

RONALD BEINER

University of Toronto

BENJAMIN'S CONCEPT OF HISTORY AS A SOURCE OF ARENDT'S IDEA OF JUDGMENT

"ich kehrte gern zurück." – Gershom Scholem

That there is an intimate bond between the last thoughts of Walter Benjamin and the last thoughts of his friend Hannah Arendt is not just a matter of commentary or intellectual speculation.

One can trace this relationship quite tangibly in the very mode of transmission by which Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" were saved from the wreckage of Nazi-occupied Europe. Arendt scholars who consult the collection of Hannah Arendt papers housed in the Library of Congress (or view this collection online) have access to a series of postal aerograms on which Benjamin transcribed a version of the text in his unique miniature script, which he then mailed to himself at his Paris address from Basle and Marseilles.

The "Theses" was Benjamin's final text, and it was apparently put in the care of Arendt and her husband, Heinrich Blücher, along with a suitcase of other manuscripts, in Marseilles the last time that Arendt and Blücher saw Benjamin. Arendt eventually passed the manuscript on to Adorno in New York, thus securing publication in several different places – in the mimeographed memorial volume produced by the Frankfurt School's Institute for Social Research in 1942, in a French version (translated by Benjamin himself) in 1947, in a German periodical in 1950, and in Arendt's own collection of Benjamin's writings in 1968.¹

¹ Although the work is commonly known by the title "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (*Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*), the more authentic title seems to be: "On the Concept of History" (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*). The English translation was originally published in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 255-266. A revised version of the Zohn translation (under the title "On the Concept of History"), accompanied by very helpful editorial notes, is included in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 4: 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), pp. 389-400. For the original texts and accompanying notes, see *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-), Bd. I, 2, pp. 691-704 and Bd. I, 3, pp. 1223-1266. Some relevant commentaries include: Timothy Bahti, "History as Rhetorical Enactment: Walter Benjamin's Theses 'On the Concept of History,'"

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* tells the story of how the "Theses" were borne, like a precious relic, from Lisbon to New York.² Young-Bruehl recounts how the "Theses" were read aloud among a group of refugees in Lisbon while awaiting the ship that would carry them away from Nazi-overrun Europe.³ Accordingly, the "Theses" are worthy of reflection, not only as a literary text but also as a historical document.

Jürgen Habermas has described the "Theses" as "one of the most moving testimonies of the Jewish spirit."⁴ Perhaps the "Theses" succeed in capturing this spirit because they were, almost literally, produced in flight. The "Theses" were written in early 1940, after Benjamin had been released from an internment camp in France. Only several months later Benjamin would be on the run from the Gestapo, as the Nazis occupied France.

Benjamin failed to make his escape. His flight from Europe was blocked at the Franco-Spanish border, where he took his life rather than risk the possibility of being handed over to the Gestapo. The story of his suicide, as related by Arendt and Gershom Scholem, is unspeakably tragic. When Benjamin wrote his "Theses," the problem of how and by what means to flee from a Europe being swept by the Nazis was all-consuming. The Hitler-Stalin pact was still in force. Benjamin's fate was not unlike that of the angel of history evoked in thesis IX, chased by the storm of progress away from a time piled high with catastrophe.

What is Walter Benjamin's intention in his enigmatic "Theses on the Philosophy of History"? According to Benjamin's friend Gershom Scholem, the "Theses" was Benjamin's way of

Diacritics, Vol. 9, no. 3 (September, 1979): 2-17; Jürgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," *New German Critique*, No. 17 (Spring, 1979): 30-59; Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin" and "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976), pp. 172-197 and 198-236 respectively; Peter Szondi, "Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4 (Spring, 1978): 491-506; Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 15, nos. 1-2 (Fall-Winter, 1983-1984): 71-104; Irving Wohlfarth, "On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections," *Glyph 3*, ed. Samuel Weber and Henry Sussman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 148-212; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); and Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), Chapter 3.

² Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 160-163 and 166-168.

