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Benjamin and Fascism: Themes of Danger in Thesis VI

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Abstract. This paper explores the themes of danger in relation to fascism within Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History," particularly on Thesis VI. It interprets and analyzes how Benjamin's work addresses fascism and its potential manifestations, drawing parallels with other theses and recent developments in fascism. The essay argues that while Benjamin's thesis effectively serves as both an understanding of and a revolutionary methodology against fascism, which may inadvertently fall prey to new fascist tendencies in the 21st-century digital and "postmodern" context. Also, the essay examines Benjamin's antifascist stance, his critique of historicism, and the potential for (mis)interpretation of his work in a fascist context, particularly focusing on the role of the historical materialist, the concepts of "danger" and "catastrophe," the pessimism that fascism has already won, the struggle "against the grain," and Benjamin's intent against the theses' publication. Finally, it concludes that the publication of Benjamin's theses might have inadvertently contributed to reactionary tendencies, highlighting the complex relationship between his work and fascism.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, fascism, antifascism, danger, catastrophe

1. Introduction

This essay explains themes relating to fascism in Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History," chiefly in Thesis VI. This paper will interpret, analyze, and expand upon concerns about fascism and possible manifestations of fascist tendencies within the text. The author will reference, while being loyal to Benjamin's intellectual accord, other theses in the essay, other texts in Benjamin's body of work, and recent developments in fascism that might explicate or challenge the thesis. Finally, this paper argues that, while the thesis serves potently as both an understanding of and a revolutionary methodology against fascism, it nonetheless falls prey to the new fascist tendencies in the context of the 21st century—specifically, within the decentralized, digital, and aleatory landscape of "postmodernity," to set the stage for an explication of Benjamin's complex relationship with fascism.

It is evident that Benjamin's intellectual project—"the task is to grasp its metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain," as he spoke as early as 1914—intimately concerns the problematic of "danger" [1]. Benjamin's concern for the idea of danger could be clarified by two synonyms: extremity and catastrophe.

"Catastrophe" in Benjamin's work has two dimensions: catastrophe as the empty continuum of history in his new philosophical "concept of history" and catastrophe as the historical background of

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Benjamin's writing—the relentless ascension and dominance of fascism and its atrocities amidst the hyperinflation and social unrest in the Weimar Republic [2]. Benjamin expresses this state of catastrophic unfolding as a state of urgency: "Things cannot go on like this" [3]. Further, this catastrophe is continual and imminent, reflecting Benjamin's personal situation as a fugitive from the Vichy authorities and foreshadowing his death [4]. Philosophically, on the other hand, "catastrophe" is also distinguished from the "chain of events" historians assume of the past [5]. By default, the unredeemed happenings of the past have already been lost or fossilized to serve the ruling class. The ruling class, namely fascism, is the victor—by "a single catastrophe," it is always already winning [5].

Benjamin admits to what might be termed his "extremism," as he wrote in 1934: "[M]y life as well as my thinking has moved in extreme positions. The breadth which it thus claims, the freedom to move things and ideas which are considered irreconcilable in proximity to each other gains its countenance only from the danger" [2]. For Benjamin, extremity has two dimensions: philosophical and political. For the former dimension, examples abound as Benjamin's project, from "The Life of Students" to "On the Concept of History," attempts to reconcile the seemingly incompatible, contradictory, and even nonsequitous—to reconcile "Marxism with Jewish theology, materialism with messianism" [6]. More generally, Benjamin also saw it necessary to unify or subvert the likewise irreconcilable poles of existing dualisms, modernist or otherwise, such as civilization/barbarism, the Objective/Subjective, and Haggadah/Halakha [7]. Thus, on the political sense, this "extreme" and radical critique with a Marxist vocabulary positions him on the far left, against both the supposed centrism of Social Democrats and what it is called as "far-right fascism" today. Therefore, the word "fascism" has been subject to various incompatible uses, and a comparison between fascism in Benjamin's time and the contemporary time shall be established throughout the discussion.

2. Benjamin as an antifascist

Notably, in the thesis, a deconstruction of a quintessential modernist dualism is central—the dualism of the past versus the present and the future. This dualism, explained by Nietzsche, is one of passivity versus activity under the term "the historical sense" or "historicism." The historical sense, according to both Nietzsche and Benjamin, has a totalizing effect—it "mummifies" history in a monist narration, usually of "objectivity," "neutrality," and "progress," which was coincidentally espoused by German historians of Benjamin's time, namely the Göttingen school of history and its heritage, Rankean historical positivism and universal history [8,5].

