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Midnight in History

Comentary on Walter Benjamin's theses: “On the Concept of History”

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INTRODUCTION

1

The theses “On the Concept of History” constitute a philosopher’s political response to a time in Europe’s history when there was no place for hope. They are inspired by that same spirit of resistance with which their author, Walter Benjamin, replied to his friend Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno in 1938, when he tried to convince Benjamin to leave Europe and join the line of Jewish exiles that had left the Old Continent behind, fleeing from fascism: “In Europe,” he said, “there are positions to defend.” He wanted to set his eyes on the Gorgon, that mythical, faceless figure that killed anyone who dared to look upon it, to extract from history the secret behind the evil that was looming over humanity. Some years earlier he had described his position as being like that of a shipwreck victim who climbs to the top of a mast that is already crumbling, in order to send out the most powerful rescue signal: “It was the position of a witness who chose, rather than happened, to be there” (Wohlfarth, 1997, 78).

It is precisely the fact that he sealed with his own death the role he had given himself as a "fire alarm"[1] that have endowed Benjamin's fragmentary texts with a singular authority. Did not Franz Rosenzweig —author of *The Star of Redemption*, the book always accompanied by its *Angelus Novus*, the Paul Klee painting that so inspired him in his personal crusade against savagery— assert that there is no greater truth than that which is defended with life itself (Rosenzweig, 2005, 439)? Of all his writings, it is these posthumous fragments, which he himself had baptized "Theses"[2], which are the most charged with this authority. If they continue to move us and inspire reflection today it is because, in addition to addressing the fascism of his time, they expose a historical logic that is still active.

The secret of the Theses is, indeed, their timeless relevance. They speak to us of something very close to us, but brought from far away or long ago: of deep roots that nourish the substance of things. Hence the sense of familiarity they evoke, in spite of the passage of time. For a time like ours, when coffee is consumed without caffeine, cream without fat and beer without alcohol, when wars are waged without fatalities (on our side, or course), when policies are instituted without politics – in other words, a time that offers us an existence bereft of substance because of the conflictive and bitter nature of such substance– the theses of "On the Concept of History" are provocative because they argue with a frankness that remains potent. According to the theses, all these attempts at desubstantialization can conceal but not eliminate the harsh reality of an insane world that profoundly traumatizes all those born into it and from which we cannot escape by ignoring the scars it leaves.

For those who have cushioned its sharp corners to prevent them from harming its inhabitants, this world may at first glance appear to have nothing in common with the midnight of the century in which Benjamin had to live. But, if we look closely, we will find they bear something more than a casual resemblance, something that is precisely what explains the current relevance of Benjamin's analysis. Indeed, today just as in the past, it is true that for the oppressed, the state of exception is the rule. The proliferation of the Welfare State, the spread of liberal democracy, the prestige of the discourse on human rights and the increased worldwide wealth as a result of economic globalization have not managed to render obsolete the compelling argument of Thesis VIII, that all this progress is achieved at the expense of a large part of humanity. And if there is no justice for some, even if they are few (which they are not), then all justice is placed in doubt. What is beyond all doubt is that justice can be suspended at the will of the powerful, that wars cause deaths and that wealth produces misery.

[1] An expression created by Benjamin himself and recovered by Michael Löwy for the title of his thought-provoking study of the Theses, cf. Löwy, 2005.

[2] His last writings according to his sister Dora, who typed them out during a visit she made to her brother in Paris. Letter from Dora Benjamin to Adorno (March 22, 1946), included in GS I/3, 1227 (Hereinafter the abbreviation "GS" will be used to refer to Walter Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, in collaboration with Th. W. Adorno and G. Scholem, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., 1972 et seq.).

The author of the Theses confronts this situation with a radical philosophical approach. The philosopher is a passerby who is able to express astonishment at situations that for the rest of humankind form part of the landscape. He is shocked, for example, that the rest of us can overlook the profound complicity between progress and fascism, or that we can so naturally accept the rationale of a world built on a logic of science and technology, or that we can take for granted that only the past of the victors has a future, or that politics is exclusively for the living, or that when we speak of the past we only accord meaning to the past of the victors. The problem is thus the crust of ideology that prevents us from seeing reality. The thinking that provokes this astonishment is radical because it is new thinking that goes against the grain of the established discourses of our cultural milieu, and also because it never loses sight of Man, who, as Marx says, is the root. We will clearly grasp the extent of this radicalism focused on the fate of man if we compare it with reflections focused on culture, such as, for example, multiculturalism, which can find excuses for the injustice or suffering of real people that philosophy cannot allow itself to do.

The Theses come from very deep and from very far. Benjamin spent more than twenty years pondering their content, but did not yet judge them ready for publication. They were still no more than "a bunch of little flowers picked on solitary walks." He was so conscious of their disconcerting originality that to publish them at that time would be to "throw wide open the doors to enthusiastic incomprehension." His dream was to write a critical history of modern society (for which the material we know as *The Arcades Project* had been written), and with these thoughts he sought to construct a theoretical armature for that history. He decided to put them down on paper in late 1939 and early 1940 because the war and all that surrounded him forced him to confront certain ideas that were so extreme that he had even tried to keep them from himself for many years[3].

The war had not surprised him; all the conditions for its outbreak were there. By this he did not mean the geopolitical excesses of fascism or the resentment produced by the Treaty of Versailles, but the development of technology. When society produces more technology than it can assimilate, war is declared to provide an outlet. What is truly surprising is not the conflict itself, but "everything that war brings with it". That which others take as natural or accept fatalistically is what unleashes in Benjamin the fury of philosophical reflection.

What is the source of this fury? The capitulation of the Western democracies and the Soviet Union to the Third Reich, through the Munich Treaty of 1938 and the German-Soviet Pact of 1939. The abandonment of the Spanish Republic to its fate while Hitler and Mussolini supported the rebels without hesitation seemed to forebode the worst, and the worst was the irrepressible desire of the French, English and Soviets to negotiate an agreement with the Nazis at any price. The

[3] This is what he tells Gretel Adorno in a letter in April 1940: "The war and the constellation that it brought with it have led me to jot down some thoughts about which I can say that I have kept them safe for twenty years, indeed I have even kept them safe from myself" (GS I/3, 1226-1227).

agreement between Stalin and Hitler not to attack one another and to divide Poland between them was the final evidence of the blindness of a policy that was not able to grasp the scope of Nazi ambitions. That pact was the end of all hope. As Gershom Scholem would later tell the writer Soma Morgenstern, Benjamin was profoundly disheartened by this agreement, apparently *contra naturam*, between communists and Nazis (Scholem, 1987, 225). For better or for worse – and in spite of having compared the practices of the Stalinist police to the Nazis a year earlier and considering Stalinism to be "a personal dictatorship with all its terror" – he still believed that for the time being it was necessary to continue to trust the Soviet Union as an "agent of our interests in a future war." It is true that it was a costly agent, demanding "the highest price imaginable insofar as it has to be paid with sacrifices that most particularly erode the interests that are dear to us as producers." Consequently, it was necessary to pay for the red confrontation of Nazism with the abandonment, at least provisionally, of the proletarian cause[4]. But the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact shattered that trust. The disillusionment that it provoked in Benjamin was not without a certain relief at feeling himself free at last to settle his accounts with communism. It was a relief mixed with rage.

For those fighting fascism, the pact smacked of betrayal. This is what surprised them. Yet it was nothing to be surprised about, argues Benjamin, if we take into account the values of conventional leftists. Didn't the socialists always say that they swam with the current? Hadn't Lenin claimed that communism was "soviets plus electrification"? Behind these two strategies lay the same faith in progress. It was the logic of progress that was fatal and the only thing to be surprised about was this blind faith in progress. This was the only valid form of astonishment, the only one of philosophical value. The pact needed to be understood for what it was: the final link in a chain that had led to the consummation of the betrayal[5].

Benjamin experienced this historic event, which plunged history into a dark night, under some very extreme generational and personal circumstances. He would say that these fragments "were not inspired only by the war, but also by the whole experience of my generation, the most sorely tested generation in history."[6] It seemed to him highly unlikely that his generation would do what the world expected of it —halt the deep-rooted cycle of blood and horror that threatened humanity. He was highly conscious of the fact that his generation was not up to the task; this is why he added his voice to Brecht's plea to future generations to look upon their failures with forbearance, because they had wanted to be friendly but could not be so. While the political situation was distressing, his personal experience was no less bleak. Exiled in Paris since the Nazis took power in 1933, he was quick to denounce the occupation of Poland by the German army. All German

[4] Letter to Horkheimer dated August 3, 1938, quoted in Löwy, 2005, 15-16.

[5] Brecht grasped this critical moment in the Theses well when he read them for the first time. That is why he comments on it with a hint of disdain "The small work is clear and unadorned (in spite of so many metaphors and Judaisms)" and "might have been written after reading my *Caesar*" (B. Brecht [1973] *Arbeitsjournal,* t. I, 1938-1942, Frankfurt a.M., 294 [quoted in GS I/3, 1228]).

[6] Letter to Stephan Lackner (May 5, 1940), quoted in Bonola and Ranchetti (eds.), 1997, 11.

