

Walter Benjamin. On the Concept of History. Gesammelten Schriften I:2. Suhrkamp Verlag. Frankfurt am Main, 1974.

(Translation: Dennis Redmond 1/7/01)

I

It is well-known that an automaton once existed, which was so constructed that it could counter any given move of a chess-player with a counter-move, and thereby assure itself of victory in the match. A puppet in Turkish attire, water-pipe in mouth, sat before the chessboard, which rested on a broad table. Through a system of mirrors, the illusion was created that this table was transparent from all sides. In truth, a hunchbacked dwarf who was a master chess-player sat inside, controlling the hands of the puppet with strings. One can envision a corresponding object to this apparatus in philosophy. The puppet called “historical materialism” is always supposed to win. It can do this with no further ado against any opponent, so long as it employs the services of theology, which as everyone knows is small and ugly and must be kept out of sight.

II

“Among the most noteworthy characteristics of human beings,” says Lotze, “belongs... next to the many forms of individual selfishness, the general absence of envy of the present in relation to the future.” This reflection shows us that the portrait of happiness which we harbor is steeped through and through in the time which the course of our own existence has conferred on us. The happiness which could awaken envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, with people we might have talked to, with women who might have devoted themselves to us. The conception of happiness, in other words, is irremediably conjoined with that of salvation [Erloesung: also transfiguration, redemption]. It is just the same with the conception of the past, which is the domain of history. The past carries with it a secret index, by which it refers to its ultimate salvation. Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices filling our ears today? have not the women, for whom we trouble ourselves, sisters who they do not recognize anymore? If so, then there is a secret protocol [Verabredung: also appointment] between the generations of the past and that of our own. For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a *weak* messianic power, on which the past has a claim. This claim is not to be settled lightly. The historical materialist knows why.

III

The chronicler, who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and small, holds fast to this truth: that nothing which has ever happened is lost to history. Indeed, only a resurrected humanity would have full access to its past. Put another way: only for a resurrected humanity would its past, in each and every one of its moments, be citable.

Each of its lived moments becomes a citation *a l'ordre du jour* [order of the day] – whose day is, of course, that of the Last Judgement.

IV

Secure at first food and clothing, and the kingdom of God will come to you of itself. –
Hegel, 1807

The class struggle, which for historians schooled in Marx always remains paramount, is a struggle for the rough and material things, without which there is nothing fine and spiritual. Nevertheless these latter are present in the class struggle as something other than mere booty, which falls to the victor. They present themselves as faith, as courage, as humor, as cunning, as steadfastness in this struggle, and they reach far back into the mists of time. They will, ever and anon, call all the victories which have ever been won by the rulers into question. Just as flowers turn their heads towards the sun, so too strives, by virtue of a secret kind of heliotropism, that which has been *towards* the sun which is dawning in the sky of history. To this most inconspicuous of all transformations the historical materialist must pay heed.

V

The true picture of the past *whizzes* by. Only as a picture, which flashes its final farewell in the moment that it can finally be recognized, is the past to be grasped. “The truth will not run away from us” – this remark by Gottfried Keller denotes the exact place where historical materialism breaks through historicism’s view of history. For it is an irretrievable picture of the past, which threatens to vanish in every present, which does not recognize it in itself.

VI

To articulate that which is historically past does not to recognize it “how it really was.” It means to seize hold of a memory, as it rises up in a moment of danger. For historical materialism it is a question of holding fast to a picture of the past, just as if it had unexpectedly thrust itself, in a moment of danger, on the historical subject. The danger threatens the prevailing stock of tradition as much as its recipients. For both it is one and the same: becoming the tool of the ruling classes. In every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver it anew from of the conformism which wishes to overwhelm it. The Messiah arrives not merely as the Redeemer; he also comes to vanquish the Anti-christ. The only writer of history with the gift of setting the sparks of hope in the past alight, is one with the conviction that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

VII

Think of the darkness and the great cold
In this valley, which resounds with misery.
– *Brecht, Threepenny Opera*

Fustel de Coulanges recommended to historians that if they wished to reexperience an epoch, they should remove everything they know about the later course of history from their heads. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken. It is a procedure of empathy. Its origin is the heaviness at heart, the *acedia*, which despairs of seizing hold of the genuine historical picture, which so fleetingly flashes by. The theologians of the Middle Ages considered it the primary cause of melancholy. Flaubert, who was acquainted with it, wrote: “Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage.” [Few people can guess how despondent you have to be in order to resuscitate Carthage.] The nature of this melancholy becomes clearer, once one asks the question, with whom does the historical writer of historicism actually empathize. The answer is irrefutably in the victor. Those who currently rule are however the heirs of all those who have ever been victorious. Empathy with the victors accordingly benefits the current rulers. This says quite enough to the historical materialist. Whoever until this day emerges victorious, marches in the triumphal procession in which today’s rulers tread over those who are lying on the ground. The spoils are, as was always the case, carried along in the triumphal procession. They are known as the cultural heritage. They are called to account by the historical materialist as a detached observer. For what he views as the cultural heritage is part and parcel of something which he cannot contemplate without horror. It owes its existence not only to the toils of the great geniuses, which have created it, but also to the nameless drudgery of its contemporaries. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another. The historical materialist moves as far away from this as possible. He considers it his task to brush history against the grain.

