

Walter Benjamin (1940) : On the Concept of History

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Original German: Gesammelte Schriften I:2. Suhrkamp Verlag.
Frankfurt am Main, 1974.

Translator's Note: Jetztzeit was translated as "here-and-now," in order to distinguish it from its polar opposite, the empty and homogenous time of positivism. Stillstellung was rendered as "zero-hour," rather than the misleading "standstill"; the verb "stillstehen" means to come to a stop or standstill, but Stillstellung is Benjamin's own unique invention, which connotes an objective interruption of a mechanical process, rather like the dramatic pause at the end of an action-adventure movie, when the audience is waiting to find out if the time-bomb/missile/terrorist device was defused or not).



Thesis VII

Think of the darkness and the great cold
In this valley, which resounds with misery.
– Brecht, *Threepenny Opera*

Fustel de Coulanges recommended to the historian, that if he wished to reexperience an epoch, he should remove everything he knows about the later course of history from his head. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken. It is a procedure of empathy. Its origin is the heaviness at heart, the acedia, which despairs of mastering the genuine historical picture, which so fleetingly flashes by. The theologians of the Middle Ages considered it the primary cause of melancholy. Flaubert, who was acquainted with it, wrote: "*Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage.*" [Few people can guess how despondent one has to be in order to resuscitate Carthage.] The nature of this melancholy becomes clearer, once one asks the question, with whom does the historical writer of historicism actually empathize. The answer is irrefutably with the victor. Those who currently rule are however the heirs of all those who have ever been victorious. Empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the current rulers every time. This says quite enough to the historical materialist. Whoever until this day emerges victorious, marches in the triumphal procession in which today's rulers tread over those who are sprawled underfoot. The spoils are, as was ever the case, carried along in the triumphal procession. They are known as the cultural heritage. In the historical materialist they have to reckon with a distanced observer. For what he surveys as the cultural heritage is part and parcel of a lineage [*Abkunft*: descent] which he cannot contemplate without horror. It owes its existence not only to the toil of the great geniuses, who created it, but also to the nameless drudgery of its contemporaries. There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another. The historical materialist thus moves as far away from this as measurably possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.