

## HISTORY AS COLLAGE IN WALTER BENJAMIN'S THESES ON HISTORY



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### ABSTRACT

The present work derives from a broader research entitled "Nexus between Teacher Training and Digital Culture: Actualities of the Critical Theory of Society" which has as one of the objectives to investigate the contributions of Walter Benjamin (WB) to the understanding of the crisis of contemporary education. In this excerpt, we address one of the author's most enigmatic and hermetic essays, the Theses on the concept of history, from 1940. Such hermeticism, by dialectical contradiction, aims at and opens up to the unknown, above all due to the author's dissatisfaction with naturalistic and evolutionist interpretations of history, hostages to the notion of progress of historicism and vulgar materialism. In place of closed visions of the human odyssey in the world, WB shuffles cards of dialectical materialism and arcane of Jewish theology to advocate a history of the unknown, of the details, of the shards and the remains of human production as pieces of the composition of historical time. In the wake of Freud, he argues that the function of the researcher is to bring to light what is submerged in the iceberg of the consciousness of being in itself and of history, patiently gluing each piece of the mosaic in order to assemble a dialectical image of history, "which flies by". Like Freud, from whom he was inspired on several occasions, he is concerned with the crumbs of meaning of each 'minor' and 'insignificant' event, especially with the manifestation of commonly stolen and neglected voices of history. In this approach, there is a sensitive ethical and reparative concern of the individual and collective remembrance process that values the unsaid, the strange, the oppressed and silenced voices, and it is up to the Angel of History to collect them, despite the storm that blows from paradise.

**Keywords:** Concept of History. Theses. Walter Benjmain. Memory and reparation.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 1919, Freud published an article whose title itself is unusual, "Das Unheimliche", usually translated as "The Stranger", but it is possible to think that another good translation would be "frightening", after all, the author seems to deal precisely with what, in the unconscious, frightens us to the extent that there is a continuous return of the repressed. Despite the unpalatable digression of the word "Unheimliche" in German and other languages, the project of the article reveals itself conceptually from the very beginning, that is, "the strange is that category of the frightening that refers to what is known, old, and long familiar" (Freud, 1925, n/p). Contradictorily, the creator of psychoanalysis attributes a totally different meaning to what is strange, that is, the frightening is linked to the familiar. This dialectic of the strange-familiar allows the author to infer that our greatest fears derive from something familiar, but not in the light of day, but in the dark corners of the unconscious. Hence the investigative function of psychoanalysis, to excavate the dark side of repressed and "forgotten" familiarities that tension and even condition, to a large extent, the subject's present life, demanding its return.

There is an explicit similarity in this Freudian project with Benjamin's conceptions of research as excavation, as the removal of layers of meanings that are almost always strange and familiar to the subject and to history. In both, we can also identify an ethical commitment to a certain reparation, a settling of accounts of the subject with himself and of the historian with the historical process. To recall, both authors are Jews - although not practitioners of the Jewish religious tradition - and the idea of general reparation of humanity is something that remains latent in their writings. While Benjamin bets on the joining of the pieces of history, or if you want, an assembly of history made from pieces of meanings, Freud seeks to put together the pieces of tensions and frightening emotions whose energies the conscious cannot support and sent to the bottom of memory, being rearranged in the analytical process. It seems notorious here that, whether they are aware of this process or not, the authors refer to the Talmudic legend of *Tikun*, because in it, rectification or reparation consists of the search for the shards (klifót) of broken vessels that could not contain the divine essence. According to Capani (2011, p. 147) the Lurian doctrine of Tikkun provides for two types of rectification or reparation: "[...] Tikkun ha-olam and Tikunha-Neshamah. The first refers to the rectification of the world and the second to the rectification of the individual, but both processes are related."

It seems that the proposal of the two authors is to seek the strange, the frightening in the ontogenesis of the subject and in the phylogenesis of the humanization process. In this brief work, we will deal only with Benjamin's attempt to look for the strange, the contorted, the bizarre, which is at the base of history, almost always neglected by "official" history. Whenever possible, we will refer to the Freudian influences on the ideas of Walter Benjamin (WB) and unusual conversions of such ideas to understand the crisis of contemporary Brazilian education.