VIII

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “emergency situation” in which we live is actually the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this. For then it will become clear that the task before us is the introduction of a real state of emergency, and our position in the struggle against Fascism will thereby improve. The reason this latter has a chance is that its opponents, in the name of progress, treat it as a historical norm. – The astonishment that the things we are experiencing in the 20th century are “still” possible is by no means philosophical. It is not the beginning of knowledge, unless it is the knowledge that the conception of history on which it rests is untenable.

IX

My wing is ready to fly

I would rather turn back

For had I stayed mortal time

I would have had little luck.

– *Gerhard Scholem, “Angelic Greetings”*

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and tosses it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [a reference to Goethe’s *Faust*], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress is *this* storm.

X

The objects which the monastic rules assigned to monks for meditation had the task of making the world and its drives repugnant. The mode of thought which we pursue today comes from a similar determination. It has the intention, at a moment wherein the politicians in whom the opponents of Fascism had placed their hopes have been knocked supine, and have sealed their defeat by betraying their own cause, of freeing the political child of the world from the nets in which they have ensnared it. The consideration starts from the assumption that the stubborn faith in progress of these politicians, their trust in their “mass basis” and finally their servile integration into an unaccountable apparatus are three aspects of the same thing. It seeks to give an idea of how *dearly* it will cost our accustomed concept of history, to avoid any complicity with that which these politicians continue to hold fast to.

XI

The conformism which secretly dwelt within social democracy from the very beginning rests not merely on its political tactics, but also on its economic suppositions. It is one of the causes of the later collapse. There is nothing which has corrupted the German working-class so much as the belief that *they* were swimming with the tide. They regarded technical developments as the course of the stream in which it thought it was swimming. From then, it was only a step to the illusion that the factory-labor laid down by the path of technological progress represented a political achievement. The old

Protestant work ethic celebrated its resurrection among German workers in secularized form. The Gotha Program [dating from the 1875 Gotha Congress] already bore traces of the confusion. It defined labor as “the source of all wealth and all culture”. Suspecting the worst, Marx responded that human beings, who own no other property aside from their labor-power, “must be the slave of other human beings, who... have made themselves into property-owners.” Oblivious to this, the confusion only increased when soon afterwards Josef Dietzgen announced: “Labor is the savior of modern times... In the... improvement... of labor... constitutes the wealth, which can now finally complete what no redeemer could hitherto achieve.” This vulgar-Marxist concept of what labor is, does not bother to ask the question of how its products affect workers, so long as they are not at their disposal. It wishes to perceive only the progress of controlling the forces of nature, not the retrogression of society. It already bears the technocratic traces which would later become apparent in Fascism. Among these is a concept of nature which diverges unwholesomely from that which appears in the socialist utopias of the Vormärz period [pre-1848]. Labor, as it is henceforth conceived, aims at the exploitation of nature, which is contrasted to the exploitation of the proletariat with naïve self-satisfaction. Compared to this positivistic conception, the fantasies which provided so much ammunition for the ridicule of Fourier reveal a surprisingly healthy sensibility. According to Fourier, a beneficent division of social labor would have the following consequences: four moons would illuminate the night sky; ice would be removed from the polar cap; saltwater from the sea would no longer taste salty; and wild beasts would turn into docile servants of human beings. All this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, is instead capable of delivering creations whose possibility slumbers in her womb. To the corrupted concept of labor belongs, as its logical complement, that nature which, as Dietzgen put it, “is there gratis [for free]”.

XII

We need history, but we need it differently from the spoiled lazy-bones in the garden of knowledge.

– *Nietzsche, On the Use and Abuse of History for Living*

The subject of historical cognition is the embattled, oppressed class itself. In Marx it steps forwards as the final enslaved and avenging class, which carries out the work of emancipation in the name of generations of downtrodden to its conclusion. This awareness, which for a short time made itself felt in the “Spartacus” [Spartacist splinter group, the forerunner to the German Communist Party], was objectionable to social democracy from the very beginning. In the course of three decades it has succeeded in almost completely erasing the name of Blanqui, whose reverberations had made the preceding century tremble. It contented itself with assigning the working-class the role of the savior of *future* generations. It thereby severed the sinews of its greatest power. In this schooling the class forgot its hate as much as its spirit of sacrifice. For both nourish themselves on the picture of enslaved forebears, not on the ideal of the emancipated heirs.

XIII

Every day our task becomes clearer and the people become smarter.