Jews exiled in France became stateless persons and the Vichy government determined to send them to a "voluntary interment" camp. Benjamin had to go to Nevers, from where he was released thanks to the pressure of influential friends at the end of November. It was between that moment and the following spring that he must have written down the thoughts that compose the Theses. He felt a profound flow of words rushing from his pen, and he wrote to Gretel that the study of remembering (and of forgetting) would be occupying him for a long time. On January 11, 1940, he unhesitatingly renewed his library card at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, which was his true workplace. But his days were numbered. The whole of Europe was turning into a battleground, as the Netherlands, Belgium and France each fell like a house of cards to the *Wehrmacht*, and into a concentration camp for all free thinkers. In mid-June, shortly before the Germans took Paris, he "managed to get on the last train out of Paris. All I had with me was a small suitcase with two shirts and a toothbrush."[7] He left behind him an occupied city, with a cultural elite consisting of the likes of Ernst Jünger, who earned a few extra francs translating the farewell letters of hostages who were to face the firing squad; Carl Schmitt, who gave talks on international law; and von Karajan, who entertained the soldiers in their leisure time with Wagner's *Tristan*. Ahead of him were a group of fugitives traveling as far away as possible from their former countrymen. Benjamin headed for *le Midi*, perhaps because his sister Dora was being held near Lourdes. He spent two months in hiding in Lourdes, consumed with the fate of the precious papers he had left behind[8] and with the wait for other papers: a visa, which was to come from the United States thanks to the diligent work of the Frankfurters Horkheimer and Adorno. A letter to the latter, dated August, reveals his state of mind:

> The complete uncertainty about what the next day and even the next hour will bring has dominated my existence for many weeks. I am condemned to read every newspaper... like a summons that has been served on me and to detect in every radio broadcast the voice of the messenger of bad tidings.

At the end of August he arrived in Marseilles, where the U.S. consulate delivered the longed-for visa. He still had to make it to Lisbon, where he would board a ship that would take him away from Europe. And this meant not only crossing Spain, whose policy towards Jewish refugees was unpredictable, but also getting out of France without permission. On September 23, the small group boarded a train in Marseilles for Perpignan and then on to Port-Vendres. The rest of the journey would have to be made on foot to avoid police checkpoints. They crossed the Spanish border on September 25, along the "Lister Route", guided by Lisa Fittko. Through her we know that Benjamin traveled carrying a heavy bag which slowed his pace considerably, but which he nevertheless refused to give up. It was "the most important thing" he would tell those who asked him to drop it so that they

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[7] Quoted by H. Arendt in Rolf Tiedemann's article "This Side of Auschwitz: Walter Benjamin's Route to Portbou." Available online at <http://www.blockwb.net/Templates/Tcatalegs1.html>

[8] He had entrusted the manuscript of *The Arcades Project* to Georges Bataille, who stored it at the Bibliotheque Nationale, thereby saving it.

could pick up the pace, no doubt because it contained a manuscript that "must be saved at all costs. It is more important than my own person" (Witte, 1997: 205). Only at the end of the journey did he lack the strength to carry it on the roughest leg of the route and needed others to give him a hand. Even though he was only 48 years old, he was not in good health. The fugitives arrived at the Spanish border town of Port Bou at dusk on the 25th. The Spanish police would not let them to go on because, as stateless persons, they did not have French permission to leave the country. They allowed them to spend the night in a boarding house in the town before being handed over the next day to the French police and, therefore, to the Gestapo. The prospect of another camp was too much for Benjamin, who had already seriously considered the possibility of suicide. That very night he decided to poison himself "with morphine tablets" (according to travel companion Henny Gurland[9]) from which he died around ten p.m. on the 26th. The police, alarmed by the death but uncertain as to whether it was the result of a suicide, allowed the rest of the group to continue the journey; before doing so, the group arranged Walter Benjamin's burial in the local graveyard. They bought a plot for five years, where they buried his remains on September 28. The remains stayed there until 1945, when they were moved to the graveyard ossuary. Thus, Franz Kafka's bleak prediction that "there is much hope, but not for us" became a reality. The man who had turned himself into a rag-picker to rummage around in the garbage heap of history until he found a grain of hidden hope among the hopeless was unable to apply that hope to his own life. The famous suitcase with those precious documents has never been found.

It was indeed midnight in the century when the life of Walter Benjamin came to an end. His life was extinguished, but not his star. Those few pages that make up the text "On the Concept of History"[10] have survived him after a remarkable history. A copy of the manuscript was sent by the author to his distant relative Hannah Arendt, who in turn sent it to Adorno. On learning of his death, Adorno and Horkheimer decided to publish it as a posthumous tribute in 1942 in a mimeograph volume bearing the title *Walter Benjamin in Memoriam*, published by the Institute for Social Research in Los Angeles. Adorno had prepared a note in which he reconstructed the history of the text, based on Benjamin's letter to his wife, Gretel Adorno. Although the text had a reserved quality, Benjamin's death "makes the publication a duty. The text has become a testament. Its fragmentary form carries the order to keep faith with the truth of these ideas through thinking" (GS I/3, 1224). The introductory note was not published and in its place appeared the following sober dedication, signed by Horkheimer and Adorno: "We dedicate these contributions to the memory of Walter Benjamin. The historical philosophical theses at the front are Benjamin's last work." The publication went unnoticed. Pierre Missac, Benjamin's dedicated French translator, published them in *Temps*

[9] Quoted in Rolf Tiedemann, "This Side of Auschwitz…" op. cit.

[10] "I have just completed a number of theses on the concept of History… [*Je viens d'achever un certain nombre de thèses sur le concept d'Histoire*…]. The appearance of moderation with which I have had to disguise them…" says Benjamin to Horkheimer in a letter dated February 22, 1940, in what is the first time he makes reference to the text "On the Concept of History" (GS I/3, 1225).

Modernes in 1947 with little response. The same indifference met Adorno's publication of the work in the German magazine *Neue Rundschau* in 1950. It was not until the appearance of the two-volume anthology of texts published by Adorno in 1965 under the title *Schriften* that the thoughts it contained had any acceptance – and that acceptance has been growing stronger ever since[11]. In 1974, Benjamin's complete works – *Gesammelte Schriften* – were published by R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, in collaboration with Adorno and Scholem. In 1967, the first Spanish translation of the Theses appeared (in *Ensayos escogidos* translated by H.A. Murena, Sur, Buenos Aires). Five years later, Jesús Aguirre prepared and published the best-known Spanish translation through Taurus publishers. It was in 1991 that Giorgio Agamben discovered a new version of the Theses – a *Handexemplar* – which was unique for its inclusion of an additional thesis, Thesis XVIIa, absent from the previous editions (and therefore from the Spanish translations) and which the authors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* would include in the final volume (VII/2, 783-784).

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It is not easy to identify the core themes on which these fragments are based. They have been given many readings. Some have seen in them a manual for urban warfare[12], and there have been many who have read them as a materialist reflection laced with theological metaphors or a Jewish meditation with prophetic echoes. Then there are those who have deemed them a failed marriage of Marxism and messianism. Any interpretation should not lose sight of the all-important point that they are intended as a theoretical armature for a new interpretation of history and, as such, of their time and ours.

We may go so far as to assert that the theoretical armature consists of a philosophical proposition articulated around the two themes that form the core of the whole text: one is epistemic, expressed in a new theory of knowledge; the other is political, developed on the basis of the opposition between Marxism – or, more accurately, that mode of Marxism that Benjamin calls "historical materialism" – and messianism.

First of all, a theory of knowledge. For Walter Benjamin, the Theses are something more than material aimed at positing a new theory of history or a new vision of politics. They are philosophically ambitious writings, as they tackle questions as

[11] K. Garber « Etapes de la reception de Benjamin », in Wismann, 1986, 918-984. Also in Lienkamp, 1992, 97-115.

[12] This is the assessment of R. Tiedemann, one of the editors of Benjamin's complete works, in Tiedemann, 1983, 95; cf. Buck-Morss, 1995, 273. With regard to how poorly understood the political dimension of Benjamin can be, Jacques Derrida stands out when he suggests that Benjamin falls into the temptation of thinking of the Holocaust as "an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence… one is terrified at the idea of an interpretation that would make of the Holocaust an expiation and an indecipherable signature of the just an violent anger of God." (Derrida, 1992, 61)

central and challenging as the substance of knowledge, reality or truth. They attempt to establish a new theory of knowledge. When Benjamin said that he needed a "theoretical armature" for his research into the fundamental structures of his time (research which bore the provisional title "Paris, Capital of the 19th Century" and which is now known under the title *The Arcades Project*), what he was thinking of was neither more nor less than a theory of knowledge[13]. It is worth noting that the folder in which the author kept the material for the Theses was entitled "Theoretical Knowledge, Theory of Progress".

Benjamin offers a couple of clues to the specific orientation of his idea of knowledge. First of all, he says that his works on history and progress "cannot but have consequences for the theory of knowledge."[14] There is a relation between time and knowledge. If we bear in mind that the criticism he makes of progress is based on the notion of an "absolute time" [*jetztzeit*] (as opposed to "continuous time"), which is "absolute" because absences are taken seriously, we will understand that this would affect the mode and content of knowledge, especially knowledge defined in exclusive relation to facts or presences. Benjamin hints at this with another clue, which he gives us when a year later he also tells Horkheimer that he has just written a number of theses on the concept of history, which will identify the yawning chasms that separate "our mode of thinking from positivism"[15]. With this brief comment he is indicating that his theory of knowledge will not adhere strictly to facts, will not use the model of knowledge employed by science, and will not shy away from metaphysical questions.