This form of German historicism contributed fondly to colonialism, which is a fascist manifestation. Consistent with the Enlightenment project of hierarchical abstraction and thingification, the inevitable conclusion of which is fascism, universal history presents itself as the neutral and objective truth that totalizes all of humanity [9]. Historicism operates under the optimism of universal "progress" in science, ethics, religion, history, ethnography, as well as, finally, race and ethnicity, sex and gender, (dis)ability, nationality, etc, which also represents the common denominators of fascism today. Notably, the Göttingen school of history was responsible for both the color terminology for race and the Biblical terminology for race, a (pseudo-)scientific hotbed for negrophobia, antisemitism, and other race-based manifestations of fascism [10].

It was with this fascistic tradition in mind that Benjamin cited the famous Rankean dictum on the historical task: to represent "what it really was" [6]. He starts by resisting the dominant notion of history formulated by "positivist historians" like Eduard Meyer as "progression through a homogenous, empty time," leaving its footprints to be excavated by historians. Instead, Benjamin

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argues, along the lines of Nietzsche, that historical study, by necessity, is a selective act insofar as it depends on motivated forgetting [8]. A passive and apparently neutral interpretation of "what it really was," obscures its own impossibility and complicity with the ruling class, the Anti-Christ, which in this context was clearly fascism. Moreover, as the study of history is "a procedure of empathy (Einfühlung)," Benjamin accuses the historicist of empathizing with the abstract "victor" whose concealed "barbarism" alludes to the fascist catastrophes of his time [5]. Therefore, under an already totalitarian fascist regime, the historicistic relinquishment of the selective act of historical studies is the acquiescence of history, a powerful political institution, to the fascist ruling class —"handing itself over as the tool of the ruling classes"—, therefore compliciting with and even embodying the workings of fascism [5].

Benjamin notes the role of the deceased in sociopolitical scenes. He writes: "[N]ot even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious" [5]. In other words, the dead, still a positive manifestation in history, embodies the symbolic value that could be taken advantage of or eradicated by the fascist metanarrative of historiography. A relevant Marxist terminology is "recuperation," the process by which sociopolitical hegemonies assimilate opposition [11]. This process remains central to fascist logic today as well. Institutionally neutralized figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, who were made to serve the optimistic ignorance, based on the liberal history of progress, of the fascist reality—systemic racism—in society. Beyond them, the co-optation of otherwise harmless symbols is most characteristic of digital age's fascism [12]. "[T]his enemy has not ceased to be victorious" [5].

Benjamin's project was vividly antifascist. It "is to liberate the stupendous forces of history [Geschichte] that are enclosed within the 'Once upon a time' of classical history writing [Historie]. The kind of history that showed the object 'as it actually was' represented the most potent narcotic of the century" [13]. It revitalizes the "timeless truth" on which stems fascistic historiography [14]. Moreover, he suggests a historical materialist's task of "brush history against the grain," to "deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it," and to "[set] alight the sparks of hope in the past" by realigning the neglected sufferings of the oppressed and thereby redeeming them. Benjamin's Messiah is an antifascist methodology [5].

Benjamin's erratic approach to philosophizing—"sudden paradoxical change of one form of [religious or political] observance into the other (regardless of which direction)" that traversed Neo-Kantianism, Marxism, heralds of modernity like Charles Baudelaire, German literary criticism, and Jewish mysticism—is also a "methodology." Benjamin's conception of the past explains this methodology—not as ossified data of "how it really was" but as intensities that "flash" in a fleeting "moment of danger," history being a "picture" of them (e.g., "History decays into images, not into stories") [5,14]. This "danger," then, is the "historical waves" of neutrality, servants of the ruling class [8]. If the historical materialist does not "[set] alight the sparks of hope in the past," the sparks —the history of the oppressed as well as the historical materialist subject that inherits it—would be put out by the "historical waves" of neutrality, "tool of the ruling classes" [5]. In this understanding of the past, the past itself may never serve as the herald of the future. Hence, the future is "opened" to all possibilities instead of the monist promise of utopianism or Judgment Day. Benjamin's Messianism is distinguished from millennialism, which invests happiness in the "world to come."

