The End of Whose History? Whose End of History?

JOHN MILFULL

Centre for European Studies, University of New South Wales

Walter Benjamin’s text on the Angel of History has attained cult status at the expense of being torn out of its intricate context in the Theses on the Philosophy of History and thus frequently misunderstood. It varies a bon mot of the German Early Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel: “The historian is a prophet turned backwards”. But while Schlegel retained at least a degree of optimism about the future, for all his disillusionment with the revolutionary dawn in France, Benjamin’s angel, whose back is turned to the future not by choice, but by force majeure, has often been read as the ultimate expression of despair with history, as a rejection of all possibility of progress.

This interpretation does not stand up even within the text itself — the storm which blows the angel backwards into the future is “what we call progress”, but the angel cannot see its goal. If he were to attempt to deduce it from the past, with its endlessly mounting pile of catastrophes, he could only predict a further, greater catastrophe; but Benjamin’s image itself points the absurdity of such predictions. In the broader context of the Theses, however, its meaning is much clearer; they constitute a sustained attack on those who claim ownership of the end of history, and legitimate their tactics through this claim. The principal butt of this critique is, of course, the “revolutionary attentism” of the German Social Democrats, who were so convinced that “history was on their side” that they failed to take adequate steps to counter the “unforeseen” rise of Nazism. But Günter Hartung has shown that the attack is also directed against the abuse of dialectic by the Stalinist party apparatus, as a constant guarantee of the correctness of the Party line.1 Within the constraints of the consensus he and Brecht had reached in their conversations in Denmark, to avoid direct and open criticism of the Soviet Union at this critical juncture in the triumphal progress of Nazism, Benjamin could only adopt an oblique approach to the deformations of Stalinism.2

2 See Walter Benjamin, Understanding Brecht (London 1977), pp. 116-119. I have translated Brecht’s “Stalin poem” (Gesammelte Werke 9, p. 683) as follows:

The Peasant’s Speech to his Ox
after an Egyptian peasant’s song, 1400 B.C.

O great ox, divine puller of ploughs,
Deign to plough straight! Please be so kind
As not to mess up the furrows. Off you go, leader, forward!
We bent our backs to cut your fodder
Deign now to eat it, dear nourisher! Forget about
The furrow for now, just eat!
For your stall, protector of the family,
We dragged the beams here, groaning; now we
Sleep in the wet, you are dry. Yesterday

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It is not hard to understand the depth of his depression, confronted by the apparently irresistible rise of the Fascists, the collapse of the socialist opposition, the corruption of socialism in the Soviet Union and the final kick in the guts, the Hitler-Stalin pact. But, in a sense, it only confirmed insights which had been present in his earlier work, and are closely related to another, lifelong conversation, with Gershom Scholem on the Messianic idea in Jewish history. Whatever the editorial justification, the fragments A and B appended to the Theses in most editions make this connection clear:

A

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.

B

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance — namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. ³

What our Prime Minister, John Howard, would term a “black armband” view of history seems even more justified in terms of Jewish history — its ultimate catastrophe was at hand, in a form that not even Benjamin could have predicted. His angel’s view of all history in a similar light is closely linked to the experience of reading history from the perspective of the pariahs, the excluded and untouchable. The Messianic idea offered the hope of liberation from the machine of history which, like the machine in Kafka’s penal colony, etched an inexorable punishment into the raw flesh of their bodies.

Benjamin concludes his early essay on Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften with the memorable sentence: “Only for the sake of the hopeless is hope given to us”. It broadens the Messianic idea of the ultimate redemption, against all odds, of an oppressed and excluded people, to include the oppressed and excluded of all nations and times. This central conviction achieves its final and most powerful expression in the Theses, in an extended attack on “historicism”, of which I quote one of the lesser known passages:

VIII

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a

chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are “still” possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge — unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which it gives rise to is untenable.\(^4\)

The *Theses* thus confront the perceptions of the Angel of History, the absurdity and impossibility of predicting redemption through the backwards-turned gaze of the historian, with a great nevertheless — however hopeless the present may appear, the future must be left open, *for the sake of the hopeless*. They constitute a frontal attack on theories of historical progress, on claims to perceive and “own” the end of history which are ultimately deeply rooted in the philosophy of the European Enlightenment, and on the capacity to transform such visions into predictions or, even worse, guarantees of historical legitimacy.

This is a difficult truth — it is precisely the claim to possess unique and definitive knowledge of the direction of history which has been the most useful tool of the aspiring false messiahs of history and their attendant philosopher/historians. Its secularisation by Hegel and Marx into a science of history, a “rational teleology”, was one of the most effective weapons in their armoury as well, which pointed the way to consigning opponents to the “dustbin of history” along with the heretics and scapegoats who had preceded them, but with the greater authority of “science” and “reason”.

To accept that the direction of history is unknowable is to shoulder the burden Kafka defined for his own trackless German Jewish existence: “nothing is granted me, everything has to be earned, not only the present and future, but the past too — something which perhaps every human being has inherited”. None of us, any longer, can lay claim to an unproblematic inherited past of the kind he yearned for. All our histories are too full of blood and tears, of human suffering swept under the carpet of our living room. Benjamin found at least a personal way out: not merely to “brush history against the grain”, but to strip what he termed “historical materialism”, his own idiosyncratic brand of socialist unorthodoxy, of the veneer of “science” and nineteenth century false optimism, and restore the redemption of the hopeless as its only real goal and justification.