A theory of knowledge has to cover aspects such as examining the meaning of reality, raising the question of the possibility of knowledge, the basis for knowledge, etc. In other words, it must reflect on the subject who knows, the reality that the subject wants to know and the relationship between subject and reality. This is what constitutes the "theoretical armature" that Benjamin needs for his political analysis of the time in which he was living. When he considers a subject capable of comprehending what must be comprehended, he is not thinking of that modern being who has reached the age of adulthood, making public, critical and self-critical use of reason[16]. That famous, enlightened subject has suffered the same fate as the lotus eaters spoken of in *Ulysses*, who fed off the lotus flower that produces amnesia and, as a result, the illusion of happiness. They then forgot to return, thereby condemning themselves to unhappiness because "happiness entails truth" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1994, 114). The subject he is thinking of is not an anesthetized subject, but someone who consciously assumes his experience of suffering and the fight against its causes. Although Benjamin confers upon this

[13] Adorno acknowledges as much when he writes that the Theses bring together "the reflections on the theory of knowledge… whose development has accompanied the project of research into Parisian arcades" (Adorno, 1970, 26).
[14] Letter from Benjamin to Horkheimer (January 24, 1939) (GS I/3, 1225).
[15] Letter from Benjamin to Horkheimer (February 22, 1940) (GS I/3, 1225-1226).
[16] This subject is the enlightened individual described by Kant in his famous response to the question *What is Enlightenment?*

subject a knowledge with the hallmarks of historical materialism, he is not thinking of the proletarians of the class struggle. From these he would take their belligerent attitude toward oppression, but he would distance himself from them in essential terms. If Marx made the proletariat the subject of history it is because in the capitalist system of production they already occupied the central position. It was their power that fascinated Marx, but Benjamin's subject is central because of its weakness. He is the underprivileged, the sufferer, the oppressed, who is in danger, but who struggles, protests and rages. This is the subject who can know what everybody else (those who oppress, order or ignore him) cannot know. His cognitive advantage is a perspective filled with experience and projected onto the reality that we all inhabit. This perspective is one that is able to say, within a Welfare State, that the oppressed there live in a permanent state of exception or that for the majority, progress is basically a process of devastation and corpses, as the angel of history declares in Thesis IX. Images are mounted one upon another to illustrate this cognitive capacity of the subject who suffers. To know is to possess a visual keenness, capable of seeing in objects, situations or events that we all are looking upon something unusual. It is a perspective that shakes the established securities that serve as a basis for coexistence, even for democracy.

The concept of reality is also profoundly shaken. We commonly identify reality with events, with what has taken place. This formulation —"what has taken place"— exposes the complicity between past and reality, as if reality were something that has taken place and continues to be present. On this point, it is inevitable for one to refer to a formula of Hegel, so astute in its sobriety: "Being is that which has been and continues to be" ("das Wesen ist das Ge-wese-ne")[17]. But if what is was and continues to be present, we must not deceive ourselves as to the reach that the past has in the present. A past event is present, but just as mountains or rivers are present: as mute facts that tell whatever the visitor wishes to be told. The historian can visit the events like tourists visit the pyramids of Egypt: they are always there, at the mercy of the visitor. "At the mercy of the visitor" means that they will tell us whatever we want to hear. Benjamin can think of no better image to discredit this idea of reality as an unchangeable and readily available fact than that of the prostitute. Whoever views reality in this way behaves like a client at a brothel who visits the prostitute like the historian visits the past: he arrives, is served and leaves, while she continues there, always herself, waiting for the next visitor.

Well it is not so, reality moves; that which took place is alive. This is very difficult to understand if we think of the fate of the victorious past: it lives on in posterity not only because the victors remember and celebrate it but because their victory is one of the cornerstones upon which the present is constructed. The problem is with the losers, who, in losing, have been excluded from the development of history. Their past has become something inert, almost natural. Benjamin's theory of knowledge removes the thwarted past from this state of limbo by revealing life in those deaths. The thwarted projects of those trampled by history are alive in their failure as a

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[17] *Wissenschaft der Logik II,* in Hegel, 1970, VI, 13.

possibility or as a call for justice. Whoever approaches them will not hear the echo of his own voice but will feel summoned like a judge to render justice in a case about which he knew nothing. We thus come to the idea that reality is facticity and, also, possibility. Let us take for example the time of Franco's Spain. The reality of Spain was not only what occurred to the protagonists who inhabited it, but also the shadow of the Republic which loomed over this whole period like the project that might have been and which, in being thwarted, was made present as an alternative possibility to the dictatorship of the time. That shadow, in its impotence, was a colossal critique of a regime which, by virtue of that past, could not be awarded historical legitimacy, even though it would last half a century. Mere possibility gives life to a past that appeared settled because its "absence" questions the legitimacy of the factual while allowing the past injustice to make its presence felt as a call for justice. Because the past might have been different, that which exists now must not be viewed as a fate that cannot be changed. And if the present has a latent possibility, stemming from a past that could not be, we can imagine a future which, rather than a projection of the actual present, is a projection of the possible present.

If the subject of knowledge is the oppressed who struggles or the one who suffers and rebels, and the object of knowledge is the space or vacuum concealed behind the sheer force of the factual, we may assume that this type of knowledge will be difficult to attain. The coming into play of possibility is not mechanical, but requires the mediation of the witness who becomes a witness of the whole reality and, as such, of the truth. It is surprising to note how naturally testimony is associated with truth in law while philosophical theories of truth are so disdainful of it, dismissing it as subjective. Here we have the suggestion of a theory of truth that needs testimony because without it there would be no information on what has been lost. We are faced with a type of truth that needs to be verified or acknowledged.

To break the force of the factual, Benjamin's knowledge requires new weapons. In a letter dated August 1942, Horkheimer tells Paul Tillich that "science is statistical. Knowledge needs only a camp"[18] —by which he means a concentration camp. Science derives its knowledge from a consideration of all the facts, while for this theory of knowledge, one single fact, for example the Guantanamo prison, is enough to storm the fortress of the factual and uncover the secret of a conception of truth that would take into consideration all that is repressed there.

Secondly, a messianic vision of politics. While it is important to bear in mind the epistemological ambition of the Theses, it is no less so to recognize its political dimension, although this dimension needs to be understood correctly. Benjamin's personal inclination towards radical Marxism, or even toward an anarchism with touches of Romanticism[19], has nothing to do with a call for direct action. Its aim is

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[18] Letter quoted in R. Wiggershaus, 1989, 355-356.

[19] Michael Löwy constantly recalls Benjamin's debt to Romanticism. See Löwy, 1988, 121-162.

to take control of the circumstances of the present in order to transform them, but not to attempt to do so through a *coup de main*. When he says that we must declare the "true" state of exception over the prevailing exceptionalism, or when he invokes "divine" violence to put an end to mythical violence, it is not to reproduce the suspension of the rule of law over anybody or the existing violence, but to bring an end to exceptionalism and violence. His strategy is the razor's edge of criticism; his weapon, "the mutiny of the anecdote" (GS V/1, 677), to stop in front of a concentration camp and deconstruct the whole cultural, political or moral complex that encompasses it. He has no illusions about the effectiveness of the method. He ultimately acknowledges that the times only allow him "to organize pessimism", which is no small thing if we consider that his intention is to discern a light of hope in the midnight of the century.

The content of the political dimension of these writings on history is focused on a strange term which, far from clarifying matters, only arouses controversy: messianism. This originally Jewish concept is the prism through which Benjamin translates Jewish culture into his own thinking[20]. From his friend Gershom Scholem he was able to learn what Jewish messianism is, although given his very personal manner of interpreting what he has heard or read, it is best to refer strictly to his own definition of the concept.

Thesis XVIIa – the one discovered by Giorgio Agamben – announces the first aspect of this concept, namely the politics of emancipation as the secularization of messianism ("In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing"); and then, messianism as an advantage that sharpens this secularized consciousness ("a genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society and, to be sure, in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself" [GS I/3, 1232]). We thus find that the politics to which Benjamin aspires is, on the one hand, a secularization (in the sense of emancipation or liberation) of messianism, but, on the other, a secularized messianism, i.e., messianism is the palimpsest upon which the politics is written, but which is always there as the origin that inspires and defines politics.

It is worth noting how this enlightened thinker relates to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment tends to be presented in sociology as the secularization of Christianity (Mathes, 1971). Benjamin, however, presents his political ideal ("the classless society") as a secularized messianism. Is there a difference? There is, and it is this difference that allows him to argue that with the Enlightenment the world

[20] "I am Jewish and when I live as a conscious man, I live as a Jew," he once said (GS II/3, 834). His is a highly unorthodox Judaism with an open door to allow Christianity to slip in constantly; cf. A. Pangritz, "Theologie" in Opitz and Wizisla (eds.), 2000, 807. Ricardo Forster sees Judaism as the guiding principle of Benjamin's thought: "The repeated emphasis I have been giving to the presence of Judaism in Benjamin… is based on the hypothesis… [that] it would be against this theological background, on the irradiations of the wisdom of Jewish mysticism… [that] Benjamin himself would come to view the catastrophe of his era," in R. Forster, 1999, 139, note 116.

may be disenchanted, but not redeemed (Wohlfarth, 1997, 43). The Enlightenment project sought to liberate man from myths, but even if it had succeeded in doing so, it would have succeeded only in disenchanting the world, not redeeming it. Benjamin's practical or political intentionality is concealed behind this distinction between disenchantment and redemption. He is not interested merely in liberating the world from myths but in liberating man from injustices, and therefore considers everything from the perspective of redemption. The term redemption has a theological flavor but we should not be hasty in drawing conclusions about this. What Benjamin is trying to say is that if in response to an individual or collective crime, or to a situation as desperate as that of his time, a statement is uttered such as "this is unjust" or "we are beyond hope", the speaker is invoking redemption; that is the crime, or Nazi totalitarianism, or the communist betrayal, or socialist conformism, is not being accepted as fate, but as failure, and, as such, as an instance of deprivation of justice or of hope. We can only speak of hopelessness or injustice when we believe in hope or we call for justice. It sounds strange to hear an Auschwitz survivor say that "never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger" (Borowski, 2000, 254) than in the camp, but it was a way of refusing to interpret the situation as fate or a *factum* imposed by the necessity of natural laws. The perspective of redemption opened political concerns up to fields hitherto considered extra- or meta-political because it was believed —and still is— that politics is a concern only of the living.