## THE STRANGE AND SCARY ANGEL OF THE STORY

*"And this enemy has not ceased to win" (WB)*

As is well known, WB is characterized by many as a multimodal author, not only for his multiple research interests, but for his remarkable erudition. It is thoughtful about his interest in a watercolor assembled from shapeless scribbles, which Paul Klee called *Angelus Novus*. Such an angel, as can be seen in the figure below, has nothing in common with classical angels, especially from the Renaissance or with family angelic representations. Let's notice: it's a strange, not to say bizarre, angel.



Source: [https://pt.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:Klee,\\_Angelus\\_novus.png](https://pt.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:Klee,_Angelus_novus.png)

It is precisely here that Freud and Benjamin come together again, because the strangeness of the angel makes him familiar. This bizarre angel leads the allegory of the

Theses on the Concept of History [Theses], from 1940. There are many assertions by the author to Klee's deformed angel, in reference to the official narrative of history itself, which distorts it. Let's look at some of them in the description of Thesis 9:

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It represents an angel who seems to want to get away from something he is staring at. His eyes are wide open, his mouth dilated, his wings spread. The angel of the story must look like this. His face is directed to the past. Where we see a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe, which relentlessly accumulates ruin upon ruin and scatters them at our feet. He would like to stop to wake up the dead and piece together the fragments. But a storm blows from paradise and clings to his wings so tightly that he can no longer close them. This storm impels him irresistibly into the future, to which he turns his back, while the heap of ruins grows to the sky. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 2012, p. 245-246).

One can see in this description much of what Freud reported of his patients in a state of torpor, hallucination and epilepsy when they were faced with the reasons for their traumas: vacant and wide eyes, dilated mouth and open wings that look at a single catastrophe. This crooked angel, for the author, is the face of history, just as tics, jokes and flawed acts are the face of the history of the neurotic subject. Here again Freud is right to affirm the strange dialectic between the terrifying and the familiar. The storm of progress is the tragic that has become familiar. The holocaust and the atomic bomb represent great storms coming from the infernal paradise that raised a pile of rubble to the sky; literally, to heaven, whether by the Rose of Hiroshima or by the ashes of those incinerated in the ovens of Nazi concentration camps. The monstrous Auschwitz monument piled up more than 5 million bodies, while the radioactive storm pulverized and buried more than two hundred thousand lives. Both storms were foretold in the "prophecy" of Benjamin's *Angel of History*, for the "enemy has not ceased to conquer." Such monuments erected to catastrophe, in the name of instrumental reason and progress, challenge the researcher to weave threads of memories and to collect the fragments, the shards of the lives taken, but not as a contemplation of great heroes or leaders, macropolitics or the causal relations of economic determinisms; but assembling the pieces of the mosaic of common life.

WB's *Theses on the Concept of History*, written shortly before his death on the border between Spain and France in 1940, is one of the last great political-philosophical contributions of one of the most influential authors of the twentieth century. Written under the impact of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression agreement in 1939, the *Theses* are a harbinger of the barbarism that would follow during the Second World War. Benjamin's concerns are situated in the context of an imminent danger due to the increase in the

escalation of violence and belligerence that would result from such a pact, from the collaboration of the two most feared secret police forces in Europe (Arendt, 2008).

As an attentive and ocular interpreter, Benjamin did not put a title on the draft of the Theses, as it was not intended for publication. Concerned about the negative repercussion of the work, in a letter to Gretel Adorno, he recommends: "I don't need to tell you that I don't even remotely think about the publication of these notes, and much less about the way in which I send them. They would open all the doors to the most inflamed misunderstandings." (BARRENTO, 2013, p. 169). After Benjamin's death, Gretel and Adorno took care of the publication of the material in the special issue of the *Revista de Investigação Social*, in 1942, dedicated to the author's memory. Also according to Barrento (2013, p. 168): "There are three typewritten versions, one without a title and two others with different titles, added by Gretel Adorno ('On the concept of History') and by Theodor Adorno ('Reflections on the philosophy of History, by Walter Benjamin'). The oldest version, and the only manuscript version, is a set of nine sheets (which was in Hannah Arendt's possession in New York) with corrections by Benjamin". Debating social issues posed in his time, WB metaphorically evokes theology to warn that barbarism knocks strongly on the door saying: "In every era, it is necessary to try to wrest tradition from conformism, which wants to take over it. For the Messiah does not come only as a redeemer; he also comes as the victor of the Antichrist" (2012, p. 244). And, he continues, in Thesis 6, reflecting on the political function of the historian: "The gift of awakening in the past the sparks of hope is the exclusive privilege of the historian convinced that the dead will not be safe if the enemy wins. And this enemy has not ceased to conquer." (2012, p. 244). In addition, it makes theoretical-methodological inferences regarding the political function of the (materialist) historian by opposing official historiography, hostage to the notion of progress subsumed to the notion of "empty and homogeneous time" (Benjamin, 2012, p. 249). In this same context, Benjamin denounces in Thesis 10 that even those considered enemies of fascism not only allied themselves with it, but also shared an idealistic notion of progress that conceives history as an autonomous movement. These criticisms are directed at both the Russian Communists and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), who are accused of being traitors, reaffirming that the reflections put forward in the Theses are clearly intended to mark a position at a time "[...] in which the politicians in whom the opponents of fascism had placed their hopes lie on the ground and aggravate their defeat with the betrayal of their own cause" (Benjamin, 2012, p.

