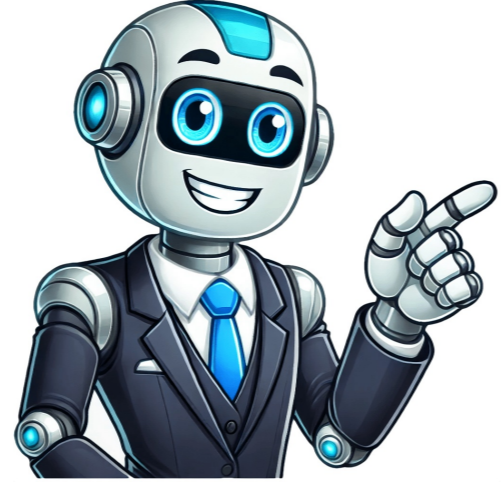


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From January 12th to February 9th 2023, I delivered a series of lectures for the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy on Walter’s Benjamin’s final work, the “Theses on the Concept of History.” These lectures examined each of the theses in turn, identifying their core concepts as they are introduced and offering explanations for the more cryptic passages with reference to Benjamin’s earlier works. What follows is a short introduction to the theses and their place within Benjamin’s life and legacy, followed by a table of contents for the lectures. I’ll be tidying up my lecture notes and adding them here over the next few weeks, with this post serving as a hub for those that follow.

Introduction Of all Walter Benjamin’s works, few are as elusive, electrifying, and divisive as his “Theses on the Concept of History” (1940). Written in the final months of Benjamin’s life, before his tragic flight from Vichy France, the theses stand as the final statement of his life’s work and a central text for the later reception of his thought. The twenty short fragments that make up the theses put forward a provocative blend of Marxism and messianism to criticise the traditional categories of the philosophy of history, from its ideological notions of progress and its complicity with the atrocities of empire, to its limited conceptions of historical time and the dampening of political spirits that comes with its abdication to the ‘inevitable’ course of history. To make sense of Benjamin’s combination of historical materialism and secularised messianism, these lectures will take up a close reading of the theses, reading each in turn and examining the main themes, images, and concepts as they are introduced. The reading of the theses will be placed in the context of Benjamin’s earlier writings on history, culture, and modernity, to help explicate Benjamin’s last work in the light of his lifelong interests and preoccupations. Born in Berlin in 1892 to an assimilated Jewish family, Benjamin’s intellectual development shows an early tendency toward eclecticism and a broad search for influences in the intellectual currents of early twentieth-century Germany. As a young man, Benjamin would engage with the neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, Jewish mysticism, his lifelong friend Gershom Scholem, and undertake a deep study of German philosophy from Goethe through Fichte to the Romantics. In 1925 his habilitation thesis on German Baroque drama was rejected by the University of Frankfurt, dashing his hopes for an academic post and marking the beginning of his precarious career as a critic and translator. In the 1920s and ‘30s, Benjamin would encounter the works of Marxists such as Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, and Bertolt Brecht, make his own mark on the young Theodor Adorno, and begin collaborating with the Institute for Social Research, then under the directorship of Max Horkheimer. A year prior to the Nazis’ ascension to power, Benjamin escaped into French exile, where he would spend the final years of his life working on a project explicating the forgotten history of capitalism in the Paris arcades. When the French government fell, Benjamin fled to the Spanish border, where he took his own life rather than be turned over to the German authorities. In the decades following his untimely death, Benjamin’s intellectual legacy was seized upon by his friends and commentators, resulting in the division of that legacy into several competing readings of his work. The most prominent among these are the mystical-theological Benjamin presented by Scholem, the radical Marxist Benjamin infected by his encounter with Brecht, and the reading of Benjamin as a cultural critic, variably presented as a tragic modernist by Adorno or as an apolitical scholar by Hannah Arendt. Sufficient it to say that each of these readings is incomplete in that they prioritise one aspect of Benjamin’s varied work over others and have over the years begotten yet more one-sided commentaries. As Benjamin’s final work, the “Theses on the Concept of History” have been a lightning rod for these kinds of interpretative differences, and have variably been treated as either an endorsement or rejection of Marxism; a release into messianism or a secularisation of the theology in politics; a contribution to the philosophy of history or a refusal of philosophy’s justifications for historical catastrophes; and any number of other warring positions. I do not intend to resolve all of these antinomies, although I plan to provide some context for the various readings of Benjamin’s final work, hazard a few readings of my own, and hopefully put you in a good position to make sense of his theses on your own terms.