3. Benjamin as a fascist

The question of whether a fascist reading of Benjamin is possible,was probably Benjamin's concern as he refused the essay's publication, the reason being "that would throw wide open the doors to enthusiastic incomprehension." However, to speak of any misinterpretation or misrepresentation of

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Benjamin is insufficient as, at least on a surface level, Benjamin's motifs could serve both extremities—the "far-left" and the "far-right." Benjamin's "danger": the threat of totalitarian fascism parallels the conspiracy theory of the New World Order [15]. Benjamin's vengeance: the right-wing stab-in-the-back myth (Dolchstosslegende) of the 1920s parallels the contemporaneous left-wing condemnation of a "social democratic betrayal" as well as Leon Trotsky's "The Revolution Betrayed" [16-18]. Trosky's sentiments, especially, manifested in his "revisionist" history on Stalin, and was repeated by Kruschev in the "secret speech," irreversibly soiling communism's image worldwide by hiding behind thousands of footnotes of Robert Conquest [19]. Benjamin's sympathetic redemption: The French Revolution's identification with the Roman Republicans parallels Hitler's Tertium Imperium's revitalization of the Roman Imperium [20]. All these proposed affective states that undoubtedly troubled Benjamin unfortunately correspond neatly with fascist propaganda: "to overload various affective capacities, such as nostalgia, sentiment, or fear" [21].

On the Social Democrats, Benjamin argues that their indoctrination made the working class "[forget] its hate as much as its spirit of sacrifice," thereby embracing the hatred latent among the newly created working class [5]. On fascism, he contends that "Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses" by "giving these masses […] a chance to express themselves" [22]. Out of context, Benjamin's "historical materialist" historiography and fascist mythology assumed by the Blackshirts or "The New Right" seem to have much in common: they both do not shy away from "brushing against the grain" and artistic narrative creation, both revolt against the liberal democratic "progress," both see as their goal to mobilize the underclass (with albeit drastically different categorizations), the victims of cultural and economic marginalization and disfranchisement, via sympathy and representation, and both are messianic. The subtle difference between Benjamin's Pascalian, pessimistic, and open-ended Messiah and Christian, utopian Messiah is irrelevant insofar as both assume an active role in creation and aim for impactful political movements [6].

Notably,there is a tension of anachronism between Benjamin's modernity and "postmodernity," between still-yet-modern capitalism and late capitalism. Postmodernity and late capitalism, as characterized by Fredric Jameson, are characterized by the waning of historicity—the loss of the sense of historical time—and a cultural logic of globalization and decentralization [23]. Jameson terms this new spatial logic "hyperspace … a world in which the space of historical experience is no longer accessible to us" other than depthless, non-representable pastiche [23]. (i.e., They are also primarily of "Americanocentric" concern, and the examples of this era given in what follows will also focus on the USA [22].) This is distinct from Benjamin's context in key factors. First, the neoliberal oligarchy, instead of assuming a national economy among the mercantilism between nation-states of modernity, also "operates outside of […] the state" [24]. In the neoliberal picture, the state is not the primary profiteer of a fascistic (dis)order [24]. Multinationalism is the default tendency as companies evade accountability, the democratic process, and taxation [24]. Second, the social and the political as avenues of "events" are losing their charm. Reflected by the Thatcherite doctrine that "there is no society," social relations, a core concern of Marxian thought, are overshadowed by isolated private power [25]. Being explicitly against the social democratic moderates of the time, Benjamin nonetheless entrusted his revolutionary/redemptive project to the lower class, seeing the "tradition," the dominant narrative imposed on the whole society, or the "grain" as correlations of an organized, patterned ruling class, the enemy. However, this struggle "against the grain" is insufficient if it is fundamentally political. Sociopolitics, given that human agency and historical subjectivity are no longer in its proper, aura-filled scene, its content regulated according to a commodified phantasmagoria—algorithms, would be one more specter of modernity.

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As John Dewey argues, "[a]s long as politics is the shadow cast on society by big business, the attenuation of the shadow will not change the substance" [26]. In sum, the "anything-goes" "postmodernity" denies the possibility of a clear enemy object (like the fascists or the Social Democrats in Benjamin's time), and the reification of the enemy serves to incite uncontrolled, undirected, and pure violence, dexterously harnessed by digital neofascism.