More importantly, he developed a “method”: “historical materialism” became the tool for unlocking the faint Messianic promise embedded in the images of the past, the alternative lives and visions buried beneath the heaps of rubble and demanding redemption in the future. When the atrocities of Fascism and Stalinism finally stripped Europe of its claim to moral and intellectual leadership of the world and revealed its miserable nakedness, Benjamin’s method revealed itself as just as appropriate to the realities of the post-colonial struggle and the attempt to emancipate and restore the dignity of the “wretched of the earth”. If his compass and experience were limited to Europe, their attempts to unearth the “chips of Messianic time” within their own suppressed and forgotten histories could almost have been part of his own project.

Is this “Utopian thinking?” If so, it is Utopian in an unusual sense, one that denies, in a sense far closer to the early Marx, the possibility of conceptualising the end of history and stresses the “actual movement” in the present which works towards overcoming untenable conditions. There may well be some kind of methodical circle involved in this process, as “visions of the future” can never be neatly separated from the “actual movement” to address present injustice, but it is a circle I am happy to dwell within. It certainly seems a good deal more habitable than some of the vicious

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alternatives on offer. What it does demand, of course, is the determined rejection of any strategy which appeals to long term ends which are never achieved to justify dirty tricks in the present, strategies just as familiar in “liberal democracies” as in their archetypical Leninist/Stalinist form.

Nevertheless, Benjamin left a whole area unexplored which has come to be of crucial importance in the postwar era, and perhaps even more so since 1989. He does not confront the issue of difference, the fact that the histories of the oppressed are very different histories, not part of a universal history from underneath, and that his own anti-theory of history unconsciously replicates the totalising effect of histories from above.

Recently, and for obvious reasons, there has been a substantial renewal of interest in the nationalities question in socialist thought and practice; I would like to take you back briefly to Otto Bauer, meditating on the future relations between the peoples of the crumbling Habsburg Empire in the first decade of this century, and try and use Benjamin’s insights to question Bauer’s attempts to come to grips with a problem that so clearly survived the demise of that empire and its Soviet successor.

For all his commitment to socialist internationalism, Bauer was realist enough to accept that the movement towards national self-determination within the decaying Vielvölkerstaat was not only inevitable and unstoppable, but that it would ultimately prove political suicide for the Social Democrats simply to oppose it, rather than attempting to harness it for their own ends. Building on a concept from Engels, he endorsed the right of the “peoples without history” of East Central Europe to cultural autonomy within a reconditioned Habsburgia, a place on the stage of history from which they had so long been excluded. Oddly, he denied such a consolation prize only to his fellow Ashkenazim — no doubt fully aware of the likely hostility of his target audience to any such suggestion.5

Bauer’s national-cultural model clearly impacted on the token and ultimately disastrous nationalities policy of the Soviet Union and later, Yugoslavia — but here I want only to argue that, in Benjaminian terms, his concept of “peoples without history” is not only based on a rather absurd German-Jewish discrimination against Slavic histories, but that it poses a wrong and dangerous question. Precisely because of the centuries of Habsburg (and later, Russian/Soviet) dominance, the “cultural identities” which were to be reconstructed were drawn not merely from a “history of the rulers”, but from “pre-histories” often quite inappropriate to the self-representation and understanding of a new and democratic society. This phenomenon has resurfaced in often surprising and unappealing forms after the collapse of 1989/1990. The history of the oppressed and excluded of Soviet imperialism has yet to be written, but it will certainly not concern itself primarily with the difficulties of the intelligentsia, Szelenyi and Konrad’s relatively privileged “new class”, nor unearth too many chips of messianic time in a mythical reconstruction of histories that belong to nobody. It is blindingly obvious to me that the only really productive impulses will come from within the analysis of the forty years of state socialist history themselves, which changed these societies beyond recognition and are the only real modern history they have — the current fashion to blank them out is helping no one. And there is always the most uncomfortable impression that those in whose name the whole creaking structure was dynamited are worse off than before.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Empire, we have been peppered with postulated ends: the end of Utopian thinking, the end of the socialist idea, and the ultimate big E, the “End of History”. It is hard to see any justification for these claims; the insights on which they are based have been round since the 1940s, the Soviet Empire did not collapse at the height of its perversion of the socialist idea, but after a long and unsuccessful attempt at internal reform. Since then, too, “Utopian thinking” has had to dispense with any claim to possess some telos which guaranteed its authority. Fukuyama’s “end of history” reasserts this claim with a breath-taking audacity: at a time in political and economic history when the only real consensus is our inability to predict anything, from the price of the dollar and the weather to the borders of nation-states and the next irruption of violence, he has us all headed down a safe neo-Hegelian path to a liberal-democratic Utopia. In prospectus it looks suspiciously like a comic-book US of A. I, for one, have no wish to buy shares in the project, but I am comforted by the thought that virtual states are facing a stockmarket downturn and that no one can own, let alone predict, an end to history. When the dust has settled, perhaps we can all get back to real, socially useful work. Of all the slogans of 1989/1990, the one that appealed to me most came from a cheerful miner from Bulgaria. He faced the cameras of a British TV series trying to coax East Central Europe onto the path to a new Manchester with the cheeky comment:

*What’s worth trying once is worth trying again.*

Braveheart could not have put it better.