247). On this point, as Löwy (2005, p. 33) states, the harsh criticisms of the Theses are aimed at "conservative historicism, social-democratic evolutionism and vulgar Marxism".

The Theses translate many of Benjamin's concerns about the rise of Nazi-fascism and the clumsy evolutionism of Stalinism, shortly after they had cooled the edges of the cannons of the First World War. The removal of the Theses from this context of production can often lead to obscure interpretations, despite Benjamin's (2012) methodological orientation that the understanding of history requires that a determined life be torn from the time, because only in this way "is the work preserved and transcended (*Aufheben*) in the work, in the work as a whole, the epoch and in the epoch the totality of the historical process". Since its first publication, in 1942, much has been said about the Theses and their contributions, especially to the philosophy of history and other fields of research, but a definition by Benjamin's great friend, Gerschom Scholem (1989), calling attention to a definition by Benjamin's great friend, Gerschom Scholem (1989), saying that it is a materialism that is placed under the protection of theology. In fact, the messianic tone of the text, and its categories derived from Jewish mysticism, can lead to interpretations like this. However, it seems that the scope of the Theses goes beyond monolithic interpretations and requires a way of knowing that takes into account a "stereoscopic and dimensional" look (Benjamin, 2007, p. 500), and which must be related to other writings of the author so that the messianic envelope can be extracted from them and a vast constellation of meanings can emerge. Although it is an urgent systematization, probably written in 1940, shortly before the escape from a Nazi-dominated France and the collaborationist Vichy government, main ideas had already been announced in other works since the 1920s, as is clear in the letter sent to Gretel Adorno in May 1940, such as the "Theological-Political Fragment", in the review "Eduardo Fuchs, collector and historian" and, above all, in the folder "N" of the Passages: "Theory of knowledge/Theory of progress" (mainly the fragments of the Late Phase, from <N 8, 11> to <N 20>). As for the question of the use of theology as a hermeneutical artifice or trope of thought, it can be seen that it is present throughout Benjamin's work, as attested by the profound metaphor of the blotter in fragment N7a, 8 of the Passages: "My thought is to theology what the blotter is to paint. He is completely soaked in it. But if it were for the blotter, nothing would remain of what is written" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 513). It is worth repeating Löwy's (2005) view in his important study of the hermetic Theses to get an idea of the complexity of the work and the various imagetic



resources and tropes of thought used by the author, bequeathing to posterity an allegory open to the most diverse attributions of meaning. He says:

Walter Benjamin's theses 'On the Concept of History' (1940) constitute one of the most important philosophical and political texts of the twentieth century. An enigmatic, allusive, even sibylline text, its hermeticism constellated with images, allegories, illuminations, sown with strange paradoxes, crossed by dazzling intuitions (Löwy, 2005, p. 17).

Based on these discussions, in the next section, we intend to convert Benjamin's concept of ethical memory, as a commitment to historical reparation of the forgotten and muted by official culture, to the crisis of contemporary Brazilian education, whose traces of barbarism demonstrate that the storm that blows from paradise tends to pile up oppression and constant silencing.

