

Adorno and Benjamin's Philosophy of History: The challenge of the history of the Left to the progressive view of history

Chris Cutrone (University of Chicago, and School of the Art Institute of Chicago)

Précis

The relevance of history is not given but made, in a dialectical sense. As Marx put it, humanity makes history but not under conditions of its own choosing. History is made but in ways that also produce us, and so we need to be conscious of *how* history is made and reflect upon its significance, rather than taking it for granted. Walter Benjamin spoke, in his 1940 "Theses on the Philosophy of History," of the "writing" of history, historiography on the Left being urgent for emancipatory politics.

From a Marxian approach to capital, there are two registers for apprehending history: capitalist society as an epochal problem distinguished from other historical forms of society; and the historical transformations that occur within the epoch of capital in which social-emancipatory movements take part, since Marx's time of the Industrial Revolution and related social and political changes starting in the mid-19th Century to the present. The issue of capital thus becomes: What changes while remaining "the same?"

Benjamin's concept of "constellation" refers to the sense that historical moments might not have pertinence to the present in a linear-progressive way. Rather, these historical constellations appear as structuring figures in the constitution of the present, as enduring problems yet to be worked through. Hence something that happened more recently might not have more immediate relevance to problems of the present than something that happened long ago. Something later might expire faster because it is less essential to the present than something earlier might allow us to grasp.

Such constellations in the appearance of history are involuntary: as Benjamin put it, they "flash up;" as Marx put it, they "weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living." So history cannot be an inventory of "lessons already learned." For, as Benjamin put it, "even the dead are not safe." The significance of the past changes as a function of the present. This is why Benjamin spoke of regarding history from the standpoint of its *redemption*. What value do past thoughts and actions have? The history of the Left furnishes a set of questions and problems that we are tasked to answer in the present. But, as Adorno put it in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), "What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations."