

WALTER BENJAMIN AND ANARCHISM

My presentation consists of three parts: First, I want to pose a simple question: Is Walter Benjamin the writer of an anarchist theory? Of course you are right to expect a positive answer, as already implied by the title of the presentation. There is a lot of interpretative work as well as textual evidence supporting the view that Benjamin was an exponent of anarchism or, to say the least, that he has been deeply influenced by anarchist writers, such as Gustav Landauer or Georges Sorel, to mention just a few names. Nevertheless it isn't clear enough whether this influence remained equally strong during his whole lifetime or has vanished for any reason, as for example because of his acquaintance with the Marxist version of communism in the '30 under the influence of Bertolt Brecht (with whom you can see him in the handout playing chess, while they were in exile in Danmark). Even if we succeed in establishing the view that there is a substantial connection between Benjamin's theory and anarchism, there still remain two difficult and, as I will try to show, interrelated questions. The first one concerns *the way* anarchism is incorporated into a theory which, considered as a whole, cannot be described as a political one. This will be the topic of the second part of the presentation. I will argue that the answer to this question cannot be clear enough, unless we take in view not only the content of Benjamin's theory, but also his philosophical method. It wouldn't be misleading here to compare Benjamin's case with that of Georg Lukacs, who in his famous book on *History and Class Consciousness* conceived materialistic dialectics as a question of method, and went so far as to define orthodoxy as 'fidelity to Marxist method'. But then we will have to invert the question and ask, in the opposite direction, which is the content of this methodological understanding of anarchism, or, to say it in a simpler way, which version of anarchism can be attributed to Walter Benjamin? I think that in order to specify this content, one is obliged to look back to the political and intellectual environment of the Weimar Republic, especially to the attitude and work of Max Weber, with whom, as I would like to argue, Walter Benjamin had a hidden dialogue. This will be the topic of the third part. Finally, instead of summarizing my arguments, I will try to discuss briefly, whether the difficulties one has to cope with when examining Benjamin's anarchism should be confined to his individual case or not.

According to my opinion, there are enough reasons to believe that some of the questions already posed apply not only to Benjamin's particular, let's say peculiar, version of anarchism but to anarchism in general.

I. I don't want to waste more of your time with introductory remarks, so I will start with my first point. The anarchist interpretation of Walter Benjamin's thought has been occasioned by no other than himself through a series of published and unpublished texts and letters, belonging to his early as well as to his late period. According to this provisional division, Benjamin's reference to anarchism goes through at least two distinct phases. To the first and, one could say, more direct one, belong texts as *The critique of Violence*, in which Benjamin seems to support enthusiastically the idea of a revolt without any prior organization or party commitment, in the style of the French anarcho-syndicalist movement, or, the, so called *Theologico-Political Fragment*, which includes nothing less than a celebration of nihilism, or even perhaps the text entitled *The Destructive Character*. In all of these works it's hard to overlook the enigmatic religious connotations. The idea of a spontaneous general proletarian strike culminating in a wild uncontrolled revolt of the masses is parallelized with the manifestation of Divine Violence, while nihilistic politics is introduced as the only effective way of accelerating the ongoing catastrophe and thus facilitating the intervention of the Messiah. Can these religious references be identified as traces of Walter Benjamin's Jewish background, as a result of the adoption of Zionist ideas or of his friendship with Gershom Scholem, the patriarch of Jewish Studies, or must they be understood as metaphors of some rather secular interests? The way Benjamin himself presents the problem suggests that there is no way to escape the ambivalence between literal and metaphorical meaning.

Here is an example: In the *Theologico-Political Fragment* Benjamin clearly denounces the idea that there is any connection between Messianic expectations and politics. He writes: “[...] the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political but only religious meaning”. Now, according to Benjamin, religious and political aims are not only different but contradictory. In order to illustrate the antithesis, Benjamin uses a rather astonishing image: “If an arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, on the other marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity

for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction”. Nothing could be clearer than that. But, rather unexpectedly, Benjamin argues that this negative relation, implies a hidden positive one. The arrows of politics and religion point to opposite directions, “but”, he writes, “just as a force can through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom”. There is no doubt that, as Michael Lowy says, Benjamin belongs to those “German-speaking Jewish writers and philosophers” who “[...] developed (in a relationship of elective affinity) a Romantic version of Jewish Messianism and a Romantic version of revolutionary (libertarian) Utopia”. Nevertheless this elective affinity approach, focusing on the history of ideas, doesn’t help us to determine the exact way Messianism and Revolution relate to each other in Benjamin’s thought.

