

From an imaginary progress to the imaginary of progress. A critical assessment of Walter Benjamin's concept of history



Panagiotis Christias

pchristi@ucy.ac.cy

Department of French and European Studies | University of Cyprus

Abstract

The ninth position of Walter Benjamin's critical account of history, his "Concept of History", pictures in an allegorical image the meaning of progress. This dystopian conception of the angel of history, Klee's *Angelus Novus*, that Benjamin had acquired in 1921, needs a daring interpretation if we are to understand the implication of the imaginary of "progress" in the modern social and political stratifications.

Keywords

Progress | Social Imaginary | Walter Benjamin | Philosophy of History | Angelus Novus

Es gibt ein Bild von Klee, das *Angelus Novus* heißt. Ein Engel ist darauf dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausgespannt. Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor *uns* erscheint, da sieht *er* eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er mochte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wachst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist *dieser* Sturm.¹



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 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 violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress².

The ninth position of Walter Benjamin’s critical account of history, his “*Concept of History*”, pictures in an allegorical image the meaning of progress. This dystopian conception of the angel of history, Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, that Benjamin had acquired in 1921, needs a daring interpretation if we are to understand the implication of the imaginary of “progress” in the modern social and political stratifications. Modern societies are orientated towards the search of infinite power. In fact, if for the ancient philosophers and thinkers, wisdom was the state to achieve, both individually and collectively, us, moderns, we only seek power, understood as the capacity to create, and produce whatever our will can imagine. There is an unlimited potential of this state of power, as scientific and technological progress keeps augmenting it. Nevertheless, it is not clear if unlimited power is what we get from progress. In Benjamin’s position, it would seem as if the angel was caught in an *infernal machine*, as the French called the explosive devices back in the 19th century. The angel’s wings are caught in this tempest coming from the direction of what is called “paradise” in the text, but again, it is not clear what the nature of this “paradise” is. Judging from the torment and the agony it causes the angel, it would certainly seem that this “paradise” is almost infernal. One could also assume that this infernal machine is of

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte, Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd 1-2, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1980, s. 691-704, s. 697-8).

² Benjamin W. (1968 and 1970). *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Jonathan Cape, 257-258.

temporal nature, it is a time machine, that works following the circularity of time. Benjamin tells us that the angel is looking to the past, but this “paradise” he is staring at is in front of him. If he is looking at it with his eyes wide open, it is because he wants to reach it, and as he cannot travel back to the past, he is only eager to recreate this paradisiac state of things in the future, that lies right ahead of him. What could be the nature of this infernal paradise to be created, or rather recreated, on earth, the proper field of history, angel’s home? This image connects to Benjamin’s well-known critique of historical materialism, and to its correlate, dialectical materialism³.

Une fois admise l’originalité à peu près unique de cette conception du matérialisme que revendique Benjamin, sa réduction impossible aux schémas classiques du matérialisme dialectique – y compris celui de Brecht –, l’interrogation sur la cohérence de cette articulation – sans synthèse et sans fusion – d’éléments matérialistes et théologiques demeure entière. C’est à l’exégète d’en expliciter les liens (Palmier, 2003: 8).

Once the almost unique originality of this conception of materialism that Benjamin claims, its impossible reduction to the classical schemes of dialectical materialism – including Brecht’s - is admitted, the question of the coherence of this articulation – without synthesis and without fusion – of materialist and theological elements remains. It is up to the exegete to explain the links (my translation).



3

This, of course, is particularly patent in Benjamin’s 1940 writings on the concept of history, where “the articulation of Marxism with messianism finds its strangest expression” (Palmier, 2003: 7, my translation). There were many reasons that could have triggered a Jewish German’s defiance towards a Neo-Darwinist theory of human action. Historical materialism is based on dialectical materialism, a Neo-Darwinian theory that posits that all things evolve through material contradictions, just like animals and plants, which, finding themselves in contradiction with their environment, they change to adapt and survive. Historical materialism is a mere application of dialectical materialism in human history. It is needless to remind Germany’s fascination of that time for social Darwinism and its relation to the Nazi’s program of racial discrimination against the Jewish people. It suffices to recall Ernst Hæckel (1834-1919), according to whom black races were the closest to the ape, while the Indo-Germans, grouping according to him the Germans, Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians), constituted the most evolved form of humanity (*Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*, 1868 [*The history of creation*]). After Marx’s *Klassenkampf* and Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf*, the Nazis discovered in Hækel the material they needed for the promotion of their very own *Rassenkampf*. This is not of course to blame on Karl Marx, who only saw in Darwin a materialistic explanation of natural evolution. But in the 1930’s and 1940’s, one could simply not ignore these connections.