Likewise, the same tension exists between modern and postmodern manifestations of fascism. In what conceptualization was available to Benjamin (and the popular imaginary that follows), fascism was characterized by rather immediate consequences of European humanism: ultranationalism, goose-stepping militaristic usurpation and centralization, and a charismatic strongman as a political agent [24]. However, fascism in postmodernity assumes a diametrically different form—it is non-territorial, decentralized, spontaneous, and aleatory; all characteristics of the digital sphere. This sporadic fascism, however, is arguably no less violent and dangerous, as incidents like the mass harassment campaign of GamerGate or Chanboard-inspired mass shootings demonstrate [27-28]. It is not even sufficient to define fascism as merely a constellation of attitudes (e.g., racism, misogyny, transphobia) since these attitudes are not assumed authentically by the historical subject but by algorithmic predestinations of a posthuman digital sphere. The "shock" of the historical subject bears little meaning. That said, fascism as an ideology today remains fascism. It inherited numerous motifs from its modern counterpart, including tendentious forms of authoritarianism, racial and sexual supremacy, nostalgia, a state of urgency against the inhuman threat, etc., each of which malleable and inessential. Benjamin could not have predicted Auschwitz, let alone internet raids and collective brigading, DDoS attacks, doxing, "search engine optimization," or other fascism practices that claimed unquantifiable victims—the new topology of "divine violence" in which he once also saw revolutionary potential [6,29].

Benjamin's revolutionary development of the concept of history arguably served as a new battlefield on which the fascist movement continued to thrive. Concerning Benjamin's project of redeeming the past and nostalgia, Michael Löwy asks: "Does this not run the risk of leading to an 'Orwellian' rewriting of the past, in terms of the political needs of a totalitarian apparatus or state—as has already been abundantly demonstrated by Stalinist practice in the late 1930s in the USSR?" Löwy answers "no" by arguing that Benjamin's model of the fleeting, fragile image of the past and the historian as an individual cancels the possibility of "Orwellian" uses [6]. However, as explained earlier, Orwellianism—or Stalinism in the late 1930s in the USSR—is no longer synonymous with fascism in postmodernity. While the transient past (that "flashes in a moment of danger")—and, by extension, the openness and unpredictability of the future—may, as a new default, resist homogenization and mummification of the past into a single narrative of the victors, it also empowers fascist agents with arsenals of "Stanislavskian" (positions assumed impromptu) instigation and remission of accountability. While the individual historian's nonconformism resists the state apparatus, fascist agents could, like Christ, "withdraw to the mountains" and play guerrilla warfare while uneventfully accumulating a web of connections that, simply by chance (even the most infinitesimal chance of catastrophe would mean inevitability given an infinitely large numerical base of population or repetition over time), culminate in stochastic terrorism [30,31]. Moreover, the individualistic picture of a countercultural revolutionary-Messiah, the personified "historical materialist," which might appear plausible in modern discussions, has been replaced by populist traction that, if one aims for any political significance, demands the principle of seduction—the Messiah must be a fetish mystique to be interpreted by self-assured subjects, like in the case of Q in QAnon movements [32,33]. The victor's history is no longer necessarily the history of the ruling class; it is the history of the utmost seductive power, which fascism arguably excels at. The

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masses' conformity and agreement are no longer the necessary, central driving force of fascism; instead, it thrives as long as it takes up space to enter people's lives, to be omnipresent, debated about, or even fought against. Without the populist dimension, the Anti-Christ remains your words against mine and eventually captured by the always already "victorious" fascism. Yet, fascism typically predominates in the populist dimension.

A comparison of Benjamin's and contemporary, digital, and fearmongering ideas of "danger" is in order. Benjamin assists that the historical materialist and revolutionary act "[t]o articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was'"—i.e., seemingly, the historical materialist ought to assume sincerity even if a counternarrative of history as "how it really was" could mobilize the masses [5]. However, paradoxically, the next proposition—to "take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger" seems to advocate for irony, suggesting that it is only in the presence of "danger" that "a memory" could be seized by the historical materialist. Taken on face value, if "a memory" means that of the working class, in contrast to the "ruling class" that has traditionally seized this memory, the historical materialist must be simultaneously sincere and ironic—for example, they must believe what they articulate, but with the epistemological humility if the relativity of truth. However, this is evidently hard to achieve for the average, working-class historical subject, and any demands solely on the minds of the masses would be veritably bourgeois ideology [34]. Coincidentally or not, fascism also captures this atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty and sometimes orchestrate it [35]. Arendt argues that this cynicism defined as "an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything" forms the basis for "totalitarian rule" [35]. The reason for Benjamin's reluctance for publishing the theses could be a form of elitism or vanguardism that must be contained and safeguarded lest epistemological humility becomes a culture of nihilism, the culture that, in Benjamin's foresight, fosters fascism more than a proletarian revolution.

