

# Blasting the Continuum of History: Walter Benjamin's "Now-Time" and the Recovery of Experience.

Explosión del continuo de la historia: el "momento actual" de Walter Benjamin y la recuperación de la experiencia.

**Juan Manuel Torbidoni<sup>1</sup>**

UCA - CONICET, Argentina

Recibido 22 julio 2020 · Aceptado 29 enero 2021

## Abstract

This paper analyses the concept of "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*) in Walter Benjamin's "On the concept of history." It shows its centrality in Benjamin's philosophy of history, by defining it in opposition to two elements of Kantian philosophy: on the one hand, "empty, homogeneous time," on the other, the faith in the infinite, inevitable progress of a generic "mankind." It argues that the notions of now-time and truth as flitting hark back to Benjamin's early concern about the devaluation of experience in modern philosophy and the need to rescue the ephemeral as a decisive element in metaphysics. Rather than a historical category, now-time denotes an instance of redemption.

**Key words:** Benjamin, Kant, now-time (*Jetztzeit*), history, redemption

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza el concepto de "tiempo-ahora" (*Jetztzeit*) en "Sobre el concepto de historia" de Walter Benjamin. Muestra su centralidad en la filosofía de la historia de Benjamin, definiéndola en oposición a dos elementos de la filosofía kantiana: por un lado, "el tiempo vacío, homogéneo", por el otro, la fe en el progreso infinito e inevitable de una genérica "humanidad". Se argumenta que las nociones de tiempo-ahora y verdad como revoloteo se remontan a la preocupación inicial de Benjamin por la devaluación de la experiencia en la filosofía moderna y la necesidad de rescatar lo efímero como un elemento decisivo en la metafísica. Más que una categoría histórica, el tiempo-ahora denota una instancia de redención.

**Palabras clave:** Benjamin, Kant, tiempo-ahora (*Jetztzeit*), historia, redención

1. [juantorbidoni@gmail.com](mailto:juantorbidoni@gmail.com)

## 1 • Introduction

For all its cryptic character, Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History* is no longer an arcane text. The *Theses* have been so widely commented on by cultural critics, literary theorists, and intellectual historians over the last half century, that they became a perfunctory reference within the Western philosophical canon. The dwarf and the puppet, the angel of history, the Messiah entering the world any moment – they all have followed the fate of many a brilliant image, as *repetitio ad nauseam* has washed away their blasting power. Even the traumatic history of the manuscript was assimilated to the imaginary of critical theory: the fatal sequence of Benjamin's escape from Nazi-occupied Paris, his failed attempt to cross the Pyrenees, and his tragic death at Port-Bou in September 1940 has tinged the text forever.

Benjamin's dialectical images are so masterfully crafted that they render the enticement of (mis)appropriation almost irresistible. As with other unsystematic thinkers, his work involuntarily lends itself to abuse – a fact all the more conspicuous in the case of the *Theses*. Indeed, their apparent lack of structural unity invites the interpreter to arbitrarily isolate any element and transpose it into his or her own theory of history. Such practice, however, seeks justification in the double fallacy that Benjamin's dislike of *esprit de système* deprives his thought of consistency and that *On the Concept of History* amounts to a sum of random – if irresistibly appealing – occurrences. In addition to their fragmentary character – a trait they share with most of the Benjaminean corpus – the *Theses* pose an additional challenge, since a forcible tension pulls the argument in opposite directions: whereas the historical materialist interpretation presses toward class struggle and revolution, a pervasive religious imagery instead inscribes the argument in the theological. In this regard, Benjamin's treatise has been read as providing the battlefield in which Marxism and theology – antagonistically embodied by his friends Brecht and Scholem – have been fighting over the allegiance of the author as a committed intellectual.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rolf Tiedemann offers a persuasive interpretation of this conflict. Although he admits: "At certain points he [Benjamin] translates back into the language of theology

This article does not concentrate on the tension between theology and Marxism, nor does it attempt to unravel the political implications of the *Theses*. Rather, it orients its analysis to the material and truth-contents brought about by Benjamin's conflation of history and metaphysics and thus focuses on the philosophical aspects of the *Theses*, while referring to the political and the theological only inasmuch as they contribute to clarify the former. Its purpose is to extricate the seeming jumble of elements that make up *On the concept of history*, by discerning the pivotal idea Benjamin's treatise revolves around. This fundamental insight, I argue, is the concept of "now-time," the metaphysical idea from which all arguments of the *Theses* spring and toward which they all converge. I thus offer a careful examination of that concept and of its negative counterpart, "homogeneous time," by carrying out a close reading of the last six theses, where these notions are more explicitly developed.