I would like to stress two points in this regard. First: The strive for human freedom and happiness assists the coming of the Messiah not because there are certain common elements in revolutionary ideas and Jewish Messianism, or even because the context of neo-romanticism applies to both, but for the very opposite reason. Only because the libertarian Utopia forms the antipode of the Divine Kingdom, there is a hidden link between them. Using the language of Benjamin’s later *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, acts of emancipation are not written in the Book of redemption, but they are eligible for being cited one day in this book, without the knowledge of the original writer or even against his own intentions. The second point I want to stress is the destructive, or, I would say eliminating character of the political action Benjamin has in mind when talking about “nihilism” as the “task of world politics”. According to him, political liberation ensures nothing but the “eternity of downfall” and does this in an unpredictable, non calculated and most horrifying manner, which makes it comparable to God’s violence: “it strikes [...] without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation”.

Before continuing with Benjamin’s account of revolutionary violence, as stated in his celebrated essay on the *Critique of Violence*, I would like to make a short reference to the psychological counterpart of nihilistic politics, which is the so called destructive character, or what Benjamin once designated as new barbarism. Like God in his violent,

expiatory acts, the destructive character knows one single activity: clearing away, even if he does this “not always by brute force” but “sometimes by the most refined”. Just as the Jews, for whom Benjamin will tell “that every second of time was” for them “the strait gate through which Messiah might enter”, the destructive character believes that “no moment can know what the next will bring”, and that’s why “he always positions himself in crossroads”. The place of destruction in Benjamin’s model isn’t just the opposite of the one of order. In fact it is no place at all, and we are fully justified here to reduce the word U-topia to its etymological root. The place, the topos of utopia, is a not existing one, and this not just in the sense of being unattainable but in the sense of not being a locus. I think, this word-play can be helpful in understanding Benjamin’s politics, by providing the key to his very unusual version of dialectics. If I may continue with another word-play, I would suggest that according to Benjamin the antithesis between thesis and antithesis is incommensurable – and thus not mediated - because antithesis means the opposite thesis *and* no thesis at the same time. I will argue that this radical understanding of dialectics forms the ground of Benjamin’s political radicalism and therefore it can be seen as the distinctive feature of his anarchism.

Before returning to the main line of my presentation, I want to sum up my argument so far. I suggest that Benjamin’s concept of destruction or annihilation underlying his theory of revolutionary action and violence implies what I would call a double negativity. We are confronted with a bi-polar construction in which there are two opposite poles, with the second one opposing, negating, not only the other but also its own being a pole, and thus forming an opposition between a pole and his opposite not-pole.

I believe that the model I have proposed can be confirmed by examining the structure of Benjamin’s essay *On the Critique of Violence*, where we find the most clear endorsement of anarchist revolutionary theory. As already mentioned, Benjamin supports here the Sorelian idea of a proletarian general strike without any positive demands and thus disregarding “even the most popular reforms”. Such a strike aims only at the center: its sole task would be to “destroy state power”, while the effect of a political strike, managed by intellectuals, parties or unions would be at most a replacement of current masters by new one. Despite the differences between Sorel’s and Benjamin’s concept of

myth – Sorel wishes to create a revolutionary myth, in order to instill courage and hatred in the masses, while Benjamin classifies state violence as mythical – despite those differences they both share the view that revolution cannot be radical enough, cannot escape the vicious circle of depression unless it takes place in the form of “a clear, simple revolt’. Although this reduction of revolution to revolt isn’t a part of every anarchist theory, it still remains a distinct anarchist idea, and I think that this is already enough to qualify Benjamin’s theory as an anarchist theory.