The gallant historian "brushing against the grain" needs to first identify "the grain" and then, for "politics" (collective decision-making), which can convince people of it [5]. Due to Benjamin essay's historicity, the grain is obviously the emergent fascism of his time, while it is not so obvious today. Benjamin's antagonism (i.e., "the Messiah arrives not merely as the Redeemer; he also arrives as the vanquisher of the Anti-Christ" [5]) resembles a moralistic, retributionist hatred towards the Nazis—"one cannot struggle against the Third Reich, Benjamin seems to be saying, without a profound aversion for [sic] Nazism" [6]. This antagonism espoused by antifascists parallels the hatred towards the left, the social democrats, and antisemitism. As a response to fascist catastrophes, Benjamin's text understandably undertakes this antagonism. It was a "hatred" and "vengeance" on behalf of the sufferings of the oppressed against the oppressor. Herein persists a central dualism of modernity: the oppressor/oppressed and, from it, conformism/nonconformism. Accepting the existence of the sociopolitical scene as a legitimate avenue of events, Benjamin sees the historical materialist as an agent in said scene. This agent takes the side of the "oppressed" and actualizes Messianic power thereby; however, with the Manichean figures of Messiah and the Anti-Christ, the "historical materialist" could designate arbitrary characters to them so long as they serve the nonconformist aura of revolution-redemption. Moreover, this task is based on the idea that the social is self-sustaining with an equilibrium between the individual and the system and between the oppressor and the oppressed, a legacy of Thomas Hobbes' social contract. This task, however, eludes the posthuman arena where fascism acquires its momentum, which no historical subject has access to,for example, the flow of capital.

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4. Conclusion

The similarities and clear lineage between Nietzsche's and Benjamin's historical projects should be alarming, considering that a fascist reading of Nietzsche exist, with Alfred Rosenberg attributing Nazism to Nietzsche's ideology, in spite of Nietzsche's scornful aversion to European humanism, colonialism, antisemitism, and nationalism [36,37]. One may argue that, as was the case with Nietzsche, a fascist reading of Benjamin would necessarily be a misreading of Benjamin, while, in reality, antifascism remains dominant in Benjamin's thought. I shall respond with three arguments. First, misrepresentation is an irrelevant and arguably dangerous concept that presumes an underlying truth or originality that likely repeats the historicistic mistake (Derrida's "phonocentrism") [38]. Second, "antifascism" is not distinct from "fascism" as this binary opposition exists in constant reference to each other, sharing the same boxing ring that, as fascism evolves, might be reflexively named "fascism" as well (Derrida's différance) [38]. Third, the moralistic imperative to read Benjamin "correctly" does not dissolve the problem that some, perhaps those who took a page out of Benjamin's own method, may read him "incorrectly"—the point, however, is to investigate and change the circumstances within and without the text that made misreading possible or likely. Furthermore, one should remember that Benjamin's unique pessimism already accepted defeat, yet he still wrote, arguably as an embrace of irony.

Benjamin's Messiah, the vanquisher of the Anti-Christ, serves a specific goal—antifascism. However, fascism also assumes the role of the Messiah: in a "catastrophe," "the Third Reich mimics socialism" in the same way that "the coming of the Antichrist […] mimics the blessing promised by the coming of the Messiah" [39]. Evinced by recent developments of fascism, Benjamin's new Messiah as well as its old specter might serve fascism well, if not better, if the urgent, fearful "danger" remains the central drive of fascism. It is clear, then, why the essay "was not intended for publication," not because the readers were "incapable of grasping the significance of the text," as Löwy argued, but because publication would serve reactionary tendencies that "overwhelm" the purpose of the essay [6,5]. In other words, Benjamin must have thought that a publication of the essay would compare to the league of Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays' open advocacy of "disingenuous" history-writing to secure a certain political reality, serving fascism and the victors more than it serves antifascism. After all, it is no secret for Benjamin that fascist catastrophes included the ironic conclusions of originally antifascist movements like communism, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact being his stark example [6]. Perhaps, one of the fascist catastrophes has also been the publication of "On the Concept of History."

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