borsig locomotive factory he suggests: “We have conspicuously avoided touching upon the one thing that has allowed Berlin to become a city of three million inhabitants... big industry and wholesale trade” (p.50). This particular story contains an in-depth description of how vertical integration works and documents an early version of Total Quality Management: “... a directory of people who have suggested improvements for whatever aspect of the company that they were especially familiar with. These suggestions are reviewed by the front office and sometimes remunerated.” (p.54). A later story on the Hirsch-Kupfer brass works has Benjamin marvelling about how such massive concerns came into being and what goes on in them: “It would be another story in itself to tell how [the company] came about. But the only thing that matters to me now is that, as you contemplate the innumerable parts, conditions, and difficulties of such an enormous factory, you have your breath taken away exactly as if you had unexpectedly stepped into one of its roaring halls” (p.71). Benjamin truly speaks the shop floor into being, leaving “your head spinning from so much noise, so many great impressions, some understood and some not” (p.75). The story on Naples has a great scene on street sellers, and ‘The Rental Barracks’ describes how capitalism has shaped the geography of Berlin. The book also contains an interesting little play called ‘Carousel of Jobs’ in which Benjamin talks about recent advances made in the “science of work” and “the concept of performance test” (p.284), and looks at two job descriptions in particular: that of the journalist and the slaughterer. He ends the talk with the remark that management and organization “is not only a question of the science of work and jobs, it is a question of the knowledge of human nature and the gift of observation, and that can leave no one who has ever considered it uninterested. To prompt you – many more of you – to consider it was the purpose of these words”. (p.291). Perhaps the strangest play is “A Pay Raise?! Whatever Gave You That Idea!”, an acted-out how-to guide for employees wanting to know how to deal with their boss. It puts forward a ‘listening model’ of self-interest and self-help which will sound very familiar to anyone who has ever attended a ‘strategic leadership’ seminar (or something of the kind). Individuals need only learn to be confident and persuasive enough to transcend any and all resistance to their cause, the model suggests:

“[The successful person] is clear, determined, and courageous. He knows what he wants and therefore he can remain both calm and polite at all times... Even in failure, he is composed. He is not easily discouraged. [He] considers his struggles to be a kind of sport, and he approaches them as he would a game. He contends with life’s difficulties in a relaxed and pleasant manner. He keeps a clear head even when things go wrong. And please believe me

when I tell you: successful people are never sore losers; they're the ones who don't whine and give up after every failure... Who will be first to fail the test? The timid and the faint of heart. The whingers, the complainers. He who goes to the exam cool and calm is already halfway there. Such people are in great demand today. That is, I believe, the secret of success". (p.302)

Against the background of Benjamin's own sense of indebtedness and failure, and an economic and political context in which the stakes of the game made 'success' an impossibility for most, we must surely read this piece alongside George Perec's (1968) satirical *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise* as instructions for the operation of a very complex system, whose internal structure the user does not in the least understand.

The didactical nature of this 'listening model' exemplifies well Benjamin's pedagogical approach using the new medium of radio. There is something truly beguiling indeed in Benjamin's enthusiasm for upholding the idealism and optimism of this young medium and in the way he tries to exploit its interactive potential. He displays a great sensitivity to the child's imagination and patience and brings abstract thinking always immediately down to the particular. His radio stories are not about the simple transfer of knowledge, rather they are meant to tease and challenge young minds and to subvert stable truths. For Benjamin education is very much about the indispensable ordering of the relationship between the generations, and therefore mastery of that relationship and *not* of children. He very much wants the children to play an active part and the stories are really about how to learn, how to see, how to engage, and how to question. 'Berlin Toy Tour 1' offers a wonderful example of this when Benjamin invites his audience to teach their parents a critique of commodity fetishism:

"So it's left to me to calmly say what I really think: the more someone understands something and the more he knows of a particular kind of beauty – whether it's flowers, books, clothing, or toys – the more he can rejoice in everything that he knows and sees, and the less he's fixated on possessing it, buying it himself, or receiving it as a gift. Those of you who listened to the end, although you shouldn't have, must now explain this to your parents". (p.43)

Benjamin always grounds the stories in the information his listeners already have and makes connections to the way they live, then makes them see something else and so takes them back into the story. He does not provide an authoritative account or close things down, but rather emphasizes the partiality of any account and the ongoing effects of history that may change how we relate to the past. The stories contain many ambiguities and fundamentally everything remains a mystery. All this involves an exceptional thoughtfulness and care which Benjamin describes at one point:

"Have you ever had to wait at the pharmacy and noticed how the pharmacist fills a prescription? On a scale with very delicate weights, ounce by ounce...That is how I feel when I tell you something over the radio. My weights are the minutes; very carefully I must weigh how much of this, how much of that, so the mixture is just right." (p.158)

We can draw obvious parallels with the didactic aims of his friend Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, which entices the audience to take a critical position toward the proceedings and the actors to take a critical position toward their role.

Perhaps a final notion to address, now that in our own academic times 'Impact' has become the new fetish, is that of popularity and the public. For Benjamin, it is precisely in relation to the understanding of popularity that radio should be most innovative. Whilst in 'the old style' (and is this 'old style' still not very much with us today?) popularization took its point of departure from a sound basis of scholarship and then proceeded by omitting the more difficult lines of thought, what Benjamin demands and strives for in contrast is "a total transformation and rearrangement of the material from the standpoint of popular relevance" (p.370); one where the interests and questions of the listener possess objective value and even call for new scholarly findings. As Benjamin emphasizes:

"In this way, the external relationship between scholarship and popularity that prevailed before is supplanted by an approach that scholarship itself cannot possibly forgo. *For here is a case of a popularity that not only mobilizes knowledge in the direction of the public, but mobilizes the public in the direction of knowledge. In a word: true popular interest is always active; it transforms the substance of knowledge and has an impact on the pursuit of knowledge itself*". (p.370 – emphasis added)

Politicians, research councils, and funding bodies take note! And with that *Radio Benjamin* gets my vote for 'business book of the year'.

References

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