I will now try to look at this revolt more closely, even though I will have to anticipate some thoughts, which belong to the second part of my presentation. For example it is worth noticing here that Benjamin’s ideal of an abrupt revolt directly aiming at the destruction of all institutions of the state entails no concerns about the future of the revolutionary event. As far as I can see, there is not a single reference to anarchy as a form of social organization not only in the *Critique of Violence* but also in the whole work of Benjamin. Of course, this cannot be considered as neutral. It seems, as though the revolt suggested by Benjamin were self-sufficient, in the sense that it isn’t conceived as a means to an end other than itself. But I think we can go even further if we examine Benjamin’s concept of revolution in the light of what we have described as double negativity. Looking more carefully at Benjamin’s text, we may notice that the anarchist tenet in his work becomes even more manifest in the way he describes revolutionary violence. This violence, intending to suspend “law with all the forces on which it depends” and to abolish state power, is said to found “a new historical epoch”. Wherein consists this new epoch? Surely not in the possibility of constructing a model of society without state and law, but in the possibility of the destruction of the law. Whereas mythical violence is law-making or law-preserving, Benjamin characterizes divine and revolutionary violence as law-destroying. Only negative terms describe its function. Revolutionary violence is an immediate one not only because it is not mediated by strategic or other political concerns, but also because it isn’t mediated by any law or even any principle. Thus immediacy cannot be thought of as an alternative political principle to party politics, it rather signifies the absence of political principles. Once more we are faced with a bipolarity, in which the second pole, the pole of the negation, is negated in itself. Very typical in this respect is Benjamin’s distinction between right and justice,

made in a lesser known fragment entitled “Notes on the Category of Justice”. Justice does not consist in the enforcement or implementation of rights, but in the liquidation of every system of rights. Such a system is conceived as a burden to human life, one has to get rid of, because every conception of rights, even the most radical or libertarian one, integrates human being into a network of conditionality, i.e. of essentially economic relationships. Whereas in every right, gained by contract or otherwise, lurks the threat of using violence, destructive justice and its violence is merciless, but innocent, ultimately non-violent in itself. This is one of the reasons Benjamin named lack of bloodshed as its hallmark, provoking many years later Jacques Derrida’s astonishment with the similarity between Benjamin’s vision of bloodless killing and the mortification of the Jews by the Nazis using gas. The second reason for the absence of blood is that the revolution envisaged by Benjamin is supposed not to be a part of the circulation of power. In fact, it is supposed to explode the continuum of history, which has been until now a continuum of oppression. However the revolt doesn’t introduce a new and happy continuum. Benjamin’s insistence that the revolution shouldn’t be oriented at the future, shows just how important it is for his conception to avoid every strategy going beyond the ‘here and now’ of revolutionary awareness.

We were discussing Benjamin’s early theory of revolutionary violence, but we have already arrived at his very last text *On the concept of History*, better known as *Theses on the Philosophy of History* because of its extremely dense, aphoristic form. Once again Benjamin suggest the idea of an abrupt, at any time possible, violent, and destructive revolt, with incalculable consequences, “for the Messiah arrives not merely as the Redeemer; he also arrives as the vanquisher of the Anti-Christ”. The fact that this time the proposed annihilation doesn’t only refer to the political order but also to the order of time changes nothing at his former model. It rather confirms the double negativity interpretation, by presenting an opposition not just between two epochs of history – between pre-history and real history in Marxian terms – but also between a continual and a discontinual, let’s say timeless, version of time. In his essay on *Surrealism*, written in 1929, Benjamin leaves us with no doubts, that the model for this timeless, or in terms of the philosophy of Leibniz, monadological conception of the revolution, is anarchism. As the revolutionary awareness involves the experience of the

absolute hic and nunc, there is no difference between consciousness and ecstasis. The ‘ecstatic component which, according to Benjamin, ‘lives in every revolutionary act’ is not so much a psychological category as it is a political. It is, he argues “identical with the anarchic” component. And this anarchic component, writes Benjamin, consists once again in “binding revolt to revolution”.