– *Josef Dietzgen, Social Democratic Philosophy*

Social democratic theory, and even more its praxis, was formed by a concept of progress which did not hold to reality, but made a dogmatic claim. Progress, as it was painted in the minds of the social democrats, was first of all the progress of humanity itself (not only that of its abilities and knowledges). It was, secondly, unending (corresponding to the endless perfectibility of humanity). It was, thirdly, considered essentially unstoppable (as something self-activating, pursuing a straight or spiral path). Each of these predicates is controversial and open to criticism. This critique must, however, when it really matters, go behind all these predicates and concentrate on what they all have in common. The concept of the progress of the human race in history is not to be separated from the concept of its progression through a homogenous and empty time. The critique of the concept of this progress must ground the basis of its critique on the concept of progress itself.

XIV

Origin is the goal [Ziel: terminus]. – *Karl Kraus, Worte in Versen I [Words in Verse]*

History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in the fulfilled here-and-now [Jetztzeit]. For Robespierre, Roman antiquity was a past charged with the here-and-now, which he exploded out of the continuum of history. The French revolution thought of itself as a latterday Rome. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a past costume. Fashion has an eye for what is up-to-date, wherever it moves in the jungle [Dickicht: maze, thicket] of the past. It is the tiger's leap into that which has gone before. Only it takes place in an arena in which the ruling classes are in control. The same leap in the open sky of history is the dialectical one, as Marx conceptualized the revolution.

XV

The consciousness that they are making the continuum of history explode is peculiar to the revolutionary classes in the moment of their action. The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar. The day on which the calendar started functioned as a historical time-lapse camera. And it is in essence the same day which, in the shape of holidays and memorials, always returns. The calendar does not count time like clocks. They are monuments to a historical awareness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent for a hundred years. Yet in the July Revolution an incident took place in which this consciousness reappeared. During the evening of the first skirmishes, it turned out that the clock-towers were shot at independently and simultaneously in several places in

Paris. An eyewitness who may have owed his inspiration to the rhyme wrote at that moment:

Qui le croirait! on dit,	[Who would've believed it! They say]
qu'irrités contre l'heure	[As though irritated by the time]
De nouveaux Josués	[The new Joshuas]
au pied de chaque tour,	[At the foot of each tower]
Tiraient sur les cadrans	[Fired at the dials]
pour arrêter le jour.	[In order to stop the day.]

XVI

The historical materialist cannot do without the concept of a present which is not a transition, but which originates in time and comes to a standstill. For this concept defines precisely that present in which he writes history for his own person. Historicism depicts the "eternal" picture of the past; the historical materialist, a stand-alone experience with such. He leaves it to others to give themselves to the whore called "Once upon a time" in the bordello of historicism. He remains in control of his powers: man enough, to explode the continuum of history.

XVII

Historicism justifiably culminates in universal history. Nowhere does the materialist writing of history distance itself from it more clearly than in terms of method. The former has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive: it marshals a mass of facts, in order to fill up a homogenous and empty time. The materialist writing of history for its part is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts but also their zero-hour [Stillstellung]. Where thinking suddenly halts in a constellation overflowing with tensions, there it yields the same kind of shock by which it crystallizes itself into a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object solely and alone where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic zero-hour [Stillstellung] of history, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past. He perceives it, in order to explode a specific epoch out of the homogenous course of history, a specific life out of its epoch, or a specific work out of its life-work. The result of this procedure is this: that the life-work is preserved and sublated *within* the work, just as the epoch is within the life-work, and the entire course of history is within the epoch. The nourishing fruit of that which is historically conceptualized has in its core time itself, its precious but tasteless seed.

XVIII

"In relation to the history of organic life on Earth," notes a recent biologist, "the pathetic fifty millenia of homo sapiens represents something like the last two seconds of a twenty-four hour day. The history of civilized humanity would, on this scale, take up only one fifth of the last second of the last hour." The here-and-now, which as the model of

messianic time compresses the entire history of humanity into a monstrous abbreviation, coincides precisely with the figure which the history of humanity cuts in the universe.

(Addendum)

A

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of various moments of history. But not state of affairs is, as a cause, already a historical one. It becomes this, posthumously, through eventualities which may be separated from it by millenia. The historian who starts from this, ceases to permit the consequences of eventualities to run through the fingers like the beads of a rosary. He grasps hold of the constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. He thereby establishes a concept of the present as the here-and-now, in which splinters of messianic time are shot through.

B

Surely the time of the soothsayers, who divined what lay hidden in the lap of the future, was experienced neither as homogenous nor as empty. Whoever keeps this in mind will perhaps have an idea of how past time was experienced as remembrance: namely, just the same way. It is known that the Jews were forbidden to look into the future. The Tora and the prayers instructed them, by contrast, in remembrance. This disenchanted those who fell prey to the future, who sought advice from the soothsayers. The future did not turn, however, into a homogenous and empty time for the Jews. For in it every second was the narrow gate, through which the Messiah could enter.