

Time in Walter Benjamin's Thesis on the Philosophy of History

Dr. Chung Chin-Yi

Research scholar, National University of Singapore
Enigma719@hotmail.com

Abstract:

Time is thus constellational rather than linear, where past events are teleologically linked with present events through an order which is redemptive and leading to an end which is redemptive and the arrest of all time with the Messiah's return, who will judge the victors in history and bring victory to those who have been oppressed through class struggle throughout history, and this will entail bringing justice to the oppressed classes and judgement for the Antichrist as ruling powers from which even the dead will not be safe. Benjamin thus describes history as the procession and succession of a series of victors—these victors are the rulers in history, the political elites who have benefited from the spoils of capitalism and who have gained power from these spoils from oppressing the lower classes or working classes. History has always been shown to empathize with these victors in history, or the rulers or political elites who have derived their power from the oppression of the lower classes or proletariat. As Benjamin puts it, this empathy with the victors in history is also an occasion of horror because the spoils of victory owe themselves to the anonymous toil of contemporaries as much as their great minds and talents who have created them. Thus Benjamin holds that there is no document of civilization which is not free from barbarism, it is the violence of class oppression which has allowed the victors in history to maintain their power and advantage. The task of the historical materialist is thus to brush history up against the grain and also depict the losers in history who will be eventually redeemed by the coming of the Messiah who will bring justice for them and give them a voice.

Keywords: Benjamin; History; Messianic Time; Class struggle; Redemption

Time in Walter Benjamin's Thesis on the Philosophy of History is conceived as teleological, constellational rather than linear, but leading towards the return of the Messiah and redemption from all who have been in power or victors in history for the oppressed classes. Benjamin conceives of history as being controlled like a puppet in a chess game by a dwarf which is actually a symbol for historical materialism, in which the so called losers in history or the oppressed classes will be finally redeemed from their position of loss by the return of the Messiah who will defeat the Antichrist and all who have been historically oppressed in class struggle.

Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim

cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.(Benjamin 1968:254)

Benjamin thus views history as a telos that leads eventually to the end of redemption, in which though we are now bound up in selfish and self-interested ways which leads to materialistic capitalism and interest in protecting one's property, there will be a time when we will be freed from envy and work towards a truly classless and selfless society with the coming of the Messiah who will free the oppressed classes from the rulers and property owners and those who have exploited them in history. Thus Benjamin conceives of time as Messianic and leading inevitably toward class liberation and redemption with the return of the Messiah who will free the oppressed classes from exploitation and subjugation.

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'(Ranke) It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger, Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: That of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as a redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.(Benjamin 1968: 255)

Benjamin thus views history as class struggle leading to redemption from the so called victors in history: the so called ruling classes and elites by the return of the Messiah who will not only liberate us from class struggle but also the

Antichrist. Benjamin's time is thus Messianic, teleological and redemptive: the end of history will see the return of the Messiah who will judge those who have aided the maintenance of the power of the capitalistic elites and ruling classes who have exploited and subdued the working classes and proletariat who will be redeemed by the coming of the Messiah who view these elites and ruling classes as the enemy, and these ruling classes and elite will not be safe from the judgement of the Messiah even if they are already dead as it is an eschatological judgement of mankind from the position he has adopted in history : as a member of the oppressive ruling class and elite or as a member of the working classes who remain oppressed and controlled by this capitalistic ruling class.

The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn towards the sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations. (Benjamin 1968: 255)

Benjamin here opposes the crude materialism of capitalism to the spiritual desire of Marxism to transcend commodity fetishism and hunger for the crudity of material desire. The oppressed classes persevere not for the reward of these material things but towards a truly classless society in which there is no more class oppression and subordination based on the ownership of property and the material. They persevere with

courage, humor cunning and fortitude. They will challenge the material authority of the ruling elites who have oppressed them through possession of greater material wealth than them. Benjamin describes this turn away from materialism as a sun which is rising in history. This heliotropism must be made apparent to the historical materialist because it signifies his eventual victory as the sun rising in history and the scourge of the ruling classes who oppress the working classes through possession of greater material wealth.

To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has been broken. It is a process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, acedia, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly. Among medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: 'Peu de gens devineront combine il a falluetre triste ressusciterCarrhage.'The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all the rulers are heirs of those conquered before them. Hence empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what this means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the past rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along with this procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with caution. For without exception the cultural treasures have an origin he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil

of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free from barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history up against the grain. (Benjamin 1968: 256-257)

History is thus selective for Benjamin in that historians only empathize with the victors of history in terms of political rulers and elites of capitalism. History only celebrates the victors of history- those elites and rulers who have oppressed the working class. Benjamin thus describes history as the procession and succession of a series of victors- these victors are the rulers in history, the political elites who have benefited from the spoils of capitalism and who have gained power from these spoils from oppressing the lower classes or working classes. History has always been shown to empathize with these victors in history, or the rulers or political elites who have derived their power from the oppression of the lower classes or proletariat. As Benjamin puts it, this empathy with the victors in history is also an occasion of horror because the spoils of victory owe themselves to the anonymous toil of contemporaries as much as their great minds and talents who have created them. Thus Benjamin holds that there is no document of civilization which is not free from barbarism, it is the violence of class oppression which has allowed the victors in history to maintain their power and advantage. The task of the historical materialist is thus to brush history up against the grain and also depict the losers in history who will be eventually redeemed by the coming of the Messiah who will bring justice for them and give them a voice.

A Klee painting named Ángelus Novus shows us an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes staring, his mouth is open,

his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face us turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1968: 257-258)

The angel of history thus sees the past as a ruin which has been compiling through the generations leading to piles of debris. These are the generations of class exploitation by the ruling powers of elites which have led to generation upon generation of ruin, catastrophe, class struggle and wreckage that ensues from the destruction of class exploitation. But Benjamin also maintains that a storm blowing from Paradise named progress is blowing through history which will eventually reach its teleological end in the return of the Messiah who will subdue the Antichrist and the victors in history such as the ruling classes and capitalistic elites and liberate the losers in history from class struggle and eventually redeem them from exploitation and oppression.

Historicism contents itself with establishing a casual connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously as it were, through events that may

be separated from it by thousands of years, A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the 'now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (Benjamin, 1968: 263)

Time is thus constellational rather than linear, where past events are teleologically linked with present events through an order which is redemptive and leading to an end which is redemptive and the arrest of all time with the Messiah's return, who will judge the victors in history and bring victory to those who have been oppressed through class struggle throughout history, and this will entail bringing justice to the oppressed classes and judgement for the Antichrist as ruling powers from which even the dead will not be safe.

Works cited:

- [1] Benjamin , Walter. *Illuminations*. Harcourt Brace Jonavich, New York. 1968.