³ Ibid., p. 162.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers," in Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), p. 34; quoted by Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, p. 231.

accomplishing "his awakening from the shock" of the Hitler-Stalin pact.⁵ According to Scholem, the "Theses" mark Benjamin's decisive break with historical materialism and a return to the metaphysical-theological concerns of his early thought. What the "Theses" have left in common with historical materialism is "only the ironic relation of the termini technici"; "frequently nothing remains of historical materialism except the term itself."⁶

The secret core of the theses is in fact, for Scholem, the hope of a leap into transcendence.⁸ In support of his interpretation, Scholem cites the first thesis, where Benjamin proposes an alliance between historical materialism and theology. Historical materialism must take its guidance from theology if it is to win the day. History is likened to a chess game, where historical materialism appears to be in command, whereas in fact it is a mere puppet controlled by the unseen hand of theology.⁹

On Scholem's reading of the theses, the angel of history (in thesis IX) cannot make whole again the fragments of history, and therefore Benjamin must have resort, in the last thesis, to the Messiah, who alone can succeed where the angel must fail – namely, in the redemption of history.¹⁰ On this reading, Benjamin appears as a theologian *manqué* fighting to break out of materialistic categories who finally forsakes the angel of historical materialism for the Messiah of Jewish theology.

The "Theses" themselves present a very different face. In every one of the theses, Benjamin gives the impression of struggling to define the true nature of historical materialism as well as struggling to formulate his position in relation to historicism generally. Phrases such as "the historical materialist knows this," "historical materialists must be aware of that," run throughout the "Theses." In each of the theses, Benjamin seems to be defining the stance of the *self-conscious* historical materialist, as opposed to the false historicism of those who lack a genuine historical consciousness. Benjamin gives the appearance, at least, of someone concerned not to detach himself from materialist categories, nor to repudiate them, but to redefine those categories and to clarify the nature of his allegiance to them.

⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 221-222; Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, p. 231.

⁶ Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, p. 235.

⁷ Ibid., p. 231.

⁸ Ibid., p. 235.

⁹ Ibid., p. 231. Thesis I is apparently inspired by "Maelzel's Chess-Player" by Edgar Allan Poe: see Poe, *Essays and Stories* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1914), pp. 120-146. See also Bahti, "History as Rhetorical Enactment"; and Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" p. 84 and p. 101 n. 46.

¹⁰ Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, pp. 232-236.

Historical materialism had always defined itself in terms of revolutionary expectations for the future. Accordingly, the historical past had always been analyzed in terms of *what is to be*. Benjamin strictly reverses this perspective. Historical materialism is now to be defined by a certain relation to *the past*, namely a redemptive relation.

Historical materialists are aware that each generation, including the present, is “endowed with a *weak* Messianic power” (thesis II). The task entrusted to historical materialism is not to make the future but to save the past. Historical materialism is a way of comporting oneself, not toward the totality of the historical process, but toward certain instants of the historical past: to make the fragments whole again. To be guardian over these moments is the task of the theological-materialist historian.

This conducts us to a second way in which Benjamin redefines historical materialism. One normally associates historical materialism with the idea of history as a rational process, as a dialectical movement, ordered by a purpose. Historical materialism, under the influence of Hegel, is an effort to conceive history as rationally intelligible. But there is nothing of this conception in Benjamin’s “Theses.” For Benjamin, history is radically fragmented; the task of the angel of history is to establish a redemptive relation to the fragments (thesis IX).¹¹ This conception is certainly far removed from the idea of history as a rationally intelligible process.

But if Benjamin rejects the idea of history as a rational process, by what right does he claim to be speaking as a historical materialist and speaking for historical materialists? Is not Scholem then justified in saying that the “Theses” have nothing in common with historical materialism but the term itself, and that Benjamin uses materialist categories as a cover for reflections that are in fact metaphysical and theological?

I wish to suggest an answer to this question. In his “Theses,” Benjamin seeks to define, for the first time, the notion of a historical materialist *historiography*. The angel of history described in thesis IX has his face “turned toward the past.”¹² That is the

¹¹ See Arendt, Introduction to *Illuminations*, pp. 12-13; see also Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, pp. 233-234, on the kabbalistic idea of *tikkun* (the messianic restoration rendered necessary by the “breaking of the vessels”). In this essay I take for granted, without further explicit discussion, that much of the imagery of the “Theses” is drawn from the theological concepts of Jewish mysticism. Young-Bruehl has claimed that the “Theses” were actually written in response to Scholem’s book, *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*; see *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, p. 161.

