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Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Political Economy: A New Historical Materialism

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Reviewed by Iaan Reynolds

Walter Benjamin's body of work challenges attempts to organize it into a self-consistent whole, let alone a theoretical program. This is partially due to the heterogenous and often idiosyncratic character of his output, the unfinished status of some of his most profound writings, and his wide range of influences, but Benjamin's own style also bears its share of responsibility. It is as though certain of his texts operate according to the complicated relationship between truth and philosophical representation developed in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel's* 'Epistemo-Critical Foreword'. Under this conception of truth, philosophy *must* take the form of an indirect and episodic collection, since representation – the ephemeral medium of philosophical reflection – is fundamentally unsuited to the expression of eternal ideas. From this perspective, it is tempting to trace out the hidden systematicity among Benjamin's works, discerning their orientation towards a truth that cannot directly appear. Duy Lap Nguyen's historically rich commentary on Benjamin, which argues that the latter's output embodies a 'coherent and expansive philosophical system' (225), is certainly an example of this kind of project. Nguyen's attempt to distinguish a unified philosophical project spanning the customary stages recognized in Benjamin's body of work – particularly between his early interpretations of Kantian philosophy and his later 'ambiguous turn to Marxism' (e.g. 59, 241 n.4) – is a welcome one, and is most notable for the detail with which it addresses Benjamin's engagement with the philosophical context of the early twentieth century.

After introducing the book's project through an interpretation of Benjamin's thought on the dialectical relationship between enlightenment progress and the eternal return, Nguyen's argument proceeds over the course of seven substantive chapters. The first three can be understood as elaborations on Benjamin's formative engagement with Kantian philosophy, outlining what Nguyen characterizes as the 'metaphysical anarchism' arising from Benjamin's treatment of the Kantian notions of experience (chapter 1), political right (chapter 2) and aesthetic judgment (chapter 3) (15). In his early reflections on epistemology, political theory and aesthetics, according to Nguyen, Benjamin takes Kant's critical philosophy beyond itself, interrogating the way in which this project's attempt to found an order selectively constructs its grounding notions so as to exclude the singular and irreducibly historical character of experience.

In the first chapter, Nguyen reviews Benjamin's claim that Kant's critique of pure reason obscures the 'total structure' of experience, since it 'fails to confront the emptiness of experience in the Enlightenment, relying on categories derived from the sciences that do not constitute experience, but rather exclude the bare form of the latter' (24). If Kant's philosophy and the neo-

Kantian epistemologies of Benjamin's contemporaries establish the timeless validity of mechanical reason, they purchase this at the cost of the certainty of immediate, ephemeral experience. This opposite problem is present in Husserl's philosophy, in which immediate experience is the point of access for the intuition of ideas, but encounters difficulty – according to Benjamin – when it comes to accounting for the formation of abstract concepts (37). The interpretation here is evenly written and provides helpful historical orientation as it recounts Benjamin's simultaneous use of phenomenological arguments against neo-Kantianism, and neo-Kantian arguments against phenomenology. This apparent inconsistency does not signal Benjamin's wavering theoretical commitments, however, but rather that the 'revision of Kant' found in these works aims at a theory of knowledge developing both sides of experience – that which is empty and timeless, and that which is full and ephemeral (40).

The second and third chapters show how the basic form of Benjamin's critique of Kantian epistemology reappears, respectively, in his interpretations of Kant's theories of right and aesthetic judgment. The second chapter focuses on Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' and argues that Kant's doctrine of right requires a right to legal possession that cannot be grounded on the universalization of individual ownership, but on an exclusion, on 'the rational necessity of the rightlessness of the object' (43). This means that law is opposed to justice, not in the sense recognized by the natural law tradition – that the law deprives individuals of goods that they are owed by the order of nature – but in the sense that justice refers to an original propertylessness of nature, and a corresponding state of moral indifference. The 'Critique of Violence' is thus understood as an attempt to restore attention to this obscured historical dimension of justice, and in so doing to investigate the possibility of the law's suspension (61-62). The third chapter identifies a correlate to this dynamic in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* and the works surrounding its publication, in which Nguyen shows how Benjamin's adoption of methodological principles from Carl Schmitt's political theory leads him to an opposite perspective to that found in Schmitt, confirming the latter's methodology 'by disproving the philosophy of the state from which it derived its epistemological principle of the extreme' (80). Specifically, according to Nguyen, Benjamin argues that the modern state is not a product of secularized theological concepts, but that of a re-enchantment of secularized life, the latter of which is evident in the German baroque.

