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OXFORD

DEPARTMENT FOR
CONTINUING EDUCATION

Philosophy of History

Week 8: Benjamin

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‘On the Concept of History’, X

- ‘The thoughts which we are developing here originate from similar considerations. At a moment when the politicians in whom the opponents of Fascism had placed their hopes are prostrate and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause, these observations are intended to disentangle the political worldlings from the snares in which the traitors have entrapped them. Our [continued]

- [...] consideration proceeds from the insight that the politicians' stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their "mass basis", and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing. It seeks to convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians continue to adhere.'

'On the Concept of History', XI

- 'Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving.'

‘On the Concept of History’, XI

- ‘a kind of labour which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials’
- cf. the early nineteenth-century French utopian socialist, Charles Fourier

Benjamin vs the idea of progress

‘moving with the current’

- *inevitability*: we will get to where we want to get to (political);
- *continuity*: where we want to get to will look like what we have now (normative).
- *futurity*: neglect of the past

Benjamin

- *contingency*: we may well *not* get to where we want to get to;
- *transformation*: where we want to get to will be quite *unlike* what we have now.
- ?

‘On the Concept of History’, XII

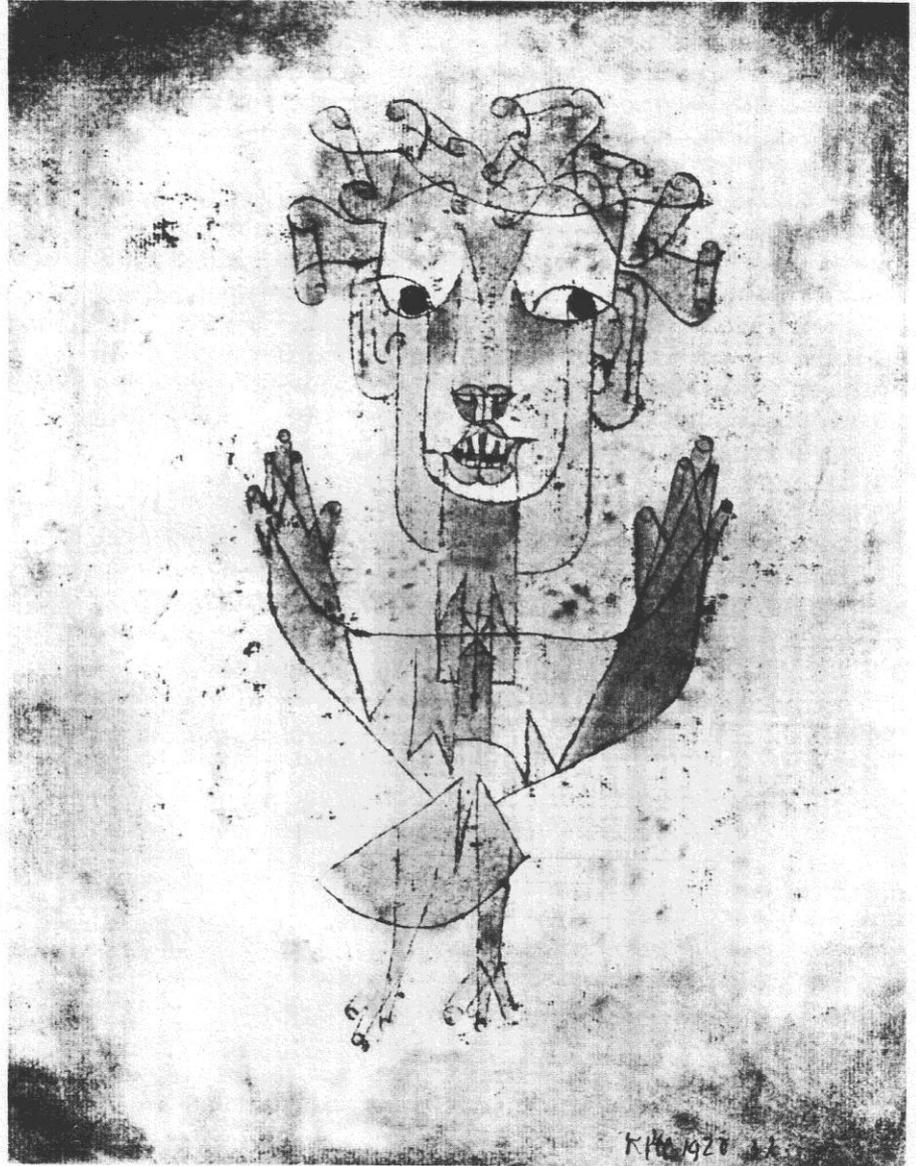
- ‘Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.’

'On the Concept of History', IX

- 'A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling [continued]

- ... 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 has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris grows ever higher up into the skies. This storm is what we call progress.' (IX)

**Paul Klee,
'Angelus Novus'
(1920)**



the idea of redemption

- 'to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed' (IX)
- *apocatastasis* (Greek)
- *tikkun* (Hebrew)
- messianic restoration and repair which makes whole and mends the original being of things

‘On the Concept of History’, II

- ‘The past carries with it a secret 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.’

‘On the Concept of History’, VI

- ‘In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of 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.’

- ‘I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” handloom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott [the ‘forgotten losers’ of history], from the enormous condescension of posterity.’ (E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963)

'On the Concept of History', III

- 'A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past - which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation a l'ordre du jour* - and that day is Judgment Day.'

historicism

objectivism

- to describe the past “the way it really was” (Ranke) (V)
- to provide ‘the “eternal” image of the past’ (XVI)

anti-presentism

- ‘historians who wish to relive an era [should] blot out everything they know about the later course of history’ (VII)
- Herder: (i) critique of presentism; (ii) recommendation of empathy [*Einfühlung*]

‘On the Concept of History’, VII

- ‘For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which 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.’

Benjamin's 'materialistic historiography'

- *specificity* (not universal history): 'an image of the past' (V-VI)
- *presentist*: 'now-time [*Jetztzeit*]' (XIV ff)
- *truth*: 'The true image of the past flits by' (V)
- *interrupts* 'the homogenous course of history' (XVII)
- 'the catastrophe that things "just keep going on"' (*The Arcades Project*, p. 473)*

'On the Concept of History', IV

- 'As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history.'

- ‘Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.’ (from the drafts of ‘On The Concept Of History’)

- Marx: 'Revolutions are the locomotives of history' (*The Class Struggles in France*, 1850).
- Trotsky: 'we wage battle with the Stalinist leadership in the Comintern precisely because it is incapable of [...] freeing the locomotive of history from its rusty brake' (1932)*