¹² Thesis IX is a commentary on a Paul Klee painting titled *Angelus Novus* that was owned by Benjamin. See Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel”; and Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 100. As an epigraph for thesis IX, Benjamin uses four lines of a Scholem poem entitled “Gruss vom Angelus” (see “Walter Benjamin

direction in which his gaze is pointed, and that is where the angel wants to linger. He would indeed dwell there, if he were not propelled away from the catastrophic past by a historical progression that is actually mere frenzy.

The angel of history prefers to tarry at the ruins of the past in order to "awaken the dead," to make whole what has been shattered. To this corresponds the redemptive function of historical reflection, the saving power of remembrance. The historian desires to keep faith with the past, and it is in *this* that his or her revolutionary commitment is expressed. Benjamin seeks to explain how one can be both a historian and a historical materialist, without defining or justifying the activity of historiography in terms of the immediate needs of revolutionary action. I believe that this had never been done before, strange as it may seem, and that in this way Benjamin defined a new scope for the historical materialist tradition.

Consider Marx's historical writings on political events in nineteenth-century France - *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Civil War in France*, and *The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850*. It is natural to regard Marx, in these writings, as a political analyst and revolutionary strategist, exerting himself to decipher the contemporary events of his time so as to plan revolutionary praxis on the basis of a better and more informed understanding of what promotes and what blocks effective action.

But here one does not view Marx specifically as a historiographer. What is missing from the conventional understanding of these writings is the distinctive relationship of Marx to the workers and revolutionaries whose tragedy he shares and whose failure he relates. Thus, Benjamin serves to disclose a further dimension to Marx's work as a historian, understood as an activity distinct from that of the revolutionary strategist, analyst, and so forth. He helps us see what Marx is really (implicitly) doing in these historical writings, even though Marx himself might be quite unaware of this dimension.

Marx begins the *Class Struggles in France* as follows: "With the exception of only a few chapters, every more important part of the annals of the revolution from 1848 to 1849 carries the heading: *Defeat of the Revolution!*" But Marx then proceeds to draw progress from defeat: The progress of the revolution required the creation

and His Angel," p. 210); the second line, "ich kehrte gern zurück" (I would like to turn back), is underlined by Benjamin in the version of the manuscript I referred to at the start of this essay. That line is also italicized in the version of the Zohn translation of the "Theses" included in Volume 4 of the *Selected Writings* (p. 392). For the full text of Scholem's poem (translated by Gary Smith), see *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. M.R. Jacobson and E.M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 184-185, n. 4; "I am all for turning back" is Smith's translation of the line underscored by Benjamin.

of a powerful, united counter-revolution that would provide the opponent necessary for the ripening of a genuinely revolutionary party. So, the revolutionary actors are defeated, but the revolution is carried forward.

According to Benjamin's seventh thesis, however, one would have to regard Marx as here turning against his own true intention as a historian, and as breaking faith with the actors who are the real concern of Marx's narrative. To forsake the standpoint of the vanquished, as Marx appears to do here, is to betray the principles of a genuine historical materialist historiography. This is brought out well in Adorno's commentary on thesis VII:

If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside - what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory.¹³

This captures what Marx, in his historical writings, accomplishes *implicitly* (that is, insofar as he is writing as a historiographer), regardless of how far it may deviate from Marx's own self-understanding as reflected in his *explicit* statements about what he is doing.

Several commentators on Benjamin cite Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.... Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead."¹⁴

¹³ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 151 (no. 98). The quotation continues: "What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must needs deal with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic."

¹⁴ Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p. 99. On the opening page of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx makes his point even more starkly: "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (*Selected Works*, p. 97). See Susan Buck-Morss, "Walter Benjamin - Revolutionary Writer (II)," *New Left Review*, No. 129 (September-October, 1981), p. 84, 179; and Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" p. 79. For the source of the "dead burying their

This passage makes clear what is common to the conceptions of history of Benjamin and Marx as well as what makes them diverge sharply. It is true that for Benjamin, as for Marx, the revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past in the sense that it does not derive its content from previous history. On the other hand, according to our reading of the "Theses," to say (as Marx does) that the dead must simply be left to bury their dead would be to relinquish precisely that which is the revolutionary moment in historical reflection. In this respect, Benjamin *must* repudiate the idea that the revolution may draw its poetry not from the past but *from the future*. What hope there is comes not from the future but from a vanquished past that resists domination by the victorious enemy. Therefore, it is the duty of the historian to continue "fanning the spark of hope in the past" (thesis VI).