The present work is divided into two parts. The first one begins by analyzing Benjamin's criticism of the social democratic faith in the boundless and inevitable progress of a generic humanity, which implies an automatic historical tendency. The discussion of Benjamin's attack on the idea of progress cannot ignore the pervasive influence of Immanuel Kant and especially of three elements that had a decisive imprint on Benjamin's work from its early years: the ideas of time, progress, and especially experience.<sup>2</sup> Following Benjamin's take on these concepts, I seek to demonstrate that Kantian philosophy provided at once the inevitable premise of Benjamin's philosophy of history and the target of its sharpest criticism. My discussion then goes on to show how Benjamin identifies Kant's conception of time in terms of a homogeneous continuum as the ultimate philosophical foundation of this notion. Kantian time is indeed an empty form that precedes and is independent of the experience that takes place in it, and as such it deter-

that which Marx had secularized," he immediately affirms: "Whenever Benjamin's language in the historico-philosophical theses invokes anew the theological origin of Marxian concepts, the secularized content of these ideas is always maintained." Tiedemann, R.: "Historical materialism or political Messianism?" 188 [emphasis is mine].

2 "Experience' has been heralded by many as Benjamin's great theme. It has been claimed to constitute the true focal point of his analysis of modernity, philosophy of history, and theory of the artwork." Smith, G.: "Thinking through Walter Benjamin," xii.

mines Kant's own understanding of progress in universal history and his emphasis on the generic perspective of "mankind." Benjamin, in his criticism of the alienating abstraction underlying the notion of human progress, draws on post-Kantian philosopher Hermann Lotze, whom I claim is a decisive yet often understated influence on Benjamin's concept of history.

The second part goes back to Benjamin's earliest period to examine his 1918-essay "On the program of the coming philosophy" – itself a response to Hermann Cohen's *Kant's Theory of Experience* – where Benjamin states that Kantian philosophy had placed excessive emphasis on eternal truths, while overlooking the importance of ephemeral experience for metaphysics and theology. I suggest that it is precisely this type of experience that will lead Benjamin to lay stress on the flitting and the ephemeral in his *Theses*, and therefore to highlight the flashing instant as the decisive moment both of danger and redemption. Benjamin had already adopted Leibniz's idea of *monad* in his book on the *Trauerspiel* to apply it to his own notion of historical idea, and in the *Theses* he takes it up again to describe history as condensed in messianic time. I finally argue that Benjamin's antithetical images of the calendar and the clock are his most compelling rendering of the two opposite ways of understanding the relation between time and experience. Ultimately, my contention is that Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* designates not a chronological category, but an instance of historical redemption.

One note regarding sources: by 1940, the year Benjamin was writing his *Theses*, he had already been involved with the *Arcades Project* for almost 13 years. The parallel between the two works is more than just chronological, since in several reflections of the *Theses* we hear resonate – sometimes even literally – elements of Benjamin's magnum opus, most notably "Convolute N: Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress."<sup>3</sup> I recur to this complementary text every time it can shed light on the more hermetic excerpts of the *Theses*.

<sup>3</sup> This section is regarded as "the most speculative and the most political Konvolut of the Arcades." Sieburth, R.: "Translator's Introduction to 'N,'" 41.

## 2 · Progress and “homogeneous, empty time”

Thesis XIII occupies a strategic position within *On the Concept of History*. After repeatedly inveighing against historicists, fascists, and social democrats, Benjamin refers one last time to the latter group, in order to reorient his political criticism toward an extensive philosophical discussion about time:

**Progress as pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats was, first of all, progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge). Second, it was something boundless (in keeping with an infinite perfectibility of humanity). Third, it was considered inevitable – something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course.<sup>4</sup>**

It is the first element of faith in progress – *der Menschheit selbst* – that provides the fundamental condition for the other two: precisely for setting their political eye on the generic, social democrats regarded themselves able to predict an era of human progress.<sup>5</sup> But the other two features are equally problematic: whereas imagining progress as boundless pushes the aim of humanity so far that it becomes unreal, representing it as inevitable, as infinitely tending to perfection, encourages the myth of its automatic nature. Consequently, both elements numb human conscience, ultimately divesting the individual subject of all freedom and spontaneity.