Contents I. The Soteriological Machine • I. Benjamin’s opening allegory of the Mechanical Turk, the distinction between historical materialism and historicism, and the place of theology. • II. The retrospective definition of happiness and the secular counterparts to messianic redemption. 1940 essay by German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin Über den Begriff der Geschichte (2010 edition, Suhrkamp) “Theses on the Philosophy of History” or “On the Concept of History” (German: Über den Begriff der Geschichte) is an essay written in early 1940 by German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin. It is one of Benjamin's best-known, and most controversial works.[1] Composed of twenty numbered paragraphs, the brief essay was written by Benjamin shortly before he attempted to escape from Vichy France, where French collaborationist government officials were handing over Jewish refugees like Benjamin to the Nazi Gestapo.[2] Theses is the last major work Benjamin completed before fleeing to Spain where, fearing Nazi capture, he died by suicide on 26 September 1940.[3] In the essay, Benjamin uses poetic and scientific analogies to present a critique of historicism.[4] One interpretation of Benjamin in Theses I is that Benjamin is suggesting that despite claims to scientific objectivity, the historical materialism of vulgar Marxists is actually a quasi-religious fraud or conversely that theology is an essential and ultimately unavoidable backdrop to philosophic, scientific and economic discourse. As a parable, the meaning of this theses is ambiguous according to the nature of parables. Benjamin uses the Mechanical Turk, a famous chess-playing device of the 18th century, as an analogy for historical materialism. Presented as an automaton that could defeat skilled chess players, the Turk actually concealed a human (allegedly a dwarf) who controlled the machine. He wrote: One can envision a corresponding object to [the Turk] in philosophy. The puppet called "historical materialism" is always supposed to win. It can do this with no further aid 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. Importantly, the Marxist author Michael Löwy points out that Benjamin puts quotation marks around 'historical materialism' in this paragraph: The use of quotation marks and the way this is phrased suggest that this automaton is not "true" historical materialism, but something that is given that name. By whom, we ask. And the answer must be the chief spokesman of Marxism in his period, that is to say the ideologues of the Second and Third Internationals.[5] One key to Benjamin's critique of historicism is his rejection of the past as a continuum of progress. This is most apparent in thesis XIII: The conception of the progress of mankind in history is inseparable from that of the process of history as passing through a homogeneous and empty time. The critique of the idea of this process must be based on the basis of the critique of the idea of progress as such. His alternate vision of the past and "progress" is best represented by thesis IX, which employs Paul Klee's monprint Angelus Novus (1920) as the "angel of history," with his back turned to the future: "Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet [...] That which we call progress, is this storm." Benjamin thus inverts Marxist historical materialism, which was concerned with predicting a revolutionary future, to assert that historical materialism's true task ought to be, in the words of political scientist Ronald Beiner, "to save the past." [6] Klee's Angelus Novus. According to Benjamin, "Historicism depicts the 'eternal' picture of the past; the historical materialist, an experience with it, which stands alone" (Thesis XVI). Benjamin argues against the idea of an "eternal picture" of history and prefers the idea of history as a self-standing experience. Thus, Benjamin states: To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was". For historical materialism it means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. The danger which threatens both the tradition and its recipients. The danger of allowing themselves to be the tools of the ruling class. The tradition must always be won anew from conformism. The Messiah will also come as the conqueror of the Antichrist, not only as a redeemer. (Thesis VI) Just like Scholem, who had seen in the "Angelus Novus" the "baroque concept of history" as unstoppable decay, so too Margaret Cohen sees the kabbalistic concept of the tikun, i.e. the messianic "restoration and mending" of all things in their original integrity, which is clearly indicated in thesis IX with the phrase: "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (German: "die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen") [7] In Thesis XVIII, he highlights a scientific perspective of time only to follow it up with some provocative metaphors: 'In relation to the history of organic life on Earth,' notes a recent biologist, "the miserable fifty millennia of homo sapiens represents something like the last two seconds of a twenty-four hour day. The entire 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 summarizes the entire history of humanity into a monstrous abbreviation, coincides to a hair with the figure, which the history of humanity makes in the universe. Benjamin's colleague Gershom Scholem, who is quoted in Theses, believed that Benjamin's critique of historical materialism was so final that, "nothing remains of historical materialism [...] but the term itself." [1][8] Scholem[6] also suggested that the cryptic essay's seemingly definitive rejection of Marxist historical materialism in favor of a return to the theology and metaphysics of Benjamin's earlier writings came after Benjamin recovered from the deep shock he felt following the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact when the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, previously bitter rivals, announced a non-aggression pact.