What, then, distinguishes historical materialist historiography? Benjamin discusses this in many of the theses, above all in theses XVI-XVII. First of all, historical materialism does not assume a reverential attitude to history, contemplating the flow of historical occurrence with the complacent assurance of continual progress. The latter approach to history is what Benjamin refers to as historicism, the political counterpart to which is the German Social Democratic Party against which he polemicizes in theses XI-XIII.

In theses VI and XII, Benjamin sets up two opposing models of historiography: the first, represented by Ranke, seeks to contemplate "the way it really was." The second, associated with Nietzsche, proclaims: "we need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it." Ranke's view corresponds to what Benjamin calls historicism, whereas historical materialism is firmly aligned with the conception of historical knowledge ascribed to Nietzsche.

According to the outlook of historicism, the truth of history is always "there," awaiting our contemplation. This is the view, cited in thesis V, that "the truth will not run away from us"; there is no urgency to historical reflection for the facts will always be there waiting for us whenever we find the time or impulse for contemplation. This, Benjamin says, "marks the exact point where historicism materialism cuts through historicism."

For historical materialism, in contrast, the past must be "seized"; what is required is "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (theses V-VI). If we miss the moment, the past is irretrievable. "The true picture of the past flits by" (thesis V).

dead" trope, see Matthew 8:21-22 and Luke 9:59-60; for further discussion, see Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 44. For an ambitious and eloquent set of reflections on fidelity to the dead as a philosophical problem, see W. James Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

The historical materialist historian is ruled by a perception of the *precariousness* of the past, and this perception gives to historical reflection the urgency lacked by historicism in its contemplative outlook.

As Benjamin puts it in thesis VI, *even the dead* are not safe from the enemy who never ceases to be victorious, and therefore historiography is an unremitting struggle on behalf of the dead. Historicism portrays the past as something eternal. "Once upon a time" is a whore in historicism's bordello (thesis XVI). Historicism presupposes a homogeneous, empty time that it attempts to fill with a mass of data (thesis XVII). The historicist "tells the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (thesis A). The historical materialist, in contrast to all this, sees history as living and throbbing with revolutionary possibilities, and strives to establish a messianic relation with the past.

Universal history (the culmination of historicism)¹⁵ is based on the *flow* of thoughts. Materialistic historiography is based on the *arrest* of thoughts (thesis XVII). With the latter, historical thinking receives a "shock," and this shock stops it in its tracks. It comes face to face with the revolutionary moment, and is determined to blast the moment out of the homogeneous course of history. This is what Benjamin calls the *Jetztzeit* (now-time) in which the present and past are drawn into a messianic relation (thesis A).

Through shock, arrest, and blasting, historical materialism replaces the homogeneous, empty time of historicism with the time filled by *Jetztzeit* (thesis XIV). Where the historicist sees an inert "chain of events," the historical materialist sees a broken vessel in need of repair, a ruined past in need of salvation, a forsaken ancestor in need of awakening (thesis IX).

What serves, above all, to differentiate materialist historiography from historicism is that the latter is based on the idea of progress (theses VIII-XIII). It was this faith in progress that enabled the Social Democrats to betray the German working class (thesis XI). But historical materialists cannot share this complacent faith in progress.

Their reflection on history never forgets the fate of the vanquished and therefore is governed by the tragic knowledge that the cultural treasures that are the spoils of the victors "have an origin which [one] cannot contemplate without horror"; "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (thesis VII).

¹⁵ This repudiation of universal history is succinctly expressed by Adorno: "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb." *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 320; quoted in Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 270.

This awareness shatters any complacency on the part of the historian. Social democracy encourages the notion that one is “moving with the current” (thesis XI), whereas the historical materialist “regards it as his task to brush history against the grain” (thesis VII). Historicism finds security in the continuum of history, while historical materialism seeks those charged moments that *explode* the continuum of history through revolutionary action (theses XIV-XV).