Yet there are three characters of progress that rely on a deeper premise, namely that it is generic, infinite, and inevitable. Benjamin proceeds to uncover the common root of these three aspects of the social democratic idea of progress:

**But when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these assumptions and focus on what they have in common. The**

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, W.: “On the concept of history,” 394.

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1863, the Social Democratic Party of Germany started out as a Marxist revolutionary organization, but gradually developed into a moderate social-reformist party, until it was banned by the Nazis in 1933.

**concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.<sup>6</sup>**

It just takes Benjamin a single line to pin down the illusion of the social democrats: the clue lies in the medium along which – endlessly and inevitably – humanity is supposed to progress. This “homogeneous, empty time,” moreover, provides the negative model in contrast to which he will delineate his own proposed “now-time” in the following theses. The problem, however, is that “homogeneous, empty time” remains an elusive notion: despite stressing the need of its critique, Benjamin omits any account of its origin. Before delving into the notion of now-time, therefore, we must first track the philosophical source of that erroneous conception of time that Benjamin so emphatically condemns.

### 2.1 Kant on time

Kant devotes the first part of his *Critique of Pure Reason* to the “Transcendental Doctrine of Elements,” where he analyzes the forms of human knowledge. Within the “Doctrine of Elements,” the “Transcendental Aesthetic” discusses the sensible forms of knowledge – space and time – while the “Transcendental Logic” examines its intelligible forms – the concepts of our understanding. Putting aside the latter section, we need to concentrate on the former and follow Kant's argument as he inquires about the ontological status of space and time.

As a prelude to his own answer, Kant discards the two conceptions of space and time prevalent in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century: the Newtonian and the Leibnizian. While the former considers space and time as “actual entities,” the latter regards them as “relations or determinations” of real entities. Only on the surface, Kant implies, are these answers incompatible, for they both conceive of time and space as conditions existing independently from our perception. Instead, Kant's radical change consists in making these forms depend on the subject that performs the act of cognition: time and space cannot be considered objective entities (or objective relations be-

<sup>6</sup> “On the concept of history,” 394–395.

tween entities) but rather "relations that only attach to the form of intuition alone, and thus to the subjective constitution of our mind (A23/ B48)."<sup>7</sup>

Kant's subjective turn, however, entails unexpected consequences for the meaning of human experience. If the forms of space and time pertain only to the subject – and not to objective reality – then they must exist *a priori*. In a certain way, therefore, they become independent from reality and should be thought of as empty forms. Kant himself is perfectly aware of this fact:

**Time is a necessary representation that grounds all intuitions. In regard to appearances in general one cannot remove time, though one can very well take the appearances away from time. Time is therefore given a priori. In it alone is all actuality of appearances possible. The latter could all disappear, but time itself, as the universal condition of their possibility, cannot be removed.**<sup>8</sup>

On ensuring the autonomy and necessity of time as an *a priori* representation, Kant fades the experiences that fill this form – it is no accident that he downgrades them as "appearances" – and naturally proceeds to emptying that representation of all content. Thus time relates to the experience taking place in it much in the same manner as a container relates to its content: in both cases, the latter term can be removed without the former disappearing. From describing time as an *a priori* intuition – independent from the experience it contains – to imagining it as an endless homogeneous progression, there is only one step. Kant takes it in his conclusion to the section about time:

**And just because this inner intuition yields no shape we also attempt to remedy this lack through analogies, and represent the temporal sequence through a line progressing to infinity, in which the manifold constitutes a series that is of only one dimension, and infer from the properties of this line to all the properties of time, with the sole difference that the parts**

<sup>7</sup> Kant, I.: *Critique of Pure Reason*, 157.

<sup>8</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, 162.

**of the former are simultaneous but those of the latter exist successively.<sup>9</sup>**

Kantian time is thus the empty, homogeneous succession, which only later the subject fills in with information. Such endlessly progressing series renders the manifold one-dimensional and will elicit a homogenized idea of humanity, where the individual disappears in the totality of the genre.

Additionally, empty time can be described as a futile expectation, based on the assumption that, by moving forward, "automatic" time brings humanity to its desired end, as if rolling on the conveyor belt of history. Benjamin, in Thesis XVIIa of his "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'" – notes written around 1940 and published posthumously – traces back the genealogy of this misconception through a reasoning that can be summarized as follows:

1. Marx secularized the idea of messianic time turning it into the classless society.
2. Social Democrats elevated Marx's classless society into an "ideal," in the Neo-Kantian sense of the term, which means that such a notion became assimilated to an "infinite task."
3. Once the aim was placed at an infinite distance, humanity need only wait for the inevitable progress of history to bring about the classless society.<sup>10</sup>

Kant's influence upon this ill-fated reasoning crops up not only in the "idealization" of the classless society, but also in the establishment of "humanity" (*Menschheit*) as the subject of history. As Theodor W. Adorno points out, when Benjamin attacks the idea of progress, he is actually censuring Kant's "universal history."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, 163.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, W.: "Paralipomena to 'On the concept of history,'" 401–402.