It is precisely because Benjamin refuses to settle for the strict Enlightenment project of secularization (encoded in the term "disenchantment"), but also wants to know what lies beneath Modernity, understood as secularized messianism, that he remarks that "a genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society and, to be sure, in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself." Here we come upon one of the core themes of Benjamin's thought. But what does he mean by giving politics a messianic face? What he is saying is that the secularized world must not lose sight of its messianic origins, not so much out of loyalty to those origins but in the interests of politics itself. It means reading the failure of personal or collective projects as the deprivation of a right; it means being able to see in those trampled by history the ones who are truly "beyond hope", that is, individuals deprived of the realization of their ideals who are left "only" with the hope that one day it will be possible to realize them. It means seeing the world from the perspective of redemption.

Can philosophy do this? The purpose of remembering is to recover from the past the right to justice or, to put it another way, to recognize in the past of the vanquished an injustice that still lingers; in other words, to read the thwarted projects with which history is sown, not as costs of progress but as unresolved injustices. Even an author who, by his own confession, is quite deaf to mystical tones, Jürgen Habermas, has no qualms about following him this far, given that what Benjamin identifies in the lure of redemption is his desire to rescue "semantic potential on which human beings draw in order to invest the world with meaning."[21] Thus, the need that everyone has to invest life with meaning is acknowledged. What is unique about Benjamin is his inclusion of the dead in this "everyone". Philosophy should explore the question of meaning for "everyone"; indeed, only by beginning with meaning for the dead may the living develop a genuine program of emancipation. Aside from that, the explanation must be convincing.

Horkheimer also follows him in this same desire: "The horrendous act that I commit, the suffering that I allow to exist, only survive, once they have occurred, in the human consciousness that remembers them, and with which they are extinguished" (Horkheimer, 1976, 198). Memory allows us to keep past injustice alive and current to the point that without such remembering the past ceases to exist and the injustice dissolves. This power of memory – and this precariousness of ethics – is, he adds, of the same magnitude as "the philosophical question" should be. But what Horkheimer is very clear about, contrary to Benjamin, is that remembering does not mean the rendering of justice because "even if a better society were to emerge from the present disorder and to develop, previous suffering is unredeemed and necessity in the surrounding nature is not transcended" (quoted in Shaw, 1985, 180). For the injustice done to the victims of history, no compensation is possible. This should be the final philosophical point: we can and should keep past injustice alive, and even demand the right to compensation, knowing full well that there is no justice in this world that can compensate for the damage. But Benjamin does not leave it there. He answers that remembering can open cases which the law has deemed closed. Only theology can allow itself the audacity to claim that for such cases there is justice. This is something which he, Benjamin the philosopher, cannot say, but he adds something disconcerting: remembering allows us to make a mundane experience out of something we have known through the Jewish tradition. Does he mean to suggest that remembrance in some way compensates for the damage or somehow brings justice? What does this mundane experience of redemption consist of? Most probably of that encounter between a past declared in-significant and a needed subject, an encounter that would recover the meaning of the past while casting new light on the present allowing us to better understand reality and discover new possibilities for it. In a

[21] Habermas, 1985, 146. Habermas is sympathetic to Benjamin in acknowledging that the world of myths holds a semantic potential from which drops of meaning may be distilled for humankind. But what he rejects is its political dimension and, moreover, that his strategy of interrupting the present with the memory of the past could be helpful to Marxism given its total faith in development, progress and social evolution. His conclusion: "My thesis is that Benjamin did not succeed in his intention of uniting enlightenment and mysticism because the theologian in him could not bring himself to make the messianic theory of experience serviceable for historical materialism." (Habermas, 1985, 150). In this, Habermas gives considerable weight to the Marxist thesis on the relation between infrastructure and superstructure. The site of debate should be that of the political dimension of theoretical criticism. Two millennia of culture defending theories of justice resistant to the past have given rise to forms of law (and, therefore, of politics) biased towards the interests of the living. To break this resistance has been Benjamin's daring theoretical strategy. The increasing attention to victims, to the imprescriptibility of crimes or to the currentness of memory – which now form a part of the general sensibility – owes nothing to the progressive vocation of Marxism. The political dimension of Benjamin is now in the daily press.

text written long before the Theses —the "Theological-Political Fragment"— there are some keys to this disconcerting anamnetic experience. Here he identifies a profane order, which is the order of the happiness of the living, and a messianic order, which also takes into account the happiness of the dead. The two orders are represented by arrows moving in parallel but opposite directions: one towards happiness and the other towards redemption. What is important in this composition is the idea that the order of redemption (the fate of the happiness of the fallen) is fundamental to the happiness of the living (profane order). If they bore no connection, then we would have to agree with Hegel (that history advances trampling the innocent flowers in its path) or with Darwin (that only the fittest or the strongest survive). If the dead do not matter, then happiness is not a quality of man but of the survivor. If the lives of all matter, then we will associate the thwarted lives of the dead with the interests of the living, refusing to follow a project that involved a disregard for the fallen. When we take the step of forgetting death we perpetrate a hermeneutic crime added to the physical crime. Then nothing stops us from applying to individual or collective life the Darwinist principle that right is embodied in the fittest or the strongest. This is why the order of redemption, which gives hermeneutic importance to the innocent flowers on the path, is decisive for the fate of the living.

The order of redemption, although it may be radically different from the profane order as it is invested with a different logic, nevertheless enriches the desire for happiness of the living because in doing so it protects them from the Darwinist logic that drives progress. Having said this, have we advanced much beyond Horkheimer's idea that the most that memory can do is recognize the current relevance of past injustices? Furthermore, do we need the reference to redemption, the contribution of messianism, to assert that crime is not prescriptive and that therefore we cannot close the file on past injustice?

The aporetic situation in which the author of the Theses finds himself is undeniable. On the one hand he attempts to look beyond the reduction of remembering, to acknowledgment of past injustices; but on the other he is forbidden from making any theological interpretation. To provide an idea of the tension between these two poles, we need to take into account the force of theological logic as understood by someone as close to Benjamin as Johann Baptist Metz. This theologian agrees with Horkheimer that the happiness of grandchildren cannot compensate for the suffering of grandparents, and that there is no social progress that can absolve the injustice committed against the dead. This leads him to consider that utopias are ultimately no more than a grand joke if they only offer happiness to their own citizens. Thus his conclusion: "The hope for the resurrection of the dead expresses a longing for a universal justice that comes by virtue of God's power, a power which, in the apocalyptic vision, does not leave even the past alone" (Metz, 2004, 35). To keep from destroying the hope of victims, it is necessary to speak of God. Benjamin of course did not know this theologian, but he was familiar with the opinion of the French writer Charles Péguy, to which he felt quite close in some respects. This Péguy, similarly determined to explore the meaning of memory, came up against the problem of whether it explained redemption in merely hermeneutic terms or whether it also covered the rendering of justice. Péguy concluded: "Better to win at the site of the conflict" (Tiedemann-Bartels, 1986, 143)[22]; in other words, it is better to assert that the response to the call for justice by the victims of the past is the theological virtue of hope… This is a strictly theological reading which, as Benjamin confessed to Horkheimer, was forbidden to a philosopher like him. Thus we come to the point of identifying an aporetic situation in Benjamin's philosophy[23]. If he follows Péguy, reason is lost, but if he renounces messianism, life is lost. If he doesn't delve into the possibilities of messianism he will receive the approval of the advocates of a rationale with its feet planted firmly on the ground, but at the price of squandering possibilities that might save mankind. If he proclaims that justice must be served, he will be forced to see that it does not exist in this world, but if he renounces this demand, there will be no justice. Remembering allows him to rescue the past by giving meaning to past injustice, even if there is no guarantee that someday justice will be done. The redemption Benjamin achieves is one of meaning.

It remains to be seen whether it was necessary to call upon messianism to inspire hope or attain justice. Have we, today, perhaps lost a sense of justice, refused to fight for freedom, given up the hope for a different world? Many contemporaries will respond in the negative, without the need to invoke anything resembling messianism. Of course, the times in which Benjamin lived were different. It was indeed midnight in history. All of Europe was a camp without categories other than deportee or jailer. Benjamin sought a way out of this time by recycling the material in plentiful supply: despair, injustice, devastation and skeletons. He turned the philosopher into a rag-picker. But is it necessary to go to such extremes today? Everything depends on whether the horror of those times has been definitively overcome or continues as a latent force. We now know that the worst premonitions of these Theses were exceeded by what occurred between 1942 and 1945. Even for a "fire alarm" like Walter Benjamin, what occurred was unthinkable. Were those threats exorcised with the events that took place? Lamentably, the experience of Auschwitz was not enough to expunge the danger, as the savagery has been repeated, although in different ways. Adorno suggested, in truly "Benjaminian" terms, that it was necessary to call solemnly upon remembrance to prevent the repetition of the savagery. If, in spite of this new categorical imperative —"to reorient thinking and action so that Auschwitz is never repeated"— the genocides, the dictatorships and the social injustice have been repeated and continue to appear time and again, might it be because memory is not enough or because we have not remembered well enough? These Theses in which the reader is presented with a definition of remembrance so demanding that it has yet to be applied, draw the conclusion that we have not taken memory seriously.