³ Palmier J. (2003). Un matérialisme problématique. *Lignes*, 11, Éditions Léo Scheer, 7-37.



But it was not only Berlin's atmosphere under the rule of the Nazi that made Benjamin suspicious of unintended connections to unpleasant realities of the Marxist vision of "humanisation of nature" (*Humanisierung der Natur*). The young Karl Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts depicted the end of the process of historical materialism as the creation of the communist society, the complete unity of man with nature, the consistent naturalization of man, free from the alienating effects of the bourgeois society, and the consistent humanisation of nature (*Third manuscript*). This would be the Marxist communist paradise on earth to come. Benjamin was very uncertain as to the nature of the Soviet regime. Even in his *Moscow Diary*⁴, relating his two months stay in the Soviet capital during the winter of 1926–27, he seems very concerned of "the cultural and political atmosphere under party rule, reporting the tumultuous effects of the New Economic Program, along with the uncertain transition unfolding in the wake of Lenin's death in 1924"⁵. In 1940, Stalin's rule was already infamous for its inhumanity. Although the reality of the Gulags was still a well-kept secret, intellectuals of all colors and wings severely criticized Stalinism and the derives of the soviet dream. One of the most powerful denunciations of the soviet regime being André Gide's *Return from the USSR*, published right after his return from Moscow, in November 1936. Instead of finding the "new man" (*homme nouveau*), promised by the communist narrative, in his Russian trip Gide found the very definition of totalitarianism.

The reality on the Russian capital is superposed to the unreality of the communist vision to create the paradise where the storm originates. The paradise in Benjamin's text is only partially the garden of Eden of the *Creation*. It is at the same time the dream of the human re-creation of the paradisiac state, the vision of the classless society, where humanity and nature would be reunited. Past and future, messianism and Marxism, are here one and the same, as the imaginary paradisiac state of the human origins is reinstated in the future vision of a Marxist messianism. The storm is only the price to pay for the hubris of Human race, thinking it can replace God all mighty. Instead of creating heaven on earth, the Modern created hell. The angel of history is therefore no other that Prometheus or Lucifer, the light bringer. He is an angel, but a fallen one. He wants to wake the dead and reverse the effects of the Fall, the catastrophe, but he is impotent He wants to put together what is shuttered but has no empire over what lies beneath him. A new Babel is rising before his very eyes, but it is not the work of modern engineering. It is rather the byproduct of modern industrial era, what the Prometheus of thermodynamics shuttered so to produce the new era, a "heap pf ruins". For the fire the modern Prometheus has to offer is as seditious as Cain's breed, "builder of cities". The modern Prometheus, the angel of history, Benjamin's Angelus Novus is no other than *Angelus Satanas*. Gershom Scholem, whose poem "Greetings from the Angel" introduces the ninth position, read the title of Walter Benjamin's autobiographical essay "Agesilaus Santander" (1933) as

⁴ Benjamin W. (1985). *October*, Vol. 35, The MIT Press, 9-135.

⁵ Hoffman J. (2017). *The Optics of Orientation: Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Kaufman in Moscow. Modernism / modernity*, Volume 2, Cycle 4, Johns Hopkins University Press.

an anagram of Angelus Satanas⁶, Benjamin's secret name. To see clearly the "satanic" reference in this passage, one must take into consideration Benjamin's interest in Charles Baudelaire.