<sup>11</sup> "The concept of history in which progress would have its place is emphatically the Kantian universal or cosmopolitan concept, not that of particular spheres of life. But the dependence of progress on totality is a thorn in its side. Consciousness of this dependence inspires Benjamin's polemic against the coupling of progress and human-



## 2.2 Kant on progress

In 1784, shortly after the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant published an essay that became a seminal text of Enlightenment's historiography: "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim." The work's title is self-explanatory: for Kant a history that is universal and does not heed the realm of individual nations – let alone the one of individual people – grounds our confidence in the constant progress of humanity:

**History, which concerns itself with the narration of these appearances, however deeply concealed their causes may be, nevertheless allows us to hope from it that if it considers the play of the freedom of the human will in the large, it can discover within it a regular course; and that in this way what meets the eye in the individual subjects [*an einzelnen Subjekten*] as confused and irregular yet in the whole species [*an der ganzen Gattung*] can be recognized as a steadily progressing though slow development of its original predispositions.<sup>12</sup>**

The predominance of the universal perspective in history, which passed from Kant to Hegel, and from Hegel to Marx, was taken up again by the Social Democrats in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. This generic *Ab-sicht*, Benjamin argues, enabled them to rejoice in the achievements of a progressing humankind, while overlooking – or at least downplaying – the suffering of the individual. The disregard of the single, concrete human being transpires in the abstract formulae employed by Kant to denote the subject of history in his essay: "mankind," "humankind," "human genre," or simply "men."<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin is not the first one to denounce the alienating abstraction of this universal perspective: German post-Kantian philosopher Hermann Lotze had denounced already in mid-19th century the multiple contradictions underlying such vision.<sup>14</sup> An author central to Benjamin's concerns,

kind in his theses on the concept of history ... " Adorno, Th.: "Progress," 85.

<sup>12</sup> Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Kant uses "*Menschheit*," "*menschliche Geschlecht*," and "*Menschen*." And even when the latter appears in singular (*Der Mensch*) it has almost always a generic meaning.

<sup>14</sup> "His work *Mikrokosmos* expresses an ethical, religious philosophy of history tinged

Lotze presents the notion of humankind's historical progress as a delusion. Indeed, Thesis II cites Lotze's sarcasm that if men really believed in progress, then at any given point in history they would not envy the wellbeing of other living people as much as the happiness of future generations. In "Convolute N" of the *Arcades Project* Benjamin repeatedly draws on Lotze – the most quoted author in this section – to lay bare the inconsistency of the idea of progress. Here Lotze's criticism covers three different levels, which I would characterize as the moral, the scientific, and the metaphysical.

The moral imputation of progress exposes its more dramatic side, by inverting the terms of Thesis II: it would not be just ironic, but utterly unjust, if at any given time (present or future) humanity enjoyed fruits obtained by "the unrewarded effort and often out of the misery of earlier generations."<sup>15</sup> This thought could have inspired Benjamin's own famous warning in Thesis VII: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."<sup>16</sup> In the 1850s Lotze also shows himself suspicious of science's progress – in remarkable anticipation of the century to come – as he warns that knowledge accumulated does not bring about a corresponding growth in commitment to and clarity of perspective on it.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3 Against the generic perspective

But where Lotze deals the ideology of progress its deathblow is in his exposing its metaphysical insufficiency:

**Whatever its various movements, history cannot reach a destination that does not lie within its own plane [in ihrer eignen Ebene], and we will save ourselves the trouble of searching for progress in the duration of history, since history is not fated to make such progress longitudinally [in ihrer Länge] but rather in an upward direction [nach der Höhe zu] at every single one of its points.<sup>18</sup>**

with melancholy, which attracted Benjamin's attention in the late 1930's." Löwy, M.: *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History"*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, W.: "N," [13,3], 71.

<sup>16</sup> "On the concept of history," 392.

<sup>17</sup> "N," [14a,3], 73.

<sup>18</sup> "N," [13a,2], 72.