The French Revolution saw a revolution in historical consciousness. It was “a tiger’s leap into the past,” and this was at the same time a “leap in the open air of history.” Benjamin tells us that this is how Marx himself understood the revolution (thesis XIV).¹⁶ Benjamin believes that fascism can only be defeated by shattering all complacency, which is fostered by the Social Democrats’ faith in progress.

For this, one requires a catastrophic appreciation of history: “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (thesis VIII).¹⁷ History is a sky-high pile of debris and the assertion of progress is meant to deflect our gaze from this unredeemed debris (thesis IX). Historical materialism means that the vanquished are not forgotten, and this means that one is never deterred by the idea of progress from continuing to wage “the fight for the oppressed past” (thesis XVII).

According to thesis XII, the working class, if it is to remain the bearer of historical knowledge, must keep its attention trained on “the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.” The transgression of this precept was the unforgivable sin of the Social Democrats, whose treachery was to depict the working class as the redeemers of *future* generations. By dangling before the working class the prospect that things would get better, it caused the remembrance of past generations to be overshadowed by the contemplation of generations to come.

But is this not the case with all progressivist social doctrines, including Marxism?¹⁸ (It was, after all, not only the Social Democrats who betrayed their own cause, as Benjamin makes clear enough in thesis X; it is reflection on the deeper and more blatant treachery of the Communists in 1939-1940 that nearly

¹⁶ Needless to say, Marx’s criticisms of past revolutions insofar as they felt obliged to draw their poetry from the past, cited earlier, make it highly unlikely that Marx understood the French Revolution in the way that Benjamin does.

¹⁷ One can detect an echo of Carl Schmitt in Benjamin’s reference to the “state of emergency.” Benjamin’s debt to Schmitt is discussed by Lilla: see *The Reckless Mind*, pp. 93-95.

¹⁸ For a critique of mainstream Marxism from the point of view of thesis XII, see Christian Lenhardt, “Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*,” *Telos*, No. 25 (Fall, 1975): 133-154. Lenhardt’s citations from Horkheimer are also relevant in this context.

tempts one to imitate the retreat from worldly entanglements of the monastic orders.)¹⁹

In its anxiety to liberate the grandchildren, the progressivist ideology risks alienating us from the sufferings of our downtrodden ancestors, who cannot be liberated, but at best, simply remembered. The historiographical task is not to anticipate better times to come but to hold open the promise of redemption for all moments that have already been.

Above all, the renunciation of historicism in favor of historiography means that remembrance shall prevail over soothsaying: "we know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however" (thesis B). Given that the "Theses" are animated by antihistoricist pessimism, if not antihistorical despair, the continued adherence to Marx's authority (invoked in theses IV, XI, XII, and XIV) remains something of a puzzle.

Christian Lenhardt correctly notes that in the "Theses," Benjamin asserts with carefree assurance the claim that Marx, together with Blanqui and in stark opposition to social democracy, shares his understanding of the meaning of revolution, without any effort on Benjamin's part to furnish textual substantiation of the claim.²⁰ However, there is at least one passage (from the *Nachlass*) in which Benjamin appears to concede that his critique of the idea of progress places a measure of critical distance between his conception of historical materialism and that of Marx. He begins by quoting Marx to the effect that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But then he suggests that maybe it is entirely otherwise, that maybe revolutions exhibit the human race reaching for the emergency brake.²¹

¹⁹ Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 3, p. 1228, on Brecht's misunderstanding of the import of thesis X; and Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" pp. 71, 90, and p. 103 n. 60, where Tiedemann argues convincingly that the main, if unspoken, target of thesis X is not the Social Democrats, as the subsequent theses would lead one to believe, but rather the Communists.

²⁰ Lenhardt, "Anamnestic Solidarity," p. 137, p. 137 n. 7, and pp. 146-148 (which includes discussion of the passages from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* cited earlier). Tiedemann says that "Benjamin is inconclusive regarding the relationship of his concept of history to that of Marx," but Tiedemann leaves little doubt about how he believes the equivocation is resolved. Whereas Blanqui is – rather implausibly – paired with Marx in thesis XII, it is clear that in the formulation of Benjamin's concept of revolution, Blanqui wins out over Marx. Despite what Benjamin says in thesis XIV, for Marx revolution is not a "leap in the open air of history." See Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" pp. 93, 95-96, and p. 103 n. 67.