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[22] "The memory is always of war" says Peguy.

[23] Ricardo Forster expresses it in his own way: "There is in Benjamin a kind of bifurcation, a forking into two roads that appear to split apart right where they are closest: one road that leads us towards the messianic promise, a place of reencounter between the name and the thing, and another road that leads us nowhere or, rather, that returns us to a territory of irreparability" (Forster, 1999, 89).

3

Our only option is to trust in the seriousness of a philosopher turned rag-picker. Benjamin's mode of working needed to be up to the epochal task that he had assumed. Conventional treatments or repetitive scholastics were of little value. If the presence of the victors was so overwhelming, he needed to infiltrate their ranks and steal the secret of their power. Some are shocked to learn of the bad company that Benjamin entertained. What was this man doing seeking the complicity of Carl Schmitt, taking an interest in Ernst Jünger, or tipping his hat to notions developed by a person as ambiguous as Georges Sorel (cf. Mayorga 2003)? These friendships have an explanation: "To tear away the authentic motifs from the reactionaries; off into enemy territory, to gather those motifs" (Taubes, 2003, 84). If Hitlerism is the overwhelming reality, he needed to get inside that labyrinth to view it from within, to make off with the foundations that sustain it. Leftists, in their eagerness for change, confuse desires with reality, dismissing as outdated the very life categories that give solidity to the power of those who now rule. The enlightened can work themselves into a frenzy selling the idea that Modernity is post-traditional, but the fact is that the power of the right is based precisely on that which the left dismisses as obsolete: the past, the dead, tradition and religion. Before leaping into the future, leftists should ask themselves whether these powerful levers might not be pushed in the opposite direction. Take tradition for example. Is it condemned to a traditionalist interpretation? Is there no possibility of an innovative version of tradition? Benjamin does not underestimate the intelligence of his enemies, and so studies their every movement in order to steal their power for his own benefit. And there is another reason for this infiltration into the trenches of the enemy: Benjamin was profoundly irritated by the frivolousness with which progressives ran after the latest novelty without realizing what change entails. Conservatives grasp it only too well; they understand the trauma that change brings, the effort it requires, the huge amount of sacrifice it involves, and so they confront it and oppose it with all their might. This resistance can only be explained by the fact that so much is at stake.

But let there be no misunderstanding. Benjamin's cause is not that of conservative Romanticism, but that of the oppressed. He is a member of the Marx school, but on his own terms; that is, with no more interest than the cause he defends. This is why he is ruthless with the vices of the left. Socialists and communists are passed through the sieve of criticism unceremoniously. Of the first he will say that they are conformists and that there is nothing more repugnant than the inertia to which a whole "movement" abandons itself. This includes both the subjects and their thought, because if anything justifies the noble act of thinking it is thinking differently, i.e. letting go of the known facts. The second he will call traitors to the cause of the workers and to the faith of the anti-fascist left, which had placed in them their last hope. Of both he will say that they share with fascism the same logic in their conception of history. He is ruthless with their historical digressions because he believes in historical materialism.

This faith had no reason for optimism in his time. Benjamin came out of a tradition with a long history of suffering behind it that could not be consoled by just anything, such as the deceptive belief that the future will be better and that the fate of the grandchildren will be better than that of the grandparents. Consolation, if there is any to be had, must be here and now. No success of the grandchild will rectify the tragedy of the grandparent. There is no value in the consolations of utopias when midnight has cast its gloom on the century. The situation calls only for the organization of pessimism, as he had written a few years earlier, conscious of the fact that optimism was only for people who could enthuse over something as sinister as IG Farben or believe in the peaceful mission of the German Luftwaffe. He wrote this in 1929; thirteen years later the aforementioned chemical company would be supplying Zyklon B to the gas chambers. What kind of optimism could found a company that produced a gas for killing or for committing suicide? Reasons for pessimism were plentiful, so what was needed was to organize it.[24]

This did not mean simply throwing up his hands, but developing an economy of war that could sift through whatever there was an abundance of in search of resources for his own cause. What there was an abundance of was, effectively, danger and tragedy. So then, Benjamin would convert the danger into a hermeneutic category and the tragic forms into figures of hope. Danger sharpens the wit, enabling the observer to see what in normal conditions would pass by unperceived. One of Benjamin's most original ideas, as will be shown later, was how to glean what there is of life in something which has been left for dead. An event or a word from the past can have meanings that escaped not only its contemporaries, in spite of their being so close to what occurred, but even the author of the phrase himself. This point of his particular hermeneutics may have been inspired by the Talmudic tradition. A story from that tradition tells of a meeting between Moses and Yahweh, concerned with putting the finishing touches on the Torah. Moses is somewhat surprised, as he had understood that it was already finished… why would it need touching up? Then Yahweh invites Moses to witness a work session at the academy of Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph. It has been so many years since Moses left the world that he is barely able to understand any of the nuances being discussed there or the exegetical subtleties being examined. In his time, he says to himself, things were simpler. His surprise is boundless when he hears Rabbi Akiba say that he learned all these subtleties and profundities from him, Moses (story narrated by Yerushalmi, 2002, 22). This interpretative advantage is provided by the condition of need in which the conscious subject finds himself. Given the situation of extreme need and danger of his time, the awareness that he needs to be able to face the circumstances will be as radical as the need that drives him. If what his time needs most is hope, because it is midnight in the

[24] Benjamin took the expression "organization of pessimism" from the book *La révolution et les intellectuels* (1928) by communist dissident Pierre Naville. Cf. details and comments in Löwy, 2005, 9 and in Traverso, 1996, 177.

century, he will have to search for it among the hopeless, especially among those who died in despair. Benjamin, like Kafka, recognizes that if they die in despair and not indifferent to their terrible fate it is because they aspire to the hope that history denies them. Thus there may be found in them a potentially inexhaustible reserve of hope because it still awaits its realization.

In considering tragic figures, Benjamin does not, like his people, think of the widow, the orphan or the foreigner, but of the prostitute, the rag-picker and in that modern figure of squalid nobility, the so-called *flâneur*. It is not sociological interest that motivates his attention to these tragic figures, but their considerable hermeneutic value. With these figures, Benjamin constructs some "dialectical images" that reveal his particular way of understanding history. This understanding is as follows: The *flâneur* is a stroller who populates the great European cities of the 19th century that have been invaded by technology. The *flâneurs* could be seen in Paris strolling at a snail's pace while gazing at shop windows in the modern arcades made of iron and glass. They would stare idly because they had time but no money. They would look but never buy. On the contrary, they would sell. As observation was their vocation, they turned it into a profession, selling it to information columns in newspapers. Of course, Benjamin's interest did not lie in the sociological explanation for this figure. Benjamin recovered it from the past to bring attention to its extinction. Industrial development had exterminated a figure that had emerged in its initial stages. Today, there are no longer streets to amble down carelessly. Cars have invaded everywhere and the *flâneur* has been pushed into enclosed spaces, artificially created, like shopping malls or pedestrian streets. What is Benjamin trying to tell us? He is trying to bring our attention to the loss that we have suffered. Once upon a time, the *flâneur* was a marginal being, it is true, but he formed a natural part of the landscape. Now he is a suspect. Anyone who looks without buying is considered dangerous. On the other hand, while the *flâneur* disappears as a dandy who conceals his poverty with distinguished manners, he reappears embodied in each one of us. We all have turned into strollers in the huge department stores where we look or rather admire commodities which, as we cannot buy them, turn into phantasmagoria, into models for our dreams. Benjamin uses the *flâneur* to denounce a society that has eliminated the best of certain marginal beings who were born when technology emerged in history as an instrument of happiness, while it has in fact universalized its most negative elements. We have lost the relaxed stroll through the stores and have turned into compulsive buyers; we have abandoned the distance of the observer of commodities and elevated the shop window to the sanctuary of our dreams and ideals for life. The free time that the machine has been able to bring in liberating man from much of his work is not leisure time but consumption time. Benjamin uses these figures of the past to illuminate the present.

Among the many powerful images that Benjamin creates to define the attitude of the school-trained thinker, there is perhaps none quite like the rag-picker

(*Lumpensammler*) (Wohlfarth, 1986, 559-611). With regard to the *Arcades Project*, for which the Theses were intended to provide a theoretical armature, he writes:

> Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say; I only have something to show. I will not conceal anything of importance, or appropriate any spiritual formula. But the rags, the waste (*die Lumpen, den Abfell*): these I don't want to invent but to do justice the only way possible, to wit, by using them. (GS V/1, 574)

The school-trained specialist will become a rag-picker and as such will not go around gathering up precious fragments, but collecting garbage. With such material there is no way of constructing a complete work, because to do so the garbage would have to cease being waste to become the foundations of a new building. If the thinker does not find any garbage in reality, there is no need for fragmentary discourse. But as long as the garbage exists, there is no reason not to engage in such discourse, or to do anything else. We need to understand this clearly: the fragmentary nature of Benjamin's discourse is not the product of working with fragments, but with a situation that generates garbage. Garbage allows no action other than the immediate response to these situations. Any attempt to construct a finished work while closing our eyes to the reality of the garbage will be insincere. This is why the image of the modern builder is not the architect in his studio attempting to shape reality at whim, but the rag-picker with his sack over his shoulder, bent under the weight of the garbage he collects as if it were the weight of history.