II. In the context of the essay on *Surrealism* Benjamin presents himself as a real and passionate advocate of anarchism. How else could we classify a thinker who has written a sentence like the following: “Since Bakounin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom”. However, something still seems to go wrong, and with this I’m beginning the second part of the presentation. What seems to go wrong is, first of all, the almost complete identification of Bakounin with the Surrealists, who are introduced as the representers of a program intending ‘to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution’. But Benjamin is not supporting the idea of infusing a dose of aesthetics into politics. On the contrary, he vehemently rejects such a mixture: “[...] poetic politics? ‘We have tried that beverage. Anything, rather than that!’”. An aesthetization of politics would amount to its mystification. And the very same reason which makes people with a “romantic turn of mind” glorify the revolt as nothing more than an ecstatic experience, leads social democrats to condemn anarchism as “a praxis oscillating between fitness exercise and celebration in advance”. So, on the one hand Benjamin doesn’t hesitate to compare a revolt of the anarchist type with a dream experience, with hashish trance, even with opium eating, in an ironical inversion of Young Marx’ judgment about religion. On the other hand this dream isn’t meant as a personal poetic experience, but very seriously as a matter of politics and as a real social revolution. This makes Benjamin retreating from his previous full support of anarchism, by subordinating unconditional revolt to a communist strategy. The revolt is not the revolution; it must be bound to it. The optimistic attitude of those who count on the inevitability of progress or of communism is still being rejected. In the essay on *Surrealism* Benjamin has an even stronger expression for his later denial of Marx’s position that the revolution are the locomotive of world history. “Surrealism”, he argues, “has come ever closer to the Communist answer. And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity”. Nevertheless

this absolute pessimism, which lies at the bottom of Benjamin's revolt theory, must now, according to the text, be organized. Whereas the structure of revolt resembles that of a dream, there is no revolution without awaking from the present nightmare. As he argues elsewhere, each epoch also dreams of awaking from its dream.

Benjamin's essay on Surrealism is written after his real or alleged conversion to communism. I say communism, not Marxism, because it is the term used by Benjamin himself most of the times. One simple reason for this choice lies in Benjamin's limited knowledge of Marxist Literature as well as of the writings of Marx himself. Apart from that it should be attributed to Benjamin aversion to dogmatism as well as to certain forms of communist practice during his lifetime. In a letter to Scholem who was asking him if his essay *on the social situation of French writers* was meant to be a credo, Benjamin emphatically replied 'no'. Of all possible forms and expressions of communism that of a credo was the most inappropriate to describe his attitude. But in order to figure out why Benjamin insisted on Communism, although he didn't show much esteem for the Communist doctrine, we have to look more closely behind the veil of anti-dogmatism. In the same letter to Scholem Benjamin mentions two further reasons. The first reason concerns his personal experience. Due to the sociopolitical conditions, he was deprived of his means of production and so he practically was in the position of proletarian. However true this may be, the second reason given by Benjamin seems to be much more important. In his effort to justify his political commitment in front of Scholem, he reminded him of Karl Kraus' reply to a woman who had mocked his appraisal for Rosa Luxemburg. I'm citing the basic elements of this reply from Ether Leslie's book on Walter Benjamin: "Kraus proclaimed in a bitter reply in his journal *Die Fackel*, that Communist praxis could go to hell, but God should preserve its 'purer ideal purpose' as a 'constant threat above the heads of those who possess property' and who preach morality to their 'victims', while giving them syphilis and sending them to war. Communism's existence might at least give them nightmares, ruin their imprudence and shatter their confidence". Is this an argument for Marxism, communism in general or anarchism? Don't we recognize here the figure of the Messiah revenging Anti-christ rather than offering reconciliation. And isn't this priority of the negative, destructive side of communism an imply to its anarchist understanding? Well, I would say yes *and* no. Yes, because the

support of communism isn't followed by any hope of his future realization through the employment of the appropriate political strategy. According to Benjamin, communism is just the 'lesser evil'. But one could also answer no, as Benjamin accepts the necessity of this 'lesser evil' and seems thereby to draw back from his former anarchic thesis that only an immediate, total revolution without concessions is worth the price. Now there is room for maneuvers and like the destructive character he positions himself in a crossroad. It seems that Benjamin has allowed a mediation of immediacy.