²¹ *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 3, p. 1232. Cf. Wohlfarth, "On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections," p. 168; and Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" p. 95.

This recalls thesis XVI: “a historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop.” (And in thesis XV, time is arrested by revolutionary action; thesis XVII speaks of a messianic cessation of happening.) According to Marx’s metaphor, the historical process is a train journey powered by revolution, whereas it is this very train journey that must be brought to a sudden halt in order to realize Benjamin’s vision of historical materialism.

The Benjaminian historiographer wishes to get off this train because, far from being elated by the destination it promises, he or she continues to be troubled by the whistle-stops that have been left behind. Despite the fragmentary and tentative character of the “Theses,” it would be hard to overstate the importance of the text, not only for the understanding of Benjamin’s own work but also, as we have suggested above, for the disclosure of a unique and unprecedented concept of historiography that is of more general significance (and that was tacitly picked up and pursued in Arendt’s writings on the meaning of the human power of judging).²²

On the other hand, it is not easy to locate the precise status of the “Theses.” It appears that Benjamin was averse to the idea of their publication, for he said, “it would leave the door wide open to enthusiastic misunderstanding.”²³ Benjamin claimed that he kept the ideas of the “theses” to himself for 20 years, but it is not quite true that he strictly kept them to himself: some of the key formulations of the “Theses” were already stated in his essay on “Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian” (1937), and the redemptive conception of history goes all the way back to the “Theologico-Political Fragment” (1920-1921).²⁴

As for the question of the further elaboration of the “Theses,” there are indications that Benjamin intended to develop the “Theses” in the direction of a more general critique of the idea of progress.²⁵

It is clear that Benjamin himself was convinced of the vital methodological role of the “Theses.” He describes the work as a

²² For a similar judgment of the significance of the “Theses,” see Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, Chapter 8.

²³ *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 3, pp. 1227. Cf. Bahti, “History as Rhetorical Enactment,” p. 3; Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 260; and Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?” p. 71.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), pp. 349-386 and 155-156 respectively; cf. “Publisher’s Note,” pp. 31 and 41-42.

²⁵ See Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 259. In *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 3, pp. 1238-1239, Benjamin produces a list of a (presumably) intended series of critiques, the last of which reads: “critique of Marx’s theory of progress.” Cf. Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?” p. 103 n. 67.

"theoretical armature" for one of the Baudelaire essays that he had done for the Institute for Social Research (whereas, according to thesis XVII, universal history – the mode of historiography practiced by historicism – is *incapable* of being furnished with a theoretical armature).

The "method" that the "Theses" adumbrate is as follows: "to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework" (thesis XVII).²⁶ The result of this method is the *Aufhebung* in this work of the lifework; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. "A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad."²⁷

In letters to Scholem and Adorno, Benjamin spoke of the need for an epistemological underpinning for his most ambitious project, the major work on the Paris Arcades, and several commentators view the "Theses" as supplying the required epistemology. In the words of Susan Buck-Morss, "it was intended as a methodological introduction to the 'Arcades' project," and as such, "it instructs the reading of his own work."²⁸ And Adorno goes so far as to claim that the "Theses" constitutes one of the few completed portions of the sprawling and unconsummated Arcades project.²⁹ Assuming that these conjectures are correct, the "Theses" should ultimately read in the context of *The Arcades Project*.³⁰

Here Benjamin is himself writing as a cultural historian. He must therefore address the questions: what is cultural history? What political justifications can it have? How can the activity of the historian be reconciled with any kind of revolutionary political commitment? How can preoccupation with a past that cannot be changed contribute anything to the task of changing the world?

²⁶ In a letter to the Adornos, Benjamin drew special attention to thesis XVII, which he characterized as central to a proper methodological understanding of his work. *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 3, pp. 1223 and 1226. Cf. Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" p. 80.

²⁷ For discussion of Benjaminian historiography as a kind of "monadology," see David Frisby, "Walter Benjamin's Prehistory of Modernity as Anticipation of Postmodernity? Some Methodological Reflections," in *'With the Sharpened Axe of Reason': Approaches to Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Oxford: Berg, 1996), pp. 16, 20, and 21.