To the immanence of horizontal progress, in which every moment fades into the following one, Lotze opposes the vertical projection toward transcendence, which turns every finite instant in an opportunity of attaining infinitude. A secularized version of this narrative – only employing biblical imagery – leads Benjamin to describe every second as “the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, by introducing Lotze’s perspective as “the religious view of history,” Benjamin hints at the usefulness of theological concepts to rectify the errors of social democracy and vulgar Marxism – a remarkable case of the dwarf called “theology” operating under the chessboard.<sup>20</sup>

Thus availing himself of Lotze, Benjamin exposes the dependence of progress upon the generic perspective: universal progress relies on universal history, which, in turn, presupposes universal mankind.<sup>21</sup> The giant we call Humanity strides along the path of history without the least concern for the fate of individual people. Yet it is to the memory of these, especially of the anonymous ones, that historical construction must be dedicated.<sup>22</sup>

If we turn back to Thesis XIII, we can now appreciate Benjamin’s critique of the social democratic notion of progress from a new angle. It is not the movement forward *per se* what troubles Benjamin; rather he repudiates the simplification of historical multiplicity into a continuous progression of undifferentiated quality. Such a narrative vulgarly dissolves single moments into universal progress, individual men into abstract humanity. This erasure of the singular, moreover, becomes blatant in the case of human suffering: universal history proposes an anodyne narrative, in which the pains of the individual evanesce into the overall gain of the species.

### 3 · Now-time and experience

#### 3.1 Recovering experience

In order to grasp the notion of human experience that emerges in Benjamin’s now-time, we need to go back to the earliest stage of his thought.

<sup>19</sup> “On the concept of history,” 397.

<sup>20</sup> “On the concept of history,” 389.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin calls this an “uncritical hypostatization.” “N,” [13,1], 70.

<sup>22</sup> “Paralipomena to ‘On the concept of history,’” 406.

Benjamin was in his mid-twenties when, as a product of his general involvement with Kantian thought, he penned "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," a terse essay that sought a reassessment of Kant in early 20<sup>th</sup> century – a task, Benjamin believed, that would determine the future course of philosophy.<sup>23</sup> The key challenge was to discern which features of the Kantian system had to be adopted and further developed, which needed to be amended, and which had to be altogether discarded.<sup>24</sup> Although the *Program's* opening paragraph stresses the importance of Kantian philosophy as the only one ensuring a historical continuity "of decisive and systematic consequence," Benjamin emphatically denounces its fatal mistake:

**The most important obstacle to linking a truly time- and eternity-conscious philosophy to Kant is, nevertheless, the following: the reality with which, and with the knowledge of which, Kant wanted to base knowledge on certainty and truth is a reality of a low, perhaps the lowest order [*niedersten Ranges*].<sup>25</sup>**

Thus, on paying excessive heed to the problem of "the certainty of knowledge that is lasting," Kant had disregarded "the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral" (*die Dignität einer Erfahrung die vergänglich war*). The new task of philosophy, Benjamin contended, consisted in recovering its authentic dignity by reorienting its interest from timeless and enduring truths to those temporal and flitting – which now became the proper object of philosophical inquiry.

Benjamin wrote his "Program" under the influence of and in response to a decisive work of the neo-Kantian School of Marburg: Hermann Cohen's *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*.<sup>26</sup> Cohen's book stated that Kant had

<sup>23</sup> As from his early twenties, Benjamin had been concerned with Kant's philosophy: he had read the three *Critiques* and attended two seminars on Kant held by Moritz Geiger in Munich. Transcendental philosophy had a powerful influence upon him: "Benjamin even originally intended to write his doctoral thesis on Kant's philosophy of history." Smith, G.: "Thinking through Benjamin," xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, W.: "On the program of the coming philosophy," 3.

<sup>25</sup> "On the program of the coming philosophy," 1.