[9] More broadly in terms of the work's implications, and more specifically in terms of the circumstances in which work on the essay takes place, "On the Concept of History" is written during a period when Benjamin is hiding out with Hannah Arendt after the Second World War has begun and the shadow of the Third Reich is expanding across the map of Europe.[10] In this essay, Benjamin speaks as a Jew with Socialists, Bolshevik, Stalinist and formerly Stalinist, Trotskyist, and otherwise communist or Marxist friends and connections, and as a sympathizer and fellow traveler in these groups: from within the darkening scene during the early days of the Second World War as the continent fell under the control of Hitler's Wehrmacht. Many of the ideas and phrases composing critical passages of Benjamin's theses appeared half-formed, but are also lifted almost word for word in places, from Benjamin's slightly earlier essay on the eccentric 19th century art collector, Eduard Fuchs. Thus the theses are partly a reduction to pure hermeneutic formula of ideas he broached in his earlier piece, and partly an expansion of this set of hermeneutic principles that he'd been exploring for quite some time in his work.[11] The winter that he drafted his theses on the concept of history Benjamin read, in a pairing or book discussion group with Hannah Arendt and her lover Heinrich Blücher, an early draft of Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism as the three of them were holed up at Benjamin's sister's house in Lourdes, France.[10] This reading, and much of Benjamin's composition of the theses, came after Benjamin's imprisonment at an internment camp in Nevers in 1939, but before Hannah Arendt's imprisonment at the concentration camp in Gurs in the midst of the Fall of France as they are reading Scholem's introduction to the Kabbalah together in the winter of 1939-1940. The "philosophy of history"—which is the guiding theme of these meditation—acts as a kind of code word for 'Kabbalah' between Scholem and Benjamin.[12][13] It is a kindred discipline to Kabbalah in their shared understanding. They'd read Franz Molitor's Philosophy of History (which is a book about the Kabbalah) together in 1916, when Scholem was just embarking on his study of the Kabbalah.[12][13] A canon of mystical literature that he reintroduces and to some extent resurrects in his Major Trends shortly after Walter Benjamin's death—which is the book, once again, whose manuscripts Benjamin was reading as he wrote the Theses.[10] They'd consulted together on this subject terrain for years (Scholem expertly as a librarian of ancient manuscripts, and Benjamin somewhat free-associatively)[14] The book Major Trends was dedicated to Walter Benjamin's memory, and started hitting shelves in the spring of 1942 even as the Aktion Reinhard camps commenced with the industrialized form of mass-execution by gassing characteristic of the Nazi Final Solution in the already ongoing genocide of the European Jewish people during the war.[15] Benjamin mailed a copy of the essay to the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who passed it on to Theodor Adorno. Benjamin asked that the essay not be published [1] but it was first printed in a monograph booklet entitled Walter Benjamin zum Gedächtnis (On the Memory of Walter Benjamin), 1947, a French translation ("Sur le concept d'histoire") by Pierre Missac, appeared in the journal, Les Temps Modernes no. 25 [16] An English translation by Harry Zohn is included in the collection of essays by Benjamin, Illuminations, edited by Arendt (1968).[17] Hannah Arendt read a draft of the work to fellow refugees fleeing the Third Reich in Europe on the ship organized by the Emergency Rescue Committee that smuggled her and other Jewish emigrés to the United States. She published her major essay under the title "The Concept of History" in 1957, partly in homage to this work by Walter Benjamin, whose work was still not yet well known.[18] ^ a b Lilla, Mark (May 25, 1995). "The Riddle of Walter Benjamin". The New York Review of Books. ^ Arendt, Hannah; Scholem, Gershom Gerhard; Knott, Marie Luise (2017). 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Schocken. pp. 310-311. ^ "Revue Les Temps Modernes - GALLIMARD - Site Gallimard". www.gallimard.fr. Retrieved 2023-09-19. ^ Walter Benjamin - Biography". European Graduate School EGS. Archived from the original on September 7, 2011. ^ Arendt, Hannah (1958). "The Modern Concept of History". The Review of Politics. 20 (4): 570-590. ISSN 0034-6705. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" Retrieved from " Walter Benjamin 1940 Source: dremdmond/Theses\_on\_History.html; Translation: © 2005 Glenn Redmond; CopyLeft: translation used with permission, Creative Commons (Attribute & ShareAlike); Original German: Gesammelten Schriften I.2. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1974; Transcribed: by Andy Blunden. Translator's Note: Jetztzeit was translated as "here-and-now," in order to distinguish it from its polar opposite, the empty and homogenous time of positivism. Stillstellung was rendered as "zero-hour," rather than the misleading "standstill"; the verb "stillstehen" means to come to a stop or standstill, but Stillstellung is Benjamin's own unique invention, which connotes an objective interruption of a mechanical process, rather like the dramatic pause at the end of an action-adventure movie, when the audience is waiting to find out if the time-bomb/missile/terrorist device was defused or not. I it is well-known that an automaton once existed, which was so constructed that it could counter any 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 aid 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 Löwy, "belongs... next to so much self-seeking in individuals, the general absence of envy of each present in relation to the future." This reflection shows us that the picture 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 could have spoken with, with women who might have been able to give themselves to us. The conception of happiness, in other words, resonates irremediably with that of resurrection (Erlösung: transfiguration, redemption). It is just the same with the conception of the past, which makes history into its affair. The past carries a secret index with it, by which it is referred to its resurrection. 