After taking us through Benjamin's interpretation of Kantian philosophy, the next two chapters develop his conception of 'profane redemption', which Nguyen identifies as 'a defining characteristic of both the theological and materialist phases of Benjamin's work' (xi). Benjamin's idea of redemption does not ground a romantic or ethical critique of capitalist society, in the sense that it argues for a return to pre-alienated existence (chapter 4). Neither is it a philosophy of technological progress, such as that found in the neo-Kantian socialism of Benjamin's contemporaries (chapter 5). Instead, according to Nguyen, profane redemption names a 'process in which an irredeemably imperfect humanity finally achieves its fulfillment precisely as such' (11). Instead of rejecting or identifying with progress, in other words, Benjamin locates a dialectical identity in this apparent opposition. According to Nguyen, the systematic intention of Benjamin's thought thus aims at a 'messianic suspension of history' (163), in which an unimproved humanity is redeemed, in which work can be converted into play, and in which ethical progress becomes unnecessary.

Chapters 6 and 7 develop the previous chapters' insights through an engagement with the *Arcades Project*, focusing in particular on this unfinished work's reading of Charles Fourier. Nguyen claims that Benjamin's sprawling study of the Paris arcades is suffused with an unorthodox reading of the critique of political economy drawing on Fourier's hedonistic utopianism in order to reject the idea of human perfectibility. The most interesting aspect of this part of the argument lies in the relationship it indicates between technology and capitalist social relations. Nguyen argues that Benjamin differs from much of the Marxist tradition, since he locates the primary contradiction of capitalism as one between capitalist social relations and technology – and not between capital and labor. The class struggle thematized by Benjamin in his later works is thus conceived by Nguyen as a 'slave revolt of technology', through which the latter frees itself from the social relations that fetter its power (160ff.). The revolution envisioned by Benjamin, according to Nguyen, is not realized through the affirmation of labor against capital, nor through a renewal of a 'tradition of the oppressed', but through a technology realizing its right to abolish capitalist society, and in so doing restoring humanity to an original state of traditionless infancy (171). In the final chapter, the implications of Benjamin's view of the transformation of work into play for the relationship between morality and nature are developed through a discussion of the works of Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski.

While the consistency of the book's interpretation of Benjamin is admirable, its methodology seems to be mostly descriptive. The book reconstructs a detailed picture of Benjamin's project drawing on a wide range of writings, but we do not get much in the way of an evaluation of the merit of his 'theoretical anarchism'. It would have been helpful for Nguyen to develop this at more length, because from the preface and conclusion in particular, it seems as though he finds resources for contemporary problems in Benjamin's thought. Many of the problems with the systematic account put forward here are clearest when we consider its contemporary importance. For example: how are we to make sense of the fact that technology is not merely constrained by capitalist social relations, but also responsible for their formation and dissolution? This side of the critique of political economy – concerned with the disruptive force of technology – seems to fall out of the picture, even though it would be an important addition, precisely because it would call into question the technological utopia purportedly envisioned by Benjamin, as well as the 'decidedly non-Hegelian' status of Benjamin's dialectic (226). Is it not problematic to claim that technology is intrinsically redemptive, seeing as so much of its development stems from and facilitates capitalist accumulation? Aren't there forms of technology for which no liberatory use can be envisioned?

Another set of issues pertains to the work's aim of finding a 'systemic intention' in Benjamin's project. Nguyen points out that 'if the attempt to broadly interpret Benjamin's work is an imprudent endeavor, it is also an unavoidable one' (225). But to what extent is the presentation of a systematic philosophical project in Benjamin's works possible? If we take seriously the theoretical reasons for his work's discontinuous character, won't every attempt at definitive interpretation necessarily de-emphasize elements that complicate this interpretation? The most conspicuous omission in the book, with this in mind, pertains to the relative absence of discussions of Benjamin's theory of education in his early works. These works are productively read by Nguyen to offer a critique of Kantian philosophy, but less clear is the fact that they are also centrally concerned with theories of pedagogy. Even in the reading of 'Critique of Violence' offered here, very little attention is paid to that work's cryptic discussion of divine violence, or

the fact that Benjamin relates this form of law-destroying force to education. This lack of emphasis especially affects Nguyen's claims about a purported ideal of unimproved humanity. If Benjamin's 'profane scheme of redemption' is 'cumulative', meaning that humanity's continual failure 'creates the conditions for a redeemed humanity to return to its original, morally unimproved state' (109), what is the nature of the accumulation at play here? How can we avoid conceiving of a cumulative process in terms of progression? Addressing this question seems to require an engagement with Benjamin's conception of education. This would probably complicate the coherence of the philosophical system put forward, however, since Nguyen's claim that redeemed humanity is about an abandonment of tradition is difficult to square with Benjamin's discussions of tradition as the medium of educational formation. Leaving aside its place in a utopian future, doesn't Benjamin claim that the 'tradition of the oppressed' communicates a form of learning to historical materialist theory under capitalism? If this is true, could we not argue that this work's guiding image of a traditionless humanity in a state of technologically-facilitated infancy jumps over the steps needed to realize the end of capitalism?

These questions do not arise from the specific details of Nguyen's treatment of Benjamin so much as from the philosophical presuppositions guiding its development. The studied interpretation of *Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Political Economy* is ultimately exemplary for the clarity with which it demonstrates the difficulties encountered by any effort at reading an *oeuvre* marked by discontinuity as a unified system.