However two interrelated problems remain unsolved. What is responsible for this theoretical shift and which is the place of anarchism in the new model? If we exclude certain personal factors, Benjamin was forced to move away from his older position because of the critical external political circumstances of the period, especially in front of the need to find an effective antidote to Nazism. In another letter to Sholem, written much earlier in 1929, Benjamin explains that he doesn't believe that anarchic methods are applicable. Notwithstanding this turn to political realism, Benjamin hasn't substituted the anarchist for a communist program. "I consider anarchic methods", he writes, "as ineffective, but the communist 'ends' as nonsense and not existent". Not a substitution but a new division has taken place. Although the effectiveness of anarchist action has been discredited, anarchism still defines the 'end' for which communist methods should be applied. However it would be impossible for Benjamin to hold such a view. The anarchic component does not fit to the means-end scheme, because it is almost defined by the absence of such a mediated relationship.

I will now try to reconstruct Benjamin's model after his acquaintance with communism. The negative pole of the previous model has become more complex. Because of its inner negativity, it has been divided into two inner poles, one of immediacy and one of mediation, corresponding to the anarchic and to the communist component in Benjamin's political thought. Is one of the two poles the dominating one? This could only be true for the pole of mediation, which in that case would absorb the other by using his energy as a means for his own ends. But, as we have seen, this is not the case. Organizing pessimism, winning the energies of intoxication for the revolution doesn't mean subordinating the latter to the former; on the contrary it means keeping the distance between them, not letting organization liquidate its object. Benjamin's and

Hegel's dialectics is different. To speak in Hegelian terms, the component of anarchism is not *aufgehoben* by communism; the relation between mediation and immediacy is not a mediated one. This permits Benjamin to remain true to anarchism even when supporting communism, however undogmatically he claims to do that. "I'm not ashamed of my 'former' anarchism", he once wrote to Sholem. The fact that he put the word 'former' in quotation marks now appears less enigmatic. His denunciation of anarchism remains anarchic.

If that what keeps Benjamin's anarchism alive in his late thinking is a lack of mediation between the extremes, then we can also understand why he replied to Gretel Karplus, the later wife of Adorno, who had expressed her reservation against Benjamin's relationship with Bertolt Brecht, with the following words. "In the economy of my existence, a few relations, that can be counted, play indeed a role that allow me to assert a pole that is opposite to my original being. It is not at all unclear to you that my life as well as my thinking moves in extreme positions. The expanse that it thus asserts, the freedom to move side by side things and thoughts that are considered irreconcilable assumes its face only through the danger". Far from being just a comment on Benjamin's personal biography, this fragment doesn't simply present an allegory of his attitude towards communism, but also coincides with what Benjamin himself had called in the *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* "the necessary direction towards the extreme", describing thus the essence of his method. According to the same early text, truth can only be represented in a constellation of ideas, where "every idea is a star and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other", i.e. in 'complete and immaculate independence'.

III. And now to the third part. Should anarchism be the political translation of a philosophical method, then we have to ask if there are any consequences for the content of Benjamin's anarchism. We may have managed to discover an analogy, let's say between Benjamin's methodological and political extremism on the basis of his concept of immediacy. But we have considered only the one side of this analogy. If a political reading of Benjamin's method is possible, then it should also be possible to discover the traces of methodologism in his anarchism. Remember how Benjamin tried to persuade Gretel Karplus of the legitimacy of his *liaisons dangereuses* by means of a reduction ad

hominem. His friends should show some understanding for his own personal way of thinking and existing. However he didn't simply refer to his existence, but to the 'economy of his existence', and the word economy is an obvious allusion to his method. Although his method rules out mediation between the extremes, it's still an economy, that is a certain way to organize, to calculate and to anticipate relations. But wasn't the absence of calculability and providence the distinctive quality of the anarchic revolt he envisaged? Wasn't the abstinence from political maneuvers, strategies and negotiations the hallmark of the genuine strike, the keeper of the purity of pure violence, which was praised by Benjamin in his *Critique of violence* because it entailed no instrumental relation between means and ends? What kind of anarchism is this, which allows for political strategems?