"The rag-picker," says Benjamin, "is the most provocative figure of human misery. 'Ragtag' [lumpenproletariat] in a double sense; clothed in rags and occupied with rags" (GS V/1, 441). He does not conceal his condition like the noblemen in Francisco de Quevedo's *The Swindler (El Buscón don Pablos)*, who expose the edges of their shirt cuffs to make people believe that there is something under their doublets. They dress as what they are. But also, their lives are dedicated to what society has thrown away and put out of circulation. The rag-picker collects it, classifies it and turns all this garbage, "chewed up by the society of abundance, into useful, pleasant objects" (GS V/1, 441). What fascinates him about the rag-picker is that he gathers the garbage, not to recycle it and return it to face the fate of consumption once again, but to awaken it to a new life, just as the surrealists did with the same material. Benjamin believes that the antidote to misery can be found among the poor. Only the excluded can imagine a system without exclusions[25]. Thus he sees the intellectual "as a rag-picker, at daybreak, picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart, not without letting one or another of those faded cotton remnants – "humanity, inwardness or absorption" – flutter derisively in the wind. A rag-picker, early on, at the dawn of the day of the revolution" (GS III, 225). The rag-picker picks up what culture throws away, and sometimes found amidst the garbage are rags as valuable as humanity, subjectivity or depth. There is thus a

[25] "As long as there is a beggar, there will be myth" (GS V/1, 505).

moment of demolition and another of construction. What the rag-picker seeks to do is to keep what the culture throws away and throw away what it keeps. For him, fashionable clothes are no more than rags and rags can sometimes be goldmines hiding that most precious of materials: truth.[26]

4

The construction work begins by deconstructing the clichés of Modernity. "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over [the] Antichrist" writes Benjamin in Thesis VI. The concept of construction, so tied to his idea of messianism, is unthinkable without destruction. It is a way of expressing, for example, his conviction that justice is a response to injustice. The new is not a mere replacement of the old, but something that grows —it could be said dialectically— out of criticism. It is impossible here not to recall the young Marx when he writes to Arnold Ruge:

> We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles… the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality… it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and future, but of *realizing* the thoughts of the past.

The future is not mere repetition nor pure invention, but creation on the basis of existing materials. This relationship between construction and destruction is expressed in the Theses as a critical re-thinking of the major themes of Modernity. Below I offer a critical overview of the most frequently recurring of these themes.

a) Criticism of Enlightenment and Marxist criticism of religion. This is brilliantly demonstrated in the first thesis, which serves as a sort of thematic introduction. In this thesis, Benjamin presents the subject who embodies the content of his Theses as a historian trained in the Marxist school or, to put it in his own terms, as a "historical materialist". Curiously, the letter of introduction for this new historical subject consists of a review of Marxist criticism of religion. For a Marxist, this is a disconcerting gesture. Marx effectively asserted that the principle of all criticism is the criticism of religion, thereby firmly establishing the importance of this dimension in Marxist thought as a whole. But he was also quick to acknowledge that there was no need to give much more attention to the question because it had already been well critiqued by the Enlightenment critics of religion when they said that religion is a projection into the next world of the unresolved problems of this one. Yet Marx's restless genius could not leave it at that; he went on to translate this general conclusion into two propositions that reignited the topic: that religion is the expression of real misery (pure Feuerbachian orthodoxy) and also, a protest against real misery (evocation of the prophetic past of his people). Meanwhile, Benjamin, who would be in full agreement with the first proposition (if by religion

[26] Benjamin speaks not of "goldmines" but of "beehives" of truth (GS V/1, 578).

we mean the religious practices of his time), would ponder further over the prophetic echoes of the protest, giving them a meaning that would go much further than either Marxist or Marxian claims. He refers to a story to express the novelty of an alliance between the chess player (who represents theology) and the mechanical doll (which represents Marxism). It is true that the chess player is in fact an ugly, hunchbacked dwarf and, as such, unpresentable; but it is equally true that he is a master at chess and that with his help there is no rival who can challenge the two. When Benjamin spoke to Gretel Adorno of these fragments, acknowledging that he didn't feel they were yet ready for publication because they might be applauded for the wrong reasons, it is possible that he was thinking of this unique game of chess that would shock Marxists and lead theologians to mistaken conclusions. Although the latter might be delighted with the elevation of religion to a position as privileged as the construction of a human history tailored to the demands of justice, they should nevertheless not lose sight of the fact that the messianic interpretation that Benjamin gives religion actually excludes much of what they stand for.

It is obvious that Benjamin wants to distance himself not only from Marxist criticism of religion, but from the solution to the conflict between reason and religion posited by the Enlightenment. With this critical gesture towards Enlightenment criticism of religion, Benjamin locates himself within the dialectics of the Enlightenment, i.e. among those who do not renounce the ideals of the Enlightenment but who feel compelled to rethink them because the Enlightenment, with its explanations, has not been sufficient to deal with current reality. The enlightened modern thinker has suffered the same fate as Ulysses, who, to move forward and evade the slings and arrows of myth, has had to tie himself to a mast while his companions plug his ears to keep him from succumbing to the song of the mermaids. To progress, modern man has had to sacrifice part of his own reason and his own freedom. The reduction of religion to a private affair, leaving reason, emancipated from religion, the freedom to manage the affairs of this world, does not seem to Benjamin the best path towards justice in this same world for the dispossessed, or to face up to the questions of the hopeless. And any self-respecting political perspective must address precisely the dispossessed and hopeless, not only to prevent the repetition of the injustice, but even to be able to speak of justice. In this sense, it is worth noting that the radicalization project represented by the Theses does not take the path of a radicalization of secularism, but a radicalization of the demands of man, who, as Marx said, is the root. Some years ago now, a mysterious professor from Munster, Hans Blumenberg, published a thesis that went against the tide of established truths but whose ideas today are common currency. Blumenberg questioned the idea that Modernity was a secularized Christianity. Emancipation from Christianity, yes; secularized Christianity, no. He explained this by arguing that there are two distinct, conflicting cultural traditions in the West. On one side, the Gnostic tradition, which locates all things positive outside man and the world, while man and the world are identified as sites of the negative (the place of evil, sin, and imperfection). According to this perspective, the salvation or realization of man can only come from without. The name of this external source has changed over time (God, eschatology, nominalism, philosophy of history, revolution, proletariat, race, etc.). Opposed to this dominant culture is the anti-Gnostic tradition, which has its first representative in Augustine of Hippo, in opposition to Marcion, who resolves the problem of theodicy (how a good and all-powerful God could allow the suffering of innocent people) with the notion of the freedom of man. Another truly Humanist phase of this tradition is Modernity, but understood as a neutralization of eschatology and of any question about meaning, judged to be beyond the abilities of man, through the creation of figures such as the State or science, which, while stripping existence of its drama, give man the vital, realistic framework for his existence. Emancipation, then, not only from Christianity but from any secularized remnant in forms such as "the meaning of history" or even "human rights", which are judged excessive.

Benjamin does not adopt this approach. On the contrary, after affirming that the classless society is a secularization of messianism, he adds that "a genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society and, to be sure, in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself" (GS I/3, 1232). We will see later what this restoration means. For the moment, suffice it to say that this alliance of "historical materialism" and "theology" —stated thus, in quotation marks, because Benjamin uses both terms in senses that go beyond their usual meaning— does not mean adopting theological discourse. If he takes his inspiration from Genesis when presenting his theory of language, it is not because it is the word of God revealed but because the revelation is a site of linguistic communication, which is what interests him. He says that his thought is related to theology like blotting paper is to the ink of a given text: it soaks it in but does not reproduce it. To Horkheimer's frustration with so many theological allusions Benjamin responds bluntly that yes, his discourse would be unthinkable without what he has learned and received from Judaism, but that, as a philosopher, he is forbidden from expressing himself in theological terms. He has no complexes when making reference to religion ("religion is a matter for free spirits" (GS II/1, 244), he would say), but it is the fate of the common man that interests him and whatever he is able to say must be comprehensible to that man. We are thus dealing with a philosophical language, with all its limitations, and also with all its aporia.

b) Science and technology under the microscope. Another *topos* that needs to be reviewed critically in order to be able to construct a new world is that of technology or, more accurately, the modern imagery constructed around science and technology. Although this question does not appear very explicitly in the Theses, it is present because it will be a central theme of the *Arcades Project*, for which Benjamin sought to provide a theoretical armature with these writings.

Nobody has addressed the rise of technology in the 19th century like Benjamin. He does not focus on its effectiveness, but on its meaning. He is struck by details that have passed unnoticed by most analysts: that the first constructions of iron and glass looked like Roman basilicas, while the first department stores "appear to be modeled on Oriental bazaars" or inspired by Classical Greek architecture. This was his explanation: the current era looks to images of the past to express the emancipating capacity of current times, thanks to technology. The past to which it turns, expresses, in the form of dreams, the utopian aspirations of humanity, aspirations which now can be realized.

The technological possibilities that iron and steel offered construction, not only democratized art, but also allowed ordinary life to adopt the form of what was once only meant symbolically. What is exposed here is a concept of technology as a means of generating and realizing long-held dreams of happiness.

What is notable is the fact that Benjamin reviews these dreams fifty years after the fact. What he describes therefore has little to do with the content of the dreams: those Parisian *arcades* where the revelation of technology was concentrated had been reduced to ruins, to rubble, or, in the best of cases, to large department stores. Technology, far from liberating man, had turned him into a cog in a machine. It is as if the development of technology had followed a logic of its own, beyond the dreams of men, which consisted purely and simply in the domination of nature. What its developers had not counted on was that its final result would be the submission of man to nature. Benjamin expresses this with a powerful image: instead of draining rivers, technology "directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities." (Benjamin, 2009, 527) If man does not know how to channel the telluric forces awakened by technology, he will suffer its vengeance: the irrigation channels will turn into trenches full of blood, and the planes, instead of sprinkling seeds from above, will drop bombs.