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 to which we lend our ears today? have not the women, who we court, 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, thereby accounts for the truth, that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history. Indeed, the past would fully belong only a resurrected humanity. Said another way: only for a resurrected humanity would its past, in each 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 precisely that of the Last Judgment. IV So long as first food and clothing, and the kingdom of God will come to you of itself. — Hegel, 1807 The class struggle, which always remains in force for a historian schooled in Marx, 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 are present as confidence, 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 every victory which has ever been won by the rulers into question. Just as flowers turn their heads towards the sun, so too does that which has been turned, by virtue of a secret kind of heliotropism, 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 of its recognizability, is the past to be held fast. "The truth will not run away from us" — this remark by Gottfried Keller denotes the exact place where historical materialism breaks through historicism's picture of history. For it is an ir retrievable picture of the past, which threatens to disappear with every present, which does not recognize itself as meant in it. VI To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize "how it really was." It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes 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 stock of tradition as much as its recipients. For both it is one and the same: handing itself over as the tool of the ruling classes. In every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it. For the Messiah arrives not merely as the Redeemer, he also arrives as the vanquisher of the Anti-Christ. The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: 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 resonates with misery. — Brecht, Thesenpny Opera Fustel de Coulanges recommended to the historian, that if he wished to reexamine an epoch, he should remember everything he knows about the later course of history from his head. 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 mastering 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 devinrent comblés à la fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage." [Few people can guess how despondent one has 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 with the victor. Those who currently rule are however the heirs of all those who have ever been victorious. Empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the current rulers every time. 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 sprawled underfoot. The spoils are, as was ever the case, carried along in the triumphal procession. They are known as the cultural heritage. In the historical materialist they have to reckon with a distanced observer. For what he surveys as the cultural heritage is part and parcel of a lineage (Abkunft: descent) which he cannot contemplate without horror. It owes its existence not only to the toil of the great geniuses, who created it, but also to the nameless drudgery of its contemporaries. There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously 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 thus moves as far away from this as measurably possible. He regards it as 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 the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this. 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. Not the least reason that the latter has a chance is that its opponents, in the name of progress, greet 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 would be the knowledge that the conception of history on which it rests is untenable. IX My wing is ready to fly! would rather turn backFor had I stayed mortal time! would have had little luck. — Gerhardt 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 hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [verweilen: 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 upside, and have sealed their downfall by the betrayal of 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 the politicians, their trust in the "mass basis," and finally their servile subordination into an uncontrollable apparatus have been three sides 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 has dwelt within social democracy from the very beginning rests not merely on its political tactics, but also on its economic conceptions. It is a fundamental cause of the later collapse. There is nothing which has corrupted the German working-class so much as the opinion that they were swimming with the tide. Technical developments counted to them as the course of the stream, which they thought they were swimming in. From this, it was only a step to the illusion that the factory-labor set forth 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 this confusion. It defined labor as "the source of all wealth and all culture." Suspecting their work, Marx responded that human being, who owned no other property aside from his labor-power, "must be the slave of other human beings, who... have made themselves into property-owners." Oblivious to this, the confusion only increased, and soon afterwards Josef Dietzgen announced: "Labor is the savior of modern times... In the... improvement... of labor... consists the wealth, which can now finally fulfill 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 