

Rick Roderick

Lecture and discussion on

“Theses on the Philosophy of History” by Walter Benjamin

(in Illuminations edited by Hannah Arendt)

March 10 (probably 1987)

East Campus, Duke University

Notes by Albemuth

[Albemuth's note: During the late 1980s, I knew Roderick and a number of his students. One afternoon in March, I walked in with one of his graduate classes. It was typical of Roderick that people could attend his classes without being signed up for the class -- or even attending Duke University. These notes are the result of my two hours (with a break in the middle) with Rick and about 10 students in a classroom on Duke's East Campus. I have reworded or added to my notes here and there, but I have tried not to change them much. Of course, there may be an error or two where I have misinterpreted one of my jottings. Reflecting on these notes now, I think that Roderick did a great job in introducing Benjamin's difficult piece and also in relating these ideas to issues of then-current interest. I will venture that Roderick's remarks say something about the situation of the left in the late 1980s. In the face of a political climate that had moved to the right and the failure of actually-existing socialism, the left seemed (to me) to turn to more anarchistic and romantic ideas. I am sure that Rick would have something to say to this statement were he still around.]

Introductory remarks

Among Benjamin's interpreters, you can see a battle over his legacy. There is a political stake in these different interpretations.

Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin: the Story of a Friendship, puts Benjamin in the Jewish mystical tradition.

Susan Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, discusses Benjamin's association with the Frankfurt school and Adorno's debt to Benjamin (including the concept of constellation).

One can also see Bertold Brecht's influence on Benjamin, especially in Brecht's idea of “crude thinking” or “blunt thinking,” materialist thinking. See Benjamin's essays “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and “The Artist as Producer” for this influence.

“Theses on the Philosophy of History” was written in Paris during 1940 and is arguably the last thing that Benjamin wrote. He was on the run from the Nazis until his suicide in September.

The first two of the theses are enigmatic and referred to a lot later.

I. This indicates the turning of historical materialism to the transcendental, in the face of a failure of practice. It might indicate a new theory of history.

Fredric Jameson has pointed out that criticizing Marxism by calling it “theological” is a double edged sword. Nothing in the passage says that the little automaton does not always make the right move.

II. Hopes, dreams, and anticipation open up a space for us to struggle.

Perhaps a current example of this is Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition.

Benjamin tells us that the sufferings of the past are not redeemable. To seek redemption is a weak messianic perspective. This is not Benjamin. It implies a linear conception of time:

past --> present --> future.

Benjamin aims at a different view of time: a sort of theological hope that establishes connections to both past and future in the same moment:

past <-- present --> future.

III and IV. Benjamin sees the history of capitalism as a continuous line of barbarism. A tiny, momentary break from this line is what he is looking for. “...this most inconspicuous of all transformations.”

V and VI. Historicism's objective is to “tell it the way it really was” (Leopold von Ranke). The historicist says “this is the Ancient Period, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and so on.” This is equivalence. Benjamin wants historical materialism to break this chain. It sees history itself as the site of class struggle. There is complicity of historicism with the rulers, as history becomes “a tool of the ruling classes.”

Roderick says that he hates the New Historicism (Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Benn Michaels, and so on). Paragraph VII ends with the famous remark that the job of the historical materialist is “to brush history against the grain.”

[Probably at this point, the class took a break of about 15 minutes.]

Read the Principle of Hope by Ernst Bloch.

Ontological and theological discourse cannot be dismissed by fiat, says Roderick. All thought may have elements of the theological. Perhaps, as Stanley Aronowitz says, “empiricism doesn't exist.”

[This notion must be in Aronowitz's Science as Power, which came out in 1988.]

The famous paragraph IX criticizes the liberal ideology of progress. Recall Theodor Adorno's formulation of this (in Negative Dialectics): “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.”

Paragraphs X and XI criticize social democratic movements (and their “stubborn faith in progress”). Paragraph X is directed against the liberalism of the Weimar Republic, which was roundly defeated during the rise of fascism.

Think also of the Bolshevization and Stalinization of the Communist Party. (Also, before this, the capitulation of the national parties of the Second International to their respective governments at the start of World War One and their support of war bonds.)

Paragraph XI criticizes social democracy's concept of work (and its enthusiasm for technological progress). He who works is subject to whoever owns labor. Roderick points out later writers on the idea of Zero Work (such as Bob Black).

XII. Immanent (enslaved ancestors) and transcendent (liberated grandchildren): both are required for a materialist conception of history.

XIII. The liberal idea of progress takes place in homogeneous, empty time, in which zero = zero = zero = zero. This idea of automatic or irresistible progression must be questioned.

Up to this point, the paragraphs have been largely negation. Now, Benjamin concentrates more on his own position.

XIV. *Jetztzeit* is time that is “filled with the presence of the now” and the possibility of revolutionary rupture. This is Benjamin's new historical materialist view of time. Keep in mind the urgency of the time in which he is writing.

XV. This registers a disgust with the past and with time itself. Benjamin notes that during the 1930 July Revolution, revolutionaries fired on the clock towers of Paris.

Albemuth mentioned Lewis Mumford's critique of and disgust with the Western past. Roderick dismissed this saying “Lewis Mumford's past is empty and homogeneous.”

XVI. No materialist view of history can accept a transitional view of history or accept, for example, a transitional government. There must be a break with the continuum.

XVII. Now, Benjamin makes an important theoretical move. He tries to separate a Marxist historical materialism from Hegel's conception of history. Benjamin sees the latter as still being an additive history.

Benjamin seeks moments of time, or monads. At such moments, you stop thinking and look. Roderick gives examples of the famous pictures of the Viet Cong prisoner being shot in the head [1968] and the shooting by the National Guard of students at Kent State [1970].

These moments crystallize possibilities as “chips of Messianic time” (see next paragraph). There is no “total” that the moment refers to; but from it, the monad, we trace out possibilities.

XVIII. The first paragraph anticipates criticism: All of human history is already an abridgment in relation to all life on earth; similarly, the monad is an abridgment of human history.

A. Against the causal chain model of history. Later on, this was exemplified by the logical positivism of Carl Hempel. [For example, his essay “The Function of General Laws in History.”]

B. This is the culmination of the essay. Benjamin promises no predictability up to: “This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment.” This registers the pessimistic view. But this is reversed by the last two sentences. Every moment is the one through which the revolution might pass.

This breaks with the objective view of Marxist dialectics. This idea of history, of the moment, can be found in Marx's own Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Note the flower motif: “Here is the rose, here dance!”

Roderick says that Benjamin's piece is important in warning us against liberal fantasies: for example, that World War Two and Fascism was an exception. Roderick feels that some view of time like Benjamin's is required for revolutionary time.