<sup>26</sup> Originally published in 1871, and revised in 1885 and 1918, Cohen's take on Kantian experience downplays the influence of Hume, to ensure Kant's affiliation to predominantly rationalist philosophers and to mathematics.

discovered a new concept of experience and specified that it was based upon Newton's mathematical natural science.<sup>27</sup> Benjamin also tackled Kantian experience, yet he did so from the opposite angle: whereas Cohen had restricted Kantian experience to mathematics, physics and philosophy, Benjamin intended to open it up again to the metaphysical and the theological. Benjamin admitted that, as a thinker immersed in the time horizon of modernity, Kant had offered an impoverished concept of experience, one essentially "naked, primitive and self evident" (*nackten primitiven und selbstverständlichen*). Kant's limitation had ultimately been a matter of *Weltanschauung*: as a philosopher of the Enlightenment, he had worked on the basis of "an experience virtually reduced to nadir, to a minimum of significance" (*auf den Nullpunkt, auf das Minimum von Bedeutung*).<sup>28</sup> Benjamin even imputed the overestimation of certainty in the Kantian system to the fundamental poverty of an experience "which had almost no intrinsic value" and which had restricted the development of Kant's philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

It is precisely this devalued *Erfahrung* – the one that Kant modeled on Newtonian physics – what needed to be expanded, precisely because it was an experience with a high degree of certainty and an "astonishingly small" metaphysical weight. To the fixed and measurable experience, which was the object of mathematics and empirical science, Benjamin opposed the "singularly transitory" (*singulär zeitliche*), which he paradoxically associated to a higher kind of experience. To undertake the epistemological foundation of this richer experience, Benjamin claimed, was the task of contemporary philosophy, since on its restitution depended the possibility of metaphysics – a possibility, moreover, that Kant had never denied:

**The decisive mistakes of Kantian epistemology are, it cannot be doubted, traceable to the hollowness of the experience available to him, and thus the double task of creating both a new concept of knowledge and a new conception of the world on the basis of philosophy becomes a single one.**

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed discussion of Kantian experience as rendered by Cohen, see Stang, N.: "Hermann Cohen and Kant's concept of experience."

<sup>28</sup> "On the program of the coming philosophy," 2.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno seems to think otherwise: "A metaphysical interpretation of Kant should impute no latent ontology to him, but instead should read the structure of his entire thinking as a dialectic of enlightenment." Adorno, *Progress*, 92.

Hence the outline of Benjamin's program: by going back to Kant and amending his *proton-pseudos*, philosophy needed to restore metaphysics based upon a new concept of experience "in its full freedom and depth."<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Benjamin gave credit to Kant for his tendency to avoid the "division and fragmentation of experience" in the individual sciences, and he stressed therefore the urge of contemporary philosophy to find a metaphysical way to attain a "continuum of experience" (*Erfahrungskontinuum*).<sup>31</sup>

### 3.2 The instant as a monad

These elements reemerge twenty years later in Benjamin's work, when he brings them to bear on the notion of time laid out in *On the Concept of History*, although he does so by means of a striking reversal. Whereas in his early *Program* Benjamin denounced the hollowness and deficiency of experience and underscored the need to recover its fullness as a continuum, in the *Theses* he imputes the fatal impoverishment of experience precisely to the Kantian understanding of time as an empty, homogeneous continuum. Furthermore, emphasis is now placed on the flitting and the ephemeral: contrary to what historicism held, the past flashes up in an instant – a "dangerous" moment – to disappear forever. Thus, in Theses V, VI, and VII Kantian certainty and security capitulate to the inexorable risk of history.<sup>32</sup>

While Benjamin refutes the idea of permanence in the past by describing the image of time as flitting, he also destabilizes continuity in the present by stressing its unpredictable irruption as a caesura. Thus, "Convolute N" states that in the field of history knowledge only comes "in lightning flashes"<sup>33</sup> and it insists upon the present as interruption – "the jags and crags of history" – and as a fresh novelty – "the cool wind of a coming dawn."<sup>34</sup> For historical materialism, Thesis XVI reads, time "has come to a

<sup>30</sup> "On the program of the coming philosophy," 3.

<sup>31</sup> "On the program of the coming philosophy," 6–7.

<sup>32</sup> This interest in the ephemeral and the concrete also inspires Benjamin's materialist method: "the eternal is far more the frill on a dress than an idea." "N" [3, 2], 51.

<sup>33</sup> "N," [1,1], 43.