²⁸ Susan Buck-Morss, "Walter Benjamin – Revolutionary Write (I)," *New Left Review*, No. 128 (July-August, 1981), pp. 52-53. Cf.

Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" p. 97.

²⁹ Theodor Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p. 239.

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999). For a section of *The Arcades Project* that is directly relevant to the "Theses," see pp. 456-488: "Convoluts," N [Theoretics of Knowledge; Theory of Progress]. Frisby, in "Walter Benjamin's Prehistory of Modernity," even though he never refers specifically to the "Theses," gives a good account of how the "Theses" can be regarded as a methodological introduction to or theoretical armature for *The Arcades Project*.

Above all, Benjamin must clarify to himself why a historical materialist should concern himself or herself at all with writing the cultural history of nineteenth-century bourgeois Paris.

Perhaps the "Theses" do not shed very much light on what it means, in general, to be a historical materialist, but they do at least clarify what it meant for *Benjamin* to be a historical materialist. To the question "why does a revolutionary write history?" Benjamin is able, on the basis of the "Theses," to answer: "to save the dead from oblivion." In *The Arcades Project* we read: "at any given time, the living see themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table."³¹

The ever-present danger, as Benjamin says in thesis V, is that the image of the past "is never seen again." This image "flits by," and therefore must be seized before it is gone. When Benjamin says that "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably," the emphasis is not on "the present's own concerns" but on the need to save the past from the threat of irretrievable disappearance. This overriding concern of the "Theses" is expressed most decisively in thesis III: the chronicler of the past should observe the truth that "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history."

What Hannah Arendt fundamentally intended with her project on *Judging* – insofar as we can extrapolate this intention from the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* – was a vindication of the perennial storytelling capacity of human beings. Her sources were Cicero (with his idea of a "silent sense"),³² Gracian (with his idea of taste),³³ Machiavelli (with his notion that the "History of Florence" is really the storybook of Florentine Stories),³⁴ Kant (with his idea of exemplarity as the "go-cart" of judgment)³⁵ – and (not least) Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's "Theses" were a tacit and uncited source of the Arendtian conception of historical judgment, and quite possibly the essential inspiration of this Arendtian conception.

As Arendt framed the crucial philosophical issue in *LKPP*, the conception of judgment that she sought to champion found its opposing interlocutors in Hegel, Marx, and Kojève.³⁶ A key

³¹ *The Arcades Project*, p. 481.

³² Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) [hereafter, *LKPP*], pp. 63-64 and 65-66.

³³ *LKPP*, pp. 64 and 66.

³⁴ *LKPP*, p. 56.

³⁵ *LKPP*, pp. 76-77 and 79-85.

³⁶ It's not an accident that Arendt, in *LKPP*, p. 162, n. 129, cites Kojève. According to Young-Bruehl (*For Love of the World*, pp. 116-117), Arendt

implicit drama in the philosophical dialogue unfolded in the *LKPP* is Arendt's unspoken suggestion that Benjamin belongs on her side of the argument rather than the Hegel-Marx side. As was the case with other famous philosophical friendships that involved Benjamin, it was important to Arendt to lay claim to Benjamin, and to try to disassociate Benjamin from unwelcome intellectual engagements. *LKPP* was (among other things) Arendt's way of asserting her claim upon Benjamin.

Tracing themes in Hannah Arendt's Kant Lectures back to Benjamin's "Theses" is a fairly easy endeavour.³⁷ Arendt, no less than Benjamin, was committed to an antihistoricist historiography. Although her reflections were presented as a general account of judging as a mental faculty, what she really offers is a theory of historical judgment. Arendt was concerned with the judgment of the political spectator reflecting on "what has been" – a capacity of reflective judgment exemplified preeminently in the activity of the historian.

Just as Benjamin speaks of blasting the revolutionary (or messianic) moment out of the homogeneous course of history, so Arendt is determined to focus on the particular qua particular – that is, those "stories" or particular episodes of historical experience whose exemplary meaning cannot be captured by or reduced to some universal narrative of History with a capital H. An adequate theory of historical judgment, Arendt implies, depends upon defeating the assumptions, which she associates with Hegel and Marx, that there is such a thing as a progress of the human race and that all things should be measured by the criterion of success.