these are no longer at their disposal. It wishes to perceive only the progression of the exploitation of nature, not the regression of society. It already bears the naiveocratic traces which would later be found in Fascism. Among these is a concept of nature which diverges in a worrisome manner from those in the socialist utopias of the Vormauer period [pre-1848]. Labor, as it is henceforth conceived, is tantamount to the exploitation of nature, which is contrasted to the exploitation of the proletariat with naive self-satisfaction. Compared to this positivistic conception, the fantasies which provided so much ammunition for the ridicule of Fourier exhibit a surprisingly healthy sensibility. According to Fourier, a beneficent servile subordination into an uncontrollable apparatus has been three sides 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. XII We need history, but we need it differently from the spoiled lazy-bones in the gardens of knowledge. — Nietzsche, On the Use and Abuse of History for Life The subject of historical cognition is the battling, 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 consciousness, 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 succeeded in almost completely erasing the name of Blanqui, whose distant thunder [Erzklang] 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. Through 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 Yet every day our cause becomes clearer and the people more clever. — Josef Dietzgen. Social Democratic Philosophy Social democratic theory, and still more the praxis, was determined by a concept of progress which did not hold to reality, but had a dogmatic claim. Progress, as it was painted in the minds of the social democrats, was once upon a time the progress of humanity itself (not only that of its abilities and knowledges). It was, secondly, something unending (something corresponding to an endless perfectibility of humanity). It counted, thirdly, as something essentially unstoppable (as something self-activating pursuing a straight or spiral path). Each of these predicates is controversial, and critics could be applied to each of them. This latter must, however, when push comes to shove, go behind all these predicates and direct itself at 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 that which is fulfilled by the 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 latter day Rome. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cities a past costume. Fashion has an eye for what is up-to-date, wherever it moves in the jungle [Dickicht: maze, thicket] of what is. 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 into the open sky of history is the dialectical one, as Marx conceptualized the revolution. XV The consciousness of exploding the continuum of history 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 functioning as a historical time-lapse camera. And it is fundamentally the same day which, in the shape of holidays and memorials, always returns. The calendar does not therefore count time like clocks. They are monuments of a historical awareness, of which there has not seemed to be the slightest trace for a hundred years. Yet in the July Revolution the new clock tower placed which did justice to this consciousness. 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, qu'irrites contre l'heure De nouveaux Josues au pied de chaque tour, Tiraient sur les cadranx pour arrêter le jour. [Who would've thought! As though angered by time's way/The new Josuhs/Beneath each tower, they captured at the dial/To stop the day.] XVI The historical materialist cannot do without the concept of a present which is not a transition, in which time originates and direct itself at 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. XVII 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 that which is fulfilled by the 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 latter day Rome. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cities a past costume. Fashion has an eye for what is up-to-date, wherever it moves in the jungle [Dickicht: maze, thicket] of what is. It is the tiger's leap into that which has gone before. 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As though angered by time's way/The new Josuhs/Beneath each tower, they captured at the dial/To stop the day.] XVI The historical materialist cannot do without the concept of a present which is not a transition, in which time originates and direct itself at 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. XVIII In relation to the history of organic life on Earth," notes a recent biologist, "the miserable fifty millennia of homo sapiens represents something like the last two seconds of a twenty-four hour day. The entire 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 summarizes the entire history of humanity into a monstrous abbreviation, coincides to a hair with the figure, which the history of humanity makes in the universe. (Addendum: A Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of various moments of history. But no state of affairs is, as a cause, already a historical one. It becomes this, posthumously, through the sun rising in the sky of history." Benjamin concludes with a warning about the subtlety of this change: "a historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of transformations." Benjamin then returns to our conception of the past. He posits that the past can only be understood as a momentary image. He then quotes the writer Gottfried Keller: "the truth will not run away from us", and claims that this is the critical move of historical materialism – the recognition of every image of the past in the present, without which the past threatens to disappear entirely. Benjamin on the Messiah A photograph of Walter Benjamin, 1928, via Wikimedia Commons On a similar point, Benjamin then goes on to characterize historical articulation as not a matter of recreating things as they really were, but as