In order to answer that question we have to look back to the time when Benjamin wrote the *Critique of Violence*, defending the anarchist revolt ideal. It was 1920. Before three years the Russian Revolution broke up, before two years the *Oktoberrevolution* in Germany, and just before one year Max Weber held his famous speech on *Politics as Vocation* in Munich. In this speech Weber distinguishes between two ideal types of ethics, each one applying to a different kind of involvement with politics. While the ethics of responsibility focuses on the consequences of political action and demands the employment of the most effective means for certain ends, the ethics of conviction displays a total disregard for the effects of action and is only interested in the actors inner consistency. This makes acting according to the ethics of conviction – as it is the case with Christians but also with anarcho-syndicalists – completely inappropriate for any public action which deserves the name of politics. Although Weber admits that there are no objective reasons for choosing the one or the other type of ethics, he argued that those who think they were acting out of conviction should not pretend to do anything more than caring for their own personal redemption. Otherwise they would use the very same methods as their enemies and couldn't claim any moral superiority. Thus, according to Weber, the means of the Bolsheviks are essentially the same with those of a militant dictatorship.

Weber's sympathy for the anarchists (under the influence of his favorite pupil Robert Michels) goes hand in hand with the devaluation of their political potential.

Benjamin's concept of pure violence, insisting on the possibility of connecting violence with purity, can thus be considered as an attempt of a reply to Weber's bourgeois theory of politics, while avoiding the pitfalls of Bolshevism. Benjamin agrees with Weber in considering the economy of means and ends as the criterion of the political. However he doesn't share with him the view that the only alternative to Machiavellianism is pacifism. Benjamin cites the words of Kurt Hiller: "If I do not kill I shall never establish the world dominion of justice ... that is the argument of the intelligent terrorist ... We, however, profess that higher even than the happiness and justice of existence is existence itself". In disapproving of such a view and rejecting the priority of mere life over justice, Benjamin is seeking a way out of the dilemma.

This way is a narrow one because it has to pass through two dangerous places. On the one side there is the realistic demand of instrumentality, permitting dictatorial measures in order to ensure the victory of the oppressed. At the other side there is pure performance, a vision of revolution as an aesthetic event, destined for self-consumption. Both lead to capitulation, either in the form of the Soviet dictatorship over the proletariat or in the form of phantasmagoria. In his essay on the *Work of Art* Benjamin attributed aesthetization of politics to fascism.

In order to defend Benjamin against performative theories of resistance, Werner Hamacher coined the term affirmative. Pure violence performs something, but as a performance of annihilation it performs nihil, nothing, that is it doesn't perform at all. Pure violence neither contributes to something else nor is confined to self-satisfaction. Scholars haven't always given enough attention to the structure of Benjamin's position. Žižek, who in his essay on Benjamin fails to recognize this affirmative character, mistakenly mentions Robespierre's terrorism and revolutionary dictatorship as historical examples of Benjamin's conception. Even less applies Ranciere's idea of aesthetic politics to Benjamin's theory of divine violence, which neither refers to something other than itself nor is self-referential. Benjamin's anarchism does not pretend to overcome the antinomy between the idea of pure violence and its realization or the dilemma between political realism and pure ethics. Benjamin's anarchism rather lives in this antinomy and owes to it its intellectual vigour and maybe its practical potential.

Instead of a conclusion I would like to finish my presentation with an early note of Walter Benjamin: “Ethics, applied to history is the doctrine of the revolution; applied to the state, it is the doctrine of anarchy”. As we have seen, this doctrine is antinomical. But let us ask ourselves if there is any other anarchic doctrine which doesn’t include such antinomies. Anarchists prefer praxis than theory, but most of the times their vision remains theoretical and cannot be applied to praxis. Anarchists despise politicians, but they are condemned to play a political role, too. In consciously exposing these antinomies Benjamin’s anarchism has many things to teach us about anarchist theory and politics in general.