What Benjamin naively proposes is a harmonious relationship between technology and nature which will in any event, he adds, be *materialist* and *dialectical*. It is materialist in the sense that the matter for reflection and transformation is the existing technology, i.e. the rubble and ruins of the recent past, as well as the dreams of happiness (*rêves*) that sleep in failure. The dreams that accompanied the arrival of technology now exist only in a dormant state. The aforementioned relationship is dialectical in the sense that it is not a question of recovering the old utopias or dreams as if nothing had happened, but using the failure, the *sleep*, as a starting point and encoding the response in an awakening. There must be a shift from the dream image to the dialectical image, while recognizing that the dream that serves as a starting point is of vital importance. Or, in other words, to speak now of utopia, dreams of happiness, life projects, etc., nature must be disengaged from this technology that has put an end to all the dreams. At this point, Benjamin takes a turn that is very typical of his way of thinking. Faithful to the Marxist tradition, he places his analysis of technology in the context of criticism of the market. Thus far, his approach is strictly orthodox Marxism. But when he then suggests that what characterizes technology is not fetishism but phantasmagoria, he is taking his own personal direction. If the problem of technology were its fetishist character, it would be enough to identify the sinister motives lurking behind technological production to put it at the service of emancipation. The fetishism of technology would consist in making us believe that the assembly line demands a kind of robotic worker. And it is one or the other: do we want a man who lives in harmony with the seasons of nature, who does not abandon the Roman plow, or do we want the worker to be industrialized, to conform to the model of the Tramp in Chaplin's *Modern Times*? The demystification of the fetishism of technology would consist in saying that there are forms of mass production that allow workers to be people.

Benjamin found this type of analysis inadequate because the problem of modern technology is not fetishism, but another, more serious illness called phantasmagoria. Modern technology has something that industrial production did not. There is a substantial change in the nature of the commodities being bought and sold and to appreciate it, we don't need to go to the factory, but to the shop windows. The difference is not seen in production, which may formally be the same, but in consumption, in the meaning that the consumption of technology has today. A car, for example, is not valued for the service it renders, nor for the fortune it costs, but for the prestige it brings. This is why he argues that the focus of attention is not the factory (site of production) but the shop window (site of consumption).

What does he mean by phantasmagoria? A commodity that can be presented to us as if it did not have a production process. In the previous phase of capitalism, the factories were highly visible in order to demonstrate the importance of the organization and that of production. Now, that organization is more virtual than real. What is phantasmagorical is this presentation of commodities as autonomous, covering up the production process so as to be presented as *non facta* and, as such, as something "holy and supernatural" as they bear no human stamp. The stamp of labor points to a production process in which the commodity appears as something derivative, produced and, as such, lacking authority to be presented as the creator and giver of dreams.[27] This *autopoiesis* gives the commodity authority to be presented to the consumer as the ideal of happiness, or even as the realization of happiness. These commodities are not the realization of dreams that we have had; rather, they propose the dreams that we should be having. They are dreams that dream us and in this sense they constitute our essence.

Consequently, we now find that the commodity has become autonomous, turning into the dream or ideal of this society; that is, turning into the essence of this society which will therefore have a dream essence. This aspect is fundamental. If the essence is dream, the realization of society will consist not in consuming the thing offered to us, but the dream that it represents. When clothing becomes an item of social prestige, its purpose is not to be used as a garment to cover ourselves with but to respond to the dream or ideal that it represents. The consumption of

[27] Benjamin refers to Adorno, who defines it as "a consumer good that does not have to remind us how it has been produced. It is presented as something magical in the sense that all the labor processed in that consumer good is presented in that same instant as something supernatural and holy, so that it is no longer recognizable as labor." (GS V/2, 822-823). For this topic, I acknowledge my debt to Zamora, 1999, 139.

clothing is therefore expressed in the externalization of the mark of prestige and not in the beauty of the design or usefulness of the garment.[28] We thus find that clothing is not valued for the usefulness it offers or for its value in the market but for the prestige that it represents. The label covers up the original use value and market exchange value; now when we speak of value, we are speaking of social consumption. Benjamin's project aims at identifying the dreams of our time: what gives them life and what frustrates them. The dreams that inspire us are shop window dreams. But these only lead to the frustration of the true dream, the dream of happiness, the attainment of which was the original aim of technology.

c) The complicity between progress and savagery. A cornerstone of the modern world is the concept of progress, which does not escape the Benjaminian pickaxe. We now know that progress has its material limitations, so we speak of sustained development, meaning the degree of progress that is possible. I once heard a remark in Brazil that if the Chinese decided to start using toilet paper, we would finish off the Amazon rainforest in no time. This may be an exaggeration, but there is no doubt that the problem with progress is that, regardless of whether it is good or bad, there is not enough of it to go around.

Benjamin's criticism, however, relates to something else altogether. He expresses it well in Thesis X when he says that nothing has promoted fascism more than the view that it is the opposite of progress. It is a fatal diagnosis, because if progress can be denounced as a breeding ground for fascism, progressives will be grouped together with undesirables with whom they would never have imagined being associated. In denouncing the complicity between progress and fascism, Benjamin is situating progress at the highest problematic level.

If we ask what the two have in common, our answer will be the disdain for the human and social cost entailed in the realization of both. It is a simple fact of life that to achieve any objective, a price must be paid and it was being paid with resignation. Now the cost is systematized by saying that whatever does not triumph is insignificant. What once was a cost is now declared meaningless and, therefore, valueless and senseless. Victory is not the sign of being the strongest, but the best, for the simple reason that progress means the advancement of the civilizing process, the overcoming of animalism, the activation of the latent potential in man and in humanity. But how are these advances achieved? Through victories and victors. It is their status as representatives of that moment of conquest that turns certain men into victors. We thus find that he who triumphs is more human because victory entails a higher level of development of civilization in terms of instruments of war or ability at conflict. It therefore follows that civilization and

[28] J.A. Zamora describes it accurately when he writes: "The immaterial properties of commodities, their mystic sheen – in short, their fetishist character – shapes even their material constitution. The possibility of empathizing with the exchange value presupposes that the transformation of a thing into a commodity entails the emancipation from use in terms of the material requirements that the thing possesses" (Zamora, 1999, 139).

morality go hand in hand: the best is he who can achieve the most. As Victor Cousin said:

> The victor not only serves civilization… he is better and more moral and for that reason he is the victor. If it were not thus, there would be a contradiction between morality and civilization, which is impossible, the two being merely two sides, two distinct but harmonious elements, of the same idea.[29]

The concern with this progressive view of history is not so much that it produces victims but that it justifies them and, therefore, reproduces them again and again. Opposed to the propagandistic notion that progress claims its own costs and ultimately repays them as general benefits over the course of history is Benjamin's condemnation that this logic exponentially increases the costs, because its logic is that of a homogeneous continuous time that admits no interruption or looking back. As the cartoonist El Roto suggests in a newspaper cartoon presenting a suburb filled with cranes and towers under construction: "The moment that we stop building, everything will collapse."[30] The increasing acceleration of time brings more and more destruction. This infernal logic is the same as a fascism that thoughtlessly pushes towards its goal, a goal that is unattainable because in the end fascism itself will be devoured by the logic of continuous time.

This criticism of progress – or, more accurately, of the progressive mentality – does not mean that Benjamin is an old-fashioned Romantic wistfully reminiscing over a past that will never return (and that most probably never existed). Benjamin is a modern, as shown in the enthusiastic greeting that he offered at the arrival of technology, but a demanding modern who adopts as his own these words of Lotze: "Nothing is progress which does not mean an increase of happiness and perfection for those very souls which had suffered in a previous imperfect state" (GS V/1, 599) (of falling by the wayside). Progress, yes, but not at any price, because it is not the same to make progress the end that all humanity must serve as to understand progress as a means to success for each and every member of humankind. What subordinating humanity to progress means is expressed well by a writer like Juan José Millás in a short newspaper column. He tells of a mass exodus of automobiles on a bridge out of a large city, on their way to the sea, the mountains or the countryside. The result of this hasty evacuation is forty deaths on the road. But what make the headlines are not the deaths, but the colossal holdups, or, as he puts it: "what was important was not the speed with which we made it to the hereafter, but the delay we suffered on the way to Benidorm."[31] As the deaths are a given, what matters is the speed of travel; i.e. the news is the traffic jam. The great problem with the progressive mentality is the inability to locate shock in the right place: instead of concerning ourselves with the deaths on a race to nowhere, what really shocks us is that we can't get more quickly… to the hereafter.

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[29] V. Cousin, *Course de philosophie, Introduction a la philosophie de l'histoire,* 1928, quoted in Löwy, 2005, 48.
[30] *El País,* December 7, 2005.
[31] J.J. Millas, "Qué bien", *El País,* May 6, 2005.

The evil of progress is the consignment of the past to oblivion. To build, we must look forward, they said after the Second World War. So we suffer the fate of the protagonist of Kafka's "A Report for an Academy", in which the speaker develops the theory that humanization consists of forgetting the mythic past. The report is offered by a simian who recognizes that if he had clung to his origins he would not have been able to reach the level of *Homo sapiens*. "In so doing, however," he adds, "my memories for their part constantly closed themselves off against me." To the extent that Benjamin situates the possibility of a qualitatively different form of progress in a specific past, to that same extent, a form of progress that turns its back on the past is suicidal.