seizing hold of memory at a moment of danger. "The Messiah comes not only as the Redeemer, but as the subduer of the Antichrist." This is the image of the past which historical materialism is concerned with. One of the recurrent themes in Benjamin is this sense of mission, of time which is not homogenous, but at once recurring and converging: "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." Benjamin then turns to another element of recreating the past – that of empathy. This is, he claims, central to historicism – the attempt, among other things, to recreate the past. Here he quotes Flaubert: "Few will be able to guess how sad one must be to resuscitate Carthage." The problem with empathy for Benjamin is that we shall generally end up empathizing with the victors. Another problem with the historicist desire to recreate the past is that it involves a veneration of cultural treasures, whose real meaning resides not just in the genius of those who created them but in the horror and barbarism of the conditions required to create them, which we are unwilling to contemplate. The State of Emergency Angelus Novus, Paul Klee, 1920, via Wikimedia Commons The historical materialist dissociates himself from the standard way of viewing the past: it is "his task to brush history against the grain." Benjamin is writing the theses in 1940, in the early days of the Second World War. It is striking that he first mentions fascism in order to emphasize how the state of things, which has brought it about is anything but abnormal, and the apparent 'state of emergency' is not a genuine one. His call is for a real state of emergency, something to break with the past. We learn this, so he says, from the "tradition of the oppressed." This leads Benjamin on to, perhaps, the most famous passage in this work: that in which he describes the Angelus Novus (a painting by Paul Klee), taking it to represent the terrible bond history is held in: contemplating the horror of the past but forced into the future. The past is left behind, even as the 'debris' piles higher and higher. The storm which carries it, so Benjamin says, is called progress. Benjamin then shifts direction, and characterizes himself and his project as one of turning away from the world and its affairs, imposing a kind of monastic discipline, or at least situating it as an extension of the tradition which counts monasticism as a part. Karl Marx, photo by John Jabez Edwin Mayall, 1875, via Wikimedia Commons This turn to an ascetic life is necessary given the uselessness of politicians who are meant to be fighting fascism, their "stubborn faith in progress," confidence in their "mass basis," and "integration into an uncontrollable apparatus," which Benjamin takes to be "3 aspects of the same thing." The point of this monastic ideal is to "convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history which avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians adhere." Conformism within social democracy is a large part of its failure: Benjamin states that nothing has corrupted the German working class as much as the inertia with which it was going with the flow of history. Defining progress in the context of technological development goes hand in hand with the centralization of labor as the source of power and wealth. It is Marx, Benjamin says, who notices the power dynamics which lie behind this shift in German society: "the man who possesses no property other than his labor power... must of necessity become the slave of other who have made themselves the owners". This conception of labor is paired with a predator's consumptive view of nature. Benjamin draws the contrast here with Fourier's utopianism, which focuses on unleashing the hidden potentialities in nature. The Categorization of Social Democracy Portrait of Maximilien Robespierre, Anonymous, 1790, via Wikimedia Commons Social democracy assigns to the working class the role of redeeming future generations, rather than turning it into the last enslaved class fated to redeem generations of the past. According to Benjamin, progress in the social democratic conception involves the defense of dogmatic claims. In particular, (1) progress is of mankind itself, not just their "ability and knowledge;" (2) progress has no limit, in accord with the "infinite perfectibility" of mankind; and (3) progress was regarded as irresistible. Criticism of progress should go beyond a critique of these dogmas of progress, and focus on what unites them; "the concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time." History is not homogenous, because time is filled by the presence of now: "to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history." Walter Benjamin on Revolution and the End of History Allegory of the November Uprising, Ary Scheffer, 1831, via Wikimedia Commons Revolution, for Benjamin, means introducing a new calendar. Awareness that they are about to "...make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action." The historicist gives the "eternal image of the past," the "once upon a time" – the historical materialist must be able to conceive of the present not as a transition, but as time that has stopped entirely. This is the position from which history is written. The historical materialist "remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history." Historicism logically concludes with universal history, whereas materialist historiography aims towards a "constructive principle." Thinking is not just a flow of thought, but the point at which thought ceases, and the structure of that thought can crystallize into a monad. Benjamin concludes that the observation that this is a revolutionary opportunity to recapitulate the battles of history. My wing is ready for flight, I would like to turn back. If I stayed timeless time, I would have little luck. Mein Flügel ist zum Schwung bereit, ich kehrite gern zurück, denn blieb ich auch lebendige Zeit, ich hätte wenig Glück. Gerherd Scholem, "Gruss vom Angelus"