"Race of Cain, mount to Heaven / And cast God down upon the Earth [*Race de Caïn, au Ciel monte / Et sur la Terre jette Dieu !*]" (*Abel and Cain*, 1857, my translation): this is according to the French poet the very essence of the modern project, to dethrone God and revendicate his place with the mediation of the almighty Leviathan. It must be understood that the modern project of progress is no different for the bourgeois prophets than it is for the prophets of the proletariat. In both cases, it is the heritage of the Enlightenment. Only the means are different. In *Charles Baudelaire*⁷, Walter Benjamin found the very description of modernity and the bourgeois conception of history, the vision of the "dreaming collectivity". In the *Painter of modern life*, Baudelaire defines modernity as the "ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent". Gert Schiff notes that "*Angelus Novus* stands for everything that was new in the early decades of the century, and for the desire to create a new humanity, a new social order, a new art⁸". But for Baudelaire, the emphasis is not to be put in the humanity or in the social order. It is to be put in the novelty itself. Bourgeois modernity creates constantly new forms of humanity, of social orders, of art. Modernity is obsessed by the creation of the new. Progress is the constant renewal of the existent. It is this constant renewal that creates the ruins that history is made of, "the pile of debris [that] grows skyward" before the angel.

Abandoned old factories, old vehicles amassed in yards, old machinery, old war ships shank in the deep oceans: a process that Joseph Schumpeter described as "creative destruction". According to Schumpeter, the "gale of creative destruction" describes the "process of industrial mutation that continuously revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one⁹". Technological progress, by creating more efficient technology, or by any standards new and better products, devalues production units operating with older technology, without them having any other internal problem. In the same manner, forms of social life that are no longer compatible with advanced monetary economy disappear, as disappear entire sectors of economic activity before the creation of new economic activities. The new spirit arouses from the destruction of the old¹⁰, as Werner Sombart wrote in *War and Capitalism* (1913), in relation to the



⁶ Shahar G. (2015). In the Name of the Devil: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'Agesilaus Santander'. *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*, edited by Ari Joskowitz and Ethan Katz, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 98-114.

⁷ Benjamin W. (1983). *Charles Baudelaire: A lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*. London, Verso editions.

⁸ Schiff G. (1987). Klee's array of angels, *Artforum*, vol. 25, No 9, New York, NY, Artforum International Magazine, p. 126-133.

⁹ Schumpeter J. (1994). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London, Routledge, 82-83.

¹⁰ Sombart W. (1913). *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des modernen Kapitalismus*. Zweiter Band. *Krieg und Kapitalismus*, München und Leipzig Verlag von Duncker & Humblot. "Wiederum aber steigt aus der Zerstörung neuer schöpferischer Geist empor: der Mangel an Holz und die Notdurft des täglichen Lebens drängten auf die Auffindung oder die Erfindung von Ersatzstoffen für das Holz hin, drängten zur Nutzung der Steinkohle als Heizmaterial, drängten zu der Erfindung des Kokesverfahrens bei der Eisen bereitung. Daß dieses aber die ganze großartige Entwicklung des Kapitalismus im 19. Jahrhundert erst möglich

deforestation of 19th century Europe to create the new industrial societal order. Such a destruction were the Pharaonic works that transformed Paris under Napoleon III. During almost twenty years, from 1853 to 1870, le Baron Haussmann eradicated the medieval capital to create the new dreamland. In his *Passagen-werk* [The Arcades project¹¹], Walter Benjamin relates the phantasmagory¹² that prevails in the creation of Paris, capital of 19th century. Big boulevards, impressive buildings, arcades, parcs and *bois*, that is areas of domesticated, humanized nature: nothing is enough so that the urban space becomes the enormous playground the bourgeois class dreamt of. The production of the new satanic order, the *flowers of evil*, can now be equally celebrated by incoming masses in the monumental spaces of world expositions, that occupy the front rows of the spectacle, as well as dead drunk workers, prostitutes and beggars occupying the trottoirs of the less illuminated city of bohemia.

This destruction of the old, however, involves also massive wars and the killing of millions, as war technology is the edge of the spear of modernity. The reason why the angel cannot wake the dead is that the dead, besides been dead, they also belong to a no longer existing form of humanity. The angel is certainly capable of waking the dead. However, he is not capable of restoring the past form of life, the ones that have been degraded and replaced by the new creations of the constant progress. This is the meaning of the storm of progress. It is storms like the one rising from the hellish paradise of Benjamin's vision of the apocalypse that discourses like Martin Heidegger's Rectorate's discourse on May 27th, 1933, refer to:



Die Herrlichkeit aber und die Größe dieses Aufbruchs verstehen wir dann erst ganz, wenn wir in uns jene tiefe und weite Besonnenheit tragen, aus der die alte griechische Weisheit das Wort gesprochen: 'Alles Große steht im Sturm'¹³.