<sup>34</sup> "N," [9a,5; 9a,7], 65.

stand" (*zum Stillstand gekommen ist*).<sup>35</sup> Yet just as the ephemeral condition of the moment does not imply ontological inconsistency, the non-flowing of time does not indicate stagnation. Rather, both features – transitoriness and standstill – reveal the rich metaphysical constitution of the instant: Benjamin describes the "now" that the revolutionary blasts out of the continuum of history as a *monad*.<sup>36</sup> This is also the reason why in his essay on Eduard Fuchs, he states that the task of historical materialism is to put to work an experience with history, stressing that history is "originary for every present."<sup>37</sup>

Benjamin had already employed the Leibnizian notion of monad to describe his own "historical ideas" in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to his book on the German mourning play, written between 1923-1925. Referring to philosophical history, he had underscored not only the "essential being" of the historical idea, the meaning of which must be grasped in its inner multi-layered oppositions.<sup>38</sup> Just like Leibniz's monad, Benjamin's historical idea reflected the totality of the world, for it condensed within itself the whole universe of ideas – past, present, and future.<sup>39</sup> Benjamin had thus entertained the possibility of a new monadological epistemology:

**The idea is the monad – the pre-stabilized representation of phenomena resides within it, as in their objective interpretation... And so the real world could well constitute a task in the sense that it would be a question of penetrating so**

<sup>35</sup> Werner Hamacher connects this arrest of time to the notion of present: "he [Benjamin] presumably links the concept *Einstand* (which is unusual in German), with the French *instant*, and interprets the present as the *Einstand* and pausing of the movement of historical time in the fulfillment of its intention." Hamacher, W.: "'Now': Walter Benjamin and Historical Time," 52.

<sup>36</sup> "The idea is a monad – that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world." *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 48.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, W.: "Eduard Fuchs, collector and historian," 262.

<sup>38</sup> "The representation of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been virtually explored." *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> "The idea is the monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings – concealed in its own form – an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas ..." *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 47.

**deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world.<sup>40</sup>**

Our understanding of the world therefore unfolds in two directions: the deeper it delves in the particular, the more it opens up to the totality of being.

The notion of "monad" also serves Benjamin's characterization of the instant. Not only the moment itself, but also *our understanding* of it can be described as monadological. Thus, in "Convolute N" Benjamin explains that the "crystal of the total event" can be grasped in the particular, small, apparently insignificant moment and that, hidden inside the historical object, we can find its fore- and after-history.<sup>41</sup> Now-time is therefore endowed with a prismatic quality that carries the potential of a revelation. Likewise, Thesis XVIII employs a compelling oxymoron to designate history as condensed in messianic time, by calling it "tremendous abbreviation" (*ungeheure Abbreiviatur*).

### 3.3 Calendars vs. clocks

In keeping with his own argumentative style, however, Benjamin renders his most effective representation of now-time not with an explanation, but with a forceful image. In Thesis XV he distinguishes between two instruments to measure time:

**The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar presents history in time-lapse mode. And basically it is this same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance [*Tage des Eingedenkens*]. Thus calendars do not measure time the way clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe, it would seem, for the past hundred years.**

Historical consciousness (*Geschichtsbewußtsein*) is therefore connected to the idea of a festive recurrence. But nothing could be farther re-

<sup>40</sup> *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> "N" [2,6], 48; [10,3], 66.



moved from this reiteration than the monotony of a broken record, which endlessly repeats the same line. Rather, the recurrence of calendars signals a moment in time whose intrinsic value makes it stand out – “burst out,” in Benjamin’s revolutionary language – from the dull continuum of history. Calendars reflect “now-time,” actuality, events with genuinely human content. And the fact that those events represent achievements and liberations – i.e. the true history of men – is what makes them persist in a celebratory manner.

The type of historiography that calendars symbolize is one in which time is punctuated by foundational moments that are recurrently celebrated. It is in these extraordinary intersections – or rather irruptions – of certain transcendence in linear time that the notion of the messianic can be recovered in Benjamin’s philosophy of history.<sup>42</sup> This individuality, whereby every single moment in time and every particular event in history stand out from the alleged continuum, signals the peculiar identities traced by history. Again drawing an analogy between time and humanity, Benjamin compares the dates in a calendar with the multiple faces that distinguish human beings from each other: “To write history means giving dates their physiognomy.”<sup>43</sup>

By contrast, the clock face deals with homogeneous time, measuring it only quantitatively as a monotonous chronological progression, as a time devoid of human significance. In homogeneous time moments lack identity and are therefore replaced by successive moments in an unalterable chain. This idea is reminiscent of an image employed by Kierkegaard, when he describes the withering out of human relations as an out of order clock that does not strike once at one o’clock and twelve times at twelve o’clock, but instead strikes once all through the day, and thus expresses an “abstract continuity” deriving in meaninglessness.<sup>44</sup> According to Benjamin, the conception of the present as mere “transition” (*Übergang*) from the past

<sup>42</sup> Robert Gibbs traces a suggestive connection between the function of calendars in Thesis XV and Franz Rosenzweig, for whom “an insertion of eternity into temporality” could turn human lived time into messianic. Gibbs, R.: “Messianic epistemology,” 199.