## **THE STRANGER IN THE CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION CRISIS**

From the Theses we can perceive a certain compulsive tendency of history to repetition. The heaps are nothing more than a repetition of the same, of the always the same, as is also the case with neurotics. Still in the essay on "The Stranger", Freud (1925, n/p) suggests an interesting hypothesis:

[...] It is possible to recognize in the unconscious mind the predominance of a 'repetition compulsion', proceeding from the instinctual impulses, and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to prevail over the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind its demoniac character, and yet very clearly expressed in the impulses of young children; a compulsion that is also responsible for part of the course taken by the analyses of neurotic patients.

Converting the Freudian hypothesis to the Theses, the unconscious of history also presents its demonic face in the compulsion for destruction. After all, as Benjamin pointed out in Teses (2012, p. 245), "There has never been a document of culture that was not simultaneously a document of barbarism".

What happened with the history of Brazilian education was no different. Following the line of Freudo-Benjaminian thought, there is a real compulsion to the tragic. Such a tragedy is manifested not only by the exclusion of subjects from the formal and non-formal educational process. The thousands of children still out of school or in precarious schools point to the historical deficit of the Brazilian State with education. Not to speculate too

much, some data attest to this compulsive condition. The Continuous Pnad<sup>3</sup> reports that in 2022 we had 9.5 million people aged 15 and over who could not read and write. The percentage of people with complete secondary education is practically half (52.5%) if you count the population up to 25 years old, and higher education does not reach 20% of the population. Even if we consider the effective investment in education, the ruins rise to the sky. It was only from 1996, a little less than three decades later, that there was funding for early childhood education and high school. Despite the advance of legislation, which contributed to the universalization of elementary education, the compulsion to tragic does not lighten its weight, because educators, families, children and young people remain invisible when it comes to the production of public policies and educational programs, after all, they are the most interested. The train of progress has been difficult to travel along the tracks of national education. From tragedy to tragedy, we have reached the twenty-first century without any effective public policy for the participation of young people in proposals for secondary education, as well as for elementary education. Locked in their offices, politicians and bureaucrats think about education and decide on it without having read at least a line on the subject.

As a return of repressed complexes, the New Right is currently trying by various expedients to recolonize education with religious agendas, either by removing terms such as sexuality and gender from specific legislation, silencing voices that are already muted in the official curriculum. Again, Eros is attacked in broad daylight in the name of Thanatos or Death Instinct. In fact, this is a process that has only been accentuated in industrial society, which over the last three centuries has only repressed the creative will, Eros, in the name of what Marcuse (1975, p. 57) called "more repression". The author says: "By introducing the term more-repression, we focus our examination on the institutions and relations that constitute the social 'body' of the reality principle."

As an arm of industrial society, the school had the important role of internalizing one of the main canons of the bourgeois reality principle, the disciplinary control and internalization of the guilt complex for individual failure. Ignored as a libidinal being,

<sup>3</sup> Available at: [https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/educacao/noticia/2023-06/ibge-revela-desigualdade-no-acesso-educacao-e-queda-no-analfabetismo#:~:text=A%20taxa%20de%20analfabetismo%20no,Geografia%20e%20Estat%C3%ADstica%20\(IBGE\)](https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/educacao/noticia/2023-06/ibge-revela-desigualdade-no-acesso-educacao-e-queda-no-analfabetismo#:~:text=A%20taxa%20de%20analfabetismo%20no,Geografia%20e%20Estat%C3%ADstica%20(IBGE).). Accessed on: Dec. 2024.



alienated from any principle of pleasure, the student's life is a great litany of penalties imposed and/or self-imputed by the civilizing superego.

Benjamin's perspective of *brushing* history against the grain could contribute to a resignification of the role of the school, no longer being governed by the death drive, but by liberating libidinal energies. This implies stopping, gathering the dead and the shards, the fragments of pleasure and filling each scene of the empty and homogeneous time of the school with possibilities of reconciliation between the principle of pleasure and reality.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In the wake of Freud, WB argues that the function of the researcher is to bring to light what is submerged in the iceberg of the consciousness of being itself and of history, patiently gluing each piece of the mosaic in order to assemble a dialectical image of history, "which flies by". Like the creator of psychoanalysis, from whom he was inspired on several occasions, he is concerned with the crumbs of meaning of each "minor" and "insignificant" event, especially with the manifestation of vulgarly stolen and neglected voices of history. In this approach, there is a sensitive ethical and reparative concern of the individual and collective remembrance process that values the unsaid, the strange, the oppressed and silenced voices, and it is up to the Angel of History to stop to collect them, despite the storm that blows from paradise.

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