But the glory and the greatness of this departure we understand fully only when we carry within us that deep and wide prudence from which the ancient Greek wisdom spoke the word: Everything great stands in the storm (my translation).

In the last lines of his discourse, Heidegger refers to the Nazi storm that was meant to create a new order for Germany, Europe, and the world. Modern collective daydreaming is almost always halted by the sirens of war, and it is standing in front of the doors of the next war that modern humanity wakes up from the beautiful

gemacht hat, steht für jeden Kundigen außer Zweifel" [Again, however, from the destruction new creative spirit rises: the lack of wood and the needs of everyday life urged to the discovery or the invention of substitutes for the wood. It urged to the use of the coal as heating material, and then to the invention of the coke process with the iron preparation. However, that this was what made the whole great development of capitalism in the 19th century possible is beyond any doubt] (Sombart, 1913: 210, my translation). See also, Reinert, H., Cambridge University & Reinert E. S. *Creative Destruction in Economics: Nietzsche, Sombart, Schumpeter*. In Backhaus, J, Drechsler W. (ed.) (2006). *Friedrich Nietzsche 1844-1900: Economy and Society*, Springer, ch. 4.

¹¹ Benjamin W. (2002). *The arcades project*, Harvard University Press.

¹² See Christias P. (2015). Le statut de l'image dialectique de Simmel à Benjamin, *Revue des Sciences Sociales*, n° 54, « Voir, Savoir », Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 52-57.

¹³ Heidegger M. (1934). *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität*, Breisgau, 5-22.

Panagiotis Christias
From an imaginary progress to the imaginary of progress

dream into the nightmare of reality. Constant progress in terms of warcraft can only lead to mankind's pure and simple annihilation. Past a certain point, destruction can no longer be creative.



Bibliography

Benjamin, W. (1968, 1970). *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Jonathan Cape.

Benjamin, W. (1983). *Charles Baudelaire: A lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*. London, Verso editions.

Benjamin, W. (1985). *October*, Vol. 35, The MIT Press, 9-135.

Benjamin, W. (2002). *The arcades project*, Harvard University Press.

Christias, P. (2015). Le statut de l'image dialectique de Simmel à Benjamin, *Revue des Sciences Sociales*, n° 54, « Voir, Savoir », Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 52-57.

Heidegger, M. (1934). *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität*, Breisgau, 5-22.

Hoffman, J. (2017). *The Optics of Orientation: Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Kaufman in Moscow. Modernism / modernity*, Volume 2, Cycle 4, Johns Hopkins University Press.

Palmier, J. (2003). Un matérialisme problématique. *Lignes*, 11, Éditions Léo Scheer, 7-37.

Reinert, H., Cambridge University & Reinert E. S. *Creative Destruction in Economics: Nietzsche, Sombart, Schumpeter*. In Backhaus, J, Drechsler W. (ed.) (2006). *Friedrich Nietzsche 1844-1900: Economy and Society*, Springer, ch. 4.

Schiff, G. (1987). Klee's array of angels, *Artforum*, vol. 25, No 9, New York, NY, Artforum International Magazine, p. 126-133.

Schumpeter, J. (1994). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London, Routledge.

Shahar, G. (2015). In the Name of the Devil: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'Agesilaus Santander'. *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*, edited by Ari Joskowicz and Ethan Katz, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 98-114.

Sombart, W. (1913). *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des modernen Kapitalismus*. Zweiter Band. *Krieg und Kapitalismus*, München und Leipzig Verlag von Duncker & Humblot.

Barber R.B. (2007), *Con\$umed, How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. Tr. It. *Consumati. Da cittadini a clienti*, Torino, Einaudi, 2010.



Panagiotis Christias
From an imaginary progress to the imaginary of progress

Srivastava A. K., Gupta R. S. (1990), "Literacy in a multilingual context", in Pattanayak D. P. (ed.), *Multilingualism in India*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 67-68.