<sup>43</sup> “N” [11,2], 67. This sentence is repeated in “Central Park,” 165.

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, S.: *The Present Age: on the Death of Rebellion*, 17–18.

into the future within an empty continuum reaches its detailed expression in the mathematical model of Newtonian science that Kant translated into one of his own categories. It is in opposition to this insubstantial notion of time that Benjamin sets the idea of "a time filled full by now-time" (*von Jetztzeit erfüllte*).

## 4 • Conclusion

In his classic 1936-essay dedicated to the memory of Russian author Nikolai Leskov, Benjamin ascribes the modern decline of storytelling to the irreversible loss of the human ability to share and exchange experiences: "One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it may fall into bottomlessness." Benjamin goes on to describe how this dramatic waning was exacerbated by the Great War, as soldiers came back from the battlefield mute, unable to communicate anything substantial. This "force field of destructive torrents and explosions" exerting all its violence upon "the tiny, fragile body," would only escalate during the Second World War, the backstage of Benjamin's Theses. His reflections on history convey the urge to recover the experience of truth and truth as an experience. But the manifestation of that truth in Benjamin's dialectical images involves as a decisive element the tension between history and the idea, a fact that prevents him from forcing a reconciliation between the immanence of history and the complex possibility of a truth that could transcend that history.

The idea of now-time resounds at the center of Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*. Every other image, idea, or reflection there contained either stems from or tends toward it. As a meta-critique of Post-Kantian thought and modern politics in general, *Jetztzeit* signals a shift from the logic of necessity to the philosophy of contingency. Just as a tiger's leap – the image he famously uses to describe fashion – Benjamin's idea of time reaches back into the past, while remaining strikingly progressive: it moves from an infinite progression to the explosion of the instant, from the imperturbable continuum of history to the accident of the standstill, from quantitative homogeneity to the irruption of the diverse, from security and certainty to the inescapable risk of life.

Benjamin's *Theses* offer more than musings on the philosophy of history: they open up the range of experience to the extent of delineating a new model of the human, one in which the individual is restituted the main role in the constellation of history. Just as Benjamin the materialist historian reorients his expectations from the final goal of history to the "now of recognizability," Benjamin the anthropologist abandons the vulgar Marxist commitment to humanity in favor of the pressing concern for the single human being. Benjamin's dialectics is not one of rational necessity, as it happens with Kant or Hegel, but one that necessarily engages human freedom and agency. History does not simply happen: history must be done.

## 5 · Bibliography

- Adorno, Th. W. "Progress". *Benjamin: Philosophy, History and Aesthetics*. Gary Smith (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Benjamin, W. "Central Park." *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Benjamin, W. "Eduard Fuchs, collector and historian." *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Benjamin, W. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1-12. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980.
- Benjamin, W. "N [Re: The theory of knowledge, theory of progress]." *Benjamin: Philosophy, History and Aesthetics*. Gary Smith (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Benjamin, W. "On the concept of history". *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Benjamin, W. "Paralipomena to 'On the concept of history.'" *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Benjamin, W. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London; New York: Verso, 1998.
- Gibbs, R. "Messianic epistemology: Thesis XV." *Walter Benjamin and History*.

- Andrew Benjamin (ed.) London; New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Hamacher, W. "'Now': Walter Benjamin and historical time." *Walter Benjamin and History*. Andrew Benjamin (ed.) London; New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Kant, I. *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*. Amélie Rorty and James Schmidt (ed.). Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Kierkegaard, S. *The Present Age: on the Death of Rebellion*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010.
- Löwy, M. and Chris Turner. *Fire alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's on the Concept of History*. London; New York: Verso, 2005.
- Sieburth, R. "Translator's introduction to 'N.'" *Benjamin: Philosophy, History and Aesthetics*. Gary Smith (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Smith, G. "Thinking through Walter Benjamin: An introductory essay". *Benjamin: Philosophy, History and Aesthetics*. Gary Smith (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Stang, N. F. "Hermann Cohen and Kant's concept of experience". *Philosophie und Wissenschaft bei Hermann Cohen / Philosophy and Science in Hermann Cohen*. Christian Damböck (ed.). Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018.
- Tiedemann, R. "Historical materialism or political messianism? An interpretation of the theses 'On the Concept of History.'" *Benjamin: Philosophy, History and Aesthetics*. Gary Smith (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.