

Walter Benjamin, messianic sentinel, as seen by Daniel Bensaïd

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Walter Benjamin has become a fetish author and object of multiple cultural and ideological entries and uses, as well as an essayist and writer subject to the permanent rescue of a work as beautiful as it is hermetic. In *Walter Benjamin Messianic Sentinel*, a work that can be dated to the early 1990s, Marxist philosopher Daniel Bensaïd set out to rediscover his potency as a thinker of the present.

Philosopher and university professor, young May 68 activist, and until his death a militant of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist League, which became the New Anticapitalist Party, Daniel Bensaïd (1946-2010) was a remarkable theorist; there are his dialogues and polemics with Toni Negri, Alain Badiou, and Michel Löwy, among others, his promotion of the new Louise Michel association, and his leadership of the journal *ContreTemps*. The author of some thirty volumes, *Marx Intempestive* and *Marx Has Returned* (with illustrations by Rep) have been translated and published in Argentina, and *Resistencias*, *Trotskismos*, *Elogio de la política profana*, *La sonrisa del fantasma* and *Una lenta impaciencia*, his memoirs, among others, in Spain. Now, *El cuenco de plata* publishes *Walter Benjamin, Messianic Sentinel*, with a preface by Cecilia Feijoo.

Benjamin has become, somewhat in the manner of Antonio Gramsci, an author of multiple – even contradictory, even opposing – uses pulled in accordance with different interests, from those who had a friendship or some intellectual relationship with him, to the well-polished and unambiguous

classifications that academies usually attempt, to order and compartmentalize a work. Thus, he has been described as a “philosopher of language” and a “literary critic” (Hannah Arendt); his Jewish messianic dimension is emphasized (Gershom Scholem’s preference), or neo-Marxist cultural criticism (Theodor W. Adorno), or a “pure and simple” Marxism, militant from the point of view of art (Bertolt Brecht). For Bensaïd, it seems, Benjamin is all of this, but much more, a thinker of the present.

A “wandering and rebellious stranger,” a “solitary sentinel”: a dissident, a resistant, a heterodox who distrusts all certainty and confidence in some “safe” and happy future world, and of reason, of any kind: of leaders and political apparatuses, of states, etc. Benjamin thus has a new sense of history, full of dangers and possibilities, which other contemporaries have merely accepted, registered, or simply denied. It is this double perception of the present, as catastrophe and event, that Bensaïd perceives in the Moscow Diary, written during Benjamin’s visit to the USSR in the second half of the 1920s, with the Stalinist bureaucratic reaction in full swing. It is this perception that he confirms with the perfidious Hitler-Stalin pact more than a decade later, to which Benjamin tries to counterpose a “strategy of urgency in the midst of a catastrophe.”

And Bensaïd is also, when he writes his book in 1990, in a catastrophic moment: the closure of the revolutionary experiences, the neoliberal reaction and the fall of “real socialism”, one of the two pillars of the global regime in the second post-war period; the status quo of the Yalta world, the “cold war”, with its “balance” of social conquests, the economic rivalry between two “systems” and nuclear terror. It is the configuration of an unprecedented situation, of intellectual regressions, social and political setbacks, and open ends in which we are still mired.

Bensaïd develops his themes by commenting on the very

fragmentary nature of Benjamin's life and work: his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the messianic question, the strategic and military question, and the question of time, or rather temporalities, and their avatars. The "meta-commentary" allows overlapping Benjamin's own cultural and intellectual lineages with those of Bensaïd. It is a rescue of the past for an actualization of the present. The (self) demand to situate oneself to the left of the possible, an undertaking as risky as, eventually, successful.

Bensaïd highlights messianic time in the "Theses" as a critical perception of the ideology of "progress," whether in its bourgeois, social democratic, or communist (Stalinist) version. There is no "future" or "revolution" assured in passive waiting. Rebellion or submission: the inescapable "empty and homogeneous" time must be analyzed and criticized. "Benjamin joins the long rebellion against the despotic chains of mechanical temporality, from Baudelaire to Proust, from Nietzsche to Bergson." What does history show us? "Far from climbing the monumental staircase of progress, history is above all the stutter of defeat. The post-revolutionary sadness and melancholy in Saint-Just or Blanqui – the same in the 20th century, with the negative dates of 1933 in Berlin and 1937 in Barcelona – is the "permanent catastrophe as the negative of the permanent revolution." "History" that immobilizes the past and that must be fought by a "materialist historiography." And messianic.

What about the events of 1989-91? "Before defeats, these are betrayals and abandonments," says an introspective Bensaïd of 20th century Marxisms. It is defeat that brings out the sentinel, the guardian of a tradition against the inclemency of the victors, against the inaudible noise of the oppressed forgotten by the tumultuous sound of the commodity.

Against the circularity and repetition of the same-as-usual of the commodity and its augmented revolutions of capital, the past constantly returns to haunt the space of the living, and

it is the sentinel who is charged with shouting the "messianic" opening: the threshold of the possible. Against passive waiting: "Far from neutralizing each other, class struggle and messianism promote each other against fatality. Profane messianism captures the fragments of Blanqui's renunciation in Eternity by the Stars, Hegel's upward and brittle circularity, Marx's rupture of the fetish and remembrance en Proust, and Bensaïd then proposes to capture the "Event" against immovable Progress and any Eternal Return. History as a bifurcation, as a history of possibilities, must not be abandoned to oblivion. As this transgression is to join the procession of the victors, it is to accept the present as a fait accompli.

In language, in memory, and in its relation to the Jewish religion and the Kabbalah, Bensaïd identifies a dialogue with heretical Marxism. History as science, or also as "a form of remembrance," because unlike memory, remembrance is an act of consciousness, it is memory that emerges in the struggle against forgetting. From Spinoza to Péguy, from Sorel to Rosa Luxemburg, from Freud to Moses Hess via Gustav Landauer, Franz Rosenzweig, Fritz Mauthner and Henri Lefebvre, Bensaïd articulates a constellation of lives, works and circumstances-against the tide, adverse, tragic-that sheds light. A story in which, however, "everything depends on man, including his torments and his impatience." This is the foundation of a political, democratic, and liberating messianism".

The task would be, for Bensaïd, to remember, not to forget that, in the present time, in the "time-now," the messianic sentinel is the bearer of an announcement, of a possible that is actively woven and that allows "inventing the new, not by making a clean sweep of the past, but by questioning it in a different way, patiently, affectionately: this is what distinguishes the messianic concept of history."