The fashionable nature of progress in an age of globalization should not be overlooked. Today, contrary to what occurred in the past, progress does not need to trample innocent flowers in its path. If there was once a time when progress fed off the process of wealth creation, worker exploitation, the conversion of Africans into slaves or the oppression of the poor, today it no longer needs these processes. The poor are superfluous; they are not necessary for progress. Once upon a time, in Spanish towns, a person out of work was referred to as being superfluous "*de más*", implying that there was no room in an economy of poverty for anyone who contributed nothing. Now, this superfluousness refers to anyone who is not a link in the chain of wealth production. Such a person is truly superfluous – in other words, a hindrance.[32]

d) Memory vs. History. The Theses tend to be viewed as reflections on memory, i.e. reflections on the past which nevertheless bear no relation to the approaches to the past made by history. Such intuition may in fact be correct, but we should begin by acknowledging that Benjamin presents them under the heading of history. Their title is not "On the Concept of Memory", but "On the Concept of History", and he situates them in the current of "historical materialism" (that is, a Marxist view of history), turning anyone who delves into them into a historian of the Marxist school. Indeed, we might consider the study of the Theses to be a kind of crash course in history.

History and memory both have the past as their field of study. The interpretation that Benjamin would give of that past, distances him from the techniques and methods of historians precisely because of the conceptual substance that he injects into the term "memory". But he does not seem willing to relinquish the field to history, as he places himself and his innovative content in the realm of memory, disputing the claim of conventional historians, academics or otherwise, to the terrain of history itself.

His immediate rivals —those who have appropriated history and the knowledge of the past— he calls historicists, and their mode of understanding history he labels

[32] Cf. U. Beck, "La revuelta de los superfluos", *El País*, November 27, 2005.

historicism. As Herbert Schnädelbach has underlined, the term "historicism" is a broad enough umbrella to cover anything.[33]

We may identify three variants of this particular method of studying history. The first is an attempt at a *scientific treatment of history*. As Ranke argued against Hegel, the objective of the historian should be knowing the past as it really was. History is science, and therefore anything other than rigorous knowledge of the facts cannot be history. The construction of explanations of the meaning of human deeds on the basis of these facts may be interesting for that simulacrum of science referred to as "philosophy of history", but it cannot be called history.

Another mode of historicism is that for which *truth is historical*. There is no possibility for truth other than history. According to this argument, if truth is historical, it can only be that which has taken place in space and time, and thus any kind of "metaphysical" truth attained by transcending time and space is rejected. Truth is relative, like history. While the first form of historicism focuses on knowledge of the fact, the second focuses on the concept of truth, although the two can go hand in hand. Indeed, there is no shortage of scientists for whom there is no truth other than that produced in the laboratory, and that truth is ever-changing, progressive, limited… in other words, historical.

The third mode is made up of those who understand history as *the criticism of Enlightenment historicity*. It is the Romantic criticism of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment has a vision of history that is rejected by this historicism. When the Enlightenment refers to history, it associates it with a concept rather less than "historical" – permanent, universal human nature. The "historical" dimension of human nature arises from the fact that it unfolds over time; i.e., it is not totally revealed in one particular moment, but involves the development of its potentialities, a development that requires the contribution of man. Romantic criticism takes aim at the heart of this Enlightenment view, based on the common belief in a human nature endowed with a permanent core and certain potentialities that unfold over time. There is no such historical nature; only individuals and peoples who make history. This form of historicism applies the same medicine to the Enlightenment that the Enlightenment applied to pre-modern metaphysics. In effect, if the Enlightenment opposes the pre-modern concept of transcendent nature (in the sense of human nature ordered by the grace of a being superior to that of human nature itself) with an immanent nature, Romantic historicism opposes this natural immanence with the pure historical becoming of individuals and peoples.

Although Benjamin does not shy away from dueling with each of these modes of historicism, in Thesis XVII (one of the Theses to which he gives a special methodological value), he challenges historicism in the terrain of "universal history" as if this were the privileged field for assessing the concept of history. If

[33] For historicism and its variants, cf. Schnädelbach, 1974.

history is the telling of facts, as historicism suggests, it should tell all the facts and it should tell everything. The problem with historicism is that it does neither one nor the other. It tells the most notable, but overlooks the rest, and given that "it is more difficult to honor the memory of the nameless than that of the famous," (GS I/3, 1241) any self-respecting history should be dedicated to the nameless. A universal history should not only tell all, the great and the small, but also that which has not taken place and has fallen by the wayside. History is not only about events, but about non-events. Historicism lacks a "theoretical armature" to address all these problems. Instead, it takes the easy option. These forms of studying history are governed by the principle of empathy. For us to be able to know today the events that occurred a long time ago, the past must speak to us in some way. Knowledge presupposes an empathy or complicity between past and present. Historicists make this empathy explicit by saying that the present asks questions of the past in order to understand the present. Benjamin expresses it differently: empathy is not a generous gesture that the present makes while asking the past to lend it a hand, but a calculated transaction between grandparents and grandchildren of the same family in order to preserve their inheritance. "All rulers are the heirs of those who were victorious before them. Thus, empathy with the victors benefits, in every case, the present rulers" (GS I/3, 1241). The current ruler takes up the inheritance of the rulers of the past. Historical empathy is a means of preserving the inheritance and increasing the patrimony. Part of this patrimony comes from production and from the patrimony of the vanquished which now constitutes the spoils of war.

The task of the Benjaminian historian is to put an end to this process, denouncing the false universality of the universal view of history. Memory, turned into a detective of the spoils, can reveal the mercantile character of history in its existing form and attempt a reading of events that has a universal value.

Benjamin was very much aware of the novelty of this proposition; he even spoke of a Copernican revolution in the view of history:

> Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in "what has been", and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned and what has been is to acquire its dialectical fixation through the synthesis which awakening achieves with the opposing dream images. Politics attains primacy over history. Indeed, historical "facts" become something that just now happened to us, just now struck us: to establish them is the affair of memory" (GS V/1, 490-491).

Here we find the outlines of the crucial elements of his idea of history. First of all, the autonomy of the past; the past is not a fixed point at the disposition of a rigorous knowledge thirsting for the whole truth, including what has been. The past has a life of its own, and leaps on the present consciousness; it seizes the initiative. Secondly, this past cannot be grasped by science, by scientific reconstruction, but by remembering. The past comes to us, strikes us, but not mechanically. A willing subject is required. The past must be read as a text that was never even written. Memory is essentially a hermeneutic of the past which without it merits no attention whatsoever. Oblivion is hermeneutic disregard for the nameless. Hermeneutic disregard does not mean that the matter is not discussed. In Pinochet's Chile, Salvador Allende was spoken of, and when historians speak of that Chile they will also speak of Allende. But they will do so from the perspective of Pinochet, who was the victor. Memory, on the contrary, speaks of Pinochet but from the perspective of Allende; in other words, memory questions facticity from the perspective of that which remained mere potential.

This makes it clear why Auschwitz is so important for memory. In being, above all, a project of oblivion, we cannot approach it without bringing the anamnesis into play. To know Auschwitz – while knowing that to comprehend it is impossible – is to mobilize all of the epistemic content of the recollection. In Auschwitz, the values of Western hermeneutics are realized; there we find the consummation of the notion that the losers, reduced to the condition of being nameless, have no value. This is why to know Auschwitz is to put on the table, exposed to the light of day, the perversion of our "noble" way of thinking. Between one time in which only the named have hermeneutic value and another in which it is the nameless who have meaning, there is a change of epoch. This is why we can and must speak of a *before* and an *after* Auschwitz. At last, the primacy of politics over history. The historical, the past, does not interest us as a reconstruction (of the past), but as a construction (of the present). The emphasis is placed on the present. The attention to the past is not directed by archaeological interest but to have an impact on the present. This is why it is political.

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This work owes much to others who have attempted to cover the same ground. Without the studies of R. Konersmann, M. Löwy, G. Kaiser, R. Forster and others, I would not have dared to embark on this journey. If there is anything original in these pages, it is the fact that I avoid becoming lost in digressions and stick to the point, clearly outlining the interpretation of the Theses and then reflecting on some aspects of their current relevance. The idea is to allow readers to complete this process with elements of their own experience or their own analysis. This focus explains the organization of the book. First of all, I propose a new, understandable translation of the Theses. Following each of the Theses is a moment of explanation where I attempt to describe to the reader how it might be understood as a whole. Following this is a third point, entitled "Interpretation and Current Relevance", where I explain the interpretation of the more obscure or controversial ideas while attempting to identify places where those ideas may be helpful to us today. The translation is accompanied by the original German text and, where applicable, by the French version translated by Benjamin himself[34]. The relevance of the German text is obvious; the French version, as loose a translation as it is, says something about the freedom of the translator and the importance of engaging the reader. Last of all, I have added an appendix with my own translation of the notes written prior to the Theses, which reveal the considerations that led to their creation. The German text of the Theses is taken from GS I/1, 697-703, and that of Thesis XVIIa from GS VII/2, 783-784; the French version of the Thesis comes from GS I/3, 1260-1266, and the preliminary notes from GS I/3, 1229-1255. I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude for the help and inspiration provided by the research group working on the project "Philosophy after the Holocaust". This collective, based at the Institute of Philosophy of the Centro Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), but with the involvement of notable researchers from various Spanish, Latin American and European universities, is a model for ongoing creative reflection on the memory of Auschwitz.

Like most introductions, this has been written at the end and, as such, has some of the qualities of an epilogue. It may introduce the pages that follow but will be better understood after reading the text itself.

[34] With regard to Benjamin's French version it is important to note that there is no translation of Theses VIII, XI, XIII, XIV, XVI or XVIIa.