Against such historicist assumptions, she appeals to the autonomy of the judging spectator. Autonomous judgment is identified with what she calls the "backward glance" of the historian (as opposed to Hegel's *Weltgeschichte* as *Weltgericht* – judgment pronounced by the course of world history). Historiography redeems those who are left behind by the historical process. This Benjaminian conception is expressed perfectly in the epigram Arendt quotes from Lucan's *Civil War* (also known as *Pharsalia*): "the victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato."³⁸

attended some of Kojève's famous Hegel seminars. For a good general sketch of Kojève's thought, see Lilla, *The Reckless Mind*, Chapter 4. Lilla's encapsulation of Kojève – "The fate of losers held no interest for him" (p. 136) – points to that aspect of Benjamin's "Theses" that was most relevant for Arendt.

³⁷ Cf. my remarks in *LKPP*, pp. 155-156.

³⁸ *LKPP*, p. 5. The same epigram was the first of two epigraphs that Arendt typed onto the intended title page of *Judging* (the only page of this unwritten work that she lived to type!). For the source, see Lucan, *Civil War*, trans. Susan H. Braund (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 6 (I: 128). Arendt, in the "Postscriptum to Thinking," refers to "old Cato," i.e., Cato the Elder (234-149 B.C.), but Lucan's Cato is in

Recall again thesis XII's suggestion about the importance of keeping attention focused on "the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren." The core idea here was anticipated, curiously enough, by Kant. Kant was himself a notable champion of the idea of historical progress; yet Kant nonetheless appreciated that even if the postulate of progress on the part of the human species turned out to be valid, this would *not* count as a universal redemption of every human individual. He wrote: "it remains strange that the earlier generations appear to carry through their toilsome labor only for the sake of the later, to prepare for them a foundation on which the later generations could erect the higher edifice which was Nature's goal, and yet that only the latest of the generations should have the good fortune to inhabit a building on which a long line of their ancestors had (unintentionally) labored without being permitted to partake of the fortune they had prepared."³⁹

That is, *even if it were true* that history has a *telos* and that the progress of the species is capable of actualization, the suffering and defeat along the way of those contributing to this *telos* would be left *unredeemed*. Even if history were to offer an ultimate redemption, it would be redemptive only for the final generation, not for their forebears. How, then, can we conceive of *universal* redemption?

This was a problem that Benjamin and Arendt both wrestled with. For Benjamin, clearly, it seemed to require some manner of resort to the messianic. Arendt, I would suggest, devised a more modest way of addressing the same problem: as human beings we have a capacity within us to apprehend the human dignity instantiated in losing causes, and by exercising this power of historical judgment (that is, redeeming them by our faculty of judging), we ensure that the dead are never truly buried.⁴⁰

fact Cato the Younger (95-46 B.C.). For some commentary on Arendt's two epigraphs, see my discussion in *LKPP*, pp. 126-127.

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 14; quoted by Arendt in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 83. In the next sentence Kant writes that "however puzzling this may be," the conundrum is unavoidable "if one assumes that a species of animals should have reason, and, as a class of rational beings each of whom dies while the species is immortal, should develop their capacities to perfection."

⁴⁰ In my commentary on Arendt in *LKPP* (p. 127), I quoted Ari Willner, a voice of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance: "Not one of us will leave here alive. We are fighting not to save our lives but for human dignity." The idea of redemption by means of historical judgment presumes that there will prevail a non-Nazi world capable of retrospectively judging this tragedy as the defeat of righteousness by evil. In that sense, of course, we continue to require the idea of the progressive unfolding of a better world to come. Still, this notion confers an autonomous dignity on the historically defeated that is lacking in the versions of historicism repudiated by Benjamin and Arendt. In this essay, I have drawn freely

Ronald Beiner is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. In 1982 he published an edition of Hannah Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (foreign-language editions have appeared or are forthcoming in 15 other languages). He is the author of numerous books, the most recent of which are *Political Philosophy: What It Is And Why It Matters* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), *Civil Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), and *Liberalism, Nationalism, Citizenship* (UBC Press, 2003).

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